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EDITORIAL: A FALSE AGGIORNAMENTO

In a major speech on 5 March, Mengistu H. Mariam announced economic reforms and half-hearted political proposals seen by many observers as virtually an abandonment of Marxism by a beleaguered regime.

On the economic front, the shift away from the Stalinist model which staggered the country into economic ruin has been seen by many as a step in the right direction. These reforms include measures allowing peasants to have full usage rights of their land, to employ workers, to transfer their land by legacy to their children and above all to be masters of their produce which they will be allowed to sell on the free market. In fact all these and the proposals to introduce a mixed economy are policies which many opposition groups, including ME'ISONE, had already adopted and have been fighting for. ME'ISONE's amended programme adopted in July 1989 calls for fundamental changes intended to allow for more private initiative in all sectors of activity within the framework of a mixed economy.

These economic transformations advocated by ME'ISONE are part and parcel of a wider vision of a politically pluralist society. Except for the hard-line TPLF/EDPM alliance whose idea of a "People's Democratic Republic" rejects a multi-party system and the 'Bourgeois liberal' concept of elections, all opposition groups now call for a multi-party democracy.

Mengistu's proposals leave much to be desired when it comes to this crucial issue of fundamental democratic and human rights and the question of nationalities in Ethiopia. Not for the first time since he created his political organisation, SEDEDE, back in 1976, he announced a change of name. The Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) founded in 1984 is now to be replaced by the so-called "Ethiopian Democratic Union Party" (EDUP) which Mengistu said will be open to non marxists and to all citizens, provided they accept to participate in the political process "within the framework of Ethiopian unity". This led to unwarranted speculations that what was being suggested was the introduction of a multi-party system. Party officials

were quick to deny such interpretations of Mengistu's speech and to declare that the 'pluralism' being proposed was "under the umbrella of EDUP".

This simply means that there will be no basic political changes to accommodate the proposals of a mixed economy. Many Ethiopians question whether dictator Mengistu is after all the right person to propose and implement the economic and political reforms that are long overdue in Ethiopia. Above all, his record as a brutal dictator does not inspire confidence. Given this, nobody within the ranks of the democratic opposition considers these half-hearted measures, calling upon Ethiopians to come under the 'umbrella' of a party subject to Mengistu's control, as a genuine exercise in democracy.

That is why these proposals were rejected as too little and too vague by all opposition groups and organisations.

Mengistu's abusive references to developments in Eastern Europe and his attempts to draw a parallel with changes taking place there have led many people to believe that the winds of change had at long last swept over this ruined land. The day after his speech, students and some sectors of the population of Addis Abeba demonstrated in support of the announced measures. Given the absence of any national, democratic and credible alternative to the dictatorship this should not come as a surprise. But we strongly believe that Mengistu will not abuse the people indefinitely. It will not be long before those who celebrated Mengistu's aggiornamento realise that in fact they have been welcoming a false one.

The announced economic reforms have no chance of being implemented. This is not only because the appropriate radical political changes are not forthcoming. Mengistu's failure to address the other basic issue of today's Ethiopia, i.e. the question of a democratic solution to the problem of nationalities, is not of good omen for peace and progress in the country.

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