

SEED - 26th Annual Awards Dinner

Tribute to His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I

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Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished leadership and members of SEED

Ladies and gentlemen,

I stand before you to give you a brief account of the wise and farsighted leadership of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I. I am honoured and gratified.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude and admiration to the leadership and membership of SEED who have invited me to participate in this platform. Before I proceed with my remarks, I wish to underscore that besides the Emperor's autobiography titled *My Life and Ethiopia's Progress*, much has been written by foreign and Ethiopian historians and political scholars. More is bound to be written and recollected as the theme is an exhaustive one.

Over the past half century, a relentless campaign has been taking place of revising, smirching, and under-rating the achievements of our past Emperors and leaders. Particularly against Emperor Haile Selassie, no stone was left unturned to efface his name from the very institutions intimately linked with his achievements, except from the memory of the Ethiopian people where it is indelibly ingrained. This initiative of SEED to honour our past imperial leaders will go a long way towards restoring our glorious history.

The good part of the reigns of our past emperors was devoted to defending the unity and territorial integrity of Ethiopia. That is not to say, of course, that they neglected the significant task of consolidating the state and caring for the welfare of the people to the extent resources permitted. Their achievements should be judged in the context of the period in which they lived.

Building on the historic modernisation initiative of Emperor Menelik II, Emperor Haile-Selassie vigorously forged ahead with what had been begun by his predecessor. It was Emperor Haile Selassie to whom full credit is due for laying the firm foundations for Ethiopia's drive to modernisation.

To cite a few examples of Emperor Haile Selassie's wise and farsighted leadership, I will focus on four main sectors, and these are:

- Modern nation-state building
- Development and expansion of education

- Foreign relations, and
- Development and growth of social services

Among the long-term objectives the Emperor set himself, priority was given to the task of building and consolidating the nation-state. His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie had realised early enough that the guarantee for a stable future of the nation required the set up of a central government and administration, matter on which he diligently and successfully worked. It was during his regency as Crown Prince Tafari Mekonnen that he decided he should visit the western world in order to acquire much-needed governance experience and knowledge. In 1922, he set out with a large entourage first to the Holy Land and then to European countries. The visit gave him a better insight into Ethiopia's underdevelopment and what efforts would be required to create the preconditions for Ethiopia qualify to join the ranks of the world nations. He went about the task of implementing creatively and wisely what he had learnt. It was this creative and subtle approach which led to the successful struggle he had to wage with the nobility, clergy, princes and traditional chiefs. At last, he had the upper hand. The attempts to abolish the slave trade do, in fact, go back to the reigns of Emperors Tewodros and Yohannes. But it was Emperor Haile Selassie who conclusively put an end to it. It took wisdom and caution to weaken and methodically ultimately abolish the so-called era of princes. These measures more than prepared the ground for the Emperor's ambition to see Ethiopia in the civilised order of nations.

In the 15th century, with the introduction of the "Fitiha Negest", the rule of law was deeply entrenched ever since the statehood of Ethiopia, and the legal system remained both spiritual and temporal. The final touch in the Emperor's modernisation drive may well be said to have taken place a year after his coronation in 1930 with the proclamation of the first written Constitution and the founding of Parliament, a forum for the expression of the people's voice and the deliberations of their representatives. The Emperor revised the Constitution in 1955, with a view to enable a knowledgeable and strengthened citizenry to take up a leadership role in the affairs of the nation.

It was Emperor Haile Selassie who replaced the inefficient feudal justice and fiscal systems introducing codified law and fiscal systems. The year 1960 ushered in successive years of legislative reforms, the establishment of civil and penal codes as well as commercial and maritime laws and much more.

The Emperor introduced a modern administrative system in which the Prime Minister was the head of government, and who in his capacity as the Chief Executive, was also tasked to head the Council of Ministers in order to implement the legislation passed by Parliament. The monarch also instituted or re-enforced modern governance practices in the regions, appointing competent officials, hand-picked on the basis of their respective merit and not their birth. His Majesty's wise leadership ensured that internal peace was firmly in place throughout the country, enabling individuals to exercise their right to settle and work wherever they chose.

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The second major objective of the Emperor was the spread and development of education. It was through his indefatigable struggle and relentless efforts that he finally prevailed on

over the nobility and the church who were fearful of foreign influence. His Imperial Majesty was deeply aware that trained manpower was essential for the development of the country, hence his long drawn-out effort to set up and build schools and training centres. His commitment to education is proven by his twenty-two years tenure of the post of Minister of Education. Besides the traditional church-based schooling, the Emperor pioneered the unfolding modern education and training curricula. Education was provided free, both locally and abroad to the extent that resources permitted. Great achievements were registered in this sector. The endeavour to train skilled manpower in the fields of public administration, health, business, handicrafts, agriculture and livestock, as well as the military and police owe their origins to the Emperor's initiatives. The Emperor furthermore established the first University in the country, donating his own palace he had inherited from his father for its campus.

In his visionary plan to provide educational opportunities to the children of rural Ethiopia and to foster mutual brotherhood among the youth from the different provinces, His Majesty saw to it that rural children, recommended by elders and traditional chiefs, attended boarding schools in Addis Ababa, where he followed their progress with fatherly solicitude. His wise and farsighted strategy also included our African brothers. He granted hundreds of scholarships to young men and women from all over Africa, which was still under colonial rule, to study in Ethiopian institutions of higher learning to prepare them for future leadership.

The third major sector which testifies to the Emperor's great and wise leadership is the contribution he made in the area of foreign relations.

During his first European visit, which I referred to earlier, he learned that his application to join the League of Nations had unfortunately been thwarted. He did not, however, take the rebuff as a setback, preferring instead to forge ahead with renewed vigour the plan he was committed to. In the end, Ethiopia was accorded membership on equal footing with member nations of the day. When justice was denied to Ethiopia during fascist Italy's invasion, in his famous address, the Emperor prophetically reminded the League that "God and history will forever remember its judgment". It was indeed an organization bereft of justice, and the Emperor was able to witness its demise a few years later.

The Emperor was subsequently exiled in the city of Bath in England where he continued mobilizing sympathy to the cause of Ethiopia as well as liaising with the Ethiopian patriotic resistance back home. He was also successful in securing the firm solidarity of black peoples all over the world. Notable among these activities was the Emperor's effort, through Dr. Melaku Bayyan, with African-Americans in the United States.

From his Coronation until this day, His Imperial Majesty's persona is the object of great admiration by black peoples in the world. Particularly in Jamaica and other Caribbean nations, it gave rise to a divine movement known as the Ras Tafarians (derived from Tafari, the Emperor's given name), which has penetrated their culture to the extent that he's currently worshipped as "Ja".

Four years into his exile, Europe itself became a victim of Fascism and Nazism. In his encounter with Winston Churchill the then British Prime Minister, the Emperor is said to have convinced Churchill that the Ethiopian anti-fascist resistance forces had already weakened the occupying Fascists militaries. This elicited the sympathy of the British PM

who was immediately forthcoming in providing military assistance to the Ethiopian patriots. When the Emperor triumphantly returned to his country in 1941, however, the British military command became intent on remaining seated on the chair warmed up by the Italians, thus making it impossible for the Emperor to fully exercise his imperial power. It was then time to resort to the Americans. His timely encounter with President Roosevelt restored him back into exercising his power to the full.

Ethiopia became one of the founding members of the United Nations in 1945, thereby restoring its position in a world body.

His Imperial Majesty's commitment to the principle of collective security acquired worldwide recognition on the occasion of the Bandung Conference in Indonesia) where the first non-aligned meeting took place in 1954. Ethiopia's participation in the Korean War in 1951 was also proof of his commitment to that principle.

The Emperor's extended visits to foreign lands and his hosting of foreign counterparts heightened both Ethiopia's and his prestige and exposure. One of the successes of his diplomatic endeavours was the federation of Eritrea with the Motherland, permitting once again for Ethiopia to have access to the sea. With regard to the African anti-colonial struggle, His Majesty's generous material and moral support over the years was considerable. Nelson Mandela has eloquently testified to the Emperor's support to his and other liberation struggles.

The Emperor and his government were instrumental in founding the Union of African States in Addis Ababa in 1963, in a summit that brought together 32 African heads of state. This earned him the grateful epithet of the "Father of Africa".

His Majesty's wisdom and foresight were exemplified by an episode that took place during President Nixon's time. In confidential documents recently released in the US, in a memo submitted by Kissinger to the President, he related that the Emperor had predicted to him that communism and extremism would soon challenge Ethiopia and the free world. His Majesty of course lived to witness this happen.

His Imperial Majesty's judicious leadership was responsible for wide-ranging development endeavours and engagement in the social sector. Numerous milestones were achieved such as the empowerment of women's rights, workers' rights, the right of the disabled for social assistance and the elderly for social care, etc. The Emperor had great respect for religious institutions. An example was his own initiative to secure the independence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church from the patriarch of the Alexandrian Church. He saw to it that the relics of ancient monasteries and the nation's treasures were safeguarded. The full application of his own motto, "Religion is a private concern but the motherland is a collective concern" proved that he was the father of peace and harmony. He has accomplished the task of developing the infrastructure the country then needed: road building, power generation, postal and telecom services, bank and financial services, factories, large-scale agricultural projects, etc. His achievements in laying the foundations of Ethiopian development are well documented.

In the end, following decades of challenges and struggles, achievements and conquests, and continuous and progressive growth, his beloved students and officers rose against him. And this was compounded by the famine that devastated the country. Finally, a

military coup known as “Derg” succeeded in 1966 in overthrowing the Emperor in 1966 (Ethiopian calendar).

The technocrats whom the Emperor groomed to power were men who came to prominence by their sheer hard work and qualifications and were appointed by merit and not by birth. They were the children of the Ethiopian people from all walks of life, knowledgeable and wise bureaucrats highly qualified for the posts they were assigned to. Having liquidated these technocrats in cold blood the Derg eventually turned its attention to the Emperor, and in a tragic and shameful manner, he lost his throne and then his life.

Any attempt to give a full account of the Emperor’s achievements and give full justice to his wisdom and foresight is virtually impossible in this short time. People who had the pleasure of working closely with him, speak of his austere and frugal life-style, and his personality respectful of religious values, merciful, pardoning and generous.

Despite his unlimited power, he preferred corrective measures when administering punishment. He applied this approach also the Italian prisoners of war after the liberation. Long before the so-called Derg took shape, there had been an aborted military conspiracy against the Emperor. When it came to meting out due punishment to the plotters, His Majesty is believed to have said, “Leave them alone. After all, they are all our children”.

He always urged fellow Africans not to be rancorous in their relations with former colonial masters. In an address to the plenary of an African Union summit, the Emperor once said that Africans have to forgive and forget and should harbour no rancour when they come to work with their former enemies in future. In emulating him should strive not to harbour rancour making of the past a mere history.

If the Emperor spirit was to return and meet those who had offended him and those who in various ways had committed crimes against Ethiopia, it’s not difficult to imagine that he would pardon them all.

There are many lessons we Ethiopians can learn from the life of this great leader. But this evening, let us reflect on only one attribute, that of his immense capacity for forgiveness.

I wish to take this opportunity to make a call that we all pardon each other and atone for our mistakes. Let us stand firm in our Ethiopianess and our glorious past history and be supported by them. Let us reject the politics of hate. As glimmers of positive change have started to emerge, I call on all to collectively solve our problems and begin to follow the path which would lead us to . Let us use it to renew our historic past and let’s remove the politics of hatred. Let’s resolve our differences step by step guided by the wisdom and perseverance. Let us move forward by emulating His Imperial Majesty and by standing on his firm ground. I call upon all to promote the good of Ethiopia.

God bless Ethiopia!

May God protect free Ethiopia!

Thank you

