

Dear Ethiopian Elders/Mediators

Subject: A Note of Appreciation of Your Efforts in
Peacemaking and some feedback

Date: June 25, 2020

Your recent visit to Mekelle and subsequent presentations in Addis has inspired hope and guarded optimism about the future of our mother land. On behalf of the many Ethiopians who choose to resolve conflicts by peaceful means, I thank you and wish you much success.

As Professor Mesfin, the chair, shared with all of us, you “have nothing personally to gain” as what you are doing is only and only a labor of love, love for a country, the nation called Ethiopia, and love for peace. I only wish I could be there to support you and to cheer you up.

Yes, you have distractors, doubters, and skeptics as well. Someone called me from Addis this morning, USA time, to tell me that he has no hope that ሽማግሌዎች such as Dr Ephraim Ysehake, and he mentioned few others, will not bring peace for Ethiopia. I tried to help him understand that the names he mentioned were not a party to the team that went to Mekelle. Not only that I tried to share with him that guilty by association is not appropriate. I am not, however, sure if I were able to convince him, but I took a lesson from what he said.

The lesson is, as you know, learning, education, does not always come from positive experiences and feedbacks only, but also from negative and critical comments. And so, the lesson I drew from his comments, which I am trying to share with you now, is when we speak in public, we must choose our words very carefully as we do not want to give the enemies of peace ammunition to hurt our causes, our efforts in making peace. In this context, may I also add that when we share with the public what was said and not side in the private meetings we had with the parties to the conflict, we must not be too transparent and give out specific details. I believe deeply in

transparency, accountability, and integrity but in my humble view in mediation work privacy and confidentiality matter. Both the art and science of mediation support this perspective. በባህላችንም “አዋላጅ ሲት እና ሸማግሌ ያየውን ሆሉ አይናገርም” ይባላል፤

I do not want to say here that Pastor D or prof Mesfin or anyone else said this or that but the point I am trying to share is that some of the details from the meetings should be kept away from the public for the short term. As you know, public statements, in most cultures and political communities, tend to be irrevocable once they are articulated in public. The statement that “you came too late” by the TPLF leaders is, I believe, an example of this.

In terms of going forward, I would like to share two perspectives:

First, please allow me to briefly offer somewhat the art and scientific bases for mediation as a benchmark for what I am going to propose later. Second, with this foundation in place, I will try to give an outline of action steps for moving forward.

As you know in mediation work, there is no such a thing as one “size fits all” approach. Or, as American say, there is more than one way to skin a cat. I think what our beloved Bishop Tutu said it better when he wrote that, “There is no handy roadmap to reconciliation. There is no short cut or simple prescription for healing the wounds and divisions of a society in the aftermath of sustained violence. As our experience ...has taught us, each society must discover its own route to reconciliation”. And yet, there is a consensus that the entry to starting the mediation process in most conflicts depends on the careful analysis of the “drivers” or causes to the conflict. We all know that there are many models for analyzing conflicts including, the Circle of Conflict Analysis, The Dimensions of Conflict model, and the Interest/Rights/Power of Conflict model, just to mention some. I believe the last two are relevant to our situation.

The Dimensions model is a framework to understand the dynamics of how conflict unfolds and how it interacts at different levels. In short, it helps practitioners of conflict mediators to diagnose the conflict and assess the depth in three dimensions:

1. cognitive or perceptual dimensions-beliefs, interpretations, assumptions, definition of the conflict, effects on feelings and behavior;
2. emotional dimensions-depth of feelings, strategy for dealing with the feelings, confidence, perspective on dealing with emotional triggers and effect on behavior; and,
3. behavioral dimensions-actions to take or taken to cope, actions that escalate or de-escalate the conflict, aggression, avoidance, behavioral triggers, and effect on perceptions.

I believe you have observed some of the dimensions, if not all of them, listed above during your visit to Mekelle. Some may consider analyzing the problem this way is too academic or they may even suggest that it is underserved of a party that created the problem we must deal with now. In my humble view, individuals who see only the problem that a given system presented are not ready to mediate. Whatever is “good” and whatever is “bad” in Ethiopia now, was a product of a system that not only has been in place in the 27 years of the EPDRF ruling, but it also has, as you all know, a longer history of blood and sweet sacrifices. More importantly, if we don’t understand both the physical fear and the psychological state of the parties in conflict, hence the analysis model being suggested above, we may not be able to offer constructive help for either the de-escalation of the conflict nor the eventual peacemaking. What this suggests, among other things, is that the analysis of the situation must be right. Furthermore, the skills required of the mediators in helping those who feel entitled to see that the sacrifices they made were done on behalf of others and should not come at expenses of a nation, is rather high.

Regarding models of conflict analysis, perhaps what you observed during your visit to Mekelle is what the third conflict assessment model above describes. According to this model the party in conflict wants to get what it wants, its interest, at the expense of everyone else if necessary. To achieve that the party’s focus is on the superiority of its interest and rights over the rights of other parties. Furthermore, you may have also observed that, if there is no negotiated settlement to get what the party deems is its interest, the party is ready to use power, force, to get what it perceives are its interest and rights. In short, in this case, the party not only feels it deserves what it wants but it also feels it is entitled to get what it wants.

Entitlement, however, is beyond wants and desires and as such it is difficult to mediate. To use a crude example from my countryside up bring, if a husband feels he deserves to have his wife to wash his feet, having a mid to provide the service will not satisfy his interest. Because he is entitled to have his wife wash his feet. It turns out, at times in conflict situation, particularly in politics, some party's claim for the right to govern is far superior to other parties claim to the same thing. The party that feels that its claim is superior, and its right is more legitimate, and especially if that party feels trapped, it can do more damage in dying than it was able to kill while living. As the Bible in book of Judges tells us Samson killed many more people when he died than while he lived. There are all kinds of historical examples where clashes of entitlements have led to this type of undesired, more importantly avoidable, disastrous outcomes. For brevity seek and not to take your precious time, I will stop here and humbly suggest few ideas regarding moving forward in the mediation process.

Assuming the diagnoses' part is either already have been appropriately done, and hoping also that I have made some suggestion here that would help you retool your approaches to the mediation process, I am going to briefly focus now on the how of the mediation process should begin.

I have heard that the focus of the mediation team is to work with the two conflicting parties, the TPLF and the current government of Ethiopia. Should that be the case, I am respectfully asking not to frame the conflict as if it were between the former EPDRF members only, now TPLF and የብልጽግና ፓርቲ. It seems obvious that the discontent is widespread. What this means is that others also must be invited to be part of the process, at least at the initial stage of the mediation process.

In other words, the entry and orientation phase of the mediation process should be distinguished from the subsequent steps and processes. At the initial stage, the process should be inviting and broad to all concerned. Once that is established, the process in place can be made known by both the other political parties and the public, so that a two-party conflict mediation, namely TPLF and the ruling party, can begin.

In my humble view, this is important for both legitimacy reasons as well as strategic advantageous. Please note that the legitimacy that will be in question

is the mediation team's and the process it follows, not that of the government or the TPLF party. What I am suggesting is to do all you can to avoid the appearance or the perception that the mediation team is organized by the Ethiopian government to serve for its purposes. The appearance of either being "sent" or "ordered" by the current administration only strengthens the destructors and skeptics views, views such as those that I mentioned earlier. The goal, however, is not to avoid criticisms, rather the goal is to maximize, as much as possible, legitimacy and your effectiveness in making peace. The perception of legitimacy as genuinely perceived national elders, I believe, is one of the corner stones that will support the good outcome that we all are hoping and praying for which is avoiding war and starting the process of peacemaking.

I hope this draft is helpful. It was a longer piece, but I was not sure if you would have the time to read it and reflect on it and so I have tried to cut it to size.

In concluding, may I suggest that if you think our forum, Ethiopian Forum for Constructive Engagement, can help, we could be happy to organize a zoom conference for live exchanges of ideas. We are here to support you, cheer you up and wish you much success, as your success is Ethiopia's success. Amen!

With regards,

Berhanu Mengistu