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LETTER FROM OBANG AND THE SMNE TO THE ETHIOPIAN PEOPLE:

The best opportunity for sustainable and meaningful success must be based on inclusive, principle-based change that protects and upholds the rights and interests of all Ethiopians

Dear Fellow Ethiopian Brothers and Sisters,

Ethiopians have new reason for hope. Over the last sixty days, we have witnessed many encouraging developments that have stirred new depths of hope within us. We should be thankful; yet, the road ahead is long and filled with challenges. Much will be required from all of us if we are to see genuine freedom, justice, reconciliation and healing become the pillars of a revived Ethiopian society.

Hope alone, without responsible action on the part of all our people, will not lead us to a better Ethiopia. Instead, our hopes and dreams are fragile and without care, they can dissipate— devolve into something of lesser or no value— like the evaporation of water among thirsty people, leaving them all the more thirsty and despairing.

Seeds of hope must be nurtured to grow, so that the seeds produce good and abundant fruit that can be harvested and enjoyed. This means we cannot sit back; waiting, criticizing or believing one person, even a leader, or a few persons, can do it alone without support from many others. The call for change that began with our youth, the Qeerro and Fano, became a source of pressure for reforms that inspired our hope. The unexpected resignation of Hailemariam Desalegn and remarkable election of Dr. Abiy by EPRDF followed.

Many of us were moved by Dr. Abiy new vision for an inclusive Ethiopia, also articulated in regionally focused meetings he held with Ethiopians throughout the country, further increasing hope for genuine change. Over this short time period, thousands of political prisoners have been released, including high profile people, like Andargachew Tsige, who was just released this past week after four years in prison on death row. At the same time, we saw the dismissal of charges of terrorism against people like Berhana Nega and Jawar Mohammed, also accompanied by dropping the ban on their media programs, ESAT and OMN. Now, the State of Emergency is expected to be lifted by the Parliament after being approved by the Council of Ministers, two months early.

These developments all signal major changes in the political climate and an opening up of unprecedented opportunity for Ethiopians to bring meaningful change; yet, we should not naively underestimate the obstacles that imperil our path, many of them subtle or hidden.

We should remember two things:

1) *Even responsible action on the part of many can be sabotaged or hijacked if we fail to clearly be guided by universal principles. This includes upholding the rule of law, which also means the rightful process of the law, something that must apply to all people.*

2) It is equally important to not underestimate our own human tendency towards self-serving ambitions and goals that will sabotage or violate our ideals and objectives to protect the rights and interests of all Ethiopians.

Knowing this, core principles and safeguards should be established now so the results are not opposite of what is most hoped for and sought after; but instead, truly reflect the common good for our society.

Possible traps:

- 1. Unrealistic expectations of what will be required to correct decades or centuries of foundational problems can bring impatience and cause some to settle for shortcuts that may sabotage the best outcomes. So many reforms are needed, especially ones that address the very real difficulties of our people within local settings throughout the country, that we need to understand it will take time to resolve these issues and to make corrections. Some of these issues must be prioritized due to urgent conditions; yet, we still must understand that for each person affected, their situation is the one that matters the most to them. This will be difficult to manage and will require many of us to help, hopefully bringing about new ideas to help oneself and others.***
- 2. A principle-based roadmap for our future, through a national dialogue that leads to real reforms and corrections to our system, must come before political agendas or we may sabotage our own hopes and goals. Competing ambitions and agendas for power and leadership will block, hijack or dilute a vision for inclusive rights and voice for all Ethiopians. Setting the foundation for democratic freedom and rights, including minority rights, must be laid firmly in place for Ethiopians to bring genuine, meaningful and sustainable reforms. An opening of the political space starts here, not in reverse order with politics.***

We need voices of wisdom and advocacy on behalf of all Ethiopians, supported by a people-driven process, to ensure reforms and corrections are principle-based and grievances addressed. This has been called a **Sovereign National Conference**, an African process for Africans, based on the African village model found all over the continent where issues are debated until consensus is reached; at which point, even the chief cannot change it. Where it has been allowed to be followed, like in Benin, Ghana, Zambia and South Africa, it has been successful.

Some lessons to consider:

Making a vision thrive in a country like Ethiopia that: 1) has been under an ethnic-based dictatorship for years, 2) where independent institutions do not exist, 3) where society is divided based on ethnicity, and 4) where the needs of the people on the ground have been neglected, is an indication of the fragility of the hope we now have. Without caution, we could see it all fail. This would not be the first time for we have repeatedly missed opportunities in the past. Whether or not we succeed this time is dependent upon a number of factors, not only on PM Abiy, Lemma or a few others.

Learning from our own experience and that of others is critically important. When Haile Selassie was overthrown, ***the people never developed a road map that provided a principle-based vision that would have led to the strengthening of our institutions and to addressing the needs and grievances of all Ethiopians, even though these were the goals of the student movement and what inspired them. Unfortunately, because there were no key independent players in place, the movement was hijacked by the Derg and the contributions and sacrifices of these young people were never realized. Many of those involved are still grieving the loss of their dream. Is this now another opportunity?***

Sadly, when the Derg came to power, the interests of the people of Ethiopia were subjugated by a smaller elite, the resources were confiscated—including young men forcibly taken into military action, and the people cruelly suppressed by a military government, launching a period of time that became known as the “Red Terror.”

In the 1970s, TPLF was formed as a resistance movement that operated in the bush. Other regionally based resistance movements also rose up throughout the country. Those involved became traumatized by years of killing, war and loss, with little opportunity for healing. Violence and force became closely interlinked with fear and survival, especially worsened with the suppression of faith-based institutions. One group was only “safe” when others were under domination, control and threat of harm. Power in the hands of another, meant danger to oneself and one’s collective group; a worldview that still characterizes our current crisis today.

Predictably, when the Derg was overthrown, once again, no independent body was there to come up with a common vision for ALL Ethiopians. How could it when the core fear coming out of the Derg meant ALL Ethiopians outside one’s own group were potential threats to one’s own survival? Therefore, it is no surprise that the system of oppression was hijacked, duplicated to the advantage of a few, and recycled— this time, worsened by deepening ethnic division. Without healing and re-examination of this fear and trauma-produced worldview, it will likely be repeated once again. It is time to break the pattern for the good of ALL of us.

Each time, the failed outcome was greatly determined by decisions made at the beginning, exacerbated by the lack of voices to speak for the whole country; yet, times were different and some alternatives, like the South African model, were still unexplored; however, if people are not careful, Ethiopia could still become worse than what we now have.

Ethiopia is not alone; nor are all examples in the distant past. We can also learn from the recent example of others, such as Egypt after the Arab Spring. Egyptians brought down a thirty year dictatorship, only to have it hijacked, setting the scene for the current military dictatorship to fill in the gap. The Arab Spring began in December 2010 when Tunisian street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest the arbitrary seizing of his vegetable stand by police over failure to obtain a permit. “*The Arab Spring was a series of pro-democracy uprisings that enveloped several largely Muslim countries, including Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Bahrain. The events in these nations generally began in the spring of 2011, which led to the name. However, the political and social impact of these popular uprisings remains significant today, years after many of them ended*”.

To avoid missing this opportunity once again, ***we Ethiopian must learn from past mistakes, take personal responsibility to contribute to a better outcome, focus on building a strong, principle-based foundation before mixing in politics and also consider some specific challenges before us.***

Some specific challenges:

I. Create a safe environment for Tigrayans through this change process, ensuring their protection, like should be done for all Ethiopians.

The Tigray are in a changing situation, certainly causing some to fear insecurity and the need to regroup. This fear has caused many Tigrayans to leave other parts of Ethiopia to return to the Tigray region. ***Who we are as Ethiopians and the viability of a better future for ALL of us will be determined by how we react to each other now. It is imperative that the security of all Ethiopians is ensured and protected during this time of change so reconciliation, meaningful reforms and the restoration of justice can bring increased harmony to our land.***

Many of these Tigrayan Ethiopians fear alienation or collective retribution based on ill will towards past actions of the TPLF or their security forces. This must be addressed promptly so as to assure them and all citizens that the rule of law will be applied to everyone and that Tigrayans will be beneficiaries of its equal application. This is the time to empower the voices of reconciliation and democratic reform among the Tigrayan people. There are many among them who could play a critical role. These are the reconciling voices that can become leaders in an inclusive transition process.

A strong and equally applied rule of law in defense of all citizens is the best insurance policy for peaceful change and Tigrayan engagement in a national dialogue leading to freedom, justice and reconciliation for all of us. This means the military, security forces, and police must be non-political and held accountable by independent authorities and institutions so the rights of all Ethiopians are upheld.

II. Empowerment of local, regional and federal leaders—including elders, religious leaders, youth leaders, and others—will be critically important in finding solutions to the present challenges.

PM Abiy and others have made an excellent effort in connecting with the people of different regions and have received a welcoming response and heard about their needs. *Now, these people are looking for direct benefits and changes on a more local, personal level—proving that what was said, would materialize. This is a need, but also a challenge because what is needed and wanted will be impossible to fulfill quickly due to the deeply entrenched, systemic nature of what’s wrong in the country—years, decades, and centuries in the making. The fastest route may be the engagement of local and regional leaders, not only government leaders, to start talking to each other, not about each other so as to find people-driven solutions to problems and meaningful ways to bring change. More planning about equipping and empowering regions and localities to address local problems may help; but, some meaningful action should be organized at every level—local, regional and federal.*

III. Minority groups should have new voice after years of marginalization and their inclusion will be a new measure of our success as a society.

Minority groups are a new power group that must be considered, particularly in regard to upholding their rights. Issues that affect them are critically important and closely connected to the rights, frequently violated, connected to land, property and resources. Land rights and related reforms will be vitally important, especially due to failures and violations over the past years.

IV. Human rights crimes committed by the State must end with the institution of accountability measures.

State-sponsored human rights crimes must be stopped with immediate accountability measures, including newly spelled out policies, training and other kinds of instruction. National leadership training and support for local leaders as well as for top and mid-level leaders must be instituted and reinforce changes and practices.

V. A call to faith-based leaders, elders, esteemed leaders and others to bring healing, conflict resolution and reconciliation to the people, communities and nation should be instituted.

These leaders must be called upon to organize and develop leadership training, reconciliation, healing of the nation, social welfare problems, and a national prayer effort for the country.

Conclusion:

The best opportunity for sustainable and meaningful success must be based on inclusive, principle-based change that protects and upholds the rights and interests of all Ethiopians and addresses and seeks solutions to the roots of our present and inherited problems.

Consider the example of Nigerian human rights activist and lawyer, Chief Gani Fawehinmi, who strongly advocated for a Sovereign National Conference so as to address the roots of years of governance problems. The following quote from him is from a press conference held on March 22, 2000.

The primary duty of the Sovereign National Conference is to address and find solutions to the key problems afflicting Nigeria since 1914 to date. The concern is to remove all obstacles which have prevented the country from establishing political justice, economic justice, social justice, cultural justice, religious justice and to construct a new constitutional frame-work in terms of the system of government—structurally, politically, economically, socially, culturally and religiously. Chief Gani Fawehinmi (2000)

He died of cancer on September 5, 2009 before realizing his goals for the country. Reportedly, on his death bed, he was to be given an award for his contribution to the country, but refused to accept it because he felt the task for Nigeria, as stated above, had not been completed. Yet, he is remembered by Nigerians for his many contributions to human rights.

Ethiopians may be facing a similar crossroads as that of 2000 when Chief Gani made a case for foundational corrections before moving ahead politically. **What will we do? The choice is ours, but the effect of this choice, for good or ill, will influence the future of all Ethiopians for years to come.**

May God/Allah give us His help, guidance, healing and protection so we may overcome the obstacles ahead. May He give us hearts to do what is right, just and good, caring about the wellbeing of all our people and bringing new life and blessings to our land.

Sincerely yours,

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This letter has been cc to Dr. Abiy, Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia and major news media outlets.