

A CALL FOR A PAN-ETHIOPIAN DIALOGUE

An Appeal to the Young Generation

by Imru Zelleke

12 June 2002

What prompts me to write this appeal to the younger generation is a statement I read in the *Journal of Ethiopian Students Association International*, March 2002, in which I found some telling confusion and contradictions. I understand perfectly the reasons for which the Association wishes to maintain a neutral position with regard to existing political organizations. I myself and many others are not members of any political party. However, this does not mean that we have no opinions about all sorts of issues regarding our country, and that we do not advocate reforms and changes which we believe are essential for the well being of the people and the orderly development of the country. In the final analysis, such issues are intimately involved in the politics and the governance of the nation.

To quote some parts of the statement: “This means that we would have to stand against actions that directly violate the well being of our country and the people...[T]he focal point of our statement is that we boldly claim to be the future leaders of Ethiopia. We are her protectors, builders and caregivers.” These are manifestly noble and great aspirations. However, whether they can be accomplished outside of the political process is highly doubtful.

The Urgent Need for a Common Vision

What is needed presently and for the future, whatever political party comes to power, is a basic framework that establishes unequivocally the equal rights of all citizens without prejudice about their gender, age, language, ethnicity and personality. This vision is naturally embodied in a Bill of Rights or a Citizen’s Charter.

With this in view, I am tabling herewith a draft entitled Ethiopian Citizens’ National Charter (*Ye’Etyopia’wian Ye’eginnet Mebit’enna-Gidetta Ti’rri*) prepared by Dr. Berhanu Abegaz for consideration by all compatriots. This is a charter that puts the focus squarely on citizens who are ultimately the guarantors and beneficiaries of free Ethiopian citizenship. It should be agreeable to all factions irrespective of their social, ethnic and political credo, as it is aimed to guarantee a level field of action and inclusive participation in national life for all people.

I am inviting all concerned Ethiopians, whoever you are and wherever you may be, to analyze it, make your amendments and suggestions so that we can together establish a shared vision that would serve as a foundation for our nation’s renaissance. I appeal particularly to the younger generation to take up this Charter as their cause because once people’s rights become the basic tenets of our civic and political life, peace and stability will be secured for the present and for the future.

I believe that a national dialogue amongst all political and civic organizations must also proceed concomitantly. A consensus on fundamentals that is based and a common understanding of the challenges facing our country is bound to generate the cooperative spirit necessary to galvanize us all into constructive action.

The Need to Debate Our Future Instead of Just Our Past

I would, therefore, like to clarify certain important points that must be clearly understood before entering into a constructive dialogue:

First of all, we have to realize that we are living today in 2002 and not one hundred, or fifty years or even ten years ago. Today the world political context has changed radically. We are moving inexorably towards a globalization of world affairs be they political or economic. The trend in Africa is for Unity and regional integration, which have become unavoidable, if rapid and effective solutions are to be found for our under-development.

Secondly, we have to admit that we Ethiopians are at the lowest level of any aspect of political and economic development, and that our people are going through endless spiritual and physical suffering.

Thirdly, our problems are common to all, and it is only by pooling all our human and material resources that we can give a chance of survival and a better life to our people.

Lastly, we must admit that all this politicking is at the expense of the people who are the ultimate victims of these terrible vicissitudes. Admittedly, abuses have been committed in the past. No one can claim to be innocent of such deeds, and base one's history on selective memories. Once these facts are established, we can discuss with a clear mind and find solutions to our serious problems.

Yes, there have been crimes and abuses committed on each other. Nobody can claim to be innocent of many misdeeds. Some factions claim that the history of Ethiopia began only a century ago. Most Ethiopians rightly have a much longer memory, maybe of thousands of years long, in which the Beja, the Tigre, the Agaw, the Afars/Somali, the Amara and the Oromo have taken turns in imposing their hegemony on the far-flung peoples of Ethiopia.

It is also sobering to note that none of them did introduce the *Magna Carta*, the *Napoleonic Code* or the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. They plundered, killed, burned and violated every ethnic group in imposing their rule. Notwithstanding these clashes, there has been a process of mutual acculturation and physical assimilation, within which the groups have been inter-acting, and incorporating with each other.

Eventually, they came to terms and managed to live mostly in peace as one nation and one people, profoundly conscious of their common experience. What was unique about our history has been our capacity to absorb each other genetically, politically,

economically and culturally. What distinguishes the Amara culture is not merely a matter of language and customs, but rather its capacity of assimilation and its pandemic character in the Ethiopian context.

For centuries most of the Ethiopian Royal houses and the ruling classes have had Oromo and other ethnic lineage. Weren't many of Ethiopia's great leaders and patriots Oromos and of other tribes? Aren't the majority Ethiopians of mixed ethnicity today in our country? (Names like Berento, Lentcha and Gobena are part of my own ancestry). Who is to deny them their identity as Ethiopians and their right to live and toil in their own motherland? Now! Do we have to go back and make this generation of Ethiopians pay for all the crimes committed in the past? Can we afford renewed internecine conflicts and bloodshed? For what gain and for whose benefit? When the rest of the world is converging towards unity and integration, are we going towards to dismemberment and disunity?

Where Do We Go from Here?

The people in Ethiopia have demonstrated more than once that they don't care about the ethnic and racist politics introduced by the TPLF. For instance EDP (Ethiopian Democratic Party) has shown clearly, the great appeal that a straightforward Pan-Ethiopian political platform has amongst the general population. Therefore, political groups aspiring to power should base their claims on democratic **programs beneficial to all the people of Ethiopia** and not on ethnic or religious bigotry that is supported by the barrel of a gun. We have had enough of that with TPLF and company.

The terrible poverty and wretchedness of our people have shown irrefutably the necessity of common action:

- a) to overcome these miserable conditions, and
- b) that no single entity can do it by itself.

Hence, shouldn't our own unity come first, in order to give some real solutions and some real benefits to our people?

We all agree on a democratic system of government, and to all the perquisites of democratic governance including one person one vote. Therefore, the political parties that claim to have the largest following have all the voting power they need to protect their own interests. Those that may have to worry, and for whom a constitutional provisions to protect their rights should be made, are the minority groups who risk to confront a permanent majority formed by the large political groups.

Therefore, our future actions should be:

- Form a national coalition on agreed principles to install a legitimate democratic state,

- Develop and implement the necessary strategy to change the political regime in Ethiopia and prepare a new constitution, and
- Hold free and fair elections leading to the establishment of properly elected legislature, judiciary and executive branches.

This formula should be acceptable to any group with a modicum of good will and genuine regard for **the welfare of ALL the people of Ethiopia**. Neither the Parties who claim to have a large following of the population nor those purporting to represent small minorities should have anything to fear from such a procedure.

I hope to be excused for the bluntness of my statement. The terrible predicaments that our people are subjected to are homegrown and mostly self-inflicted. Even a minimum improvement in their standard of living of the people, would be an enormous achievement, which no political flag waving can accomplish. Ignorance, disease, poverty, environmental decay, inefficient and corrupt governance are battering our people and the land. The future might look rosy for those few who have, but for ninety-eight percent of those others, life is bleak, hopeless and divested of human dignity. Neither our people nor the country deserve this demeaning fate. The issue now is to reconstruct our country.

We must stop using past tragedies as terms of reference for the future. What we are facing today is a matter of survival. We don't have the time and the energy to waste on marginal and unproductive issues. The challenge is to build a modern civil society, wherein all citizens have their rights respected and in which they can toil and live freely in equality, peace and harmony. It is only under these conditions that all the citizens can develop fully their creativity and their potential to build a dynamic and prosperous society. This has been made even easier in our times because of the new advances in science and technology. We might not solve all the problems at once because they are of monumental proportions, but we can make a good and positive start. We owe it to all the people of our country.

I appeal particularly to the young generation because you are the leaders of tomorrow. Your sacred mission is to save Ethiopia and make of it the land of great and well-to-do people that it should be, and can be. Ethiopia is a rich country; its natural resources are barely exploited; its human resources are abundant; and it offers a tremendous and exciting challenges for those who have the vision and fortitude to undertake such noble and exhilarating endeavor. The greater our ambition and the clearer our vision, the more formidable will be our achievements. Thank you.

Imru Zelleke
(Former Ambassador of Ethiopia, Ret.)