



An Open Letter to President Barack Obama,
The alarming political conditions in Ethiopia that may threaten the future
security and stability of this strategic country in the Horn of Africa

February 5, 2015

Honorable Barack Obama
The President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20501

Dear President Obama,

I am writing this to you on behalf of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) to alert you to the alarming political conditions in Ethiopia that may threaten the future security and stability of this strategic country in the Horn of Africa. Current United States policies that strongly support the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) are being abused by this regime to undermine the democratic aspirations of the Ethiopian people. As the EPRDF intensifies the crack down on the political and human rights of the people there is fear that some event may ignite the simmering tensions, causing them to explode into violence, killing and chaos.

My name is Obang Metho. I am the Executive Director of the SMNE, a non-violent, non-political grassroots social justice movement representing the diverse people of Ethiopia.

I come to you first and foremost as a human being who believes that the future well being of our global society rests in the hands of those among us who can **put humanity before ethnicity** or any other distinctions that divide and dehumanize other human beings from ourselves; inspiring us to care about these others; not only because of the intrinsic God-given value of each life, but also because **none of us will be free until all are free**. These are the underlying principles of the SMNE. The SMNE is committed to bringing truth, justice, freedom, equality, reconciliation, accountability, respect for human and civil rights and economic prosperity to the people of Ethiopia and beyond.

Urgency of concern:

The escalation of frustrations regarding the upcoming Ethiopian national elections scheduled for May 24, 2015, may become the trigger to violence as Ethiopians face the dismal reality that all avenues to democratic political change are solidly blocked. If violence breaks out, it may spin out of control. Now is the time to take steps to avoid it; however, the TPLF/EPRDF fears the people to the degree that they may find it impossible to alter their direction, even if it is what pushes people over the edge towards a violent backlash. The SMNE seeks to help all parties avoid such an outcome.

Unfortunately, the TPLF/EPRDF will never voluntarily give up power by holding a free and fair election. They know opening up political space would lead to a reversal of power. As a result, there is little hope that the situation will improve without leverage.

We know that, the United States is the chief financial, political and security backer of the TPLF/EPRDF. If the appropriate actions are taken, it may give the US an opportunity to improve the long-term interests of the US in Ethiopia and the Horn as well as to contribute to a better future for Ethiopians and their neighbors.

Clearly, Ethiopia is the most stable country among its neighbors like Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan, but if it were to descend into instability, it would be devastating for the Horn of Africa and beyond. There needs to be an alternative that would offer a peaceful way out for all parties, including the TPLF/EPRDF. The TPLF/EPRDF will not and cannot do it alone. The people of Ethiopia must do the major work, but if they are facing a strongly-US, UK or EU-supported TPLF/EPRDF; the job will be all the more difficult.

The TPLF/EPRDF has become an increasingly totalitarian government over the last 24 years they have been in power; however, the real power behind them is the ethnic-based Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) that dominates every branch of the government. Their stated goal is to gain perpetual rule and hegemony of Ethiopia. As documented by both the US Embassy in Addis Ababa and the US State Department's human rights division, the Ethiopian government is becoming increasingly brutal in its crack down on basic freedom, democratic processes, and the rule of law. This is not new.

Since coming to power, this regime has never held a free and fair election. The closest it came to allowing a degree of political space was in 2005 when the opposition nearly won. Instead, the TPLF/EPRDF claimed a victory, killed 193 election protestors in the streets, imprisoned opposition members, and closed down all political space in the 2010 election. At that time they even misused humanitarian aid to control voting at every level; finally claiming an absurd 99.6% electoral victory. The Ethiopian Parliament has only one opposition member out of 547.

Some are willing to overlook the lack of democratic progress, believing that claims of economic progress make up for it. However, although there may be some advances made, TPLF/EPRDF statistics claiming double-digit economic growth are being challenged as Ethiopians remain at the bottom of most every poverty index. There is little to no private sector, but instead, economic opportunities are limited to regime cronies, another source of contention among Ethiopians.

A robust civil sector that could act as watchdogs of society has been eliminated due to the implementation of the ***Charities and Societies Proclamation***. This is a law that has made it a crime for civic organizations who receive more than 10% of the funding from foreign sources to advance human and democratic rights, to promote equality among ethnicities, genders and religions, to promote rights for the disabled and children, to promote conflict resolution or reconciliation, or to promote the efficiency of justice and law enforcement services. Some 2,600 or more civic organizations closed in response. In their place, the TPLF/EPRDF has set-up pseudo-organizations they control.

Similarly, they have passed an ***Anti-Terrorism Law*** that is used to silence democratic voices, journalists, bloggers, editors, opposition leaders and religious leaders under false pretenses. Ethiopia has become one of the highest jailers of political prisoners in Africa. In present day Ethiopia, every important public and private institution is under the control of the TPLF/EPRDF, whether it is the judiciary, the police and security forces, government offices and ministries all the way to the local level, the military, the media, the telecom system, the Internet, the educational system, the economy, and most importantly right now, the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE).

In the last month, they have increased their efforts to eliminate any competition. This includes beating up opposition leaders and any who speak out against them, even pregnant women and the elderly. Many are jailed in an effort to intimidate any who call for a legitimate democratic process. Obstacles are erected to block every effort of opposition parties to satisfy the impossible requirements of the NEBE.

Two prominent opposition political parties, the Unity for Justice and Democracy (UDJ) and the All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP), have both made valiant attempts to comply with unreasonable demands; however, they now have been denied participation in the election. Instead, the TPLF/EPRDF has hijacked the ownership of these parties, even taking on their names, UDJ and AEUP. They have appointed their own people to run as candidates against others in the TPLF/EPRDF, essentially competing with themselves in a ruse to confuse the people.

Recommendations for meaningful US action regarding Ethiopia:

US silence or only symbolic gestures regarding the evolving crisis in Ethiopia may work for the short-term, but no one knows for how long. In fact, continued US support or meaningless action may inadvertently exacerbate the crisis and undermine stability. Instead, the US should use their leverage to bring democratic change and sustainable stability to the country; both of which would enhance long-term US interests in Ethiopia and the Horn.

Meaningful actions include:

- Calling for an independent election commission
- Implementing the Omnibus Bill 2015 concerning Ethiopia
- Releasing imprisoned political prisoners
- Freezing security cooperation with the regime
- Implementing travel bans on key regime officials and freezing their assets

It is not in the interests of anybody to wait for an explosion. Ethiopia is in crisis. Our goal is to bring peace even as some are beating the drums of violence. We strongly encourage you to put pressure on this regime. Condemn these actions. The US should not be silent when such a stance could contribute to the future wellbeing and stability of this strategic country of over 90 million people.

Respectfully yours,

Obang Metho,
Executive Director of the SMNE
910- 17th St. NW, Suite 419
Washington, DC 20006
Email:Obang@solidaritymovement.org.
Website:www.solidaritymovement.org

This letter has been Cc to
Vice President Joseph Biden
Secretary of State John Kerry
National Security Advisor Susan Rice
Senior Director for African Affairs on the National Security Council Gayle Smith
Senior Director for Democracy on the National Security Council Linda Thomas-Greenfield
Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of African Affairs Earl Gast