

## THINKING ALOUD

GRAPECA AND THE DEADLOCKED PEACE PROCESS IN ETHIOPIAI. INTRODUCTION

Since its creation in 1990 , the major arguments that GRAPECA advanced to counter warmongering forces in our country were two fold:

Politically, we said that opposition ot the present dictatorship was so massive and widespread that it was possible to peacefully mobilise millions for democracy and to marginailse all those who resort to arms and in so doing play into the hands of EPRDF.

Diplomatically, we argued that the internaitonal community - specially in this new era of no more Cold War - would systematically side with those who struggle for peace, democracy and human rights and stand firmly against the ethnic minority regime. This assesment of ours was further encouraged by empty talk about 'preventive diplomacy" which we thought was the appropriate approach to our country's problems.

From the first Paris conference to the one we organised in Addis Abeba we systematically and firmly adhered tothis strategy and sucessfully concluded the first phase by master minding the creation of the CAFPDE while at the same time sucessfully conducting our diplomatic offensive which was crowned by the presence of representatives of 31 governements at the Addis Conference.

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7/23/96  
After conversations that I had with most of you both in Ethiopia and abroad, I am more and more convieneced that for the first time since we decided to stand up to the challenge of peace building , there is confusion within our ranks. The situation both in our country and the diplomatic field is, to say the least, not very encouraging. Now most of us feel that the peace process is deadlocked. Our strategy based on the assumption that it would be possible to intensify the peaceful political sutruggle while at the same time enjoying an ever growing support from the international community is failing. This is creating a very dangerous situation for the peace process in our country.

As you all remember, those who from the very beginning challenged our strategy argued that given our secular tradition of violence and the fact that EPRDF is

a minority ethnic based government which will never accept the challenges of democracy and peaceful struggle, the only way to bring democracy and peace to our country was to resort to arms. As for the diplomatic struggle, they were extremely sceptic. They argued that, notwithstanding a few ineffective resolutions condemning blatant and massive human rights violations, foreign powers will continue to deal with the "legitimate" government. It was also argued that these foreign powers would never take us seriously until we launch armed struggle and show that we are a credible and strong force in the country.

Who turned out to be right? Unfortunately we have to admit that these people have now the upper hand. Unlike the situation which prevailed in the country between the Paris and Addis Abeba Conferences when we were congratulated by all quarters for the historic initiative, we are now on the defensive. Most of us seem to be discouraged and to doubt.

## II. WHAT WENT WRONG?

When back in 1992 we decided to work for a National Conference to be held in Addis Abeba itself and to regroup all those who opted for peaceful political struggle in what we then called an "Alternative Congress for Peace", our objective was to create a broad based structure which would pose as a legitimate partner in the dialogue we intended to engage with the regime. We also intended to make this group or congress the spearhead for the peaceful political struggle against the later.

Most of us took it for granted that once this body set up, it would easily overcome the deep-rooted scepticism concerning peaceful struggle, mobilise the people by their millions, show the regime and the international community that there is a strong, peaceful and popular force to reckon with. This of course also implied that with the rising tide of the peaceful struggle the armed opposition would progressively be marginalised.

We created the CAF and to foster the on going peace momentum we decided to work on two levels:

- 1) The public awareness campaign: We wanted to continue, intensify and systematise the public awareness campaign launched during the period March-

December 1993 so as to maintain the momentum gathered during these eventful months. This campaign got a tremendous boost thanks to the initial success of our operation "RADIO SELAM"

Now EPRDF is plotting to silence RADIO SELAM. We know for sure that in late November Ethiopia's Ambassador to the Russian Federation has complained to the foreign ministry. Now we suspect that EPRDF agents are directly dealing with officials of the private company which rents the transmission facilities. After the 6 months contract expired, they seem unwilling to sign for a new 6 months term even though we agreed to a 30% increase as they demanded. This means that we are being silenced and that the momentum we gathered after years of relentless efforts is being endangered. This is particularly serious in light of the crucial months that are before us.

2. The peaceful political struggle: We tried to work closely with GRAPECA sympathisers within the CAF through the Task Force we set up to prepare the Addis Conference and which we decided not to disband after December 1993. Our efforts in this field have not proved rewarding. I am not of course blaming the Task Force or CAF leaders for this. But the fact is that CAF did not live up to our (exaggerated?) expectations. Except for the three mass demonstrations during the last year and a few communiqués published to condemn EPRDF's repressive acts no serious initiative or offensive has been launched by the Council.

So I feel like most of you. We have failed to keep the momentum of the Paris and Addis Abeba conferences due to the difficulties encountered in efforts to intensify the public awareness campaign and the peaceful political struggle. I now fear that paralysed by EPRDF's repression, attacked by the armed opposition movements and more or less left on our own by the international community the Council and all the forces of peace risk marginalisation.

This brings me to the second and most disappointing aspect of the problems we are facing: the failure of the international community to live up to our expectations. Here again, I would say that our optimistic attitude was to say the least somewhat unwarranted. We took it for granted that our genuine struggle for peace, democracy and human rights would automatically convince foreign powers to at least withdraw blind support to EPRDF. We underestimated the role of REALPOLITIK in diplomacy. Instead of principled support to the

cause of peace and democracy in Ethiopia, what do we see?

- Ineffective resolutions and half-hearted calls on EPRDF to respect human rights, to free political prisoners, to engage dialogue with the opposition, to organise free and fair elections in line with international standards

- Repeated and blatant attempts 'especially by the Anglo-Americans - to marginalise the Council of Alternative forces and to divide and destabilise the democratic opposition

- Inconsistency in attempts to organise dialogue between the opposition and the government as is witnessed by the seemingly endless series of "initiatives" by the Americans which have led us nowhere and whose only objectives seem to be to demonstrate the opposition's "negative attitude" and to foster EPRDF's image as a "constructive" force:

1. The CARTER initiative of early 1994: After plotting to sabotage the Addis Abeba conference, Carter tried to mediate in early 1994 between "the major opposition organisations" and the TGE. He tried to leave out the Council and it was only after COEDF and other groups said they would boycott these negotiations if the Council was not invited that the latter was admitted as a party to proposed negotiations. Carter's proposals were accepted by the opposition. EPRDF rejected these proposals at the last minute after having accepted them. Carter then abandoned his efforts without blaming EPRDF for the failure of the proposed talks.

2. Then the Americans came out with the so-called Congressional Task Force on Ethiopia. They also came out with a set of proposals which were accepted by the opposition. Once again EPRDF refused to take these proposals as a basis for discussion with the democratic forces. Instead of blaming the government for its stubbornness the Task Force came out with another set of proposals. But this time the "mediators" presented as their own the uncompromising positions of EPRDF! In their first proposals these people proposed debate on the constitution, in the second there is no mention of this. Instead they called on the opposition to participate in elections on the basis of this Constitution. In the first document they talked about negotiations on "substantive issues" the second makes no mention of these. In the first document there was the idea of an "Independent Electoral Board" In the second they only speak of the necessity of the opposition's participation in the forthcoming "free and fair elections" etc

3. Then there came the infamous call by 18 western ambassadors. The

implacable urge of these people to appease EPRDF is such that they have gone as far as calling the Stalinist Constitution "democratic" and congratulating Melese Zenawi for this 'success' of the democratic process. The document which most of us fear would pave the way for a one party dictatorship and sooner or later to the disintegration of Ethiopia is incredibly said to have sown "the seeds of democracy in this beautiful land". The country's democratic forces are being pressured to participate in the coming elections on the basis of this document.

In short, we have not as yet succeeded in making the council an effective instrument for the mobilisation of millions as we hoped to do. Attacked from all sides and marginalised by the Americans and EPRDF it may soon become still more ineffective. Our public awareness campaign has problems of its own. If we have more or less failed in these two fields we must also bitterly admit that the international community has failed us.

So where do we stand? The questions that we have to address now are clear but we are not sure of the answers. Can we still cling to our strategy of "mobilising millions for the peaceful struggle" If not what other options do we have? What other strategy do we have to counter the rising dangers of intense armed conflicts? Can we still delude ourselves with the hope of a more consistent and less partisan international community? What other strategy - short of armed struggle - could be followed by the democratic opposition or be taken more seriously by the international community?

I do not of course believe that our forthcoming meeting will provide answers to all these questions. But I hope that comments, suggestions, debates and proposals by participants would at least provide some optimism about the future and GRAPECA's role in the struggle for a better Ethiopia.

However, before discussing the difficulties in our long term tasks ( ie. the public awareness campaign) and "thinking aloud" about the possible courses of action to break the present political deadlock - which if allowed to continue could be a disaster to the peace process - I would like to briefly outline the possible attitudes of the different actors in the crisis.

### III. THE DIFFERENT ACTORS IN THE PRESENT DEADLOCK

The transitional period will soon come to an end with the elections to be held in May 1995 without the country "transiting" from the old repressive and violent order to a new order of peace and democracy. Whatever we may do in the

coming four months, these elections will be "won" by EPRDF which for all practical purposes would be competing with itself.

Even if by some miracle, the opposition participates and wins this contest this "victory" will be meaningless. Under the Stalinist Constitution which is a "comprehensive" document incorporating EPRDF social and economic policies, the winners will have no choice but to apply the political programme of the later. They will be "constitutionally" obliged to do so unless the loser EPRDF cooperates in amending the Constitution which I am convinced it would never accept to do. Melese's actions and attitudes in the coming months will stem from a correct assessment of this elementary political reality. The opposition is more or less confused on this issue.

1. EPRDF: The most important thing for Melese at this stage is to have his "Constitution-Political programme" legitimised as the supreme law of the land. He will therefore go out of his way to persuade at least a fraction of a divided and confused opposition to participate in the coming elections. He will therefore negotiate with any one accepting to participate in the process and would even make some concessions concerning the demands of the opposition on free and fair elections. This of course will impress his foreign friends who will pretend not to understand our "intransigence" and press for "realistic" and "responsible" attitude from our end.

2. THE ALTERNATIVE FORCES: The net result of such "concessions" and international pressure would be to divide and weaken the alternative forces.

(i) The process of marginalisation of CAFPD, pursued by the Anglo-Americans will continue in earnest. I fear it is somehow giving the desired results. The confusing signals we get from Addis are that Beyene is falling into the trap as he is more and more accepting his role of chairman of the "Joint Political Forum" rather than leader of the CAF. This I think is a very serious development.

(ii) There will be serious divisions in the ranks of the democratic opposition: between those who take at face value these "concessions" and accept to participate in the forthcoming elections and those who see these elections however "fair and free" as futile exercises. The former will be accused of opportunism and sale out of the vital interests of our people especially in view of the ridiculous gesture of the Anglo-Americans who have openly and arrogantly proposed money for participation in these elections. The partisans

of boycott will be accused as "adventurous elements" who reject the peaceful political process without proposing a realistic alternative to the present crisis. I believe that the greatest contribution that GRAPECA can make to peace in Ethiopia is to work out a compromise aimed at bringing these two forces together and working with everyone to have this compromise solution accepted.

3. THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY: All of us are worried by the rising "Anti-Ferenji" sentiments in our country. It is clear that most Ethiopians are now feeling abandoned by the international community and specially the Americans. This trend now seems to gain ground even among the ranks of CAF as can be seen by the "MESSAGE TO BLOOD THIRSTY FOREIGN POWERS" published in the first issue of CAF's journal "AMARATCH". The attacks against "American imperialism" which now appear in the independent press are also clear signs of this growing scepticism and hostility.

The Anglo-Americans will surely blame "extremist forces" while at the same time trying to take steps at least to look as if "they are doing something". More negotiations between EPRDF and the "reasonable opposition" may be arranged. EPRDF will be pressured to somehow improve its human rights record. But nothing palpable will come of these attempts by way of leveling the ground for the peaceful opposition to meaningfully participate in the political process. This I fear will signal the wrong message to the armed opposition: Intensify the armed struggle to be taken seriously by the "Ferenjis".

4. THE PARTISANS OF ARMED STRUGGLE: Given their simplistic approach to the complicated problems in the country, there is no confusion in their ranks. In fact they believe that events in our country are proving by the day that they offered the only correct course right from the beginning. They will pursue the same old strategy: intensify the armed struggle to weaken EPRDF and "gain respect" in the eyes of the international community. My fear is that, given the present confusion within the ranks of alternative forces, this simple message would fall on more and more receptive ears.

#### IV. WHAT ROLE FOR GRAPECA?

Here I will only deal with two major problems: an assessment of the difficulties we encountered in our public awareness campaign and a reflexion about our future course in this respect and the steps we will have to envisage

to save the peaceful political process.

# 1. OUR PEACE EDUCATION CAMPAIGN:

In a country bedeviled by violent confrontations and a culture of violence rooted in its social fabric, the central theme of the message we have been trying to deliver to our people was clear and simple: "It is possible to change things by peaceful struggle. Mobilise by your millions and support those who are following this path."

However, we wrongly assumed that the culture of violence was the apanage of the ruling circles and underestimated its hold on the minds of our people. This in turn led us to underestimate the formidable task that laid ahead in our efforts to uproot this culture from the minds of both governors and governed.. As we advanced in our public awareness campaign, we recognized this and tried to gear our peace education campaign to two complementary themes:

(i) We tried to overcome society's deep rooted skepticism by showing that we are no less intrensigent adversaries of the regime and squarely in the opposition, our differences with those who are in the armed struggle being our faith in the peaceful path to democracy;

(ii) In an attempt to overcome the psychological and cultural inhibitions of our people concerning the the peace process, we tried to propagate a "new concept" which revolved around the catch word we coined : Peaceful struggle is heroic!

We did not as yet assess the results of this campaign. But I am convinced that whatever successes we might have gained would have been more rewarding had it not been for two major obstacles: One is of course lack of time and continuity. This struggle demands sustained efforts over a long period of time. This, we did not have. The interruption of RADIO SELAM is no good news in this respect.

The other obstacle is more fundamental. For this strategy to work, to convince people that peaceful opposition is possible and could work there must be peaceful opposition in the first place. There must be a palpable peaceful political process for people to see and follow. As I outlined at the beginning of my article this kind of struggle has not as yet gathered momentum and is losing what ever it had gained after the Paris and Addis Conferences.



Therefore my question is: can we go on preaching peace and calling upon the people to struggle peacefully in a country where there are no leaders to lead them on this path of struggle? What arguments do we have to counter attacks by warmongers who accuse us of "disarming" the people by preaching a non existing path? In the final analysis is our Peace Education campaign credible? What solution do we have to this intricate problem which threatens the very existence of GRAPECA as a group dedicated to peace building?

## 2. THE IMMEDIATE DANGER AND OUR URGENT TASKS:

Given the prevailing political situation and the possible course of events in the coming months we have to act very quickly if we want to avoid chaos in the country. In the past we tried and succeeded to bring all alternative forces together by proposing a clear strategy which was the call for the convening of a National conference for peace and reconciliation. After december 1993 our call was for every one to rally around the idea of free and fair elections. This we thought was the most appropriate call to unite a maximum of people around minimal objectives. Every one in the camp of alternative forces boycotted the june elections for a Constituant Assembly because the conditions for free and fair elections were not there. EPRDF went ahead with its plans and we have now a Constituion which every one in the democratic opposition condemns.

We are now in fact in a position like the one we had during the pre-Paris conference months. Most organisations in the opposition were calling for the convening of a national conference. We seized the occasion and brought together the major political forces to make a common call for a national conference and we succeeded. In the same manner the major opposition forces are united in their rejection of the Stalinist Constitution. But there is deep and dangerous division as to what should be done next.

Some like COEDF seem to call for a re-start of the whole constituional process and demand the holding of free and fair elections for a genuine Constituant Assembly. This means that they totally reject the present constitution and refuse to participate in the forth coming elections even if they are free and fair as long as the purpose of the contest is the setting up of a gouvernement working on the basis of this constituion.

Others like SEPDC also reject this Constituion but now seem to accept participation in the coming elections as long as they are free and fair. This means that they have dropped the idea of campaigning for a genuine Constituant Assembly. Beyene and his friends have taken this position in the name of SEPDC and not the CAF. By so doing they are effectively participating in the Anglo-American drive to marginalise the Council. This of course is a very dangerous devleopment as it threatens the very existence of the structure we had worked hard to creat.

I am sure that you are all conscious of the dangers for the peaceful political process, as it complicates the already volatile and difficult situation. The question now is what can GRAPECA do to keep the peaceful opposition forces together?

As you know I am convieniced that the country's democratic forces should never accept this Stalinist Constituion. I have already forwarded my views to those concerned and specially to the COEDF leadership and to others in the CAF including Beyene. From the feed back I have already received the arguments in favour of rejection have convieniced everyone. But unless we propose an alternative accepted by the major actors, denouncing the Constitution would not only be futile intellectual exercise but also somewhat irresponsible. We must find a way of bringing these forces together by proposing a compromise solution. Here are the main points of the proposals that I would like you to consider:

1. My contention is that we must all find a way to participate in the coming elections not only to keep alive the political process but also in the interest of unity of the democratic opposition. This means that the call for election of a Constituant Assembly must be dropped by COEDF and others.

2. SEPDC and those who seem to accept participation in these elections on the basis of the Stalinist Constitution must compromise and accept that as far as the democratic alternative forces are concerned, participation in these elections has only one purpose: to mobilise the people to reject the Constituion as it is and specially for inclusion of an article in the constituion allowing for amendments by referendum.

3. Once this compromise is reached and the unity of purpose and strategy

of Alternative forces is restored we must act together and present our conditions for participation. This is no difficult task as we have recognized international standards. If Melese and his foreign friends - specially the Anglo-Americans are serious, they must accept the setting up of a **DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION COUNCIL** whose task it would be to level the ground for these elections to be free, fair and genuine. Representatives of the international community can be invited to observe the proceedings of the DTC and to guarantee transparency.

4. If conditions for free and fair elections are not there then there is no sense intalking about participation. If the above conditions are met then we can pass to the next phase. This will be the setting up of what I call **COALITION FOR A DEMOCRATIC CONSTITUTION**. All those forces who stand for a democratic Constitution should compete under the banner of this coalition.

5. I am absolutely certain that such a strategy would create a tremendous momentum like the one we created thanks to the Paris Conference. Like the call for free and fair elections "according to international norms" the call for a democratic constitution will be based on a clear, simple plateform which EPRDF and its foreign mentors would be embarrassed to refuse. The call will be for the inclusion in the constitution of the principles of separation of powers, judicial review, garanteed human rights etc and for the exclusion of articles which have no place in a democratic constituion like the economic provision allowing for state ownership of land. If the Anglo-Americans who are now at the forefront of the plot to impose a totalitarian document on our people refuse these basic "liberal democratic" principles then they have to tell us what their idea of a democratic constituion is. If those in the aremd struggle refuse to go along with this strategy then we will have to take the offensive and expose them .

6. Once this strategy is accepted by all, GRAPECA members must mobilise to prepare three working documents that would be submitted to organisations of the democratic opposition: A short document containing the conditions for free, fair and genuine elections; a second document dealing with the structure, tasks and working methods of the proposed **DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION COUNCIL** (which will also be submitted to EPRDF and would be observers from the international community) and a third document containig details on the proposed **COALITION FOR A DEMOCRATIC CONSTITUTION**.