



Real Dialogue: It's About People, Not Political Parties

By Soreti Kadir



Since the assassination of Haacaaluu Hundeesaa and the commencement of the Tigray genocide, the West, activists and, overall, a diversity of institutions and individuals concerned with the crisis in Ethiopia, have been calling for a national dialogue. To effectively bring an end to the cyclical violence, dialogue in Ethiopia must be grassroots-focused, trauma-informed, and have on the table a decision-making tool, such as a referendum, for all the nations that desire it. Moreover, if the people were to choose a state arrangement other than the continuation of the current Ethiopian polity, it would be unwise not to consider this to be an option in place of dialogue. Dialogue that is grassroots-centred and concerned with addressing generational trauma will be necessary for the health and peace of whatever state arrangement the people choose, including that of independence/s.

The 1991 process was a form of national dialogue. Taking place in the wake of a devastating civil war, its focus was on negotiations between a handful of people that were tasked with representing the lives and deciding the fate of millions. On its own, such a framework will not be adequate to address the plethora of issues that have surfaced since the transitional government was put in place in 2018. Leaders that execute the will of the people are necessary but for the people to truly experience dialogue in the wake of the violence that has consumed Ethiopia since 2018, Ethiopians must have a conversation with each other.

Moreover, it is not just the events of the last few years that need to be addressed, but events that go as far back as the 1800s. It is the social, military, and political violence that has been part of Ethiopia since the beginning of the state's formation that has rendered traumatic the relationship between the state and the nations that it governs. For example, one of the Prosperity Party's social ventures was the erection of the Menelik II statue in the presidential palace. Menelik II was the Emperor of the Abyssinian Empire from 1889 until 1913. With the help of European powers, he was leader of the conquest that created the foundations of modern-day Ethiopia. For a section of society, Menelik II is a symbol of genocide and destruction. For another section of society, he is a national hero.

In tandem with memorialising Menelik's legacy, the party's leader has also preached a philosophy he calls "*Medemer*" or "*Synergy*". In its essence, *Medemer* is a people-focused and trauma-informed dialogue, where people can communicate their stories to each other as they relate to historical moments and figures. I believe it to be a form of abuse and state violence to expect people that have been traumatized by settler colonialism and are still subject to the state's violence, to embrace symbols of this violence as a collective representation of cohesion and togetherness.

Recent attempts to create grounds for dialogue mean nothing because there has not been a cessation of hostilities by the state, but should we get to a point where the state ceases its hostility and grassroots resistance can lay down arms, the most important site of dialogue must be people-focused. It should address what it has meant for diverse people to live under a state with the identity of "Ethiopia" across generations. It should address the relationship people have had to different political eras and moments. It should address the culture of genocide, how people have been impacted by it, and whom they blame for it. It should address the impacts of hate speech and the internalized beliefs that people hold about each other, where these beliefs come from, and how they are perpetuated systemically. This dialogue should create space for processes and acts of transitional justice to emerge. I find it interesting that the word dialogue within the English lexicon suggests a sense of amicableness and non-confrontation. I believe that the depth to which we are called to listen to another person requires us to set aside our own filters and optics, but this cannot mean that truth does not arrive fully on the table, that tensions will not arise and that the outcomes intended in the pursuit of accountability and delivering justice must be sidelined.

For unity to flourish in a place where there has been systemic oppression, the truth must be given space. Only then does a context for new paradigms of relationships emerge. Within these new paradigms of relationships, triggers may be put to rest, families and communities can heal the fault-lines that elites use to pit people against each other, and real unity, which in its strongest form is solidarity, is formed.

Dialogue in the context of the political state implies conflict resolution and, sometimes, charting new administrative structures. Calls for dialogue in Ethiopia have become synonymous with an event that takes place with the understanding that Ethiopia is to continue as one polity, and as a result, people who aspire for a future beyond Ethiopia as a state are cast as anti-dialogue, and thus, anti-conflict resolution, and by extension, pro-war and pro-violence. Interestingly, this is the state's narrative, despite the fact that no party or army, currently in opposition to the state, has denied the need for dialogue, the only pre-condition being a cessation of hostilities by the state. Considering their positions, those in military and political opposition to the Ethiopian state must make it clear that a dialogue that is trauma-informed and people-centred is what they champion.

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This is important, especially In the event that people do not choose Ethiopia as the political and state arrangement of the future; this work of healing is vital not only for people at individual and community levels but also for security between neighbouring states. I believe that dialogue is a way to embed grassroots mechanisms for accountability and security. If in the future we as a people are triggered by the re-emergence of prejudice at the grassroots level, or by harmful political rhetoric that may be espoused at the institutional level, if a grassroots, trauma-informed dialogue has taken place, we will have created a collective memory that can reach forward and remind us of our decisions, our choice to forgive, the transitional justice we experienced, and the red lines that we set for our chosen leaders. This kind of dialogue is a must for any version of the future, including one where Oromia, Tigray, or any other nation achieves its independence.

All parties that are pursuing a national dialogue but have not made explicitly clear their intention to facilitate a decision-making process such as a [referendum](#) must be held to account. No true sense of community and comradeship can develop between the people who live within Ethiopia's borders without the masses *choosing*: either to make Ethiopia a consensual nation-building project or to let it go. Any national dialogue that does not acknowledge and prioritize this reduces itself to a wrestle for power between political elites. What I find inspiring about the new world order that has emerged in [Rojava](#), North-East Syria, where Abdullah Ocalan's thinking on democratic confederalism has inspired much of the society's formation, is that in the face of the state's collapse, local communities did not assume their first and foremost priority to be the formation of a conglomerate political elite; their first and foremost priority was and is, *people, and their needs*.

A dialogue that is grassroots-centred, trauma-informed, in search of transitional justice (a radically reparative process) and facilitative of a political decision-making process such as a referendum requires the adoption of a fiercely abolition politik whereby we re-imagine how adequate justice is facilitated through a *grassroots process*, instead of punitive state processes. We must be willing to re-invest every resource into people and the relationships that they have with one another at the most localised level. The future is not with the state project if that project is not born out of consensus or *real dialogue*.

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