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WHAT KIND OF LEADERSHIP IS NEEDED IN ETHIOPIA TO AVERT ETHNIC VIOLENCE AT THIS TIME OF CRISIS?

Is the TPLF willing to take the country down with them, thinking they could simply secede from the country as an escape plan and leave the rest with chaos?

Allegedly, the TPLF and some of the people of Tigray are seriously considering seceding from Ethiopia, believing they can no longer safely “lead” the country due to the rising opposition and ethnic-based resentment from large numbers of Ethiopians. They may have been shaken by the recent outburst of destruction of Tigrayan or TPLF government properties in the Amhara region in retribution for the violent killing of at 32 people by federal security forces in the town of Woldia, Kobo and Mersa. The reason? These young people in Woldia were singing anti-government songs. They were among the thousands of believers who had been observing the day of Epiphany, the holiest day of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church when believers come out to identify with the baptism of Jesus Christ. Amongst those who were murdered in Woldia was a 12 years old Yoseph Eshetu Tessema.

TPLF Extreme Sensitivity to Anti-Government Songs Leads to Deadly Over-Reaction and Destructive Retaliation from Others

Anger and outrage quickly resulted in the area in the aftermath of the slaughter of young Amhara, leading to the burning of buildings and property by others in retaliation. As details of their deaths circulated to other areas and regions, hatred and anger has increased; not only against the TPLF, but also generalized to others from that region. This is a very dangerous time and the TPLF know it.

Apparently, it is believed they will be safer if they “retreat” into Greater Tigray— an original long-term plan from the beginning— and let the rest of Ethiopia, in their own words, “fight it out” among themselves. However, the likelihood of such internal fighting continuing on is greatly lessened if they in fact secede, and can instead be interpreted as an attempt to shift the blame to others, despite the fact they remain the major, but not solo, contributor to a potential ethnic-based explosion of violence.

The signs are present that things may get out of hand quickly and if they do, the result could mean more killing, more destruction and even the possibility of a larger-scale massacre or genocide. If the TPLF did not also see the signs, the whole idea of secession would not be on the discussion table right now.

Can an Explosion of Ethnic Violence and the Destabilization of Ethiopia Be Averted?

Recently, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn gave a list of eight identified problems for which the EPRDF was responsible and promised to take corrective action. This announcement followed an 18-day meeting of the EPRDF. The day after this statement, he announced the EPRDF decision to release all political prisoners; however, by the next day, it was called a mistake in translation. Additionally, despite his prior statement to take corrective action to “fix things,” more than 32 of our young people have been massacred after the popular revolt in Northern Wollo of the Amhara region in the town of Woldia, Kobo Mersa and not only in the Amhara region, but also in Oromia.

What is going on in the upper echelon discussions of the TPLF/EPRDF? The back and forth decision-making appears to be evidence of the deep internal divisions rumored to be going on among the TPLF/EPRDF with the TPLF losing increasing power and control. Increased violence, broken promises, harsh crackdowns and now signs of secession signal the serious volatility of this situation where few can predict what will happen. How can we help avert a potential crisis of ethnic violence and destruction? Can the downward descent of the country be reversed?

The Rise of New Principle-Based Leadership

In the midst of this very dangerous scenario, another factor has arisen that is very positive— the emergence of newly strengthened, courageous and morally principled leaders, like Obo Lemma Megerssa, president of Oromiya Regional State, Ato Gedu Andargachew, President of Amhara Regional State and Dr. Abiy Ahmed who have crossed over ethnic divides to facilitate the formation of a new alliance between previously alienated large groups like the Amhara and the Oromo. This is significant and a sign of real hope!

In order to reverse the direction from violence and destruction to dialogue and justice will require leaders who will prioritize the larger interests of the country and of all its people. This is not about ethnic leaders, but instead means empowering servant leaders who will try to find a solution to the problem. We respect the fact that someone like Obo Lemma, Dr. Abiy and Ato Gedu are speaking for the whole, who thinks beyond one ethnic group, political group, region, or religious group, with the genuine goal of caring for the future well being of all Ethiopians. The goal is to prevent chaos, the killing of each other and the destruction of the property and infrastructure of the country while instead seeking dialogue, reconciliation and meaningful corrective changes.

Lemma is from the Oromo ethnic group, but he has spoken for other Ethiopians as well. The following is a translation of remarks given by Obo Lemma Megerssa: *“We only have one Ethiopia. We have recorded it for history. It is when we [ourselves] change and work for change that our country changes. So therefore, to change Ethiopia we must change Oromiya. As leaders, we have our shares of duties and responsibilities. In all aspects of the economy, it is necessary and proper to take appropriate and corrective action. Only the truth matters. We must first give precedence to justice and affirm it. We must ensure respect for the rule law. It is not going to be done by godfathers jailing people here and there. Perhaps such things may work once but no more.*

The following is a translation of remarks given by Ato Gedu Andargachew, President of Amhara Regional State, at the “Amhara-Oromo Discussion Forum” in Bahr Dar, a city in north-western Ethiopia, on November 4, 2017. *“Ethiopians have used our diversity in traditions, ethnicities, religions, history and other things to build a house for ourselves and used our diversity as strength and mark of beauty, and not as sources of antagonistic division. Indeed, our diversity has been the amazingly distinctive feature and pride of our Ethiopiawinet. The strong bond in the mosaic of our Ethiopiawinet is reflected in the diversity of our religions, traditions, languages and cultural practices and common unity and our honored identity. The linkage of our unity over the ages has remained very strong. It is not something that dissipates like vapor [steam] that dissipates in the air. It is not a thing swept by the wind and scattered or easily broken. It is a unity that is deeply rooted. It is a great unity with immeasurable depth and strength. It is a powerful unity that is deeply rooted. Our forefathers who made and preserved our history were not without differences and not without their obstacles and hinderances. Despite their differences they kept our beautiful Ethiopia shedding their blood and sacrificing their bones, protecting her from invasion by the enemy. They chose to stand together not apart because of their differences. That’s how they gained victory together, grew together and delivered the country to us.”*

We also need such leaders from Tigray who can speak on behalf of not only Tigrayans, but also for the best interests of all Ethiopians. In fact, we need like-minded leaders from all over our country to help save us from ourselves and any unrestrained emotions and anger. We have at times resisted such leadership, but it is the only kind of leadership that will bring peace, freedom, and well being to this country. The public should be informed about what kind of leaders to support. It does not matter what ethnicity these leaders are, but instead, if they are genuine and care more about leading in the right direction for the well being of all of us rather than someone who has personal ambition for power or material gain. Let the public come out and call those who have already proven themselves to be good leaders who might step out to do the work and start a dialogue.

We cannot pretend there is no crisis in Ethiopia as the sparks are already being seen in various places. The temperature of hatred is rising daily toward the Tigrayan and the pressure cannot be reduced without moral, strong and principled leadership calling for calm, dialogue and common sense that can restrain the people from taking the matter into their own hands. The need is urgent. It is a matter of time and little time is left. We especially need these Tigrayan leaders to join with others for a level-headed, inclusive dialogue so that all people can be protected now and in the future.

The relationship between young Amhara, Fano, and young Oromo, Kero, has flourished to the point it has greatly resolved—thanks to them and Lemma's, Dr. Abiy's, Ato Gedu's and others' contributions to that. They seem to have overcome the historical problems between them that the TPLF worked hard to maintain as a defensive tactic against the majority. However, now the common focus is not on the EPRDF as much as it is on the TPLF, who are now viewed as a common enemy; but it is now going beyond that to include all Tigrayans. Ato Meles Zenawi, his ethnic based party, the TPLF, planted the seeds of the ethnic hatred crisis long ago and they are now reaping a harvest of anger, but they are not alone. This crisis is now affecting all of us, including Tigrayans who have not supported them.

There is great expectation on the Tigray to speak out, but they are not. As one Ethiopian stated on the VOA, "It is difficult for the Tigrayans to criticize the TPLF as they expect to be treated like the Biblical Ark of the Covenant that no one can touch without dying." Tigrayans are not only facing the anger of the majority, but they also must face a weakening and cornered TPLF. How can we reach out to help them become part of the solution? They are our brothers and sisters and with God's help, we can find a way to reconcile the past, restore justice and live together in peace.

The only way to do this is by dialogue, not violence, and for the Ethiopian people to think beyond themselves. It will take moral boldness, humility and courage to think beyond caving in to reactive emotions that lead to violence, killing and destruction; and to instead, trust in God's way out of this dangerous time.

The highest call is a responsibility to think beyond ourselves; to care about others in the present and future; to put our lives on the line for the betterment of all and the greater purposes; to protect the lives of others, to respect universal rule of law, to correct injustice, to prevent destruction and to help bring a new different future. What does it mean to be human? Short term gratification of angry emotions will bring long term regrets and cycles of violence, vengeance, bloodshed and chronic poverty. We need a different worldview based on truth. The short-sightedness of the past led to a repeat of the past. Let us do it differently this time.

Ethiopia is at a crossroads. Will we find leaders who are virtue-based, moral, mature, who are not personally ambitious for power, who will speak the truth and help us restrain the worst, in order to build the better? Anything less than that will be a boomerang—bringing us back to the same place.

The Call:

Will each of us stretch out our hands to God to seek wisdom, restraint and God's best for our country? Will our people of faith pray for the people of Ethiopia to make the right decisions to avert the worst from happening? Will we pray for leaders of God's choosing to be given wisdom and voice? Will we pray for our enemies? Will we pray for ourselves and all our Ethiopian family that we might become ambassadors of reconciliation and justice in a transformed Ethiopia?

Please spread this message to people beyond your own groups. We will not be complete as the family of Ethiopians until we hear the voices from all, like the: Aari, Agw-Awi, Alaba, Argobba, Bacha, Bench, Bodi, Chara, Dawro, Dime, Dizi, Fedashe, Gamo, Gebato, Gedeo, Goffa, Hadiya, Hamar, Irob, Kambaata, Komo, Konso, Male, Mareqo, Messing, Murle, Nyangatom, Oyda, Qechem, Shita/Upo, Sidamo, Surma, Tembaro, Tsamai, Yem Zeyess and all the eighty plus ethnic groups that make up the people of Ethiopia!

Today is a day of opportunity to make a difference. Will you put humanity before ethnicity or any other differences? Will you reach out to your neighbors and those beyond your own ethnic groups to care about their freedom, rights, respect, well being and future for no one will be free until we all are free? Will you start talking and listening with respect to each other instead of about each other so as to build new relationships that will lead to a new Ethiopia?

May God help us!

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