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Ethiopian People's Congress for United Struggle (Shengo)

www.ethioshengo.org shengo.derbiaber@gmail.com

Rescuing Ethiopia from impending major crisis: The ‘fierce urgency of now’ and facilitating all-inclusive process for a non-violent political transition

A position paper of Shengo

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It has been some time now since Ethiopia has plunged into a political crisis. This follows the recent popular protest of Ethiopian Muslims, the uprisings in different parts of the Oromo region and the North West provinces of Gonder and Gojam in the Amhara region. During this period, the ruling TPLF-led regime (EPRDF) is employing the same old tactics that it has used for 25 years to crush the popular uprising and to stay in power. Despite the regimes ongoing use of brute force however, the popular resistance is growing and gaining momentum both in its intensity and scale.

This new reality requires a new political approach. Thus, Ethiopia should urgently embark on formulating an all-inclusive political process or risk a wide spread resistance, that could engender more catastrophic consequences and could veer off to unforeseen directions. Sadly, so far the very nature of the autocratic rulers deny them to have an insight of the reality and do not have the political will to relent to the popular demand for overhaul change.

The wide spread repression

The national election in 2005 marked a major watershed for the ruling party. Its disguise of having popular support was unravelled. It clearly showed that it was unwilling to yield power to the /popular/ will of the people. The regime’s crackdown demonstrated how far the regime would go to suppress independent opposition and dissent. As part of that crackdown, thousands were imprisoned, hundreds killed and thousands forced to flee the country.

Since then, through relentless repression, the regime has weakened the capacity of the opposition, the free press and effectively eliminated the independent civic society by introducing 3 anti-constitutional laws – relating to the media, civil society and the anti-terrorism law to suppress dissidents.

One of the major developments in the Ethiopian political arena after 2005 is the fact that the regime has dropped the pretentious facade of foisting multiparty democracy. Since then, the

ruling TPLF-led regime has been openly very critical of liberal democracy and continued to justify its monopoly of power through its ideology of ‘Revolutionary Democracy’ under the cover of “Developmental State”. This has increasingly made both the opposition and the public at large to conclude that the ruling TPLF/EPRDF would not yield political power peacefully increasing the likelihood of armed conflict. Tragically, signs of such activities are beginning to appear in various parts of the country.

Wide spread dissatisfaction

Despite the regime’s attempt to down play the issue, there are multiple political, economic, and social factors that contributed to the tremendous dissatisfaction and anger demonstrated by a wide spectrum of the Ethiopian population at this point. Here are a few

- Cumulative effect of 25 years of relentless and brutal suppression, political killings, disappearances and mass incarcerations etc.;
- Total lack of faith on the ruling TPLF led regime that it will allow any form of meaningful exercise of human and democratic rights;
- Frustration arising out of the regime’s complete disregard to the citizens basic rights to safety and security of their own habitat. This includes eviction of citizens from their land with little or no compensation, forced takeover of their businesses and properties, throwing people out of their job with little explanation or compensation etc.;
- The absence of rule of law has caused citizens immense frustration and wide spread feeling of vulnerability;
- The systemic ethnic discrimination, and the establishment of hegemony and special privilege to members and supporters of the ruling group over all other individuals and groups;
- Lack of employment opportunities and lack of economic mobility to the young generation both in urban and rural parts of the country
- The relentless labelling, demonization, belittling and attack on different ethnic or cultural groups (i.e. Amharas and Oromos), religious groups (both Orthodox Christians and Muslims) as Chauvinists, narrow nationalists, extremists etc.
- The misguided, ill-advised and politically motivated redrawing and imposition of internal administrative boundaries without the consent of the residents (i.e. Welkait Tsegedie, Tselemt, Raya, Konso etc.) and the discontent and open conflict related to the above
- The limitless corruption within the ruling group and glaring embezzlement of the country’s coffer with little or no consequence.

Rage, growing Public Resistance and dissent from within the EPRDF

The increased repression over the last 25 years did not result in the complete annihilation of dissent, as the ruling group would have wanted it. On the contrary, what has surfaced is a more determined more vigorous, more informed grass root resistance. The resistance is now wide spread involving cross-sections of age groups, geographic, ethnic and religious groups etc.

Sub-cultural groups that the regime once thought will be its “loyal supporters”, including the youth, the farmers, the Oromo’s, the Muslims, the people in Southern Ethiopia etc.... are now in open revolt. Clearly, the regime’s support is narrowing and diminishing rapidly. Out of clear desperation it has now decided to declare a state of emergency. This changing dynamic is resulting in a very fragile security environment across the country.

The Resistance is gaining momentum and stamina

In the past, an open display of resistance in Ethiopia has been met by a crushing blow /repression/ and therefore has been a short-lived phenomenon. However, at this point, the resistance in the Oromiya region has been taking place since November 2015, the open resistance by members of the Muslim community is now more than four years old, the most recent resistance in the northern regions of Gonder and Gojam has now continued for over four months. Using different forms of peaceful civil disobediences the resistance in the Northern provinces is showing some maturity in scope and nature becoming more dynamic and more organized.

It appears the relentless nature of the resistance could provide a galvanizing opportunity to the movement and a much-needed time to consolidate leadership, solidify its support, expand its reach and articulate a broader common vision.

There are also a number of unique characteristics that contributed to the dynamic features of the resistance today. These include:

- In the past, including in 2005, the resistance was confined to major cities i.e. Addis Abeba, Awassa, Dessie etc., it was active mainly in big urban centres or locations. Now it is spread out over the entire country, across different regions, including small towns, i.e. over 200 locations in the Oromia region, almost the entire regions of Gonder and Gojam, part of Wello in north east Konso in the south, and different other locations.
- The resistance in the past was mainly directed by the leadership of the legally registered political organizations i.e. Kinijit, UEDF, MEDREK, Andent, Blue Party etc. In a way, one could say that it was a top down movement. The regime was then able to paralyze these resistances by locking up the top leaders of the political parties. However, the current resistance is developing from both ends; it is as much bottom-up as it is top-down. This has made it more dynamic and very difficult for the regime to suppress.
- The issues why people are rallying are grounded on challenges the people see and face on a day-to-day basis i.e. eviction from their lands, issues of identity, poverty, insecurity, corruption, absence of justice and rule of law. Therefore, the public’s determination to fight for the issues raised at this time is much stronger. The political agendas raised at this point are more appealing to a larger audience.
- In the past, the ruling party faced the fury of the people as one, undivided and unified party. But currently, the division within the ruling EPRDF is more evident. Members of the ruling party, mid-level and in some cases from the upper leadership, in Oromo and Amhara regions are increasingly siding with the resistance.

- In the past, ethnic and religious divisions have helped the ruling party to weaken the resistance. However, currently, the Orthodox Church in Exile as well as the movement of the Ethiopian Muslims (both inside and outside the country) are on the same side, they both are against the regime's unabated interference in their religious affairs and against the ruling party's desire to control the leadership of both religions. The Orthodox Church within Ethiopia is also becoming more vocal against the detention and killings of citizens.
- Currently, there is increasing solidarity and interdependence between the Oromo and Amhara based resistances.
- The psychological barrier of fear and reprisal has been shattered. As observed in Oromya, Gonder, Gojam etc. Ethiopians are no more afraid to speak out their disapproval of the ruling TPLF/EPRDF.
- The killings at the Irrecha celebration has now galvanized unprecedented level of open defiance against the ruling group

All of these factors show that it is highly likely that the resistance will continue gaining increased strength as time goes on.

The government's rigid and sterile approach

Despite the wide spread and open uprising, the regime continues to go back to its old tactic of brutal /forceful/ suppression, widespread imprisonment, offering empty promises of reform, blaming others and endless meetings etc. Furthermore, despite repeated calls by the opposition to engage in dialogue to address this national emergency, the regime has continued to refuse talking with the opposition. Instead, the regime has deployed thousands of armed forces, both in Amhara and Oromo regions, and engaged in wide spread mass arrests, killings etc. In Oromiya region, an estimated 1200 (some sources put the estimate to be 5500) peaceful demonstrators have been killed by the security forces and in the Amhara region of Gonder and Gojam the numbers of people killed is estimated to be about the same.

However, unlike in the past, this time around, it appears the social uprisings springing up across the country appear to be more organized and bold with a clandestine organizational and tactical plan of sustainability. This shows the maturity, character and scope of these movements cannot be crushed by the regime, as was the case in the past. There is also ever increasing concern that even if the regime dares to crush the resistance, the cost of such approach in human life could be immeasurable. Moreover, there is a worry that such repression would very likely give rise to extremism and radicalization of the youth. Hence, political analysts and observers warn, if the government does not start a dialogue with the opposition in very short order, armed groups could mushroom around the country, making the country completely unsafe and ungovernable.

The way forward

The complex political situation in Ethiopia requires a comprehensive solution that addresses the immediate safety and security concern within the country as well as addressing the root causes and demands of the popular discontent.

This will require a sober, give and take process that includes the fundamentals of trust building, inclusion, justice, fairness, mutual gain, forgiveness and a meaningful process to address long-standing grievances. Comprehensive and lasting peace is not to be achieved by just freezing the current conflict or attempting to go back to the pre-crisis status through one means or another. Doing so would only aggravate the situation.

Ethiopia is located in a region that is mired by conflict and fragile state. The deteriorating political unrest within the country will only add to the already exiting instability both within Ethiopia and the region. As such, resolving outstanding issues in Ethiopia is an urgent task for regional and global peace and security.

We believe that resolving the current situation in the country requires a three-step approach

1. Creating STABILITY by initiating a genuine, safe and inclusive political process acceptable to all stake holders;
2. Addressing the root causes of the crisis through an all-inclusive NATIONAL DIALOGUE and the establishment of all-inclusive transitional process
3. Putting in place a well-grounded process for ON-GOING CHANGE, DEMOCRATIZATION and prevention of similar crisis in the future.

The following are key principles that need to inform the solution framework:

Non-violent transition

The current situation in Ethiopia requires a non- violent transition that leads towards more inclusive, more democratic and accountable political order. Ethiopians are clearly expressing their rejection of TPLF/EPDRF's one-party rule. On the other hand, the ruling group is involved in an irresponsible and unsustainable path of delusion and denial of observable facts. The regimes view as such is seeing itself as the only “change agent who could fix the problems”. This demonstrates the ruling party's profound detachment from the reality on the ground. Delaying the inevitable and much needed change will lead to a more violent confrontation, creating an environment of uncertainty and instability in the country. This ultimately will have a major ripple effect on the economy and social dislocation, spiralling Ethiopia in to a vicious cycle of violence.

Transparent and all-inclusive transition

At this point, bringing stability in Ethiopia requires transitioning into a government that has credibility and respect of the people. EPRDF has lost the peoples' trust and respect.

In today's Ethiopia, there is no single political party or group that garners the trust of most citizens. No political party or other form of organization has an overall control or influence in what is happening throughout the country. Certain groups might be influential in certain parts of the county and some others may be influential in other parts of the country. As such, there is no one or two political parties that could be considered as representatives of the resistance in all parts of the country.

As such, resolving the current crisis requires bringing together all stakeholders so that together, they all own the process as well as the solutions.

Before the situation reaches a point of no return and events on the ground get out of control leading to the violent downfall of the regime, there is an opportunity to show willingness towards a smooth political transition. During this transition, political power should rest in the hand of a government of national unity made up of representatives of diverse political views, including the ruling TPLF/EPRDF. This process should reflect the unity and diversity of the Ethiopian society by having a representation from cross section of the country such as ethnic, religious and gender diversity. We propose that this government should adopt a hybrid model and include both representatives of political parties who are participants in the transitional process as well as technocrats, politically neutral (none political affiliated) prominent individuals with high qualification and positive reputation as role models and consensus builders within the Ethiopian society. Members of the government (cabinet, heads of corporations, commissions and government enterprises) must be conferred by the consensus of the participants of the transitional process.

The security forces, the judiciary etc. should be freed from direct or indirect control of any political party and be answerable to the Transitional Government and the Transitional Assembly.

In addition to the government, Transitional Assembly of National Unity representing political parties, civic organizations, different regions etc. should be established with a mandate to act as a legislative body until the transition to an elected parliament/assembly is completed. It will work to encourage positive democratic engagement, development, sovereignty and national unity of Ethiopia and to approve budget as well as approve the activities of the transitional government.

The transitional process should be tasked with

- Administering the country until such time (maximum 3 years) that an elected government assumed power
- Repealing the current undemocratic and repressive constitution and replace it by a Transitional Charter agreed upon by participants of the transition. Establish a constitutional commission that will undertake the responsibility of drafting a new constitution with full participation of all Ethiopians, Ratifying the new constitution through open and transparent referendum.
- Introducing legislation to facilitate free and fair democratic election in the country. Replacing the current election board by a competent non-partisan election commission.

- Initiating a peace and social reconciliation process and taking appropriate legal steps to bring to justice those who have committed atrocities and crimes.

Legislative guarantee to respect human and democratic rights

A corner stone of the transition should be full respect of human and democratic rights including the right to organize, to freedom of expression etc. A clear demonstration to the public that the country is moving forward in the right direction will be the immediate release of all political prisoners, ending the state of emergency, ending the repression of free press, and legalizing all political parties.

Commitment to equality, self-rule and unity of the country

In Ethiopia, there is a contested national identity and concern about the unity of the country. While most outstanding issues need to be addressed through a national dialogue process, given the distrust and the prevailing identity politics, it is imperative to provide a framework that could be a starting point for collectively deciding what kind of administrative structure best would fit the country and its people moving forward. We propose that the transitional process and organization involved in this process commit themselves to the principles of equality, devolution of power, self-rule and unity of the country.

Commitment to social reconciliation

The need for social and political reconciliation is one of the most pressing issues in the country. Ethiopia faces a number of outstanding historical as well as recent grievances. For a long time, these historical and recent grievances have been left building layers of trauma. Addressing these grievances and creating a long terms process of healing these wounds requires dealing with those real or perceived outstanding issues in a respectful, generous, truthful and transparent way. This could be achieved through engagement in national reconciliation and a healing process sanctioned by all stakeholders. The transition process needs to initiate this process.

Lessons from the past

Ethiopia has passed through two political, economic and social experiments transitions, in 1974 after the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie and in 1991 after the overthrow of the Military regime.

Both transitions were non-inclusive, insular and decided mainly by narrowly defined interests. Neither of the two produced inclusive democratic governance. The results of both processes were disenfranchisement, the rise of dictatorships, bitter confrontation between the regimes and opposition forces and political instability and recurring violence.

In this context, the proposed transition at this point should take a lesson from those two failed processes. Exclusion will yield sense of alienation and perpetuation of conflict.

The other factors that contributed to the failure of the 1991 transition were the following:

- The lack of transparent process. Most decisions on key issues were made behind closed doors with little or no transparency.
- Making rushed decisions that went way beyond the mandate and scope of a transitional (provisional) government on issues that should have been left for permanent government with mandate from the people;
- Imposing TPLF's political program as the transitional charter of the country;

These are issues that should not be allowed to be repeated again.

Untangling Eritrea out of Ethiopian politics

The separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia and the role of the EPLF led government in Asmara in Ethiopian affair is one of the most contentious political issues. This further complicated the political landscape of the country and injected additional dimension to the problem.

Entangling the Ethio-Eritrean Border issue or any other outstanding issues with the current internal crisis in Ethiopia is therefore unnecessary and unhelpful. It will only aggravate the already complicated situation. Therefore addressing one issue at a time is the most logical approach. The relation between the two should be determined after a legitimate and mandated government is established in Ethiopia.