

Speaking Truth to Power: Obang Metho's Timely Letter to the TPLF

Ato Obang Metho, the Executive Director for the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) and the well-known human rights advocate among Ethiopians and friends of Ethiopia, recently sent a historic and principled letter to the leaders of the TPLF (<http://www.solidaritymovement.org/amharic/140904-Open-Letter-to-the-TPLF.pdf>), highlighting the dangerous trajectory our country finds itself under the TPLF's apartheid-like governance policy. It is a historic letter because no one has systematically documented a protest letter addressed to the leaders of the TPLF on the fundamentally flawed nature of their ethnic policy, the danger it poses for the future of our people, and the need to come-up with an all-encompassing alternative strategy. It is principled because the letter stems from a passion for fundamental freedom, human rights, and democracy for all Ethiopians and harbors no ill will or hatred toward anyone, including the TPLF leadership. In short, the letter is a clarion call for those responsible and their supporters to stop the ominous tumbling cascade and open-up to reform and reconciliation before things are out of hand and too late. It captures the agony of the present and the aspirations for the future. I see it as a challenge not only to the TPLF leadership and its members but to each one of us, regardless of our unique background, to take a critical look at the apartheid-like system foisted upon us and to adopt a principled position to seek a negotiated acceptable solution.

Ato Obang's letter is respectful but does not mince words at pointing the dangers of ethnic politics and the incalculable damages it has already inflicted on Ethiopia and its people, including what it has done to Obang's own ethnic group – the suspected murder of over 420 innocent ethnic Anuakes under the TPLF in 2003. Despite these atrocities, he holds no grudges and displays remarkable love and forgiveness toward his political opponents for the sake of lasting peace. His letter argues that ethnic politics is an abomination that is devoid of morality, ethics, religion, logic or the rule of law, hence must be discarded. Most importantly, it argues that such a system is nihilistic and antithetical to peaceful co-existence and the pursuit of sustainable development in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country like ours. Ato Obang urges the TPLF leaders and their supporters to overcome their suspicion and fear and embrace Ethiopia and all Ethiopians.

The Ethnic federation of the sort the TPLF is dogmatically pursuing is not a benign, misguided policy but a toxic prescription that is eating away the social, cultural, and historic fabric that holds the people and the country together. What is scary is that it inhibits the cultivation of a common heritage, assimilation, and destiny essential for the healthy survival and growth of the nation. It has created an unhealthy "them" and "us" mentality among Ethiopians of all hues and persuasions, laying a fertile ground for pitting citizens against each other at the slightest sign of misunderstanding or discord. The pitfalls of such a misguided policy are in the open for any rational and sane person to see. As the direct result of officially-sanctioned policies of the TPLF and by virtue of its total dominance of the Ethiopian government, discrimination is openly exercised in budget and resources allocation among the regions and in the provision of government services. Citizens face blatant discrimination in employment, business, and

educational opportunities. The country's key economic sectors from banking and finance to industry, from transportation to communications, from health services to pharmaceuticals, and from agriculture to food processing have been systematically misappropriated by the TPLF and turned into lucrative financial spigots for the party and its supporters. The country's key public institutions from defense to foreign affairs, from intelligence to immigration, from law enforcement to the security forces have been brought under the total control of the TPLF. They are disproportionately staffed by TPLF party hacks and loyalists and turned into party instruments for the suppression of dissent. As such, there is no clear demarcation between the TPLF and the government. Governmental institutions have been stripped off their independence and the rule of law has been crippled, and therefore, there is no avenue for redress. Essentially, the government is there to serve and advance not the interests of the people but that of the TPLF. We should not be fooled by Ethiopia's much talked about economic progress, because any current achievement in the sector should not be confused with a broad-based sustainable economic progress that has taken root for the benefit of the majority.

The independent media is obliterated, opposition politics is suppressed, civil society is stifled, and academic freedom is curtailed. The state media is co-opted into an instrument of propaganda to foster division, misinform and confuse, instill fear, and dehumanize critical voices. Religious and cultural institutions have been infiltrated and shamefully silenced from preaching the truth, justice, equality and freedom. As such, the TPLF has purposely closed off all possible avenues for constructive criticism, and in the proverbial sense, is dancing naked to its own discordant tune. In this type of stifling environment, brave gadflies emerge to tell the truth head-on and seek solutions. Ato Obang has become that sorely needed gadfly by courageously and publicly broaching the subject on everybody's mind. His argument is that the blatant discriminatory policy of favoring TPLF members, who are exclusively from Tigray, over other citizens, is morally reprehensible, illegal, and should be rejected by all of us. That the party's discriminatory policy is building resentment against the party and its political base and can no longer be ignored. That unless this injustice is remedied and the abhorrent policy reversed through dialogue and compromise, the accumulating grievance could nudge the nation into an ethnic conflict and undesirable outcomes. He sees it as our national duty to discuss the "elephant in the room" openly and candidly and seek a better model that would guarantee our common future and aspirations. In that sense, the letter carries our collective demand to end the subjugation of the multitude by the few and our yearning for a fair and equitable system.

Thanks to Ato Obang, no self-respecting person can hide any longer behind shenanigans and illogical arguments to prop-up or ignore this morally-bankrupt and illegal system. Despite past disappointments, I for one, hope the letter would not fall on deaf ears. I am optimistic because it also directly appeals to our Tigrayan brothers and sisters to serve as bridges for the change we so desperately and urgently need. One thinks of Ato Abreha Desta, a compatriot who is paying dear price in TPLF dungeons for encouraging dialogue and reform. A brighter Ethiopia lays in the uplifting visions and sacrifices of Obang, Abreha, and multitude of others. I hope and pray that many other Tigrayans quietly agonizing behind the scene would come out in the open and encourage needed reconciliation and reform. I am sure such compatriots would find

principled, reliable and solid partners in Ato Obang and like-minded reformers from all corners of Ethiopia.

By the same token, it is disappointing, but not surprising, that some zealot TPLF hardliners and supporters have resorted to raw bigotry and foul language to attack Ato Obang for sending the historic and principled letter to their party and leaders. This attack is not just on Ato Obang but on each one of us. The TPLF and its supporters at minimum should apologize to Ato Obang, condemn the bigotry targeted at him in no uncertain terms, and take concrete action to expel such bigots from their party. Similarly, member and affiliate parties of the EPRDF should condemn this vile bigotry in the strongest terms possible and demand action from the TPLF, if they are indeed about equality and fairness and have a scintilla of independence.

THANK YOU, Ato Obang for being the voice of the voiceless and an inspiration to millions!!!