

## Ethiopian Political Elites and Their Foreign Policy Perspectives (revised)

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**“The only true knowledge is knowledge of one’s own ignorance.”**  
Socrates

A major **intellectual vacuum** that persists in discussing Ethiopia’s present and future is the content, rationale, vision and direction of the **country’s foreign policy, meaning the country’s relations with nations, states, the United Nations system and international organizations which influence, affect and play critical roles in the well being of the Ethiopian people.** Increased globalization, the rise of new economic and political powers such as Brazil, China, India and Russia (BRICS), recent developments in financial markets, increased commodity prices, regional competition for natural resources including use of water resources, the movement toward African regional and continental cooperation and integration, the fight against international terrorism, the unprecedented and historic election in the United States with the first African-American nominated to be President of the USA, and, regional stability compel us to take a deeper look into our individual and collective memories and examine our perceptions of Ethiopia’s relations with the outside world. It behooves us to look at the world and the country’s relations with a different and more progressive lens with Ethiopia’s interest in mind.

These developments and the dramatic demographic changes in Ethiopia, with youth emerging as the dominant age group, demand that, political actors, intellectuals, opinion makers and spiritual leaders take a fresher look at how Ethiopia and Ethiopians should and can be positioned to take advantage of new opportunities that have begun to emerge and that will continue to flourish in the decades to come. If there is anything we can dare to predict, it is to anticipate the unpredictable. We say this because **change** is inevitable. The question is how and in what ways we can influence and, if we are smart, shape it to improve the lives of the Ethiopian people.

### **Dramatic changes in international relations:**

Ethiopian political elites of any persuasion, intellectuals and opinion makers must grasp the reality that today’s **world is radically different** from what it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the decades to come, the world will see dramatic changes in the relations of states. China, which decades ago, was considered to be a country that may fracture, has emerged as a major economic and political power player, with huge influence in Ethiopia and the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa. The Olympics that dazzled the world community demonstrated its prowess as an economic,

social, political and global power that has to be taken seriously. It just achieved its first manned space ship which it successfully launched and brought back safely. Indian companies have become global players, with huge stakes in Sub-Saharan Africa. Russia has begun to assert itself as a reemerging 'super power' with economic and military ties to Venezuela and other countries. Brazil is now an economic powerhouse with far reaching investments throughout Latin America, North America, the Pacific region and Southern Africa. The European Union is no longer an appendage to the United States. Small oil rich Gulf States exert huge influence on Wall Street, Main -Street and, on Ethiopian young people who want to break away from the trap of poverty.

Many Sub-Saharan African countries have begun to transform the lives of their citizens for the better through **good economic and political governance**. **For example, Mauritius, a small island country with limited resources and, a diverse population, is among the most developed in the Region. Among its proudest achievements--- a good African example for all Ethiopians, is the shattering of divisive ethnic silos and mindsets and the establishment of an all inclusive nation state.** Rwanda, a country that went through horrific genocide is building a post ethnic, progressive and democratic society largely free of bitterness, bigotry, hatred and mistrust. Here too, wise, participatory and forward looking political, social and economic leadership is playing a lead role. Botswana, Ghana, post conflict Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania and Uganda are growing at steady paces by opening the windows of economic opportunity to all of their citizens. South Africa serves as the hub of Africa's economic renaissance, with many Ethiopians moving to and, some thriving in the private sector.

### **Why should we care about these transformations?**

We should care because the confluence of these and other global developments has and will continue to have dramatic impact on Ethiopian society for better or for worse. In order to understand the potential impact, we must grasp the formidable economic, environmental, social, financial, political and cultural challenges that the Ethiopian people face. Hunger and starvation of millions, especially children; price escalation at rates unprecedented in the country's history; environmental degradation that will affect generations to come; endemic corruption with a privileged few amassing wealth, while the vast majority are unable to meet their basic needs; constant migration of intellectual and other social capital; financial transfers and flight; denial of fundamental freedoms and rights; fractured opposition groups that spend more time chastising one another rather than building bridges; a generation of political elites that does not acknowledge its mistakes and that does not learn from the past; rampant greed and individualism mimicking the worst in Western culture and, suffocating or crowding out the best in Ethiopian culture, identity and traditions. What happens regionally and globally will continue to have profound impact on Ethiopia and Ethiopians. We ignore these developments at our peril.

Educated Ethiopians in general, political elites, intellectuals and opinion makers in particular, have an obligation to their country and society to respond to these challenges through a new lens. Simply put, the new lens cannot be less than the capacity to think outside the box, **placing the vital national interests of the Ethiopian people as a whole central to political thinking and action.** It cannot be less than the willingness and readiness to be flexible; and, to see political struggle as a means to achieve a better society so that the lives of ordinary people would improve. They have to challenge their mindsets in fundamental ways. The paradigm of thinking with a focus on narrow, ethnic or religion based interests; on political brinkmanship; short sighted alliances; vitriolic attacks on one another; placing blame only on the ruling party and its leadership will not do. The blame game is a path to disaster. Those who make 'the blame game' a political and social sport cannot and will not contribute to the aspirations and hopes of the Ethiopian people in constructive and innovative ways.

### **The 'I know it all' culture of elites:**

The hurdle for transformation resides within each and every one of us because we have not shown the capacity and willingness to go beyond our egos, self interests, 'friends and acquaintances.' As the quotation above states, the first step towards transformation ought to be the ability and willingness to acknowledge that **"Knowledge is knowledge of one's own ignorance."** Experience and history teach us that political elites, intellectuals and opinion makers rarely admit that their individual and group knowledge and understanding of complex societal and global issues may be limited. There is no single individual or group who can be a source of wisdom on every topic and every issue. Yet, this ego and arrogance oriented mindset prevails and persists to this day. The willingness and readiness to learn from one another; the ability to listen in order to understand rarely occurs. There is a mindset of becoming an expert on every thing without justification or merit. Readiness and sharpening of the pen or the spoken word are rampant among us. Willingness and capability to look at different options in order to come up with solutions are barely practiced in our political tradition. Our notion of leadership differs from one person to another; from one group to another. We discuss democracy and democratic concepts but rarely deploy them in our interactions within groups and with one another. There is very little acknowledge of the need for order and discipline in running political organizations and groups because of the tendency of 'I know as much as you do' culture. We hardly walk the talk, as management experts say.

In short, Ethiopian political elites have yet to go beyond mimicking reminiscent of the ideology of the 'left in the 1960s and 1970s' when individual political leaders and factions made communist ideology a central tenet of their political discourse. They tried to out-left one another; galvanized innocent young women and men who had no clue of the vision and consequences of belonging to this or that faction. The national question that the current ruling party adopted became a

mantra, with liberation fronts exploiting it to their own advantages. At the time that the national question (the right of nations to self determination, including secession) dominated political thinking of the rising left, only a limited few warned against its unintended consequences. Those who advocated its virtues never calculated its long term adverse impact on Ethiopian society. As one Ethiopian intellectual put it in a conversation recently: **“Advocates of secession found turkeys in our midst unable to predict that they will be sent to the slaughter house”** in due course.

For sure, the innocent wanted the peasants and workers to be free of feudal oppression and found the left tantalizing and paid dearly with their lives. The recklessness of carbon copying leftist ideologies is still inexplicable. Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Che Guevara, Castro, Ho Chi Min and other revolutionaries were the heroes who shaped thinking and political actions and alliances. There was limited appreciation and understanding of the context in which such variations of socialist ideology could be and should be applied in the Ethiopian context. Some of today’s ardent promoters of freedom and democracy were among the strongest proponents of this ideology. They were also among the most vocal supporters of the current ruling party. History will show whether or not they have totally detached themselves from the grips of the ruling group that enchanted them in the first place.

To be sure, the Ethiopian student movement and some aspects of leftist politics raised political awareness in the country. In large measure though, the result of the left’s short lived experiment has been a disaster for the Ethiopian people. Thousands of innocent Ethiopians and a whole generation of young women and men were sacrificed for a cause that was not ultimately sustained through reason, dialogue and a long term vision and strategy that will server the Ethiopian people as a whole. Ethiopia became a land-locked country in part because of the left’s miscalculations. The saddest thing is that we, collectively, have **been unable to admit the enormous mistakes** made on behalf and in the name of the Ethiopian people. We still blame ‘others’ for the miscalculations and enormous mistakes made. We even blame foreign powers for our own failings without the willingness and capacity to reflect and examine our own mistakes, values, strengths and weaknesses. Introspection is in short supply.

### **What can and should political elites do?**

In order to be taken seriously by foreign powers and actors, Ethiopian elites in the opposition camp and opinion makers must show skills, competence, dedication to national interest that will serve all Ethiopians and willingness to compromise for the greater good. They must energize and motivate others. They must never lose sight of the reason why change is vital for all stakeholders. They must be able to distinguish between right and wrong and refrain from blaming any one who differs from them, because no one is perfect as Ethiopia’s 20<sup>th</sup> century political history shows.

**Accordingly and in light of the past, there is every reason to argue that what will serve all Ethiopians is to make the common political, social, economic, financial and cultural interests of the people at the heart of political and social thinking, vision, strategy and action.** Any thing less is simply irrelevant and self serving. Political gymnastics and mimicking this or that ideology won't make any difference to a poor farmer, malnourished child, HIV/AIDS or malaria victim, a poor urban dweller who is unable to feed his/her family, a young woman/man without a job, prisoners languishing in thousands of jails throughout Ethiopia because she/he opposes the ruling party, a refugee in the Sudan with no hope of freedom or livelihood and so on. It makes no difference to affected Ethiopians whether in Afar, Bale, Gambela, Gondar, Gojjam, Harrar, Ogaden, Sidamo or Tigray.

The degrees of oppression and agony may differ from one region/town to another. But the majority of Ethiopians suffer from the same bad political and economic governance and, from dysfunctional and self-serving political elites that have failed to take the high road of serving the **national interests of the Ethiopian people**. Blaming the leadership of the ruling party does not and will not serve the Ethiopian people. Look at where political elites are today compared to where they were during the May 15, 2005 elections and then judge by yourselves whether the 'blame game' has worked. They offered hope and then failed to live up to the promises they made to the Ethiopian people. In our view, the blame game has not and will not work.

Part of the 'blame game' goes to foreign powers, especially the United States which has buffeted the ruling party. For sure, the current US administration supported and supports a dictatorship in Ethiopia as it did dictatorships in other parts of the globe, for example, the **Military dictatorship in Pakistan that has now been removed. In supporting dictators, the US was simply motivated by its own national interest.** To US decision makers, dictators who are strong are preferable to weak fractured, self serving and non viable alternative opposition groups and personalities. No one takes weak opposition groups seriously irrespective of their motives. Therefore, placing blame on a foreign sponsor of dictatorship in Ethiopia without getting one's act together makes no sense. We can begin the hard journey of being more responsible and responsive to the Ethiopian people by stopping the carnage of blaming one another. We can strengthen this by reaching out to one another so that governments, opinion makers, potential supporters and the Ethiopian people will begin to trust our judgment and maturity.

In sum, we believe that it is **time that we all reach out to one another** and conduct constructive dialogue to arrive at alternatives to support the democratization process in our country. We believe that if we are willing, we can stop the sliding path that will only perpetuate the agonies the vast majority of the Ethiopian people face each and every day. Only then would we be taken

seriously by the international community and, more importantly by the Ethiopian people we purport to support.

### **National interest shapes foreign policy:**

One of the areas of Ethiopian failed political elite leadership (the opposition camp) is lack of a deep grasp of the real foundations that shape the foreign policies of powerful countries such as the United States, regardless of the regime in power on either side. It is especially critical that we understand the driving factor of United States policy since we are now uniformly inclined to think that Senator Obama may end up winning the Presidential Election. Without doubt, his victory will be a shining example of the compelling virtues of democracy and freedom. That the son of a black African would win and head the most powerful nation on the planet today will be a historical event and, will either confirm (if elected through a fair and transparent process) that the US practices its values; or (if not elected due to his race), that the US has no moral authority to preach democracy and freedom when it is unable to practice them at home. His election will raise the hopes and aspirations of hundreds of millions of people around the globe, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa where good political and economic governance is lacking. America will have restored its credibility as the hub of democracy and freedom. Those aspiring and hoping for peace, democracy and freedom will have a most significant ally in the White House. For these reasons, Ethiopian Diaspora support to Senator Obama is not only commendable but the right thing to do.

However, the key driver of United States foreign policy toward Ethiopia will remain fundamentally the same. It will be crafted and re-crafted and implemented to serve American national interests. It is unlikely that any US government would sacrifice its national interest in order to promote and defend the national interests of the Ethiopian people. Only the Ethiopian people can **defend and preserve their national interests** by mobilizing their talents and creativity; **by thinking and acting beyond the archaic ethnic** based political architecture imposed on them by the ruling party; and, by demanding that dysfunctional and quarreling political elites close ranks to serve the common and collective interests of the Ethiopian people.

Regardless of political tendencies, ideologies, affiliation and alliances today's opposition political parties can be relevant only if they begin to free themselves from their narrow, outdated and dysfunctional mindsets, by placing the national interests of the Ethiopian people on the radar screen. **The vigorous pursuit of a common and unified purpose that will usher in a new era of peace, national reconciliation, pluralist democracy, the rule of law, protection of fundamental human rights and freedoms and the institutionalization of accountable governance** is the only way out. To this end, a more progressive alternative vision that takes into account the dynamic changes that are shaping the global community, backed and sustained by strong national opposition

political parties which mirror a common destiny, will have significant influence in shaping US and other foreign policies toward Ethiopia. A new democratic US administration can and will provide tools, moral and diplomatic support to enable the Ethiopian people to realize their aspirations. The highly contested HR 2003 that is being debated in the US Congress will have a boost from a new democratic administration.

In our view, the lead responsibility to promote the mutual interests of the Ethiopian and American people in the Horn of Africa will largely remain in Ethiopian hands. We have primary responsibility to come up with innovative and constructive alternatives. Opposition political parties, intellectuals and opinion makers can begin the hard work of positioning Ethiopia to take advantage of new and emerging political and diplomatic realities by closing ranks and by making the **vital interests of the Ethiopian people** central to their thinking, political programs and actions. Change has to come from all of us, ie, from Ethiopians. Thinking and hoping that external powers will bring salvation to the Ethiopian people is just a dream. Perhaps, heeding to Senator Obama's dictum "This election has never been about me. It is about you, the American people" can serve us as a reminder." Transforming Ethiopian society for the better is not about individual egos. It is about the common interests of the Ethiopian people. Change is about Ethiopia and Ethiopians. It is about leaving a legacy for this and the coming generation of Ethiopians.

Last, but not least, we believe that political struggle is about seeking better alternatives and opportunities. It is about our readiness and willingness to dialogue, negotiate and arrive at mutually acceptable policy options that will serve the common interest. It is about willingness to discuss and bargain around a conference table and, and about making elections free and open. It is not about "My way or the highway."

Ethiopia Will Prevail