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An Ethiopian Peace Initiative

By

Mesfin Wolde Mariam

Were it not for the unwarranted generalization that all control is wrong, we should deal with the social environment as simply as we deal with the nonsocial. We accept the fact that we depend upon the world around us, and we simply change the nature of the dependency. In the same way, to make the social environment as free as possible of aversive stimuli we do not need to destroy that environment or escape from it, we need to redesign it. B.F. Skinner

I. THE PROBLEM

The fundamental problem—the source of all the problems—is the absence of a civil government which in effect means the absence of the rule of law, the absence of free expression of ideas, the absence of any sort of political association. This is a deliberate policy designed to preserve the monopoly of power for each of the contending groups. In this regard, therefore, there is no difference between the groups contending for power. Consequently, any solution must be sought outside the framework of the present contenders for power.

II. SOME BASIC FACTS

1. The Ethiopian people, whose profound faith in God as the Ultimate power without whose will nothing can happen, whose proverbial pride and deep sense of honor which have always manifested themselves by their equally deep sense of sacrifice rather than by their material wealth or their instruments of war, have now fallen so low, both by the estimation of others, and by their own, that the name Ethiopia has become synonymous with famine.
2. A people who have throughout the centuries demonstrated with enormous sacrifice that they will not submit to any monolithic ideology, whether it was Judaic, Christian, or Moslem, had to face once again in the last quarter of the twentieth century the monolithic, atheist and exclusive ideology of Marxism-Leninism. Once again, they paid enormous sacrifices in life, property and continuous suffering and remained unshakeable in their rugged individualism and sense of freedom in their relationships to their chosen God. Thanks to President Gorbachev who changed the global relationships by removing superpower rivalry and the stifling notion of the infallibility of Marxism-Leninism, there is a faint hope for a better future, although the situation in Ethiopia has not changed fundamentally.
3. To this day, the Ethiopian people suffer with the patience that only a people who have an unshakeable faith in God can endure. They suffer from famine brought about not only by the vagaries of nature, but

more so by blind exploitation that refuses to recognize the subsistence needs of peasants. They suffer from wars that have very little relationship with real and felt problems. They are nevertheless expected by all sides to bear the major brunt of the war effort in more ways than one. It is not uncommon to find brothers in different camps shooting at each other.

4. The continuing fratricidal wars turn the productive energies of Ethiopian youth into cannon fodders and the precarious subsistence economies of Ethiopian peasants into relief dependency.
5. As the unprecedented and unabated emigration of Ethiopian youth and its best trained manpower continues, the serious and adverse consequences on the social and economic future of the country becomes compounded. As Israel continues to trade its resources for the Beta-Israel, the Ethiopian Jews, one more area of shame for Ethiopians is becoming evident. I question not the right of the Beta-Israel to emigrate to Israel, but the manner by which they are taken and the selection process.
6. The fast pace of erosion of the Ethiopian traditional sense of decency (chewannet) and the growing allegation of corruption against those in public office is extremely disturbing. Bureaucratic capitalism has never flourished in Ethiopia as it is today. While it is doubtful that there were any millionaires some fifteen years ago, now, it is generally believed that there are at least scores of them.

III. THE MAJOR ISSUES

1. The most crucial issue in Ethiopia today is that of freedom. The tight control of the press and the absence of any public forum for discussing Ethiopian problems freely and openly must be recognized as the basic source of all issues. The proliferation of liberation movements is a direct outcome of total censorship. Those who sincerely want peace in Ethiopia must insist that freedom of speech and of the press is a necessary condition. This will remain true whoever is in power.
2. Peace must not be and must not mean the defeat and humiliation of one group and the victory and jubilation of another. In fact peace should not mean the cessation of differences of views of whatever kind. Peace can only mean the substitution of violent and destructive conflict by a positive and constructive one; the substitution of fighting with bullets by fighting with words and ideas, leaving the verdict to the Ethiopian people.
3. The steamrolling of a people to submission by any group and for whatever purpose does not constitute unity; nor does it create a real unity of purpose as the armed oppositions wish. It is not by imposing unity but by demonstrating its inherently greater strength and better opportunities than disunity that one can forge true and genuine unity. At any rate I do not believe that the majority of people in any region of the country will stand against unity. Admittedly there are problems of perceptions even amongst some of the most educated Ethiopians, perceptions that seem to confuse a

given government at a given time with the Ethiopian state. But the facts as they are unfolding demonstrate that one must give credit to the Ethiopian people and to their sense of unity.

4. Repression which conceals the raging storms below the surface does not constitute stability. At present none of the opposing forces are really stable. They all survive strenuously, relying on brute forces for total obedience.
5. The Ethiopian people believe in justice and the rule of law. The Ethiopian people call it the God of Law. To any disrespect for the God of Law the Ethiopian people will sooner or later respond in no uncertain terms, decisively and effectively.
6. The real issue is not whether this or that group should give up their political convictions, but that they change only their method of combat; that all groups must change from armed to political combat.
7. The basic issue is whether the various groups that claim to represent a section or the whole of the Ethiopian people are willing to submit to guns or to the people as the final arbiters of all issues.
8. Whether Ethiopia should be a unitary or a federal state, or whether this or that region should be autonomous is not the decision of a few elites. The Ethiopian people must be allowed to resolve these issues after considering all the pros and cons in extended public debates. It should, however, be remembered that federalism is tradition to Ethiopia.

9. With nearly the whole population of Ethiopia left to the mercies of suppliers of relief assistance, there is hardly any indication of anything that constitutes governance.

Right now peace is in the forefront of every Ethiopian's mind. But I wonder how many actually think, I mean really think, about the meaning of peace and the necessary conditions for it. Granted, peace is a very important condition for social and economic development. But peace is not the mere absence of wars. It must be something more, something positive. It will be wrong to assume that a repressed society will be at peace with the authorities and their machinery of repression. That is why it is imperative to also consider the necessary preconditions for genuine and lasting peace. These preconditions are outlined below.

IV. PRINCIPLES:

1. The fundamental principles on which any civil society is constituted are the following:
 - a. Freedom of expression, including writing and publishing, speaking without any fear of persecution;
 - b. Freedom of association in accordance with the specific and peculiar interests of groups;
 - c. The rule of law which protects individuals and groups from any arbitrary arrests and persecution by those in authority;

d. Most importantly, the acceptance of the people as the ultimate source power and that no authority is legitimate if it is not derived from the people who are sovereign.

2. These principles are enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights which asserts that:

The "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,"

And that:

"Disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people."

And finally that:

"It is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law." (emphasis added)

Violence as a means of receiving differences or as a means of acquiring power over any section or the whole society is both morally and intellectually unacceptable. The resort to violence is not only a concrete

demonstration of rejecting the sovereignty of the people; it is also a violation of one's own stand against oppression and arbitrary rule by force. Those who resort to force as a means of acquiring power are in effect making a statement that oppression is right if the one is the oppressor and wrong only if one is oppressed. Such a position is morally and intellectually untenable.

V. Conclusion

If my series of statements are basically sound, then there is much that is wrong in Ethiopia. We must do something real soon in order to avoid the impending catastrophe that will without any doubt vitiate all the values in Ethiopian culture. The time is approximately a quarter to six. We have only fifteen minutes to straighten up ourselves and to ward off the war clouds that may continue for another generation.

I wholeheartedly and sincerely believe that we are all responsible for the mess we are in. Even so those in power must accept a greater share of responsibility. In the fifteen minutes that is remaining they have the choice of writing the concluding chapter of the last generation and the introduction for the next. They need to demonstrate their leadership in patriotism, magnanimity in face of unexpected odds, and above all, a sense of history which will allow them to shape the future in the best way possible.

My suggestion is a simple one and it is based on Ethiopian tradition of reconciliation, *irq*, and forgiveness, *yiqir leigziabher*. Both traditional Ethiopian concepts require the involvement of elders, *shimaghille*. The process will be briefly as follows:

1. A council of elders will be elected by the people from every region and they will be authorized to appoint a trustworthy government under their control.
2. The first duty of the trusteeship government under the control of the council of elders will be to sign an agreement with the present government on matters relating to the safety and security of party members, functionaries and officials. This is a practical necessity not only for the sake of those involved, but also for the country and the nation which cannot afford another occasion for losing its trained manpower one way or another.
3. The other duty of the trusteeship government will be to ensure that the sovereignty of the Ethiopian people and not the possession of guns that will be the sources of power. Thereafter, all groups who have different and opposing ideas, no matter how unfashionable they may be, will debate freely and publicly with a view to winning the support of the Ethiopian people.
4. After ratifying the constitution that will be fully and freely debated by the whole population, and after legislating the function, operations and the standards of contest between parties, both the council of elders and the trusteeship government will hand over authority to the winning parties and leave. Their roles will be terminal, and that is neither the members of the council of elders nor the members of the trusteeship government will seek any position in the succeeding administration.

VI. A PLEA

1. In the name of Almighty God, in the name of humanity, in the name of all Ethiopian mothers throughout our long embattled history, in the name of all Ethiopians who continue to suffer indignity, degradation, poverty and famine, I ask those in power to consider seriously the alternatives to the request for a magnanimous and historic decision that is the hallmark of sound leadership at such extraordinary times.
2. I ask those engaged in armed opposition to the regime to prove the courage of their convictions by changing not their objectives but their methods of violence against the Ethiopian people and their meager resources. I ask them to reflect on the suffering of the Ethiopian people and their degradation as refugees in many parts of the world.
3. I ask all men and women of good will everywhere especially the leaders of the United States, the Soviet Union, and Western European countries to use all their influences both on the government in Ethiopia and on those engaged in armed opposition, and by so doing contribute to restore the traditional dignity and sense of honor of the Ethiopian people and alleviate their suffering.