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## My Remarks on Joining the Board of the Ethiopian Press Agency

March 17, 2020

It is honor to have been appointed as a volunteer to the Board Member of the **Ethiopian Press Agency** this past week, an institution with a 79-year-old history. It is not something I ever expected; however, because of my commitment to truth, accountability, freedom of speech and the free flow of information to and from all our people, I am grateful for this opportunity to help advance these values in this organization.

First of all, I would like to thank those who nominated me to be on this board as well as the Prime Minister who gave endorsement for that nomination and the members of the Ethiopian Parliament who voted to approve my appointment. It resulted in being sworn in by the Chief Justice of Ethiopia on March 12.



*This position is very different from running for a political office or being appointed for a political post with a salary. Instead, it is a means to contribute to the advancement of democratic ideals and practices, something I have been working on for more than 16 years.*

*This appointment would have been unthinkable three years ago when these same values and principles were clearly opposed by the government and the Parliament. It is a meaningful indication of how far we have come over the last two years. Even though we still have a long way to go, it is a very encouraging sign of new opportunity to bring greater access to the free flow of information in this nation.*



*As a result, I am compelled to do my best to help build a strong system in Ethiopia that provides access to information along with the freedom to express it; where the values of truth and conscience matter and robustly contribute to the public dialogue. It would serve as a representative voice of the Ethiopian people, by the people and for the people, promoting greater accountability throughout the public and private sectors. It is foundational to freedom and the advancement of other important reforms. This is my motivation in accepting this position.*

*Without a healthy media, a society will more easily fall victim to the strongest oppressor. When information starts being controlled, it becomes a tool or weapon of either the government or the self-interest of power holders. Lies, deception, propaganda and misinformation become the accepted practice. Truth-tellers become the enemies who are then punished.*

*The free exercise of conscience becomes a threat. This clearly explains why over the last many decades, we Ethiopians never achieved genuine freedom and the prosperity that flourishes best, if not exclusively, in free societies.*

*The same reasons that led authorities in the past to repress information, to silence civil society, to muffle voices of faith and conscience, to put pressure on the judiciary for prejudicial outcomes and to criminalize the peaceful efforts of opponents, including journalists, are all evidence of what happens when truth, freedom, conscience and the free exchange of information are denied from contributing to the creation of a healthy, well-functioning and more caring society.*

I strongly believe a door of opportunity has been opened in Ethiopia at present, which we should not ignore.

### **What are the critically important contributions of a healthy media?**

- One of the foremost purposes of the media is as an independent institution that promotes truth, ensures the free flow of information and holds accountable, government and other public and private institutions within a society.
- It also can act as a “public square” where ideas can be shared, debated, discussed and analyzed from a variety of perspectives.
- It is where visions can be cast and where plans, solutions and remedies can prepare the way to action on the ground.
- It can be educational or inspirational.
- It can increase awareness or keep people informed as it is used as a tool of communication.
- In summary, it is a place where people can “talk to each other rather than about each other,” solving conflicts and building greater unity around a variety of issues.

### **What are the dangers?**

When it does not maintain high standards or loses control of its message, it can become a tool of propaganda rather than of truth. It will fail to serve the interests of the people. Its “product” will not be trusted and it will fail to be relevant.

### **What are some goals for the Ethiopian Press Agency?**

The name says it all: **Ethiopian Press Agency**. It is an independent organization for Ethiopians, set up by Emperor Haile Selassie in 1940 as a public media enterprise operating in Ethiopia. *It is the sole publisher of the only daily Amharic language newspaper known as “Addis Zemen.” The enterprise also publishes “The Ethiopian Herald”, a daily newspaper except on Mondays in English language. Among its tabloids are the weeklies: “Berissa”-in the Affan Oromo; and “Al-Alem”- in the international Arabic languages. The agency has yet another by-monthly magazine, known as “Zemen” in Amharic. With a current staff of more than 300, the Ethiopian Press Agency runs its own business affairs through own-generated incomes”.*

In the last 79 years, its strategic function has been taken over by the each subsequent government. It has never been truly free to be independent, but has been exploited as a tool of whoever came into power. Yet, they are financially independent, not receiving funding from the government; but instead they support themselves through revenue generated from their newspapers, advertisements, magazines and other media sales.

*If we the people of Ethiopia are to resolve the political problems ahead in a meaningful and sustainable way, the Ethiopian Press Agency must become totally independent as it was intended to be in the first place. It will also require maintaining a strong voice for truth, freedom, transparency, accountability, justice, rights and equality for all people as necessary ingredients to*

*a free society. This is in line with the principles of the organization with which I am involved, the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE), as well as in line with my own personal values.*

I believe the solutions to our undemocratic problems are systemic, requiring a renewed commitment to re-examine all the institutionalized parts of our government to see where it undermines our values.

### **How does our “worldview” make a difference?**

What we hold true and important is part of our basic worldview. We all have a worldview; what shapes ours? In a society, it makes a pivotal difference in how we view others, especially those outside of our own families, communities and groups. It will affect nearly every aspect of life in this country, depending on how widespread the view is and how integrated it is into our system of government and institutions as well as among the people.

For me, I believe in principles; that, **if followed, will lead us to value others as having inherent worth and dignity regardless of our differences.** These same principles, **if followed by our politicians and society, will lead us, Ethiopians to uphold the inclusive freedom, justice and rights of others like we do for ourselves or those close to us.**

Another value is the belief that talking to each other, including throughout the media, is a road to peace, stability, security and greater prosperity. **The free flow of information, through the media or other venues, can challenge our thinking, help us reform our ways, advance our ability to resolve our conflicts, help us reconcile our differences and increase our ability to work together.** As a result, **an independent media is a key institution of our society that can influence all others for good or ill, depending on its standards of truth and reliability.**

### **How can a “social covenant” with the people of Ethiopia make a difference in the outcome?**

The media is an institution that can build trust or tear it down, depending on its commitment to maintaining the highest standards of truth and independence from the influence or control of power holders who may seek to change “the narrative” to their own advantage. The expectation of the people is that there is an agreement, a **“social covenant,”** to maintain these high standards so the people can trust the outcome; however, when this trust is violated by misuse or abuse of information, it is difficult to restore faith in the system.

**Right now, we, Ethiopian who care about the wellbeing of all our people, our national interests and our national sovereignty of Ethiopia; both presently, and into the next generation, should not settle for anything less than the highest standards, including constitutional and institutional reforms that can bring lasting change rather than a recycling of past dysfunction.**

**Being in this position of the Board member of the Ethiopian Press Agency now, will be an opportunity for me to contribute to these values and to fulfill our agreement and responsibility to the people. I will do my best, hoping this board can push these values forward with authenticity. The real beneficiaries of a strong and highly principled Ethiopian Press Agency should be the people of Ethiopia.**

*In conclusion, I would also propose to improve the working environment and salaries of more than the 350 employees who are working for this agency; investing in them in order to develop and advance this organization to the standards needed to efficiently and effectively provide this high standard of service to the public.*

*Anything less than that will be short of our highest commitment to these goals and objectives. It is only if I feel unable to carry out this task that I would excuse myself from this position.*

May God help and guide us in the tasks ahead!