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### **Dr. Getachew Begashaw's paper "Is it really Lessons learned and the Way Forward?"**

Why are our lessons learned from the May 2005 elections and its aftermath so different from that of Dr. Getachew Begashaw's as presented to the Canadian Peace-building Coordinating Committee in Toronto – entitled "*Lessons from the May 2005 Ethiopian Elections: The Way Forward*". Before we address the topic, we would like to say this is written in the hope of starting a healthy and constructive dialogue from which we believe refined positions and clearer directions will ensue. We hope our modest contribution will foster a democratic culture that will contribute towards building a democratic system. It is not meant to score points and engage in a "win/lose" discourse.

Dr. Getachew Begashaw presented the government and the opposition's political positions on the May 2005 election in the form of narratives. Narratives cannot be proved or disproved and when he uses narratives, he confuses fact with fiction and endangers the truth. The May 2005 elections in Ethiopia cost hundreds of precious lives and thousands were imprisoned. There was empirical evidence collected and deliberated on by the Ethiopian Inquiry Commission set up by the EPRDF government. The commission concluded that the shots fired by the government troops in June and November 2005 were intended not to disperse the protesting crowd but to kill them. That is why we say Dr. Getachew's confusing narratives is a distortion of the facts, contradicting the reality of major events that took place in May 2005 in Ethiopia.

Dr. Getachew also asks. "who won the Ethiopian federal election of May 2005?" In May 2005, 90% of eligible voters turned out to polling stations throughout the country and waited in long lines to cast their votes. Despite huge irregularities, shortages in ballot papers, and outright cheating government cadres planted in some polling stations, the voting ended relatively peacefully. It was indeed a resounding and stunning victory for the people of Ethiopia and the opposition parties. While the final vote counting was going on in the some areas, the Prime Minister announced on national television that public demonstrations and outdoor gatherings were banned in Addis Ababa for a month. Knowing that the opposition parties were heading for a landslide victory, the ruling party prematurely declared itself a winner of the majority of the seats for federal Parliament and Regional councils with the exception of the capital (Addis Ababa). Following this, leaders of opposition parties in Addis were placed under house arrest. The government imprisoned en-masse, in violation of basic human and civil rights, leaders of opposition parties, trade union leaders, civic organization leaders, independent journalists, students, and peaceful demonstrators.

What is the meaning of "fair" when Dr. Getachew inquires into Ethiopia's 2005 elections? Does "fair" for the ruling party and the opposition mean the same thing? EPRDF's fundamental policies towards the opposition have been consistent rejection, hegemony and dictatorship. Now on the defensive, the opposition in pre-May 2005 elections showed the relatively successful formation and unity it lacked in previous elections.

What does Dr. Getachew mean by “*the May 2005 election was a marked improvement over the 1992, 1995 and 2000 elections*”? To attribute “improvements” to the May 2005 election process as gratis of EPRDF and calling for praise while disregarding the decisive contribution of an effective united front of the opposition is a gross oversight. What was different in May’s 2005 election, Dr. Getachew, was the opposition decided to apply pressure in unity and mobilize the Ethiopian people against EPRDF; that was the real “*marked improvement*” over the previous elections. EPRDF has consistently maintained its dictatorial rule with Meles at its head in 1992, 1995 and 2000 elections. EPRDF’s perpetual offensive on any opposition to its rule began with its march into Addis in May 1991 and the years subsequent to EPRDF ascent to power ushered the demise of some opposition parties, the regrouping of others and the coming into being of new ones. None of these parties were a match to the organized power of EPRDF & EPLF that continually thwarted their formation, development or advance.

The opposition parties' united front, a progress born out of the persistent and determined struggle, created a legitimate opposition coalition force that got popular support. It forced Meles and his party to come to the negotiation table for the first time in March 2004 and make concessions; i.e. discuss some of the oppositions preconditions ( e.g. change electoral laws, admit international observers into Ethiopia, access to media, neutrality of the National Election Board etc). Sorry Dr. Getachew, we don’t share your praise for “the ruling party” that you claim facilitated “a largely conducive condition to conduct elections”. We believe it was the opposition leaders and the Ethiopian people in the May 2005 elections that forced Meles to play out his hand, the hand he dubbed “a calculated risk”. EPRDF’s vote rigging, ballot destruction, harassment and innumerable sabotage activities during the elections became more visible to the international community in May 2005, but were always there in 1992, 1995 and 2000 elections. As such, talking about “conducive condition to conduct elections” rings hollow for us.

Furthermore, no lesson can be learned by stating the May 2005 elections as a “marked improvement over 1992, 1995 and 2000” without adequate comparative analysis of the periods, the contending parties and their relationships to the ruling party. The ruling party immobilized the opposition parties with pernicious propaganda and curtailed their movement around the country while PM Meles continued to scream for a “viable opposition”. The feeble opposition boycotted the 2000 elections and the outcome of 1995 election was predetermined before any election campaigns began. Meles kept his pretense of no viable opposition until his rude awakening in the May 2005 elections; i.e. until Ethiopians in their millions demonstrated their support for a united opposition. We credit the staunch support of the Ethiopian people, which catapulted the opposition into prominence and gave a legitimate challenge to the ruling party. Only months before the May 2005 elections, Ato Meles refused to have the presence of international observers during the elections citing “sovereignty” in these matters, refused to change the electoral laws tailored for EPRDF’s hegemony, refused and curtailed the opposition’s access and use of media outlets. No! Dr. Getachew, EPRDF does not deserve any praise. The lesson learned in the May 2005 election is a strong **united front of the opposition got results and forced** EPRDF to concede to numerous opposition demands though it came only a few weeks before election day. Some of these concessions were allowing the presence of international observers during the May 2005 elections, changes to the electoral laws, use of

media (Television debates, etc.). The lessons learned is a united opposition is a formidable force that can mobilize millions to effect change.

Now Dr. Getachew advises the opposition parties to “diligently exercise responsible politics and playing the role of loyal opposition.” Hasn’t Dr. Getachew heard that the job of “responsible politics” and “loyal opposition” is occupied by the likes of Ato Lidetu, Dr. Merera and Dr. Beyene who are diligently exercising “responsible” politics and playing the role of loyal opposition? Who are you advising to conduct responsible politics and loyalty? To the opposition leaders in prison and scores of journalists, civic leaders and opposition supporters languishing in Meles prisons?

***“There is symmetry of opinion between the ruling party and the opposition” and that “an agreement between the opposition and the ruling party might be a distinct possibility”?*** Here is a quotation from a March 2007 the Economist report that summarizes where the relationship of the party in power and the opposition is *“At present, the expectation is that most of the prisoners will be found guilty and sentenced to serve time in jail. Under this scenario, the best case in terms of maintaining political stability would be if most were quietly released after serving a few years of their sentence, once their political powers had been drained. The most pressing concern is that there are a number of elderly defendants with pre-existing medical conditions and there is a risk that some will not survive internment, which could spark a new bout of political unrest,” the report said. (Report Guilty verdict very likely: Report the Economist Intelligence Unit | March 1, 2007).* ” Dr. Getachew, do you still think that there is a symmetry of opinion and a distinct possibility for agreement between the opposition and the ruling party?

***“Effective power-sharing presupposes an innate belief by both the ruling party and its opposition that they are both toiling for the good of the country,”*** says Dr. Getachew. We have yet to see a leader, party, group or person now and in previous years that has not claimed its mission as “toiling for the good of the country” (Emperor Haile Sellasie, Col. Mengistu and the “champion” of peasants PM Meles). The only toilers are the people of Ethiopia that have been disappointed by opportunists who sell them out with every turn of event. Action speaks louder than words and the fact is negotiation at present only means negotiating away our people’s hard won gains. Victory in establishing democracy can be certain if the need for clear and trustworthy leaders with concrete political actions are met. The illusion in the opposition camp that EPRDF will change through national reconciliation or will share power has been demonstrably shattered by innumerable events in its seventeen years reign and more dramatically in the May 2005 elections. EPRDF will not share power without an intense struggle involving our people. EPRDF is quick to put the tip of bayonet on our people’s throats that demand freedom and democracy, always making confrontation unavoidable.

And what about Dr. Getachew’s call for ***“third parties”*** to resolve our problems? The lessons of third parties involvement (Cohen in London 1991), Congressman Harry Johnston (1993) have not been helpful for Ethiopia to say the least. In the post communist world, Meles, Museveni, and Kagame in Africa and Karzai, Nouri, Awaki, Mushareff etc., in Central Asia have become models of modern day democracies lauded by the world dominating powers. That is the kind of democracy we see globally when third parties are involved in resolving the questions of democracy. Democracy is not looking for equal “opportunity to rule” with the blessing of third

parties. “Ene Ishalalehu, lenes tera Setugne”. We can’t afford to sideline our people and make them spectators. Instead of mobilizing and organizing our people for the painful struggle that lies ahead, why does Dr. Getachew point to “third party” solutions? What are we to make of this kind of advocacy for backroom negotiations that downplays our people’s bitter experience? Such calls for third parties at present detract our people from self-reliance in solving problems and preparing themselves for the decisive struggle needed to create a democratic system. Third parties showed no effective influence or leadership even after Meles ordered the shooting of students and Addis dwellers that were demanding the recount of votes in June and November 2005. In spite of “essential third party” mediations and negotiations, there is in essence, no resolution to the voting “irregularities” and no resolution to Meles’ repressive measures. In fact, third parties were pressuring the opposition to call off boycotts, be happy with the votes they got and join the parliament or take matters to the courts in the aftermath of the May 2005 elections. Dr. Getachew, this is a lesson worth noting and should never be forgotten. And where are the opposition leaders now who resisted this “third party” intervention? The leaders have been charged and found “guilty” of for “treason” and “outrage against the constitution” facing possible death. Shocked, aren’t they these “third parties” by the outcome of the Meles’ verdict?

All opposition parties, civic groups, and individuals are still the target of EPRDF’s destruction. EPRDF has unleashed a reign of terror. The *lessons we draw from the bloody suppression of the opposition and its supporters by EPRDF’s harassment, arrest and eventual imprisonment and guilty verdict of opposition leaders is not* the necessity of wheeling and dealing with EPRDF or screaming for third parties or a “middle road” as it is now becoming fashionable in certain quarters. The “middle roaders” lesson is “no chifen telacha, no chifen degaff” a la Ato Lidetu, “Yewendemamach tegel new”. Interestingly those who call “Beherawi Irque” have gotten their response from PM Meles. “Man tetalana?” And lately, an advise from a cadre of the ruling party, “gold and dirt, don’t mix”.

Our people’s struggle and the May 2005 elections taught us the meaning and importance of a *united opposition. At no time since EPRDF’s ascent to power did the effectiveness of a united front demonstrated as in the eve of May elections.* . It taught us the necessity of the participation of millions to sweep EPRDF/TPLF out of power. Ethiopian opposition politics has opened a new chapter in the country’s journey towards democracy and it is our people that got us here and deserve praise and not “essential third parties”.

May 2005 and the subsequent developments have also clearly demonstrated to our people the limitations of populist electoral politics. EPRDF government was in dire straight and decisively beaten in major cities and even a veteran TPLF cadre admitted publicly recently that the ruling party knows it lost the elections. However, this veteran TPLF cadre added that the EPRDF will not “let go” of power it won by the barrel of the gun in exchange for paper ballots of the opposition for the sake of democracy. Will the next election be any different? Those who claim to be in the opposition –but who, in reality, desire to impede our movement by calling us to focus only of the 2010 election only detract us from summing up our bitter experience; election (2010) would not resolve the problems that emanate from EPRDF dictatorial rule based on sheer military force.

Participation in parliamentary elections has served the participating parties as a brilliant means to extend their political influence and membership. This is yet another lesson learned. The electoral politics helped to effectively get the opposition parties message out and we all have witnessed the millions that came out in Addis and other cities and towns during the pre-election campaigns in support of the opposition parties.

Today, the activities of opposition forces outside parliament have been the target of EPRDF/TPLF terrorizing onslaught, so why talk about “effective power-sharing” when the ruling EPRDF is busier than ever reversing the democratic gains with so much indifference! Reversing gains that even EPRDF held as bragging points in the “democratization process” to its donor partners. The free press is snuffed out including selected websites critical to EPRDF’s rule. No one is held accountable for the indiscriminate killings and the blood split in the June and November 2005 demonstrations. The horrifying killings and the subsequent sharpest increase in human rights violation unmistakably point that EPRDF is not by any stretch of imagination toiling for the good of the country or wants to share power.

The lessons of May 2005 and its aftermath show the importance of mobilizing of our people and conducting a coordinated struggle aimed at stopping the EPRDF from leading the nation into dangerous and destructive paths. No real movement towards democracy is possible until the EPRDF’s rule is brought down to its knees by the mighty force of millions; is there really an alternative to this? The opposition’s unrelenting struggle must continue to concentrate on demands to reinstate all the democratic gains that were reversed by EPRDF/TPLF. No real movement towards democracy is possible until we thoroughly expose the double standard of some foreign governments who play “deaf and mute” to our people’s plea for justice. We must expose their indifference to the injustices of the EPRDF government, its cruelty and sheer state terror in the aftermath of May 2005 elections. Sadly, we have observed some EPRDF foreign supporters indict the oppositions’ peaceful demonstration and vociferous demands equally with Meles’ bloody suppression and brute response.

UEDF has in many ways communicated, and we share the view, that restoring and consolidating the gains, further building on them, moving the democratic struggle forward and disallowing EPRDF leaders from derailing our democratic movement has become the urgent task of Ethiopians in the democratic opposition. The struggle to win back, consolidate and build on gains should be conducted simultaneously demanding for the release of all our leaders and the thousands of supporters in prison, release the members of the free press so that they can continue their work and hold responsible those that have committed atrocities on our people. As has previously been repeatedly expressed by UEDF leaders, short of conducting these struggles and creating a democratic system where there is supremacy of law, gains made and the rights won can easily be reversed by EPRDF. EPRDF incarcerates opposition leaders and followers when it wants too, release them and then put them back in prison again. We have to stop falling for this nonsense, and believe it is our historical responsibility that we win back our gains and struggle towards a stable democratic system.

Fairness, marked improvement, conducive, praise, possibility of agreement, effective power-sharing, reconciliation are not exactly timely vocabularies used when engaging EPRDF. We say let’s concentrate on organizing and mobilizing our people for an effective struggle to restore our

gains that were made possible through the bitter struggle and glorious sacrifices of our heroic people. Focus on exposing the double standard of “third parties”. Let’s do what we can to contribute to the democratic process.

LA UEDF Support Committee  
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