

Implications of the Election of the new PM from Southern Ethiopia on the Sidama Regional Question- A Brief Analysis

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A sudden ascendancy into the helm of the Ethiopian politics dominated by the Amhara and Tigray ruling elites for the past 120 years, by a national of a minority Wolayita ethnic group from Southern Ethiopia symbolizes a “radical” shift in Ethiopia’s political tradition. Haile Mariam Desalegn, 47, and a former University Professor at Arba Minch Water Technology, who was elected as the country’s new PM over the weekend, is the first leader of Ethiopia from the South in the history of the country. Despite talks of continued behind the scene rule by the Tigray ruling elite; I assume that it is not entirely feasible to have two puppet leaders in one country- the President and the PM- at the same time. I therefore am inclined to believe that the PM will have a reasonable political leverage to exercise.

Although South Ethiopia and Oromia together account for 58% of the country’s population, they have never had assumed any political leadership in the country since the country took its current shape over a century ago. Three quarters of the stated period had seen an obsolete feudal system that had robbed land and human dignity from the peoples in Oromia, southern, western and eastern parts of the country leading to economic stagnation, illiteracy, poverty, and underdevelopment. The much hoped revolution in 1974 had failed in every respect except the nominal transfer of land to the tiller, which was later monopolized under state ownership killing private incentives for investment, economic development and rural transformation. Forced collectivization and villagization under the military-cum-socialist dictatorship led to drastic fall in food production contributing to the catastrophic famine that killed over a million Ethiopians in 1984.

The hope for democratic transformation, economic recovery and development that ushered in with the demise of the military dictatorship was not easy to come by. Encouraging initial inclusive arrangements such as the formation of all inclusive Transitional Government of Ethiopia in 1992 and the creation of 14 federal regions in the country including 5 regions in the South (regions 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11) were swiftly reversed without consultation with the stakeholders.

Instead the ruling party fabricated democratic organizations in each of the Southern and Oromia sub regions to constitute the two of the four leading coalition members of the EPRDF: OPDO and SEPDM. While this has secured the long term survival of the ruling party, it has been to the detriment of democracy and development in the South.

In particular, the forced and illegal dissolution of the 5 independent regions in the South has preserved the economic and political marginalization of the largest ethnic group, the Sidama people. The Sidama people have waged armed struggle against two successive regimes for the very regional autonomy that was taken away from them in 1993 when the current regime

dissolved region 8, that was composed of Sidama, Gedeo, and Burgi. The right to regional self-administration is a foundation for economic recovery and development in Sidama. A people that has no say in the process of decision making about the allocation, production, use and distribution of its resources in its land has no future as a nation.

The current movement in Sidama for regional self-administration is therefore a continuation of an age old demand by the Sidama people who according to the official Ethiopian statistics number 3.4 million as at July 2012, and remain one of the 5 majority ethnic groups in the country who make up 74% of the population of the country.

What then is the implication of the election of Haile Mariam Dessalegn as the new PM of Ethiopia on the Sidama regional question? My gut instinct dictates me to assume that as a person from the oppressed sisterly nation in the South, who assumed a historic responsibility by becoming the first leader of the country from the South in over a century and whose people have shared the same pain and suffering under the previous successive regimes, he would be able to transcend a minor ethnic strife and uphold the genuine demand of the Sidama people for regional self-administration.

I expect that the new PM would work closely with the Sidama people to ensure that their demand for regional self-administration is answered within the constitutional prerogative as a matter of urgency. I would like to defy the adage that the oppressed people are their own worst enemies and would like to think that the oppressed peoples in the South are no enemies of each other. I defy assumptions that there are certain rogue elements in Sidama society that would strive to use this opportunity to undermine the genuine demand of the Sidama people for better governance, political empowerment and economic development that would ensure peace and harmony with their neighbors and the various peoples living in their land.

We in the South have learnt a lot during the past two decades. Forced imposition of perceived changes against the will of the people can never be sustained. The disastrous Wogagoda project that was scrapped after an outlay of millions of Birr and the loss of tens of lives in Wolayita zone in mid 1990s was the clear testimony that impositions of the will of few ruling elites on the masses of the people will be resisted whatever the cost to that people. My hope is that sanity will prevail and the voices of the oppressed people will reign supreme all over the world.