



NEW OPPORTUNITIES POST-FAKE-ELECTION: IT IS THE PEOPLES' TIME NOW

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(Washington, DC)-- The fake and unlawful election of May 24, 2015 is over in Ethiopia. No one is surprised with the sweeping victory of the incumbent regime, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), over the stifled opposition. *Over the last five years, the EPRDF, which is mainly controlled by one ethnic group making up 6% of the population, the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), has focused enormous efforts on closing all political space to any contenders. They are now claiming themselves the winners—by a landslide.* Although the final "count" is not yet in; some early reports indicate the EPRDF has "won" every seat in parliament—a 100% victory. This highly unpopular regime has somehow managed to improve upon the results of 2010 when they received a mere 99.6% of the vote. What is surprising is their apparent lack of shame and embarrassment when everyone knows the results are blatantly false.

Thanks to new technology, pictures of some of the obvious manipulations by election officials are already being posted on the Internet. For example, election results are hand-recorded on official documents. These documents carry the logo of the election board and are signed and dated by election officials; yet, one can see that the numbers have been repeatedly crossed out and changed to the advantage of the EPRDF candidates only. This resulted in some candidates being listed multiple times with various different numbers of votes. A specific example is of a Blue Party candidate who was winning by nearly 800 votes over the EPRDF candidate. The Blue Party candidate's votes were crossed out and the lead disappeared. Conversely, the EPRDF candidate's lower numbers were crossed out and replaced with much higher numbers, but the continuing manipulation of the number of votes could easily be seen and occurred multiple times in some cases. No one knows why votes suddenly disappeared for non-EPRDF candidates while large numbers were added to the regime's candidates. The election board did not even make an effort to hide what they were doing, not anticipating that the documents would be leaked.

Reports are also surfacing regarding people voting for the EPRDF on behalf of absent family members—for example, a man for his pregnant wife or a man for his elderly father. These votes and others like it were all accepted when they were cast for the ruling party. In other cases, local officials demanded to see how people were voting and intimidated any who did not want to vote for the EPRDF. One election official was filmed harassing a voter, saying if the voter did not vote for the EPRDF he would not get salt, sugar or anything.

Those within the TPLF/EPRDF who have a sense of morality should know it is time to stand with the rest of Ethiopians in opposition to this shameful injustice. Donor countries, who speak of a commitment to strengthening Ethiopia's democratic institutions, encouraging the opening up of more political space, and the furthering of human and civil rights, should realize that support for this ethnic-apartheid regime is not only totally incompatible with these goals, but it is also immoral.

These brazen violations of the process and bullying of the people are indications of the TPLF/EPRDF's arrogance and belief that they are invincible. To outsiders they may use democratic rhetoric and carry on the pretense of an election for the benefit of Western donors; but at the ground level, they lack any conscience as they steal the election.

Reports indicate that some TPLF officials are further aggravating the situation with sarcastic and challenging remarks. One example was an official who boasted about the TPLF's 100% victory and then incited the people by asking them what they were going to do about it. He then added that winning this election proves what the Obama administration and the Under Secretary of the US State Department, Wendy Sherman, recently said about expecting the election to be "free, fair, credible and democratic." Nothing is further from the truth and all Ethiopians know it. They also know that the TPLF/EPRDF have done nothing for the people or for the country. No one buys what they are saying except themselves.

What this TPLF official and others do not understand is that the people of Ethiopia will make the decision what to do and when. In fact, we may actually find that the TPLF/EPRDF actions will backfire, creating one of the most opportune times in many years to change the course of direction in Ethiopia. We are highly encouraged about these indications. However, it does depend on whether or not the people are ready and willing to make use of this opportunity.

We see several different options:

1. Maintain the status quo
2. Collaborate while remaining in ethnic, political, regional, religious, and sectarian groups
3. Join together as one force, in a non-political, non-violent, principle-based movement for democratic change for all Ethiopians

Option one will mean we remain in our separate groups. This means working as sub-groups, focusing on making improvements for these sections of Ethiopians, possibly even hoping to take the position of the TPLF/EPRDF. Those without hope or in competition with others will resist these efforts due to lack of any assurance of being included in the benefits or wanting to take charge themselves. Still others will continue to suffer under this flawed model of governance. This approach is what brought the current regime into power. It is easily exploited by the TPLF/EPRDF in maintaining division among the opposition and is ineffective in bringing change; however, our familiarity with it can entrap us.

Option two will improve our chances; however, where core principles are not shared or when groups see collaboration only as a means to gain dominance for their own group or sub-section of Ethiopian society rather than for all; this effort will fail. If by chance one sectarian-based group succeeds, the interests of others may be ignored or forgotten. The legitimate interests of sectarian groups can be best advanced through a fair, just and free Ethiopian system of government.

Option three provides the opportunity to join together around shared principles which incorporate the interests of both large and powerful groups as well as those of the minorities and the less powerful. The goal is a change to a more equitable, free and fair system; not simply a change of power-holders. It is also far more effective for one strong and united group to call for change than for independent groups. It may be time to rethink the effectiveness of our previous modus operandi and consider what could bring a better, more sustainable result.

It may have become clearer than ever that an ethnic-based or regional-based approach will only prolong the TPLF/EPRDF. If it has not worked in 24 years, a new strategy is needed. Furthermore, even if this approach were to be successful, which is doubtful; it would likely produce another tribal-based system that promotes one group over another.

The election results should make it clear that the only way to confront the TPLF/EPRDF and win over many within its ranks is to join together in one strategic and coordinated effort. We must learn to at least tolerate each other and respect the rights of those outside our groups. You do not have to love each other, but if we share core values, we should be able to work together towards common goals.

If we want to move forward, our goals must reach beyond ourselves and include the goal of lessening the suffering of others. It is not about political leaders competing for dominance, but about serving the interests of the greater good and about the survival of Ethiopians of our country. This is about saving lives in this time of great tension. Some are angry and want to lash out, but it will be the innocent of this generation and the next who will bear much of the burden if the situation explodes into a violent bloodbath. This is not who we are nor is it who we should become.

Some foreigner governments say there is no viable alternative in Ethiopia so they will wait until it explodes and then they will know who the players are. This is not an option for us. If violence begins, it will be Ethiopians killing each other. If we join together to bring about an Ethiopia conducive to free and fair elections, we can compete for political opportunities in the future. We can lobby or represent the interests of sectarian interest groups in a civil and effective way. Above all, it is about the survival of our country, our people and our descendants.

It is now up to us to plan for a better future. We are ready to do that and are already taking steps in that direction. The real election has not taken place yet. Our votes can be acted upon in the days and months ahead. It is not a time to be discouraged; but instead, it is an opportunity to learn from what has happened and to set a new agenda for the next five years. This agenda should be one that will liberate this country from a dictatorship and ethnic-apartheid system where the few thrive and the majority hardly survives. This is the beginning of the movement of the people. If there is a rally in the coming days, weeks or months; it should be a rally of the people—not of a party, a tribe, a region or a religion. It should embrace all of the people of Ethiopia—putting humanity before ethnicity—because freedom, justice, and well being is far more attainable and sustainable when we care about our neighbors—for no one is free until all are free!

Ethiopian people in the Diaspora should prepare, standing ready to respond to what the people do at home. There must be a coordinated effort. All groups should play their roles—religious leaders, civil society leaders, youth, the media, journalists, business leaders, intellectuals, people who have financial means, and other various groups and individuals. It is when each of us contributes our share that we will be most effective.

We know the games of divide and conquer that defeated Ethiopians following the 2005 election. We must be cautious if the TPLF/EPRDF attempts to reach out to one group in order to divide and defeat the heart of the struggle. They can even engage foreigners to play into their hands in order to achieve their purposes. We must be discerning with those who want negotiation in order to ensure it is genuine so that the mistakes of 2005 are not repeated. All dishonest efforts should be rejected; on the other hand, it may be a better time now than ever before for people to join together as one force.

It was twenty-four years ago today (May 28, 1991) when the TPLF rebels marched into the capital city Addis Ababa to take over the parliament, massacring people along the way, many of them innocent people. They took power by the bullet, not by the ballot. No wonder they do not believe in elections so as they celebrate this anniversary, they will boast about their accomplishments, but all the people know that they never offered anything better to the people or to the country than the previous dictatorial regime. In some ways they have made it worse through their ethnic-apartheid policies that have divided the people as well as the lack of security and economic opportunity that has caused millions to endanger their lives as they sought refuge or better lives abroad.

Do not be fooled, they know what they have done in killing their way to power and dividing the people to sustain their rule. We must find a much better way that includes everyone, including them and their descendants.

May we seek God's guidance, strength, and help through these days of opportunity. May we reach out to our Ethiopian brothers and sisters, regardless of ethnicity or religion, in reconciliation and solidarity.

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