It takes two to tango. The government’s talk about democracy appears to deal more with the image of democracy than with the reality of democracy. The opposition’s talk about democracy seems to be targeted more at assuming power by whatever means than at providing an alternative unified option for the people to choose. That is the drama of democracy played everyday in Ethiopia. The question is, how can we abandon the drama and get on with the real thing? In this part one of my article, I would focus on the opposition.

The political climate on the ground is squeezing the opposition with each passing day. To make things worse, the opposition itself is weak due to divisions, and forgoing leadership it settle for mere opposition. The opposition has to go through rebirth; otherwise it will soon become a do-nothing force as far as peaceful struggle is concerned.

I argue that the opposition is not at the mercy of the government regarding its significance. It is within the grasp of the opposition to chart the way and hold the government accountable for the progress or lack of democracy in Ethiopia.

The people have spoken about the need to be united and to be purposeful. The opposition leaders echo the need for unity and reinvention. But how can it be done? I would like to share some reflections as to how to achieve the rebirth of a divided opposition that can transform how politics is played in Ethiopia. I hope this attempt might change the public discourse from merely talking about the condition of the opposition to discussing practical how-to steps for achieving genuine progress.

**The Political Landscape of the Opposition**

The political landscape of the opposition in Ethiopia is characterized by three major sectors: those who are pursuing peaceful struggle in Ethiopia, those who are taking the armed struggle to Ethiopian government, and the Diaspora organizations that are trying to have their input on Ethiopia’s future. Each one is calling for unity, which actually is a call that serves its own end. Each one is calling the other to join itself. Each one is facing dual challenges: first against the government, and second against each other.

Imagine a paradigm shift in how all the groups do business. Imagine each group getting out of its comfort zone, redefining its purpose and reorienting its agenda with the grand vision in sight. I ask the impossible: each group should surrender its self-serving quest for power and instead aim to be an instrument of unity for divided Ethiopia. Some say, “Dream on…”

First, I ask the militant opposition to reorient its agenda and give peace a chance. I argue that nothing in the order of this magnitude has been tried in Ethiopia. Therefore, abandon violence and join your brothers and sisters in a peaceful struggle. If you do so, then all opposition parties will be committed to a peaceful struggle without distractions.
Second, I ask the opposition engaged in a peaceful struggle at home to reorient its agenda and to form an alliance with all opposition parties at home. Instead of marching ahead with your own goals, find a greater cause to make room for all. Bring on your strength to the table in formation of a single United Front.

Third, I ask the Diaspora opposition organizations that are struggling for unity to reorient their agenda and to take on a supportive role for the single United Front. Instead of creating parallel organizations here and there, be the one that empowers the single United Front that has a base in Ethiopia – where the action is.

**Strategic Vision and Mission**

A look at the state of the opposition shows not only the difficulty but also the hope for the opposition. We are all stuck at the first observation that the opposition is hopelessly divided and throw up our hands with despair and frustration. But a closer look reveals that there is an opportunity in disguise – if there are any takers.

The fact that the opposition is divided, each with a different program should give us a clue that this is not where one should start to seek unity. Instead, we should look for what the common denominator of the oppositions is.

The big mistake is to try to mobilize the opposition towards a single unifying slogan of overthrowing the government by whatever means, fueled by hate. That is negative energy. That is the way to win in a violent struggle; it doesn’t work in a peaceful struggle.

Therefore, I suggest that you find a voice that all Ethiopians stand behind, including even those who are pro-government at the moment. Do the first thing first, find the one voice that all can speak in one accord for the betterment of Ethiopia. Fortunately, you have that voice that resonates with every one: *develop human and democratic rights in Ethiopia*. That is where you find your unity. Create a United Front on that vision alone and stand behind one leader.

Unless you win on those fundamental rights, how can you make conversations about your programs in the first place? Since you are committed to a peaceful struggle, the first strategy is to have the environment that can nurture your non-violent struggle towards implementing your programs.

The odds were against you when you were divided. Now that you are united, it is wise to prioritize your actions. You cannot go for everything you want with one shot. The first priority is given to the single vision of the single United Front. That is your united voice. Then you have the second priority, which is holding a dialog over different solutions presented by the interested groups that constitute the single United Front. You try to win together, not fight and destroy each other. This approach requires you to work together now, and also to be prepared to govern together in the future, and even to work alongside
of the present ruling party on matters of national interest. We all need each other for this to work. Remember this journey together is all about a peaceful struggle. Therefore, the parties involved should unite on this basic principle and act accordingly.

The single United Front will be on a mission towards a non-violent struggle for freedom of speech and press, freedom to organize, and free and fair elections to name a few. The united non-violent struggle for such a cause, while the member parties are conducting their political work at the grassroots level, undoubtedly empowers the member parties to relate their program to the people. This non-violent struggle requires that most of the action take place in Ethiopia. The Diaspora needs to play supportive role in one voice as those on the front line assume the primary responsibility.

**Strategic Organization and Leadership**

There has to be a distinction between voting members and supporting members of the United Front. The voting members are the ones who reside in Ethiopia and can participate in Ethiopian elections. The supporting members refer to the Diaspora, which cannot participate in the Ethiopian elections.

You don’t have to start from scratch. You can use the organizations that are already functional both in Ethiopia and abroad towards the formation of the single United Front. The delegates from the member parties who are in Ethiopia will constitute the leadership council of the single United Front. The delegates from support organizations of the Diaspora form support chapters in each geographical area.

You shouldn’t try to merge all the different programs you are fighting over into one that is not real. Unity in diversity should be your goal, not unity in uniformity. At the same time, don’t get stuck with numerous overlapping parties under the single United Front for long. True, at the beginning all opposition parties in Ethiopia and the Diaspora at large are invited to be voting members and supporting members of the single United Front respectively. At that time the numerous opposition parties that are engaging in the election process or planning to engage in the election process in Ethiopia become what I call “member parties” under the umbrella of the single United Front. However, the strategic goal is not to stay there, but evolve further. You start taking a hard look at the numerous member parties and encourage similar parties to merge together to produce a few solid parties, what I call “representative parties” that represent the wide spectrum of ideas highlighted by the opposition.

The relationship between the council of the single United Front and the leaderships of each member parties needs to be defined in a way that will maximize the advantage of having the unity in the first place. For example, the single United Front should be the sole contact point for national, Diaspora, and international relations. The Diaspora should not splinter itself into membership in specific parties. Having the single United Front reach the Diaspora and the international community, and coordinate the non-violent struggle on a national level in Ethiopia unleashes the potent power that resides in a genuine unity. Such a strategy is the bedrock for the endurance of the unity.
India had Gandhi, South Africa had Mandela, and the USA had King to spearhead the non-violent struggle. Why does Ethiopia not have a clear single championing leader for the cause of the opposition? Is it because we all want to lead but not follow? Is our personal agenda in the way to form a genuine unity? Enough is enough, it’s time to let destiny find the leader now.

Here are some minimum qualifications, I think you should consider, when you look for this leader. First, he/she should be from the new generation. Time has changed, and the political tide has turned. The time is up for the old guard to continue being the front-runner. Pass the mantle and cheer from behind. Second, he/she should be impartial to the member parties by not holding any leadership office at member party level. Third, he/she should be a tested, humble leader who has a heart to listen to the people and to put Ethiopia first.

The first requirement alone would exclude several of the current opposition leaders. Would they still be excited to get on with this program now that they are out of the limelight? Let your action speak louder than just your talk: are you in it for yourself, or for Ethiopia?

The creation of the single United Front and a few representative parties should progress in time with much deliberation. A quick fix during election season has no place for this kind of serious dream act. The time to start is today, not tomorrow. Here is what seems to be an impossible mission. You know that this is the will of the people. The people like to believe that you have what it takes to accept this challenge. You have the capacity to show that we are one big intelligent family that specializes in making the impossible possible.

In conclusion, the opposition has the opportunity to lead the way in abandoning the drama and ushering the real thing into the political space. Such an act cannot allow the government to play the drama as usual but face reality head on. The real power has nothing to do with having military force, but having eternal ideals that touch humanity now and forever. That chance is equally available for both the government and the opposition.

At the moment, the ball is neither in the government’s court nor in the opposition’s court. The real engagement in the democratic motion has not yet begun. The ball is sitting idle in the middle, while the two groups are preoccupied with their own respective obsession to be right at either extreme polar end. Time will tell who will assume the higher moral ground and lead Ethiopia into democracy and prosperity instead of being mired in the status quo. This is an independent voice of truth in love.

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