



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL

Justice, Peace and Freedom

Ethiopia Has Leaders Who Can Build Bridges to a New Ethiopia!

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People tell me that the movement for freedom and justice in Ethiopia has died because we do not have the leaders who can give us a vision for a new Ethiopia and who can demonstrate it by their actions. I may have agreed with this statement before, but no longer do so because I have discovered that we have some of the best leaders among us that we could ever ask for—qualified, capable and full of personal integrity and character.

These new leaders are emerging and older leaders are changing their views as together they catch the vision of a different Ethiopia where truth, freedom, justice, equality and civility replace the lies, human rights abuses, injustice, cronyism and hate that now prevails. I wish I could name all of them, but there are too many to be named. Many of these leaders may not be known, especially outside their groups, but they are already working among us.

Our present crisis may be the catalyst that is drawing in new people—people who may have never joined the struggle otherwise. They are people who are bridging the gap between previously divided factions by building new relationships. As a result, I now can identify Ethiopians from all over the country who possess the humility, expertise, talents, commitment and vision to bring about a New Ethiopia.

They have not emerged as leaders in the past for a variety of reasons—because those in power closed the door to them for not “fitting” certain requirements or equally because these quality people did not feel the need or urgency to become involved and were instead leading private lives filled with family, education, career and other personal pursuits. They are the kind of individuals who would have been happy to simply pursue their own lives, but difficult times have drawn out these new people of strength, commitment and character to rise to the challenge of the day.

Others may have devoted years to politics in hopes of bringing about change for their own groups, but may be newly convinced that reaching out to others in unity around principles of truth, freedom, justice, equality and civility are the guideposts to follow to revive a dying country. These leaders are the true “new breed” of African leaders, not the false “new breed” like Meles who Tony Blair and Bill Clinton praised. Instead, these new genuine, life-valuing leaders are the ones at the forefront of breaking down the invisible fences built on years of prejudices, alienation, suspicion, factionalism, abuse and misunderstanding.

However, do not expect division and conflict to disappear because these two opposing worldviews between the “true new leaders” and the “false old leaders” will clash and collide, causing new divisions. If the push for unity gains momentum—and I believe it will—those resistant to change or to shifts in power may attempt to sabotage its progress and this will probably reach to the inner sanctums of most every organization.

Within these organizations, it will be important to create room for dialogue so that what is best is strengthened and what is enabling destruction, is confronted. As this happens, many organizations will feel the brunt of the growing pains necessary in the birthing of a New Ethiopia. Just like a mother who struggles in labor during the birth of her child, so must we struggle and labor for the birth of a country that will sustain life, not take it.

We must understand that there are powerful forces—people, government, institutions and outside entities like unethical multi-corporations with corrupt and exploitive business practices—like the Chinese Oil Company that was trying drill in Gambella region during the massacre and now in the Ogaden region, that will fight against a free Ethiopia, but we must persevere in a civil manner until we accomplish our goals with the help of our Creator. Unless what has been destroying us is confronted by what will free us, we will stay stuck in the same downward cycle that will ultimately destroy Ethiopia.

Look at the example of the Oromos:

This is the second year I have been invited to speak at the yearly meeting of the Oromo American Citizens' Council in Minneapolis. I wondered if anything would be different this year. I can enthusiastically say, "Absolutely!"

The 2008 Oromo American Citizens Council, the OLF and the Oromo Community all showed a significant shift of paradigms since last year, with much greater visible openness to engaging with other Ethiopians than was seen only a year ago. Last year at the rally and the meetings, I witnessed an almost total focus on Oromia with exclusion of everything "Ethiopian." This year, despite some wariness, there was a very different mood apparent. The Oromo were not the only ones a year ago to be suspicious, so were some Ethiopians from the highland and north who advised me not to go. This year, no one made such a suggestion and instead, it seems to have been perceived as a good thing by all.

When I sat and ate breakfast and lunch with our Oromo brothers and sisters, we talked together as family and as human beings. The Oromo extended their hand of friendship through leaders like Mr. Degage Kumera; the Chairman of the Oromo American Citizens Council and Mr. Robsan Itana; the founder and director of Oromo American Citizens Council and other executive members of Oromo American Citizens Council. The caring and the warmth that extended from these leaders made us all feel welcome. These are people who care about the country. It was all apparent from the way they set up and conducted their meeting. These are the kind of leaders that will have a place in a better Ethiopia where solidarity could exist like we have never seen before.

They understand very well the role the Oromo must have in shaping a future Ethiopia that embraces—rather than dominates—all of its citizens, something they may be able to better understand because of their own painful experience of being severely repressed and marginalized during the last several regimes. Because of being the largest ethnic group in the country, Oromo have historically been seen as a threat to any minority regime; however, any Ethiopia that does not embrace Oromo along with the smallest of ethnic groups, will not be a society that is free, just and harmonious.

These new leaders recognize that to survive as a people, they must engage with others to create a society conducive to the survival of all people. As the largest of groups, they have even a greater responsibility to include all and they are moving in the right direction. It was apparent in the way they reached out to include new people as presenters. As one Oromo organizer said, "Never before have we had such a diverse panel of guests."

In the past, Ethiopian society and Oromo society, when not in embroiled in conflict, co-existed without almost ever intersecting—that is, except in inter-marriage—creating a surreal world of experience because of the close proximity, but disconnectedness of the two. However, something is beginning to change this pattern of alienation from each other as increasingly more Oromo are reaching out to embrace new people and groups within Ethiopian society and those groups are reaching back. It is time for the disconnected world of Ethiopians to come together. Judging from what happened during the last week, the effort of these Oromo leaders to build a new bridge among Ethiopians was successful. I was thrilled to be part of it.

We do not have to wait for well-seasoned politicians to take action

The Ethiopian Diaspora media took notice too and when they did, it made the top news on most websites—a feat in its own right! When was the last time you saw an Oromo organizational posting of an upcoming meeting hit the front page of a non-Oromo website, let alone appear on most all of them—Abbay Media, Ethiomedia, Abugida, Ethiopian Review and many others?

What does this mean?” I think it means that we do not have to wait for well-seasoned politicians to take such action, but instead, that it can begin at the ground level and be led by leaders of our civic organizations. They are in touch with the people.

I wish I could name all of them but to name a few of them. Mr. Robsan Itana, is by his actions, words, how he treats others. Like Mr. Guled Kassim, very bright youngman from the Oganden region, by his noble words of encouragement to us all. By his words of remind us to care for each other and be active in social justices. Like Professor Alemayehu G. Mariam; by his brilliant writing and soul healing words toward his beloved people and country. Like Dr. Golto, specialist in surgery and he is a man whose conscience has directed him to put so much time into this. Not into power or leadership but wants to help because he is Ethiopian.

Like Mr. Ibrhim Yousuf from the Benishangul Human Rights Foundation who challenged Ethiopian Muslims to advocates for Human Rights in Ethiopia. Mr. Ibrhim Yousuf himself is an Ethiopian Muslim who is ready to work together with other Ethiopian to create a unique environment in new Ethiopia where Muslims, Christians and Jews can live together in harmony like they have been for centuries.

Like Ms. Abeba Fekade, from International Ethiopian Women’s Organization, who said we have no other choices but to find a way to work together for a health society.

Like Mr. Abraha Belai, the Chief Editor of Ethiomedia, who courageously stood up for the truth and for what was right even though it meant alienating some within his own ethnic group. Mr. Abraha is a Tigrayan who publicly and jointly come forward as Ethiopian, separating himself from the policy of ethnic hatred that Meles and his TPLF. The list can go on.

These are true leaders who display humility, caring and strength of character in the way they can sit together, discuss issues and respect each other despite sometimes disagreeing. These people have what it takes and we should rally behind them. None of these want a dynasty for themselves or for their tribe, but are bridge builders who can take us from the confines of tribal thinking to the values and attitudes of what is important in a well-functioning multi-cultural society.

We have been watching those driving the political machinery of Ethiopia to discover who can help us accomplish goals to benefit the country. Some of these doing a great job, came into the struggle following the pain surrounding the election of 2005 when the dreams for a genuine democracy were hijacked and instead backfired in the death of 197 peaceful protestors.

These are people like those who run the websites where we can keep up with what is going on. Some got involved because of pictures on those websites of the dead youth and crying mothers. Others have been brought into the struggle by the suffering of their families, friends and communities. I was brought to the struggle through the death of Anuak and have continued as I see other suffering Ethiopians.

Many have been outraged by other things and will not rest until what triggered them is resolved—like me who will not stop speaking up until justice comes. These people have what it takes and if we combine each of these unique people with their unique talents, the light of the full moon will break through the darkness. These people, if brought together, can accomplish in solidarity what could never be accomplished alone.

We have had a culture that avoided politics, regardless of the suffering

We have had a culture that avoided politics, regardless of the suffering, but the suffering has just gotten too great to run the other way. Meles has led us where we do not want to go, but these leaders on the ground are picking up the slack for those who have been unwilling or unable to change our downward direction.

The spine of Ethiopia has been broken, but the spirit of reconciliation seen in these new leaders will provide healing. These leaders are the seeds for the future. They are ready and if we plant, water and nourish them, they might rise up and bear wonderful fruit for not only Ethiopia, but for the whole continent.

I have seen these Ethiopian people of differing background, gender, educational level and religion. I have met them in airports, hotels, restaurants and at meetings. They keep saying, “We don’t have the leaders who put the people first or who speak the truth, instead they mislead us in their lies.”

I have talked with these Ethiopians who were working hard cleaning public restrooms in Minnesota, making beds in Munich, driving a taxi in Washington D.C. or driving a bus in Seattle. Some are dishwashers, servers in a restaurant or parking attendants and are here because they had no hope or future in Ethiopia. Others are very well educated and working in hospitals, universities and clinics in the West.

Many, if not most would go back to contribute in any way they could. An Ethiopian woman in a Geneva hotel who was making a bed told me, “I would like to go back to Ethiopia to train my people to be the best professional bed-makers possible and teach the people to make sure everything in rooms such as these were clean.

Like Dr. Golto Ailo, a well-respected spinal surgeon, who has told me how he I would love to go back to perform surgeries in Ethiopia. He is extremely conscientious with every patient and does his best to help in addition to all he has done for this struggle. He is a real leader with great wisdom. Professor Alemariam could help restore justice and the rule of law. I could list thousands of great Ethiopians like these, but there is not enough room.

Our problem is that now, in Ethiopia, we now have these greedy leaders who have no love for the people. They do not realize they are in this world for a short time and that thirst for money and power can blind them from seeing anything. Meles and others will not change it for us without pressure.

We are that pressure and we cannot do it if we are broken up into warring factions that worsen as we become numb to our moral conscience. It is then that people slide into becoming subhuman, enabling them to commit acts like what happened in Rwanda, in Yugoslavia and like has been done to some of us during Haile Selassie, the Derg or now under the EPRDF.

To avoid a future that replicates the past, we cannot rely on leaders with the same kind of thinking. In actuality, as we intermarry outside our groups, we will be the same ones we are fighting like the wonderful man by the name Brahan, in Minnesota who told me that “1/8 of me is Amhara, 1/8 is Oromo, 1/3 is Gurage and I don’t know what the rest is.”

One man from Winnipeg told me that he did not want to go to Ethiopia with his eight years old twin boys because people tease them for their tribal background when it differed from others.

A hotel worker at the Radisson in Washington DC is Oromo and told me she does not want to bring her children with her when she goes to Ethiopia because she does not want to expose her children to the tribal thinking.

Another man I met has a daughter who is Gurage who married a man who is half Tigrayan and half Amhara and he told me that this was infecting their marriage.

Another man I recently met told me his ethnicity was divided into five parts.

In an ethnically divided society this creates “ethnic identity confusion,” but in a multi-cultural society, he fits in perfectly and becomes more identified with being “Ethiopian,” or simply, a human being!”

A man from Rochester, New York told me that because of the way he had been treated by the TPLF that we should show them.” I asked him what he meant by “showing them.” He said, “.By killing.” I never ignore these kinds of comments and challenge those holding these views. I then asked, “Do you want your children to have to live in this kind of environment, with someone else wanting to kill them in the future because of your actions now?”

Usually the person had not thought about how their own actions created a hateful, violent and dangerous society for their own children. What if their child married someone “from that other ethnic group and had children that were partly from that other ethnic group?” This is one of the most mixed societies ever, but Meles has destroyed our society and it will take years to heal, but we now have leaders who are challenging this barbaric and ungodly thinking.

“There is no future without forgiveness”

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, “There is no future without forgiveness.” However, it will take lots of work. Imagine a society where the people are taught hatred, golden tribe ideology and shame instead of the truth that God loves each person and that what He desires is a humble, loving servant-heart towards others.

There is something wrong in our society and it should not be ignored. It is the responsibility of every living Tigrayan to speak up against this evil, apartheid system of the TPLF that has been put in place in their name and which is sustained by some among the elite who exploit others without mercy.

It is something people have to talk about in order to replace nihilism with life. Can you imagine what would happen if Ethiopians fell into violent chaos against their brothers, sisters, neighbors and fellow human beings?

Ethiopians are already shamed because they cannot take care of themselves and are at the bottom of most every index scale, but can you imagine if Ethiopia fell into worse violence than Rwanda or Yugoslavia, becoming the country known as one of the worst moral failures in the universe?

We must help those hurt and angry in our society to regain their senses by respectfully confronting these attitudes and beliefs wherever they are found. However, it is these new leaders that are rising up all over who must take charge because these new leaders must do it because an unhealthy society cannot find solutions to its problems from the same kind of people who have led them into the pit of inhumanity and death.

Opportunistic societies, filled with greed and heartlessness, cannot be changed by opportunistic, greedy and heartless people. They are too much into power rather than submitting, serving or sharing. We need new thinking from new leaders and we thankfully, we have them, leaders like--- Golto Aila; Degage Kumera; Alemayehu G. Mariam; Guled Kassim, Teddy Fikre; Achame Shana, Meron Ahadu, Kifle Teka; Abebe Gelaw, Emebet Bekele, Mesfin Berhanu, Lemlem Tsegaw; Abebe Belew; Alebachew Kassie; Fekade Mariam; Berhan Tsehai; Agonafer Shiferaw, Genet Abraha; Yassin Kassim; Sioum Gebeyehou; Leoul Mekonen; Abebe Gebre-Tsadik; Enndelbu Worku; Zenebe Tamirat; Negussie Ali; Terefe Masresha; Pelle Danabo; Lulit Mesfin; Mikael Deribe; Judge Wolde Michael Meshesha, Ibrahim Mohammed, Eyob Tadesse Nigussie; Abeba Fekade; Hagos Berhe; Robele Ababya; Tedla Asfaw; Abraha Belai; Elisabeth Girma, Mekonnen Alemayehu; Mamo Muchie; Orion Mengistu; Aden Yunis; Robsan Itana; Melaku Terefe; Girma Kassa; Adam Zerihun; Abebe Bogale; Wondimu Mekonnen; Yilama Bekele; Girma Aweke, Sebsebie Abera; Kinfu Assefa; Ghidey Zeratsion; Genet Mersha; Teodros Kiros; Abiy Ashenafi; Melegudi Agita; Ferecha Tulu; Meron Agonafer, Mulugeta Mindaye; Elias Wondimu, Mengistu Yemane, Takele Argaw, Melaku Mekonen; Yami Getachew; Fisseha Abebe, Elfneh Sileshi, Bekele Molla; Yoseph Tafari; Dagnea Teshome; Gabe Hamda;

Berhanu Kebede; Mistre Haile Selassie; Samuel Berhanu, Teklemichael Abebe Sahlemariam; Lischan Gizaw; Yonatan Degagu; Bedilu Tekle; Kifle Mulat; Melkie Demissie, Seid Hassan; Selam Beyene, Aster Meshete; Wudineh Zenebe; Elizabeth Demissie; Martha Admassu; Muluneh Yohannes; Eshete Hailu; Mareshet Meshesha, Mimi Tamrat; Ahmed Ali; Merid Bekele; Endashaw Worku, Kale Negash; Tewodros Asfaw and many, many more. I wish I can name all of them.

I am inspired by these leaders and thousands more whom I have met— by their courage, their determination, their love, their care— by you name it! I have met with so many remarkable Ethiopians from many different ethnic groups that I'm overwhelmed with the beauty and variety of our fellow-Ethiopians. All of them have touched me and taught me so much more about our shared humanity. These friendships have broken down many of the negative stereotypes that have been promoted and exaggerated in the past. With God's help, we can find healing, reconciliation and restoration.

In closing, I want to share this Ogadeni tale with you that I just recently received from one of those leaders we need who can see the truth. It speaks to the heart of what is at risk in our country, the suspicion, lack of care and humanity towards our fellow Ethiopians as not be of value.

An Ogadeni Tale: The Lion and the Three Oxen

We Ethiopians are like the three oxen in the story I am about to tell.

In an Ogaden tale, there used to be three strong oxen in the bush; one red, one white and one black. One day a lion came upon them and wondered to himself about how he might eat the three oxen. The lion realized that he could not attack all the three oxen at the same time because of their combined power. He made a plan to divide them and to eat one at a time.

The lion came to the red and to the white oxen and told them that the black ox was spoiling the valley and the bush where they lived. He suggested that the black ox should be killed in order to save their environment. Unknowingly the two oxen thought that the lion was right and allowed him to kill and eat the black ox.

After few days, the lion again came to the red ox and told him that the white ox was arrogant and was intending to kill him (the red ox). The lion suggested that he, the lion, should protect the life of the red ox by killing the white ox. The red ox agreed to the lion's plan and the white ox was killed.

After few days the lion came to the helpless red ox and said, "It is now your time to die."

The red ox now understood the long planned trick of the lion, but was now helpless against him by himself. The red ox said to the lion, "You killed me when you killed the black ox."

The friend who sent this tale to me added these words at the end.

"So dear Ethiopians now Meles is killing Ogadenis because they are supposedly Muslim terrorists, at the same time he is killing Anuak and Oromo because they supposedly want to disintegrate Ethiopia and others will follow for some other justification. In the end, the Tigray people will be in the Meles slaughter house because now they can no longer help themselves. When will we wake up? Maybe after, when we all die in the hands of Meles"... and the TPLF policies that teach hatred, division and destruction until the life and soul of Ethiopia has died.

For the revival of the soul of Ethiopia, come to the Symposium in Washington D.C. regarding "Where do we go from here?" on August 30, 2008. It will be the next step in the formation of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia. You will have opportunity to hear directly from some of the new leaders I have mentioned. May God breathe life back into this neglected, abandoned, forgotten, bleeding, wounded and dying nation.

For more information please contact me by email at: Obang@anuakjustice.org