

The Election Dramas in Ethiopia: The TPLF/EPRDF Deceits Unveiled.

March 6, 2005, By Halaale Xawissa

I. Introduction

Ethiopia was ruled by an archaic feudal system for the most part of the 20th century. The student movement triggered by hunger and famine that caused death to millions of the peasantry in the north and the feudal serfdom that robbed livelihood and human dignity for the peoples of the south led to the down fall of the feudal regime in 1974. However, the fruits of the revolution were not enjoyed by the peoples. The military junta snatched the political power and plunged the country into political, economic and social crises. The serfdom was abolished. However, it was replaced by the system of villagization and collectivisation; the system that killed private initiative and hence any hope for social and economic progress. There was no political freedom. Any opposition to any of such misguided policies of the regime was crushed by the brutal forces of the junta.

However, there was one thing positive about the military regime. The military regime was not deceitful. It always did what it meant. There was no political pluralism, no private capital accumulation, no private media, no pledges and vows for human and democratic rights of individuals and peoples, no self determination up to secession by any people or group of peoples. The people knew what the regime meant and the regime was crystal clear about what it meant and did. This was important for two reasons: First there was no confusion about the regime at home. Second there was no confusion about the regime abroad. Most powerful countries in the world openly condemned the regime and supported all movements against the junta both at home and abroad. It was such high level of both national and international collaboration that shortened the life of the military regime. TPLF could never have defeated a regime with the mightiest army of half a million soldiers had it not been for both national and international support that it amassed during its struggle for the liberation of the Tigray people.

Immediately after such a massive international and local support brought TPLF to power in 1991, it begun to reveal its true intentions. By creating a fictitious EPRDF to upgrade TPLF and its original goals, it managed to monopolize the political power with in a year of its takeover. Every thing the regime promised to the Ethiopian people during the transitional charter that established the coalition transitional council turned out to be a deceptive manipulation of peoples. Political pluralism, human and democratic rights, self determination of nations and nationalities, free and fair elections, you name it, all became weapons of deception instead of the rights that should be exercised and enjoyed by the Ethiopian peoples. The irony of this is that while the regime lost total credibility by the Ethiopian peoples immediately after the 1992 elections, only after a year in power, the international community continued to be deceived by the regime until today, the first decade of the 21st century.

The election scheduled for May 2005 is going to be none other than the repetition of the dramas of the past 15 years in a more sophisticated manner. This article tries to highlight some pertinent issues in this regard.

The article is therefore organized as follows: part two reviews the state of political pluralism in the country at present. Part 3 exposes the current deceitful preparation for the May 2005 elections with a particular emphasis on the use of agricultural extension workers for political ends and the so-called multi party political debates. Part 4 assess the situation in Sidama while part 5 presents a reminder to all concerned.

II. The State of Political Pluralism in Ethiopia.

When it took over the political power in 1991 the TPLF regime invited ethnic based and national opposition political parties to participate in the process of forming transitional national government. Encouraged by such open call to accommodate opposition in a country where no body dared to oppose rulers for over a century, both the international community and the Ethiopian peoples appreciated TPLF and its leadership. However, no later than a year after these parties were invited to form the transitional government they were forced to withdraw from it. This proved the true intention of TPLF, i.e., the deceptive manipulation of the donors and the Ethiopian peoples.

Instead of accommodating the genuine political opposition the TPLF begun to fabricate its own pseudo-political organizations in the name of peoples' democratic organizations. Using the national treasury it seized after the fall of the military regime, the regime targeted and bribed the low paid primary school teachers and the unemployed youth to form its own surrogate political parties in the name of every ethnic group (nation), and in every corner of the country. Millions of birr was paid to buy these individuals. These less experienced and formerly disadvantaged group of young people begun to harass, kill and intimidate the genuine opposition leaders of different peoples that were fighting for the liberation of their down trodden masses even before the emergence of TPLF. In exactly the same manner the military junta labelled TPLF only a year before, the latter begun to label the genuine political opposition as "anti peace", "antinational unity" and so on. History repeated itself not in a decade or a century as most history does but in one year. The TPLF purged out all the opposition from its government with in two years of its takeover and effectively established a one party dictatorial rule different in form but similar in content to its predecessor. This was legalized by drawing a deceitful constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic and the subsequent election carried out in 1995. In this election TPLF/EPRDF "won" over 95% of the vote. This shattered any hope for political pluralism in the country.

Once again the international community failed to understand the true nature of the new regime. Emboldened by its capacity to cheat the international community, the regime continued to carry out its evil plans with out any fear. It continued to loot resources from the south and builds the Tigray regional state at an amazing pace

turning it into a well established industrial zone that supplies manufactured goods to the South while the South was kept as the supplier of raw material for the Tigrain industries. The steel industry, the cement complex, the medical factory, the textile complex are but the very few of a dozen of sophisticated industrial complexes built in Tigray in less than a decade. Tigray has a population of 3 and a half million. No single industrial complex I know was built in the South and the Oromo region with the total combined population of over 40 million since TPLF took over power in 1991. Instead the TPLF regime continued to dismantle small development initiatives that sprang in the South with the help of donors. The clear case in point is the dismantling of the Sidama Development initiatives assisted by the Ireland Aid and various other donors in the south. Thus TPLF not only developed Tigray at the expense of the southern nations but also deliberately underdeveloped the south.

However, few brave individuals and intellectuals continued to expose the true nature of the TPLF regime. Among such brave Ethiopians the author would like to mention the leader of the opposition United Southern political organization, Dr. Beyene Petros. His party and the few other opposition parties that sprung after 1995 tried to participate in the 2000 election. However, the election was openly rigged and TPLF/EPRDF won over 95% for the second time. For instance, the Hadiya people in the south overwhelmingly voted for Dr. Beyene's party in this election. However, the regime refused to accept the vote of the people. It harassed, killed and tortured those who voted for the opposition in broad daylight. That was the fate of any citizen that tried to express his/her democratic right.

Thus the TPLF regime failed to honour its pledges. Political pluralism remained only a hope but not a reality. Elections became a mechanism for deceiving the international community to ensure smooth flow of aid and other resources.

Opposition political parties reorganized themselves in an opposition coalition before two years hoping that the TPLF regime would make the environment conducive for free and fair elections in May 2005. However, they have proved before hand that that will not be the case. The regime rejected the alternative organizational structure for the Election Board presented by the opposition. The opposition proved that the Election Board is not independent and cannot execute a free and fair election. The regime rejected all the demands of the opposition that would improve their chance to make effective participation in the elections except for one deceptive compromise that allowed them to participate in political talk shows on TV. I will turn to that issue next.

III. The Prospect of the May 2005 Elections.

A). The "Multi Party" Debates

The preparation for the coming election is underway at present. The TPLF regime has prepared a relatively new recipe of deception this time. All demands of the opposition parties were rejected except the participation in political talk shows. Party leaders are

given air time on TV to debate with the cadres of the ruling party on various policy issues. In these debates the ruling and opposition parties present their alternative policy perspectives on social and economic issues. The main problem in this process is the credibility of the alternative policies issues presented by these parties. While no body has measured the credibility of the alternative policies being presented by the opposition parties as these parties have never been in power, the Ethiopian peoples are sure about one thing. They know very well that TPLF/EPRDF never does what it says. After 15 years of deception the Ethiopian peoples can no longer trust what the TPLF regime laments. Moreover, even if the opposition presents a golden policy alternatives compared to the ruling party, they will never win the elections no matter what. This makes the talk shows a waste of time. By participating in these talk shows while all the other legitimate demands that could create the level playing field for the opposition have already been rejected, the opposition is serving the purpose of TPLF by providing it further legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. The opposition itself is already being deceived!!

B). Agricultural extension workers as political cadres.

Ethiopia is the only country in the world that has permanently failed to feed its peoples. Whenever there is small failure of rain, millions of people in the country face serious hunger and famine so much so that the country itself has become synonymous with drought and famine among the international communities. The incumbent regime has done nothing to address this problem. In 2003 alone over 15 million people, i.e., one fourth of the total population depended on international food aid for their survival. The situation did not change much even today with the government making fresh appeal for food aid for millions for 2005. However, the international community seems to have lost any interest this time with no pledges for food aid made so far.

One may wonder what has happened to this country. Famine in Ethiopia is not the result of drought. Several countries in the world faced more severe droughts than Ethiopia but have never begged for international food aid. They have made structural changes in land and other resource allocations and in improving the production technologies that allowed them to produce sufficient surplus to feed their population during such times. The situation in Ethiopia is different. Both the previous and the current regime failed to address these issues in the country. The primary objective of the current regime in Ethiopia is to stay in power as long as they could so as to enable the leaders to build the region where they come from.

There are superfluous evidences that support these facts. However, the writer wishes to emphasis the use of the so- called agricultural extension workers by the current regime. These workers are supposed to assist farmers in rural areas in introducing new ideas and technologies to help farmers increase their agricultural productivity and hence ensure food self-sufficiency at least theoretically. However, this is not the case in Ethiopia. The main functions of these agents since TPLF took over power has become the distribution of fertilizers to and collection of proceeds from these farmers

on behalf of the TPLF/EPRDF owned companies who have the monopoly power in supplying fertilizer in the country. These “development agents” often imprison farmers who are unable to pay the fertilizer money because their crops have failed and they have no other assets to sell and repay the monies. Thus farmers often complain that by forcing them to take fertilizer regardless of their economic positions and by forcing them to repay even if their crops have failed, these agents have made a great contribution to vulnerability to hunger and famine in rural Ethiopia.

Another important function of these “agricultural extension agents” has been buying votes from poor rural communities for the ruling party. TPLF/EPRDF has a well-known history of buying individuals and votes in the country since it took power in 1991. These agents make contacts with their localities particularly in the South in regions such as Sidama and Hadiya where the opposition for the ruling party is very strong. These agents distribute bribes to the community leaders and some vocal community members to vote only for the ruling party. The writer of this article has first hand information regarding what the regime is doing in the Sidama region in the South in this regard at present.

The Sidama people have completely rejected the TPLF/EPRDF regime because it is anti peace, anti democratic and murderous regime. Among the various atrocities the regime has committed against them, the Sidama people will always remember the massacre of its innocent students and farmers on May 24, 2002 in Awassa by the defence forces of Meles Zenawi simply because they expressed their peaceful protest against the illegal decision of the regime to remove them from their land of Awassa. Thus because it lost total credibility with the people, the regime is currently buying poor farmers with money to vote for it during the up coming elections. This is the case not only in the Sidama region but also in many other parts of the country. This gives two important lessons to the international community: First, the upcoming elections will never be free and fair. And second, the country can never be able to feed itself while the agents for rural development have been tuned in to agents for prolonging the life of the ruling party.

IV. The Situation in Sidama

The incumbent regime has victimized the Sidama people in various ways for the past decade and a half. Exploitation of its resources, both material and human, the dismantling of development initiatives and hence deliberate underdevelopment of the society, snatching its land of Awassa and eviction of legitimate Sidama owners from this land are but only a few of the crimes the regime committed against this people. The May 24, 2002 massacre was the culmination of the decade old suppression and exploitation of the Sidama people by this deceitful regime.

Not regretful of what it has been doing on this people for these all time, the regime is trying to extend its rule by another five years by legitimising the upcoming May 2005 elections. The Sidama National Liberation Organization urges the Sidama people to boycott these elections. If the people cannot boycott them they should vote for the

opposition. The Sidama people appreciate the contribution Dr. Beyene Petros has made in exposing the massacre of the Sidama people on May 24, 2002. He is the true son of the country. The Sidama scholars abroad commend his political activities and call for all Sidamas to support this hero. Voting for TPLF/EPRDF and its Sidama bandits means mocking on the sacrifices of our innocent students and farmers on May 24, 2004. The Sidama people should fight to ensure that this murderous regime would not extend its brutal rule for another decade in the Sidama land. The Sidama people as brave as they are should teach another lesson to this murderous regime as it thought various lessons to its predecessors.

V. Call for the Ethiopian Peoples and the International Community.

The political passivity of most peoples in Ethiopia since the 1990s has provided unlimited avenues to the current regime to do any thing it likes to prolong its despotic rule over the various peoples of the country. It is high time the Ethiopian peoples say no to such brutal regimes. This is the dawn of the 21st century. The Ethiopian peoples should put an end to the shameful legacy of famine and hunger by removing such predatory regimes from political power. There is no doubt that the regime tries to rig the upcoming elections as always. However, the peoples' power should prevail this time. The lie that "I can stay in power as long as the Ethiopian peoples want me to stay to" is another blatant deceit that indicates the belief of the current rulers that the country cannot have better alternative leaders than them. The peoples of Ethiopia should exercise their powers by rejecting the outcome that will be against their will. The Ethiopians should learn from the Philippines, Kenya, Lebanon, Ukraine and many other countries in the world where people have brought down despots by their coordinated mass actions.

The peoples of the South have special responsibility in ensuring that the current regime will not extend its brutal rule for the coming years. They are required to coordinate their efforts and reject the deceits of the regime once and for all. The brave peoples of Sidama, Hadiya, Oromia, Somalis, Kafficho and others have to make sure that their suffering should not be extended for more years.

The international community should stop its ghalibility on the Ethiopian politics for two decades. It should make a clear and credible involvement in the upcoming elections and should show to the Ethiopian peoples the true outcome of the election processes. It should stop rewarding despots and should take the side of the peoples of this country that have suffered for centuries. It should be ready to denounce the already expected outcome of the May 2005 elections and should create conditions for smooth transfer of power to the alternative opposition political parties. This will ensure not only that the Ethiopian peoples will enjoy the fruits of freedom and democracy for the first time in their histories but also that the international community will not continue to feed these unfortunate peoples for unlimited period of time.

