

Opportunity for TPLF/EPRDF to right the wrong and for Ethiopia to reclaim its legal and historic rights

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On December 6, 2013, a number of media reports including Aljazeera and Africa Review have all indicated that the ruling party in Ethiopia (TPLF/EPRDF) and the Isayas led EPLF in Eritrea are currently negotiating through a mediator, Omar AlBashir of the Sudan.

On December 16, 2013, in an opinion that appeared on the online publication African Argument: Herman Cohen, the former Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, also alluded to the same rapprochement stating that “in recent months, positive signals have been coming from both countries. “

In principle, this writer is not against the idea of resolving conflict and differences through peaceful negotiation. However, I believe, a meaningful conflict resolution requires addressing the unspoken but true concerns of the Ethiopian people. In my opinion, any attempt to move forward without addressing these outstanding issues will only aggravate the sense of injustice thereby sowing the seed for continued conflict.

I am an Ethiopian therefore; first and foremost my focus is safeguarding the current and future interest of Ethiopia.

First and foremost, any attempt to resolve this outstanding issue should weigh-in the fact that Ethiopians have been betrayed by the ruling TPLF/EPRDF regime when it comes to some of the cardinal decisions made about the unity and territorial integrity of their country. Here are some of the highlights:-

The “referendums” of 1993 was conducted in a way that did not represent the interest of Ethiopians. Ethiopians were completely excluded from having a say in that highly important decision. Such a decision of monumental consequence was made in a closed door away from the people of Ethiopia. At the time, the government was only transitional and with no such mandate whatsoever from the general public.

Ethiopia’s historical and legal rights were completely ignored. Instead, ill-conceived political calculation and ideological gimmick dictated the ruling group’s extremely short sighted decisions. Thanks largely to Mr. Zenawi’s and his small circle’s decision, Ethiopia’s right of access to the sea was completely denied. It is noteworthy to mention here that even the so-called

outside negotiators like Herman Cohen were baffled by Meles's disregard of this distinct and less controversial possibility.

Following the 1998-2000 war that killed over 70 thousand people, once again, the ruling group in Addis failed to protect the best interests of the Ethiopian people. The possibility for a military solution was sabotaged by the order of none other than the PM Meles Zenawi .

The so called "Algiers agreement" basically does not take into account, the historical, legal and strategic interests of Ethiopia. The Algiers agreement hands Badme over to Eritrea and does not even contemplate providing Ethiopia with access to its historic and legal port of Assab. As a number of prominent legal scholars have documented, the Algiers agreement was a tragic miscarriage of justice. The "lawyers" representing Ethiopia were arguing in favour of Eritrea, not Ethiopia (see *Asseb Yeman Nat*, by Dr Yakob H. Mariam , 2004 Et Calendar). As Leo Tolstoy, once wrote "Wrong does not cease to be wrong because the majority share in it." — Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession* . The unfairness of using colonial references to disadvantage Ethiopia was wrong and should not have been accepted as a legal base to settle such disputes. Assab and Bademe have and should always belong to Ethiopia. Anything less would be a betrayal of the inhabitants of these regions.

Many of the then key decision makers within the TPLF/EPRDF now acknowledge that these were historical wrongs of the ruling TPLF/ EPRDF when it comes to issues related to Eritrea. Chief among those who have publicly declared their positions are the then President Negaso Gidada, PM Tamrat Layne, Defence Minister Seye Abraha, and Mr Gebru Asrat (the then Governor of Kilil One -Tigray Region).

Even today, issues related to Eritrea are not yet fully settled. At this point, the ruling TPLF/ EPRDF has an opportunity to right some of the wrongs of the past. Hence, it should stand firm and demonstrate that it stands for the best interests of Ethiopia. The interest of 97 million people should not be in any way compromised. The involved world knows how misguided and lopsided both Eritrean referendum of 1993 and the Algiers Agreement of post war 1998-2000 have been. There is nothing wrong to take measures to address the injustice done to Ethiopia.

Action matters

The current leaders of TPLF/EPRDF have to understand that they cannot and should not continue to disadvantage and disregard their own country. The government of PM Hailemariam Desalegn should learn from the bad and fatalistic practices of the past and conduct business by being loyal to the will and desire of Ethiopians and Ethiopia's own sovereign interest – not to the will of some foreign power. This government should not surrender the right of Ethiopia to have full access to the sea port. Ethiopia cannot continue to pay tens of millions of dollars to others to use their port and put our national interest in jeopardy.

Until such time that EPRDF/TPLF shows its commitment to Ethiopian Unity, it will continue to pay dearly and suffer from lack of trust by Ethiopians. One cannot buy trust with money, by intimidation or through misleading propaganda. It has to be earned by travelling through

painstaking process. As the saying goes, show clearly that you love the people and the people will in turn love you and/or at least respect you.

Clearly, everyone understands that there is no easy way to right all the wrongs committed in the last several years. However, now is the time for the ruling group in Ethiopia to do the right thing and set the country in the right direction. Ethiopia cannot afford to miss yet another opportunity to reclaim its legal and historical rights and assert itself. Action matters. There is no justification whatsoever to continue on the path that has disadvantaged Ethiopia and relegated her to a dependent country on states like Djibouti.

What needs to be done now?

The Government

To start with, the ruling party should stop being obsessed about the opposition and holding to power forever. It should stop the desire to accommodate Issayas to cajole him in order to stop supporting the opposition. The government should trust the Ethiopian public not Issayas. Issayas is not trustworthy and there is no way one can satisfy his insatiable appetite for domination.

The government should commit itself to find a way to right the wrong of the past 22 years when it comes to Issayas. Clearly, this should inform all activities of the government moving forward.

The right of the Afar, the Erob etc people to remain Ethiopians and Ethiopia's historical as well as legal right to Assab should be fully asserted. The government has to be committed to act on the best interests of Ethiopia not the interest of any foreign power.

The border issue should be resolved without splitting Ethiopians in Tigray, Saho, the people of Erob and Afar into different countries. The government must protect the right of those who rightly claim their Ethiopianness. Badme belongs to Ethiopia as does Assab.

Herman Cohens recommendation that "Ethiopia offer to accept a symbolic initial takeover by Eritrea of territory awarded by the EEBC, followed by the same day opening of dialogue with a totally open agenda" should be fully rejected. Ethiopia cannot be tricked twice.

The government should work with the opposition in order to develop a strong "Ethiopian position" for any negotiation or eventuality with Esaiyas Afewerki and his regime.

The government should use this opportunity to develop a national dialogue and to build national consensus among all Ethiopian political forces. This opportunity should be used to bring lasting peace through national dialogue and by building national consensus and reconciliation.

The Opposition

Just like the ruling party, everyone in the Ethiopian opposition should also clarify its position when it comes to the issue of Eritrea. Saying nothing on such important matter is tantamount to endorsing the status quo. And the status quo is not in the best interest of Ethiopia.

Engage EPRDF/TPLF in order to develop a strong Ethiopian position vis-à-vis the Isayas/Shabia position.

Use this opportunity to develop trust for national dialogue and to build national consensus and reconciliation among all Ethiopian stakeholders.

Discharge its/their responsibility to the public faithfully by providing timely and accurate information about the status of any “negotiation” or rapprochement with Isayas and Shabiya

The Ethiopian Public

Be vigilant and follow diligently any action related to negotiation/ dialogue with Issays / Shabiya. An informed public is an empowered public.

Speak to the politicians both within the government and the opposition to pressure them to stand up for a strong Ethiopian interest and to redress past mistakes. An engaged public is the key to influencing political decisions and the future of our collective destiny.

Use this opportunity to pursue a national dialogue and to build national consensus among all Ethiopians. Our future is intertwined and we cannot afford to leave any one behind or exclude any Ethiopian.

Members of the Ethiopian media, both diaspora based and locally, should also discharge their professional obligation by reporting without any biases and by holding politicians accountable. Media biases have become the centre of our political life and that has to change.

Ethiopia is bigger than the political ambition of any single politician or political party. The interstate of Ethiopia goes beyond the interest of one party. Ethiopia has room for all of its citizens. The party that reflects the interest of Ethiopia will always be the winner of the hearts and minds of the Ethiopian people during election times.

Now Ethiopians have an opportunity to reclaim our collective destiny and to jump start our bright future through a national consensus. TPLF/EPRDF too has yet another opportunity to demonstrate that it has learnt from its mistakes. Let us not spoil this opportunity.

Ethiopia does not have to be bound by the defective Algiers Agreement and the decisions of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Border Commission (EEBC). The new leadership in Addis should not be bound by the meaningless Algiers Agreement and simplistic and outdated ideological gimmick. Just like the treaty of Wuchale that favored Italy’s interest over Ethiopia, we should reject the Algiers agreement; because the Algiers agreement too is unfair to Ethiopia. Anything less will be unacceptable to Ethiopians everywhere.

It is important to note that foreign governments (weak or strong) have their own interest. And when they recommend solutions, it is first and foremost to protect their own national interests.

Ethiopia has no one but its sons and daughters to protect it. The sons and daughters include the politicians within the ruling party as well as in the opposition. Better late than never, the politicians in the ruling party and its supporters need to stand up for Ethiopians interest now.

I urge the public to engage actively on this issue, make your voices heard by writing, discussing in all pal talk rooms, radio programs etc. Not doing so could have a colossal consequence for our beloved country both today and in the future too.

May God bless Ethiopia