

The Role of Civil Society in Promoting Democracy and Human Rights in Ethiopia*

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For many Ethiopians, the year 1991 came brimming with promise and optimism. Knowing the Ethiopian people's love for freedom for which they shed their blood to make it unique during the scramble for Africa, their natural intelligence, their patience, their rich culture, their resiliency, their capacity to learn as shown following the disaster wrought upon them by the imperialist Ottomans in the 16th century,¹ the sky seemed to be the limit to their potential for democracy, for progress and for development. Yet, it became clear right after the 1992 election that the promise and optimism they had in mind was substituted by a harrowing calamity.²

Democracy, that exalted concept the Greeks invented in Europe and one group of the Ethiopian family, the Oromos practiced for centuries was not on the agenda of the new regime except for employing the term as a palliative for the West's aid package of some 2 billion dollars a year.³ Ethiopia lost its innocence when the Damocles sword of secessionism started to dangle over its head, when its daughter Eritrea became an orphan and its mother forever land-locked, when its centrifugal force of multi-ethnic concord gave way to the raising of the banner of Bantustanism, when feudal tyranny and Derg's totalitarianism gave way to a new form of despotism.

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I happen to be of a generation that sang the mantra of American democracy Abraham Lincoln's "government of the people, by the people and for the people" Thomas Jefferson's ".governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." Many people forget that the Ethiopian youth's forsaking of democracy in the 1960's did not come very easily. It was the frustration of the lack of that hallowed system of governance under Emperor Haile Selassie's modernizing autocracy that turned the Ethiopian Students' Movement towards the East. It was also not only the lack of support but the cold shoulder they received from the United States hailed as a bastion of democracy as evidenced in the rapport du force of the abortive 1960 coup d'etat that led them to a clandestine organization dubbed by many as "the Crocodile movement" ⁴

Mark that when the going got rough, when the so called "White Terror and Red Terror" campaign was unleashed consuming the lives of scores of thousands of youth, none of those lucky enough to escape the carnage chose to go to the Moscow, Peking, or Tirana. Even those who were there on a study mission rushed to America or Western Europe. I remember asking one of those fugitives who came to the States, why he chose to do so. He did not blink an eye. He quoted Benjamin Franklin who said: "Where liberty dwells, there is my country."

Ethiopia, is unique in Africa because it carries the burden of history. But even Ethiopia cannot be what it was before the Portuguese friends came to rescue her from utter destruction – a giant that could "sleep for a thousand years forgetful of the World by whom it was forgotten." Today, we are part of, to use Marshall McLuhan's apt aphorism "a global village"

As soon as the Cold War came to an end, Mengistu's regime lost the external underpinner that had sustained it for a decade and a half since the Soviets with their new policy of 'glasnost and perestroika' could no longer bailout the Derg with "socialist" pretensions.⁵ At the same time, people's war in the name of TPLF, EPLF and OLF pushed the regime into a total desperation. Pummelled from within and shunned from without, Mengistu's regime went into oblivion.

Then a guerrilla movement that was paying allegiance to Enver Hoxja's brand of communism claimed conversion to "Democratisation" and the word became the rallying cry that united internal campaigners for political liberalization as well as external donors in Ethiopia. Former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Herman Cohen's soon warned the Meles regime when it took over power in 1991, "no democracy, no cooperation" and that was music to the ears of Ethiopian democrats because it seemed to signal a new approach to encourage a free and transparent system of governance in Ethiopia. Yet, what was created as a multi-party system proved to be a façade.

An innovative approach that came on the heels of Cohen's democratization drive was the addition of civil society and the guaranteeing of human rights.⁶ The West had come to make these two developments important preconditions for financial support as well as the certification of good governance.⁷

Partly induced by this external pressure and partly goaded by internal forces, there had been a mushrooming of civil society organizations in Ethiopia and the rest of Africa such that the ECA set up what has come to be known as the 'African Centre for Civil Society' (ACCS) in 1997 with the view to strengthening civil society organizations⁸. Trade unions, peasant cooperatives, youth and student organizations,

professional associations, the non-government media, NGOs and advocacy groups soon sprouted. These organizations, as distinct from the formal institutions of governance such as the executive branch, the parliament the judiciary and business groups were expected, to foster deepening and broadening of democratic governance through grass-roots participation.

But there were chronic economic development problems facing Ethiopia. Diseases such as the new pandemic, HIV/AIDS) ravaged the country wiping out the most productive sectors of its population. The war with Eritrea, exacerbated this not only by consuming its youth but also by gobbling up billions that could have been invested on long range development programmes. To redress the problem, one required not only "Determined Leadership" but also creative, pragmatic and responsible leadership that was ready to adopt the requisite policies to rid the country of the dreadful afflictions of economic underdevelopment, disease, and war. Above all, it portended designing a system of political culture of listening to the people rather than dictating to them. But that was not to be.

At this juncture, it is important to discuss the concept we referred to above, the concept of civil society on which many had pinned their primary aspiration.⁹ What is "civil society? Civil society is a public space between the state, the market and the ordinary household, in which people can debate and take actions that try to do right and struggle to right wrongs non-violently. In this definition, civil society includes charities; neighbourhood self-help schemes; international bodies like the Red Cross; religious-based pressure-groups; human rights and non-governmental organizations that try to improve peoples' welfare , their health, their education and their living-standards

Economic transformations that have taken place during the past decade and a half have led to the decline among authoritarian systems of governance. This has spawned the genesis of democratic institutions and systems of authority in Eastern Europe, in Latin America and in Asia.¹⁰ In the specific case of Africa, the respective roles of the state, the precarious market system, and civil society started to be re-considered¹¹ Leading this wave are NGOs devoted to development¹² and Community based Organizations [CBO's,] that advanced headlong against the already entrenched venues that the state and the market had methodically carved out for themselves.

Several political and economic events have led to this re-appraisal. One is the decay and final breakdown of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe as well as their appendages in Africa and Asia. Second is , the increasing integration of centralized economies like Ethiopia, Angola and Mozambique to open capitalist markets. Third is the fiscal crisis exacerbated by the ballooning of the price of oil and the ravages of HIV/AIDS that bedevilled Africa. And fourth is the effects of structural adjustment forced upon nations by the International Monetary Fund and the Market economies of the West. Then, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, symbolically brought to a close the Cold War confrontations between the East and the West and presaged the quest for a different type of development paradigm. After this momentous event, emphasis on democratic governance and economic development became a rallying cry of all wishing to see the rapid economic and political transformation of the South . Civil society, then became a motivating instrument for the new agenda

The proliferation of democratic regimes has gone hand in hand with the emergence of vibrant civil society movements. The Freedom House in New York has for example

found that the number of free or liberal democratic states doubled in less than a decade and a half – growing from 42 in 1972 to 76 in 1985.¹³ What this indicates is that the third wave of democratization alluded to by Huntington in 1999 was being nurtured by civil society.

At the moment, the dual phenomena of civil society and democratic governance have captured the imagination of scholars, social activists, opinion leaders, and development assistance providers. They have generated numerous panels, conferences, and scholarly publications. The trend has stimulated vibrant advocacy for political and economic reforms of the state apparatus. More significantly, it has generated an alternative version of development assistance.

The new approach is to channel bi-lateral and multi-lateral aid and social services through non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), and local private foundations. Civil society institutions were then transformed into preferred service delivery venues for providing aid. They also became instruments of political discourse and key agents of development, particularly considering the bankruptcy of public and para-statal institutions already in place.

Statistics clearly show that at present, donor countries channel their development aid package mainly through NGOs. Thus, while in 1975, the amount of total aid from OECD countries conveyed through NGOs was less than one percent it has risen to five percent, by the beginning of the millennium. This is not including aid emanating from UN agencies and multilateral institutions.¹⁴ The change in this modus operandi came about due to the awareness that in wide contrast to the state apparatus which is burdened

with red tape and infested with corrupt officials, NGOs are more accountable and more transparent as conduits of development assistance.

Civil society is a motor force for mediating the state-society dynamics, the engagement between the two being influenced by the burgeoning communication technologies, the efficient transfer of information through cyber space,¹⁵ the movement of capital, and human resources between institutions and territorial boundaries.

The rapid growth of civil society today must also be juxtaposed against the milieu of many African rulers who try to entrench themselves in power even as they talk of elections and democratic values. Many allow civil society to function in order to advance economic development for which they can claim credit, its spinoff being the acquisition of or consolidation of political legitimacy. Though it has its own limits, civil society is clearly a cardinal factor for reconfiguring the global-local nexus of leadership-state-market-civil society interactions which in turn, define the scope of the challenges of the new millennium.¹⁶

Contrary to popular belief, civil society is far from being new. It has in fact a long intellectual and political tradition. It was practiced even in old Biblical times.¹⁷ We can also easily add our age-old equb credit association among these ancient institutions. Contemporary analysts of civil society have derived their inspiration primarily from the political theories of Locke¹⁸ and de Tocqueville¹⁹ or from Hegel, Marx, and Gramsci. Those who are inspired by the first group of theorists, celebrate the democratic role of civil society organizations [CSM's] and credit them for integrating and propping up the democratic processes and its institutions.²⁰ Their ideas are strongly articulated in the developmental policies and programs promoted by UN agencies, bilateral, and

multilateral institutions in third world and non-Western countries.²¹ But those who are inspired by the second group – the critical theorists have a totally different agenda. Though they define the concept the same way as the first, they portray it more as an instrument that can be utilized for achieving political and economic empowerment.²²

It is important at this juncture to trace the evolution of civil society the way we conceive of it today. For this we have to go back in history to the Greek and Roman periods as far back as 2,500 years ago. It is true that in the Hellenic world, “polis” meant both “Society” and “state” but the Greek term “Demokratia” from which we borrow the concept of democracy literally meant “people power”. For the ancient Greeks, “Demokratia” encompassed not only individual participation in the governance of a country, but also the strong independence of civil society from political rule. This can be clear from Pericles' famous funeral oration, recorded by Thucydides.

We do not get into a state with our next-door neighbour if he enjoys himself in his own way .. We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law. .. Each single one of our citizens, in all the manifold aspects of life, is able to show himself the rightful lord and owner of his own person, and do this, moreover, with exceptional grace and versatility. .. Future ages will wonder at us, as the present age wonders at us now. .. Make up your minds that happiness depends on being free ..²³

Although the ancient Romans like the Greeks, still tended to identify the state with the community of citizens, called 'the Roman people', they did produce some major advances in the conceptual separation of state and 'society', especially in the Roman Law which distinguished between public and private spheres and gave private property a legal status with clarity it had never enjoyed before. In that sense, the modern concept of “civil society” and its association with the specific property relations that citizens enjoy within the framework of the free market individually or in group, is a variation on this old theme.

One thing that is clear in the two traditions is that the term 'civil society' had direct equivalents in both Latin and Greek vernaculars. What the Greeks and the Romans meant by the term was a 'political society', with active citizens directly or indirectly determining and delimiting the range of institutions and policies of a "polis." One notion taken for granted by the classical European philosophers, starkly different from those of contemporary social thinkers is, however, the idea that there were people who could not enjoy the benefit of those who were "civilized." In other words, non-citizens and barbarians- could not have a "civil society."

In 17th century Europe, where the influence of Thomas Hobbes' classic work *Leviathan* (1651), held sway, primitive life was conceived of as one where men constantly competed and in the process, often killed one another over sustenance, property or sex. Just like the Greeks and the Romans, Hobbes also believed that persons construed as 'savages' could not form social organisation. But in a complex developed state with civic rights, individuals can interact with fellow-human beings without resorting to violence.

The term "civil society" was revived with vigour in the eighteenth century when the Scottish social thinker Adam Ferguson, in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, attempted to revitalize the old Roman ideal of civil society where the latter is directly or indirectly shaped by citizens whereas despotism and savagery excluded individuals and groups from partaking in the process of governance. It is important to note that Ferguson, differed from his contemporaries, in that he recognized the social nature of people who tend to live in groups and under the right circumstances, do form civic societies.

In the 19th century, the German philosopher, Hegel who was an avid reader of Ferguson, conceived of civil society as something separate from, although symbiotic with, the state.²⁴ For him it defined men as doing business and as socially networking, separate from the state and its laws.²⁵ However, the “Young Hegelian” Karl Marx, though strongly influenced by his ideological mentor, looked at civil society negatively. For him, civil society was nothing but a manifestation of bourgeois rule. In Marxism, everything is reduced to economic life in which individuals are alienated from their work from their labour relations and from the state.²⁶ Civil society was for him governed by the base which is the economic system and is used by the ruling classes to advance causes working to their benefit.

The modern concept of Civil Society was popularized in a work called “Prison Notebooks” written by the “Euro-communist” Italian member of parliament, Antonio Gramsci who died in Mussolini’s jail in the 1930’s. Going beyond Hegel’s and Marx’s concept of civil society which is perceived to permeate economic and social interactions, Gramsci detached civil society from economic relationships. He conceived civil society within the context of cultural institutions including the church, educational establishments, professional associations and the trade union movement.

For Gramsci, though civil society, subsumed within the concept of 'cultural superstructure', enables the bourgeois class to impose its hegemony in order to keep the working class in its place; it also acts as a wedge between the state and the class-structured system. This, for him, provides a revolutionary potential of dislodging the ruling class and empowering the people. Gramsci is therefore the first theoretician to conceive the idea that civil society co-exists with but is distinct from the state and the

market. He thought, however, that this is going to be transitory. Once a revolution takes place and moves towards its last stage of historical materialism, differences that are now seen among the state, the economy and civil society would disappear. Likewise, individual concerns and communal interests of society would wither away. But until that development takes place, civil society could be utilized towards the advancement of nascent revolutionary process.

There were some followers of Gramsci notably Althusser, Anderson and Bobbiol, who believed in the scientificity of this dialectical process. Then came the American sociologist Talcott Parsons who picked the idea up in the 1960s; but in general, there was little debate or interest among liberal democrats of the West at this time. but there was little debate or interest.

The term 'civil society' resurfaced with vigour with dissidents against the authoritarian states both Latin-America and Eastern Europe. For these dissenters, the idea of civil society as something separate from the state was strategically expedient. For leftists of the 80's and 90's, Gramsci became a revolutionary hero in the same leaguer with Che Guevara and his "Prison Diaries" were read by them with the reverence given to the or the Koran by religious devotees.

In the American context, it was the French theoretician Alexis de Tocqueville who tried to tackle civil society of the post independence period.²⁷ But the American conversion to civil society did not take place before or during the cold war. It came only after the collapse of the Soviet block.

While the neo-Marxists were struggling to define the concept in every way possible, civil society almost disappeared from the lexicon of West European and American

political thinkers. It is interesting to note that it was not in Western Europe or North America but in Latin America and Eastern Europe that 'civil society' as a concept saw its renaissance. In Latin America, Gramsci's concept fit the purpose of the radical activists of the 1970s and 1980s where they had to contend with authoritarian or Fascist dictatorships that were, buoyed by a conservative Catholic culture which could be used as an instrument of domination and subjugation.

With the Central Europeans, the experience was basically different. Pro-democracy intellectuals in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland used a Marxist instrument defined by the neo-Marxist Gramsci and his disciples to challenge a totalitarian state, where no distinction was made between the interests of the ordinary citizens and the interests of the state. The latter dubbed "people's republics" categorically disallowed 'civil society' and placed it within the clutches of a powerful nomenclature class. For the pro-democracy group in Eastern Europe, therefore, it was only logical to employ a 'civil society' instrument to dislodge the seemingly powerful but intrinsically weak states that had barricaded themselves within the confines of colossal military and security apparatus that happened to be equally fragile and a paper tiger when faced with "people power." The Solidarity civil society movement that brought down Poland's totalitarian system, is an excellent example of this phenomenon.

After the visible social transformations elicited by civil society in Latin America and Central Europe became public knowledge, the spirit of the movement started to spread into other parts of the Third World like wildfire. Africans trampled under dictatorships saw the potential of the concept in their arduous struggle to win freedom from dictators of diverse hues. For them, there emerged also a rather more

cynical explanation for the concept's popularity. Donor countries all invariably from the West, had adopted the creed that strengthening civil society is essential for sustained development. Thus using the language of civil society became almost a prerequisite to apply for funding.

Civil society is not a concept that Ethiopians alone hold dear today. It is an idea and a reality that affects everybody, in every nation on earth ²⁸It is a term that is cropping up among all those who are concerned with good governance.²⁹ It is 'the ultimate third way' of administering a society. Even US President George W Bush had stated in his inaugural address that "a civil society demands from each of us good will, respect, [and] fair dealing." Addressing an international conference recently, UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan remarked:

The United Nations once dealt only with Governments. By now we know that peace and prosperity cannot be achieved without partnerships involving Governments, international organizations, the business community and civil society. In today's world, we depend on each other.

In the case of Ethiopia, after centuries of autocracy and oppression and a decade and a half of totalitarianism, it would be naïve to hope that a strong, vibrant and vocal civil society would sprout out of the blue. There is a trace of it but the road to make it work for the people of Ethiopia is bound to be long and arduous.

The disastrous calamities of hunger of 1973 and 1984 attracted large numbers of NGO's to Ethiopia.³⁰ At first, their preoccupation was with famine relief and rehabilitation, but in time, they extended their services into long range development activities³¹ which by its nature showed the weakness of the state to provide the basic needs of its citizens. The bloody and expensive civil war waged particularly in the North,

the shrinking price of commodities in the world market, the wastage of the country's resources and the slow pace of economic development made it impossible for the state to provide the people with what it promised to fulfil when the ancien regime was toppled.

Not only did the NGO's become indispensable, their numbers proliferated since the mid 80's when there were only 70 non-governmental organizations. Today there are 350 and more are created every year. Although their impact is minimal due to lack of resources, the local NGO's have also increased from 34% in 1994 to 68% in 2006.³² But local NGO's are also engaged primarily with family welfare and basic health matters

In general, the amenities provision and development programs of the NGO' have so far benefited 14% of the rural masses and have created 14,000 jobs. The range of these activities continues to grow each day. Since 1984, they have spent 49% on agricultural projects, 8.7% on health, 7.5% on urban development programmes, and 6.2 % on environmental protection. The amount slated for education is less than 4%. Similarly, sanitation and water projects attracted less than 4%.³³

NGO's are known for reaching the most disadvantaged peasants in the remotest parts of the country.³⁴ They are also characterized with efficacy and flexibility compared with the government that is burdened with bureaucratic red tape. They introduce innovative methods that are useful to the rural masses in their daily life. Their approach, unlike that of the government which believes in simply offering help the way it perceives it, is participatory. However, none of them have so far involved themselves in policy advocacy for fear that it might get them into trouble with a suspicious government that constantly keeps them under guard.³⁵

The main advocacy groups in Ethiopia are few in number. By the end of the last decade, there were only about 12 in the entire country. Most are small in size and lack experience in carrying out their proclaimed aims of advancing human rights issues such as respect for the rule of law and the creation of civic awareness among the people. What can be considered unorthodox is that despite the fact that poverty and environmental degradation, are major problems of the country,³⁶ few even raise the two issues in their advocacy activities.³⁷ Two of the most well known and most vocal in this category are EHRCO and EWLA

The Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) was created in October 1991 by concerned individuals from academia, business and the professions. Its cardinal objectives are the advancement of: the democratic process, governance by the rule of law and general protection human rights.³⁸ It also states in its manifesto that it is opposed to ethnic intolerance and religious fundamentalism as a method of gaining political power.

EHRCO has clearly stated in its publicity campaign that it is totally devoted to peace and harmony and fights all forms of dictatorships. In the last decade and a half, the Ethiopian Human Rights Council remained as the only organization that scrutinized and reported transgressions of human rights violations by government personnel. It has produced over a dozen lengthy reports describing acts of unlawful incarceration of citizens, torture, extra-judicial murders, and violations of property rights. It has also published a book entitled: *Democracy, Rule of Law and Human Rights in Ethiopia: Rhetoric and Practice* in April 1995. This informative book is now being widely used

by international human rights groups as well as concerned governments of the democratic world.

ERCO, by detailing the foibles of the Meles regime, has become such a nuisance to the authorities that not only did the government refuse to register it as a legitimate NGO but in 1998, the state controlled Commercial Bank of Ethiopia refused to release its assets thus forcing EHRCO to survive on donations from the public.³⁹ Though EHRCO does not represent aggrieved persons in court or help them with legal aid, its main strength is the capacity to publicize government violations of human rights which it exposes not only to the citizens at large but also to the donor community on which the regime depends.⁴⁰

Established in 1995 the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) has the stated objectives, of sensitizing the general public a propos the plights of Ethiopian women who have generation after generation been subjected to blatant abuses of human rights where they faced administrative, legal and social intolerance and bigotry that included, domestic violence, abduction, rape, assault and battery. EWLA preoccupies itself with lobbying the government to adopt legal reforms in order to change all inequitable and gender based legal provisions that adversely affect the rights of female members of the society. During the last decade, it fought to right many wrongs.

It is clear that in Ethiopia, women's condition has always remained precarious. Females have never been treated equally in the social, economic and political arena. For generations, they lacked a voice to be heard in the society and could not put pressure on the government to change adverse conditions. Tendering advice to and representing aggrieved women in litigations comprise the legal aid component of EWLA's mission.

By the year 2000, EWLA had given free legal aid to 30,000 women, through its national office in Addis Ababa and a dozen branch offices located in remote places like Asosa in the Beni Shangul zone. Most, who have benefited from this generous service were from poor and downtrodden urban and peasant households.⁴¹

The organization has so far accomplished much. EWLA has tried to empower women in terms of land ownership since both legally and traditionally, women could not inherit land and the only way they can have access to land is through marriage. But when the husband passes away, the widow cannot keep the land; she is evicted immediately.

One of the shining achievements of EWLA is the part it played in changing one section of discriminatory family laws. The old law stated that the husband was the head of the household and was therefore by implication in control of the family's common property including land.⁴² EWLA successfully fought and got that law changed to one that does not discriminate against women.

In another case, the old law stated that in a situation when paying for domestic work was not possible, the wife was obliged to provide household maid service. During divorce, when child custody and division of property was at issue, family arbitration was the mechanism by which the problem was solved. But this was always against the basic interest of the wives since the institution was made up mostly of men. EWLA succeeded to channel this to the normal courts that would interpret the law more equitably.

The old law put the marriage age of women at 15. Now, thanks to EWLA's arduous struggle, this has been changed to 18. But tradition dies hard and in some parts of the country, girls as young as 8 and 10 are still forced by their families into marriage. So the fight of EWLA in this is to see to it that the law is respected and that the transgressors

punished in order to protect children against abuse. The same with female genital mutilation which is forbidden by law but is widely practiced.

At the present time, EWLA is fighting to address the problem of domestic violence and sexual harassment at the work place so that there would be legislation not only prohibiting such practice but also prescribing stiff sentences to stop them.⁴³ The organization is also agitating for the creation of a human rights tribunal and the office of an ombudsman.

EWLA is now fighting to increase the participation of women in the democratic process not only as voters but also as elected officials. They are agitating to force the government to follow the example of South Africa, Uganda and Mozambique where minimum quotas have been set in place for women candidates interested to participate in elections.

Next come professional associations which were discouraged during the Haile Selassie days even though none of them had political ambitions. It was worse under the Derg that saw “bourgeois interest” and the inexistent but nevertheless assumed long hand of “Imperialism” behind any independent professional body. As a result, they were forced to dismantle or voluntarily closed shop. The only safe organization allowed to function unmolested after the 1974 revolution was the Ethiopian Medical Association which steered off sensitive issues and discussed problems connected only to health.

The fall of the Mengistu regime in 1991 led to the creation, with renewed vigour, of significant numbers of professional associations. By the end of the 1990's, there were 75 of them though most were small in size with a routine function of looking after the

narrow interest of the membership. Some ritually met once a year while others put out occasional professional publications. None, however, dared raise any issue of general public interest such as democratization or human rights violations. One notable exception is the Ethiopian Economic Association which is known to hold meetings by academics, professionals and even government personnel to discuss broad policy issues. In its bi-monthly publications and occasional papers, the EEA had boldly criticized the government on some key policy and economic development matters, though not serious enough to incite the wrath of the Meles regime.⁴⁴ But even this organization has rarely raised matters pertaining to democratization and human rights abuses.

Trade Unions are arguably the oldest NGO's to emerge during the feudal period. The Ethiopian Railway Workers' Association [ERWA] was organized right after the end of Italian Fascist occupation in 1941. But the most significant development was the birth of the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions [CELU] in the early 1960's. CELU's membership reached 70,000 just before the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie's regime. Mengistu's Derg then totally purged the leadership of CELU following the attempted general strike of 1976. The military junta took over the organization, entrusted it to its political cadres and made it a docile body that would only be mobilized to support the regime whenever a need arose.

The EPRDF regime has not been any less hostile to the trade union movement than it has been to other independent civil society organizations. Its known tactic is to foment splinter in the organizations, support factions favourable to its policies and crack down on groups opposed to it. Many labour leaders have thus been thrown out of their jobs, jailed, or exiled. In practice, under all regimes, whether feudal, Marxist-Leninist, or

Ethnic Federalist, the trade union movement was a sleeping giant that was forcefully and systematically manipulated by the powers that be.

The Ethiopian Teachers' Association is the oldest professional association in Ethiopia. It was established in 1948 with 32 members. It is the largest organization in the country with a membership of 120,000. The ETA has been harassed during the feudal regime and its members jailed, killed or exiled during the time of the Derg. It should not be surprising that even after the liberalization that took place following the fall of the Mengistu regime in 1991, the EPRDF had been keeping a close eye on ETA's activities being aware that it was one of the groups that spear-headed the fall of the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974.

As part of its intimidation mechanism, the government arrested Dr Taye Woldeamayrat, President of the Ethiopian Teachers' Association, on 29 May 1996 at Addis Ababa international airport upon his return from a general meeting in Europe. He was accused of armed conspiracy so that if convicted, he would face the death penalty. Taye is well-known internationally as a government critic, who has always opposed violence and has eschewed party political affiliation; and he was just among many who were harassed, and maltreated because the present government has a plan to control all trade union movement in the country. The chair of the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions, Dawi Ibrahim, was forced to flee to the Netherlands where he asked for a political asylum to escape unremitting government surveillance on his private life and open ended persecution and hostile measures by the state machine. The General Secretary of the ETA, Gemoraw Kassa, fearing for his life, has taken asylum in the UK.

The harassment aimed against the Ethiopian Teachers' Association members has never abated since it started on a large scale in 1993. In order to destroy it as an organization, the government of Mr. Meles has resorted to the freezing of ETA bank account as well as its pension fund. It has also closed down its regional offices, conducted several illegal searches, fired ETA members from their professional jobs and jailed many peaceful activists.

The EPRDF government has disfranchised the original ETA and has established in its place, a rival pro-government organisation that carries the same name. In May 1997, ETA executive committee officer Assefa Maru, who was also a member of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council executive committee, was shot and killed in broad daylight.

When the EPRDF came to power in 1991, it adopted a national charter and to their great joy, journalists were informed that except in matters concerning state security, they were free to enjoy full rights to disseminate information in any shape or form without state interference. But in practice, that was not to be.⁴⁵ The Ministry of Information routinely cancels licenses of those publications that it deemed “have not been able to respect their journalistic code of ethics as well as failing to discharge their responsibilities.” Thus, many have lost their businesses. According to a well-known international human rights organization, the Committee to Protect Journalists [CPJ], no less than 300 reporters have been jailed in Ethiopia since 1992. It has also been public knowledge that between 1992 and the end of year 2005, at least 16 Ethiopian journalists lost their lives in the hands of armed death squads.

The chairperson of the Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association, Mr. Kifle Mulat, announced in 2000, many journalists lost their lives under dubious circumstances, including suicides. Robert Menard, general secretary of CPJ, wrote to the Ethiopian Minister of Culture and Information that the journalists “did nothing more than exercise [their] professional duties and should never have been arrested.”⁴⁶ He reminded the Ethiopian authorities that, “Since they have ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, they have the duty to protect press freedom.”⁴⁷ The government of Mr. Meles however did not change its course.

Following the disputed election result of May, 2005, editors and reporters of independent and privately-owned newspapers were detained and charged with “treason,” “outrages against the Constitution” and “incitement to armed conspiracy”.⁴⁸ The accusations are reportedly based on published articles. They are also related to the charges against the KINIJJIT leaders. None of them are members of that political party, though they had conducted interviews with its leaders and had made critical remarks about the EPRDF government regarding the conduct of the election. Six publishing companies owned by some of the accused journalists were charged with offences as corporate entities. Most of the detained journalists had been arrested more than once before and they are incarcerated under the 1992 Press Law for no other reason than expressing their opinions and exercising their legitimate professional duties as reporters

Since December 2005, numeral trials with serious charges have been laid.⁴⁹ Two journalists of Oromo background who worked for the state television service have been remanded in custody since 2004 . The accusation against them was alleged armed

conspiracy and membership in the OLF and the Mecha Tulema Association that the government has targeted as outlaws and illegal entities.⁵⁰

Former and current presidents of the Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association (EFJA) were charged with professional misconduct, misdemeanours and felonies. The two escaped arrest because whereas the previous EFJA president, had fled the country in 1997, the current president was abroad attending a Human Rights Defenders conference in Uganda at the time the charges were laid.⁵¹ A reporter for Hadar newspaper, was also arrested in November 2005 and was charged in a separate treason trial. The EPRDF government's draft new Press Law, heavily criticized by the international media was sent to parliament for promulgation. Even without that, new provisions in the 2005 Criminal Code clearly stifle freedom of the press.⁵² The new regulations also provide for harsher treatment for alleged "media crimes".

It is clear that the conduct of the EPRDF does not in any way measure up to international treaty standards which define the character of freedom of press. As a result of the arrests of journalists and editors, and the closure of their offices, freedom of expression, including the right to request and obtain information, has been gravely curtailed under the EPRDF government. The few independent newspapers, that are left unmolested are the *Reporter* and *Addis Tribune*, both of which publish their pieces employing self-censorship.

Nine reporters were charged in a case involving the Kinijit party leaders who were elected into parliament by landslide but have now been thrown into jail on allegations of attempted genocide which carries the death penalty. Five others arrested include U.S. citizens who work for the Voice of America (VOA) radio. The accusations

against them, also “attempted genocide” and “crimes against humanity” were dropped in March 2006 under U.S. pressure. A reporter for the US-based *Ethiopian Review* website, whose editor is accused in absentia was arrested on 27 January 2006 when she was three months pregnant. Two US-based Ethiopian website editors are still charged in absentia for the same reason⁵³.

On March 30, 2005, the Government of Ethiopia, expelled three internationally esteemed United States non-governmental organizations--the International Republican Institute,[IRI] the National Democratic Institute, [NDI] and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems-[IFES] -that were attempting to train civil society organizations so that they would promote a democratic practice that would help the general election process of 2005. Draft of a bill introduced by Mr. Chris Smith of New Jersey [Republican] . who is the Vice Chairman of the House Committee on International Relations has demanded that the Meles government reinstate these organizations so that they can help the People of Ethiopia achieve their cherished aim of building democracy.⁵⁴ Then on June 27, 2006, a bipartisan Bill sponsored by Mr. Smith himself and Congressman Donald Payne (Democrat) which was named "Ethiopia Freedom, Democracy, and Human Rights Advancement Act of 2006" unanimously passed the Full International Relations Committee and is now being forwarded to the Full House.⁵⁵This proves that just like in Europe, there is a growing US support for Ethiopia's struggle to uphold justice and build genuine democratic governance.

Another civil society organization in Ethiopia is connected with the rural masses. It was the Derg that established service and producers cooperatives in order to administer its land nationalization policy. However, these organs were not independent units; they

were created by and were controlled by party cadres most of whom worked in the ministry of agriculture. Their non-voluntary nature lead to the unpopularity of the institution.⁵⁶ It was owing to this unpopularity that when the Derg fell, all service cooperatives became a target of arson and looting.⁵⁷ Their assets and properties were confiscated by vigilantes all over the country.

The EPRDF that looked at peasant associations as a nest of Derg stalwarts dismantled the whole structure, arrested many of its leaders and launched a new mixed economy policy which it thought would win the support of the donor community. Since then however, it had second thoughts and has re-established service cooperatives but this time on a voluntary basis. One important function of the Service cooperatives today is to buy grain from the farmers at the time of harvest and sell them during periods when food becomes scarce. Cooperatives also double as sellers of products at a cheaper price. Some deliver veterinary services and sell necessary drugs to peasants in remote areas. However, the problem is that those running these services are not peasants themselves but government functionaries⁵⁸ who favoured those who voted for the EPRDF and punished those who supported the opposition parties. It is important to note in this connection that for the EPRDF, opposition parties that some citizens choose to support are not the potential government of tomorrow; they are enemies to be destroyed.

Conclusion.

Two scholars, Desalegn Rahmato and Kassahun Berhanu have made an extensive empirical research and have made stinging criticisms regarding the conduct of civil societies in general and NGO's in particular. According to their observation, the problem of civil society organizations is that it is the government not the organizations

themselves that decide what they have to do. Since they need to renew their registration permits annually, they are totally at the mercy of the EPRDF.⁵⁹ In fact it is this modus operandi that has given the state undue power over civil society organizations's and has stifled free will and group initiative.

The bureaucratic warren deliberately put in place by the ruling elite has proven to be highly unproductive. While moving at a snails pace in providing permits, regulations and supervisions prescribed by the government are tainted with abuse and corruption and have strained relations between the beneficiaries of the services and the functionaries of the state. That the state through its party machine creates and runs parallel organizations for trade unions, women's and peasant bodies to stifle the function of the civil society organizations has made the whole exercise almost a farce.

Civil society institutions, in Ethiopia do not depend on contributions from voluntary or philanthropic organizations but are rather dependent on international donors.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the brain drain that has hit the country during the time of the Derg has depleted the country's trained manpower is essential in running most of the civil society organizations .

The fact that the civil society organizations are concentrated in Addis Ababa and are hardly seen in rural areas has meant that their impact, if any, has been greatly diminished. The public is not informed of the day to day activities of the civil society organizations since the fledgling independent press is generally inept concentrating on sensational issues to sell its papers than informing the public of the positive inputs of the civil society organizations. Furthermore, in government circles, the civil society organizations are not looked at as voluntary organizations that cater to the interest of the

public but rather as an extension of the political activities of the opposition groups. But some of the bold and vocal institutions such as ERCO do advance public awareness and promote human rights, democratic values and good governance though some of their architects such as Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam have to face ridiculous charges of “crimes against humanity” and “attempted genocide” and are presently languishing in jail.⁶¹

One cannot deny that other NGO’s that came in the name of emergency relief aid have contributed to the rural masses of Ethiopia by donating emergency food aid, by providing sanitary services, water and health care systems. In general, they have increased the chances for food security through their “Food for \Work” programme and by contributing to rehabilitation and long range development programmes.⁶²

When it comes to enhancing democracy, Ethiopia’s civil societies have contributed little. Democracy in this sense means the advancement of social well-being through the enjoyment of political freedoms and civil liberties; it means being governed by the rule of law, being able to engage in open discussion regarding issues that affect one’s life, choosing policies and priorities through the active participation either directly or in directly in decision making process and resolve matters through pragmatic consent and open discussion, it means empowering and raising the lot of vulnerable citizens in one’s area of competency.⁶³

The Christian Relief and Development agency has made public one its findings in a Survey where it found that 72 per cent of all NGOs engaged in relief work in Ethiopia⁶⁴ deal strictly with subsidies and service delivery activities, 22 per cent concentrate on the improvement of the quality of life of its rural clientele as well as their

productive capacities. This latter group gave emergency aid when the need arose. Only 10 out of 350 NGO's operating in Ethiopia mentioned engaging in human rights advocacy, and democratic awareness.

Repeated studies have shown that the activities of most NGO's in Ethiopia are supply driven. They aim to satisfy the source of their funding to carry out their prescribed projects. The funding almost entirely come either from donor countries abroad or from the government of Ethiopia itself which supplies and, basic infrastructure and tax relief for goods imported in connection with relief programmes. Due to this dual dependence the NGO's go out of their way to please foreign donors as well as the government of Ethiopia.⁶⁵ One thing that they would never do in order to keep this delicate balance is therefore not to advocate anything that may displease the government.⁶⁶ Hence their total silence on the advocacy of democratic empowerment and the protection of human rights.

Civil society is clearly a necessary condition for sustainable development – sustainable development not only economically but also socially. It is a sign of liberty, democracy and an exercise of free will. But one needs to create a set of practices and institutional frameworks that link the voluntary association in Ethiopia to advocacy duties that each and every one of us can help with. We should bear in mind that the NGO's in the country are exceedingly fearful of the Meles regime and lack confidence in their role as public advocacy groups. They are unsure of their mission outside providing relief and development aid. Hence, there is a need to steer them towards peaceful activism where they can employ their enormous monetary power to bear upon the regime to respond to the people of Ethiopia's yearning for democracy and good governance. On the positive

side, many of the rich countries of the West that have generously given billions to Ethiopia tend to channel a large segment of their aid money through NGO's rather than through government bureaucracies that they know are infested with corrupt officials. We have to goad the NGO's whether international or local to shift focus. We have to see to it that they develop approaches and strategies that facilitate conditions for democratic transformation.

Indeed, without the active engagement of educated Ethiopians in the Diaspora or at home, it is difficult to expect the Civil Societies in the country to desist from their present practice of avoiding issues that deal with democratic governance and human rights. We have to demand from all of them that relief aid is not enough, that they ought to do everything in their power to educate our people to practice democracy and to derail the autocratic and divisive road chosen by the Meles regime. Only if we do that can we reasonably handle the enormous problems our people are facing and fulfill their needs with decency and civility. We have to create more forums like the one prepared by the Ethiopian Americans Council on July 2 2006. We need a civil discourse. But we should realize that a civil discourse is more than a plea to seek a just and rational outcome by replicable, traceable formal instrumental procedures adopted by civil societies. Rather it is to undertake and participate in an active covenant that as Ethiopians, we cannot avoid our civic duties. We have to excite debate on civil society, for to avoid doing so is to ignore some of the fundamental elements of modernity that we wish our country should have, a modernity which is a bedrock of democracy, freedom, and human dignity. In conclusion, I would like to point out something important to the Meles regime. Ethiopia and Ethiopia's freedom was dashed to the ground in 1451 when the Ottomans employed

surrogates and launched a devastating proxy war with firearms that Ethiopia did not have; the Italian Fascists dashed Ethiopia and Ethiopia's freedom with tanks, planes and poison gas that Ethiopia did not have; and in 2005, the TPLF dashed Ethiopia and its people's free choice by using stealth and death squads that the Ethiopian people do not have and have no interest in having. But Ethiopia is like an India rubber ball: the harder you dash her to the ground, the higher she rises.

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 END NOTES

² The armies of Ahmad el Gazi [Gragh for Ethiopians] succeeded to defeat the Ethiopian army because the Turks, armed his troops with firearms which the Ethiopians did not have. The Portuguese, who came to defend Ethiopian Christians against the invasion introduced firearms which became a weapon that all Ethiopian emperors after El Gazi's defeat bought to use in the ensuing wars including at the battle of Aiwa where the Italian colonialists were totally crushed, thus ensuring the uninterrupted independence of Ethiopia.

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³ Pausewang, Siegfried, Kjetil Tronvoll and Lovise Aalen (eds) 2002: *Ethiopia since the Derg: A Decade of Democratic Pretension and Performance*. London: ZED Books.

⁴ U.S. officers were close advisors of the loyalists and Haile Selassie was brought from Brazil on a U.S. plane that used the American base in Liberia from where he contacted his supporters who instructed him to head home since they were already in control. From Liberia Haile Selassie flew to the American base in Asmara before returning to the capital. The Ethiopian students who supported the change never forgave the U.S. for that action because they thought they would support a move towards a more liberal system of government in the country.

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Leykum Engeded of Wonchif newspaper was sent to jailed for 15 months. On March 8, Abraham Gebrekidan of Politika magazine was thrown into jail. Abraham Reta, a freelance reporter, was sent to jail for a year. On 19 April Goshu Moges of Lissane Hezeb newspaper, was charged with treason and is awaiting trial that might bring him the death penalty. Ibid.

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