

## **The EPRDF cadres in South Ethiopia continue to commit crimes against humanity in Sidama: Cry the Beloved Country!**

By Hawassa Teessonke

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Africa is shining. From the Economist Magazine's "Hopeless Continent" in just 2000, it has become a formidable force to reckon with within less than a decade. The continent's real economic growth rate, which averaged between 5-6 percent for the past decade, is second only to the fast growing Asian region. 7 out of the top ten fastest growing countries in the world are in Africa. Africa and Asia are now the main drivers of global economic recovery and growth.

Africa is reclaiming the economic development that eluded it for half a century and there is every hope that the 21<sup>st</sup> century would become the African century. Africa is also reclaiming political pluralism that was a foundation of its pre-colonial egalitarian traditional system of governance. Over a dozen countries in the continent have made a startling transition from autocracy to democracy. A level playing field has been created to opposition political movements in a number of African countries. Incumbent parties have conceded defeat and a peaceful transition of political power from a ruling to opposition political parties took place in a number of African countries including Kenya, Zambia, Ghana, to name a few.

Amid such hope for transformation of the world's least developed continent, we confront a grim reality where countries continue to slide backward. A typical case in point is my country, Ethiopia. Cry the beloved country!

Ethiopia is an anti-thesis of the African renaissance. A glimmer of hope that shone with the overthrow of the brutal socialist-cum-military dictatorship in 1991 was dashed when the new regime began to shut down political space, and space for voice and accountability as early as in 1993. The first major manifestation of the disaster in waiting was the purging of the opposition political parties that constituted the Transitional Government in 1991. These parties included the Oromo Liberation Front and the Sidama Liberation Movement, among many others. The purging of the opposition political parties that were fighting the previous oppressive regime side by side with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (the dominant party in EPRDF) dashed the country's hope for much anticipated political and economic transformation.

To make matters worse, in the South, the new regime took further sinister measures with utter disregard to the peoples that lived in the region. It unilaterally dissolved the five independent regions formed by the Transitional Government and forcefully amalgamated 56 ethnic groups under one pseudo region known today as southern Ethiopian nations, nationalities and peoples' regional state (sennprs), perhaps the longest name of a province in the world and the biggest joke of all. The 56 nations, nationalities and peoples had never been consulted to form one region. Their voices and concerns have never been heard. They have never been under one province since that part has been annexed to the Ethiopian empire. The current Southern region was part of 4 different provinces during the feudal regime including Sidama (often confused with a degrading and humiliating misnomer Sidamo), Gamogofa, Kaffa, and Shewa provinces and over 8 administrative regions during the final years of the derg.

The justification provided by the current regime to restructure the previous administrative arrangement in the country was to establish an ethnic based federal administrative system to

ensure self-administration by each nation and nationality in the country. However, as I indicated in one of my previous articles, the major fallacy of this approach lies in the fact that regional administrative boundaries are made to be based on ethno-linguistic identity in all regions except South Ethiopia. This reduces the current Ethiopian constitution to an Orwellian analogue where “All animals remain equal but some animals remain more equal than others.”

Under the current regime, ethno-linguistic identity matters in the rest of the country except in South Ethiopia. Is this not a gross violation of human right? If it is not, then what is.

The Sidama people objected to the forced amalgamation into the Southern region from day one. This is for the following main reasons:

1) Ethno-linguistic dissimilarity between most of the 56 nations: the Sidama people belong to the family of Kushitic speaking group of nations including Oromo, Afar, Somali, which were the ancient settlers in Northeast Africa stretching from Southern Egypt through northern Sudan to Tanzania. Therefore, whether the current regime likes or hates it, the Sidama people prefer to become a zone in Oromia than a zone with an amalgamation of alien groups. The Government can not force the Sidama people to become what they are not.

2) The right to self-administration: the Sidama people demand justice and impartial application of the constitution in the land to all peoples. Our geographic location in the South does not justify our forced amalgamation with other minority nations while our population is the fifth largest in the country. As long as Tigray is a region of its own there is no justification for Sidama not to become one. As long as a city state Harar, with a population of 100,000 is a region of its own, there is no justification for Sidama with a population of 3.4 million not to become one.

3) Economic development and fiscal allocations: the Sidama region is the backbone of the Ethiopian economy. We produce and supply to the central market at least 40,000 tonnes of mostly washed specialty Arabica coffee. Most of the producers of this green gold, nevertheless, remain in abject poverty due to unfair commodity trading systems and undue government interferences in the commodity market. The Sidama people deserve a proportional fiscal allocation from the central government to develop the region. Under this regime, the Sidama people have for the first time failed to ensure livelihood security. An estimated 20-30% of the Sidama people depend on food aid today thanks to a deliberate government policy of underdevelopment.

4) To reverse this catastrophe, the Sidama people must be able to administer their affairs by themselves; receive proportional share of fiscal allocations from the central government to investment in socio-economic development and livelihood security. This can only be realized if Sidama becomes a regional state in line with the provisions of articles 39 and 47 of the current Ethiopian constitution.

The points I tried to articulate above are not exhaustive. Further reasons have been provided in my previous articles. The gist of the argument is that these points are founded on basic principles of human rights, voice and accountability and fair treatments of all citizens before law. However, in Sidama today any person who voices these concerns is regarded as a de facto criminal.

Hundreds of the Sidama civilians who voiced these concerns are rounded up and thrown into the various prisons throughout the 19 districts with impunity.

I learned the re-arrest of Duka'le Lamisso, a veteran Sidama Human Rights Activist, who was just released from jail a month ago with utter shock and dismay. Duka'le did not commit any crime. Iyasu Ragassa and Legesse Jillo, two leading religious leaders in Sidama, are languishing in prison for alleged comments they might have made on Sidama's right for regional self-administration.

Let me ask fellow Ethiopians, fellow Africans, and the international community at large, where in the world is the demand for a provincial status within a state a crime?

The ERPDF cadres in Southern Ethiopian region, who are perpetrating these atrocities against the innocent Sidama civilians, are committing crimes against humanity. The international community should bear witness.

**Hawassa Teessonke, November 17, 2012**