

Any Decision on the status of Hawassa Administration and the Sidama Regional Question without Referendum will remain Illegal

The ongoing meeting in Hawassa called by the EPRDF President of Southern region about which our various reporters have provided an excellent account is said to have continued as misguided as ever. Reports indicate that the meeting has discussed the following five agenda during the past three days:

- 1) How the development of Sidama can be sustained.
- 2) Why the people of Sidama do not accept the concept of EPRDF/SEPDM. The Oromo people are more numerous than the Sidama people but they are under the EPRDF/ OPDO rule.
- 3) As long as the Sidama people are forced to be under SEPDM rule, they would be forced to allow joint administration of the Hawassa town. The Sidama cadres should apologize for not letting that happen up till now.
- 4) The question of regional self-administration is not possible for now and forever.
- 5) Anybody who is interested to fight for the freedom of the Sidama people can continue to fight but the members of the SEPDM/EPRDF will always be guided by the rules of their party.

By looking at the way the discussion agenda are framed, I wondered whether these are prepared by a historic enemy of the Sidama people than any one who claims to have come out of the womb of a Sidama woman. I leave the answer to this question to history, as it is the ultimate judge of the heroes and the villains in the struggle for freedom and justice in Sidamaland. Let me return to the so called agenda of the meeting and scrutinize them closely:

Agenda 1. How to sustain development in Sidama????

Sustaining development presupposes that there is an adequate ongoing effort by government aimed at improving the plights of the 3.4 million people through investments in economic and social infrastructure, in various sectors of the economy such as agriculture, mining, manufacturing, tourism, and the like. The reality on the ground proves that there has not been any meaningful development activity in Sidama after the ERDF government shut down the Sidama development activities that were supported by donors 11 years ago. The Sidama people, who have always ensured food security through subsistence and cash crop production and family safety net systems, have for the first time in history became dependent on food aid under the current regime.

This was because the government neglected the main stay of the economy, the agriculture sector that accounts for 90% of employment and livelihood in Sidama. The Sidama region is endowed with vast water resources, including its lakes and rivers that could feed the entire Southern region. Did the government build any irrigation scheme to increase agricultural productivity during the past 21 years? Please any one in Sidama inform us if there is any single irrigation project in Sidama that was aimed at increasing agricultural production and food security in Sidama built during the past 21 years.

Among the 3.4 million Sidama people the youth is estimated to account for a minimum of 60% of the population. About 80% of this youth are either unemployed urban dwellers or underemployed in rural subsistence farms. In such highly subsistence rural economy, governments throughout the world create employment opportunities through agro processing schemes and by building labour intensive manufacturing sectors to shift surplus labour from the subsistence agricultural sector to the manufacturing sector. This will have a multiplier effect on the development of small and medium rural enterprises (SMEs) that will further shift redundant rural labour to more productive activities. This will in turn boost the productivity of the small holder rural farmers as less labour will sustain the current level of agricultural output. This will eventually lead to the structural transformation of the Sidama economy away from one dependent on subsistence agriculture to the one dominated by modern manufacturing sector with gainful employment by the majority of the people.

Before this is ensured the government must make massive investment on education particularly on technical and vocational education and training (TVET) to create the skills required by the manufacturing sector. Does anyone indicate to us how many agro-processing factories were built in rural Sidama during the past 21 years? Does anyone tell us how many TVET schools were built in Sidama during the past 21 years?

The land holding in Sidama has diminished significantly during the past two decades as population density rose rapidly. The population density in Sidama is currently over 450 one of the highest in the world with average land holding less than 0.3 hectares. Unless the redundant rural labour is provided an alternative employment opportunity, the Sidama region will not be able to sustain life as we know it today.

We acknowledge that few infrastructure projects were built including electricity supply and telecommunication in rural towns by the current regime, but these are minuscule compared to the demand of the 3.4 million people residing in a small area of land. What then does the regional EPRDF cadre like to sustain in Sidama? Does he plan to sustain poverty and underdevelopment or development?

The Sidama people are well ahead of the regional EPRDF president. They are saying that the current inappropriate regional administrative arrangement perpetuated underdevelopment in Sidama instead of development and must be changed and changed now. Because the regional president is rich through graft and misappropriation of the Sidama resources, he may not feel the pain of the people. It is estimated that over 70% of the Sidama people live below the poverty level of US\$1.25 per day in spite of massive cash crop, coffee, they supply to the central market. The main reason for this is that the current administrative arrangement in the South limits the people's access to adequate government capital budget for development besides the massive maladministration.

Development in Sidama is impossible with the current system of administrative arrangement. Therefore, the Sidama people must be granted regional self-administration now before it is too late. Otherwise rest assured that the continued poverty, political marginalization and underdevelopment will push people to the edge and and to the point of no return.

Agenda 2. Why the people of Sidama do not accept the concept of EPRDF/SEPDM????

This is the most ridiculous and the stupidest agenda to be discussed in front of any people during the 21st century. This is a crux of the usual lies and deceptions of the system. The Sidama people have never rejected the concept of EPRDF. As we have made uncountable sacrifices fighting the successive oppressive regimes in the country, we welcomed the TPLF/ERDF regime with open arms when it overthrew the previous regime in 1991. What the Sidama people are demanding is respect to ERDF's own laws that each nation and nationality in Ethiopia has the right to self-determination up to and including session. If EPRDF respects this and grants regional self-administration to the Sidama people, we are with EPRDF. If it does not respect its own constitution, how does EPRDF expect the Sidama people to respect it?

The analogy with the Oromo people being under EPRDF rule is stupid. The Oromo people have been granted their own ethnic based region. They are not mixed with any other ethnic groups. How can the Sidama and Oromo situation be compared here?

Agenda 3. Forced change to Hawassa administrative arrangement????

If ERPDF decides to forcefully takeover Hawassa town and place it under federal administrative system, it begins to dig its grave as far as, the Sidama people are concerned. The Sidama EPRDF cadres are not elected by the Sidama people. They are handpicked by the regime and have no legal right to decide on the Sidama regional question and the status of the Sidamaland, Hawassa. Any decision made without a referendum in which all eligible voters out of the 3.4 million Sidama people have fully participated will remain illegal and the Sidama people will reject it unequivocally. Make no mistakes; the will of the people will always prevail.

Agenda 4. The question of regional self-administration is not possible for now and forever????

What is not possible for ever is to crush the will of the people. Regimes have risen and fallen. But the will of the people will never fall. The Sidama people will achieve the regional self-administration sooner or later whether the regional enemy of Sidama accepts it or not. This is a fundamental human right. It is not a chart from any one. Nobody thought before 1989 that the former USSR would become 15 independent countries, the former Yugoslavia 6 independent countries; South Sudan to two Sudans; Indonesia gives birth to East Timor, you name it. Do not hoodwink us with baseless threats.

Agenda 5: Anybody who is interested to fight for the freedom of the Sidama people can continue to fight????

The Sidama people accept advice only from their heroes not villains. We have fought injustice in Sidama for 120 years and do not need an advice of amateur belly politicians to continue to fight for the freedom and justice in that land. Let us remind those who are gathered in Sidama cultural hall once again. Refrain from making historic mistakes by signing rogue documents on the Sidama regional question and the status of Hawassa town before the 3.4 million Sidama people approve the proposed decisions in referendum. The dissolution of regions 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 are already illegal according to the EPRDF's own law. If you sign these documents, you will add two more illegal documents into the history of the EPRDF's misrule in Sidama. That would not be forgiven by the Sidama people and history.

Hawassa Teessonke

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