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Open Letter to Political Leaders in Ethiopia

SMNE's Call to Ethiopian Political Leaders in Ethiopia: A Viable Alternative to a New, Better and More Inclusive Ethiopia Will Not be Delivered by Foreigners like Humanitarian Aid!

*Are Ethiopians Ready to Discard Ethnic Politics and Embrace Inclusion in Preparation
for the 2015 National Election?*

Dear political leaders in Ethiopia,

Warmest greetings to you from the (SMNE) <http://www.solidaritymovement.org>. We are writing to you because we believe you are among those who have shown courage and perseverance in pursuing the struggle for freedom and justice in the face of many obstacles. Despite the lack of political space, you have found a way to bring light through the cracks in the foundation of the TPLF/ERPFD. Kudos to you and to those working with you! We want you to be successful, not only for the sake of Ethiopians and those in the opposition, but also for those fellow Ethiopians currently in power who may be realizing they are trapped in a faltering system of their own making. How can we all find a way out before it is too late?

The next concern on everyone's mind today is what can replace the TPLF/ERPFD and will it be any better? Are we Ethiopians ready to discard tribal politics and to embrace inclusion of all our diverse people, **Putting humanity before** ethnicity and caring about the well being of those who are beyond our tribal groups, for **No one is free until all are free**? No nation can sustainably prosper when one tribe takes all, like has been happening in Ethiopia under the TPLF/ERPFD. As one group dominates over the majority, tensions have escalated.

Many people now fear for the destabilization of the country, believing the TPLF/ERPFD, as is, may have become the greatest source of its own fall and the biggest contributor to possible violence. However, no one seems to know what can alter the course from self-destruction, short of either a change of government or meaningful and comprehensive reforms. Both of these alternatives are far from the minds of the TPLF/ERPFD; yet, they might not have an option. If this is the case, we want it to be a good option for the common good of the people of Ethiopia, both now and for future generations.

As you know, Ethiopia's national elections are coming up only a year from now May 2015 and we all expect the TPLF/ERPFD to continue to suppress any genuine opposition, but yet, it might also be the best opportunity in years for genuine change. Outsiders in the international community are showing a greater readiness to abandon the TPLF/ERPFD, should there be a viable alternative. One may wonder the reasons behind this shift of support. We have heard through various connections in Europe and North America that the TPLF/ERPFD's increasingly repressive policies are catalysts for increasing discontent in Ethiopia that could lead to ethnic-based violence and chaos.

As TPLF/ERPFD policies are increasingly running counter to donor's interests of maintaining stability in the Horn, they are looking for a better alternative. They can see for themselves that the tightening of political space and the crackdown on civil society through anti-terrorism laws and the Charities and Societies Proclamation have led to the arrest of increasing numbers of journalists, bloggers, activists, students and religious leaders. **If there were a strongly supported, inclusive and well-organized Ethiopian alternative, capable of bringing greater stability to Ethiopia for the long-run, alliances may quickly change. Now they are asking the question, "Where is that viable alternative?"** The warning signs are apparent and there is not that much time for inaction.

Tensions are already simmering so close to the surface that many Ethiopians are seriously concerned that an unexpected event or action may trigger violence, destruction and the disintegration of their society. How will the TPLF/EPRDF clamp down during this election period without becoming that trigger? The most dangerous scenario of all is an Ethiopia post explosion, without structure. Without structure, a vacuum of power and leadership could easily spiral into a failed state. In other words, people are afraid of what will happen if the TPLF/EPRDF remain in power; and even more so, if they lose power quickly through the internal implosion of Ethiopia into ethnic-based strife.

Without significant change within the TPLF/EPRDF or without the emergence of a viable, NON-ETHNIC based alternative—one which could challenge, reform, or replace the TPLF/EPRDF—the end results may be the same. The TPLF/EPRDF, as is, have become a source of instability, endangering both itself and everyone else. The best course of action and the least probable is for the TPLF/EPRDF to pro-actively initiate actions leading to a more inclusive electoral process and the transfer of power back to the people. Currently, the TPLF/EPRDF have much to lose if there is an eruption of violence, leading to their downfall. On the other hand, their best interests and the interests of their children and future generations could be served by pro-actively opening up society and the political system to a genuine transition of power that would lead to meaningful reforms, the restoration of freedom and justice to all people, and to national reconciliation; all of which must be people-driven, not controlled by the TPLF/EPRDF.

With the 2015 election coming, it is a make or break year and we may not get another chance soon. The Ethiopian people will be an alternative, but ONLY IF political leaders and the parties they represent on the ground are willing to convene, strategize and do the hard work of establishing a common agenda for the common good rather than to compete against each other for an otherwise impossible goal. Only then could it become a strong force for genuine political change, reforms and national reconciliation.

We all know the majority of Ethiopians, both in the Diaspora and at home, are not happy with the difficult conditions for the majority within the country. This in itself is the grassroots base for an alternative, though not yet made viable. **What will make it viable? It will only be viable if there is a willingness among leaders and opposition groups to sacrifice personal ambition, self-interest and power for something of far more importance—the freedom, well-being and reconciliation of Ethiopians, including members of the TPLF/EPRDF.** Think of it this way, groups like the Unity for Democracy and Justice, the Blue Party, All Ethiopian Unity Party, Oromo People's Congress, Union of Tigrins for Democracy and Sovereignty, Medrek and others, have established these organizations for goals and objectives that still remain unaccomplished. All of these groups and many more have something in common. They were established to help make things better for their constituencies and yet share many common objectives that go beyond their constituencies.

Whether it is land rights, political rights, injustice, human rights, inequality or lack of opportunity; are these goals of only one party or are they the desire of every Ethiopian, transcending political groups? More specifically, are your goals bigger than for one tribe, one region, one religion, one gender or one political group? If so, you are better and more equipped than you know. If so, the opposition is not divided and weak. If so, we believe you may be that viable alternative for which Ethiopians are waiting. Freedom will not be delivered by foreigners in trucks like humanitarian or foreign aid, which Ethiopians have learned to depend upon rather than doing it themselves. In fact, such aid contributes to nearly half of the budget. Are we not capable? We think we are!

There is no way they can bring the viable alternative for which Ethiopians are hoping. One foreign policy maker told us, “Ethiopians need to know that we will never free them, even if we stop all foreign aid and support. It is the people of Ethiopia who will do the work, not us, the donor countries! Ethiopians should understand this and create a better alternative than the TPLF/ERPFD and that will leave us no choice but to support them.”

This also applies to the Ethiopians outside the country who cannot free people within the country. Freedom will not come from the Diaspora, but from those most available and invested in change—those inside Ethiopia. To do so, some of us are paralyzed with a victim mindset that restricts us from even trying, oftentimes dwelling on past grievances or prejudices against others that prevent us from coming together. Where this applies, this individual or collective victim mentality is defeating us.

It convinces us to wrongly that we cannot do it ourselves—with God’s help—but must wait for someone else to free us or to sacrifice themselves for our own freedom. Instead of doing something, we only complain and blame others, weakening the prospects for ever getting out of it. **We cannot use this mindset as an excuse for not doing our share in contributing to the change. In terms of the Diaspora, we can be supporters, but we are not the same as being on the ground. The best thing the Diaspora can do is to advocate on behalf of the people of Ethiopia to urge policymakers to shift their support to this new alternative; if, it is indeed better, more inclusive and genuine. This is something we, in the SMNE, have been doing for a long time and we know how to do it.** If we now have another God-given chance of forming a noble and authentic alliance for the common good, how can our joint efforts finally bear fruit, yours and ours?

Some or most of you may be planning to run for office in a challenge to the TPLF/EPRDF’s monopoly of most every government position, but we assure you; there is zero possibility that any one of these candidates or their parties can win individually. If you do, you may only be a token without any power or influence. Many of you understand this and are already making efforts to reach out to others; knowing that numbers of different political groups, all working independently, will never be a threat to the TPLF/EPRDF. Instead, it will give the TPLF/EPRDF the means to remain in power and the legitimacy to appear democratic to outsiders. In fact, to promote a better image, they may even give some unexpected political space to a select few, as long as there is no collaboration with others. However, if a strong and viable alternative emerges, the people of Ethiopia will have far greater ability to become a force for change.

What will replace the TPLF/EPRDF and will it be any better?

An alliance of political groups will have the goal of creating a political environment conducive to genuine political engagement. Freedoms and rights must be restored. This is a primary core goal. To accomplish this, there is no other choice than to put differences aside so as to create a viable force that can confront the TPLF/ERPFD. The effort cannot stop short of accomplishing these goals or it could be reversed. If you cannot do this; then at the very least, Ethiopians must stop inflammatory, derogatory, and degrading criticisms towards others—it is complicity with defeat. If something needs correction, use constructive criticism, civility and humility. There is no other choice if we are to create a healthy working environment where cooperation can flourish. Only then can a well-functioning alliance or coalition be formed.

There are successful examples of various countries in the world run by coalition groups, like Israel, the United Kingdom, and Germany, where for the common good of the country they formed a coalition government for the sake of the people. **You also can do this, keeping in mind that the purposes are larger than one’s own. Our people are leading examples in the world of living in extreme misery. How can we help change the future for Ethiopians of today and tomorrow? How can we help end ethnic division and hatred, the flood of refugees out of the country, the imprisonment of some of Ethiopia’s most courageous voices, the displacement of the people from their land so it can be leased to foreigners or government cronies, and the never-ending poverty and corruption?**

These are our goals and they go beyond oneself and one’s groups to include the common good of the people. This means opening up the media to all Ethiopians so the dominant group does not control it. This means protecting free speech so that a journalist, activist or political opponent would not be charged for terrorism and locked up. This means holding violators of human rights accountable for their crimes. This means allowing groups to meet without threatening, harassing and arresting either them or those providing meeting space to them. This means upholding the law justly so no one is above it.

When we look at Ethiopia, we see that God has given us a beautiful land, beautiful people, abundant resources and great potential. Why have we not better capitalized on these gifts? Time and time again, the people of Ethiopia have been given opportunities to make life better; however, despite great efforts, Ethiopia remains one of the poorest and most un-free countries in the world. In the event that an alliance of political groups arises and successfully overcomes the TPLF/EPRDF, people also fear, rightly so, the effort may be hijacked and not end up being any better than what it replaced. Look at our past. Successive governments have been repressive to large sections of the people. How can we get it right this time?

Our history of political hijackings of Ethiopian freedom movements

In 1960 we saw the rise of the student movements as many young people awakened to the yearning in their hearts for change. They worked hard, many sacrificing their lives and futures to bring about political change. Yet, in the midst of their efforts, mistakes were made and good intentions were hijacked on many levels by those with political, ethnic, regional or other ambitions. Their dreams were further dashed once the “old” system was overthrown in 1974 because the “new” system was no better than the previous one. The people did not get what they fought for; instead, the Derg regime under Mengistu Hailemariam became known as the Red Terror, a government characterized by its brutality.

The suffering of the people gave birth to ethnic-based rebel groups, like the TPLF, OLF and many more. Even the TPLF had to form a coalition in order to overthrow the Derg. Many regions and ethnic groups joined together, but when the victors established the EPRDF, it was a coalition in name only. Instead, it was controlled by the elite of the TPLF and the organization served the interests of this group. In total, four ethnic-based political groups were represented—the Tigrayans, the Oromos, the Amharas and the Southerners. Even though other groups contributed to the victory or were part of Ethiopia, they had no role in the new government. It soon became apparent that only the TPLF held the power and that even the representation of the major groups was bogus.

Dissatisfaction grew among most every sub-section of society, but no one talked with each other until the formation of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), only six months prior to the 2005 national election. **Since the EPRDF came to power, this was the only time it looked like the TPLF/EPRDF could be defeated. The formation of this coalition awakened a massive groundswell of people. Their burning desire for justice, freedom and inclusion shook the ground underneath the TPLF/EPRDF, but when the CUD leadership became embroiled in a conflict over achieving a personal victory rather than victory for the people, the entire movement was killed. It became another lost opportunity. These same risks exist today within any struggle for freedom and should be guarded against by a viable alternative that embraces principles and protections**

Will you align with others to become that viable alternative?

We now face another God-given opportunity. How can Ethiopians stop the worst from happening in Ethiopia? Could Rwanda have been saved? How about Somalia, Sudan, or now South Sudan? This must not happen to us! **It is our moral responsibility to leave our own private ambitions behind—being willing to lose something in order to gain something of far greater value than our own personal, political or regional aspirations. If we refuse, we will carry the burden of our failure into the next generation if Ethiopia descends into violence, killing and chaos. How can we turn the situation around, using this crisis for the common good? How can you, working with others who share similar core values, create an environment that will end the misery of the people? This can only be done by the people of Ethiopia themselves.**

First of all, do not buy in to the idea that there is no alternative. You who are on the ground can become that viable alternative: 1) if you form an alliance based on core principles of truth, freedom, justice, equality, accountability and limited power; 2) if you focus on core goals of opening up political space, restoring the rights of Ethiopians and endorsing a process leading to national reconciliation; and, 3) if you and other leaders and groups are willing to give up immediate political goals of leading a country in order to build a better foundation for a New Ethiopia for everyone.

As previously said, if you cannot do this, at least you can stop the politics of hatred and division, personal attacks, name calling, the dehumanization of others and their groups and the lack of civility. This is critically important! If you get an opening or want to do a rally, like the UDJ is planning on doing this coming Sunday May 4, make it something for all Ethiopians—Christians, Muslims, Jews, Oromos, Afars, Tigrayans, Ethiopian Somalis, the Blue Party, Arena, AEUP, the Oromo Congress, and everyone else. All of these groups and others should come out in unison. Make this rally a rally of one people for change for all Ethiopians, joining together for the common good. This is not really about politics but about bringing foundational change and restoring rights and freedoms.

Imagine what could happen if all these people could somehow agree to work together! The number one threat to the TPLF/EPRDF is unity. If you want to win, the majority must create the political space, or it will never be offered except by the promotion of false parties who are really not representative of the opposition at all but government-controlled.

The TPLF/EPRDF is a tribal-based party. The way things are now, you could be smart and qualified, but if you are not in one of the four represented parties: the Amhara, the Oromo, the Tigray or the South, there is no room for you and even if you are part of one of these groups, you must bow to the TPLF dominated EPRDF. Under the EPRDF umbrella, the TPLF control the whole party. Ethiopians have to put this system of deception, discrimination, marginalization and exclusion—all based on ethnicity and crony networks—to an end. No one should attempt to gain a constituency by inciting age-old grievances, prejudices or ethnic arrogance.

Ethiopians can create a better alternative than this. It can be put to an end if there are enough people willing to view others as human beings, with intrinsic worth, rather than dehumanizing them through the lens of their own tribe, region, gender, religion or crony networks. You deserve better than this. This is really a golden opportunity. The election is coming and if the TPLF/EPRDF really claim they want to run, let them be challenged. This illusion that there is no alternative is only present because of the resistance from the TPLF/EPRDF to any other voice and the lack of aligning together. This can all be changed if you choose to participate. Those who join should examine the principles, core values, the vision of what is to be accomplished and the reason for uniting in an alliance, all of which should be clearly understood and agreed upon.

However, you do not have to give up your own organizational distinctives to do so unless so desired. For example, we in the SMNE have encountered a number of requests in the past to abandon the SMNE in order to join a newly formed organization. However, just like within this alliance, there must be convincing reasons to join. Joining simply for the sake of unity is not enough. We have a responsibility to guard our core values, guiding principles and vision. Where we can share these core imperatives, we can come together fairly easily. What went wrong in the past is where compromises of these core imperatives sabotaged the heart and outcome of the effort. We cannot afford for this to happen again or it will be another hijacking of the Ethiopian struggle for a New Ethiopia.

Simply stated, we are not telling anyone to give up your organizations but instead to cooperate for the common good. In fact, different political parties among Ethiopians may eventually want to run with your own platform in the future; however, if you decide to run as part of a larger alliance of political groups to achieve broader goals, it will take many of us and you have to be strategic. It will not be easy. You must have tactical strategies. For example, within one particular area you must find a candidate who is more likely to not only promote the common values for the common good, but also who is more likely to win. This is the only way to be effective. It must be carried out in every area of the country.

You who are registered party members can take the lead. Despite the lack of political space, you are not an outlawed group and you are in the country. This is the only way to awaken the silent and sleeping Ethiopians. Who knows, it may be what brings the TPLF/EPRDF to the negotiating table. It is a far better alternative to an explosion of violence. We also know that many within the TPLF/EPRDF are disillusioned with the status quo and may be ready for change if the Ethiopia of the future had room for all Ethiopians, including them.

We must institute protections to ensure that the effort remains focused on the common good rather than for sectarian or ethnic factions. Powerful groups cannot forget about the rights and needs of minority groups and individuals. In the United States, the Bill of Rights ensures that the rights of individuals will not be trampled on by either the majority or by one group that dominates over others, like the TPLF/EPRDF has done. We want the right leadership, not just a replacement of the TPLF/EPRDF. We want this alliance to create an environment where there is political space. If you decide to do this, we in the SMNE will do all we can to support the struggle for a New Ethiopia where humanity comes before ethnicity or any other identify factor and for the establishment of a system that upholds the freedom and rights of our neighbors close and far—for no one is free until all are free. This will require national reconciliation and this is a high priority.

The SMNE is currently working on a project to empower and organize civil society, both in the Diaspora and within Ethiopia; so that it might play a bigger role in mitigating the root causes that may ignite the explosion of ethnic violence. The SMNE is also committed to the continuation of its current work within the international and Diaspora community in advocating for democratic reforms, but we are also willing to help in advancing this work within the country.

For example, we may be able to assist in finding people who could help with such things as structure, training, workshops, and other supports in order to help maintain the core values throughout the system and process; however, the main leverage for change will come from the people on the ground. Ethiopians, with God's help, must free themselves.

Conclusion:

It is time to achieve a consensus among political parties. This means sealing a deal to cooperate and to work out your major differences; not necessarily the minor differences, which are considered negotiable. Oftentimes minor issues cause major divisions; instead, let us focus on the important issues. There is a major difference between negotiable and non-negotiable issues. Non-negotiable issues cannot be given up without sabotaging the entire effort. An example of such is the critical need to replace a system of ethnic-based domination with a system of government that is inclusive, fair and just to both the majorities and minorities.

A negotiable issue may have varying sides, sometimes both legitimate, but the outcome will not jeopardize the larger goals and explains the need for multiple organizations to promote a variety of positions. More simply, major on the major issues and work out the minor ones. Try not to compete but instead try to complement each other. Focus on a working structure, recruiting and making sure there are representatives from all over. Build on the youth who make up 65% of our population. It is their future. Involve women, farmers, miners and the urban poor. Challenge students and unemployed youth. Design campaign strategies. Prove to the Ethiopian people you are serious this time. Call on God for his help. It will not be easy.

Expect to serve instead of being served. As many Ethiopian Christians just celebrated Easter, they should remember that Jesus became a servant to offer his life for others. This example is one we should model no matter what faith tradition we come from. Give up personal ambition for it will take extraordinary acts of serving the common good of the people over self-interest to solve the crisis before us. If we dwell on selfish motives, anger, hurt, revenge or violence, our country may fall apart, but if we act justly, love mercy and walk humbly before our God, will He not heal our land and show us the right path to a new and more inclusive, just and prosperous Ethiopia for all? The future may look grim, but with God, nothing is impossible!

May God soften your hearts towards each other in order for you to see you are brothers and sisters and always will be. May God reward you as you stand firm with the humility, love, respect and wisdom that will help restore life to a darkened land!

Respectfully your brother in this struggle to help bring truth, justice, reconciliation, healing and peace to our beautiful people and land,



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