

ADDIS DIGEST

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Editorial

AN ASSAULT ON THE PEACEFUL PATH

The refusal by the government to register CAFPDE - the largest democratic opposition organization in the country committed to peaceful political struggle is yet another blow to the peace process in Ethiopia. The silence of Western governments who claimed after the sham May 7 elections that «a serious interest in human rights and democracy will continue to be an important aspect of our government's relations with Ethiopia» is all the more astonishing in that—until it was suddenly decreed by the National Electoral Board that CAFPDE was not a political organization—these embassies in Addis Abeba recognized and dealt with the Council and some even tried to arrange «negotiations» with the government in an attempt to draw CAFPDE into the electoral process.

As part and parcel of the dispersing and eliminating any opposition in the country, this latest violation came as no surprise. It will be seen whether CAFPDE action forces committed to a peaceful path can work out a common and credible strategy to counter the government's moves. Some Ethiopians have been calling for a peaceful path. But the immediate implications of this latest assault on the peaceful path and the consequences of any reaction are clear for everyone to see.

A notorious strategy of all democratic current acts of human rights violations in Ethiopia. It remains to be seen whether democratic opposition forces can find a course of action to counter and continue on what has been the «defunct» peaceful path. The consequences of this latest assault on the peaceful path are clear for everyone to see.

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The single most important development in the opposition forces over the last few years has been on the question of the method of struggle. Those who favoured a radical tradition of political violence have been overtaken by the drive for democratization which surfaced in the wake of Mengistu's dictatorship. This has been a historical opportunity to introduce a new concept in Ethiopia's extreme political tradition. They argue that the TPLF-led ethnic minority groups have been so widespread that it was necessary to steadily mobilize millions for a peaceful political struggle, that it was also argued that with the intensification of the peaceful political struggle, the government would find it more and more difficult to maintain its dictatorial rule in an international context marked by the end of the Cold War. It was assumed that the international community would consistently and systematically support those who struggle for peace and rights.

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Groupe de Recherche et d'Action
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Research and Action Group for Peace in

RAGPEHA

pour la paix en Ethiopie
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Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.

Those who from the start challenged this strategy argued that the minority ethnic-based government would never accept the challenges of democracy and peaceful struggle. The insignificant democratic overtures were destined to wither away with the rising challenge from the democratic forces. As for the international community, they were extremely sceptical. They argued that, notwithstanding some resolutions and statements condemning blatant and massive human rights violations, foreign powers would not bother to understand, let alone consistently support, the peaceful political process in the country. So, given the national and international context, the only option left if the country's opposition is to be taken seriously both by the government and the international community, is to launch armed struggle.

The short and long term implications of the government's decision to deny CAFPDE legal status and the indifference shown by TPLF's Western mentors to this and other human rights violations should be seen in the context of this debate among the country's opposition forces.

In a society where resorting to violence has always been the standard method of solving political differences and where the peaceful path is looked at with tremendous scepticism, it should be clear to everyone that the net result of this decision is to further marginalize the country's peaceful opposition. This policy of marginalization of the democratic forces who accept to peacefully participate in the political process has been going on throughout the entire «transition» period. Pressure on the free press has been such that Ethiopia now holds the record in sub-Saharan Africa for the number of journalists in prison. The detention of «several thousand» political prisoners (see Amnesty International's annual report for 1995) means that there are more political prisoners in Ethiopia than in the rest of all the countries in sub-Saharan Africa combined. Assassination and abduction of political activists, torture of prisoners and extra-judicial killings continue to be committed with absolute impunity—not a single person who has committed these crimes has ever been brought to justice. Now that the crucial importance of a strong civil society has been «recognized» by the regime, that regime is busy breaking up unions, professional associations and human rights organizations and attempting to replace them by its own para-statal «non-governmental organizations».

The cumulative effect of this fury against the country's democratic forces accepting to «play the game» within EPRDF's legal framework is now clear. Today, all observers of Ethiopian politics say that the democratic and peaceful opposition struggle is at its lowest ebb. This is no good news to all those who have the interest of peace and of the Ethiopian people at heart. Meles and his Western mentors should understand that what they seem to have achieved is not so much a weakening of peaceful democratic groups but rather a loss of credibility of the peaceful path of struggle. In a violence-prone society like ours, «peaceful struggle at its lowest ebb» simply means that the risk of seeing the country revert to another round of civil war and bloodshed is at its highest.

In a country bedeviled by violent confrontations and a culture of violence rooted in its social fabric, the central

theme of the message GRAPECA tries to deliver to the people of Ethiopia is clear and simple: «It is possible to change things by peaceful struggle. Mobilize and support those who are following this path». For this message to be received well by our people, we believed in and worked towards the emergence of a tangible, peaceful political process which culminated in the setting up of CAFPDE. Millions of Ethiopians pinned their hopes for a democratic solution of the country's political crisis on the Council. Against tremendous odds, we tried to help CAFPDE's struggle to maintain the momentum initiated by the Paris and Addis Abeba Conferences.

At the same time, EPRDF and its Western mentors did everything to prevent CAFPDE from meaningfully participating in the peaceful political process. Harassment and arrest of its activists by the government, repeated attempts by Westerners, especially the Americans, to marginalize the Council, attacks by some sectarian elements within the radical armed opposition, growing scepticism by the general public concerning the validity of the «peaceful path» and now the government's latest action denying the Council's right to operate legally in the country combined with the interruption of GRAPECA's Radio Selam broadcasts which allowed the Council to directly and regularly deliver its message to millions of people both in Ethiopia and the neighbouring countries explain why the peaceful, democratic struggle inside Ethiopia, spearheaded by CAFPDE is «at its lowest ebb».

If we are to avoid another tragedy in Ethiopia, we in GRAPECA believe that it is not enough to «preach» peace to this country's peoples. For the complex peace-building process to take root, there must be an effective and credible democratic organization capable of mobilizing the people for a peaceful solution to the country's crisis. We will therefore continue to work, with our compatriots both inside Ethiopia and abroad, towards the restoration of the credibility of the peaceful path by helping CAFPDE overcome the present difficulties and become an effective instrument in the struggle for peace and democracy.

Although many Ethiopians are disillusioned and disappointed by the international community's response to the country's crisis, we still believe that our people have many friends in the outside world. We have been encouraged to note that in the post-election period many NGOs, some of them long time and staunch supporters of TPLF, have started not only to open their eyes to what is happening in Ethiopia, but also to speak out. The interest many have shown in ADDIS DIGEST and GRAPECA's struggle for peace in Ethiopia has been found to be far more than we expected. This, we believe, is an important step forward. If pursued with more consistency and less blind partisanship, it could serve as a basis for a more positive and meaningful contribution to the efforts Ethiopians are exerting to avert yet another tragedy.

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