

The Making of the
Citizens Charter for a Democratic Ethiopia
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Remarks made by Dr. Berhanu Abegaz made at the ENPCP Convention
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"A society that does not defend itself is doomed. A system that remains passive in the face of attack deserves to go under. Those unwilling to defend freedom will become unfree. To stand idly by is to commit suicide." **Brian Crozier**

"Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle. And so we must straighten our backs and work for our freedom. A man can't ride you unless your back is bent." **Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Why a Citizens Charter?

I wish to address two questions: why do we need a civic charter? And how can we tailor it to fit the peculiarities of emerging Ethiopia? But before I do that, let me just say at the outset that the Citizens Charter belongs to every aspiring Ethiopian democrat rather than to any organization. I am also proud to note that a small cadre of educated Ethiopian youth was among the first in Africa to mount a struggle, in a manner they then thought best, to advance the collective welfare. Consistent with this record of civic activism, we (not so young any more) are among the first in the continent to produce such a charter to guide the mature phase of the collective search for a prosperous and democratic order.

The Ethiopian Citizens Charter, I am proud to say, has been crafted over ten years by a group of dedicated and well-established Ethiopian professionals residing in the Diaspora. Distressed by the relentless government attacks on independent civic organizations and the determined attempts to capture such organizations, by opposition political parties, we sought to articulate a shared vision for a democratic Ethiopia that would inspire and

galvanize Ethiopians everywhere to launch a united movement of civil disobedience and civic advocacy.

A decade in the making, the Citizens Charter is first and foremost a collective effort led by Ato Abate Kassa, Ato Elias Wondimu and Dr. Berhanu Abegaz. It was promoted early on by another group, nicknamed “the Charter Group,” which publicly distributed an early version in October 2006. They include Ato Deneke Hailemariam, Dr. Fekadu Fullas, Dr. Mammo Muchie, Dr. Mesfin Genanaw, Ato Paulos Asrat, Ato Robele Ababya, and Dr. Samuel Gameda. Since then we have received incisive comments from members of ENPCP and Dr. Assefa Mehretu. As you can see, one could not ask for more love of country of birth, brain power, principledness, and diversity of views in shaping such an inspiring document than a group which has offered to the public a strategic map out of the tyranny trap with humility of spirit and accessibility of language.

Needless to say, we were also inspired by the vital role of civic activism by the youth in emerging democracies—including two generations of Ethiopian youth who were among the first to do so in the African continent. It is only now that the idea of adding a civic leg is recognized as the key to a sustainable democratization drive. Clear-headed civic engagement, being the voice of the voiceless, remains an effective tool for restraining self-replicating dictatorships by progressively expanding the space for public authority that is transparent, effective, and accountable.

The May 2005 elections have taught us several lessons: that the Ethiopian voter can muster remarkable courage, against all odds, to publicly and defiantly assert her or his democratic rights; that a determined group of opposition parties with a credible vision can go a long way toward giving hope to a citizenry confronted by a ruling party with an apparently congenital inability to engage in normal politics; and that, in the final analysis, the Ethiopian voter can exercise only those rights that it is able and willing to defend.

The irony is that, despite its pedigree as the home one of the oldest post-tribal states in the world, Ethiopia's failure to industrialize has denied it a middle class whose human and economic resources would have allowed for the emergence of effective civic and political organizations to restrain abusive power-holders. It is true that the early introduction of Christianity and Islam, two universalist religions, enabled the region to form powerful states that were centralized enough to ensure a modicum of peace and order—not to mention the quintessentially African wars for the control of territory and tribute. Instead of being “subjects” of some traditional authority of bondage, they now wish to be free citizens socially, politically, and economically.

The rub is that abject poverty and tyranny reinforce each other to create self-perpetuating vicious traps. Such traps have, of course, been escaped by at least two of the seven billion people in the world who now live in emerging and mature democracies and economies. Merely establishing enfeebled and fragmented civic organizations and political parties will not do since they tend to be captured by a self-serving urban elite that masks its narrow interests by populist ideologies of all colors—socialism, ethno-nationalism, religious fundamentalism, liberalism, developmentalism, and even Ethiopianism. Supporters of the Citizens Charter fervently believe that the escape valve for ordinary Ethiopians is to be found in people's own agency—an all-encompassing and sustained civic engagement that is guided by a clear and shared vision *Ethiopiawinnet* for the 21st century.

As we all know, a modern civic society is in its infancy in Ethiopia—limited as it is to the fledgling middle class in major towns and cities. The existing rights-oriented organizations and professional associations seem to suffer from the predictable maladies of deep economic insecurity, the absence of a rich culture of constructive engagement in order to resolve conflicts of interest in the public arena, and the instinctive desire ruling elites and opposition parties to “capture” independent groups through sectional appeals.

In the economically and politically rich countries, there is some justification for distinguishing among three autonomous spheres of society—civil society, political society,

and business society. Civil society organizations (CSOs) are a segment of private voluntary associations which encompasses social organizations, certain professional organizations (trade unions, professional associations, women's associations, etc.) and rights-based organizations. In an Ethiopia, a poor and post-conflict society that has no powerful friends, these differentiations hardly matter.

An effective Ethiopian civic movement will surely contribute to the democratization process in two major respects. First, they provide dense networks of civic education and collective action by upholding the best of pan-Ethiopian, nay pan-African, collective identity--*Ethiopiawinnet* (love of freedom and liberty, shared pride, tolerance, reciprocity, and trust). Second, they strive to expand the constricted public space and serve as an effective counterweight to the impunity of the abusive political class—in power or aspiring to capture power. The age-old patriotism that is *Ethiopiawinnet* must now be tethered to the modern value of democracy—of equality, justice, citizen sovereignty, freedoms, and civic engagement.

Every national civic movement should have a strategic vision, if not a blueprint, that outlines the medium-term goals (and some concrete objectives) for a successful transition from dictatorship to democracy. This will provide it with a sense of direction and common purpose along with a reasonable strategy and metric for ascertaining the relevance and assessing the effectiveness of its tactics. The Citizens Charter provides such a quintessentially Ethiopian vision of the future something very few recent democratic movements, including those of Eastern Europe and the Middle East, have yet to produce.

It goes without saying that the best place to begin the launching of a pan-Ethiopian civic movement is a good knowledge of Ethiopian political and economic realities, the role of rights-oriented CSOs at home and abroad, and what it would take to facilitate a transition to an enduring democratic order. Although myriad lofty goals have been articulated by civic society organization at home and in the diaspora, Ethiopians have not had a charter that outlines clearly what it means to uphold the common vision of *Ethiopiawinnet*, and what it

means to unravel exclusionary and extractive institutions of oligarchies (that seek to fuse political and economic power) and replace them with the institutions of inclusion and accountability. Copying words from other countries will not do either—these ideals and strategies have to resonate with Ethiopians of all walks of life.

The Citizens Charter, therefore, is a historic and solemn declaration which looks at the structural factors that incubate tyranny and thereby delegitimizes the forcible capture of the Ethiopian state by Big Men, and identifies critical considerations for a successful transition to a post-EPRDF democratic Ethiopia. I will summarize the highlights, and invite you to endorse the Citizens Charter thereby making it one of the most notable achievements of this Convention.

The Charter is currently in distribution in Amharic and in English. It deserves to be translated into more Ethiopian languages.

What Kind of Charter?

The big ideas and challenges Ethiopian democrats will have to seriously grapple with are identified in four clusters. The Charter addresses wide-ranging issues, including the rights and responsibilities of free citizens, the factors that bind Ethiopians, the dreams for a democratic and prosperous Ethiopia, what it would take to have a successful transition to a political order where peace and the rule of just law prevail, and the universally recognized rights are honored in practice.

Part One, the preamble, deals with the rights and responsibilities of a free Ethiopian citizen. If Ethiopians are to be worthy of membership in a free society, they need to reclaim their human dignity and individual liberty, express their appreciation for their local and national communities by a demonstrated willingness to defend their hard-won rights and the rights of others, and by developing the knowledge and skills of self-government. In other words, they have to cultivate new civic virtues by shifting their political cosmology from one of subservience to self-appointed supreme rulers to the sovereignty of the citizen through civic

and political engagement. We must surely draw inspiration from our pedigreed traditional values of “*neg bene*” when fellow citizens are unfairly abused; “*feriha Igziabher*” and “*behig Amlak*” when we exercise authority over others.

Part Two clarifies what we mean by Ethiopiawinnet by identifying the common bonds that define modern Ethiopian citizenship. While it is to be expected that our history is open to contestable interpretations, what must also be clear is that: (a) Ethiopia’s age-old statecraft has no discernible tradition of political institutions that are based on political ethnicity; (b) Ethiopia is a nation of ethnic minorities and religious diversity with a remarkable tradition of inter-communal tolerance and intermingling; and (c) Ethiopia has a strong history of resistance against foreign invasion by a coalition of all its far-flung people. These illustrious legacies should give us the wherewithal to rebuild a new commonwealth of equality, justice, and prosperity.

Part Three grapples with the vexed question of what kind of a democratic system Ethiopians must strive for and the right process for making it a reality under the circumstances the country finds itself. It is fair to ask whether the preconditions for a modern democratic system exist in Ethiopia today (basic economic security, a culture of cherishing individual liberty, respect for the rule of law, a culture of inter-communal trust, etc.) and, if some have been weakened or missing, how they can be built up. Since about 1950, Ethiopia has experienced unprecedented hyper-centralization of its government, and a deliberate polarization of its communities. Most Ethiopians may indeed be forgiven for expecting little more than to live in peace, under the rule of law, and having met their basic economic needs. The Charter cannot, and should not, presume to prescribe what forms of government Ethiopians should want, but it does call for a process of constitution-making and building key institutions that are open, broadly participatory, and receptive to change as the country modernizes.

The Charter endorses the five “core values” of ENPCP (now *Ethiopiawinnet*) which are:

1. National sovereignty and territorial integrity,

2. Inviolability of the unity of the Ethiopian people,
3. Respect for internationally recognized human, civil and political rights—including equality of all citizens before the law,
4. Security of private property, and
5. Checks and balances among the major organs of government.

But it calls for more. Mindful of the travails of the transition to an enduring democratic order, the Charter also advocates that the new Ethiopian constitution embrace additional core values, principles, and strategies but not policies:

6. *Primacy of individual-based rights over any group-based rights:* While the Charter recognizes the right of groups to organize themselves in order to promote their cultures or defend their collective achievements, it recognizes only the individual citizen as the sole source of sovereignty and public authority. There is no group or government authority that cannot be traced to or derived from the consent of the governed. Any other conceptualization of rights falls into the toxic trap of exclusionary political ethnicity or theocracy—of accentuating our differences based on the accident of birth.
7. *The right to food security for all citizens:* The right to food and clean water is the most fundamental of all rights dealing as it does with the God-given human right to life. In these day and age, no decent government (however poor) with democratic pretensions should allow entire communities of Ethiopians to die of starvation.
8. *Amharic as the working national and regional language:* The Ethiopian state is the commonwealth of its regionally and culturally diverse citizens. Central to this common bond is the ability of all citizens to have a good command of at least one language so that they will be able to live wherever they like or to engage in occupations of their own choosing. As the country industrializes and urbanizes, place of birth will increasingly mean little and knowledge of major regional and international languages will increase geometrically. Given the current realities, however, Amharic stands far and above others in its spread and development to

deserve the status as the national working language. Other languages, most notably Oromiffa, must follow soon after.

9. *A non-ethnic (or religious) devolution of state power:* The Charter categorically rejects the use of birthrights (such as ethnicity and gender) or deep-seated identities (such as religion) as a foundational basis for *political* organization. It also reserves the right of Ethiopian citizens to choose what form of government they wish to establish—whether it is a decentralized unitary government or a federal government.
10. *Broadly representative military, security and civil services:* The core values enumerated above fully imply that public institutions should be broadly representative of the diversity of Ethiopian society if they are to be considered legitimate.
11. *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 scandalous confiscation of capitalizable value from urban and rural landholders is conceivable only under an authoritarian regime. 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 constitutes the first line of defense against tyranny.
12. *Respect for the independence and freedom of action for civic and political organizations:* The Charter upholds the freedom of non-state organizations an essential restraint on power-holders. Without such inbuilt checks and balances, even a freely elected political party is likely to degenerate into a dictatorship.
13. *Checks and Balances among the Organs of the State:* This Charter calls for a broadly-representative constituent assembly that is charged with carefully evaluating the wisdom of instituting an appropriate form of government, including the choice between a parliamentary or a presidential system. It also encourages the use of traditional, non-state forms of “public authority” until a fully transparent and accountable state emerges.

Part Four reiterates the call for a dogged and peaceful building of organizational capacity and strategic civic engagement by civil society institutions in order fulfill the pan-Ethiopian vision of this Charter. Achieving the twin goals of Ethiopian democracy and prosperity presupposes a government that is at once competent and accountable to citizens. Such a government is, unfortunately, a product of protracted struggles by a coordinated political movement that includes political parties and civic organizations. Needless to say, this movement has to be inspired by an abiding commitment to a democratic process for public decision-making and by a cultivating a mindset that dwells on our commonalities rather on real and imagined differences.

We must ultimately learn operate on the premise that politics is too important to be left to politicians. Individual citizens and civic organizations play a crucial role in conveying the sentiments of the public to governments as well as to political parties vying for state power. The struggle for freedom and empowerment may take the forms civic engagement political engagement, or both. They are also indispensable for restraining abuse of public office by those in power. Any people who are unable or unwilling to own the long fight for their rights are not worthy of a democratic order. The rights of free citizenship, after all, are inseparable from the responsibilities of free citizens.

We have no illusion that everyone will agree with every statement contained in the Charter, but we are confident that they will with most them. We are also convinced that there is no alternative to rallying around a pan-Ethiopian agenda through covenants such as those contained in this Charter. Let us hope that this generation of Ethiopians, especially the young, are up to the monumental task avoiding the ever-present temptation to capture the political kingdom in order to amass someone else's wealth, and instead engage in the far more fruitful task of wealth creation by fair, equitable, and legitimate means. They should strive to do good for themselves in a manner that also does good for society. Thank you.

Reference:

Citizens Charter: *A Common Cause for Freedom, Prosperity, and National Renaissance*, May 25, 2012.

Website: <http://www.ethiopiawin.net>