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Ethiopia and Its citizens Are Seized with an Unprecedented Opportunity for a Peaceful and Democratic Election

Ethiopia is at an inflection point in its political history. It is undergoing a political transformation unprecedented in its long history of statehood. For the first time, we are engaged in a genuine process of establishing a government of the people, by the people, for the people. With a shared commitment from all stakeholders- people, government, political parties, civil societies, and the media- the march toward a peaceful and democratic election has begun.

For a fledgling democracy such as ours, free and fair elections are a rare and precious opportunity that we all must cherish, uphold and protect. Our own history teaches us that our rulers are hardly ever mandated by the citizens; they have often imposed themselves upon us through the barrel of the gun, until they are forced out by the same means. The June 2021 national election promises to break this vicious cycle for all of us. It provides an unprecedented opportunity for a political transformation that is uniquely and qualitatively different. It is about charting a new path and a more sustainable one at that.

This administration has been clear-eyed from day-one in preparing Ethiopia for something it never truly experienced before – a free and fair election. In fact, the administration has repeatedly reiterated its unwavering commitment to ensure a free and fair election in Ethiopia. Free and fair election – the only legitimate pathway to a peaceful transition of power – is the bedrock of democracy and the essence of it.

This election comes on the heels of significant political and legal reforms undertaken by the government. Indeed, a number of bold and ground-breaking steps have been taken to open up the political space and ensure all of us Ethiopians take an active part in shaping our destiny, in complete freedom and complete equality regardless of political orientation, ethnic and religious identity or other extraneous considerations.

In his inaugural speech, acknowledging opposing parties as competitors with alternative ideas rather than adversaries of the ruling party, Prime Minister Abiy promised to create a conducive environment for a fair and leveled playing field in which all parties are able to operate constructively. That was followed by the release from imprisonment of politicians and return of political dissidents in exile, many of whom had criminal charges or convictions. To cap that off, all political prisoners and dissidents were granted pardons further illustrating his commitment to the cause. These measures have instilled real optimism and confidence in the democratization process.

However, no election can be free, fair and democratic without the requisite legislative framework and independent institutions overseeing its implementation. Cognizant of this, the uneven playing field of the past, the election and political party laws have been overhauled, and the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) is restructured in a manner that guarantees its independence.

Today, NEBE has the financial and technical capacity and institutional independence to conduct free and fair elections. The Board is chaired by a renowned former judge and opposition leader, whose appointment to the chairpersonship was roundly accepted. Reforms undertaken in respect of the legal and institutional set up of election administration have eliminated practices inconsistent with the FDRE Constitution and the election law. The board serves everyone only based on the set procedures and legal provisions. As such, there are times the board entertained requests from both the ruling and competing parties, and times when it declined requests from both. This shows the board stands with the law, with no one else.

Furthermore, other laws having a direct bearing to ensuring a conducive and civil political landscape have either been overhauled or newly enacted. Such laws include the revised anti-terrorism law, which was routinely used to stifle opposition or competition, and a newly enacted hate speech and disinformation prevention and suppression law.

Legal and institutional preparedness alone, however, will not result in democratic elections that we all long for. The holding of democratic election requires a shared responsibility. All participants of elections must be determined to abide by the rules and procedures in place. No one should engage in or tolerate any practice that would impinge on the integrity and credibility of the elections.

The government has the primary obligation to ensure that elections are held, and that they are free, fair and peaceful so that they fulfill their objectives. When it comes to elections, however, the buck never stops with the government. Everyone – from government officials to members of political parties, election officials, law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, civil society organizations, and, of course, the electorate and general citizenry – all have a role to play. It is, therefore, critical that everyone understands its responsibility and carry it out.

Political parties must root out all unlawful practices whether they are party-espoused tactics or doings of members or supporters to gain unfair advantage. They must understand that they shape public opinion and stance. Unlawful practices undermine the credibility of election processes and results, cast doubt on the legitimacy of victory, and may ultimately lead to conflicts. Political parties

should focus on and be guided by sound ideas, communicate civilly, and avoid confrontational rhetoric.

Election officials have to conduct their duties strictly in accordance with the law. They need to always heed that what they commit or omit could make or derail democracy. They must persevere in the face of any challenges they could face while doing their work.

Law enforcement bodies ought to acknowledge that policing and maintaining security plays a critical role in conducting democratic elections, and, therefore, perform their duties lawfully and treat everyone equally and impartially.

The judiciary must be prepared to handle ably and in a speedy manner any issues within its jurisdiction that may arise in relation to the elections and treat everyone equally and impartially.

No less equally important is the role of an independent, competent, professional and free media – a media that is free of sensationalism, that seeks the truth, that works for peace and reconciliation in our society, a media that is there to educate the citizens and challenge those in power to do their best.

It should also be noted that the active and constructive engagement of citizens in the governance of their country through political and civic organizations of their free choosing is decisive. Every Ethiopian eligible to vote must understand that building a democratic nation requires everyone's participation, and that elections are the foundation of democracy. As such, they must register for and vote in the elections. Voters and other citizens must do what is expected of them to ensure the integrity of elections and trust legally installed systems to resolve any issues that may ensue.

We must all accept that each of us may have different opinions or stances than the other on how so many of our social, economic and political problems should be addressed, but it is upon us to be civil in getting across our ideas and thoughts. It is only when we are respectfully open to listen to and objectively assess the value of the ideas of others that we can see the value of our own ideas.

In a true democracy, individuals and parties win or lose, but only for a short time. In a democracy, the system wins all the time – regardless of which political party or individual wins or loses a specific electoral contest. It is this mix of an evolving and ever-flourishing system, on the one hand, and the cycle of peaceful and rules-based contestations for power between individuals and groups that forms the bedrock of a thriving democracy. Let us not repeat the mistakes of the past and squander this opportunity.

We are confident that this election will break new ground, to produce, for the first time in the long history of this old nation, a parliament in which spectrum of ideas and policy options are represented, where there is a place for all who believe in freedom, sisterhood and brotherhood regardless of our ethnic, religious or other differences, a system in which the welfare of the whole is dependent on the welfare of the individual constituent parts.

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