

The Sidama Liberation Movement withdraws from the Ethiopian local elections amid widespread rights abuses

Press Release by United Sidama Parties for Freedom and Justice (USPFJ)

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The 14 April 2013 local government elections in Ethiopia have been marred by widespread abuses of the representatives and supporters of the Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM), which remains the main opposition political movement in the Sidama region. The SLM accuses the regional and Sidama EPRDF cadres of continued intimidation, harassment and persecution of its representatives and supporters during the period leading up to the elections.

The SLM members in all 19 districts of the Sidama administration who were nominated to contest in the stated elections have often been arrested and imprisoned for prolonged period of time to intimidate them and deter them from contesting the elections. The elected SLM representatives were barred from freely campaigning in the Sidama region. To the astonishment of the Sidama people and in an outright contempt to any democratic principles, Duka'le Lamisso, the Vice Chairperson of the Sidama Liberation Movement continues to languish in EPRDF jail in Hawassa. The hope for his release to campaign for the local elections was dashed as the EPRDF regime chose to unleash further crackdown on the remaining elected officials of the movement.

The ERPDF administrators in the Sidama region and Southern Regional State blocked any access by the opposition political parties to the media. Opposition political parties in the region including SLM were barred from accessing the government owned regional television services, as well as the only radio services in Sidama that broadcasts in the Sidama language. The latter was established by the support of donor funds under the Sidama Development Programme to broadcast academic and adult education programs and promote the development of the Sidama language and culture. The radio station was however confiscated by the ruling EPRDF cadres and is currently being used as the party propaganda machine.

Following the botched general elections in 2005 and 2010, the EPRDF government closed any political space for its political opponents throughout the country turning the country in to a virtual one party state. Currently there is only one representative in the legislator, the House of People's Representatives, with 545 members. The continued intimidation, harassment, arrest imprisonment and torture of the representatives of the opposition political parties decimated any hope for political pluralism, good governance and accountability in the country. Citizens' democratic and human rights have been abused at massive scales with impunity throughout the most regions in the country. The country is in downward spirals in democratic dispensation.

The support for EPRDF in the Sidama region evaporated following the failure of the regional and federal governments to address the age-old demand of the Sidama people for regional self-administration. The demand for regional self-administration was re-echoed from all corners of

Sidama in 2012 following the announcement by the regional EPRDRF cadres to place the administration of the Sidama capital city, Hawassa, under the federal government. The main objective of such announcement was to permanently silence the Sidama question for equitable political voice and accountability in the country. The Sidama nation rejected the forced amalgamation by EPRDF in 1993 into the Southern Ethiopia Regional Administration, which constitutes 56 different nations and nationalities in the Southern part of the country stretching from the Ethio-Kenyan boarder in the South to the country's border with South Sudan in the west.

As an organization founded on heroic Sidama anti-feudal resistance movement since the late 1960s, the SLM spearheaded the Sidama demand for regional self-administration during its armed struggle with defunct military-cum-socialist dictatorship between 1975 and 1982 during which the movement liberated three former high land districts from the then brutal regime. During the armed struggle the Sidama nation lost over 30,000 heroic fighters.

Following the downfall of the socialist regime in 1991, the Sidama Liberation Movement was one of the few opposition political movements that formed the Transitional Government with the EPRDF. However, the alliance was short-lived as the EPRDF systemically purged all the national liberation movements and free political organizations and replaced them with "people's democratic originations" that it quickly fabricated after 1991. In Sidama, it created the Sidama People's Democratic Organization (SPDO) in 1992 which was dissolved recently to create a single EPRDF branch for the 56 nations in the South.

In essence, therefore, SLM remains the only political organization that is operating in Sidama today outside of the Sidama political parties primarily based in Diaspora, notably the United Sidama Parties for Freedom and Justice.

As the sole voice of the people SLM therefore echoed the voice of the Sidama people under the prerogatives of the very constitution promulgated by the EPRDF itself. However, this was not to be. In few days leading up to the 14 April 2013 elections the EPRDF regime made it impossible for the SLM representatives and its supporters to hold meetings, travel to districts to visit polling stations, and contact the electorates. The elected officials, members and supporters of SLM have been arrested and beaten and imprisoned. One member in Hawassa district was beaten unconscious and dozens were wounded across the 19 districts. Nevertheless, this did not intimidate the Sidama people. They rose in unison from corner to corner and rejected the regional cadres who attempted to visit the 19 districts to garner support for EPRDF candidates. In all districts the regional puppet president visited, he faced stiff opposition. The Sidama people told him to his face that he was a traitor who denigrated the Sidama people due to their rightful demand for regional self-administration. In most districts civilians chanted slogans with the Sidama wise words: "lukkichchu quuppe qallano. Gobba mama mani hiranno!" roughly translated as: "even chicken give birth to eggs; who betrays his land?"

Cognizant of the total rejection by the Sidama civilians, the regional puppet president requested military assistance from the federal government to quell the “unrest” in Sidama leading up to the third botched elections on 14 April. Sidama is again like a war zone, soldiers roaming in districts towns reminding the people of the brutal Loqqe massacre of 2002.

Preliminary assessment by the election observers of SLM who managed to reach to the polling stations have confirmed that the Sidama EPRDF cadres have been filling ballot boxes with fake electorate names and distributing them to all polling stations. EPRDF has made it clear for the consecutive 22nd year that it does not care about the voice of the people. Even if SLM was able to contest, the votes of the electorate do not matter. Results are predetermined making a mockery of democracy in East Africa where our neighboring country, Kenya, just conducted the most democratic and successful elections in the history of the continent, praised by the international community.

Under these circumstances, SLM had no choices but to announce its unequivocal withdrawal from the sham election; while affirming to the Sidama people that it would continue its peaceful struggle until the Sidama people achieve self-determination.

The United Sidama Parties for Freedom and Justice, therefore,

- Condemns the gross violations of the fundamental human rights by EPRDF in Sidama; and call up on the regime to desist from further ill treatments of the Sidama people;
- Calls up on all democracy loving institutions in the country to condemn the ongoing atrocities in Sidama;
- Calls up on the international community to condemn the Ethiopian regime for continued violations of fundamental human rights in Sidama.
- Calls up on the African Union and the United Nations organizations to condemn the brutal acts of suppression by the Ethiopian regime in Sidama.

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