

Sidama Victims of Atrocity: Five years on after Loqqe Massacre

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Little is known about the Sidama nation, its people, its history and culture. Sidama studies were virtually non-existent even for academic purposes. There are many reasons for this. First and foremost, the emergence of enlightened nationalists and the promotion of Sidama nationalism were late and slow in comparison to other regions. Secondly, the Ethiopian historiography had no room for the promotion or development of non-Habasha cultures and peoples. Worse, still, it had circumvented and undermined knowledge production and dissemination of the latter. The combination of these factors engendered ambiguity about the past and uncertainty about contemporary developments. (S Hameso, 2006, p.57)

BACKGROUND and HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Sidama nation is one of the nations who have been and are being ruled by iron-fists of Abyssinian (Habasha) successive regimes that lingered to this date. The Sidama nation, however, hasn't in any way peacefully accepted the domination of Abyssinian elites and their repressive ideology. Instead, the nation resisted the invasion with strong sense of unity and pride. On various occasions, since late 1890s, the nation attempted to repulse the aggression of the only black colonial powers of the planet, although they didn't re-gain their sovereignty to date.

Sidama nation's indefatigability and resilience weren't successful simply because of the following reasons. The first and foremost for their failure is that, the support and modern weaponry given to their Abyssinian counter-parts by European colonial powers, notably by the British, whereas Sidama nation was traditionally launching their resistance with hand made weapons that has left the enemy in disarray on various battle fields. Nevertheless, the nation has lost its battle to its colonial power. In effect, the successive regimes kept their domination to this date on Sidama utterly pervasive. 'The Son of a Snake if a Snake', it can't be humane. Due to this fact the successors of Abyssinian rulers are repeating the same thing that their predecessors have done against their colonies.

Ironically, there is no fundamental difference between the intent and overall objective of Empire expansion whether it is Mussolini's, Minilki's or other European scandalous colonial scavengers. All they have some thing in common in their minds. That is making money and securing their advantage by the sufferings of their colonies in the way that dehumanises fellow human being. Ethiopian nations that have fallen at the hands of Habasha colonial powers are under such tyrannical system in the 21st century.

Besides, in the history of Sidama nation, they didn't attempt to push any ones' border nor did they allow theirs to be pushed voluntarily. As they are guided by traditionally egalitarian system that is governed by the moral code called 'halaale' truth or true way of life. Based on this moral code and attached values, they preserved their ways of lives despite lingering colonial domination for the past century. In fact, this hasn't happened with the good will of the colonial powers. Rather, they preserved at least their identity

with their precious lives and blood that is split in entire Sidama region sporadically. By suppressing their true way of live, Abyssinian rulers kept attempting to dilute Sidamas sense of unity, identity and pride to assure their complete subservience.

The May 24, 2002 massacre of the innocent Sidama demonstrators was a part and parcel of such successive regime's heinous acts against the Sidama nation. To this date, the rulers are not allowing the nation to decide on its own issues and decide their destinations. Over 100 Sidama peaceful demonstrators were killed inhumanly whilst they were demonstrating requesting autonomy for their regional administration. Requesting regional autonomy is constitutional rights for all other regions. Based on this conceptual understanding, the Sidamas were peacefully demonstrating unlike previous resistance movements. The following parts shall deal with the accounts of the May 24, 2002 atrocity in Sidama region and goes onto discussing why it happened, and the reaction of the Sidama people in the country and in Diaspora as well as the response of international community.

WHY SIDAMA AND OTHER PEOPLE ARE VICTIMISED BY THE SUCCESSIVE ABYSSINIAN REGIMES?

There are several reasons for this. In human history the rulers don't rest unless they make sure that they are fully in control of dominated nation or country. If they are not sure that they are in full control, they become restless like 'wounded tiger' that is determined to attack before he dies. In particular, if the rulers think that the nation is threat to their expansionist policy, they take merciless action to destroy such a feeling. Sidama nation is one of the strongest nations of the Abyssinian Empire that kept resisting their rules in a number of ways that remained stronger to this date and managed to preserve their cultural heritage, language and ways of lives despite relentless brutality they receive on various occasions including that of the Boricha massacre at the beginning of 1990s and the May 24, 2002 Looqe massacre.

The ability of the Sidama nation to avoid full compliance with and accept colonisers' ways of lives made colonial masters to make the nation the focus of suppression and repressions that virtually subjugated and tame the nation to utter sufferings. That is why, under guise of democracy and federalism (that is not a part of Sidama's national interests), TPLF/EPRDF's regime is increasing the sufferings of Sidama people.

The rulers attempt to undermine Sidama identity in a number of ways, and they directly or indirectly loot its natural resources on constant bases. They suppress any democratic movements by introducing various systems that diminish Sidamas sense of identity and undermine culturally egalitarian system that is based on true ways of lives, 'halaale'. They always tell lies and undermine an essence being equal as did their European colonial counterparts against fellow African colonies. This proves previous argument that emphasises that there is no difference between European colonial powers and their Ethiopian counter parts as they all are based on the same notion of dehumanising fellow human being apart from the methodology being used.

Sue Pollock explains the similarity of other European colonial powers with their Abyssinian counter-parts as follows:-

“As a result of slavery, colonial and neo-colonialism, African traditions and cultures have received little recognition from the outside world. African value systems have been undermined and undervalued leaving African people with diminished feeling of self-worth. The story is also one of domination and exploitation of people and land; it is one where democratic participation and self-determination of the people has been ignored” (Sue Pollock, 1997, p.81).

Abyssinian rulers adopted the same technique to undermine the values, cultures, and ways of lives and religion of colonised nations of the Empire by substituting theirs. They regard the ways of Sidama life and others nation with similar situation as uncivilised and backward. By doing so, they attempted to plant sense of fear and insecurity in the psyches of their colonies that further obliges the colonies to feel inferior to their colonial masters. Such feeling leads its captives to the level of expecting the colonial masters to tell them how to live and what to do in their lands and homes; not knowing that their colonial masters' lack the very elements of being humane. Sadly, such arrogance remains typical behaviour of wild animals although historians attempt to embellish this.

God created man in the image of Himself. And human beings have got a power of making fair decisions and judgements, the power of ruling the world and in it justly, the power of being humane and genuine to one another. Such is the essence of humanity all despotic dictators and colonial masters lack all over the world including Abyssinian colonial elites. The lack of human dignity experienced by Africans is the direct result of the policy of white supremacy, in the case of European colonialism. White supremacy implies black inferiority and this is the case in Abyssinian Empire.

Thus, I compare all colonial powers and their policy with the policy of wild animals that devour their preys without slightest remorse to sustain only their lives regardless of others feelings and sufferings. While the colonial powers claim that they are the most civilised people, their savagery actions prove otherwise. All fellow human oppressors all over the globe share the same behavioural pattern and intentionally do almost similar things against humanity.

In Ethiopian as well as in wider colonial world, the colonisers preach their colonies that they are the only almighty and decide the futurity of their coolies. We are conditioned by the history of Abyssinian successive regimes in the country to accept the fact that non-Abyssinians, when we make our demands strongly and powerfully enough to have chance of success; will be meet by force and terror on the part of the regime. They work tirelessly to make their expansionist and inhumane policy the reality of daily lives of their Empire. By doing so, they make sure that their colonies are making their conscious subservient to their brutal system and establish a sense of inferiority that bury a quest for identity once and for all.

Whether colonial powers are happy or not, resistance movement remains profound as long as people are oppressed and deprived of their basic rights. Liberty is natural right for any human being. Therefore, it is not some thing that powerful gives to the powerless. It is the rights of all human being, not only for whites, yellows, blues, blacks or chocolates. Unless this natural need is satisfied, people keep resisting any kind of brutality even if punishments are as heavy and hard as South African Apartheid's barbed wire. That itself has been dismantled by the consorted efforts of the oppressed majority's freedom movements. Such is the movement that keeps colonial powers eye on the Sidama nation and makes it to slaughter innocent peoples whilst seeking their constitutional rights.

WHAT HAPPENED ON MAY 24, 2002?

May 24, 2007 will be the 5th anniversary of Sidama Victims of atrocity. Sidama people were showing their disagreement to the government's decision that deprives the nation off their regional autonomy. The government decided to move Awassa, 'Sidama capital' to the federal administration from the Sidama people. The quest for regional autonomy is not only for the Sidama people whose population exceeds 5 million and the third populous nation in Ethiopia; but also it is for nations such Adere of Eastern Ethiopia whose population is less than 'half a million' that is regionally autonomous. The Sidama nation was asking this constitutional right in a peaceful manner.

Their claim is also enshrined in Ethiopian constitution. Not only regional autonomy that an Ethiopian constitution guarantees for nations and nationalities, but also to the level of self determination that goes up to independence that prevailed by the independence of Eritrea. The Sidamas were peacefully and non-violently asking these constitutional rights when they were responded brutally with highly sophisticated machinery guns' live ammunitions.

To make the situation worse, the demonstrators were carrying leaves of olives as a sign of peace and non-violent movement when they were responded with live ammunition of the security forces of the government that has been ordered by Meles Zenawi and his federal architects, and their regional cadres. On May 24, 2002, from 11am to 12pm local time onwards peaceful Sidama people were savagely treated with bullets and their corpse left to lie on the streets. Several dead bodies have been devoured by hyenas in the bushes around and in Awassa city where no one was allowed to collect the dead bodies of their beloved ones. At least 69 confirmed dead bodies have been counted within one hour massacre.

Immediately after the shootings and the following days, thousands of hundreds of innocents additional Sidamas of all walks of lives and ages were imprisoned, tortured and brutalised by the orders of the same politicians. Sidama people were made to deny their identity 'language', ways of lives and cultural heritage. During these periods, Sidama people were not allowed to speak their language in their capital city, Awassa. If any one is found speaking *Sidaamuafoo* (*Sidama language*), an undercover security force catch them immediately for arrest. Countless number of innocent Sidamas were arrested and some of whom are still languishing in prison to this date; whereas the killers are enjoying their corrupt lives.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MASSACRE OF SIDAMAS AND THE RESPONSE OF WESTERN POWERS,

No one is held accountable for such heinous acts against basic and constitutional rights of Sidama people nor has Sidama's quest for regional autonomy received positive response from Meles's regime.

Four years after the Looqe Massacre, Meles Zenawi went to the Sidama region to deceive the nation by telling them a lie. He used various tactics to neutralise the anger

caused by the mass murder including deceiving nation's highly regarded elderly who were asking him very basic question about the rights of the nation for regional autonomy, by telling them that they will hold referendum based on constitutional rights within time of 1 year that didn't materialise to date.

Equally, no one from Western powers raise the issues of Sidama's May 24, 2002 massacre in a reasonable way. Western nations as well as Medias surface only post May 15, 2005 election's death in Addis Ababa that exposed and damaged democracy decorated ugly face of Meles's regime. In the face of these all tragic acts against humanity, Western powers are working with such brutish regime that slaughter helpless and armless citizens.

Sidamas in Diaspora contacted international media organisations to raise the plights of Sidama. Some in the international community did not do enough to reveal the hidden face Meles's regime. The UN didn't raise the issues of Sidama in such way that puts pressure on Ethiopian regime to hold those who are responsible for the massacre. Only EU immediately after the massacre directly asked Meles Zenawi in Brussels (while he was begging money that goes for military and his region's build-up) who promised an independent inquiry into this. The so called independent system doesn't exist in the country. However, Meles's lie convinces the West. Meles usually tells them an implausible story as he is an architect of deceit and lies.

The failure of international community to act appropriately to bring an end to the lingering abuses of all kinds and magnitudes obliges deprived nations to seek alternative solution with all possible means to regain their identity or languish eternally. No wonder if the people raise their arms after they exhaust all peaceful avenues. People struggle until they become agents of their destiny when they have opportunity. People continue their stride to freedom and justice by defying unjust system until they freely involve themselves in any political activities without boundary and decide who governs them and decide on their socio-political and economic spheres. That is what happening in Ethiopia as well as wider world.

STATUS-QUO IN SIDAMA REGION, SIDAMA PEOPLE IN DIASPORA AND AT HOME

Sidama region becomes the most neglected region in the country. All politically appointed cadres are neither competent nor have conviction for developing and improving the life of Sidama people. They are simply kept on power to channel the orders of intimidations and suppressions from federal Meles's regime by the pretext of Sidama nation's representation. The region doesn't have infrastructures, development activities, above all free human resources that is determined and has conviction for the development and betterment of his nation. In comparison to other regions such as incumbents (Tigray whose population is less than Sidama) that has got several hospitals, higher academic institutions like Universities and colleges including Medical Schools, electrification of their towns and cities and road works, various industries such as textiles and pharmaceutical factories, international airports that links the region with external world and so forth and other development activities; but Sidama has none of mentioned above.

Two years ago, one friend (Mr X) came from Tigray region to pursue a post-graduate study abroad. We're discussing about the human rights and development in Ethiopia. Mr X explained to me that how Tigray is developing and told me that even there are special schools where one of his sons attends. The school for talented children (Kelemi), that is purely designed to prepare favourable foundations for Tigray Scientists was operational since mid 1995. Sidama doesn't have properly organised high school let alone special schools and higher academic institutions that are the base for social transformation and technological advancements that helps the enlightens the whole nation.

Mr X further narrated to me about the abundance of NGO's in Tigray that receives strict supervision and directions from government agents from federal level to the region. I felt very happy for the success of Tigray people and its children as genuine thinker; and equally felt utterly sad for unjust and inequitable distribution of resources. I explained to Mr X that Sidama only had just one NGO (IRISH AID) that has been dismantled by the Ethiopian regime immediately after the May 24, 2002 Massacre of the Sidama and the founders of this NGO were intimidated, victimised and obliged to flee the country. I further explained to Mr X that all development activities those were built by dedicated Sidama intellectuals are entirely out of use at the moment. Mr X said that he and wider Tigray people doesn't at all know this tragedy under the leadership of their people who were claiming to be agents of freedom, democracy, peace, justice and equality of opportunities.

As Sidama nation is completely neglected; there are no professionals who think for their region. If there is one who is genuine thinker, he will be victimised or made to flee the country unless he wants to comply with repressive rule of Meles's regime. The nation is left like 'a ship without radar'. Knowing this fact, a sense of frustration, hopelessness and anger in Sidama region remains overwhelmingly part of daily life.

With regard to the people in Diaspora; Sidama people out side their region are very few let alone in Diaspora. The successive regimes didn't allow Sidama people to go to school never mind higher education abroad in the last half a century. Emperor Haile Silassie's regime was purposely blocked and deprives off Sidama nation's children their basic rights of going to school. This is the historical fact Mele's regime is repeating against Sidama nation. The Sidama people remain in their region as result. This confinement has negative impact when it comes to campaigning all over the world.

I think there are few hundreds (not more than one to two hundred) from which most of them live in the United States of America who moved in the past decade with green Visa scheme that doesn't have any thing to do with the rulers. But the lack of resources and losing hope in the system and giving up by the day to day tragedy they see in Sidama region makes the effort of campaign sluggish. Therefore, the Sidama people in Diaspora are not doing enough due to some of the reasons mentioned above and other factors. Only some, not more than dozens are trying to update international community with ongoing plights of this down trodden Sidama people.

THE WAY FORWARD AND CONCLUSION

Unless people are able to be the agents of their own destiny, the problem remains the same. Sidama people need to be their own agents. International community, in particular powerful nations that knowingly or unknowingly sponsor the sufferings of

helpless nations of Ethiopia in general, Sidama in particular need to rethink their approach. We urge international independent inquiry into the massacre of the May 24, 2002 whilst allowing the nation to regain its regional autonomy for which innocent civilians loss their precious lives on constant bases asking these basic and constitutional rights whereas Ethiopian regime claims that it is respecting its citizen's constitutional rights.

References

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