

Can the Ethiopian Government Save Itself and Ethiopia Too?

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[**Postscript:** I finished writing an article just hours before I heard the disturbing news about the death of scores of people during the Irrecha festival in Bishoftu. My main motivation in writing the article was to reach out to the Ethiopian government with a hope that the ideas in the article might help to prevent a violent overthrow of the government which will surely have catastrophic consequences. I had a little bit of hope when I was writing the piece below, but the Irrecha massacre has almost extinguished that little hope that the regime might listen to its citizens if only to prevent its own demise. I decided to still reach out to the regime through the piece below with the remaining flickering and dying hope that right after the deadly aftermath of the Irrecha massacre the regime might wake up to abort a potentially disastrous end of its time in power. The most important question now is: Will the regime continuously refuse to seek a peaceful transition to the next chapter in Ethiopian history or will it listen to its citizens, even once in 25 years!]

The main purpose of this article, as the title suggests, is to propose a practical and realistic solution to the crisis in Ethiopia that can accomplish two significant goals: To save Ethiopia from ethnic conflicts or civil war, and also to propose and challenge the Ethiopian government to bring about real reform that can be done without overthrowing the government in a violent way. The solution I am proposing is not brand new or original, but if it receives a proper response it could save Ethiopia from disintegration and civil war that involves ethnic cleansing. Here are simple questions to the regime in power the answer to which will save the country: Do those of you in power really want to save yourselves from the following fates: (a) a violent overthrow of your government that could have fatal consequences, or (b) being forced to abandon power and to run away to save your lives with a consequence that involves leaving behind most of the fortunes you've unjustly acquired over the years?, and either of the fates, (a) or (b), would have the consequence (c) that has a potential for ethnic conflicts the result of which is death and destruction of your loved ones as well as the lives of so many more. Do you really want any of these options to be real? Do you really want to end your role as government in any one of the options mentioned above? One chief goal of this piece is to make a case that the regime in power can prevent all the above three scenarios without paying any price. If that is the case, it would be absolutely absurd

to wait for the inevitable fate, one or the other mentioned above, or something much similar to them.

Let us start with a proposal which is a set of familiar demands of citizens that the government must meet. Note that these demands might be seen as the “price” the government is asked to pay in the sense that it would cost the government something if the government meets these demands, but in reality there is no price the government is paying in meeting these demands. Let me list some of the demands that the Ethiopian government is asked to meet:

1. To release all political prisoners including journalists who are imprisoned for expressing their political opinions or doing their job as journalists.
2. To stop killing, arresting and jailing citizens for expressing their political views or expressing legitimate grievances in peaceful demonstrations or as an organized political party.
3. To remove any restrictions on the press, to allow the media to serve the people of Ethiopia without any interference from the government.
4. To repeal the so-called anti-terrorism law since this law is designed to silence freedom of expression and to stifle dissent from the political views of the government.
5. To establish a clear way for the courts to maintain their independence from interference from the government.
6. To establish an independent body to investigate the recent deaths, injuries, and arrests of citizens in the wake of the protests in the Oromia and Amhara regions and elsewhere in the country. This independent body must include investigators that are impartial, just, and transparent.

A Reflection on the Demands

Let us briefly reflect on the nature of the above demands and how meeting them is not paying any real price for the government for the sake of achieving what is desirable both for the people of Ethiopia and the government itself.

Consider (1) above, releasing all political prisoners and journalists jailed on various false charges. What would the government LOSE by releasing political prisoners and imprisoned journalists, for example, Eskinder Nega? The answer: Nothing. If the government has been confident of responsibly carrying out its responsibilities, no dissident citizen and no journalist should be jailed in the first place. Conversely, what would the government GAIN for releasing political prisoners and

journalists? The answer: Quite a lot. The government will earn trust of the people and millions will receive the news as evidence that this government is ready for real change. To release all political prisoners and journalists will mute the challenge from millions of Ethiopians and the government will spend its time and resources dealing with worthwhile projects than consistently lying and misleading citizens and the international community why dissident voices and journalists are in prison.

Consider (2) above: To stop killing, arresting and jailing citizens just because they organize themselves on the basis of political views, or when they peacefully protest to express their legitimate grievances, etc. Let's ask again: What price would the government pay for stopping the killing, arrest and jailing of citizens on the grounds of false charges of violence, terrorism, etc.? What would the government LOSE if it stops killing, arresting and jailing citizens because of their political differences and peacefully challenging the government to stop all the arbitrary arrests and jailing citizens? The answer: Nothing. What would the government GAIN for meeting this demand from millions of citizens? The answer: Quite a lot. Thousands and thousands of people who are protesting against the government's brutality will stop their demands about the killings, the arrests, and jailing of citizens on the grounds of false charges when the government meets this demand. The government can then spend its time and resources doing what benefits the people of Ethiopia instead of spending endless media hours and resources lying to cover up all the wrong things that government does against citizens.

Consider (3) above: Removing restrictions on the media and freedom of expression. What price would the government pay if restrictions on the media are removed and the media does its job without fear of retaliation from the government? If the government does its job responsibly and does not have much to worry about, why would the government restrict freedom of expression, especially the media? What would the government LOSE if the media do their jobs without any unnecessary interference from the government? The answer: Nothing. What would the government GAIN if it removes any unnecessary restrictions on the media? The answer: Quite a lot. Only governments that do bad things to their citizens do whatever it takes to interfere with the freedom of expression and the media because they want to cover up their failings, their crimes, and their wrongdoings. But it has to be noted that the media do also report the good the government does to its citizens. Who would benefit from truth being reported by the media? [I am not suggesting that the media always report only the truth]. Both citizens and the government. If the media are not independent from the government control, all the Western democracies would most likely end up being like totalitarian and tyrannical governments like the Ethiopian government. Do the governments in the West, where the media are free from the government interference, do their jobs worse than the Ethiopian government? Absolutely not!

Let me skip the other demands and consider (6). The demand to open an independent, impartial, just, and transparent investigation regarding the recently killed, injured, arrested, and jailed during the ongoing protests in the Oromia and Amhara regions, among others, seems to require the government to pay some price unlike the other demands listed above. But is this true? Not at all. Why? Here is the reason: The investigation that is demanded is about justice. Whoever has committed injustice must face justice. That includes government officials, security forces who used excessive force in an unjustified manner. To bring anyone, be it government officials or ordinary citizens, to justice is not about the government paying any special price. This demand is about justice for anyone under the law and the government obviously is not above the law of the land. Hence, there is no special price the Ethiopian government will pay to meet the demand in question. Now to the question: What would the government LOSE by meeting the demand in question? The answer, once again: Nothing. What would the government GAIN for meeting this demand? The answer: Quite a lot. For the Ethiopian government which rarely, if ever, undertakes such impartial and transparent investigation, if it does this even once, that would be welcomed by millions of Ethiopians as one of the most definitive reasons to believe that the real reform has begun. Let me conclude this piece by drawing out some short term and long term consequences if the government meets the above demands, even if not perfectly, to some clearly appreciable degree.

Short and Long Term Consequences

Consequences for the Government: Among the short term consequences of meeting the above demands is that the government will win an unusual degree of trust and credibility for undertaking a real reform which has been sought by millions of Ethiopians for so many years. This need not be seen as a defeat for the government. This need not be seen as giving in to the pressures of the people for unreasonable and unjust demands. Absolutely not! This is giving back to citizens, their natural, birth rights, that have unjustly been taken away from citizens by their own government. People are not getting any favor from their government when the government meets the above demands. This short term gain for the government will serve as a steppingstone for a more enduring, long-term democratic transition for the country, which is good both for the government and the people. Any proposal for a transitional government requires meeting the above demands, among others. A transitional government that is built on the same old tyrannical structures will be the same old government under a different name. A transitional government and a subsequent democratic government which the people of Ethiopia have been asking for for years must distance itself from a deeply flawed and an anti-democratic ideology of “revolutionary democracy”, which is neither

revolutionary nor democratic. All the evidence shows that practicing the ideology of revolutionary democracy is death, destruction, enslaving citizens, giving power only to a handful to misgovern the country. To meet the above demands is to begin to dismantle the flawed edifice of revolutionary democracy. Hence, meeting the above demands is the beginning of a real reform. Therefore, the government has a powerful reason to meet the demands if only to save itself.

Consequences for the People of Ethiopia: If and when the government meets the above demands, the short term gain for the people of Ethiopia is getting an opportunity to organize themselves to work together with the government for a more enduring, long-term democratic transition of the country. Part of this could be working to bring about a transitional government that will pave the way for a genuinely democratic government which has been demanded by the people of Ethiopia for so many years. Hence, the short term gain will give rise to a long-term goal of building a democratic Ethiopia in which citizens are justly treated on the basis of their humanity that allows the protection of the basic human rights of everyone under the law. Note that the proposal under consideration steers clear of the views of the various ethno-nationalist movements whose overt or covert aspirations conflict with the goal of building one, democratic Ethiopia in which people from all ethnic groups are treated equal and respect to human dignity for all is front and center.

Note that I have not said anything about some of the central demands of the most recent protests in the Amhara and Oromia regions, among others. The reason I did not talk about these issues can be summarized as follows: The proximate causes for these protests are different, but I submit that the ultimate cause for these protests is a complete absence of democracy, and the rule of law in Ethiopia and a continuous violation of human rights. But the focus of the protests have undergone change. The focus of the protests has recently been on the economic injustice against the majority of Ethiopians and the concentration of military and political power in the hands of the TPLF. Most recently, the demand has culminated in asking for change of the regime. Without a doubt the demands for change of the regime is a legitimate demand with which I stand in total agreement. I absolutely condemn the unjust concentration of power, military, political, and economic, in the hands of the TPLF. However, my view about going forward and how to go forward is hopefully clear by now. In my view, a violent overthrow of the government will have a much worse consequence for the people of Ethiopia than the proposal I am offering. I am making a case for a real reform of the whole structure of governance that will effectively, and without violence, can lead the country into a democracy where the rule of law properly, even if imperfectly, functions without the current regime in power for far too long. Meeting the above demands (1-6) can lead to the formation of a transitional government and the function of the transitional

government is to peacefully pave the way to replace the regime in power. This proposal, if implemented, will save the country from inter-ethnic conflicts and a civil war and eventually to a peaceful transition to a democratically elected government.

In conclusion, I want to underscore the following: All of us who strongly want to see the change in the regime, one thing we must not forget is that these people in power are extremely corrupt in many senses of the word and they have an absolute contempt for the people, for the millions of citizens. Clearly, they are incapable of entertaining any other way than their own way of solving national crisis—by continuously killing, arresting, and silencing voices of dissent at any level. But this can't go on for a long time when millions of people rise up against the regime no matter how brutal and powerful the regime is. Furthermore, we should not underestimate what love of power and love of money can do to people. For the TPLF and those who allied themselves with the TPLF, these are hundreds and thousands of people, to leave their position in response to the demand for the regime change right away would amount to taking away everything that has made their existence possible. They cannot imagine life without that power and all the fortunes they have amassed having stolen from the people of Ethiopia. At the end of the day, the regime must face the options either to be overthrown violently and pay the price that comes with that or run away for life in exile. But I have made a case above that the regime can avoid the worst that can happen by beginning and making a real reform with a clear intention to pave the way for the transitional government, and I argued that meeting the demands to bring about real reform does not cost anyone anything. No superficial changes, even if such changes are in thousands, can replace the real reform the Ethiopian people have been seeking. At the very least, meeting the above demands (1-6) can save the regime in the sense of avoiding its catastrophic demise and save Ethiopia from potential inter-ethnic conflicts or a civil war. What price would the Ethiopian government pay to achieve the two important goals, saving itself from destruction and saving Ethiopia? Nothing! Therefore, it is in the interest of the government to bring about the real change, reform by meeting demands (1-6). Note that meeting these demands is only a necessary condition for the real reform to begin. I nowhere claimed that meeting these demands is a sufficient condition for all the demands the people of Ethiopia are making.

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