

An Open Letter to Ethiopians

Re: Citizens' Charter for a Democratic Ethiopia
Ye'Etyiopianian Yemebitna Gideta Qal-keidan

27 October 2006

Dear Compatriots at Home and Abroad:

We, the undersigned, are a group of concerned Ethiopians who value civic activism in the cause of freedom, that is, freedom from unrelenting poverty and freedom from unremitting tyranny. The lessons of history clearly show that the cause of liberty is best served by a political system that respects the sovereignty of the citizen and generously rewards those activities that promote the common good. They also show that shared prosperity comes with the help of an economic system that guarantees economic freedom and rewards productive activity.

Achieving the twin goals of Ethiopian democracy and prosperity presupposes a government that is at once competent and accountable to citizens. Such a government is, unfortunately, a product of protracted struggle by a coordinated political movement that includes political parties and civic organizations. Needless to say, this movement has to be inspired by a democratic process for public decision-making and by a pan-Ethiopian vision of the future of the country.

Recent political movements in Ethiopia have also shown that the country has never lacked for citizens, as individuals as well as groups, who were ready to pay the ultimate sacrifice in the cause of meaningful institutional reform. These struggles have taken the country forward in some respects from a very low base.

We need only mention a few illustrative examples to underscore the point: the introduction of a modern military and civil service as well as the idea of constitutional rule, recognition of professional organizations such as trade unions, and institutions of higher education all under the Monarchy; the recognition by the State of the equality of all religions and ethnic groups, and the implementation of an egalitarian land reform program under the Derg; and the introduction of decentralized governance, albeit along manipulatively ethnocentric lines, as well as significant movement toward liberalization of the regimented economy under TPLF/EPRDF. These reforms, however, remain incomplete and shallow; certainly not deep enough to undergird a robust democratic system or a vibrant economic growth engine. Just as importantly, the leveling effect of previous reforms has meant that the depth of insecurity—of poverty and injustice—is remarkably similar across the country.

That is why Ethiopians today cry out for robust coalitions of political parties and civic organizations that would provide leadership of the emerging multifaceted movement for a successful transition to a genuine Ethiopian democracy. It is in recognition of this urgent need that we call on political parties (including the TPLF/EPRDF) and civic organizations to hold back on their sectarian concerns and instead focus on a common agenda. In our judgment, this agenda must be one that embraces the diverse Ethiopian family and aims at expanding the political space for exercising those human, civic and political freedoms that are enshrined in international conventions.

It distresses us immensely that the existing alliances of political parties—most notably CUDP, UEDF and AFD—have not succeeded in mounting an effective global movement for deeper reform in the aftermath of the historic May 2005 legislative elections. The May 2005 elections have taught us several lessons: that the Ethiopian voter can muster remarkable courage, against all odds, to publicly and defiantly assert her or his democratic rights; that a determined group of opposition parties with a credible vision can go a long way toward giving hope to a citizenry in despair in confrontation with a ruling party displaying a seemingly congenital inability to engage in normal politics; and that, in the final analysis, the Ethiopian voter can exercise only those rights that can be defended collectively under current circumstances.

It also pains us to note a number of recent developments that have conspired to stymie the emergence of a single-minded and united grassroots movement for meaningful change: the systematic attacks on peaceful dissent by the TPLF/EPRDF government including mass killings and unjust imprisonment of leading opposition politicians and heads of key civic organizations; the cynical peddling of Ethiopia's abject poverty to maximize foreign aid receipts

which are then used to finance a pernicious system of political patronage; the inability of pan-ethnic parties and their ethnocentric partners to reconcile divergent political platforms; and the ever-fractious personal and organizational rivalries within the opposition.

With regard to civic organizations, despite various attempts to form alliances of like-minded organizations in Ethiopia and abroad, a global coalition has yet to emerge to coordinate the rights-oriented civic organizations. To make matters worse, the fledgling private press has been emasculated by the TPLF/EPRDF government through mass arrests of journalists and the introduction of draconian press laws.

Mindful of the spirit of reflection occasioned by the Ethiopian Millennium, we humbly offer the attached “Citizens’ Charter for a Democratic Ethiopia” for thoughtful consideration and debate. The Charter, which has been in the making for five years now, constitutes an attempt to outline a fair reading of the country’s historical legacies in our search for a positive affirmation of *Etyopiaminnet*, a declaration of principles that ought to guide the country’s political and economic future, and a number of suggestions for managing the transition underway to a post-EPRDF political order. We have no illusion that you will agree with every point made in the Charter. We are, however, confident that you will endorse the fundamental principles it advocates and the national spirit it embodies.

We have three immediate goals for issuing the Charter at this time: (1) to urge any political party which considers itself democratic and Ethiopian to unequivocally and publicly endorse the Charter so that Ethiopians would know who is truly upholding their common cause, (2) to call on all Ethiopian civic organizations interested in promoting civic and political rights to adopt the Charter as a foundational document, and (3) to insist that all political prisoners be released immediately and unconditionally. Regarding the first goal, we recently invited UEDF, CUDP-NA and AFD to endorse the Charter. We regret that this communication was somehow leaked to some websites prematurely. Nevertheless, UEDF and the CUDP-NA responded positively but short of endorsing the Charter. The AFD has yet to send us a formal response.

Regarding the second and third goals, we operate on the premise that politics is too important to be left to politicians. Individual citizens and civic organizations play a crucial role in conveying the sentiments of the public to governments as well as to political parties vying for state power. They are also indispensable for restraining abuse of public office by those in power.

We, therefore, ask all concerned citizens to rally around a pan-Ethiopian agenda through covenants such as those contained in this Charter which unequivocally express the widely-shared aspirations of Ethiopians. We expect that in due course the Charter will be translated into a number of Ethiopian languages for the widest possible circulation and sober deliberation.

Etyopiaminnet will prevail!
Ethiopia shall triumph!

THE CITIZENS’ CHARTER GROUP:

Ato Abate Kassa
Dr. Berhanu Abegaz
Ato Deneke Hailemariam
Ato Elias Wondimu
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Ato Paulos Asrat
Ato Robele Ababya
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Attachment: “Citizens’ Charter for a Democratic Ethiopia.”

Home: We invite you to participate in the discussion forum on the Charter by visiting www.eineps.org/forum.

CITIZENS' CHARTER FOR A DEMOCRATIC ETHIOPIA

Ye'Etyiopianian Yemebitna Gideta Qal-kidan

A Common Cause for Democracy, Economic Prosperity, and Social Renaissance

PART I: PREAMBLE

This Charter is a nonpartisan declaration of founding principles that seeks to articulate a shared vision for a postsocialist, postethnic polity that defines a cosmopolitan Ethiopia.

It serves as a platform and national conscience for an alliance of engaged citizens, civic organizations and political parties to bring to fruition the fervent desire for national unity, territorial integrity and self-governing local communities in a democratic Ethiopia.

It relies on the power of reason and conscience to launch a worldwide civic and political movement that is dedicated to the respect and protection, by government and citizens alike, of the universally accepted human, civil, cultural and political rights of all Ethiopians.

It upholds the fundamental values of dignity of and respect for the individual, service to community and appreciation of cultural diversity—all of which are among the hallmarks of the Ethiopian spirit and Ethiopian civilization that the present generation can build on.

We seek to elevate civic activism as the most reliable guarantor of freedom from autocratic politicians and a predatory State. In so doing, it rings the wake-up call for Ethiopian citizens to take up the common cause of fighting for the full realization of individual liberty as their birthright, and honoring with conviction the duties that are inherently bundled with such rights.

It issues a clarion call to all self-respecting Ethiopians to discard for good the outmoded political culture of master and servant (*Gezhi'na Tegezhi*) and usher in a new culture of rights and responsibilities (*Mebitna Gideta*). This inevitably means that our political discourse shall henceforth be honest and citizen-centered, and our leaders shall be judged by their demonstrated commitment to public service and accountability.

This Citizens' Charter is, therefore, intended as an inspiration for Ethiopians of all walks of life to assert the sovereignty of the citizen through tenacious collective action for an inclusive democratic government (*Hul-aqef Hizbami Mengist*). It is in this spirit that we ask all democratic Ethiopian political parties and civic organizations to publicly endorse and incorporate the basic tenets outlined in this Charter in their manifestos and programs.

PART II: LEGACIES AND CHALLENGES

Every generation has the duty as well as the privilege to articulate and defend its own cherished vision of Ethiopia. It has a responsibility to define for itself an inclusive and unifying pan-Ethiopian identity. This vision of *Etyopia'winnet* ensures that each citizen finds her or his own reflection in the icons of the nation's cultural, political and economic life. By so doing, all citizens affirm their representation in, and embrace their obligations to, a free Ethiopia.

Affirming positively the aspirations of the present generation, however, presupposes a measure of consensus concerning the country's predicament at the present and an informed appreciation of the most enduring legacies of the past. Many of these legacies have been so distorted by ill-informed and self-serving revisionist history. The premises on which a common cause is forged must, therefore, be made explicit for all to see. The socio-

economic and political landscape of Ethiopia has certain recognizable features, the most notable for our purposes may be distilled as follows:

- The Ethiopian polity, whose territorial reach ebbed and flowed over the centuries, has no discernible tradition of territorially identifiable, ethnic-based states. That is because various linguistic groups overran each other's territories resulting in mutual accommodation and absorption as the norm. Political elites, Christian or Muslim or Traditional, instead sought to capture the multi-ethnic state and rule on behalf of all groups. This non-sectarian tradition of high mobility, shared governance and mutual accommodation provides a fertile seedbed on which the present generation can build a modern democratic country.
- That Ethiopia, with a population of nearly 80 million people, is a nation of ethnic minorities also makes it imperative to opt for a democratic system of coalition building and protection of minorities. The cultural diversity of the country is further underscored by the significant representation of Christianity, Islam and Native religious systems.
- Ethiopians have historically enjoyed strong communal identities that, with rare exceptions in times of great turmoil, are undergirded by unprecedented inter-communal tolerance and mutual respect. Geographic diversity has also meant that the lowlander and the highlander, the settled and the transhumant live in a dense web of economic interdependence, competition and cultural diffusion. The parish, the mosque, the council of clan elders, and the multitude of community institutions have bestowed on us a dense network of social capital that is so essential for building a viable democracy as an effective modern mechanism for reconciling competing interests.
- Ethiopia has an illustrious literate tradition to supplement its equally strong African oral tradition. This is reflected in the long and illustrious record of Ethiopian receptivity to foreign ideas with an uncanny gift for selectively indigenizing them. The distinctive face of Ethiopian religion, for example, is a unique melding of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions with native value systems.
- Contemporary Ethiopia bears the scars of major political shocks. They include two waves of Italian invasion and the creation of a centralized state bureaucracy in the aftermath, the 1974 revolution and its socialist experiment, the accession and then secession of Eritrea, and the end of the cold war that has ushered in TPLF's pernicious politics of ethnicism which has sought to cannibalize the national institutions that bind Ethiopians together.

The unsavory effects of these societal shocks include erosion of social trust and national self-confidence, progressive pauperization, and the rise of a strident politics of group identity that is born of a siege mentality. Key sections of the civil service and the military have been politicized. Absolutist cadres have, in the name of alien ideologies, supplanted respected local community leaders as well as the fear of God (*Feriba Igziabher*) both of which had served us well in protecting the weak from the strong.

This state of deep insecurity points to two inescapable conclusions. First, the modern political system we all seek must be inclusive and embrace the best of our traditions. Second, full integration with the outside world on the basis of mutually beneficial terms is essential for sustaining prosperity, preserving freedom and ensuring Ethiopia's status as a stable anchor of the Horn of Africa and beyond.

Thanks to the unprecedented resiliency of Ethiopian nationalism and the legendary civility (*Chewa'nnet*) of its people, responsible Ethiopians now have a window of opportunity to reinvent government and to defiantly announce the birth of the 'free citizen.' Free citizenship (*Ras-gez Zeginnet*) upholds as a civic virtue the pursuit of legitimate self-interest that also nurtures the collective interest.

This Charter recognizes that there are three core principles that together define our conception of Ethiopian renaissance. They are: representative governance, cultural pluralism, and economic freedom. What follows from these first principles is a set of guidelines for crafting concrete plans for political and economic renewal. The triad symbolizes a clear public commitment to an enduring social peace, a robust collective identity, and the pursuit of democracy by democratic means.

PART III: ETHIOPIAN DEMOCRACY

Representative democracy, whether liberal or social, is the only political system that boasts an unenviable record of paving the way toward full realization of fundamental human rights. A written constitution that embraces internationally recognized rights is its foundation. That is why this Charter calls for a constitution that fully embraces the best of Ethiopian values and inescapable realities. By doing, this Charter offers a vision of Ethiopia's future that is radically different from that of the current ruling party.

Our vision of Ethiopian democracy is informed by the experiences of other countries and the realities of Ethiopia itself. The three post-WWII Ethiopian constitutions, needless to say, did not guarantee Ethiopians an appreciable degree of justice, equality, or prosperity. In a country of grinding poverty and no meaningful tradition of democracy, they turned out to be little more than smokescreens for modernized forms of despotism. Dismissing their instrumentality for a progressive emergence of a responsible government would, however, be a big mistake. As the history of modern democracies clearly shows, a good constitution serves as the highest earthly authority for organized citizens to appeal to in their struggle for fair and transparent rules of political and economic competition.

Experience has also taught us that cherished principles enshrined even in a 'paper-perfect' constitution come to life and become institutionalized only through an assiduous cultivation of the 'common cause' of free citizenship and mutual responsibility. Rights and informed consent are *earned*, not granted. Political and civic organizations in Ethiopia and the growing Diaspora, which will be primarily urban for the foreseeable future, shoulder special responsibility for educating as well as learning from the predominantly rural voters.

This Charter demands that the Ethiopian Bill of Rights affirm current international standards in granting every citizen an enforceable legal remedy if and when the government infringes upon their rights. The non-ethnocentric Constitution we seek should, therefore, recognize the set of fundamental and inalienable rights of all individuals by virtue of their humanity and citizenship. These include *inter alia* freedom from injustice and for the rule of law, from fear and for thought as well as expression, from discrimination and for full participation, and from want and for equal opportunity.

It is beyond the mandate of this Charter to dictate or predefine the full content of a democratic Constitution for post-TPLF/EPRDF Ethiopia. We must nonetheless offer certain principles that merit full consideration. At the very least, the new Constitution, as a freely-entered compact between citizen and State, must:

- be created with maximum public representation and participation.
- guarantee political equality for all citizens and the full empowerment of women.
- guarantee food security for all as a matter of entitlement since, without it, other rights are patently meaningless.
- enshrine the ultimate sovereignty of the citizen over the State.
- facilitate the full institutionalization of a culture of respect for the rule of law.
- empower the citizen by upholding individual rights and respecting the cultural identity of groups.
- encourage an open society and a competitive economy.
- facilitate transparency, civility, and honesty in public life.

Principles that are rightly believed must also be rightly lived. That is why we insist that the new political system go beyond this by providing practicable legislative and judicial mechanisms for enforcing theoretical rights. Such mechanisms should put a high premium on *simplicity* to minimize ever-present corruption by the political class, and on *flexibility* to ensure adaptability to changing circumstances. It bears repeating that procedural equality before the law or free and fair election will mean little to the majority poor so long as lack of resources effectively prevents them from meaningful participation in public affairs.

The Charter implores Ethiopians to critically reflect on the bitter lessons of the recent past. This is why we humbly but uncompromisingly draw attention to the need for a meeting of minds on the following guiding principles which capture the lessons of experience with modernization in the past half century:

- (a) *The Right to Subsistence*: Every Ethiopian should have a constitutional right to immunity from death by avoidable starvation. A democratic government worthy of the name has the obligation to ensure that millions of its citizens shall not perish with depressing regularity as a result of predictable famines and avoidable epidemics.
- (b) *Respect for Ethiopia's Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity*: The Ethiopian people through their long history have time and again defended their sovereignty, unity and indivisibility. They have forged this legacy through war and peace and thereby created the unbreakable bond. This historical resolve of the people must be affirmed and strengthened. It must also be recognized that Ethiopia and her neighbors need to develop a regional pact in order to ensure regional security.
- (c) *Primacy of the Constitutional Rights of the Individual Citizen*: This Charter rejects as pillars of the TPLF/EPRDF constitution which define Ethiopia as a forced aggregation of disparate 'nations, nationalities and peoples.' This is regrettably inconsistent with the national interest and accepted democratic principles that proscribe the granting of special sovereignty based on unchangeable, primordial identities. In a multi-ethnic society, a constitution that privileges "group rights" is inherently exclusionist and self-limiting to the point of triggering people-on-people violence; it erodes the rights of minorities; and ultimately undermines inter-group solidarity without which a cohesive national community cannot be nurtured. In a system based on one-person-one vote, citizens enjoy the freedom to form or dissolve all sorts of groups which are open to anyone who subscribes to their publicly-sanctioned goals. This is not to suggest that group identities are not important. It is rather to note that rights enjoyed by groups, important as they are for facilitating self-government, are best understood as derivative rights emanating from those of the free citizen.
- (d) *Protection of the Rights of Minorities*: Among the hallmarks of a modern democratic system of government are representation, majority rule, and the protection of minority rights against the ever-present tyranny of the majority. Depending on how 'group' is defined, an individual may belong to a majority in one case and to a minority in another. As a matter of principle, however, electoral rules should be crafted to preclude the emergence of a permanent electoral majority, and to ensure that a coalition that wins an electoral contest is adequately restrained from violating the constitutional rights of electoral minorities.
- (e) *A Non-Ethnocentric Devolution of State Power*: Some form of a federal or a decentralized-unitary model is appropriate for Ethiopia given the polity's low level of economic development, cultural diversity and an unhappy experience with over-centralization. Serious consideration will have to be given to making zonal administrative units (with half to one million residents) the basic unit of self-administration with further devolution to the *woreda* level. In all cases, regional units must have administrative boundaries that are drawn with the consent of the affected communities and with due recognition of the relevant historical, ethnic, geographic and economic linkages among localities. They must be big enough to be economically and politically viable but not so big as to preclude full accountability to the electorate. Finally, they must enjoy a degree of autonomy from the center in a manner that balances the need for local control with the equally important need for a sufficiently strong central government.
- (f) *Official Language Policy*: Given limited resources, it must do for now to adopt a two-pronged language policy: Amharigna as the national and official language, and regional language(s) for each self-governing region. Amharigna as a pan-Ethiopian lingua franca, and English as the international lingua franca, should be taught in all private and public schools to ensure equal opportunity and participation by all in national life. Predominant regional languages, which ought to be raised to national status as

expeditiously as possible, should be available for all Ethiopians as medium of instruction in public schools and for local administration.

- (g) *Representative Military and Civil Service*: Constitutional rights can only be safeguarded with the creation of meritocratic military, civil and security services that reflect the ethnic, religious and gender diversity of the country. Needless to say, these services should also be fully accountable to an independent judiciary that upholds the supreme authority of the Constitution.
- (h) *A Properly-regulated Market Economy*: Ethiopians seek to enjoy economic security through private ownership of property and the freedom to engage in legitimate economic activities in any locality of their choice. The government must transfer, through a fair and transparent process, most publicly-owned land, houses, industrial capital and service enterprises to the private sector. The predominance of private property and secure economic freedom, besides being conducive to prosperity, also constitutes the first line of defense against predatory politicians. The appropriate slogan today is: "ownership to the producer" (*Balebetmet LeAmrachu*). A responsible government is one that prefers to be a development *partner* to the private sector by supplying key economic infrastructure, nurturing strategic industries, providing aid to laggard regions or disadvantaged citizens, encouraging cooperatives that provide social safety nets, and securing fair rules of competition and clear property rights.
- (i) *Independent Civic Organizations*: Emergent democracies, especially poor ones, find it difficult to build up a dense network of civic organizations to educate citizens about their rights or to provide vital assistance in ensuring the enforcement of these rights. Professional organizations and an independent press are key conveyer belts that advocate or interpret legislative measures, and serve as watchdogs of public authorities.
- (j) *Independent Political Parties*: Ethiopian democracy must be based on the principle of a transparent and competitive political market where parties seeking state power are open to all citizens who subscribe to their programs. No political party, ruling or seeking to rule, shall be permitted to rig the political process by seeking to create a state-within-a-state with the help of a party militia and/or a business empire. Otherwise, elections in such a fragile democracy will be reduced to one of many instruments for legitimizing the capture of the state by sectarian or narrowly-based interests.
- (k) *Checks and Balances among the Organs of the State*: This Charter calls for a broadly-representative constituent assembly that is charged with carefully evaluating the wisdom of keeping the parliamentary form of government. The winner-take-all rules and a civil society that is too feeble to defend its constitutional rights have enabled the executive branch to wield virtually unconstrained power over the legislative and judicial branches of the state. Citizens are, even under a freely elected regime, be left out of the loop not to mention their vulnerability to repressive legislation. A system must be devised, tailor-made for Ethiopia and subject to a national referendum, which builds-in enforceable checks and balances at the lowest cost possible.

PART IV: MANIFESTO OF THE TRANSITION PERIOD

It is beyond the scope of this Charter to address issues pertaining to a legitimate interim administration that would manage the transition to a truly free society. This task is best left to statesmen, stateswomen, political parties and civic organizations with a history of closeness to the people and a proven record of farsighted leadership.

However, this Charter implores all to recognize and appreciate the myriad challenging tasks for the transition period:

- 1) The establishment of a strong coalition of civic and political organizations as well as respected individuals to develop a *common platform* and to map out the modalities of the transition period.

- 2) The devising of a framework of national reconciliation that, without absolving of their responsibility for past abuse of power, entices influential members of the ruling party to join the coalition for change.
- 3) The establishment of a caretaker government of national unity, that would clean the state of all parallel partisan institutions embedded in the bureaucracy and the economy for the purpose of serving the sectarian interests of the ruling party.
- 4) The establishment of a constitutional commission or a constituent assembly to draft a new Ethiopian Constitution (*Ye'Etyopia Reisse Hi'g*), one that embraces the principles outlined in this Charter, for eventual approval by a national referendum.
- 5) The unconditional release of all political prisoners and the granting of general amnesty for exiles.
- 6) The conducting of the first free and fair national election in Ethiopian history and the eventual handover of power to those who have been duly elected.

PART V: CIVIC ACTIVISM AS A HANDMAIDEN OF ETHIOPIAN DEMOCRACY

The pan-Ethiopian vision embodied in this Charter is consistent with a broad spectrum of modern political systems including a constitutional monarchy, liberal democracy, and social democracy. It only insists that Ethiopians must be free to choose the system under which they wish to live. While political parties inevitably focus on assuming state power, a dense network of disinterested and patriotic civic organizations is an essential precondition for ensuring the accountability of ruling parties and for promoting peaceful resolution conflict through the promotion of a level playing field for those who aspire to political leadership. The challenge of resuscitating the body politic inevitably calls for a strong sense of pragmatism, forgiveness, patience and open-mindedness. After all, the cultivation of trust in government and among compatriots is an outcome of a process rather than a one-off event.

The imperative of restoring this generation of Ethiopians to their rightful place in the global community of free peoples calls for nothing less than a fully mobilized citizenry ready to proclaim ownership of its destiny. We are confident that the indefatigable sons and daughters of Ethiopia will rise once again to the occasion to mount an effective collective action in defense of liberty. The Ethiopian Millennium demands no less from us all.



27 October 2006