

Our Quest for the Resolution to the Ethiopian Human Rights Crisis: Time for A Critical Appraisal

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The massive and systematic crackdown that followed the post-election protest of 2005 is in its second year. Needless to say, none of us had any idea that such destruction and carnage would follow such a powerful statement----- a people under a repressive environment, waking up to the fact that the key to the future of their country was in the ballot--coming out by the millions to vote for the first time!

Going over every detail of what has happened to the people who made that statement, and the country of which they are citizens will be redundant for the purpose of this discussion. Still, it is necessary to recognize the people's commitment and sacrifices for the liberty and prosperity that they so crave for themselves, and their country. I salute each and every victim and victim's family who has had to endure so much; with the recognition that they have paid the price for the freedom we so covet. Most importantly, I salute each and every victim and victim's family in recognition of the trauma that they have endured, and the atrocity they have been subjected to; most important because, it is only when we find the moral sensibility to recognize and acknowledge their victimization that we would be compelled to summon our outrage and demand redress, accountability and, an end to ongoing and future abuses.

Human rights abusers obviously do not have the slightest respect for human life and dignity. Therefore, they dehumanize, vilify and, eventually, brutalize their victims and commit all sorts of crimes against them. Since they have conditioned themselves to consider these victims as objects, rather than as fellow human beings, any sense of moral dilemma they might have had in actively victimizing their targets or condoning atrocities committed by others, has been diminished or, worse, completely drained out of them.

OUR CURRENT PREDICAMENT AND APPROACHES TO A SOLUTION: Multi Pronged or Divergent?

A proper identification of the nature of any given crisis is always the first step towards its resolution. Accordingly, I believe what Ethiopians are currently facing is a human rights crisis—a systematic, massive and widespread suppression of peaceful dissent as is manifest in the detention of tens of thousands, the enforced disappearances, beatings, torture, arbitrary arrests and summary killings,. These are people whose rights were violated SIMPLY BECAUSE they dared speak out and make their voices heard, one way or another, giving the regime a vote of no confidence. The victims also include people who sought to protect their loved ones in moments of serious danger and others who had nothing to do with anything but were randomly targeted as scores were rounded up and carted off, beaten and shot at.

The catalyst for this most recent human rights crisis is an unresolved post-election dispute, and the saga of most of the victims, including the prisoners of conscience is tied to that issue. So, on the one hand, there is the question of recent and ongoing human rights violations against thousands of people including the hundreds who have been killed and the journalists, opposition, and civil society leaders who are in detention. On the other hand, there is the issue of the preservation of the ideals and principles, and the viability of the political party that has effectively challenged the supremacy of the ruling regime.

Some of us may be persuaded to think that the above two are separate issues and that the pursuit of one may weaken the other and, therefore, we need to act in a certain order of priority. Indeed, with the passage of time, the concern for the viability of the popular CUD, for example, seems to have displaced the desperate need for redress for thousands of Ethiopian victims of human rights abuses --- and this includes the many CUD members, founders and leaders--- and the reversal of the current downward spiral of extreme abuse. This, however, is both erroneous and dangerous because the two aspects of the crisis mentioned above are not only inextricably linked to one another but more specifically, any attempt to tackle the second issue without primarily addressing the first, is bound to be futile.

It is fair to assume that many people supported the CUD and its imprisoned leaders because of its commitment to a path that would usher the country to a new and democratic future where the rights and dignity of each and everyone is respected. It is also fair to assume that those who are most concerned about the viability of the organization are also committed to pursuing the above ideals. If both of the above assumptions are correct, then, there is no other conceivable way of proving the extent of one's commitment than standing up for those who have paid and continue to pay a heavy price for being at the forefront of the struggle to advance the values we all claim to share.

Second, for those who tend to think that the above is a mere restatement of abstract principles or something that is of specific concern to the victims and their relatives, there is a more persuasive and pragmatic argument for the primacy of the human rights issue. What happened to yesterday's and today's victims of arbitrary killings, torture, arbitrary detention, including the CUD leaders on trial, is emblematic of what will happen to anyone whenever the regime feels its grip on power is seriously challenged. Therefore, any political party or personality who aspires to reinvigorate the CUD or participate in Ethiopian politics in any other manner must either abandon the powerful statement made by the Ethiopian people in the May 2005 elections and espouse some other platform or inevitably, suffer the fate of the imprisoned women and men.

Thus, while it is very tempting to assume that it is possible or even easier to "move on" politically without necessarily addressing the issue of the rights of detainees and other victims of human rights violations first, those who give in to such temptation will only be deluding themselves and their followers. There simply will be no "moving on" in the relevant sense to the extent that no democratic opposition can meaningfully operate where basic human rights, including freedom of association and expression, freedom against arbitrary detention and torture, are guaranteed. None of these, in turn, can be guaranteed as long as perpetrators of human rights abuses continue to get the signal from us that there are no

negative consequences for human rights violations. In other words, those who hope to “move-on” today will end up being tomorrow’s victims and the cycle continues. That much, we should learn from our own recent history by taking a moment to reflect on how much of a burden we carry from the memory of the countless victims of torture, enforced disappearances, murder and arbitrary detention, etc. It is high-time that we realize the fact that a movement is only possible when we are no longer willing to abandon, at every turn, those who dared to make the move, and when we let the perpetrators know that they can’t go on arbitrarily killing, maiming and detaining citizens and expect us to disperse after momentary and isolated protests and condemnations.

Needless to say, I care deeply about my father’s well-being and rightful freedom, as much as I care about these fundamental values that he has given so much for. Although I cannot claim to speak for all my family members, much less for the families of all detainees and other victims, I would imagine that the issue of human rights is just as high a priority on their minds. For family members, no doubt, have additional personal reasons to care for the safety of their loved ones and seek justice. Yet family members are not just concerned about the physical safety of their loved ones. They are as much concerned about their spiritual needs and the dreams they shared with them as well as with the millions of fellow Ethiopians. Ultimately, therefore, their interests and those of the millions of Ethiopians who wish their country the best is intertwined in more ways than one.

FINDING SOLUTIONS: A Call for Unified Action

That a united effort will get a more immediate and sustainable result is not in question. This is precisely why we continue to hear several calls from several quarters, for a unified approach towards the crisis that we have endured for the last couple of years. Indeed, a unified approach would only ensure complementary strategies, more effective approaches, and a lasting solution.

Unfortunately, these calls for unified action have not succeeded in gathering the momentum that each caller—individual or group—had obviously hoped for. Although there are numerous possible explanations for this, I will cite the few that I perceive to be the major practical hurdles:

1. **Identification of the problem:** It is indeed the political crisis that brought about the human rights crisis to this point in Ethiopia today. However, as discussed earlier, failure to address the human rights crisis, can only fail to address any and all political problems in a lasting manner. If the human rights concerns are glossed over, the political resolution that takes place will have no foundation and therefore undermine the sacrifices made by many, while at the same time inviting further impunity, and thus no mechanism whereby the rule of law is guaranteed. Therefore, the description of the human rights crisis, as articulated by community activists both within and outside of the country, as being the primary problem is a correct one. In fact, the immediate and unconditional release of the journalists, civil society leaders, human rights defenders and CUD members and leaders at Qaliti prison—a cause that most efforts, though fragmented, seem to embrace—is very critical to the beginning of a

path towards restoration(renewal) in Ethiopia. It is important however, to note that this can only be the beginning of a peaceful resolution to the impasse.

- The immediate and unconditional release of the prisoners at Qaliti is a prerequisite for a peaceful resolution. These prisoners of conscience—standing up for a free press, freedom of opinion and political freedoms-- are the ladies and gentlemen that are carrying the struggle. They are not simply the casualties. Failing to make their release AND immediate entry into mediated discussions with their jailors the basic precondition, yet setting the conditions for other movements whose commitment to their own respective cause though significant, is both qualitatively and quantitatively different from that of the prisoners of conscience, is atrocious and irresponsible on the part of anyone who has remained in touch with the developments of the last two years. Lest anyone misinterpret this statement, I would like to be very clear that *there is nothing wrong with a broad-based, all-inclusive forum*, but that agenda can be set **only AFTER the basic problems have been addressed and mechanisms are put in place for ensuring that fundamental rights are respected.**
- The other pre-requisite for a lasting solution is addressing issue of the human rights abuses that are taking place against Ethiopians of diverse political, professional, religious and ethnic/linguistic background. The perpetrators have committed these violations with impunity. Deliberate disregard of this fact is the ultimate insult to the victims and their families (this includes the families of the prisoners of conscience at Qaliti) and the nurturing of impunity. Each one of the people who died, became disabled, or sacrificed their livelihood, their children's future etc, believed in the supremacy of the rule of law, was confident that the sacrifices would not be in vain and that in the end, justice would be vindicated. Each one believed that ours would be a country where human rights would be respected and was willing to give of her/himself for this noble cause. **We should always respect that.** In the first few years of the founding of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, my father, Mesfin Wolde Mariam pushed long and hard for the rule of law and respect for due process just so that we could take the opportunity to realize the sorely needed institutionalization of the rule of law while seeking redress for the many thousands of victims and avoid the squandering of such a chance through endless and partisan trials. It seems to me that the current calls "for unity" or "unified action" and many other spins on movements are bent on wasting this opportunity altogether yet again. find that sad.

The human rights crisis that we are so desperately trying to reverse, in our disparate ways is simply a result of the pervasive impunity in Ethiopia I see no problem with party functionaries struggling to maintain a viable thriving political party apparatus. However, the latter concern in most instances seems to have become the overriding concern of partisan interests. Where partisan interests supersede the human rights interests, concerns for the institutionalization of respect for the rule of law and human

rights become gravely compromised. This situation is not just morally and ethically wrong; it also makes very little political sense. The rule of law and respect for human rights are the basis for a meaningful democratic process.

2. **Proposed strategies:** There are several proposed strategies. Quite naturally, the strategies address the stated problem, but the problem is stated differently by different bodies. Yet, unity is now touted as a central theme in many of these calls. While it is generically true that strategies could benefit from a well developed tighter outline for leadership, expertise, timing, and utilization of resources, a strategy addressing one problem cannot as effectively help address another. In other words, if we have identified different problems, then it is not likely that we can outline the same strategy, or even a unified one to address it. So, now we have yet another problem. Since the strategy is developed based on the problem identified by different and usually disparate groups, we run into the question of: i) legitimacy of groups; and ii) legitimacy of problem identified and strategy developed to address it. This circular problem is manifest in many ways already.
3. **Community buy-in:** The power and therefore the success of community-based mobilization for a popular cause are within our reach. The success of the movement of the last two years shows us that a broad based community-level mobilization is the best strategy. Each of the multiple efforts independently underway commands significant support. The focus therefore should be more on what each respective movement is promoting with its constituency, and not on what the other is doing wrong. Any movement that engages its grassroots with a uniquely attractive agenda will enjoy sustainable buy-in from its constituency. Negative campaigns will only drag out the ordeal of those very same heroes and victims whose plight we are working to end. Ultimately, the movement that has built its community buy-in through such negative campaign will find that its strategy has backfired.
4. **The basis for a unified effort:** Many different movements have overlapping priorities with one another. If there were more emphasis on the overlap and less doubt about each other's effort, the community support for each could easily translate into a wider support base, lightening the load for each active player, and making the cause at least a little bit more easily achievable.

For the purpose of this discussion, item number 1 is by far the most important and the basis for my discussion here.

The only reason that we have constantly been arguing for the immediate and unconditional release of the prisoners at Qaliti is because we know, as well as their jailors do, that they have done no wrong. They are imprisoned simply for their beliefs and opinions and to suppress the formidable, peaceful resistance that they have so courageously laid the foundation for. Whether we like it or not, the agenda has been set for us, as has the strategy. They are the symbols and the messengers of the call for the respect for human rights and the rule of law, **without which the democratic process is not guaranteed.** We have a moral

obligation to fight for their human rights, thereby also building on the institutionalization of the rule of law and democratic process for the future.

If we agree on the above, the call for accountability for the massive, systematic and widespread human rights violations against civilians particularly in relation to the post-election disturbances of June 2005 and November 2005 simply cannot be dismissed. Those of us who systematically attempt to do so are not only (unwittingly) colluding with perpetrators of such injustice and laying the ground for future injustices but also undermining the resolve, commitment and personal sacrifices of the prisoners of conscience who continue to languish in jails, and of all the other victims who have given so much.

CONCLUSION

Social movements come and go. Legitimacy is earned and not bestowed. A unified effort can successfully be launched and thus the call for unity answered NOT by the claimed legitimacy of the caller, but rather by the legitimacy of the call and the moral authority of the caller. When such moral authority has been squandered, a call for unity is greeted with skepticism rather than enthusiasm.

In addition, a call for unity can be answered and sustained only when the peripheral issues that clutter the table are removed, and not when multiple issues and agendas (however legitimate) are piled on top of each other. The fundamental issues—that of freedom for the prisoners of conscience and political prisoners AS WELL AS the demand for accountability of the atrocities of June and November 2005—are the basis for what will unite the scattered energies that we continue to exert;

The outright rejection of either one of these two primary issues on any table is not only immoral and unethical. It is also self-defeating. In fact, the sole winning agendas on any social platform would be the one that combines these two items where everything else is secondary. This is a moral and a practical matter (fact).