

Ethiopia: The Country under Siege

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December 26, 2006.

A lot has been said about political suppression and gross abuses of human and democratic rights under the EPRDF Ethiopia. Ethiopians both at home and in Diaspora have carried out massive campaign against political dictatorship in the country. However, the international community continued to turn deaf ear to the plight of over 70 million people in Ethiopia in favour of one dictator and his few henchmen because of their services to the global war on terror. Ethiopians must be fully aware of the double standards of the global power relations and should not expect any thing more from such utterly unfair global order. The burden of liberating ourselves fully lies on us. Thus it is time that we become more resilient in our struggle to achieve freedom and democracy in our country than ever.

To achieve this noble objective, we have to enhance both the scope and the intensity of our campaign against EPRDF's brutal one party dictatorship. In doing so we have to ensure that combating and exposing the direct political suppression and violations of human rights should not overshadow our efforts to expose other brutal policies of this decadent regime. In this regard, I feel that while Ethiopian scholars have done massive work in exposing the political plight of the Ethiopian peoples, more needs to be done in exposing inimical economic policies, policies on the use of information and communication technologies, and other restrictive and regulatory policies of the EPRDF regime that are the manifestation of its absolutist political system.

The core manifestation of EPRDF's misguided economic policy is its failure to guarantee food security for the majority of the Ethiopian peoples. After 15 years in political power and continued deceptions about "sky rocketing annual economic growth" in the country, about a fifth of Ethiopian people still depend on foreign food handout and are unable to cope minor natural calamities such as drought and flooding. Against the backdrop of false economic performance, the country's per capita GDP remains one of the lowest in the world with its stationary value of about US \$100 for the past three decades. Lack of economic progress coupled with rapid population expansion meant that an average Ethiopian is economically worse off today, in EPRDF Ethiopia, than he/she was during the time of the socialist regime.

Ethiopia is unable to feed itself in 15 years of EPRDF rule. According to the recent estimates the Ethiopian population will double in about two decades to make the country the most populous on the African continent. One can imagine what will happen to over 150 million Ethiopians in 15-20 years time if no genuine groundwork is made for sustainable economic development in the country today. A decade and a half of EPRDF

rule is another lost period in Ethiopian economic history. South Korea achieved an economic miracle in mere 25 years to become one of the top 25 advanced countries from the position of massive poverty and economic underdevelopment. In this regard EPRDF failed the country. However, it is fighting tooth and nail to cling to power. Sadly, this will only perpetuate the misery of Ethiopian peoples.

EPRDF's failure to bring any tangible economic progress in the country in a decade and a half is the result of a host of inimical and misguided economic policies pursued by its dictatorial regime. Among others this include, continued state control of land ownership and lack of clear land tenure system, distortion of the market system by massive involvement of party owned industries and service providers, misguided agriculture and industrial development strategies and so on.

Lack of flexible land ownership and tenure system in a country that primarily depends on its land resource for food security and over all economic development is disastrous. The present land policy, land administration and legislation do not guarantee the tenure security of the Ethiopian peoples. This has already become a major bottleneck to ensure food security, expand investment and improve economic growth. However, the regime is not willing to adjust its failed economic policies in line with the requirement of the country's economic dynamics.

Proliferation of party owned and operated companies not only severely distorted the market system but served as means of financing preferential development strategy geared towards the advancement of a single priority region in the country. Agriculture led industrialization strategy is sound in principle but flawed in practice in EPRDF Ethiopia. In Ethiopia no conducive environment has been created to increase agricultural productivity in the past 15 years. Therefore, the sector is unable to feed the growing population let alone produce the surplus required as input to the industrial sector.

If farmers manage to produce some surplus during a certain bumper season, the price of the product plummets leaving the producers unable to pay for the soaring cost of fertilizer input thereby removing any incentive for any future increase in productivity. If the surplus produced in a given region is not backed by development of agro-processing industries or efficient interregional marketing, or export opportunities, it is impossible to sustain agricultural productivity or achieve agriculture led industrialization. I have observed no practical action taken by the EPRDF regime during the past 15 years to promote agriculture led industrialization in any part of Sidama and South Ethiopia where I come from.

The EPRDF regime not only failed to draw appropriate policies to promote economic growth and development in the country but also exercises deliberate policy of underdevelopment towards regions and peoples that are regarded as opposition strong holds. The dismantling of the Sidama Development Corporation in 2002 and the blockage of foreign grants such as Ireland Aid and international NGO assistances provided to the local development initiatives in Sidama is a clear proof that EPRDF stands for poverty and underdevelopment instead of growth and advancement of the

Ethiopian peoples. The regime not only exercises deliberate underdevelopment strategy but also actively promotes inter-ethnic strife so as to ensure the existent of sustainable instability in all parts of the country. The recent instigation of skirmishes between the Oromo and the Sidama peoples over a grazing land around Wondogent in northern Sidama is a reflection of such brutal strategy of the regime.

However, EPRDF's inimical policies are not limited to economics and instigation of ethnic conflicts. The regime extended its desperate act of restricting and interfering in the global use of information technology and the communication networks. Advances in information technology and communication particularly since the last decades of the 20th century have ensured the fastest exchange of information and knowledge that are crucial to advance political freedom, human rights, democracy, economic development and poverty alleviation in many parts of the world. Although many less developed countries particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa have not fully benefited from the revolution in information technology, they are making the best use of the resources they have accessed.

However, by virtue of being under repressive regime, Ethiopians both at home and in Diaspora are unable to make effective use of the global information and communication networks. It is both outrageous and embarrassing to witness that the Ethiopian regime blocked the widely used Short Messaging Services (SMSs) from entering Ethiopia. Ethiopia is the only country in Africa where citizens cannot receive SMSs via their cell phones. Moreover, the regime is involved in blocking Internet networks which it believes are involved in "anti-government campaign". Ethiomedia web site is the case in point. How long can EPRDF continue to rule the country by blocking its peoples from accessing information from the rest of the world?

The country is under siege. Its liberation rests on the shoulders of all its citizens. Enough is enough. Let us speed up our campaign for freedom and democracy.

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Sidama Nation Online,