

# **Deliberately Caused 'Marginalization and Underdevelopment' among the Sidama**

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## **Introduction**

The nation of Sidama inhabits the eastern part of the present so called Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region. The total population is estimated to be five million. The main occupation of the people in rural Sidama is agriculture (cultivation of crops and rearing of different animals even though the contribution of the later is dramatically decreasing due to land shortage). Coffee, which is leading export item and major source of country's revenue widely grows in Sidama; as are food crops such as Teff, wheat, barley, etc. But, Enset (*Ventirocosum*) is the staple food for the majority of the Sidama people. Variety of fruits and vegetables also grow in different parts of Sidama region.

Even though, agriculture is the major source of livelihood for the people of Sidama, its contribution in sustaining the life of the people is threatened by an unbalanced growth of population. The density of population in Sidama is above 500 p/km<sup>2</sup>, which is one of the highest in the country. The average land holding size is below 0.5 hectare. Employment opportunities outside agriculture are not available in Sidama. The efforts to increase agricultural production and productivity by both government and non-governmental organizations are negligible. Few NGOs recently operate only in some woredas, (districts).

Therefore, generally the living condition of the people is deteriorating from time to time, which is forcing people to opt for external food aid and other strategies like begging and street life, which has never been practiced in the history of Sidama people. Sidama is even neglected in emergency food aid and the only remaining option for the people is 'death'. The effort to reverse the situation by government is almost non-existent, and that of the non-governmental organizations is not promising. What is the root cause for this relentless suffering of the Sidama people? How could the problem be reversed? These and other questions will be discussed very briefly in the following sections.

## **Root Causes for the Marginalization and Suffering of Sidama People**

The root cause for the present marginalization and suffering of Sidama people in the view of this writer is primarily political and socio-cultural. But this article focuses on political aspects.

Politically, the successive rulers of this country have denied the right of Sidama people to think for themselves and bargain for their rights. Individual and organized struggles of the people to resist this suppression have been brutally crushed even though the Sidama people has in the past history and today never surrendered to its enemies and oppressors it liberty. In response to people's struggle to their rights, respective rulers denied the

people to basic rights of even education and health. This can be witnessed by meager number of Sidamas graduated with higher degrees. Sidama people were intentionally denied access to land in urban areas within Sidama territories and civilization and modernization related to flourishing of urban centers. The present very low proportion of urban population of Sidama people is the consequence of such strategic deprivation of Sidamas basic rights.

Moreover, the urban based northern affluent or loyal affiliates of rulers have been main decision makers on behalf of Sidama people. They decide whatever they want for Sidama people irrespective of people's consensus and good will. The people have usually been forced to accept these decisions; if there is any resistance, the consequences have been murder, arrest and torture. Through these intentional and well thought strategies, the successive rulers of Ethiopia have contributed to the present marginalization and suffering of the Sidama people. The overthrow of the Derg regime and consequent EPRDF's coming to power has sparked a glimmer of hope in the spirit of Sidama people; that at least increased their optimism to have a say on their affairs by breaking the chain of long rooted exploitation. As a result, following the debacle of ruthless Derg's regime in early 1990s, enthusiastic episodes have taken place at the beginning of EPRDF's 1<sup>st</sup> two years which affirms this hope. Among these, the following could be mentioned:

- Ø Regional administration structure was theoretically given (even though real authority was still in the hands of national rulers);
- Ø Sidama language became both working and education language in Sidama region;
- Ø Sidama intellectuals came from different corners of the country to work for their people;
- Ø Inflow of Sidama people to urban areas as business men and civil servants increased, etc.

The historical rulers of Sidama soon recognized that some promising future is coming for the people and they saw it as threat if this takes its shape. Therefore, they immediately started to reverse what was taking shape. The regional administration status and identity of the people was snatched away and artificially engineered by cadres of ruling classes. The people who were working for the development of people and its culture started to be seen as anti-government. Arrestments, intimidation, harassment, loss of job, etc used as a key strategy for demoralization of any Sidamas those who are thought to be threat to the rulers' simply because of their views. Sidamas once again forced to retreat to rural areas leaving key urban centers for historical rulers.

Such acts of the rulers have created serious public anger in Sidama region. The discontent reached its peak when decision was reached on changing the accountability of administration of urban centers in Sidama from Sidama zone to regional government. Some Sidamas in the ruling party bitterly opposed this strategy as anti-Sidama and part of undermining its development. They were immediately sent to prison and dismissed from their posts. This still exacerbated more anger among the people and they staged-out for

peaceful demonstration against these acts. Government's response to this peaceful act was massacre and bloodshed followed by arrests, torture, dismissal, etc. The May 24, 2002 and its aftermath witnessed the reality of this argument.

As unusual, the government of Ethiopia is using income from coffee (which is supposedly produced in Sidama region), for purchase of ammunitions to suppress the very struggle of Sidama people instead of improving the life of people through development interventions. Along with all these events, retaliation against entire Sidama nation has continued in the following fashion:-

- Ø Biased allocation of budget against Sidama people;
- Ø Alienating major development interventions including basic infrastructures;
- Ø Destroying local development organizations supporting people;
- Ø Using Pseudo Sidama cadres to disintegrate internal unity;
- Ø Undermining the voice of people, etc.

Despite all these suppressions, the struggle of the people and its unity is still firm and strong as usual. This is evidenced by the key decision passed unanimously by the people regarding the status of regional administration for Sidama people in July, 2005. Even though the question is constitutional and legal, it has created fear and anger among the ruling party and they are denouncing this question as illegal. Therefore, they are working tirelessly to reverse it. The rulers don't want Sidamas to decide on any issue affecting their destiny. They always expect their cadres to serve as conduits to pass down whatever centrally decided. To facilitate this, they have committed to award some pseudo Sidama cadres at the expense of entire Sidama people. But we believe that sooner or later our people will be masters of their destiny.

May God Bless our people.

**Amme Ka'nona,**

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