



Our Mutual Challenge: Silently Becoming Our Words through Our Actions

Solidarity Movement for New Ethiopia | January 26, 2009

We are pleased to know that Professor Alemayehu G. Mariam, is now publicly endorsing so many of the ideas and principles of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia, as demonstrated in his recent article, *“Close Ranks, Open Hearts and Minds, Shake Hands and Get Busy.”* We hope that these ideas and principles continue to spread to others because we are convinced that it will be on such a foundation that the **“NEW ETHIOPIA”** will be built.

In his article, posted on January 19, 2009, this is the way he summed up the need for Ethiopians to adopt these two foundational principles of the Solidarity Movement if we are to succeed in our struggle for democracy: *“...we must also develop a new approach — a new paradigm — to the struggle for democracy in Ethiopia based on an express commitment to a set of core values and principles that will enable us to defer our differences for another time. Our core values must be built on two compelling philosophical principles: 1) **Our humanity must always rise above our ethnicity, nationality, religiosity, Africanity or Ethiopianity.** 2) **No one can be truly free in Ethiopia unless ALL Ethiopians are free.** If we subscribe to these two core principles, open our minds and hearts and collectively pull together, we will soon find ourselves in a win-win situation.*

We love sharing these principles, values, attitudes and the other ideas that we believe will lead to a change of thinking within Ethiopian society, without which we will continue to repeat the same mistakes of the past. What we believe and practice makes a difference in our cultural, political and economic outcomes. What we have had in the past has led to destruction, hatred, division, sabotage, deceit, subterfuge, greed, power-grabbing, oppression, poverty, serial dictatorships and the marginalization or dehumanization of “others.”

This is why we are glad to see Professor Alemayehu G. Mariam, comprehensive endorsement of the basic tenets of the Solidarity Movement. He is one of the key Ethiopians who, with others, worked diligently for the passing of United States House of Representatives’ legislation, HR# 2003, a bill meant to exert strong pressure on the Ethiopian regime of Mr. Meles Zenawi. We in the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia thank him for his hard work and hope to see him continue in his efforts to promote these ideas.

We also hope to see increasingly more Ethiopian people endorse and spread these principles of **“humanity before ethnicity”** and **“no one is free until we all are free”** because working for the common good in solidarity is key to transforming a dysfunctional society like ours. Despite all of the division within Ethiopian groups of every kind, it is encouraging to hear more people promoting the language of unity and collaboration as they are starting to see its importance for themselves. This call has been part of most every speech, article, Paltalk discussion, radio interview and meeting in which I, Obang Metho, have participated for the last three or more years and it is encouraging to see this happen.

For myself, some of the seeds, which led me to reach out to other Ethiopians, were planted when the Anuak faced their darkest and most tragic days when few others were paying any attention. We in the Anuak Justice Council advocated alone. At the same time, I met others in Washington D.C., like the Oromo, doing the same, advocating alone to many of the same key people within the US government.

However, *it was on February 18, 2005, when a conversation with an Ethiopian taxi driver in Washington D.C. hit me so forcefully that I purposely changed my focus from a singular, ethnic-based one to the broad-based focus that included all Ethiopians. Perhaps, if I had not come out of a minority group that had been regularly left out of the mainstream for years, I would have been more satisfied with the status quo, but I did not and my experience riding in that taxi jolted me into a new paradigm of thinking.*

I have told this story before, but it bears repeating. *It was in a casual conversation I had with a friendly Ethiopian taxi driver, Ato Girma Negash, who could not accept me as being Ethiopian. He could accept me being from any other country in Africa with the exception of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. He told me that I did not look Ethiopian and that there was “no way” I could be an Ethiopian. It led me to the thought that as long as I only advocated for the Anuak and did not reach out to other Ethiopians, attempting to know them and to work together, our alienation and the lack of caring for each other would forever frustrate our independent attempts to stop the cycle of injustice. This is when I started speaking for all Ethiopians, realizing that we needed to work together, to grieve with others and to suffer for others.*

When I was invited to testify at the Congressional hearing on March 28, 2006 and my assignment was to talk about the Anuak, I purposely chose to speak for all Ethiopians as well. For those Ethiopians who were there or who have seen a video of my testimony, you will know that before I started my testimony, I first turned around and addressed Ethiopians in the audience, saying, *“Some of you may mistake me for not being an Ethiopian or not looking like the typical Ethiopian, but I am Ethiopian and we must acknowledge one another and work together.”* After that statement, I turned back to address the Congress.

A few days later, I gave my very first speech to Ethiopians at the Marriott Hotel in Washington D.C. [You can read my speech to Ethiopians at “Free Ethiopia”...](#) If you review the substance of that speech, you will find that *I called for unity, forgiveness, acceptance, reconciliation and healing between Ethiopians who were so deeply divided by ethnicity, skin-color, political view and region that they could no longer even drink coffee together in our traditional “coffee circles,”* that in the past, were much more open to others.

I continued to try to spread this message of unity and reconciliation even when many of my own fellows Anuak did not understand.

In April, 2007, when I was invited to be the keynote speaker at the Gasha conference, [you can read my speech at Gasha for Ethiopians in Washington, DC...](#) *I again stressed the need to call on our Tigrayan brothers and sisters to come out and tell Meles that we would not tolerate him using our ethnicity to divide and destroy others as well as ourselves. In that speech, I called on the Tigrayan people to stand side by side with the other Ethiopian people to stop this cycle of “one tribe” domination.*

When our Oromo brothers and sisters invited me to speak to them in August, 2007, [you can read my address to the Oromo Community in Minnesota...](#) *I did not see one single Ethiopian flag, but instead, the flag of the Oromia region everywhere. Because of this, I felt compelled to remind them that as long as we advocated, fought and struggled for only our own group, that we would not go anywhere, but would only prolong our suffering. I urged them to reject the past ethnic politics where “today, one group would be in power and tomorrow, another would take its place.” I emphasized that the name Ethiopia or its flag had never oppressed or killed anyone and that instead, we should all be working together to create a society where everyone would belong, feel welcomed and be appreciated.*

In August, 2007, when I was invited by the Ogadeni community to speak, [you can read my speech of invisible fence...](#) *I stressed the same message, telling them we might look differently from each other, but that our differences made up the beauty of the garden of Ethiopia. I urged our brother and sister Ogadenis to break the invisible fence that divided us Ethiopians from each other.*

In September 2007, when there was a division between the Kinijit, *I called on all factions to put their political differences aside and to come together to create an umbrella movement to free Ethiopia. You can read my open letter to Kinijit leaders...* *I explained that once the country was freed, they could go back to their own political platforms, which could then be presented to the Ethiopian people for a vote. I even offered to find mediators who were not aligned with any one particular group so that the best interests of the country could be placed above partisan politics through reconciliation of differences. Unfortunately, my call fell on deaf ears.*

In November of 2007, the struggle for unity and inclusiveness was taken to a higher level when we *invited all civic organizations, especially the leaders of human rights groups, to come together in new relationship in order to hear the grievances of our people in other regions and to better know better their suffering so we could begin working together. The human rights abuses and oppression that each described was originating in the actions of the same government.*

We had representation from people from most regions of the country—Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Ogaden, Oromia, Amhara, Tigray and from the South. At that meeting, I called people from all the regions to speak up for each other. For example, someone from Benishangul-Gumuz can speak for more than just the people of Benishangul-Gumuz. The same is true of an Amhara who can speak for more than the Amhara, an Oromo for more than Oromo or an Ogadeni for more than only the Ogadeni because *we need to find common ground to work together to relieve the suffering of all of us.*

It was at this meeting that I announced these principles—“*humanity before ethnicity,*” and that “*no one would be free until we all were free,*” indicating that it was the only way to stop the cycle of one-tribe domination or not caring for others outside our own groups. At the time, there was a call to speak out for the Ogadeni who were being especially targeted by the Meles regime. Most of those who were present at that meeting became the leaders of what has become the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia.

In March of 2008 was when we received an invitation from a *great Ethiopian leader, Dr. Golto. Previously, he may not have been known to mainstream Ethiopians, but soon showed his love and his care for his country. He is an example of those bright and talented people, with excellent leadership ability combined with good values and wisdom, who have often not been part of the mainstream because they come from ethnic groups which have been intentionally ignored and pushed aside by the previously governments. How many more are there like him, who have not yet surfaced, but who may be strategic to reviving this dying country?*

Dr. Golto had already been working with other Ethiopians and had formed a *Solidarity Forum of Ethiopia* and invited us to be part of it. His position was that he was comfortable with his own life as a spinal cord surgeon and was not interested in being a politician, but stressed that the only reason he was becoming involved now was because he could not go on with his peaceful life in America while his people were suffering back home.

He made it clear that he had no hidden agenda and did not care about credit to him or his name. He instead wanted Ethiopians to work in solidarity to create a better Ethiopia. We joined together with him so when we organized the Worldwide March, he was one of the key leaders—besides Alemariam and myself. He was involved in chairing the more than ten teleconferences we held before the event took place.

After this, in May of 2008, we in the Solidarity Movement (SMNE) took the initiative of organizing a four-day, multi-focused memorial observance of the killing of election protestors following the flawed Ethiopian National Election of 2005. One of those events, a Worldwide March, drew people from diverse groups in cities all over the world.

In August of 2008, the Solidarity Movement (SMNE) invited all civic organizations to come together in Washington DC for a forum focusing on “Where Should We Go From Here?” [You can read the symposium on Ethiopia Offers New Solutions to the Question: “Where Do We Go From Here?”](#). The mission statement and principles of the SMNE were established at the time.

The Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia is a grassroots movement whose mission is to: **Mobilize Ethiopians in the Diaspora and within Ethiopia to unite in a coalition across ethnic, regional, political, cultural, and religious lines around principles of truth, justice, freedom, the protection of human rights, equality and civility in order to bring about a more open, free and reconciled society in Ethiopia where humanity comes before ethnicity and where the same rights, opportunities and privileges are available to all because no one will be free until all are free.**

The logo was later created and is an indication of the values of the SMNE. *As you can tell from looking at its circular design, the three separate parts of it are meant to represent the diverse Ethiopian people in the colors of our national flag, all sitting together at a roundtable, in equal position. If you remove any one part or “person” in the circle, it will not be the same, but will be imperfect. As long as it has each component, it is circular and can be put into motion, like a wheel meant to move forward to transport us together to a new Ethiopia where no one ethnic group will be pushed aside, left behind or denied an opportunity.*

More literally, removing one person from our circle is like removing one ethnic group from our country instead of valuing all of our parts and members. *That is why you will find that the people within the executive committee of the SMNE are from all over the country. For instance, you will find Robson from Oromia, Ibriham from Benishangul-Gumuz, Yassin from the Ogaden, Teddy from Tigray, Dr. Golto from the South, Meleaku from Amhara region, Ismael from Afar region and some women like Ms. Sosina and Ms. Lemlem, Achame, Abebe, Girma, Tessema, Groum, Wondimu, Michael, and Berhan, among others.*

These representatives, and others as well, have been reaching out to their respective groups at the grassroots level. As you might have read in our recent article, “Are the Skies Brightening Over Ethiopia,” [You can read: Are the Skies Brightening Over Ethiopia?...](#) that Ethiopians from different regions, various backgrounds, differing political groups and diverse professions are endorsing these principles. There are many other comments from Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians who have given words of support that we have not released to the public.

We are progressing with the development of our infrastructure, part of which required legally registering our name and setting up a bank account in that name. We in the SMNE are willing to work with all other groups, not wanting to exclude any as long as we have goals in common and as long as they are consistent with our basic principles and values. This is a principle-driven movement instead of an ethnic-driven movement as one can see through our action plan for 2009, that just came out a month ago. We want to work with those who agree with these principles and ideas because we believe they are life-building.

The goal of the Solidarity Movement is to see the ideas needed “to liberate a people and a nation,” move through Ethiopian society until they are accepted as part of what it means to live “humanly.” These ideas are not genuinely being carried out if the benefits are only enjoyed by a special or entitled segment of society. For instance, if my neighbor is left out, we are violating the principles. If those from Addis Ababa or Gambella are only included, we are violating the principles. If those who are of a certain religious belief or political belief are left out, we are violating the principles. Yet, we do not want to compromise or “water down” the principles.

When an institution, business or a religious organization is formed, those who have the vision, must set the direction based on what they believe to be true, important and effective. Others may choose to become part of it if they agree with the founding principles and values, endorsing or rejecting it.

In the case of the SMNE those principles include truth, equality, the rule of law, respect for human rights, respect for personal liberties of free press, free speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion and other such basic principles that promote a healthy society. These non-negotiable principles are not really our ideas but are based on greater universal principles.

For example, they are based in the intrinsic worth of every human being because God has created every one of us in His image. As Jesus said, “We are to “love our neighbor as ourselves.” Is this not similar to placing humanity before ethnicity and the belief that no is free until we all are free? However, because of our moral flaws, none of us can uphold them perfectly, requiring the fair and equal application of the rule of law in order to hold everyone accountable. In a healthy, well-functioning society, our most important institutions are formed and shaped by them. This has not been the case in Ethiopia for many years and change may be painful.

We cannot expect that the “new Ethiopia” of our hopes and dreams will rise up into new vigorous life until we hold our own “funeral” on the negative elements of the “old Ethiopia,” while recovering that which has best nurtured and sustained us for many years like our coffee circles.

What I mean by “funeral” is the purposeful giving up of those beliefs, attitudes and practices that are causing the physical death of our nation. This will not be easy and there will be resistance. When anything dies, even when it is unhealthy, there is always a struggle. Think of the physical deaths of our loved ones. Their bodies might have been full of cancer or a deadly virus; yet they struggled on for life and breath. The same will be true of the old way of life that has produced our collective misery. Even though it is killing us, it will be hard to give up.

The struggle between the two is inevitable for the “old” is threatened by the “new” in fear that there will be loss, not gain, but life-giving principals can liberate everyone. We must be patient and endure though, for just because it will be a difficult transformation, does not mean we should give up the fight for what can free the “soul” of Ethiopia.

Not everyone will go through it in the same way and at the same time. However, history has demonstrated that the societies which most flourish are the ones who most promote these values promoting human dignity and basic rights. Conversely, it is also those societies that most reject and repress these values, which most fail to advance in every arena.

What are we to be? Are you willing to attend the “funeral” of your own destructive thinking so our future generations can live in peace and harmony? We can speak about unity and inclusion, but our challenge will be to become what we speak. Each of us can use lofty principles and inspiring words, saying all the right things, but we above all must “be our words” without ever speaking. This is a challenge to every one of us, including me!

May God help us to be **the kind of people who will bring reconciliation, inclusion, respect and dignity to our fellow sojourners on this earth.** May those we pass by in our life be more enriched and blessed by our adherence to Your divine principles and may they be fully integrated into our hearts, lives and actions.

May we not compromise our beliefs, but may we always reach out to extend grace, love and forgiveness to others as You have done for us. May God bless Ethiopia!

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