Memorandum on

Ethiopia’s failed reform experiment and the urgency of an All-inclusive Dialogue on Peace and National salvation

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Mekelle

Ethiopia
The election of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, as chairman of EPRDF and later Prime Minister of the country, was received with enthusiasm and hope of a better future. The Prime Minister has, however, from the outset, betrayed public trust and engaged himself in populist-like political adventurism that generated further problems.

Political reform is essentially a planned and deliberate science-based process. It requires sufficient and comprehensive understanding on what to improve, what to change, and what to maintain. A clear strategy and agreed upon road map of implementation are also key factors for successful consummation of a reform program. Political reform also requires meaningful participation of all political stakeholders and the public at large. It demands harnessing the collective knowledge and wisdom of all players to reach an objective assessment of the problems and possible solutions. This is what has been absent in Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s leadership. His exclusionary and unilateralist style mismanaged the transition and lost a once in a generation opportunity to take the country to greater heights.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s promise of reform is actually just a mere camouflage of his quest for personal power consolidation. For him, ‘reform’ has been a convenient excuse to cleanse the system from perceived or real opponents. As a result, the changes made in the name of reform further weakened the existing institutions rather than bringing them in line with current global standards. He focused on superficial beautification projects rather than on substantive policies that affect sustainable development and building enduring institutions. Instead of running the reform process on generally accepted scientific approaches, he focused on a hollow, self-promoting, campaign.

The Prime Minister, originally touted as a reformer, instantly transformed himself into a vengeful victor. He changed the much applauded reform in to a win-lose political spectacle. As a result, the political spirit of the time has become one of confrontation rather reconciliation. The initial reluctant moves and pronouncements to widen the political space have clearly been reversed. Many who were voices of political opposition in the last three decades have been jailed.
or forcefully silenced. For all intents and purposes, the Prime Minister has put an end to multi-party politics in the country.

The health of the economy is also rapidly deteriorating. According to a recent report of the IMF, Ethiopia’s economy will grow by 3.2% in 2020. Inflation has skyrocketed; a high rate of unemployment is threatening social stability. The credit rating of the country has plummeted. The regime is; however, busy doctoring statistics and embellishing its failed economic policy.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s foreign actions are no better. In the last two years, he has used foreign policy and diplomacy in the most unorthodox manner. His foreign policy objectives are simply an international dimension of his strategy for personal power consolidation. His foreign policy and diplomacy activities have nothing to do with protecting and promoting the national interest of the country. Some of his foreign policy behaviors, rather, border on treason.

The crisis Ethiopia has currently encountered is not simply a natural hiccup in the process of democratic reform. It is an outcome of a mismanaged transition mishandled by a leader with totalitarian intentions. It is an outcome of unbridled drive of a Prime Minister turning into full blown dictator garbed with democratic pronouncements.

The Ethiopian people have been voicing their opposition to the dangerous route the regime is leading the country to and have been calling upon the government to change course and respect the constitutional order. The group in power has, however, turned a deaf ear to the many wise appeals of the people and has rather escalated the intensity and scale of its repressive policy against the people and its leaders.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s false start has had a processional effect on subsequent political developments in the country. As a result, old problems have become intractable and have also added new daunting challenges. Consequently, political problems have further degenerated to the point of imperiling the very survival of the country. Referring to the dire situation the country is currently facing, The Coalition of Ethiopian Federalist Forces, in its recent Call for Peace and National Salvation said the following,
‘Unless the ensuing political crisis unsettling the country is resolved in time and is unwittingly allowed to further deteriorate, no doubt, in no distant future, Ethiopia can imminently slide into a nasty specter of disintegration.’

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed uses all branches of government, including the representative bodies, as an extension of his executive arm and as political instruments to consolidate his personal power and weaken that of his political opponents. He used the House of Representatives to indefinitely postpone the election using COVID-19 as an excuse. He used the House of Federation and the President of the Supreme Court to manipulate the constitution for the purpose of extending his term in office and to criminalize the Tigray election.

After the premise for cancelling the Tigray election was refuted by the successful outcome of the Tigray election and after mounting international pressure on the Prime Minister to hold election, he unashamedly used the same institutions to decide in favor of holding the national election. The reversal of the decision becomes even more intriguing when it’s noted that the COVID-19 infection rate in the country is higher and increasing more rapidly as compared to few months ago when the pandemic was used as a reason for postponing the election. In a characteristically totalitarian fashion, the Prime Minister instructed the allegedly independent, House of Representatives to pass contradictory decisions in a span of only three months.

The decision of the Prime Minister to hold the national election now does not absolve him from the crime he originally committed in violating the constitutional provision on holding the election nor does it make the planned election constitutional. The right of the Ethiopian people to hold elections is not a benevolent gift from a particular leader. It is a constitutional right and should have been respected in the first place.

The dictatorial and unpredictable behavior of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his group in the last two years has depleted whatever trust we have in the current government. It has irreparably damaged the nature of the relationship between the ruling party and all political stakeholders. The regime has even deliberately
sown a spirit of mistrust and animosity between our people. The government, therefore, cannot be trusted nor does it have the capacity to preside over the next election and resolve the major political and constitutional issues afflicting the country. More importantly, it does not have the legal mandate to govern, including organizing the national election, after the expiry of its term of office at the end of September.

The only way out, as outlined in the recent statement by the Coalition of Ethiopian Federalist Forces, is organizing a new political arrangement to address the deep political crisis afflicting the country. The current government is the source of the problem and cannot supervise the process of resolution of the complex problems it has brought about. It can only take part as any other political organization in the country. The mantle of power should be given to a caretaker government composed of technocrats. The caretaker government, as stated in the peace plan announced by the Federalist Forces, would be mandated to govern the country until such time the political parties, civic societies and representatives of the Ethiopian people, nations, and nationalities agree on the solutions to the fundamental constitutional and political issues and until a government is elected through a free and fair election.

Such process cannot, however, be undertaken in a vacuum. There should be a conducive political and security environment to address the fundamental political and constitutional issues of the time. Initially, the government should, with immediate effect, halt all repressive measures against the people and its leaders. Members of opposition political parties should be released in order to facilitate meaningful dialogue. It is totally unacceptable to talk of a dialogue let alone an election when political leaders representing alternative ideas are incarcerated. Moreover, no progress can be made until the government stops its military like administration in many parts of the country and trust between the government and its political opponents can't be restored as long as foreign security forces roam the country in support of the ruling regime.

The suspicious and secretive manner the government handles public affairs has further fractured the people and the political class. He has shown little respect to
the constitution of the land and the institutions of government. The many high profile assassinations which occurred during the current Prime Minister’s term have not yet been properly investigated. Demands by many groups, including the Government of Tigray National Regional State, for transparency and independent investigation, have been contemptuously ignored. A lasting reconciliation can’t be achieved unless large scale human rights violations, political assassinations and corruption from 1991 to date are investigated by an independent body and the outcome is made public to the Ethiopian people.

The hope and trust of the Ethiopian people in Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has long been dashed. The government has complicated old problems and has created more intractable crisis. The government is at war with its own people. What is more dangerous is it does not seem to appreciate the gravity of the problem it has dragged the country into. It is oblivious to the looming danger it has invited. It rather, underestimates and, at worse, denies the existence of the political crisis that certainly is defining the very survival of the country. Once the term of the current government expires, in few days time, the country will find itself in a state of nature. No one, including the Prosperity Party, will have the legal authority to govern the country.

It is in this context that the Government of Tigray National Regional State, once again, appeals to the Ethiopian people, nations, and nationalities and all political and civic stake holders to stand shoulder to shoulder to save our country from the fast approaching danger of national collapse. We also would like to reiterate our earnest call to the international community, especially the African Union, to play its rightful role and assume its responsibility in helping dispel the impeding danger hovering over our country.