

NES COMMENTARY. No.4



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Title: A Millennium Resolution: Never Take Wrong Historical Turns Again!

Justice is like fire; even if one covers it with a veil, it still burns

(Malagasy Proverb)

One of our strongest weapons is dialogue, sit down with a man, if you have prepared your case very well, that man, after he has sat down to talk to you, will never be the same again. It has been a very powerful weapon.

Nelson Mandela

Introduction

All those who desire to see a democratic, free, stable, peaceful, secure and prosperous Ethiopia can only wish all the divisions, rifts, squabbles, mistrusts and hatred borne of the many real and imagined difficulties and history come to an end through a moratorium freely entered out of respect of the important historic moment that September 11, 2007 provides as Ethiopia's 2000 year old 2nd Millennium!

Such a historic milestone is rare. It should not pass with the messy and ugly quarrels that our nation is currently lumbered with. Our church is divided. The nation's moral and material needs are not fully satisfied. Our politics is cantankerous and brutal. The mistrust amongst opposition and government is high. Even the mistrust within opposition groups is unforgivably destructive and often childish. Meanwhile the clock is ticking to the

Millennium Day. It will be our generational and collective failure if we fail to create a grand moratorium where for a change and just for once we ignore the things that agitate each of us and reach out to each other and enter the next 1000 years with hope, justice and the will to triumph over cruelty and adversity together as one.

2. Leadership

Here is a challenge to leadership. The first move to prepare a new environment that can bring all together in a moratorium for the grand entry into the millennium and beyond must come from the sitting Government. If this Government fails to live up to the call of history and rise above its own worries and pre-occupations and call on all to join, it is hard to expect those who are imprisoned and feel persecuted to join in spite of the Government. So there is thus a call to national leadership. The big question is whether this Government can rise to the challenge and create the conditions for the moratorium to be created. For once it must learn to be humble before history, before the millennium and the people and lead to initiate a moratorium by releasing the prisoners immediately and unconditionally.

3. Release all Prisoners

There is a national conversation that the prisoners of conscience will be released. Equally confusing and mixed signals continue to appear that the prisoners may or may not be released. This speculation is unnerving if not cruel. Will the prisoners of conscience be released or not? What is the Government thinking? Why keep spouting out doubts to a population anxious to celebrate the release of those the people elected believing in a rule of the game that seemed to launch a democratic era in this ancient of ancient nations? It is impermissible to bring in irrelevant concerns such as what happens in the USA or Europe to keep the prisoners hostage in exchange to what legislators and parliamentarians do or not do elsewhere in other lands. Frankly it is not good to use it to keep them in jail, as the reports tell it. If the agreement has been reached through mediators to release the prisoners, the Government side must honour this agreement and release the prisoners unconditionally. There must not be any prevarication. The longer the prisoners remain in jail, the harder it becomes to prepare the ground for a grand and united entry into the millennium and beyond by securing a collective pause to enter into a moratorium for the millennium: united, together by suspending group interests and preoccupations and setting them aside at least for one month- the month of September! This is not much to ask, neither anything to lose, but much to be gained!!!

4. The AU-CIVIL Society Pre-Summit

I went to Accra to participate to the AU-Civil Society Summit. My main goal in making this journey was exactly the same as I did a similar journey to go to Ottawa to appeal and plead for the release of the prisoners of conscience.

My motion stated:

“We call upon the Heads of States in Africa assembled in Accra, Ghana marking the 50th anniversary of the independence of Ghana to accelerate the implementation of the African peer review mechanism without doctoring the evidence and interfering with the process by maintaining integrity and ethics at the highest level possible; call for a strict adherence and implementation of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights- as a sure guarantee to facilitating the grand debate to accelerate African integration, self-reliance, renaissance, unity and freedom.

In this connection we call on the assembled Heads of States to treat the African democratic opposition with democratic toleration so that all can enter into a public arena where the rule of the game allows democratic debate, conflict avoidance and security commitment. There is no worthier shared value than creating the conditions for democratic opposition to express voice without threat and intimidation obviating the need for the opposition to resort to strategies that contravene peaceful methods of struggles.

In the end as Dr. Nkrumah said the Independence of Ghana is incomplete without the total liberation of Africa, today in the 21st century the overriding value is the democratisation of each African country as a necessary condition for the democratisation of all others. This is the value that we Africans must share to evolve a collective strategy in dealing with a difficult world and communicate better and with openness with each other.

Finally we call upon the Heads of States to call upon their Ethiopian colleagues to release without any condition the prisoners of conscience in Ethiopia that have been put into jail for the crime of expressing fine citizenship of the highest quality and standard.”

The Summit accepted the substance of my motion to release the prisoners of conscience, although it did not include it in the final communiqué. The main reason for that was the fact that the issue of prisoners release did not fit directly with the main topic of the pre-Summit conference : **The AFRICAN UNION GOVERNMENT: Towards the United States of Africa by ACCELERATING AFRICA’S INTEGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY.**

5. The Struggle Continues in the Summit and beyond

Codesria has put a fine statement and appeal to the Summit. This is an important statement of solidarity and NES encourages all to heed the Codesria call and join their appeal:

“CODESRIA invites all its members and other researchers and persons concerned about the freedom of the intellectual and the principles of justice and fair play to join in the protests which the Council is mobilising for the attention of the Ethiopian authorities and the African Union. The

expressions of concern should be addressed to the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Mr. Meles Zenawi and copied to the Chair of the Commission of the African Union, Mr. Alpha Omar Konare, and sent directly to CODESRIA at the following e-mail address: academic.freedom@codesria.sn. The Council intends to collate all letters of expression of concern and solidarity and forward these to the appropriate quarters in Addis Ababa. The letters will also be distributed for campaigning purposes at the upcoming summit of the African Union holding in Accra, Ghana, in July 2007 where, in concert with other organisations and networks, CODESRIA is determined to make the fate of the Ethiopia 38 an issue that has to be addressed and resolved in the only viable way available: Their total and unconditional freedom.

The Council invites a full and enthusiastic response to this call for solidarity with the Ethiopia 38 and for an expression of outrage at the behaviour of the Ethiopian authorities. In acting, let us all be reminded that at this critical point in time, silence and/or indifference are not options to be exercised and duty demands that we muster our collective solidarity to make a difference in the fate of colleagues, courageous men and women from the academy and civil society who dared, in accordance with the spirit of the 1990 Kampala Declaration, to be socially engaged, won an uncommon victory, and are being persecuted by a ruling oligarchy that is unwilling, no matter the cost, to accept the popular verdict returned by the people of Ethiopia”

There are also other teach-ins and a number of other activities those civil society groups, parliamentarians that have put the case of the prisoners of conscience in the African agenda in Accra. Andargatchew Tsige and others are expected to join this effort. Not only are other Africans concerned about the prisoners of conscience, but they are deeply worried also with the danger of ‘the politicisation of ethnicity and the ethnicisation of politics’ pauses for Ethiopia and more widely for a pan-African project in Africa. Far from Ethiopia being a symbol and example of African unity and renaissance, the particular ethnic politicisation is perceived as a matter of concern for all of Africa. Whilst in Accra I was struck by how much Ethiopia meant to the first generation of independent Ghana. Even the flag of Ghana in substance if not in form is borrowed from Ethiopia. A number of names from Ethiopia are used to name the streets of Ghana. The respect of Ghanaian intellectuals to Ethiopia as a symbol of freedom is still current. I felt proud to see this wonderful connection of Ethiopia with Ghana, Africa’s first free star from colonialism. Ghana appears to enjoy not only Ghananian but also Pan-African organic intellectuals

6: Concluding Remark: Call for Ethiopian Intellectuals!

On the contrary in Ethiopia, I feel we have intellectuals that may be linked to the people but who do not share an African and indeed even an Ethiopian project. There may be intellectuals with a project but who are not linked to the moral and well being of the people. There is a need in Ethiopia to create organic intellectuals with both a shared project and rooted in the lives and well being of the people and the country.

I am struck by how much there is a failure to create such organic Ethiopian intellectuals that combine project specially a pan- African project with rooted-ness in the peoples life, needs and moral and material welfare. Ethiopia desperately needs large minded, open and powerful intellectuals who share a value, vision and mission to undertake a project that unite the people and not divide them, that anchor them morally and not disperse them, that inspires them to improve their well being and their lives and not kill them and expose them to risk and danger. We need a community of organic intellectuals to support the people in their democratisation and enlightenment. But first thing first we need to unite

and get the prisoners released and vow to make sure the opportunity of the millennium is not lost to march in unity even if this is only for one month to start with.

The organic intellectuals are needed to think big, to think deep and act with commitment to create democratic toleration, democratic institutions where transitions are lawful, predictable, irreversible and sustainable. There must be an opportunity for those who wish to run for public life to circulate and for each set of people to come to Government, make their mistakes and go out allowing others to make their mistakes and pass on the baton to others within a rule of law and rule of the game that is open, transparent, non-deceptive, legal and moral producing justice and development in the process. Only when the society is able to circulate argument like commodities can real organic intellectuals emerge to generate a vibrant public sphere. Let us hope the Millennium will be a moment where we all reflect how to bring about this civilisation for this oldest of the old countries in the world. Millennium times are rare and come once in a thousand years. Let us not regret latter by missing the moment. Seize the moment now. Tomorrow is too late! First thing first let the prisoners free without delay and confusion.

Mammo Muchie, on behalf of NES