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SMNE UK Conference on Land Grabs Rallies Support from Diverse Ethiopians

If at the end of a conference you see many of the participants and speakers embracing one another, laughing and exchanging personal contact information, an observer might judge the event a pleasant success. However, *when such a reaction is between previously estranged or isolated Ethiopians—like Tigrayans, Oromo, Amhara, Sidamo, people from the Southern Nations, Muslims, Christians, Separatists, Ethiopianists, dark-skinned, light-skinned, armed movement advocates or peaceful struggle advocates; it really means something!* As Dr. Shigut Geleta, a top official in the OLF, summed it up, **“This kind of thing never happened before!”**

This all took place at the conclusion of the recent two-day conference on **“Land Grabs, Human Rights Violations and the Repression of Political Rights in Ethiopia;”** sponsored by the UK branch of the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)**, a social justice movement for advancing the rights of the diverse people of Ethiopia. The conference was held in Reading, England from October 28-29th.

The purpose of the conference was *to raise public awareness of the growing race for control over the most fertile agricultural land and natural resources in Ethiopia, currently being advanced by the strengthening family-styled dictatorship of Meles Zenawi and his wife—Azeb Mesfin—a duo-led regime willing to use increasing repression, human rights abuses and the easy disposal of old allies in order to advance its own increasingly self-concentrated interests.*

One could see from the diverse speakers and participants that this was an extremely emotionally-charged issue among Ethiopians of any region, ethnicity, viewpoint or religion. Selling off the land of Ethiopia to foreign investors, right out from underneath the feet of its citizens, may end up to be the loudest rallying cry for a unified effort yet; the one that finally brings Ethiopians together in collaboration.

At the beginning, no one knew what to expect, but as each speaker presented their ideas and viewpoint, a sense of understanding, consensus and camaraderie grew. Whoever thinks there is no chance of Ethiopians ever unifying would be proven wrong after this meeting. A light of hope was lit as the conference brought real people together with other real people; resulting in meaningful dialogue, new connections and emerging possibilities for future collaboration.

The meeting was opened by Achame Shana, the organizer of the conference and a longtime SMNE executive team member from the Southern Nations who was initially attracted to the SMNE by its principles of **“putting humanity before ethnicity”** and that **“no one will be free until all are free.”** After he was done, he introduced the SMNE Executive Director, Obang Metho.

After thanking Achame for his excellent work in organizing the event, Obang gave a short introduction to the **SMNE; first explaining it was not a political organization to run for office; but instead, a social justice movement meant to bring about a healthier, more inclusive and more politically open society.**

Mr. Obang described how the *SMNE logo could be used as a symbol of the diverse Ethiopian people, sitting around a table in respectful discussion and collaboration*. He recognized how some do not want to be identified with the name “Ethiopian” or with the flag of the country because of past grievances; however, he *reminded the listeners that neither the name “Ethiopia” nor the flag ever killed anyone. Instead, he explained, what is needed is a different system—not the “old Ethiopia” of Menelik, Mengistu or Meles, which cannot be undone now, but a “new Ethiopia” for the future where the people; regardless of differences, would all have God-given value and equal rights.*

He elaborated that under the current system, the *EPRDF has broken Ethiopians into two groups; “us” and “them.”* However, Obang explained that the SMNE was grounded on a totally different premise—saying, *“...there are no enemies in this “room” [Ethiopia] and that the goal of the SMNE was to bring the people together rather than to push them apart.*

As each speaker shared from their own perspective; there was a mounting realization that something wonderfully encouraging was unfolding before their eyes—a deeply shared concern for the crisis in Ethiopia and the suffering of all the people, the acceptance of basic SMNE principles of *“putting humanity before ethnicity”* and caring about others for *“no one can be free until all are free”* as well as an openness to collaborate in creating a “new” Ethiopia. Here are some individual comments in condensed and slightly paraphrased format:

Achame Shana:

“Meles speaks about meeting the UN Millennium Development goals, but many Ethiopians do not know what those goals are; particularly in terms of seeing an identifiable impact in their communities. Money granted for millennium development is used on projects that do not provide long term benefit to communities. In regards to promoting accessibility to clean water, most often the quality of water that is coming from these newly drilled boreholes is not known and evidence suggests that people are drinking polluted ground water. *The money coming for millennium development goal projects should have been used on creating proper processes to deal with water obstruction, purifying and distribution rather than the mere provision of raw water.* For example, all boreholes in Addis Ababa are heavily polluted and are not fit for human consumption.

Billions of money is spent on trivial projects and performance measures using soft KPIs and evaluated at demonstration centers rather than in “real” people-based projects. The evidence on this alone suggests that the Meles regime is subverting it for its own interests. *The few TPLF elite at the top are becoming grossly wealthy while the majority of the population is becoming increasingly poorer. It is a country without morals; where the people leading have no concern for the poor and the suffering. You can see it by the selling [leasing] of the land. Instead of using the land to grow food for the people; the produce is for export. No matter how difficult it is, we should not turn our backs on our suffering and dying people.”*

Wondimu Mekonnen from Ethiopia Civic Organizations in the U.K:

“The TPLF has control of the powerbase through its EPRDF affiliate agents. To allow them 100% control over the peasant farmers, the TPLF controls all arable land. It is forbidden in Ethiopia to own land. All of the land belongs to the government. The government gives farm lands to whomever it wishes and takes it back from anyone; regardless of how effectively the land was tilled by the farmer. This gives the TPLF control of the lives and living of those in the country side. The TPLF controls 90% of the economy of the country.

The TPLF is a destructive force that no one should undermine. They have disarmed our people but armed themselves to the teeth. They are killing our brothers and sisters on a daily basis. The regime is selling the entire country. Uniting our efforts is the only way to combat that onslaught by the TPLF. We have no choice but to come together in the face of destruction waged against Ethiopia by the TPLF. We must find a way to collaborate!”

Dr. Aregawi Berhe from the Tigrayan Alliance for National Democracy:

“Part of our problem is that the intellectuals have failed to connect together in a productive way and those intellectuals who come into power, manipulate the system to their own advantage. This pattern goes all the way back to 100 years ago. We have never had a government of the people. The TPLF is not for the Tigrayans; it is for those of any ethnicity that Meles sets up to be his puppets in every region of the country.

Today, Ethiopia is at a cross-roads; either to slide from a nation with a deformed state to a stateless nation or with the collective efforts of its change seeking people; making it able to rise up as an independent and sovereign state that has regained its historic dignity and self sufficiency.”

“All of Ethiopian political and civic society should consciously combine its efforts to forage a people-based state which is inclusive and never exclusive. This should be the first and foremost task before we even contemplate competition for power. Let us have the broad-based organization that could facilitate this in order to achieve the collective goal by removing the obstacles to this noble cause. Once the people-based system of governance is set in place, we could run orderly government offices that are accountable to the people.

Intellectuals must find a way to work together or we cannot rule out a future for Ethiopia like what happened in Rwanda or Somalia. The only way out is to find a way to come together and then to fight for the rule of law and “humanity” like espoused in the principles of the SMNE.”

Dr. Shigut Geleta:

*“This is a very good beginning. What the SMNE is doing is the way to do it; starting with reaching out to others. There is a misunderstanding about the OLF among many. **We originally fought with others against Mengistu so that all of us could have freedom. It has always been OLF’s conviction that liberation from all sorts of national oppression paves a way for the peoples in Ethiopia and beyond to join hands to form a political union on the basis of equality and voluntary association.***

The TPLF/EPRDF regime pursues a malicious divide and rule policy by instigating a chain of conflicts between historically peaceful co-existing nations. Today, Ethiopia is under an iron fist rule of an individual. Ethiopia is a crossroads between hope and hopelessness; change and disintegration. I am sure we all opt for hope and change rather than for their negative counterpart.”

*“The question that immediately comes to mind is what will be the way of achieving change and kindling hope then? To speak even more practically and in political language I would rather put it this way: **what will be the way forward for opposition political forces to genuinely contribute for a lasting peace? OLF’s quest is the quest for freedom, democracy, justice and peace as is the case with most opposition forces. Therefore, I don’t see any obstacle in our own way that would prevent us from standing united against the TPLF/EPRDF regime.** Even though OLF was established for the Oromo; we care about other people. Let us find a way to protect our people by working together.”*

Dr. Tadesse Biru from Ginbot7:

“There are three BIG QUESTIONS to ask: Why do we Ethiopians not cooperate all the time? Why has it been so difficult for us to form efficient and effective coalitions? What can we do to avert the dismal situation we are in?”

“There are at least five “universal” reasons why cooperation is difficult. They are: 1) lack of shared convictions and coordination; 2) lack of commitment; 3) lack of trust; 4) that individual rationality may lead to collective irrationality when ownership is poorly defined and when the task tends to be “nobody’s” business; and, 5) cooperation is more difficult in large groups than in smaller ones.

“We are not the only people who face such a problem. It is a universal issue related to the human nature; however, others have managed to mitigate the adverse effect; why not us?”

*“There is a lot civil societies can do to forge sustainable and effective coalitions. The problem of Ethiopia is a universal one that all human beings experience when facing such problems. Those who are successful in overcoming it eventually find a way to collaborate; just like was done in Europe, South Africa and in many other places in the world where people find common vision that brings them together to solve the problem. Furthermore, where people are successful, there are always committed people, willing to sacrifice; however, unfortunately, there is a lack of commitment among the Ethiopian people and its civic organizations. **We need a group like the SMNE who can mediate between the people, bringing all of us together.** The SMNE could play a big role in this.”*

Ms. Bente Madeira from Reading International Solidarity Center

*“Ethiopians have to find a means to collaborate or if you don’t, outsiders will find a way to take your resources. If you fail, you will be exploited just like the Caribbean people who grow most of the bananas for the world, but do not benefit from it. **Ethiopians should stand together if they want a better future.**”*

Mr. Betena Hotesso from Sidamo Liberation Front

*We need to find a way to collaborate for the suffering is going on among all of us. **Meles is using other Ethiopians to destroy Ethiopians; but we should use each other to better it. People should unify to create a free, more prosperous Ethiopia that is not divided by ethnicity.***

Question and Answer Period:

Following the presentations, the audience and speakers engaged in meaningful and respectful discussions of these issues. One man in the audience, **Yosef Haimanot**, a member of the **EPPE**, made the following notable comments:

*“**What Ethiopia needs today is a peoples’ government with an independent army, independent judiciary and the independence of our institutions instead of the government controlling all sectors of Ethiopian society. If we had an independent army today, Meles would not last.** We should be fighting for a government that follows principles, the rule of law, creates independent institutions and upholds equality between people—like the principles that SMNE is talking about like respecting the value of all people. This is what everybody should be fighting for. This is what has attracted me to the SMNE.”*

Closing Comments by Obang:

The SMNE was created for the exact purposes these speakers have addressed. The SMNE is already here and is meant to be a vehicle or tool to protect and empower the people; helping us move from one destination— one-party ethnic rule—to the destination described by all these speakers—a genuine government of, for and by the people.

When the SMNE was established it was to be used by the people to advance their rights; regardless of ethnicity, regional background, religious belief, political view or any other differences. Some people mistakenly see the SMNE as a political party; but it is not. It is to be used by any and all political parties willing to seek a freer, more inclusive and more just Ethiopia where different political parties can advance their own agendas in a pluralistic society. In fact, once things change in the country, it is expected that the SMNE assume a different role of being a watchdog organization for justice and democracy while encouraging different groups with different platforms to compete against each other.

***The people should be the ones to choose their government rather than the government establishing itself by oppressing the people. Because the SMNE is a new approach to bringing freedom to the country; some continue to label it a political organization in competition with their particular groups instead of being a grassroots social justice movement of the people.** However, from listening to all the speakers; **there is an obvious consensus that it is only through collaboration around the most important values and principles of Ethiopians that we will change a fundamentally flawed system to become a government of the people rather than of a select few.** This is the purpose of the SMNE.*

I have hope that what began here during the last two days will continue. People should exchange names and numbers and continue to nurture the relationships started here. ***We are in this together. Ethiopia is what it is because people before us did not put the interests of the people forward. If we want to have a more respectful, free and just Ethiopia, it starts in our own hearts.***

We must be free of tribalism, the easy marginalization of others and attitudes that make us not care about the barefoot child from the Ogaden, the Oromo teen sleeping on the streets, the Amhara orphan or the displaced subsistence farmers throughout the country. If we are to break the cycle, it starts with each of us.

The SMNE in the UK is helping to act as a bridge by bringing people together, but it also takes effort by individual people. Follow principles that value others and advance a civil society. If you do not agree; still do not attack others; treat them with respect and civility. ***The pain of our people should give us the foundation for working together until all are free. Let this be a beginning of people appreciating each other as human beings; regardless of where one comes from in the country and regardless of religion, gender, political view or other differences.*** This is what Meles does not like.

It is no time to give up on our people or country; despite the difficulties, for otherwise, we may end up becoming the next Rwanda or Somalia like my brother from Tigray stated. The SMNE was formed in order to stop this from happening. Unity is essential for our mutual survival. Even Meles uses other tribes to prolong his control so why don't we do the same in a productive way to bring about our shared freedom? Even if some regions of the country end up separating, they will still need the rest of us.

We need to come together to protect the interests of our land and we need each other to do it. Let us be humble and become an example to others so together, we can improve the lives of our people and each other!

May God help us see the beauty of His creation in the faces of each human being!

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Original papers presented on this conference can be found on SMNE website.

Please do not hesitate to e-mail your comments to Mr. Achame Shana, member of the SMNE's Executive Team Leader, at: Achame@solidaritymovement.org

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