

Ethiopians in the New York City area Held a Historic Panel Discussion at Columbia University

As part of the continuing effort to bring democracy to Ethiopia by ending the divisive and ethno-centric dictatorial rule of Meles Zenawi, Ethiopians residing in the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut tri-state area held a historic political discussion on January 28, 2012 at Columbia University. The forum brought together Diaspora community members, including students, scholars, and professionals, to critically examine the prevailing political and socio-economic conditions facing the country and to explore avenues to enhance engagement of the Diaspora in the struggle for freedom of the Ethiopian people.

The inspiring and civil discussions were spearheaded by the well-respected economic scholar Dr. Aklog Birara and human rights activist Artist Tamagne Beyene. The audience was mesmerized by the breathtaking presentations, which were fully supported by impeccably researched facts and figures, on the current political repression of the TPLF regime, and the rampant corruption, brazen ethnic-based discrimination, and ominous years facing the country.

Focusing on the current economic, social and political conditions of the country, Dr. Birara elaborated how Zenawi's ethnic-based party controlled the economy through endowments, such as EFFORT and GUNA, unabashedly looted the national resources, and exposed the vast majority of the people to untold economic hardship, while giving a false image of "growth and democratization" to the outside world. In particular, he underscored the adverse social, environmental and economic consequences of the regime's sinister and ill-advised policy of "land giveaway" to foreign investors, and emphasized the imperative of nipping at its bud the full-blown implementation of this practice that he dubbed "farmland colonization by invitation". Further, Dr. Birara exposed the magnitude of corruption that is systemic in nature, and stated that the country's economy is being irreparably devastated by the billions of dollars embezzled out of the country with acknowledged cognizance of the leaders. In conclusion, the speaker outlined alternative solutions to end the country's political problems, and affirmed that only a regime that has a popular mandate will lead toward national unity, genuine peace, freedom, justice, equity and prosperity for the future of Ethiopia. Dr. Aklog captured the audience's hearts and minds by presenting the ethno-centric TPLF's misrule citing concrete examples, and with occasional reference to his seminal work on land grab, *The Great Land Giveaway* (2011).

Through his trademark eloquence and charm, Artist Tamagne Beyene further elucidated the critical points raised by the earlier speaker, using carefully and factually compiled audio-visual illustrations, with particular reference to the failure of the TPLF leadership to learn from its mistakes during its twenty years of dictatorial rule, its antagonistic stand against established Ethiopian institutions, as demonstrated by the firing of 42 university professors and dissolution of the standing army when it snatched power from the previous dictator, and its current obsession with putting all vital economic, political and security functions of the government in the hands of members of a minority ethnic group. Artist Tamagne gave enthralling testimonials of the dangerous policies of Zenawi's regime through video clips that showed an army leadership primarily composed of one ethnic group, and an administration that is fully characterized by rampant corruption, suppression of free

expression of opinions, and a policy of ethnic animosity. Tamagne counseled the audience to teach their children Ethiopian history and emphasized the need for the Diaspora to continue to organize and actively participate in the struggle to end the unjust rule of the TPLF. The artist presented his illuminating and, at times entertaining, thoughts through his usual captivating style that frequently brought the audience to its feet.

Following the presentations, the forum participants exchanged views on other pertinent issues, including the prerequisites for viable tactics to promote democracy in Ethiopia, the need to stop party bickering and avoid succumbing to TPLF's divide-and-rule strategy, and the effective use of the internet and civil discussions.

Over the past several decades, the Ethiopian people have lived under undemocratic rule. The current regime is continuously implementing misguided policies to unravel the social and economic fabric of our society, while using the military and intelligence institutions as instruments of repression. As evidenced by the 2005 or 2009 elections, which were marred by indiscriminate killing and jailing of peaceful demonstrators and massive vote rigging and ballot stuffing, the regime has no respect for rule of law or basic democratic principles.

The Ethiopian youth, both at home and in the Diaspora, in coalition with other social groups and organizations, has a historic responsibility to bring an end to this corrupt regime. This segment of the Ethiopian populace, as it ominously faces the specter of living with no jobs, no voice and an uncertain future, especially bears a disproportionate share of the brunt of TPLF's oppression. The propaganda machinery that works overtime will not dampen the frustration and anger of this group, and its zeal to thwart the unimaginable government corruption and increased brutality.

The alarms have been going off for far too long to ignore the looming dangers of TPLF's human rights abuses, moral decay, unaccountability, land giveaway, and ethno-centric rule and other misguided policies. The regime has effectively exploited opposition political differences and petty bickering to stay in power and propagate its dictatorial rule. The dire situation in Ethiopia now calls for the opposition party, civic groups and other organizations to forge a united front and fight for the establishment of democracy and rule of law.

We believe that the successful forum held in New York is a demonstration of the usefulness of evidence-based dialog and discussions to build unity and to establish mutual trust and understanding, in the search for a viable solution to the problems facing our country,

The Organizing Committee
New York, NY
January 28, 2012