

My Views

by Imru Zelleke

20 January 2004

Quote for 2004:

“THE HOTTEST PLACE IN HELL IS RESERVED FOR THOSE THAT IN TIMES OF GREAT MORAL CRISIS, MAINTAIN THEIR NEUTRALITY”

Dante

I am not an intellectual neither a political philosopher. I am a pragmatist. I am a born and bred Ethiopian. I share the pain, the frustration, the anguish, the failures and the guilt that afflicts our people and nation. I have no personal axe to grind, but for the terrible degradation and the misery that prevails in our country. All my adult life I have dedicated myself to the well being of our people and the progress of our nation. I am not alone in this endeavor, countless others have dedicated their lives and sacrificed themselves for the same goal. Unfortunately, whatever good and positive deeds we have accomplished have vanished in the tragic mist that cloaks our recent past.

What we hear today from our own people is an endless lament about the hell-hole in which we have fallen. We listen to polemics over polemics, rhetoric's after rhetoric's, and voices of despair and defeat. Some almost claim that Ethiopians are incapable to work out their own salvation. We accuse foreigners of being the cause of our problems, yet we expect them to cure our ills. Despite all the prophets of our doom, the country is still striving and surviving the best it can. I believe that we are running away from the truth of our own doings, since nobody seems to accept any responsibility for the ills that have ruined our nation, and left our people at the mercy of a miserable and uncertain future.

In politics and in the pursuit of national life, crises do not happen as supernatural phenomena, it is usually people that create problems. In our case, after the fall of the Monarchy, which had its historical legitimacy and its moral and political canons, nobody was there to pick-up the pieces. A generational failure has resulted in a leadership vacuum, a loss of values and sense of direction for the nation.

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However, all that is history. Now, we must face the realities of the day and find a solution for them. Although they are daunting, Ethiopia's problems are not unique or insurmountable. Ethiopia is a rich country, her natural resources are hardly exploited and it has ample human resources to challenge her predicament and build a prosperous nation. The majority of Ethiopian people may be poor and even illiterate, but they have history, religion, culture, ethics and morals inherited and inhibited in their customs. These wisdoms and perceptions are reflected in every culture that exists in Ethiopia. These are the ligaments that form the texture of their shared national consciousness. They have acted as one nation and one people throughout their long history, shading their blood and sacrificing their lives, as recently as in the crushing victory they inflicted against the invasion from the North.

Given the opportunity, Ethiopians men and women, whether farmers, merchants or professionals are diligent and hard workers. They have shown it in performing the most modest function to the highest technical and scientific tasks, in the most competitive environments of the world. The ills that Ethiopia suffers do not come from the people, but from those perverse would be leaders and politicians that have sown evil and depravity in our national life and political governance.

Therefore, I say:

a) That if we want to rehabilitate our country and put in the right path, first of all, we must believe in the Ethiopian people. We must stop thinking of them as an ignorant amorphous mass to manipulate at our whim, and the objects of ill conceived and failed social and political experiments. We must present them with a vision that fulfill their aspirations and wants, and not self-serving political credos.

b) We have to be practical and realize that whatever change and political development occurs, will be within Ethiopia and nowhere else. Therefore, we have to deal with the elements and conditions that are active in the country. I am not saying that those groups outside the country are not functional, but that at best their role is limited by time and space. Nevertheless, if mobilized for a common purpose, the community in Diaspora can have a major impact on politics at home by providing professional skills, political support and funds to the parties at home.

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There are also some half-backed political incentives that have been vented from here and there, they have no structure or clear purpose and are unlikely to make any valuable contribution, but to confuse and distract people from achievable goals.

c) At this time the opportunity we have for change, is to win the 2005 national elections and establish a genuine legitimate popular democratic government in Ethiopia. To this end we have to build a strong party(s) with a large national constituency to challenge and win the elections against the woyane click in power. The people all over Ethiopia are ready and willing to work and welcome change. They have paid a dear price for the past twelve years and they know what they want. Even the armed forces and security units, upon which the regime relies for its protection, have serious doubts about the integrity and patriotism of the regime they serve. After all they are also Ethiopians, they are aware of what is going on, their interest cannot be different from those of the people. Overall, there has never been a regime so disliked and hated nationwide, neither has there been such favorable and vigorous popular demand for change.

d) The chance of winning the elections are real. Therefore, we must concentrate and focus all our efforts towards this goal. We must cease the endless diatribe over irrelevant political arguments that go nowhere and produce nothing. Those who have no particular convictions should not feel obliged to involve themselves in unproductive arguments to quell their conscience or vent their own detachment. Ethiopia does not need them.

e) Personally, I support the All Ethiopia Unity Party because it has a large popular constituency and is active in two hundred fifty Woredas around the country and it stands for a plural democratic system of government. Further, its leaders have shown courage and determination. Given adequate help it is likely to win a substantial majority. Qualities, which I believe deserve our full support. This said, if you do not wish to support AEUP, at least help any other party, provided it stands for the unity of the country and for a genuine democratic system of government.

f) A key element for all this is the leadership. We must choose leaders that possess the knowledge and experience to run an efficient and just government, but also whose personal

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integrity and honesty is unquestionable. They must have the will and moral fiber to resist the temptations of power and of special interests. If a leadership fails it is also our failure and ultimately our responsibility, because we have chosen the wrong people.

Now, lets say that we won the elections, what should be done to rehabilitate the country as soon as possible? If I had anything to say about it, I would:

- i. Human Rights and Freedom of expression and assembly must be rigorously implemented, while some constitutional changes will be worked out. Eliminate and streamline all the bureaucratic stumble blocs that are hampering and stifling the incentives of the people. They are a source of corruption and inefficiency.
- ii. Create 200.000 jobs the first year, 300.000 the second and incrementally the following years. This might need some creative financing, but it can be done.
- iii. Education being the key to survival, give high priority to vocational schools and technical training and enhance education with the introduction of new technologies and educational sources.
- iv. Increase three-fold number of teachers at all levels, and upgrades existing qualifications. Teachers play a very important role in the community, they not only educate the young but they are symbols of learning and progress. Their standard of living should be made equal to their status as community leaders.
- v. Revise and reschedule all international aid programs to focus on most urgent problems. At the moment there are too many programs to meet effectively critical problems that are wasting resources that can be used more productively.
- vi. National health should be given the highest priority, particularly for contagious diseases, with great emphasis on prevention.
- vii. Women represent fifty percent or more of the population. The role of Ethiopian women in history has been a most important factor in maintaining coherence and social stability in times of unrest and in peace. They must participate fully in the political and economic life of the country. The mobilization of the society, which is a sine-qua condition for the

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revitalization of the nation, cannot be done without the participation of our womenfolk. We must honor them and give them their rightful place in building the society.

- viii. Land must be returned immediately as personal property to the peasants who toil it. It is obvious that the population has increased tremendously and land cannot be found for everybody. However, this does not mean that people will not have opportunity to earn their living. Ethiopian agriculture is still at a primitive stage. The introduction of new crops, new production methods, agro-industries, large industrial farms and the development of the industrial and business sector will absorb significant amount of labor to alleviate most unemployment.
- ix. Build food reserves and distribution centers in affected areas. Construct small dams and water reserves, initiate large-scale forestation projects by involving and assisting local communities.
- x. Assist local entrepreneurs and foreign investors with proper legal protection and financial incentives.
- xi. Reform the Financial and Banking sectors and make them instrumental to rapid development.

These are some ideas I would suggest to implement, of course there are many others. The principal objective is to put the nation to work and make Ethiopia a HUB of dynamic development within three years. It can be done. I trust our people, if we open the way for them and restore their confidence in themselves, they can perform miracles.

Last but not least I would like to remind you that however much we don't like what they have done to the country, Ato Meles and company have not arrived to where they are now drinking coffee in some buna-bet.

The time is pressing; the moment to ACT is NOW.

Imru Zelleke
(Former Ambassador of Ethiopia, Ret.)