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EPRDF: The Change in Leadership

(Translated by Michael Mered PhD¹)

(Translator’s Note: This article has been translated for the benefit of English speaking Ethiopians and the non-Ethiopian audience, including the donor community. In light of the upcoming elections in Ethiopia, it is important to understand the thought processes of the EPRDF political organization. The EPRDF article translated below openly and directly addresses the rank and file membership of the organization and has been discussed and debated on numerous occasions. Similarly, the rationale and objective of all major political and economic policy decisions have always been discussed in transparent detail with the EPRDF membership, as has been shown in a number of articles in this publication. Clearly, this indicates the inherent democratic nature of the organization and its determination to institute a democratic culture in Ethiopia while implementing a strategy of sustainable and broad based economic growth within a stable environment. While the organization’s policy decisions may at times be wrongly perceived as being undemocratic by the rest of the world, every decision is, nonetheless, based on the rule of law and the Constitution and is driven by the objective of achieving the twin goals of democracy and economic prosperity in Ethiopia for generations to come. I believe that the organization’s consistent weakness to date lies in its limited ability to effectively portray and articulate its position and intent to the Ethiopian public and, in particular, to the non-Ethiopian audience and the donor community.)

Ever since the Chairman of our Party indicated his personal preference for leaving office, the domestic and international media have repeatedly commented on the subject. Both opposition groups and supporters of EPRDF have also discussed the issue in some detail.

The need for considering a change in leadership has been on the agenda of the EPRDF Executive Committee for a number of years, not only in connection with the Chairman’s preference, but also to consider similar views reflected by other members of the leadership. Extensive studies have been made on the subject and a number of discussions have been conducted. The EPRDF Council has now made its final decision on the matter. In this regard, the basis for the Council’s decision is fundamentally different from the usual media rhetoric. Consequently, this publication feels it would be useful and of great educational value to our EPRDF audience and others if this issue is discussed in some detail.

1. Democracy and the Process of Changes in Leadership

A change in leadership is a necessary condition for democracy for it is the mechanism by which constituents exercise their will and ensure the accountability of persons in

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leadership positions. The ability of constituents to assess the performance of political leaders and to approve or reject candidates as needed, based on performance and merit, is a fundamental characteristic of democracy. It is unthinkable to claim that democracy can prevail in an environment where the people cannot exercise the basic right of selecting their leaders in a free, unrestrained, democratic environment. It is for this reason that people in democratic countries hold general elections periodically but consistently and exercise their right to approve or reject political candidates as they see fit.

The process of changing the political leadership by democratic means becomes more sustainable and meaningful in a given society, if the internal leadership selection process of political parties also reflects a similar democratic pattern. The EPRDF has long followed such democratic processes. While our organization's inherent democratic character with regard to the internal decision making and the selection of the leadership is by now well known, it would still be useful to review these processes.

1.1 Changes in Leadership -- Government

The constitutional setup of governance in democratic societies can be categorized into two primary systems; the presidential and the parliamentary system of governance. In the presidential system, the executive head of government is the president who is directly elected by the electorate after a vigorous personal campaign. The winning presidential candidate establishes the new government and his cabinet of ministers. While the executive and legislative branches of government are quite independent in such a system, there can be instances where one branch of government can unduly influence or even control the other. Supporters of the parliamentary system have criticized the presidential system of governance as unduly focusing on the individual candidate rather than the party he or she represents. Critics also assert that the presidential system does not unequivocally guarantee the parliament's authority as the supreme representative of the people.

The parliamentary system, on the other hand, is based on the democratic election of the parliament and not the executive branch. Competing political parties present a variety of policy alternatives to the electorate which will then choose the party which best reflects the interest of the majority through the ballot box. The winning party will dominate parliament by claiming the majority of the seats of representatives. This party, which has elected its leadership democratically based on merit, will also elect a leader to head the executive branch, namely, the government. The head of the executive branch usually referred to as the Prime Minister, will select his Council of Ministers and other executives in consultation with his party. In this system of governance, the executive is subordinated to parliament and can be dismissed by parliament at will. In addition, compared to the presidential system, a candidate running for office in the parliamentary system represents his party and individuality is much less of a focus.

Ethiopia has chosen the parliamentary system of governance. National elections are held every five years and the electorate selects the winning party by majority vote. The Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers are then selected in line with the procedures discussed above.

The winning party in a parliamentary system can be repeatedly voted into power if it stays true to the will of the people who voted it into office and is able to gain the

confidence of the majority. For example, in Japan, the leading party has been able to win the confidence of the voting public and has been in office for decades. On the other hand, political parties unable to successfully implement policies supported by the people and, for a variety of reasons, are judged to be incompetent by the electorate are replaced. The incoming political party is given the opportunity to select the executive leadership and govern the country.

While the EPRDF has consistently won all the national elections since the democratic order has been in place in our country, upcoming elections cannot be foregone conclusions in favor of our organization. There should be no doubt that if EPRDF is unable to deliver the desired high quality leadership on a sustained basis, it will be swept out and replaced by another political party through the power of the ballot. This is not just a theoretical possibility but is a distinct reality as evidenced by the elections of 1997 E.C. (2005). As a result of losing the vote of a large segment of the electorate, the EPRDF lost a significant number of seats in parliament. In addition, EPRDF suffered a devastating loss in Addis Ababa resulting in the need to hand over the administration of the city to the Kinijit party. Thus, unless EPRDF corrects its mistakes, it should be crystal clear to all that the election of 2005 has shown the might of the ballot box in our democracy and that political parties who fail to perform can and will be replaced.

As discussed above, in democratic countries, including our own, the primary means of ensuring government's accountability to the electorate is the democratic process by which the political leadership is changed. This system of governance is deeply entrenched in our constitution and is currently being implemented nation wide. In this context, the decision made by the EPRDF Council on the change of leadership is completely consistent with this core belief of democratic governance. The discussion below will focus on this decision by the Council which is also based on the fundamental directive of development and democracy.

1.2 Changes in Leadership – the Political Party

The internal procedures and regulations of political parties participating in any democracy, particularly, in a parliamentary system of government, must also fully reflect democratic principles. In the absence of such principles, parties will not be able to govern competently and may even endanger democratic rule in the country. A major criterion by which the democratic nature of political parties is measured is the procedure by which the leadership is elected and replaced.

The EPRDF is a coalition of four political organizations and consistently follows democratic principles in electing its leaders. All the members of the four political organizations elect representatives to their congresses which are held every 2-3 years. These representatives in turn elect the Council, the Chairperson, and the Deputy Chairperson of each organization. Similarly, members of the executive council are elected to manage and implement the policies of the respective organizations. The executive council is accountable to the membership and can be democratically replaced at any time. The council also elects the organization's representatives to the EPRDF Council.

The leadership structure of the EPRDF is organized in a similar manner and is represented equally among the four member political parties. Each political organization is represented by 45 persons making up the total membership of the EPRDF Council of 180 persons. The 36 members of the EPRDF Executive Council are also elected from

within the EPRDF Council; nine members representing each political party. The 180 member Executive Council elects the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the EPRDF. As the records indicate, the membership of these councils has been repeatedly changed over the years, based strictly on democratic principles.

While there may be minor procedural differences between the four member organizations of the EPRDF, democratic principles have been consistently followed over the years with several changes in leadership being implemented. In effect, the organization has shown that democratic principles are applied practically and are not only theoretical rhetoric. Nonetheless, it is also clear that there are political leaders who have been repeatedly elected by the membership. These political leaders must have instilled confidence in the membership and, despite the fact that the membership can exercise its democratic right to replace them at any time, it has chosen to re-elect them. Most importantly, the right of the membership to choose its leaders is guaranteed and practically applied, making the process of electing the leadership democratic.

2. EPRDF's unique situation and the implication for changes in leadership

2.1 The rationale behind the need for additional procedures

The process by which the EPRDF replaces its leaders is consistent with the universal principles of democracy. It is thus clear that the process of change in leadership both for the government and the EPRDF is at par with internationally accepted standards of democratic rule both in theory and in practice. These democratic principles are based solely on the nation's constitutional requirements and the internal charter of the EPRDF; they are not, as some presume, recent inventions of the EPRDF Council. Nonetheless, given the environment in which we operate, EPRDF believes further measures need to be adopted in addition to the internationally accepted democratic norms for the change in party leadership. The following paragraphs elaborate on this statement in some detail.

EPRDF's primary objective is to rid our country of the misguided political economy which features deeply embedded rent seeking behavior², and instead to allow a democratic, sustainable, and equitable development strategy to prevail. While this change can be viewed as fundamental and revolutionary in its concept, the EPRDF believes it can only become reality through peaceful and democratic means. Success will require designing an appropriate strategy and relentlessly implementing this strategy which is likely to require decades of unwavering commitment.

Given this objective of the EPRDF, it is important for the organization to maintain its democratic character and its commitment to balanced development. The prevalent environment in Ethiopia today is conducive to rent seeking behavior and corrupt practices which in turn can pose significant danger to the EPRDF's basic identity. As noted above, the EPRDF's objective is a long term phenomenon and the need to ensure that this effort is irreversible over the coming decades requires careful

² The phrase rent seeking behavior or rent seeking is used in broad terms in this article. It refers to persons and groups whose primary aim is to enrich themselves illegally by taking advantage of market imperfections, political instability, and other transitory economic and political weaknesses. Such persons and groups have no interest in achieving sustained and balanced economic growth for our country and the pursuit of democratization.

consideration of the change in leadership from generation to generation. The EPRDF is fully aware of the need for such a change. However, it must take into account the value of the current leadership who have played a critical role in strengthening and developing the organization and have gained the support and confidence of the membership since the start of the armed struggle. While it is important to maximize the contribution of the current leadership in the development effort, it is also necessary to introduce carefully designed procedures allowing an effective change of leadership before the current leaders retire.

To maintain the viability of the EPRDF and its objective, the normal democratic process of selecting our leaders is a necessary but not sufficient condition. As long as the current leadership is performing well and has the confidence of our members, they will likely be re-elected until such time that they are no longer able to pursue their responsibilities due to the natural aging process. While this may be appropriate from a democratic perspective, the unique environment in which we operate requires additional measures to ensure the transition to new leadership is smooth and without danger to the organization and its objective.

Aside from our internal organizational needs for a proper change in leadership, it is also important to acknowledge that EPRDF's success in national democratic elections hinges on the development of competent leadership for the next generation. So far the EPRDF has been in power for some 15 years following the transition period, however, it is also clear that we have received strong warning signals during the national elections of 1997 E.C. (2005). As long as we do not commit major policy mistakes offending the electorate and as long as we diligently continue our efforts for sustainable and equitable development, we can win elections for the foreseeable future. This will provide us with the necessary time and the opportunity to implement our vision of building a democratic Ethiopia characterized by sustained and balanced economic growth.

Nevertheless, winning democratic elections repeatedly is not only an opportunity but it is also a formidable challenge. On the one hand, this would clearly indicate that the electorate is satisfied with the EPRDF's policies and its efforts, on the other hand, implementation mistakes, for any number of reasons, could easily lead to a loss of confidence and drive us out of political power. Our performance matters as we are always accountable to the voting public. In addition, as our performance delivers good results in governance and economic growth, the public's expectations and the criteria by which we are assessed continue to rise, making winning consequent elections increasingly challenging. As it is not possible to achieve long term success solely relying on the current leadership, it is necessary to prepare for the transition of the next generation of EPRDF leaders. Hence, it will not be acceptable to allow a gap between generations of leaderships given our operating environment, the need for political success, and the maintenance of EPRDF's objective. The normal democratic selection process of the leadership in the absence of additional measures could lead to such a gap.

2.2 Additional Procedural Measures

To meet the challenges discussed above and to avoid the obvious political pitfalls, the EPRDF intends to train and prepare a large cadre of its members for leadership positions and to design a transition system by which the current leadership in key positions across the party and the government will train and develop potential

replacements. The implementation of these efforts will avoid the inevitable gap that could be generated from simply following the democratic election process.

2.2.1 The training of competent leaders

The need to develop and train competent leaders is useful not only to fill the possible generation deficit at the top of the governing structure but also to provide lead support to the organization's stated objectives at all levels. Unless we are able to develop competent leaders starting at the initial kebele (local) and intermediate levels, we will not be able to manage the increasingly complicated struggle for democracy and equitable development and win the confidence of the voting public. Also, developing a broad set of candidates for leadership is useful, as it provides the flexibility needed to select the best and maintain the necessary quality.

Our organization has focused on the need to develop leaders at all levels of governance particularly after the 1997 (2005) elections. At the kebele level, we have recruited and trained numerous members. We have provided training on the principles of our organization and good governance. Leaders who have clear potential have been recruited and trained. It has been possible to recruit and train millions of members, particularly in the rural areas, and to select those with leadership qualities. At the intermediate level of leadership, we have recruited tens of thousands of the educated youth willing to join the EPRDF. These youth have been provided with continuous training regarding EPRDF principles and objectives; those indicating strong commitment and ability have been placed as interns for leadership positions. By confronting potential leaders with the daily challenges of the democratic struggle and by screening out those who have not been able to show sustained good performance, the organization now has a well established pool from which candidates can aspire to leadership at the highest level.

While it is clear much remains to be done to sharpen the performance of the system in the selection of leaders at all levels, we believe we have now laid the ground work for the proper transition of leaders from one generation to the other. In this context, the EPRDF Governing Council has given strong directives to strengthen and continuously improve the system by which competent and committed leaders are recruited at all levels of the organization.

2.2.2 The gradual transition of the current leadership from an executive to an advisory role

The EPRDF Governing Council and its Executive Committee have also considered ways to gradually change the current leadership of the organization while, at the same time, strengthening the incoming leadership without creating any undue gaps. The Council is aware of our Chairman's request to retire from his current position as discussed intensively in the media; there are also a number of members holding key positions in the organization from the time of the armed struggle expressing their desire to retire. While the Council took these requests seriously, the primary reason for the Council's attention on the subject of changes to the top leadership was systemic. Just as work has progressed to develop a system whereby leadership capacities at the lower

and intermediate positions are enhanced, the same logic would apply to the organization's members who are currently in top positions of leadership.

As the current leadership still has a number of years to contribute meaningfully to the nation building effort, the organization will prepare suitable advisory positions for those who will retire from executive positions. Their vast experience and strength of leadership will continue to be critical to the organization and the incoming leaders. As long as the membership continues to instill confidence in these leaders, their input will be useful in advisory positions. Our organization views these changes as part of a reorganization and redeployment for continued successful implementation of our stated objective.

The Governing Council and the Executive Committee have reviewed the experiences of democratic parties in a number of countries. While some useful recommendations have been grasped from this review, the unique situation in which we operate and govern has made this review only marginally useful. The Committee has also assessed the experience of the change in leadership at the lower and intermediate levels during the long armed struggle and has benefited from this experience. It has taken into account the desires of the current leadership to vacate key positions, while, at the same time, ensuring consistency between the systemic procedures of changes in leadership by the organization.

Based on the above considerations, the Governing Council has approved several decisions regarding this matter. It has placed a ceiling of 65 years of service for top executives who hold key positions in the organization. While it is clear that the age of 65 is actually the beginning rather than the end of political careers in many democratic countries, this decision was made to ensure quick succession of political leaders and full functionality.

The other controversial decision made was to require that all members who have been serving in top leadership positions since the years of armed struggle must retire within 5 years of the next EPRDF Congress to be held in September 2010. The process of training and selecting new leaders and the replacement of current executives must be completed within the same time frame. This decision was made to take account of the need for continuity in the leadership process given the unique situation of the organization and the governing environment. As this decision was made by the elected members of the Council, who in turn elect the top executive members, the chairman, and the deputy chairman, it can be considered democratic. In addition, it indirectly reinforces the democratic process by ensuring continuity and the proper implementation of our stated objective.

The decision to place an unwavering time limit of five years by which the change in leadership must take effect, indicates the organization's confidence that the process of recruitment and selection of qualified leaders at all levels is well on its way to full implementation. The decision is irreversible and is not contingent on election results or the stage of preparations for effecting change.

While the overall EPRDF membership seems satisfied with the direction and strategy of implementing the change in leadership, there are differences of opinion in determining who among the top executives will retire and when. For example, the chairman of our organization has clearly indicated his desire to retire by the next EPRDF Congress in September 2010; so have others in the leadership without officially declaring their

wishes. While these intentions have been taken into consideration by the organization, it is not possible to comply with the desired departure dates of each request. For example, the organization has decided to accede to the Chairman's desires but in line with the implementation schedule of the program to develop new leadership. The Council has decided that his resignation would have to be towards the end of the 5 year period. Similarly, requests for resignations from other executive committee members have also been accommodated but the timing was not necessarily consistent with their demands. It is important to note here that the organization makes every effort to accommodate individual requests; however, such requests must yield to the organization's priorities and strategic plans.

3. The Change in Leadership – some comments and opinions

The above sections have attempted to briefly explain the basis of the decisions regarding the process involved in the change of leadership by the EPRDF Governing Council. The discussions were not only limited to the Council; groups and individuals who seek to maintain the environment where rent seeking activities flourish have also tried to advance their views. In particular, these views became more pronounced as our chairman officially announced his desire to be relieved from his post to the domestic and foreign press. Other executive committee members also privately declared their intentions to resign from their posts around the same time.

Many of the groups and individuals who benefit from rent seeking activities expected that the EPRDF would waver and perhaps collapse if the leadership retires. Consequently, these rent seekers have attempted to put pressure both directly and indirectly on the organization for a speedy transition process. In fact, this view was also partly reflected by a number of EPRDF members and supporters. On the other hand, many members of the organization have also declared their concerns regarding the dangers of a quick transition. Others in the general public who want the continuation of rent seeking activities to prevail did not actually believe that the members of the executive committee would willingly resign from their key positions unless they are driven out by the electorate.

As is usually the case, rent seekers incorrectly understand that executive power is simply a means for corrupt practices to be used for self enrichment. They do not believe that such posts could be vacated voluntarily. As a result, these individuals and groups believe that executive power would have to continue being under the control of the current leadership either directly or indirectly.

EPRDF has a diametrically opposite view on this matter. We believe that executive power is an instrument to be used to meet the organization's stated objective requiring immense sacrifice and commitment. Persons and groups endowed with narrow rent seeking attitudes cannot possibly comprehend the organization's intent to remove top executives from power while they are still functional. Such groups and individuals have no stated objective other than to advance their own narrow interests. For example, political parties who claim to have similar programs and agendas have continuously contradicted each other unable to sustain a unified front. Accordingly, rent seekers believe that the removal of the leadership by the EPRDF is likely to lead to divisiveness and collapse of the organization. This is a fundamentally flawed view emanating from a lack of understanding of the principles of our organization.

There are basic differences between EPRDF's thought process and those of the individuals and groups who have rent seeking tendencies. These entities have a distorted view of EPRDF; they do not understand our strategy or our vision. Rather they believe that the EPRDF is simply a network of individuals at the top. Such a view is not surprising, as this reflects the basic character of their associations or political parties.

Just as there are differences on other fundamental issues, there is a major divergence of views on the process and rationale for the change in leadership. The EPRDF's views on this matter are centered on its overall strategy and direction rather than the issue of replacements of individuals at the executive level. Our organization is building leadership capacities starting from the kebele level to include intermediate and high level executives. Changes in leadership are assessed from this perspective rather than simply replacing key executives and personalities; and, the five year horizon and plan approved for implementing such measures by the EPRDF Council reflects just that.

The paramount issue for the EPRDF is to ensure that the direction toward the building of a democratic society with balanced and sustained economic growth is irreversible. The need for the change in leadership is assessed solely from this perspective.

4. Let us work to implement the decision of the EPRDF Council

The recent decisions made by the EPRDF Council in relation to the changes in leadership can be considered decisions of historical proportions. The Council has declared publicly that the current leadership will resign within five years as requested by some of the executives. While consistent with internationally accepted norms of democratic procedures, the Council's decision goes beyond these norms by limiting the period of governance by top executives despite their continued popularity. This decision was made to ensure continuity of our stated objectives and to enable new leaders to effectively govern. For our country this is a new phenomenon, where historically leaders have only won and retained power through the barrel of the gun. The EPRDF has fundamentally changed this tradition by approving and implementing our new constitution—a truly historic decision.

As noted repeatedly above, EPRDF views the change in leadership from the perspective of building leadership capacity to ensure our stated objective and is not focused on individual replacements. The Council's decision can only be fully implemented if we diligently pursue capacity building in leadership. If we concentrate only on replacing individual executives, our views will not be much different from the rent seekers we oppose. To implement this historic decision each and every member of our organization must play a critical role. We need to effectively expand the available pool of potential leaders starting from the kebele and woreda (district) levels. When building our leadership capacity we must correct errors of implementation and be able to produce results in a relatively short time. Strengthening our leadership capacity will not only ensure continuity and effective governance but is also critical to our objective of development and democracy; this can only be achieved if every member diligently participates in this effort.
