

For a New Ethiopian Political Direction

by Imru Zelleke

25 June 2001

One word used ad-infinitum by politicians of all kinds is 'unity'. If there were unity, there wouldn't be any reason to claim it infinitely. The problem is that unity has different meanings to different people, who perceive it according to their own light. This means that the foundation upon which the unity is to be erected has not been defined and formulated to the satisfaction of all concerned. This, in turn, means that the dialogue entertained so far is in a vacuum, filled with platitudes and empty gestures.

Politics being a power game, it is played on real fields and with real issues and real people. There is nothing abstract or ephemeral about it. The end game is to win, in order to implement your political program. To win, you must convince a large majority of the constituents to vote in your favor, against your opponent(s). Or, otherwise you must have enough clout to impose your will. The rules of the game being such, if you loose, you try to gain as much popular support to stay in the game. After all, half a loaf is better than no loaf. But there is a price to that, the final say remains with the winner.

In the case of Ethiopia, during the Imperial rule we had one foot somewhere in the beginning of the 18th century, and the other foot in the 20th century, with highly contradicting currents pulling us in various directions, while the imperatives of modernization were driving us inexorably toward change. When, at last, the climax of our tribulations came, our own contextual potentials were ignored and an alien ideological political philosophy, which was already dying from its own contradictions, was adopted. The result has been a quagmire of our own, that has been obfuscating our minds and sapping our energy to this day.

Now, we all talk of democracy, as if democracy could exist in a vacuum, and ignoring the fact that it is a most difficult system of government. Democracy needs vision, laws and institutions and an absolute commitment to its principles and edicts. It needs a creative leadership and competent management. It needs a civil service dedicated to the public good, and a judiciary of unquestionable integrity. It also needs transparency and accountability, which can be assured by the existence of a free, independent and vigorous media and press. And last but not least, it necessitates statesmen who understand the practices of state-craft, and politicians who can put the national interests above their own.

Actually, there is no secret about democracy and its practice. From the US to India, examples are abundant. Although it is true that we have no democratic traditions, it does not mean that it cannot be adapted to our country. In fact, Ethiopia has the philosophical and ethical values as well as the organic laws that are basic for a democratic system of government. Neither is there a shortage of experienced and mature politicians and civil servants. What has been lacking so far is an open political forum, in which the people have the freedom to exercise their rights and elect a government of their choice. Two regimes later, the first pseudo-Marxist the second pseudo-democratic and neo-fascist, we find ourselves back to square one.

However, thanks to the bloodshed made by our heroic students and angry citizens who made the ultimate sacrifice by confronting openly the forces of oppression, another window of opportunity has been opened. To start with, the Ethiopian opposition parties seem to have

For a New Ethiopian Political Direction

by Imru Zelleke

25 June 2001

acquired a new cohesive spirit and, hopefully, will coalesce into a united national democratic alliance -- at least on certain basic issues - that will offer a credible alternative to the existing regime. And secondly, the US and donor countries, who so far have been its main supporters, seem to have taken a realistic view of the TPLF/EPRDF regime, a regime that has been deceiving them with its shameless lies and manipulations. Presently, the true image of the regime is unravelling itself, and there is no way to hide it.

Moreover, it seems that a new element, which advocates some agreement between the domestic opposition and some liberation movements as to what Ethiopian sovereignty is, has been voiced by some policy makers, prior to any negotiations with the TPLF/EPRDF regime. In view of the very narrow popular base of the liberation movements, and the still-to-be-ascertained national leadership of the present opposition parties, a Balkans type political arrangement at this preliminary stage is likely to be counter-productive and a cause of future misunderstandings and conflicts. The issue is a matter to be settled through the normal democratic process by the ballot box and popular consultations and consensus, and not by pre-arranged political deals imposed by few political parties. This matter should be left with the future care-taker government and a constitutional assembly, and ultimately for the people to decide. Over and above all, a serious consideration should be given to the popular stance which, after ten years of ethnic-based corrupt and incompetent governance, has practically repudiated the ethnic policies imposed by the present regime.

On their part, Meles and his cohorts of TPLF/EPRDF are scrambling all around to keep their group afloat. Recent developments indicate that with the arrest of half of their former comrades in jail, on accusations from which they themselves are not immune, they have lost a large portion of their power base in Tigray and in the Tigrean community abroad. The assassination of the Security Chief and, most importantly, the arrest of the Chief of Staff and over a hundred officers of all ranks for corruption and plotting against Meles, have created a highly unstable situation in the army, which might take some unpredictable turn. Of late, the President of the country has been ousted from the EPRDF over alleged ideological differences. Armed clashes against the regime are rumored to have occurred in Tigray and in other parts of the country. Thus, the overall perception is that the regime is disintegrating rapidly.

At this time, Meles and his group are seeking new alliances and promising all sorts of reforms and changes, including some power sharing with the opposition. They also appear to be tilting towards former leftist affiliations, despite the declared policy of restructuring the party towards further democratization. Their main goal is obviously to overcome somehow the present crisis and continue to hold power for the next four years until the next elections. This will give them plenty of time to restructure the party, consolidate their hold on the economy, and conjure some new tricks to neutralize the opposition. Coming from a minority group, there is no way for them to allow free elections that will automatically divest them of power. The opposition must not have any illusion on this point, unless Meles and his gang simply quit, and migrate abroad where they have their moneys stashed. (It is rumored that members of their families are already out of the country, maybe a repeat of Mengistu's road to exile.)

For a New Ethiopian Political Direction

by Imru Zelleke

25 June 2001

The opposition political parties and civic groups must overcome their differences, and make a serious effort to define clearly their stand, in case that a US or other mediating initiative may be offered. In politics, agreements on general principles are easy to establish, the real problems come in the nitty gritty of their implementation. This is particularly so when the party in power, even though enfeebled, holds the reins of the state machinery, the army, the police and the media, as in the case of the Meles group. The newly proclaimed 'revolutionary democratic capitalism' based on the peasantry, whatever it may mean, and the new 'reconstruction' of the EPRDF, are hollow gestures intended to secure the survival of the minority regime and the present leadership.

The onus is on the opposition parties to table publicly, as of now, clear and unequivocal conditions that will secure the installation of a genuine democratic system of government, and will guarantee lasting peace and stability to the nation. However tempting an offer, they should avoid any kind of half-baked deal that will compromise their own future and that of the country. They have to understand clearly that, once they enter into any agreement with the Meles regime, they are also responsible for any and all of its outcomes as much as the regime itself.

Here is an outline of some basic tenets for the establishment of a democratic system of government in Ethiopia and some future priorities:

Basic tenets:

- Abrogation of the present ethnic based constitution.
- Release of all political prisoners.
- Establishment of a care-taker government (with full participation of all political and civic groups with the exception of separatist movements). All armed units must be disarmed or partly integrated in the national defense forces, after which the parties can participate in the political process as legitimate political parties subject to their recognition of the unity and sovereignty of the Ethiopian nation.
- Constitutional Assembly to draft a new democratic constitution that will guarantee freedom and equality to all citizens of Ethiopia, and establish clear separations of power between the legislative and executive branches and an independent judiciary.
- Dismantling of the ethnic-based federal system, redistricting of federal entities according to social, economic and cultural lines and return to their original status territories forcibly integrated to other jurisdictions.
- Guaranteed freedom of the press and media.
- Restructuring Army, police and security units as integrated national forces

For a New Ethiopian Political Direction

by Imru Zelleke

25 June 2001

- Free elections under a revised electoral law that will guarantee free and fair elections indiscriminately to all citizens.
- Right of ownership and privatization of all rural and urban land. Citizens will have the right to own the land they are farming. All citizens have the right to reside, toil, own property and exert any legal activity anywhere within the sovereign territory of Ethiopia. Owners of confiscated property will have their property returned or will receive fair and just compensation.
- Free market economic system in which the government will promote, advise and assist the development of the private sector, compatible with the economic development and safeguard of the nation's environment. Exclusion of political parties from commercial activities and liquidation of all existing party-owned corporate bodies and monopolistic ventures.

Future priorities:

- High priority to be given to social services, health, education, welfare and skill development.
- Enhance the role of women and their full participation in all sectors of our national life.
- Foster the expansion and appreciation of traditional and cultural values and the understanding amongst all factions of Ethiopian society. Promote vigorously cultural traditions, the arts, literature, theater, music and crafts.
- Encourage and help the development of civil societies.

Imru Zelleke
(Former Ambassador of Ethiopia, Ret.)
