



# 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 of a postsocialist, postethnic politics 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, of the universally accepted human, civil, cultural and political rights of all Ethiopians.

It upholds the fundamental values of dignity 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 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. By 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 (*Gezbi'na Tegezbi.*) 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 Hizbawi 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 being the following:

- 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 for the present generation to 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.
- 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 product of the 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, accession followed by 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.

The unsavory effects of these societal shocks, however, include erosion of social trust and national self-confidence, progressive pauperization, and 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 Igzjabher*) both of which had served us well in protecting the weak from the strong.

This state of affairs 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 (*Cheva'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, robust collective identity, and the pursuit of democracy by democratic means.

### **PART III: OUR VISION OF ETHIOPIAN DEMOCRACY**

Electoral 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 incorporates the Bill of 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.

The three post-WWII Ethiopian constitutions, needless to say, did not guarantee Ethiopians measurable 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 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 of all citizens and 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 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 the 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 be allowed to 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 that binds them. 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 mutual security.
- (c) *Primacy of the Constitutional Rights of the Individual Citizen*: This Charter rejects as pillars of the TPLF constitution which define Ethiopia as a set of 'nations, nationalities and peoples.' This is regrettably inconsistent with the national interest and accepted democratic principles 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 discriminatory to the point of triggering people-on-people violence; it erodes the rights of minorities, and thereby undermines solidarity without which a viable 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. The rights enjoyed by such 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 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 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: Amharic as the national language, and regional language(s) for each self-governing region. Amharic 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 understanding by all in national life. Predominant regional languages, which ought to be raised to national status as resources and popular demand permit, should be available for all Ethiopians as medium of instruction in public schools and 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 authority of the Constitution.
- (h) *A Properly-regulated Market Economy*: Ethiopians seek to enjoy economic security through private ownership 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" (*Balebetnet LeAmrachu*). A responsible government is one that prefers to be a development *partner* with the private sector by supplying key economic infrastructure, nurturing strategic industries, providing aid to laggard regions or disadvantaged citizens, 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 conveyor 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, 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.

#### **PART IV: THE 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 chart 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 guaranteeing 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, 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 the cause of freedom for all.

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*September 2006*

# MEMORANDUM

6 September 2006

Ato Dawd Ibsa, Chairman, Alliance for Freedom and Democracy (AFD)  
Ato Fasika Belete, Chairman, United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF)  
Major Yoseph Yazew, Chairman, Kinijit—North America

Dear Compatriots:

We are a group of concerned Ethiopians who are committed to civic activism, especially in crafting a broad-based global coalition for Ethiopian democracy. We believe in the watch-dog role of constructively engaged civil society organizations for building a robust democratic order and ensuring sustained economic development in Ethiopia.

It is in this spirit that we call on Ethiopian civic organizations and political parties to rally around a common vision of Ethiopia that informs the programs of an effective united movement. Needless to say, this vision has to be based on a shared understanding of the nature our diverse country and the founding principles of the pluralist democracy for which we all strive.

This is why we applaud the efforts made by so many opposition parties to build effective coalitions for change, a recent and notable example being the collaboration between the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) and the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) in the May 2005 elections. The recent formation of the AFD has raised hopes of advancing the unity of purpose of parties which did not participate in the elections.

We are, however, cautiously optimistic. One lesson of the past decade in coalition building: are that alliances that are not based on a common vision for a democratic Ethiopia are ineffectual and self-limiting. The obverse of this truth is amply demonstrated by the success of CUD in galvanizing Ethiopians throughout the land, not least of which is due to the clarity of its vision as outlined in its election manifesto. Another is that politics is too important to be left to the politicians alone.

Because the UEDF and the AFD--the two most promising coalitions today--embrace a diversity of members in terms of ideology and party programs, it is understandable that the independence of member parties be respected as much as possible. It is also the case that coalitions fail because they are based on procedural issue regarding a change of government rather than substantive political consensus. That is, as aggregations of disparate parties, they lack a clear-cut public stance on how they differ from the ruling party in terms of where they intend to take the country. In our humble opinion, existing coalitions leave much to be desired regarding this litmus test.

We, the undersigned, would like to offer one solution for the perennial problem of disabling fractiousness which merits serious consideration. Over the past five years, a number of thoughtful individuals have participated in the drafting of a citizens' charter, which is intended to guide far-flung pan-Ethiopian civic and political movements for democracy. Its latest version is attached in

the document titled: “Citizens’ Charter for a Democratic Ethiopia.” The Charter constitutes an attempt to outline a fair reading of the country’s historical legacies that positively affirm *Etyopiaminnnet*, a declaration of principles that should guide its political and economic future, and suggestions for managing the transition period.

Fully cognizant of the fact that many of the principles outlined in the Citizens’ Charter are inconsistent with the programs of many parties, we strongly urge you and through you to the constituent member parties, to:

1. publicly endorse the Citizens’ Charter as an unequivocal expression of your commitment to pan-Ethiopian goals, and
2. use this endorsement as the basis for forging unity between the AFD and the UEDF which would clearly open the door for other groups to help forge a global alliance for Ethiopian unity on the basis of democracy.

As we await your considered response, we wish to convey our readiness to meet with you to explore these issues further. Looking forward to hearing from you soon.

Respectfully yours,

Dr. Berhanu Abegaz (contact person)

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