

## Is EPRDF Sincere to Build a Free Democratic Nation?

**By: Abegaz Bellete**

As we followed the election debates in the television and radio, and from the talk of the people, it looks that EPRDF is losing ground everywhere. People now in the streets, in the buses, in the mini-buses, in the *Wiyeyets*, in the liquor houses, in the mosques, in the churches, in the work places, and all over in the cities, towns and rural villages are talking about the emergence of credible Opposition parties particularly of CUD and UEDF. The real statistical data is coming out from the mouths of the people themselves as demonstrated at Meskel Square, Addis Ababa. The betrayed and overlooked people of Ethiopia are finally speaking their minds. The Meskel show was not only a supporting rally for CUD but it was also a revolutionary rally against the ruling party, EPRDF. I recall few years back PM Meles giving an interview to the BBC journalist about the famine in Ethiopia. He said, "It is like a recurring nightmare." If there were anything that is a recurring nightmare to PM Meles since that interview, it is really CUD - the recently home made coalition, consisting of four strong political parties, that is led by Ethiopia's finest minds. CUD's foremost belief is peaceful struggle and it believes that power comes from the will of the people and not by the barrel of the gun. Since CUD came into the mainstream Ethiopian politics, things have changed fast by the day. In this path of social awareness, what transpired from the debates and the day-to-day campaign activity is that EPRDF and Meles are insincere in building democracy and shaping a viable free nation.

EPRDF has used its mighty force all over Ethiopia to curb the popularity of CUD and other democratic forces. In Southern Ethiopia, all over Oromiya, Gojam, Northern Shewa, Wollo, Begemider, Afar, Benishangul, Tigray and Addis Ababa, CUD's and UEDF's members and supporters have been and are being harassed, persecuted, tortured, massively imprisoned and or killed to this date. A month ago, it was reported that CUD's point man from Afar (the symbol of 1.5 million Afar people inhabiting the strategic eastern province of Ethiopia) was kidnapped in Addis Ababa in broad daylight by EPRDF security. He was tortured and found dumped in the outskirts of the city. Just recently, about five hundred members of CUD have been displaced from Southern Wollo to escape arrest and killings. Can it be imagined in modern times that the very existence of government to stop crime turns out to be a dangerous force against innocent citizens simply for exercising their democratic rights? In the rural villages and smaller towns the ruling party members, militia and police are becoming obstacles for opposition supporters to organize meetings and propaganda work. **Democracy is about reaching people and freely communicating ideas. Free and fair election starts from this process.**

The EPRDF and its confidants tried to influence the election through bribing. That CUD and other Oppositions have managed to provide qualified candidates in such a short period of time has been a source of worry to EPRDF. Therefore, bribing candidates to withdraw from the election contest, and buying voting cards have been additional tactics of EPRDF to weaken the Opposition. In a country where 80% of the population is below poverty line (less than a dollar per day income), the ruling party can mislead some for minor monetary gifts. We believe that election board in conjunction with the contesting parties should have created a mechanism to curb this kind of problem as it is threatening to infant democracy such as ours.

EPRDF has lied and misinformed Ethiopians. Because of the popularity of Oppositions, EPRDF also designed a strategy to divert the minds of the Ethiopians at home and overseas. One of the ways, at least for this election season, has been raising issues that attract attention. The "Abay talk" by the PM, and others surfaced since election temperature started to rise. The irony is that the same government has been the obstacle for agricultural developments in the country. Who destroyed the famous Tana Belles irrigation project in the Abay basin in northwestern Ethiopia? Was it not *Woyanie*? How many irrigation projects have turned useless in other parts of Ethiopia after the fall of Derg? How many of them are now on sale but have no buyers? Aren't the land policy and the uncertainty of the future of the ethnic states one of the obstacles?

Above all, can the EPRDF government defend development projects in the Abay basin when it cannot even defend the territory of the constituency it claims to represent?

The election process has never been free and fair: The election board is not neutral; Majority election monitors recruited at the various polling stations are EPRDF members; Election board has barred independent foreign election observers from functioning in Ethiopia, allowing only those the government wants; it barred local election observers although the decision was reversed at two courts at the last minute; it issues new rules and directives when the election time approaches. EPRDF used government resources, administrative structure, security, militia and military to the disadvantage of opposition parties. Vehicle owners are persecuted for carrying the banners of opposition parties. The ruling party calls meetings throughout the country for development purposes only to tell them to hold demonstrations and denounce opposition parties when they show up in these meetings. The rural people have been told unequivocally by EPRDF that they will lose their farmlands if they elect opposition. The EPRDF has formed numerous associations throughout the country to control the people for election purposes. Therefore the May 15, 2005 election by itself cannot be free and fair since the election process has been highly compromised in rural Ethiopia where the majority of the population resides. Notwithstanding its determination to contest the May election, the opposition has every legitimate reason to call this election as unfair and not free.

EPRDF does not respect alternative political views. CUD's proposal to amend the constitution was unfairly decried by the EPRDF and company as equivalent to demolishing the constitution. They accuse CUD of wanting to abrogate the constitution by electoral processes and shower every offensive word against this party. In the first place, CUD did not say it would abolish the constitution. What it says is it will amend the constitution when those articles in the constitution are found to violate the rights of people. Ethiopians do not want rules that curb their rights. It is not the constitution that gives us our rights. It is our humanely right to have our rights. When and wherever the constitution is against the wishes of the people, it should be amended and for that the people will be consulted. CUD's manifesto has made this very clear. The independent newspaper, *The Reporter* says of CUD, "According to the Manifesto, the basis for these modifications would be the observance of the wishes, interests and desires of the people." CUD has also shown its commitment to the right of self-determination, including respecting the right of those people who want to live together. Could this be worrisome to EPRDF?

EPRDF is a party that does not believe in collective responsibility, and it worships one-man dictatorship. The party is furious about CUD's reflections to restrict the power of the executive. CUD proposes that it wants to limit the service of the PM in Office **only to two terms**. By doing this, CUD is putting a policy that the party itself can no more be undemocratic. Ato Meles who has always thought to remain a prime minister for life (recall the BBC interview) is surely going to be upset by this proposal and accuses CUD of wanting to violate the constitution. If we see the Ethiopian history, the executive has always determined the fates of Ethiopia and Ethiopians. During the imperial era, the King, during the Deg time, the Chairman and during the *Woyanie* time the PM have been the ultimate decision makers. Professor Mesay Kebede, from his observation of the recent Ethiopian history, teaches us that leaders of Ethiopia are just promoting what members of a political organization or a group of people are aspiring for. The difference from the rest of the members is that leaders have a unique personality to do the job. However, in the end, when these very same supporters become victims of their own bad desires, they put the blame on that one man - the leader. Professor Mesay asks and proposes, "What is the lesson to be learnt from this chain of reversals? That if we want to have good leadership, we must start dreaming big and noble." I think **limiting the terms of the PM constitutionally is the beginning of that noble big dream**. This limitation surely calls for a PM to conduct himself in a manner acceptable to the law of the land, as he will be accountable once he vacates office.

EPRDF governance system is far from democratic norms. EPRDF and supporters prides themselves that they have been able to ascertain group rights and the right of nations and nationalities to self-governance. However, the reality on the ground is that ethnic federalism in Ethiopia has not brought any better group rights and self-governance to the Ethiopian people. Ethiopia now is effectively a unitary government where power is consolidated under the minority leadership of the EPRDF. It is comparable to the aristocratic ancient kingdoms we read of human history. In ethnically divided federal country for example one would expect that the states are free and govern their ethnic territories and can promulgate laws that suits them. But in actuality they are not. The “federal government” can easily interfere in the states’ affairs and do what it wants. We have seen PM Meles removing Abate Kisho of SEPDO, Kuma Demekssa of OPDO, Tamirat Laynie of ANDM and Gebru Asrat of TPLF simply because they want to act freely and independently in their respective states. In an ethnic federal state, and parties competing on that platform, one would also expect that those that get the majority votes will form government, and the executive power will be given to them. But the minority party that has about 40 seats in a 547 parliament seats occupies the executive power. This is not to say that executive power should not be given to a person coming from a minority group. Ethiopians have no problem of having a prime minister from a minority group. Ethiopian nationalities have shown their highest regard for one another when they struggled against the Derg under the multi-ethnic party, EPRP. People of minority ethnic groups occupied both the political and army leadership of EPRP positions. The fallacy under EPRDF is that if Ethiopia is organized under ethnic federalism, then logic has it that the majority ethnic group, on its own or in coalition with others, will form government and takes executive power. That is what happened in Iraq and other countries. But here in Ethiopia *Woyanie* wants to eat the cake and have it at the same time. Is it possible for *Woyanie* to belong to the 80 ethnic groups of Ethiopia at the same time? Surely, by ethnicizing the Ethiopian people, and at the same time not giving power to the majority, EPRDF in the long run is taking us to the medieval period politics, where we will be engaged in endless wars.

The EPRDF is a party that is against the “Right to property and legal protection.” The EPRDF’s intention is controlling the masses of Ethiopia by possessing key development sectors including land. **They proclaim if land does not remain in the hands of the EPRDF, there will not be democracy (PM Meles repeatedly says privatization of land will only be realized** Because EPRDF does not believe in the “right of Ethiopians to property and legal protection,” it confiscates land from the peasants; it has a policy that makes peasants remain peasants for eternity. EPRDF demolishes houses in cities like Addis Ababa and drive the residents out of the city. People who have lived in the center of the city for life are evicted from their homes by the thousands and forced to live in the peripheries only to give their holdings to another person. Mind you the EPRDF came out of the bush to Addis Ababa only fourteen years ago, but it and its confidants have the luxury of choosing where they want to live when the early inhabitants are ejected out. The EPRDF government says it stands for the poor yet the poor are the victims. The government sells their holdings in millions and the compensation they receive is surprisingly negligible. The money they receive is nothing when compared to the advantages they have by living in the center of the city. Further more they are leaving their habitat and it takes them years to reconcile with the new environment. Even the so-called repressive regimes of Derg and the King recognize that people should be removed from their homes when the area is needed **for public purposes**. And when people are removed from their location, the rule was that a **similar** location has to be given and that the compensation should include the likely mental and physical damages that can occur as a result of eviction. In EPRDF Ethiopia often times people are evicted not for public purposes and no proper compensations are given. Not only houses are confiscated and given to individuals in the name of investment by EPRDF, but houses are also sometimes demolished by diverting directions outside engineering and geotechnical principles because the poor are the worthless, and it is always easier to pay them smaller money and chase them out. As a result, roads are widened in the wrong side, towards gorges and unstable ground. When projects are formulated, we do not hear of any environmental impact assessment (social and the natural environment) and that residents are not consulted. An environmental impact assessment (EIA) essentially requires alternative project definitions and that residents be consulted followed by public deliberations before final decisions. When CUD and other democratic forces come out

with the right approach and disclosed their stand to the public, EPRDF starts to be annoyed. It is said that Ato Arkebe is now coming out with a new cosmetic proposals to capitalize on the May election. Although Ato Arkebe might be a good man, as many seem to suggest, he cannot escape from the sins as his decisions are based on the EPRDF policies. This new proposal of Arkebe, it is said, is vague and does not even address the real issue of compensation based on the market price as proposed by CUD and does not also mention about providing comparable sites for house construction, and compensation for all other damages arising from eviction. It is a pity by what criteria development partners release money to the EPRDF government without meeting this crucial requirement of EIA. Removing people, without their agreement and without adequate compensation, is an act equivalent to **ethnic cleansing**. Leaders of the opposition parties should therefore formally submit a letter of protest to development partners and particularly to the actual funding agencies.

The EPRDF is a detrimental force against the national interest of Ethiopia. Proposals of democratic forces such as CUD and UEDF for peaceful settlement of Ethiopia's interest in the region, particularly with Eritrea, are a source of worry to EPRDF. The EPRDF sees Eritrean integration as a problem to EPRDF dictatorship and outsmarted the EPLF when it agreed to recognize the independence of Eritrea in 1993. But this is not without a burden to the Ethiopian economy. Just recently a UN forum in Africa has indicated that Ethiopia loses 40% of its income for insurance and haulage due to lack of port ownership. Against the obvious, the EPRDF reasoned out to Ethiopians and the international community that peace and respect for the rights of people are its core principle for the loss of the country's vital national interest. The EPRDF has been waiting to capitalize if CUD's manifesto puts any forceful demands on Eritrea by trying to get buyers from the international community. But CUD came with a very plausible peaceful stand in its manifesto that could get acceptance by all players. It is strongly believed by political analysts that once democratic forces come to form a majority government in Addis Ababa, Eritrea will be at peace with itself. Parties like CUD and other democratic forces are inclusive, and their vision is national scale. This effectively clears the competition spirits that preoccupied Eritrean leaders. Moreover, Eritrea's very survival will not be challenged due to ethnicity since these parties are not ethnically organized. Eritrea will be on the advantage commercially from united Ethiopia and there is no need and benefit for Eritrea to install political opponents to Ethiopia. As the EPRDF itself is the main source of conflict with Eritrea, it is unlikely there will be a cause for any antagonism with Eritrea after the fall of EPRDF.

EPRDF attacks prominent Ethiopian professionals and intellectuals instead of seeking their advice. Its leadership has an attitude of "I know it all" when in fact we all know they are only good debaters that are far from truth. Therefore, nervous EPRDF helplessly has now reverted to low-level false propaganda work to tarnish the images of the leadership of democratic forces. Because of the arrogance of EPRDF and the absence of opportunity to influence policymaking, best intellectuals prefer to work with the opposition. EPRDF is thus worried about the high quality of men joining democratic forces. Personality is always an issue in any democratic society during election time. The resumes of the leadership of democratic such as CUD and UEDF and that of EPRDF are well known to the Ethiopian people. There are too many bad records of EPRDF leadership before and after assumption of power. **Therefore the contest between democratic forces and EPRDF in Ethiopia should not even be about policy and achievement; it is rather to use democratic rights to choose between two contrasting sides of human nature - of truth and deception, innocence and guilt, faithfulness and treason, good and evil.**

The EPRDF professes as respecting Ethiopian ethnic groups and it accuses oppositions of fomenting ethnic hatred ahead of the May 15 general elections. Ironically, it is the EPRDF government that has been engaged in rampant human rights abuses and has failed to uphold the rule of law. It is Meles Zenawi's government that has always been the source of ethnic hatred in Ethiopian politics. A number of ethnic clashes has surfaced in present day Ethiopia than it was during the Haileselassie and the Derg regimes combined. Mr. Meles Zenawi and supporters display a tremendous ethnocentric behavior. Mr. Meles Zenawi and his TPLF-EPRDF

confidants have always considered certain ethnic groups as their arc enemies. TPLF labels an entire majority ethnic group as chauvinists. Since it came to power, TPLF has killed or has become the cause for the death of thousands of Amharas in different parts of Ethiopia. The TPLF has incited different nationalities of Ethiopia against the Amharic speaking people of Ethiopia in various parts of the country. The TPLF is also harassing the vast Oromo and Somali people labeling them as narrow minded or as supporters of OLF ONLF respectively. Many students have been killed and purged merely for being Oromos or for demanding their God given democratic rights. TPLF-EPRDF army has conducted genocide acts in various part of the country. The Sidamas, Wolaytas, Gambella people, Somalis and etc. have been victims of such nature.

In general, the TPLF-EPRDF so far has obviously become insincere to build democracy in Ethiopia. It persecutes and terrorizes citizens, lies and deceives the public, creates disparity among Ethiopians, spurs ethnic hatred, denies the "full right to private property and legal protection," promotes corruption, bad governance and executive dictatorship. The only positive step in EPRDF's 14 years of rule is the limited media coverage it awarded to the Opposition for the May 2005 election, although in a country where most people do not have radio and TV the impact might not mean so much. The EPRDF has been to a greater extent a barrier for opposition parties to reach the rural population in this election campaign. The EPRDF warns peasants that they will lose their farmlands if they elect opposition. Despite its determination to contest the May 2005 election, Ethiopian opposition has every legitimate reason to call this election as unfair and not free since the election process has been highly compromised. All they need is to see the outcome of the election and take a course of reasonable measure. The EPRDF has one last chance: show a better face to the opposition to minimize any possible discontent and avoid any unlawful act in the Sunday election and in the subsequent counting of votes. If this is met it is very likely that victory is in the side of opposition irrespective of the anomalies in the election process.