

Chatam House Presentation: Opening Statement main points.

Thank you Mr. Chairman

- Let me first thank the organizers for inviting me to participate in this forum. I am asked, by the organizers, to address 4 issues related to EZEMA's expectations and "ambitions" in this coming election. But, by way of introduction let me say a few words about the larger global context in which we are trying to establish a meaningful democratic dispensation for the first time in our country before I get to those issues.

I am sure you know full well that this is not a very conducive global environment for initiating a democratic political order in our world. This is a time where liberalism as an ideology, has been seriously challenged both from the left and the right largely because of its presumed inability to deliver meaningful political equality and representation on the one hand (for example in terms of issues related to race and ethnicity) and on the unmet promise of "shared prosperity" and "equality of opportunity" that it assumed to follow automatically from the dominant neo-liberal economic policies that were pursued in the West and more or less imposed on the developing world since the beginning of the 1980s. (This has largely alienated the working class in the west as income and wealth inequality has skyrocketed during this period and drove working people to tribal, even fascistic politics in the West)

It is also a period of social media dominance where unfiltered stories, mostly sensational and untruthful, have a very large sway on the minds of the population to a point where truth and reasoned discourse have become increasingly difficult in our public life. This is a very difficult environment for an ideology such as liberalism, that, at least in theory, relies on reasoned discussion to guide public life. (Look at what is going on in the US and in the UK and the quality of public discourse in the past four years or so, in the countries that were once considered the stalwarts of liberal democratic governance that others were supposed to emulate). As the Yale historian Timothy Snyder intimated, the Post-Truth world that we currently live in, is a Pre-Fascist world.

The old assumption about the twin values of freedom and prosperity (unfortunately and erroneously measured by economic growth) that has

fueled the dominance of liberalism in the past is now seriously challenged by rapid economic growth in authoritarian countries (Such as China), which has become a convenient example for authoritarian regimes in developing countries to decouple liberty and prosperity. The foreign policy of the West (largely informed by the realist school) which insist on the primacy of economic liberalism at the expense of political and individual liberty, has also significantly degraded liberal ideology's value as intellectuals in developing countries associated such policies as manifestations of Western hypocrisy. In other words, the dominance of liberalism as a source of "soft power" is largely spent. [Noah Harriri goes even further and suggests, that the last of the three ideologies that dominated our world in the 19th and 20th centuries, liberalism, is dead and our world is currently without any organizing ideology]

It is in this difficult global environment that we still insist on the importance of liberal democratic politics in Ethiopia as the only (with all the difficulties) mechanism to push our country towards a stable political order that is a necessary condition for addressing the accumulated economic and social problems that we must solve urgently.

With this broad introduction I will now quickly address the four questions posed by the organizers in the order they are asked.

1) What are EZEMA's ambitions for the 2021 elections and how do you see the party's prospects?

- Ezema's most important ambition at this stage is not centered around EZEMA per se. Our ambition is to ensure a free and fair and credible election for the first time in our country's history. While ensuring that the process works and works well is largely the responsibility of the government (ensuring security, avoiding all kinds of harassment of opposition candidates especially in the regions...etc.) as well as the proper and independent functioning of election related institutions (NEBE, the Judiciary, the Attorney General's office, EHRC, the security apparatus...etc.) we as opposition parties also have a significant role in ensuring that we play by the established rules and will not be cause for any kind of disturbance by cynically using the election platform for sowing discord within the community. If we can all do our part and ensure a really meaningful and credible election, we believe we all win in the long run, irrespective of who actually won

this particular election. Sure, we will play to win and we will work hard to win in this election. But, we want to win by the strength of our vision and the policy positions we espouse, not by whipping emotions and false narratives. We know this is a very sensitive transition period that we should trade very carefully with an eye on the long-term systemic issues than short-term victory.

2) EZEMA will compete nationwide in 435 out of 547 election districts. What do you see as being the key debates and issues framing this election?

- There are so many unresolved issues in our national life that this election will not be short off issues to debate. That is partly why I hope this election will be a meaningful battle of ideas on these issues than the usual debasement of ideas by way of smearing opponents on falsehoods and conspiracy theories to garner emotional support. In this election there are both long-term issues related to the nature of the political community and its future legal and institutional posture as well as short-term issues that determine the immediate future in political, economic and social terms. These include, for example:
 - a) The nature of the constitution and the kinds of changes that it needs to ensure a stable political community (eg. What kind of Federalism? What kind of political system; Parliamentary or Presidential? The nature of the civil service? The politics of Ethnicity vis. The politics of Citizenship within a broad democratic framework...etc.

And, lots of short-term policy related issues dealing with the economy, as well as urgent social issues that need to be addressed, such as;

- b) Issues related to corruption and mal administration, education and health policy, food security and agricultural transformation, unemployment in general and youth unemployment in particular, macroeconomic stability, glaring inequality, issues related to land policy and urban development...etc. [we are preparing some 42 policy positions on a range of topics]

3) Are debates over citizenship-based politics versus multicultural ideologies at the heart of these elections?

- As I said earlier, it sure is going to be one of the long-term issues we have to address that define the future of our political community. I

believe the debate will start in this election. I understand this can be an emotional issue for some, but it has to be debated rationally and with an eye to trying to understand the concerns of the other side of the debate to ensure that these topics are addressed within a clear understanding of the democratic agenda and the principles enshrined in it. What is critical is the degree to which all sides to the debate play by the “rules of the democratic game” than resort to violence and intimidation to achieve their desired goals. I do believe linguistic and cultural concerns as well as the desire for self-governance can be addressed reasonably well within a well-functioning democratic dispensation without resorting to identity-based politics (whether on the basis of ethnicity or religion or any other marker other than citizenship). Our failed experiment with identity politics for the past 30 years and the various conflicts it has engendered since then (but particularly in the past three years) should be a painful lesson for all of us to learn from.

4) How do you reflect on the 2005 elections and whether there are potential parallels with the upcoming elections?

- 2005 was a lost opportunity for our country. It failed because of the hubris of the then PM Meles as well as the inability for the whole ruling party, EPRDF, to accept defeat on the ballot box [as well as the support that the Meles regime got from the west for its troubles of forcefully squashing the democratic aspirations of the people; maybe they thought we were not ready for democracy?] In any case, this partly emanates from the difficulty, nay the impossibility, of an ethnic based minority government to stay in power legitimately through a democratic process. In 2005, Meles and his group decided that democracy will not work if they are to stay in power. They decided that force and intimidation is the only way to stay in power and use this power to unduly benefit from the resources of a large multi-national country. Unfortunately, that can only be a short-term proposition as we can see now. Eventually, a violent, humiliating end is the final fate of such a system. I hope the Abiy government learns from these historic mistakes. That, and the mistaken premise that the west will side with democracies [the fatal mistake of the opposition as it turned out] as a matter of principle, are the key lessons of 2005 in my view.

5) A brief concluding remark;

Let me conclude by saying a few words to my fellow compatriots. As messy as democratic politics can be, if the broad human experience is anything to go by, there is no better political system, yet, that could provide us with the necessary political stability and freedom to seriously address our economic, social and governance related problems. In my life time, we have seen the problems of unbridled power with the monarchy, the horrors of left-wing dictatorship with the Derg and the divisive, brutal and corrupt dictatorship that comes with ethnic politics with TPLF. None of these systems obviously work for peace, stability and prosperity and met tragic ends. This is our chance to turn the page and move towards a more accountable, fair and equitable democratic governance. We are not going to get there if we think this is some kind of “Western” project that will be delivered by the good graces of the West or get financial and moral support from western donors. We have observed where the values of western governments lie when the choice is between power and principle in 2005. This time around, we should take this as our own project. A system that we need [irrespective of the ideological turmoil that we see in the west] for our stability and eventually for an equitable prosperity that balances the issue of equity and efficiency. We need to strive for a principled unity that comes from a deep understanding that we are equal citizens that live in a multi-religious, multicultural society. We have fought and won against foreign aggression and imposed tyranny in the past as a united people only to succumb to all kinds of domestically motivated tyranny. It is time to unite again to form a truly free society that treats each one of us as equal citizens.