

Citizens Charter for a Democratic Ethiopia

A Common Cause for Freedom, Prosperity, and National Renaissance



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PART ONE: PREAMBLE

The Citizens Charter is a nonpartisan declaration of the bedrock principles and protections that define our shared vision for a post-socialist, post-ethnic and cosmopolitan Ethiopia:

- It cultivates civic virtue by serving as a Bill of Rights for Ethiopians who wish to build a society that is open and pluralist.
- It provides a clear vision and collective aspirations for an alliance of engaged citizens, civic organizations and political organizations to bring to fruition the fervent desire for national unity, territorial integrity, and self-governing local communities in a democratic Ethiopia.
- It relies on the power of reason and conscience to launch a protracted worldwide civic engagement that is dedicated to the respect for and protection, by government and citizens alike, of the universally accepted human, civil, cultural and political rights of all Ethiopians.
- It upholds the fundamental values of the dignity of and respect for the individual, mutual support and service to community, and appreciation of cultural diversity—all of which are among the hallmarks of the Ethiopian spirit and Ethiopian civilization that the present generation can build on.
- We seek to elevate civic activism as the most reliable guarantor of freedom from autocratic politicians and a predatory State. In so doing, the Charter rings the wake-up call for Ethiopian citizens to take up the common cause of fighting for the full realization of individual liberty as their birthright, and honoring with conviction the duties that are inherently bundled with such rights.

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It issues a clarion call to all Ethiopians to discard for good the outmoded political culture of master and servant and assume the unavoidable responsibility of ushering in a new culture of rights and responsibilities. This inevitably means that our civic and political discourse shall henceforth be

honest and citizen-centered, and our leaders shall be judged by their demonstrated commitment to public service, transparency, and accountability.

The Charter is, therefore, intended as an inspiration for Ethiopians of all walks of life to assert the sovereignty of the citizen and the indivisible national identity of *Ethiopiawinnet* through collective action for an inclusive democratic government. It is in this spirit that we ask all democratic Ethiopian political parties and civic organizations to demonstrate their leadership by endorsing it in full or incorporating the basic tenets outlined in this Charter into their manifestos and programs.

PART TWO: LEGACIES AND CHALLENGES

Every generation has the duty as well as the privilege to articulate and defend its own cherished vision of Ethiopia. It has a responsibility to define for itself an inclusive and unifying pan-Ethiopian identity. This vision of *Ethiopiawinnet* ensures that each citizen finds her or his own reflection in the icons of the nation's cultural, political and economic life. By so doing, all citizens affirm their representation in, and embrace their obligations to, a free Ethiopia.

Affirming positively the aspirations of the present generation, however, presupposes a measure of consensus concerning the country's predicament at the present and an informed appreciation of the most enduring legacies of the past. Many of these legacies have been so distorted by ill-informed and self-serving revisionist history. The premises on which a common cause is forged must, therefore, be made explicit for all to see. The socio-economic and political landscape of Ethiopia has certain recognizable features; the most notable legacies for our purposes may be distilled as follows:

- The Ethiopian polity, whose territorial reach ebbed and flowed over the centuries, has no discernible tradition of territorially identifiable, ethnic-based states. This is because various linguistic groups overran each other's territories resulting in mutual accommodation and absorption as the norm. Political elites, Christian or Muslim or Traditional, sought instead to capture the multi-ethnic state and rule on behalf of all groups. This non-sectarian tradition of high mobility, shared governance and mutual accommodation provides a fertile seedbed on which the present generation can build a modern democratic country.
- That Ethiopia, with a population of over 80 million people, is a nation of ethnic minorities also makes it imperative to opt for a democratic system of coalition building and protection of minorities. The cultural diversity of the country is further underscored by the significant representation of Christianity, Islam and Native religious systems.
- Ethiopians have historically enjoyed strong communal identities which, with rare exceptions in times of great turmoil, are undergirded by unprecedented inter-communal tolerance and mutual respect. Geographic diversity has also meant that the lowlander and the highlander, the settled and the

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transhumant live in a dense web of economic interdependence, competition and cultural diffusion. The parish, the mosque, the council of clan elders, and the multitude of community institutions have bestowed on us a dense network of social capital that is so essential for building a viable democracy as an effective modern mechanism for reconciling competing interests.

- Ethiopia has an illustrious literate tradition to supplement its equally strong African oral tradition. This is reflected in the long and illustrious record of Ethiopian receptivity to foreign ideas with an uncanny gift for selectively indigenizing them. The distinctive face of Ethiopian religion, for example, is a unique melding of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions with native value systems.
- Contemporary Ethiopia also bears the scars of major political shocks. They include two waves of Italian invasion and the creation of a centralized state bureaucracy in the aftermath, the 1974 revolution and its socialist experiment, the accession and then secession of Eritrea, and the end of the cold war that has ushered in the pernicious politics of ethnicism which has sought to cannibalize the national institutions that bind Ethiopians together by creating de facto multiple citizenships and by enshrining full capture, by a single ruling party, of all economic, political and civic institutions.

The unsavory effects of these societal shocks pose formidable challenges for the new generation of Ethiopians. These include erosion of social trust and national self-confidence, progressive pauperization, and the rise of the polarizing politics of group identity that is born of a siege mentality. Key sections of the civil service, the military and the security services have been hyper-politicized. Absolutist cadres have, in the name of alien ideologies, supplanted respected local norms, conflict resolution local traditions, and community leaders all of which had served us well in protecting the weak from the strong.

This state of deep insecurity points to two inescapable conclusions. First, the modern political system we all seek must be inclusive and embrace the best of our traditions. Second, full integration with the outside world on the basis of mutually beneficial terms is essential for sustaining prosperity, preserving freedom, and ensuring Ethiopia's status as a stable anchor of the Horn of Africa and beyond.

Thanks to the unprecedented resiliency of Ethiopian nationalism and the legendary civility of its people, responsible Ethiopians now have a window of opportunity to reinvent government and to defiantly announce the birth of the 'free citizen.' Free citizenship upholds as the civic virtue of the pursuit of legitimate self-interest that also nurtures the collective interest.

This Charter recognizes that there are three core principles that together define our conception of Ethiopian renaissance. They are: representative and accountable governance, cultural pluralism, and economic freedom. What follows from these first principles is a set of guidelines for crafting concrete plans for political and economic renewal. The triad symbolizes a clear public commitment to enduring social peace, a robust collective identity, expanded and equal opportunity for all, and the pursuit of democracy by democratic means.

FREE CITIZENSHIP UPHOLDS AS A CIVIC VIRTUE THE PURSUIT OF LEGITIMATE SELF-INTEREST THAT ALSO NURTURES THE COLLECTIVE INTEREST.

PART THREE: ETHIOPIAN DEMOCRACY

Liberty is about the freedom to make meaningful choices, and it constitutes the substantive foundation of democracy. Representative democracy, for example, is basically a procedure for delegating authority to leaders by citizens who have already won their freedoms. Modern democracy boasts an unenviable record in guaranteeing due process of law to ensure respect for life, liberty and property. A written constitution that embraces internationally recognized rights is its public embodiment. That is why this Charter calls for a constitution that fully embraces the best of Ethiopian values and inescapable realities as well as universally recognized human values of our age.

Our vision of Ethiopian democracy is informed by the experiences of other countries and the realities of Ethiopia itself. The three post-WWII Ethiopian constitutions, needless to say, did not guarantee Ethiopians an appreciable degree of justice, equality, or prosperity. They turned out to be little more than smokescreens for modernized forms of despotism. Dismissing their instrumentality for a progressive emergence of a responsible government would, however, be a big mistake. As the history of modern democracies clearly shows, a good constitution serves as the highest earthly authority for organized citizens to appeal to in their struggle for fair and transparent rules of political and economic competition.

Experience has also taught us that cherished principles enshrined even in a paper-perfect constitution come to life and become institutionalized only through an assiduous cultivation of the common cause of free citizenship and mutual responsibility. Rights and informed consent are *earned*, not granted. Political and civic organizations in Ethiopia and the growing Diaspora, which will be predominantly urban for the foreseeable future, shoulder a special responsibility for educating as well as learning from the predominantly rural voters.

This Charter demands that the Ethiopian Bill of Rights affirm current international standards in granting every citizen an enforceable legal remedy if and when the government infringes upon their rights, such as conducting elections that violate basic freedoms. The non-ethnocentric Constitution we seek should, therefore, recognize the set of fundamental and inalienable rights of all individuals by virtue of their humanity and citizenship. These include *inter alia* freedom from injustice and for the rule of law, from fear and for thought as well as expression, from discrimination and for full participation, and from want and for prosperity based on equal opportunity.

<p>THE NON-ETHNOCENTRIC CONSTITUTION WE SEEK SHOULD RECOGNIZE THE SET OF FUNDAMENTAL AND INALIENABLE RIGHTS OF ALL INDIVIDUALS BY VIRTUE OF THEIR HUMANITY AND CITIZENSHIP.</p>

It is beyond the mandate of this Charter to dictate or predefine the full content of a democratic Constitution for Ethiopia. We must nonetheless raise as compelling reminders certain imperatives that merit serious consideration. At the very least, the new Constitution, as a freely-entered compact between citizen and State, must:

- be created with maximum public representation and participation, especially of the youth;
- guarantee political equality for all citizens;

- build-in the full empowerment of women;
- guarantee Basic Needs for all as a matter of entitlement since, without them, other rights are patently meaningless;
- enshrine the ultimate sovereignty of the citizen over the State;
- facilitate the full institutionalization of a culture of respect for the rule of law;
- empower the citizen by upholding the rights of the individual and respecting the cultural identity of groups;
- encourage an open society and a competitive economy; and
- facilitate transparency, civility, and honesty in public life.

Principles that are rightly believed must also be rightly lived. That is why we insist that the post-dictatorial political system go beyond formalism by providing practicable legislative and judicial mechanisms for enforcing inalienable rights. Such mechanisms should put a high premium on *simplicity* to minimize ever-present corruption by the political class, and on *flexibility* to ensure adaptability to changing circumstances. It bears repeating that procedural equality before the law or free and fair election will mean little to the majority poor so long as lack of resources effectively prevents them from meaningful participation in public affairs.

The Charter implores Ethiopians to critically reflect on the bitter lessons of the recent past. A legitimate state will have to be rebuilt on the basis of durable peace, the rule of law, and justice. This is why we humbly but uncompromisingly draw attention to the designers of a democratic Ethiopia the need for a meeting of minds on the following guiding principles which capture the lessons of experience with modernization efforts in the past half century:

- (a) *Respect for Ethiopia's Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity:* The Ethiopian people, through their long history have time and again defended their sovereignty, inviolable unity, and territorial indivisibility. They have forged this legacy through war and peace and thereby created an unbreakable bond. This historical resolve of the people must be affirmed and strengthened. It must also be recognized that Ethiopia and her neighbors need to enter into a regional pact in order to ensure mutual security.
- (b) *Primacy of the Constitutional Rights of the Individual Citizen:* This Charter upholds unconditionally the inviolability of basic human, civic, and political rights. In a multi-cultural society such as ours, a constitution that privileges primordial group-rights is inherently sectarian and discriminatory; it erodes the rights of minorities; and ultimately undermines inter-communal solidarity without which a cohesive national community cannot be nurtured. This is not to suggest that group identities are not important. It is rather to note that rights enjoyed by groups, important as they are for facilitating self-government, are best understood as derivative rights emanating from those of the free citizen. And, of course, the hallmark of modern democracy is not just the rule by the majority; it is also protection of the minority.
- (c) *The right to food security for all citizens:* The right to food is the most fundamental of all rights dealing as it does with the inalienable right to life. In this day and age, no self-respecting Ethiopian government (however poor) would allow entire communities to die of starvation, the majority of its children to be permanently stunted by chronic undernutrition and malnutrition, or fall victim to easily eliminable communicable diseases.

- (d) *At least one national language:* *Ethiopia*winnet is a solemn social contract among multilingual citizens. Central to this common bond is the ability of all Ethiopians to have a good command of at least one national, one regional, and one international language without any prejudice to none. A working language at the national as well as local levels is a prerequisite for equal access to public services such as education and the courts by any citizen throughout the country. The Charter holds that Amharic currently stands far and above others in its spread and development to deserve the status of such a working language at all levels. Oromiffa stands next in line for such a status. English serves the bill as the international language. Other regional languages deserve investment to serve as effective local and regional languages.
- (e) *A Non-sectarian Devolution of State Power:* Some form of a federal or a decentralized-unitary model is appropriate for Ethiopia's socio-economic development, cultural and religious diversity. Serious consideration should, therefore, be given to making regional administrative entities the basic operational units of self-administration in order to bring government closer to the people. In all cases, regional units must have administrative boundaries that are drawn with due recognition of the relevant historical, ethnic, geographic and economic linkages among localities. They must be big enough to be economically and politically viable but not so big as to preclude full accountability to the electorate. Finally, they must enjoy a degree of autonomy from the center in a manner that balances the need for local control with the equally important need for a sufficiently strong central government.
- (f) *Representative Military, Judicial and Civil Services:* Constitutional rights can be safeguarded only with the creation of independent and meritocratic military civil and security services that reflect the ethnic, religious and gender diversity of the country. Needless to say, the military and security services must be under civilian control, and all are fully accountable to an independent judiciary that upholds the supreme authority of the Constitution.
- (e) *A Full-fledged Market Economy:* Ethiopians seek to enjoy economic security through private ownership of property and the freedom to engage in legitimate economic activities in any locality of their choice. The government must transfer, through a fair and transparent process, most publicly-owned land, houses, industrial capital and service enterprises to the private sector. The predominance of private property and secure economic freedom, besides being conducive to prosperity, also constitute the first line of defense against ever-present tyranny. The appropriate slogan for today is: "ownership to the producer." A responsible government is one that prefers to be a development *partner* to the private sector by supplying key economic infrastructure, nurturing strategic industries, providing aid to laggard regions or disadvantaged citizens, encouraging cooperatives that provide social safety nets, and securing fair rules of competition and private property rights.
- (f) *Independent Civic and Political Organizations:* Emergent democracies, especially poor ones, find it difficult to build up a dense network of civic organizations to educate citizens to know about and defend their rights or to provide vital assistance in ensuring the enforcement of these rights. Independent professional organizations such as the press are

key conveyer belts by serving as sources of public information, as aggregators of the public interest, and as watchdogs of public authorities. Ethiopian democracy must be based on the principle of a transparent and competitive political market where parties seeking state power are open to all citizens who subscribe to their programs. No political party, ruling or seeking to rule, shall be permitted to rig the political process by seeking to create a state-within-a-state with the help of a party militia and a party-owned business empire. Otherwise, elections in such a fragile democracy and politically captive economy will be reduced to one of many instruments for legitimizing the rule by law rather than the rule of law.

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(h) *Checks and Balances among the Organs of the State:* This Charter calls for a broadly-representative constituent assembly for the transition period which is charged with carefully evaluating the wisdom of instituting an appropriate form of government, including the choice between a parliamentary or a presidential system. The winner-take-all rules and a civil society that is too feeble to defend its constitutional rights have enabled the executive branch to wield virtually unconstrained power over the legislative and judicial branches of the state. Citizens, even under a freely elected regime, can easily be left out of the loop, not to mention their vulnerability to repressive legislation. It also encourages the use of traditional, non-state forms of “public authority” until a fully transparent and accountable state emerges. A system must be devised, tailor-made for Ethiopia and subject to a national referendum, which builds-in enforceably checks and balances at the lowest cost possible.

PART FOUR: DEMOCRATIC ACTIVISM BY CIVIL SOCIETY

The pan-Ethiopian vision embodied in this Charter is consistent with a broad spectrum of modern political systems including a constitutional monarchy, liberal democracy, and social democracy. It only insists that Ethiopians must be free to choose the system under which they wish to live—a system that fulfills their modern ambitions while remaining authentically faithful to the most cherished of their traditional values. Since political parties inevitably focus on assuming state power, a dense network of disinterested and patriotic civic organizations is an essential precondition for ensuring accountability on the part of ruling parties and for promoting peaceful resolution of social conflict by ensuring justice through a level playing field. This existential challenge of resuscitating the battered body politic inevitably calls for a strong sense of pragmatism, forgiveness, patience and open-mindedness. After all, the cultivation of trust in government (and among compatriots) is an outcome of a long process rather than a one-off event.

A DENSE NETWORK OF DISINTERESTED AND PATRIOTIC CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS IS AN ESSENTIAL PRECONDITION FOR ENSURING ACCOUNTABILITY OF RULING PARTIES AND FOR PROMOTING A PEACEFUL RESOLUTION OF CONFLICT.

The imperative of restoring this generation of Ethiopians to their rightful place in the global community of free peoples then calls for nothing less than a fully mobilized citizenry ready to

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proclaim ownership of its destiny. We are confident that the indefatigable sons and daughters of Ethiopia will rise to the occasion once again to mount an effective collective action in defense of liberty. The Ethiopian Millennium demands no less from us all. Long live Ethiopia!

May 25, 2012
Washington, DC (USA)



ETHIOPIANS HAVE HISTORICALLY ENJOYED STRONG COMMUNAL IDENTITIES THAT ARE UNDERGIRDING BY UNPRECEDENTED INTERCOMMUNAL TOLERANCE AND MUTUAL RESPECT.

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