

## **Beginning To Begin: Good Governance in the Next Ethiopian Millennium**

*By Mezgebe Gebrekiristos,  
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The term “good governance” has become a catch phrase in the last two decades. Economists and social development advocates have linked good governance with achieving sustainable economic growth. But, notwithstanding the seemingly understandable adjective (i.e. good), what really is good governance and why is it essential for economic growth and social development? Well, there are many ways to define good governance: Simply put, good governance is mainly concerned with averting abuse of power and corruption, and promoting respect of the rule of law in the process of decision-making. It is a matter of implementation of decisions by governmental and non-governmental authorities while minimizing the abuse of public authority in the form of corruption. Experts agree that the motivation for corruption is economic in nature, and thus, major donors and international financial institutions increasingly base their aid and loans to developing countries on the premise of good governance. Indeed, good governance is crucial to the development process.

### **Characteristics of Good Governance**

In its resolution 2000/64, the United Nations’ Commission on Human Rights identified the main characteristics of good governance as transparency, responsibility, accountability, participation, and responsiveness (to the needs of the people) [1]. These attributes ensure that corruption is minimized, the views and concerns of minorities are taken into account; and, most importantly, the voices of the most vulnerable in society are included in the decision-making process. The commission underscored the requirement for the promotion of economic growth and sustainable human development as critical aspects of good governance. There is a common belief that financial crisis stems from weaknesses in the institutions of governance.

#### **Transparency**

Transparency stipulates that decisions made by governmental and non-governmental authorities are openly communicated, and their enforcement is conducted in accordance with established rules and regulations. It also requires that information is freely available and easily accessible to those who will be affected by such decisions and their enforcement. In short, transparency refers to the availability of information to the general public and clarity about government rules, regulations, and decisions. The result: inhibition of corruption among public officials and reduction of distrust among their constituents. Transparency is a pre-requisite for an effective enforcement of accountability. Attempting to implement accountability in the absence of transparency is tantamount to shooting in the dark.

Adhering to the principles of transparency is no easy task, especially in developing countries such as Ethiopia. Moreover, in this era of national and international unrest, some information could be classified as sensitive, and may not be disseminated to the public. However, the Ethiopian government seems to have recognized the importance of transparency for economic development, and has been doing its best to achieve that goal. The Constitution—a covenant of governance—is the guiding document for decision-making and enforcement.

### **Responsibility**

One of the solemn duties of governments in general is providing a clear and responsible direction for the people. A good government is one that is entrusted by the people and responsible to the people. Governments shoulder the responsibility to provide good governance consistent with the vision and principles of established by the people they govern.

### **Accountability**

Accountability is responsible for the very existence of good governance. Governmental institutions as well as the private sector and civil society organizations must be accountable to their institutional stake-holders in particular and to the public in general. Overall, an organization or an institution is accountable to those who will be directly affected by its decisions.

### **Participation**

Participation refers to the involvement of citizens in the development and governing process. Citizens could participate either directly or through legitimate institutions or representatives to effect decisions regarding their country's affairs.

Participation by all citizens is pivotal to the existence of good governance. For instance, among the 529 total seats of the House of Peoples' Representatives, 116 (22%) are occupied by women representatives [2]. Considering the roughly one to one male to female ratio in Ethiopia, a 22 percent female participation in the legislation process is a good start and it must be encouraged [3]. In contrast, as of 2007, the 110<sup>th</sup> United States Congress is comprised of 84 percent male, and 16 percent female [4]. In this regard, it can be said that Ethiopia is more catholic than the Pope. Amen!

### **Responsiveness**

Responsiveness is the receptiveness of institutions to the demands of their stakeholders. Institutions should be approachable to their clients and serve them within a reasonable timeframe.

During the previous administration, responsiveness was a rare commodity in Ethiopian institutions--governmental or otherwise. In those days, a simple business matter in governmental institutions was not only a several-day endeavor but also was unnecessarily costly for ordinary people who had to bribe the public officials in order to expedite their case. Today, corruption is minimal, and most business transactions can be done within a single day, if not hours. According to the World Bank's "Doing Business in Africa" report (2004), Ethiopia ranks second only to Morocco in the number of days it took to start a business; seven and five days, respectively [5].

### **Ethiopia Now and In the New Millennium**

Several pressing questions lie ahead of us. Will the forward-looking face of Ethiopia continue to embrace the aforementioned elements of good governance, and thereby realize sustainable growth? Will the old and new millennia represent the transition from primitive to modern civilization, respectively?

Here is an analogy: Legend has it that ancient Romans dedicated the first month of their year, Ianuarius, to their god of gates and doors--Janus. An ancient Italian god, Janus, has a distinctive artistic appearance in that he is portrayed with two faces at opposite angles—one concerned with what is behind and, the other, looking toward what lies ahead. In essence, Janus was a symbol of reflection on the accomplishments of an old year while looking forward to the new. As one should emerge through a gate in order to enter into a new place, Janus was believed to represent beginnings of planting and harvesting seasons, and worshiped abundantly by the Romans for his dual role as the custodian of exits and entrances.

Like the ancient Roman god Janus, whose two faces looked back to the old year and forward for the new, Ethiopia simultaneously gazes at both the old millennium and the new. The old and new millennia are the two faces of Ethiopia. The upcoming millennium celebration is a gate to a prosperous and democratic Ethiopia—a portal of heaven. Ethiopia is leaving behind the old millennium, and greeting the new millennium.

The old millennium has been a mixed era in terms of development, peace, and stability for our country, Ethiopia. For most of the millennium from which we are about to depart, Ethiopia was one of the few powerful countries in the world. Civilization was at its peak as evidenced by the Lalibela church buildings, and other artifacts. The fact that Ethiopia is the only African nation that is celebrating its own millennium for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time (technically speaking, for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time) is also a source of pride for Ethiopians, in particular and other Africans. As the only African nation with no account of being colonized in its entire 3000-year history, Ethiopia has served as a beacon of freedom for all peoples of Africa, and, by extension, the whole world.

On the other hand, however, few countries exceed Ethiopia in trepidation and misfortune. Inevitably, time transforms all countries. Despite its great achievements throughout ancient civilization, Ethiopia has been known for its poverty-ridden children, particularly

in the eyes of the Western media. Indeed, the 1984 famine has become a defacto-defining factor for Ethiopia: One of the unfortunate legacies of this old millennium.

Many years ensued before the trend of hunger and destitution was confronted in a meaningful way. Towards the end of the old Ethiopian millennium, the current government has committed itself to eradicating poverty by introducing proven economic strategies in tandem with good governance, unlike its predecessors that were hiding the problem amid widespread hunger in most parts of the country. The good economic strategies have begun to show fruition as evidenced by the double digit economic growth in the last four consecutive years.

### **Conclusion**

Certainly, the above mentioned attributes of good governance are the ideal. In reality, fulfilling these requirements to the fullest is a challenge, if not impossible. Even the oldest democracies struggle with these concepts. Nonetheless, the purpose should be working towards achieving the characteristics of good governance.

Ethiopia has laid down the framework of good governance already. Technically speaking, Ethiopia is beginning to begin implementing the elements of good governance. As Ethiopia enters its new millennium, continued efforts in improving the efficiency and accountability of the public sector, and ensuring the rule of law should be given utmost attention for the greater good. Moreover, good governance can only be realized by the full participation of citizens, and Ethiopia needs our concerted effort in the upcoming millennium more than ever. It is the responsibility of prudent citizens to help the government in the establishment of good governance. Now is the time to shoulder that responsibility, and to act accordingly.

May the new Ethiopian millennium bring the rebirth of peaceful and prosperous Ethiopia where its people live in harmony, and enjoy the fruits of democracy! I wish you a joyful millennium celebration and beyond.

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