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Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (Kinijit)

<http://www.kinijitethiopia.org>

e-mail kil@kinijitinternational.org

Voice Mail/Fax 1-206-203-3974

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The Struggle for Democracy in Ethiopia The nature of the struggle and its TPLF Adversary

The regime in power calls itself the government of Ethiopia. The people prefer to call it the TPLF's government. The ruling party calls itself EPRDF, while the people refer to it as Tigray People's Liberation Front. It does not like this designation. However, the people of Ethiopia insist on it, for they know the TPLF as the real power broker. They do not also appreciate having the wool pulled over their eyes.

The people do not call the regime TPLF without a reason. TPLF came to power by the barrel of a gun in 1991. Even today the political power and military might of the state belongs to TPLF, though the party would like us to believe otherwise.

The people have come to realize that a government which they regard as legitimate must be one elected by them; one which represent their interests. This realization was amply demonstrated by the historic election of May 15, 2005 in which the people rejected the TPLF. The TPLF rescind on its election promise to render the results null and void.

Ethiopians are well aware that the various parties under the EPRDF umbrella are appendages formed from groups of incompetent and opportunist orderlies for the purpose of legitimacy and for endorsing TPLF's agenda. That is why TPLF never had acceptance from the people. It is very hard for the people to view the party and its government as their own.

Unless the regime retains power through a democratic process, and not by means of brute force, it will remain a TPLF regime. The perfect opportunity to do this was provided by the May 2005 election. Though Ethiopians have been talking about democracy and the desire to elect their rulers for the last 50 years, the opportunity occurred for the first time under the TPLF regime. For this reason CUDP leaders and the people as a whole accorded due credit to TPLF and Meles Zenawi even when they were mindful of the crimes committed by the regime prior to the election period.

During the election, the people were given two choices. One was to legitimize TPLF's hold on power through the ballot box. Voters could then feel they have a government that they can call their own. The other choice was to bring one of the other competing parties to power. Democracy is all about winning the trust of the people to come to power, or upon failing to do so, waiting patiently for the next election. To win elections the parties need clarity of vision and well thought out programs that relate to the people. TPLF could only come up with the same old discredited policies which it implemented in the previous 14 years

and which have resulted in entrenching poverty, disease, ignorance, arbitrary rule and corruption. Its candidates were unable to win the hearts and minds of the voters.

TPLF officials went for election oblivious of the reality on the ground. They had thought to have done their homework while the opposition had not. That they would emerge victors was an open secret for them. This arrogant attitude was clearly evident in discussions which Meles Zenawi had with foreign officials. It was also from perceived invincibility that the TPLF allowed the opposition to limited media access, to campaign freely, and to agree to face-to-face debates transmitted live on national media. Since this foolhardy confidence was not based on any research on voters' opinion, or on any quantifiable evidence of public support, TPLF was unable to suspect that the little window of opportunity it created could be used to oust its leadership from office.

Even if the opposition had not done their homework, the TPLF was ill advised not to realize that their opponents could convince voters to discredit the ruling party by exposing its criminal record and failed policies in the previous 14 years. Parties in power are always at a disadvantage for they may have indefensible records to be challenged with. If the incumbent is as discredited as TPLF it will not be difficult to persuade the public to vote for the opposition. To avoid such vulnerability to the opposition incumbent parties need to have exceptionally good record. If voters are satisfied with the policies of the incumbent party they rarely terminate its term of office. The problem for the TPLF was that its rule had never been good for Ethiopia. Yet, Meles Zenawi, like his predecessors was self-convinced that his 14 year rule had been successful.

Another point lost on the TPLF was that Ethiopians never acknowledged the existence of EPRDF except as a multiethnic facade for its parochial ethnic organization. To the vast majority, EPRDF is synonymous with TPLF. The latter never comprehended the prevalence of this perception among the people. By setting up a pretentious coalition with ethnic parties such as OPDO for Oromos, ANDM for Amharas, parties which are its own creations, the TPLF had assumed to have done away with the problem of perception. The people, however, see these parties as obedient accessories of the TPLF. Thus any candidate fielded by the regime, irrespective of his/her ethnic origin, was perceived as representing TPLF and not the Ethiopian people. The ethnic politics TPLF pursued to stay in power has become its own undoing.

The problem is faced by many African political parties that have tried to promote ethnic/tribal politics, particularly among ethnic groups who do not represent over 50 percent of the population. The folly of ethnic politics by minorities lies in being unsustainable for lack of numbers. We are of the opinion that the election of May 2005 has provided a lesson to those who want to pursue ethnic politics in Ethiopia where no single ethnic group constitute a majority , where one cannot find ethnic cohesion even among the largest ethnic groups, where further parochial splits on dialect, religion, lineage, power and privilege are evident. If truth be told, it is hard to comprehend how TPLF could expect voters in multi-ethnic cities and other regions outside of Tigray would give their votes to candidates from its satellite parties. Once voters equated EPRDF with TPLF, the likely consequence was a wholesale rejection of the qualification of the incumbent's candidates in 94 percent of the country's

regions. It was only in Tigrai that it had a good chance of winning. Even there, had there been a free elections, TPLF's track record could have caused its rejection rather than endorsement by the people. That is why TPLF was unable to win in the multi-ethnic cities. For example, in Addis Ababa CUDP won all **23** parliamentary seats and **137** seats in the City Council. TPLF managed to win the remaining one seat only because CUDP did not field a candidate. Never in the history of democratic elections has an incumbent regime lost by such a huge margin. It was one momentous event for the history books. It must have shattered the hopes of TPLF to keep power through free and fair elections, especially after the loss was repeated in rural areas as in cities and towns.

That is why TPLF failed to win in the Amhara, Oromia and Southern regions, except in those areas where the opposition did not have candidates.

It took three months for the partisan Election Board to sift through the results and come up with a bogus result in order to cover up TPLF's devastating loss. The EU-EOM certified that the election was rigged. But the extent of the fraud was only known to the TPLF, the opposition and the Ethiopian people whose votes were stolen in broad daylight. Even in rural areas where TPLF boasted to have the support of the people it was defeated by larger margins of votes than in urban centers. The ratio was 7:1 for the CUDP in the city and 20:1 in the rural area. This explains why top officials of the TPLF could not muster a decisive win.

The one time Deputy Prime Minister Kassu Ilala, Information Minister Bereket Simeon, Justice Minister Harkoye, the Defense Minister Abadulla, Oromia's president Junedin Sado and many others were trounced by virtually unknown candidates of the CUD and other parties. As all polling stations were closely monitored by international election observers in constituencies where these officials contested they could not save themselves from utter humiliation.

It was also the defeat of these very well known officials that obliterated TPLF's assertion that it has the support of the rural population. If these top officials could lose so badly, it was highly unlikely that TPLF cadres notorious for their abuse of power and for mistreating the rural population could have won.

While TPLF wanted to tell us that Bereket Simeon, the Information Minister, was cheated by the opposition candidate, their candidates in neighboring constituencies were winning by 80-90 percent over their rivals.

If truth be told, it was the presence of international and local observers which, acting as a deterrent to vote stealing, led to the humiliating defeat of all the high level TPLF officials. And if these well known officials were defeated by huge margins, it is not hard to imagine the greater loss of ordinary candidates fielded by the TPLF in other constituencies. We know a constituency where a CUD candidate received 1,000 votes while that of the TPLF received none. This was confirmed because international observers were present. In many polling places however, the TPLF had driven out the local observers and had become the only observer and ballot counter to manipulate the results.

In particular, in the large population regions of Amhara, Oromia and the southern regions, just as in Addis Ababa, TPLF could not win substantial votes. The Chairman of CUD, Hailu Shawel, observed that the total number of seats TPLF won during the election could not have been more than **50 or 60** and nowhere near the **372** that it was granted by the Election Board. Truthfully speaking TPLF could not have won any more seats except in Tigray where TPLF ran uncontested and in some other places where the opposition did not field candidates. Thus once the confidence TPLF had shown before the election had evaporated into thin air, it had to resort to common thievery and dictatorial measures.

The political problem Ethiopia is facing today is related to the election and the lessons TPLF learned from it. As a direct result of the rigged election many lives were lost. Many were maimed and imprisoned, beside the thousands who have been forced into exiles. The trumped up charges against the CUD leaders, independent journalists and civic society members, and the massive rights violations against defenseless farmers in the countryside are also consequential to the election.

Furthermore massive reshuffling of the bureaucracy is taking place to make room for TPLF supporters in the civil service. Another new phenomenon after the election is the mushrooming of pseudo- private media and radio stations in the country to propagate TPLF viewpoint exclusively.

It was after the election that flagrant misuse and abuse of the judicial process began for the purpose of persecuting political opponents. A special elite force directly under the control of Meles Zenawi and his inner circle came into being after the election. The rights of the people to freedom of assembly and freedom of speech were banned because it was not useful for TPLF. Huge sums of money are being spent for public relations to buy international respectability for Meles and his inner circle to cover up domestic humiliation that the regime suffered during the election.

Like past dictatorial regimes in Africa Meles Zenawi claims that freedom and multiparty democracy are not needed in Africa. He wants to regenerate the bankrupt views of his predecessors realizing that future elections do not bode well for his party. Meles is more like Bokassa, Amin, Mobutu and Mengistu before him. Yet he prefers to cast himself in the image of the leaders of China, preaching the virtues of one party rule to bring rapid development. He knows very well that in a competitive multiparty election TPLF will never win elections.

TPLF has realized for quite some time that it had no choice but to revert to one party rule to stay in power. It has been working to implement this. It has been a while since it stripped off the rights of the people, and since it locked up their democratic aspirations in a toothless parliament. There can never be parliamentary democracy in the absence of freedom of expression and assembly, civic organizations and rights advocates. If we justifiably ignore the occasional tolerance to confused noises from the loyal opposition in parliament, the exercise of making, interpreting and enforcing the law is entirely concentrated in the hands of the TPLF. For all intents and purposes today Ethiopia is a one party state.

Another point to take into account is TPLF's problem with the CUD leaders who have exposed its hidden dictatorial ambitions. Their refusal to join parliament has deprived it legitimacy. Their valid argument states that in order for CUD to join Parliament, TPLF has to demonstrate its seriousness about building democratic institutions.

The fact that CUD leaders are willing to sacrifice themselves for the cause has botched up TPLF's sinister plan. The longer TPLF keeps them jailed unjustly, more and more people are going to confer trust, respect and admiration upon them. None of the smear campaigns, harassment and intimidation employed against them seemed to work. The trumped up charges, the fabricated evidence, the false witnesses, and the long drawn out trial have, if anything, strengthened their resolve whilst proving their innocence to all concerned. They cannot be apologetic for a crisis which is not their making. The recent attempt by Bereket Simeon, advisor to the PM, to connect CUD leaders with anti-peace elements is a clear indication that the TPLF is getting ready to bring additional charges on CUD leaders and keep them in jail indefinitely.

There is no crime which the TPLF has not tried to impute to CUD: from acts of terrorism to those of attempts to overthrowing the government or to launch genocide like interahamwe. But nothing has worked. The people of Ethiopia, knowing TPLF's tricks all too well, did not have the patience to listen to its pack of lies. In recent weeks a government that has been terrorizing its own people has been accusing a medley of opposition group of terrorist acts. While the CUD has been calling for peace and reconciliation all along, the TPLF forces have been busy terrorizing the populace — including shooting a 14 year old kid in cold blood, and killing a woman who tried to protect her husband, a newly elected City Council member, from being dragged to jail without cause.

CUDP is founded on conviction that in Ethiopia it is possible for a government to come to power through the ballot box instead of through the barrel of a gun. Kinijit leaders, in spite of their suffering and huge sacrifice, are still calling from Kaliti jail for peace and reconciliation.

At this time of repression people have not resorted to wanton violence, nor have they organized an uprising against the TPLF. This can only be explained by their acceptance of the calls of CUD leaders for peaceful struggle. CUD has also been working with various armed groups to bring them to the negotiating table to solve the country's problems peacefully, and not out of conviction that the groups would bring democratic change through armed struggle. In fact, when these liberation fronts indicated their desire for peace, it should have been the duty of the ruling regime to embrace them.

The May 2005 election gave the TPLF a historic opportunity to change its course. The event had given chance to its leaders to do soul searching as to why they lost the election, and what they needed to do to get ready for the next one in 2010. Had it conceded defeat CUDP would have embraced the organization as its parliamentary adversary since it believes on the vitality of a strong opposition to the growth of democracy in the country. On the other hand the TPLF was not prepared to relinquish power, having always claimed that there was no viable opposition, let alone one strong enough to unseat it. There was another opportunity after the vote rigging. CUD was calling for an all-inclusive national government which would include

the TPLF. Even after being robbed off its votes CUD was willing to allow TPLF to hold on to power provided that systemic changes are introduced to prevent election fraud reoccurring in 2010. However, the reply was negative. Instead TPLF chose to resort to the intensification of extra judicial killing, unlawful imprisonments and false propaganda which remain unabated to this day.

Acts of the TPLF/EPRDF over the last year and a half betray hopelessness. Again the cause lies in the 2005 election. The organization has realized that unless it abandons ethnocentric politics to transform itself into a pan-Ethiopian pluralist party, winning any more than the 39 seats (the number it won in Tigray in the last election) will remain illusive. Its current winnings in Tigray could also diminish or vanish if proper democratic elections are allowed in the regional state. Indeed even if TPLF can manage to transform itself, it will have an uphill struggle to win popular trust.

TPLF's predicament is that its leadership is incapable of emerging as winner in a truly free and fair election. Visionary leaders would forego narrow personal and group interests to put the national interest above all, or to do what is good for their country. Leaders of the TPLF seem to think otherwise. Even if democracy brings peace and stability to Ethiopia, even if it proves to benefit the people immensely, the organization is unwilling to make changes unless the latter allow its monopoly of power. Therefore, today, TPLF is left to depend on its soldiers and on foreign financiers to rule with an iron fist.

The opposition have been calling for strong institutions that are essential building blocks for a vibrant democracy. Their repeated calls have been rejected by the TPLF because these will shorten its days in power. This concern for power also constitute the main reason for persistence not to free the CUD leaders. Once at liberty they will keep raising the burning question of the day to advance the democratic process. The road to peace and reconciliation will eventually lead to democratic election and to removing the TPLF from power lawfully. That is why TPLF is adamant not to reconcile with the opposition. Instead it has chosen to use soldiers, networks of spies, and a wrapped system of justice to suppress dissent and to bring false charges against political opponents. Presently it appears to be even more assured to continue subverting the democratic process having concluded that the United States, the only global super power, is on its side on account of being considered important ally on the war on terror.

TPLF may have also been banking on the idea that traumatic experiences Ethiopians went through under the Derg, and now under the TPLF, have sapped their energy to make further sacrifice required to fight against its rule. Consequently, their best option has been to try to weaken the resolve of the people and the opposition in order to rule uncontested for a long time. However this infamous strategy of dictators backfires in the end. We have witnessed how dictators more powerful than Meles have been relegated to the dust bin of history. In the end, brute force cannot contain people's demand for justice and democracy, especially when they are conscious of their democratic rights. It will be pure folly for TPLF to think that it can rule by the barrel of the gun indefinitely. The kind of repression we see in Ethiopia today will eventually lead to a broader conflict that is not in the best interest of the country. CUDP has

time and again called on the TPLF to desist from such acts since no one will emerge a winner in the end.

It is clear that peace, reconciliation and democracy will not benefit TPLF and its supporters in the short term; that is if benefit dividends are measured in terms of staying in power. But that is the only option to ensure the long term interests of the people as well as the leaders, members and supporters of the TPLF.

Both the regime in power and the Ethiopian people know that the problems of TPLF has not much to do with CUD as with democracy itself. Therefore to blame CUD for the crisis engulfing TPLF — for losing face in the eyes of the international community, a result of its own repressive actions — is a vain exercise in self cheating.

All Ethiopians at home and in the diaspora know that the TPLF has fundamental quarrels with democracy. A party which is apprehensive of democracy, regarding it as a system that takes away its monopoly of power, cannot be trusted to be a willing architect of the system. This makes the struggle for democracy a long and bitter fight, one that demands a great deal of sacrifice.

For more than 30 years Ethiopians from all walks of life have paid immense sacrifice to bring democracy to Ethiopia. A poignant note in Ethiopia's history is that the country has not yet embarked on the path of democracy, especially when one observes the progress made in this respect by some other African countries in a relatively short time. It is equally sad to note that the struggle for democracy is being waged against the TPLF and its leadership who mobilized the people of Tigray to sacrifice their lives to end tyranny of the Dergue, and to save Ethiopia from a brutal military dictatorship.

Be that as it may, the mission and vision of CUDP will forever remain to bring peace, love, unity and democracy to Ethiopia. It will never be to introduce or enshrine violence as a means to seize or retain political power.

The struggle for freedom and democracy is long and bitter!
Let's all rise up infused with the spirit of peace, reconciliation and tolerance!
Let us pay the sacrifice required for the peaceful struggle!