



Open Letter to Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn

19 February 2016

H. E. Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn
Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
Office of the Prime Minister
P. O. Box 1031
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

Please allow me to extend my greetings at a time when my heart is, once again, grieving for all the Oromo that are being killed, jailed and brutally assaulted by your security forces merely for demanding their legitimate constitutional rights. During the last four months, reports reaching us from the center, east, south and west of Oromia indicate that hundreds have been killed, thousands have been wounded and tens of thousands are being held in prisons or detention centers. Rarely have in the history of contemporary Ethiopia members of a particular nationality suffered brutality on such a scale and magnitude. The Oromo Democratic Front (ODF) would like to call upon you to take practical steps to right these wrongs and avert more calamitous developments. Moreover, these upsurges of protests, despite the heavy-handed crackdown, demonstrate that the 25 year old policy of deploying the security forces to suppress popular yearning for justice, equality and basic freedoms has failed. Surely, reconsidering this policy is way overdue.

Mr. Prime Minister,

Further crackdown is no answer to the widespread and sustained protests. Neither is brandishing the government's achievements in the economic realm for what is at stake is people's lives. Having already stated that the country is ailing from lack of good governance, it should not be lost on you that something more serious is amiss with the EPRDF's approach to governance. If your government does not consider these incidents as the writing on the wall, what other signals would serve as the wakeup call? At this point, pointing fingers at your usual culprits is not only pointless but also a dereliction of duty. Mustering the political will to bravely deal with the root causes of the ongoing turmoil is astute leadership.

The Oromo protests have, on the whole, been peaceful. However, that these largely peaceful rallies were at times marred by violent incidents is regrettably undeniable. We should not be surprised. The brutalities visited upon them forces youthful members of brutalized communities to consider violence as an effective response to what is happening to them and members of their society. If the government employs brutality as an effective instrument to suppress demands that the government itself has declared to be legitimate, what hinders these individuals from following the example set by officials expected to be responsible?

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Mr. Prime Minister,

You, as a person with engineering training, must be aware of the valuable role that relief valve play in averting disaster. Unless the cause of the over-pressure that set off the relieve valve is identified and dealt with, catastrophic explosion would be the inevitable outcome. Peaceful protests are social relief valves indicating that simmering societal discontent is approaching explosive levels. By simply repressing them instead of dealing with their root causes, one only makes an explosion inescapable at an unpredictable later moment and with equally unforeseeable consequences.

Throughout history officials of long governing parties have failed to realize and deal with simmering societal discontents because their powerful situation cloaks them from feeling the pain suffered by the average person. If one throws a frog into a boiling vessel, it will immediately jump out and save itself by reacting to the heat shock. If it is placed in a steadily heating container, however, its body naturally adjusts to the rising temperature oblivious to its inevitable demise. I am afraid that EPRDF officials, ensconced in a comfort zone behind a wall of an expansive military and security apparatus run the risk of being blind to the storm cloud of rising societal discontent that is thickening over Ethiopia. Hence, it is in your best interests to heed the warnings of those outside this comfort zone, disturbing though their messages may be.

Mr. Prime Minister,

I have always been disturbed by EPRDF's sense of self-righteousness and blamelessness and the ease with which it attributes all 'wrongdoings' to this or that culprit. I imagine you are also troubled because, as a religious person, you must believe that only the Almighty Creator is completely infallible and blameless. Thus, humble humans must engage in soul-searching exercises in order to question if, through their commissions or omissions, they contributed to tragic developments. Aside from hollow talk about lack of good governance, it is high time for EPRDF to lift the blinders of hubris and ask itself if its policies or practices led to the tragedy currently unfolding in Oromia and other similar happenings elsewhere and take appropriate action.

Mr. Prime Minister, as the leader of the country at this most trying of times, it is incumbent upon you to exercise utmost wisdom. To this end, please allow me to pose a few questions, if you may. Can Ethiopia afford more chaos? What if the situation spins out of control, as it has in many countries nearby and far off, as to plunge the country into an all-out pervasive crisis? I am afraid, as millions are, that Ethiopia is nearing a point of no return. What would be the use of waking up and wailing after the Rubicon had already been crossed?

Mr. Prime Minister,

Let me conclude by mentioning one tragic political tradition in Ethiopia with ever rising disastrous consequences. And that is the tradition of leaders failing to institute reforms with the view to averting impending disasters. Emperor Haile Selassie failed to heed such a signal when his own Bodyguard attempted the *coup d'état* of December 1960, indicating that instituting reforms was overdue. His refusal to heed the warning culminated in the tumultuous 1974 revolution that claimed his life, exposed members of his family to years of suffering and forever sealed the fate of the millennia-old institution of monarchy.

The Emperor's successor, Mengistu Hailemariam, could also have likely averted the separation of Eritrea by simply restoring the abrogated federation. Instead of seeking a political solution to the Eritrean issue, however, he persisted to wage war even after the *coup* attempt of 1989 exposed the degree to which the high brass as well as the rank and file of the armed forces was frustrated. Hence, I plead with you to aspire going down in history as the first Ethiopian leader that instituted timely reforms by heeding the writing on the wall. Much more immediately, I appeal to you to show leadership by addressing the country and taking the following measures:

- ✓ Unequivocally declare that Addis Ababa (Finfinne) is an integral part of the Oromia National State, that also serves as the seat of the federal government;
- ✓ Establishing an independent commission to investigate the killings and assaults committed against peaceful Oromo demonstrators and to bring the culprits to justice;
- ✓ Releasing all political prisoners regardless of their political, religious and ethnic backgrounds and revoking the unconstitutional laws passed in recent years;
- ✓ Sacking the Chief of Defense Staff General Mohammed Yunus (Samora), and Chief of Intelligence and Security, Ato Getachew Aseffa, for their mishandling of the crisis, and replacing them with professional and impartial officers;
- ✓ Initiating an open, transparent, and inclusive dialogue on the situation in Oromia and the country's future.

Wishing you all the wisdom and courage required of a leader at a time of deepening crisis and with the expression of my highest regards, I remain.

Yours truly,

Leenco Lata, President
Oromo Democratic Front (ODF)