



January 4, 2018

IS THE EPRDF OFFER FOR REAL?

IS THE RELEASE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS AN HONEST FIRST STEP TO PRODUCTIVE DIALOGUE LEADING TO RECONCILIATION, MEANINGFUL REFORMS AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE OR IS IT A MANIPULATIVE SURVIVAL TECHNIQUE FOR THE EPRDF?

---FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE---

Washington, DC-- On January 3, 2018, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn publicly declared the EPRDF'S (Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front) decision to release all political prisoners and to close down the infamous Maekelawi detention center as a confidence-building measure with the goal of promoting a political dialogue and national reconciliation. **Is it for real?**

If real, this is unexpected good news for Ethiopians and long overdue. Ethiopians, including ourselves, have been calling for this action for years, but increasingly more in the last months of widespread protests where our political prisoners have been a focus. Unfortunately, instead of responding to the concerns of the protesters, federal security forces have used brutal force to silence them, resulting in the killing and wounding of many Ethiopians, especially our youth. Now, will their concerns be addressed?

Additionally, Ethiopians know that thousands of political prisoners from every region are being held in various places, but Maekelawi detention center is known to be one of the worst of them. It is a place where many Ethiopians have died and countless others have been inhumanely tortured. If these promises are true, the closing of this detention center of torture is very good news for thousands of people and their families.

In the past, the EPRDF would not even admit there were political prisoners in Ethiopia. Even yesterday, January 2, the EPRDF seemed to be going in a different direction when the EPRDF's resolution for their party was made public following an 18-day EPRDF meeting regarding the crisis in the party and country. The summary of their end conclusions made it appear as if they lived in a totally different reality than other Ethiopians, as the recommendations seemed to endorse more authoritarianism as the answer, many achievements on their part and a serious lack of acknowledgement of what they have actually done wrong. Then today, the prime minister declared the release of all political prisoners. What has happened?

People are wondering if something of significance is really going on or is it simply a knee-jerk reaction meant to “manage” and ultimately suppress the increasing protests in the country with some negotiated, but superficial, resolution of the conflict— like the release of political prisoners? For example, who decides who is a political prisoner? Will there be strings attached with unreasonable pre-conditions that will silence these people? There are other possibilities that the entire offer is simply a manipulative survival technique for the EPRDF.

We hope not; but yet, Ethiopians remain suspicious. Few will celebrate until the prime minister's promises are followed up with real action. That means the actual release of ALL political prisoners throughout the entire country—those whose names we know and those unknown to us.

It is too soon to tell what will happen, but if the EPRDF carries out this intent with the actual release of all political prisoners, it will be seen as a meaningful first step towards a national dialogue and reconciliation effort. This is an alternative for the EPRDF that could be in their best interests as well as in the interests of Ethiopia and its people.

We in the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) will closely watch the process for if there is a genuine openness to transformative change, we will heartily applaud the move as a welcome beginning and will fully engage in the process as long as it continues to be genuine.

BACKGROUND

*If real, the credit for the release of prisoners and the closing of Maekelawi goes to the people who have been demanding real change for the last 27 years. During this time, the regime has been challenged by many of the people who sought their God-given rights. As a result, many lives have been lost, countless people injured, disappeared, tortured and locked up in jails, detention centers and prisons. It has resulted in untold grief, suffering and hardship among the victims, families and communities affected. **Many unknown Ethiopians have sacrificed and these are the unsung heroes and heroines we may never know, but hopefully, their struggle is beginning to be acknowledged today. This is a result of their courage, persistence, resilience and their efforts to put pressure for change and correction on the regime.***

This is what is called the fruit of a peaceful struggle. This did not happen as a result of some rebels capturing a town or killing a number of EPRDF soldiers; but instead, it is a result of many, like the young university students, who peacefully stood up with their hands crossed, especially the Oromo youth, the Kero and the Amhara youth, the Fano. They did not point guns at others, but made a powerful, heartfelt statement. It is these youth as well as human rights activists, journalists, opposition leaders and others who took a stand for truth and right, even knowing it might jeopardize their lives or take away their freedom, all of whom that deserve credit. These brave leaders could have gone abroad, but instead maintained a struggle from within to demand something already promised in the constitution of their country.

Countless Ethiopians, from every ethnic group, background, region and walk of life, put their lives on the line for a better Ethiopia where the rule of law and basic rights are for everyone. They contributed to the regime's decision today; if it is real, and we commend them for this.

This is an abrupt development after twenty-seven years of EPRDF deception and dishonesty that must be tested. For example, Bekele Gerba was recently "legally released" from Kaliti prison by a judge, but prison officials would not cooperate in actually releasing him from custody. This kind of thing is not new and people expect the worst for good reason.

For example, the EPRDF resolution that came out a few days ago is completely opposite to this newly proposed action. Why? Which is correct? It does show the amount of pressure being exerted on the regime, but we hope the EPRDF will act swiftly to release ALL the political prisoners without conditions. Additionally, if they are to build trust among the people, the EPRDF must repeal the Anti-Terrorism law, the Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSO law) and then initiate a genuine, inclusive dialogue that will lead to a transitional process, reconciliation, meaningful reforms and restorative justice.

WHAT NEXT?

Ethiopia and its systems of power will not easily be transformed after so many years of ethnic-based power and control by a tiny minority and where ethnic apartheid policies for hegemony have divided the people for many years. *As a result, people to people reconciliation will be critically important. Even families, communities, and religious groups have been divided, using the differences to maintain control, creating a factionalized society. It will require humility, wisdom, compassion, forgiveness, correction and a willingness to talk to each other, not about each other.*

The building blocks to a better, more just and more inclusive Ethiopia are based on God-given principles, some of which we have repeatedly encouraged for years— **putting humanity before ethnicity and caring about our neighbors near and far, not only because it is right, but also because no one is free until all free.** As a society, from the top down to the grassroots levels, these principles must be integrated into everyday life. *What Ethiopia needs is not replacing one ethnic group with another ethnic group, whether another ethnic minority or a majority ethnic group, who will rule under the same philosophy or worldview, but one that embraces all the people.*

Whatever decisions PM Hailemariam and others in the EPRDF make *must be based on these principles in order to build needed trust and to bring about reconciliation and the desired results—nothing short of social transformation. Only when there is wide participation and endorsement by the people, will it sustainably work.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

We call on all Ethiopians, especially the people back home, to stand together as one people. We are one family; we do not only share land, but we share blood. Every one of us has intrinsic God-given value.

We call on our youth (the Kero and Fano) to remain strong in standing up for these principles that will better their future rather than to repeat the mistakes of the past.

We call on opposition leaders to stand together for a common vision based on these principles. This is not the time to compete for leadership, but to join together to help bring a better future for all. It is a time to work together to create a platform for productive and genuine dialogue. This should not be a sectarian struggle, but one for all of us that will build trust in our institutions.

All of us should reach out beyond our circles. Groups that are organized by ethnicity should work together, reaching out to others while still speaking out for your own group for no one is free until all are free.

We call on religious leaders and elders to play a much-needed role as reconcilers and voices of wisdom and moral courage and to stand up for what is true, right and good. We call on people of faith to pray, calling out to God for His divine help at this time. Pray for our enemies as well as for ourselves. We are asking for the humanly impossible, so let us humble ourselves and call on the God who knew us from the beginning.

We call on the EPRDF to support the people and take a strong role in bringing an inclusive transitional government that can bring about meaningful reforms, reconciliation and restorative justice for all. The evidence clearly shows us that ethnic federalism did not work and instead, contributed to ethnic violence and the inability of people to live peacefully.

It has also undermined efforts to grow the economy due to alienation between groups and the inability to effectively collaborate. Instead, join the people and exert pressure from within to demand genuine changes that advance sustainable freedom and wellbeing for all the people.

The same is critically important for parliamentarians: to admit the need for a better Ethiopia for everybody, including those people within the EPRDF and their children. We are fighting for everyone, including you. Regimes will come and go, but this is a time to join the people and use your role in the parliament to help achieve advancement for everyone.

Other leaders within the regional governments should also join together. Listen to the people from those regions left out of the EPRDF for years, so all can join in the effort in creating a new and better Ethiopia for all. The pretense of unity will not work, only the real thing.

Prime Minister Hailemariam: This is a golden opportunity to be an example of Ethiopia to the world. Stay strong so as not to contribute to its downfall. You have a chance now to reset the direction of Ethiopia.

International community and donors can take this opportunity to pressure the regime to stand with the people in finding a lasting and peaceful resolution.

A SPECIAL WORD TO THE TPLF AND TIGRAYANS

For the TPLF, you have fewer and fewer choices. Do you really want to use further violent authoritarian force over the EPRDF and all others, which would be destructive to you and everyone else, or are you willing to join with other Ethiopians in pushing forward an agenda of transitional leadership, meaningful reforms and reconciliation that will lay the groundwork for you to be in new relationship with your Ethiopian brothers and sisters?

We especially reach out to the Tigrayan people who are part of us. Exert pressure on the TPLF and others to make the changes necessary for this transition to be positive for all Ethiopians, including you. We all need a new beginning to a society based on valuing each other as people created by God and for each of us to take the meaning of this seriously.

As a member of the family of Ethiopians, my dear Tigrayans, I, Obang Metho, must tell you the truth as someone who cares about you and the outcome of this predicament. My conscience will not allow me to pretend with you when doing so could be hurtful to you and others. This is not the first time I have said it, on June 11, 2009, I sent an open letter to fellow Tigrayan brothers and sisters. I urged them, especially those Tigrayan brothers and sisters who are benefiting from the TPLF regime at the expense of the majority of other Ethiopians to say, **“No, not in my name,”** to the ethnic favoritism that was blatantly obvious to everyone. Even foreigners know the key positions are held by Tigrayans in every sector of society.

As a result, there is so much hatred and resentment towards you that I am afraid it might explode and cause so much destruction and harm. Click at the link to read my open letter <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/090611OpenLetterToMyFellowTigrayans.php>. The ethnic hatred fear is what led me to also send an open letter to Meles, click at the following link to read the letter in English <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/091130OpenLetterToPrimeMinisterMelesZenawi.php> or Amharic

<http://www.solidaritymovement.org/amharic/091130SMNELetterToMeles.pdf> and then to the TPLF Central Committee, on August 2, 2014, entitled ***“Wake Up! Your Ethnic-Based Apartheid Government has Made You the Prisoners of a Self-Destructive Future! Only Morally Righteous and Genuine Actions will Free You Now!”***.

Click at the following link to read that letter in English

[http://www.solidaritymovement.org/downloads/140802-Open-Letter-to-the-TPLFBR.pdf](http://www.solidaritymovement.org/downloads/140802-Open-Letter-to-the-Chairman-of-the-TPLFBR.pdf) and in Amharic <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/amharic/140904-Open-Letter-to-the-TPLF.pdf>. Both letter were ignored. We cannot ignore this any longer, for your own sake and for the sake of our entire society.

Now is the time to vocally speak up and embrace reform instead of live an illusion, which can make things worse. Face reality and only then can you do something good about it. Then we have a place to start in talking with each other genuinely about our shared future with truth. Even the things we are ashamed of we must face and talk about if we are to be freed to build a healthier society together. You are part of us and you already are isolated and alienated from the rest of Ethiopians. This is unacceptable and must be confronted and dealt with effectively.

We know that all Tigrayans have not benefited from the domination by the TPLF, but still, a great many have and this must be acknowledged truthfully. If we want lasting change, we want you to speak up. The truth frees people and you currently are not free. No one is free until we all are free and that includes you. We want you to be part of the family of Ethiopians.

CLOSING

In closing, we in the SMNE do not know if the prime minister’s promises on behalf of the EPRDF to release ALL political prisoners and to close Maekelawi detention center are “for real” or not. Yet, just having the prime minister say this has made an impact that will not easily disappear. Instead, ***it has incited the public and raised their expectations to a level not seen in recent years. Few will now settle for less than the original promises because we all know of the injustice that put these Ethiopians behind bars and the lives destroyed by torture and death at Maekelawi. Ethiopians should not reduce our expectations and demands. This is a time for Ethiopia to move ahead for the cause of truth, freedom, justice and the rights of ALL our people. May God help us!***

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For more information, contact Mr. Obang Metho, Executive Director of the SMNE.
Email: Obang@solidaritymovement.org