

For a National Dialogue

by Imru Zelleke

7 July 2003

I think it is important to clarify certain points before entering into a constructive dialogue about the future of our country.

First of all we have to realize that we are living today in 2003 and not one hundred, or fifty-years or even ten years ago. Today the world's political context has changed radically, we are moving inexorably towards the 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. Second, we have to admit that we in Ethiopia are at the bottom of the ladder in many aspects of human development, and that our people are going through endless suffering. Third, that our problems are common and closely interdependent; it is only by joining all our human and material resources that we can give a chance of survival and a better life to our people. Fourth, 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.

It must also be clearly understood that the opposition to the present regime, must not be construed as to negotiating the dismemberment of the country under any guise, that implies de-facto that we split first before we enter into any 'voluntary' association. Particularly there must be an enlightened and constructive understanding between the two large ethno/cultural groups the Amara and the Oromo.

Yes, there have been crimes and abuses committed on each other. Nobody can claim to be innocent of many misdeeds. Certain OLF factions claim that the Oromos have been colonized by the so-called "Abyssinians" 105 years ago. The Amaras and other ethnic groups could claim the same, going back some 300 years, beginning from the Oromo invasion from the South all the way to the North. The Amaras, in alliance with many Oromos, did the same on their turn. However, since that time the groups have been inter-acting and mixing with each

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other and with other ethnic groups. Eventually they all came to terms with each other and managed to live mostly in peace as one nation and one people, profoundly conscious of their common experience.

For centuries most of the Ethiopian royal houses and the ruling classes have had Oromo lineages. 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 advantage?

The people in Ethiopia have demonstrated more than once that they don't care about the ethnic and racist politics introduced by the TPLF. Whether it was at Adwa, Maytchew and Zela-ambessa didn't stand together in defense of their country? For instance AEUP and EDP (who should logically merge into one party) have 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 racially biased and hate generating platforms supported by the barrel of a gun. We have had enough of that with the TPLF and company.

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

- a) 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 a democratic governance. Which means one person one vote. Therefore, the political entities that claim to

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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 may be envisaged, are the minority groups who risk to confront a permanent majority formed by the large political groups. To this end, there also should be a decentralization of power and empowerment given to local authorities to manage their own affairs. Which, by the way is not a new idea because the Imperial government already initiated it.

Therefore, our future actions should be:

- Form a national coalition on agreed basic 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
- Hold free and fair elections and establish a legislature, a judiciary and an executive with clear separation of powers.

This formula should be acceptable to any groups with a modicum of good will and genuine interest for the welfare of ALL the people of Ethiopia. Particularly, parties who claim to have a large following of the population should have nothing to fear from such procedure.

The terrible predicaments that our people are subjected to are homegrown and mostly self-inflicted. Even a minimum improvement in their standard of living is an enormous task, 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. Wars and internecine conflicts have ravaged and reduced our people to the lowest level of poverty and deprivation in the world. 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

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dead 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 is even made 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 land.

I appeal particularly to the young generation because you are the people 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, it offers tremendous and exciting challenges for those who have the vision and fortitude to undertake such a noble and exhilarating endeavor. The greater our visions will be, the more formidable will be our achievements.

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