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The Renaissance Dam Project -- a golden opportunity

By

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All things considered, supporting the *Renaissance Dam* project is the right position to take. We should support this project not only because it is absolutely necessary for development, but also it gives us a chance to come together to carry out a project which is profound, long-lasting, and historic. As my ninety years old father expressed it, this is a project that can lift us to reclaim our place in history. Therefore, we cannot afford to miss or mess-up this golden opportunity.

For the last forty years or so, claiming that we have irreconcilable differences, we tried to settle our cases through the barrel of a gun. As a result, we have seen that this continuous fighting among ourselves brought nothing but backwardness, hunger, and stagnation. Somehow this madness must stop; we have to recognize that we can find common ground to work together so that we can defeat our common enemy -- poverty. To move forward, first and foremost, we must be willing to change our mind-set. If we can overcome our egoistic mind, it is not that difficult to realize that, deep down inside, our vision for our country and our desire for our people is the same. Therefore, what is urgently needed from all of us is a major transformation -- a change of a mind-set. We need this transformation to realize that, regardless of our political differences, we can still come together to carry out a major project that is vital for our people and for our country. The question is, therefore, should we support and participate to make the Renaissance Dam project a reality even though we have major political differences with the current government? I say, yes! Yes, we must capture the moment to write a new chapter in our history. Especially for my generation who spent most of our lives fighting and tearing-down each other, this is a golden opportunity to correct, if not all, some of our mistakes; let history record that, at least once, we managed our differences to achieve this major goal. Let this be our gift for the next generation and for generations to come.

Supporting this kind of major project doesn't mean endorsing everything the government is doing. In fact, I argue, supporting these kinds of grand projects will create a favorable ground to start a national dialogue that can lead us to improve in other areas, such as moving to a better democratic system. On the other hand, opposing everything and rejecting even the positive actions the government is taking will help maintain the current status quo. I strongly believe that the current poisoning environment must change, and those of us who don't have political ambition but want to see progress in our country must speak out without paying attention to any kind of character assassination and name calling that may come from all sides. It is this

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conviction that leads me to share my opinion with my brothers and sisters, and it is this conviction that leads me to support the Renaissance Dam project.

Visiting Ethiopia every two or three years, I have noticed that a major improvement is taking place in the country, especially in infrastructures development: the city roads in Addis Ababa and major highways, modern airports in Addis Ababa and other historical places, communication systems including wireless telephone and internet connections throughout major cities, and power systems such as hydroelectric power are the areas where meaningful improvements are visible. Since these improvements are vital for economic growth, I always felt that the government is doing an excellent job in these areas. This time, when I went to visit, I was able to meet with Ethiopian Professional Engineers and Energy experts who are involved in power system development, and that gave me the opportunity to visit Gibe III hydroelectric power project. During my visit, I learned that the project is one of the major projects currently in construction. Gibe III, which will produce about 1870MW at its full capacity is currently 45% completed, and if this construction continues as planned, it will start generating power in 2013. Even though, Ethiopia has the natural recourses to produce much more hydroelectric power, the current total power system capacity in the country is about 2000MW. It is obvious that, whether we propose agriculture based economy or industry based economy, the current power system in our country is not adequate for the kind of economic growth that is needed to transform the nation. Furthermore, it is impossible to imagine economic development without first developing the country's infrastructures. Therefore, completing Gibe III and the Renaissance Dam projects must be seen within this context. Since these are major projects for our country, if other nations and institutions refuse to fund these projects simply because they want to protect the interests of others, we should resent that and the feeling of it should itch us everywhere. Indeed, in this situation, we must come together and our patriotic feelings must prevail.

Within the Ethiopian community abroad and inside the country, there are some who strongly support and participate to fund the renaissance dam project, and there are others who chose not to participate for different reasons. Among those who don't want to participate, some say that at a time where the economy is very bad, inflation is high, and the people are starving, it is wrong for the government to spend all this money for this kind of project. I respectfully disagree with this line of argument. In fact, this kind of project creates jobs at this time, and it is needed for sustainable growth. In the United States, for example, Hoover Dam was constructed during the great depression; *the Colorado River Aqueduct* that brings water to Southern California from Colorado river was constructed during the great depression, and the government sold bond to fund this 242 miles long project. In fact, one can argue that without these major projects, Southern California could have been a ghost town by now. Therefore, "let us buy bread using everything we have" is a short-sighted proposal. Even at a difficult time like this one, we should think big and we should think strategically to find a permanent solution for our permanent problem.

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Others also say that we shouldn't support this project because the current government is not a democratic one, and supporting this kind of project is supporting the government. Again, I respectfully disagree with this notion too. For example, let us assume that Ethiopia is invaded by another country and the government called to mobilize the nation to stand up and fight for our freedom. What should be our position in this case? Are we going to say no because the government is not a democratic one? Of course not! Therefore, why is it wrong to support the government's call to fight poverty? How does this stop us from demanding a better democratic system in our country? Why do we think that cooperating in one thing will lead us to surrender in everything else? Why don't we capture this kind of opportunity to open a national dialogue so that improvement in other areas can be achieved as well? Yes, just like everybody else, I would like to see a better democratic government; I don't want to see one party or one person ruling the country for twenty years or so; I don't want to see a single political prisoner in my country. The question is, however, how can we achieve a major improvement in these areas? Again, in my opinion, what is needed is a change of a mind-set from all of us. To say the least: the current government must open up the political stage for all so that not only the economic infrastructure, but also the political infrastructure can be improved; those who want to drag the Ethiopian youth to the jungle must understand that the Ethiopian mothers don't have the stomach to swallow this kind of medicine again; private or government owned mass-media, must report the truth without pushing their own hidden agenda; and, of course, the Ethiopian intellectuals, regardless of their political views and affiliations, must maintain intellectual integrity. The truth is that, we are where we are by choice, not by accident; and we still have the option to choose the right path that can lead us to achieve a national reconciliation. This path requires a pragmatic approach, and it requires a clear understanding that progress is a process, not a destination. With this clarity, and conviction, we must look for common ground to work together. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize that the Renaissance Dam project is one opportunity we cannot afford to miss. Think about it! Opportunity missed is opportunity not realized.

I have also heard others saying that, even though we support the project in principle, we should not donate or buy bond to support this project; we know that the government introduced this project to divert attention, and the whole five years transformation plan, what is called *Growth Transformation Plan* (GTP) is just a hoax, and it will not happen. Again, I disagree with this conclusion as well. First of all, as far as improving the infrastructure is concerned, the government has a good track record in this area. For example, the total power system capacity before 1991 was about 500MW. After this government completed hydroelectric power projects in Tekeze, Beles, Gibe I, and Gibe II, the current power system capacity is about 2000MW. Frankly, there is no evidence to suggest that the government is not serious about the Renaissance Dam project or about the Growth Transformation Plan. In fact, all the indications are quite the contrary. Furthermore, if you talk to the professionals who are executing or managing these projects, they will tell you under what pressure they are functioning to deliver these projects. It is clear that the government is committed to complete these projects. Yes, I totally agree that we

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must demand transparency. We should have performance measures by which we gage the progress of the project, and the government must have a report and video clips to show us the progress of the project. If we contribute, we deserve to know what happened to our money. All these embassies, consulates, and banks that are collecting money for this project should post on their web site the names and contributions of each person unless the donor wants to remain anonymous. The money collected for the project must be a public record. Therefore, instead of refusing to participate, let us demand transparency, and let us find a way to establish an independent and honest fact finding group.

Many times in the past, we have missed opportunities that could have brought us together to do something profound. The question is, therefore, can we afford to miss another opportunity? Especially for members of my generation, here is my question: how much time do we have left, and what do we want to do with it? It seems to me that we all need to pause and reflect on the path we took and the choices we made so far. My trip to Gibe III was a teaching moment for me. As an engineer who has been working for the last twenty three years building and improving infrastructure for the State of California, I thought that I have a successful career. By all measures, I thought I am content with my life. But, suddenly (standing in the middle of Gibe III construction site watching these professional Ethiopian Engineers, Energy experts, technicians, and laborers who are working hard to transform the nation) I found myself feeling guilty and feeling jealous at the same time: I felt guilty because I am not there to help them, and I felt jealous because I know that the satisfaction they are getting from what they do is priceless. Putting my emotional turmoil aside, I started thinking what I can do to help them succeed. I know that my voice or my technical expertise will not be good enough to help them solve the gigantic problem they are facing. Even Alamudi with 1.5 billion birr didn't make a huge dent. Only we, we the people, can rise-up together and make a visible impact. Therefore, realizing the fact that this is our duty, I urge you to capture this moment and help your brothers and sisters succeed.

I strongly believe that only a pragmatic approach can lead us to common ground to solve our major problems. With this in mind, let us communicate and try to create a broad platform. I can be reached at Shimelisamare@gmail.com