

# Of “The Opposition Pentecostals” & the Road Ahead

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## Introduction

Judiciously disseminated intelligence can be a potent national security device. Through such a device internal politics of a given polity could be stopped in its tracks or steered in directions favorable to one’s own interests. This in turn could take the form of legitimizing one group and not the other, blackmailing the opposition, or introducing new ‘facts’ into the public forum. The gathering of a useful intelligence is, of course, unthinkable without a willing and oftentimes greedy and ambitious individual(s) operating from within the corridors of power.

## Brokering power?

Indian Ocean Newsletter (ION) must be in the business of “brokering power and their connections.” The trouble is that every so often the connections are broken and intelligence is wasted. I shall present four examples to corroborate my assertion:

1. The September issue of ION [No. 1222, 22/09/2007] is blazingly titled “The Opposition Pentecostals” in which certain individuals are identified by name and the church they belong to declared as holding “influence among the ranks of the Opposition.”

The very idea of juxtaposing “Opposition” with “Pentecostals” is made to sound some revelation is at hand or that an unholy alliance is being plotted. We are told that “certain opposition supporters prostrated themselves in front of Birtukan—going as far as kissing her feet—and her colleagues ... This kind of behavior has not been seen in Ethiopia since the time with the subjects of Emperor Haile Selassie prostrated themselves before him ... this strange scene ... is a sign of the growing importance Pentecostals have in the CUDP leadership.”

The fact that Ethiopians convey their joyousness “strangely” differently from Europeans seems to be lost on our respected observer. The report also showed insensitivity in that Birtukan and company had spent nearly two years in an appalling Ethiopian prison and were released only after the death penalty was handed down and later commuted. For some (friends and relatives) this ordeal is, understandably, charged with emotions. What did the observer make of the *ililta ክልልታ* she heard on arrival at Dulles Airport of Opposition delegates or during the Millennium festivities?

Is the fact that Birtukan is “Pente” so “strange” as to need dragging into the conversation the church she belongs to? Is the Honorable Judge really incapable of making up her mind about joining a political party to the point of needing ecclesiastical injunction? What is the significance of reminding us that Orthodox Christians use the pejorative “Pente” for the likes of the judge? Are not both Christian groups? Is this the ION version of good intelligence? I am afraid the brief dismally failed to inform the reader that even during the atheistic Derg rule “Pentes” had served their country with distinction.

Not that we expect ION or any such groups to get it right every time. In this and similar cases the blunders tend to be cultural as well as informational: alas, the “insider” may be more intelligent than the intelligence reporter; the intelligence reporter may be unaware that the ruling party in Ethiopia is a close-knit ethnic family. It could be the reporter is adept at putting a spin on facts. Hence, ethnicity and religion, not competence becomes the focus of his argument. Whatever the reason, ION is habitually committing factual errors. In the end, such pattern of transgressions is bound to turn the newsletter into one unworthy of our trust.

2. ION No. 1220, 25/08/2007 repeats a variation on the phrase, “a pardon from Meles Zenawi” in too quick a succession to not mistake the intent of the report when in reality it is the President that grants a pardon (see the transcript to Dr. Hailu Araya’s<sup>1</sup> interview on VOA, 19 September 2007.)

3. We read in the same issue “Berhanu Nega ... could quit ... because he has a valid Green Card.” What is this bit of information supposed to accomplish? On the contrary, subsequent activities have proved that Berhanu Nega is not quitting and is in fact only warming up, or better still, electrifying supporters and observers alike by his demeanor and his clear, informative and inspiring speeches (ዲሞክራሲያዊ ትግል በኢትዮጵያ፤ In Amharic: “The Struggle for Democracy in Ethiopia,” AddisVoice.com).

4. True to form, ION of December 2006 had also stated as fact that Professor Bahru Zewde was involved in mediating between the ruling minority party and the opposition more than a year after the May 2005 elections, etc. The professor had to lodge a complaint in EthiopianReview.com (December 20, 2006) pointing out the fallaciousness of the report.

Whether it is ION or any number of groups and individuals, the underlying goal is ultimately the acquisition of power to set the agenda and impact local politics.

**What can we extrapolate from the preceding statements? I believe several things.**

First, in the above cases ION is consistently biased in favor of the ruling minority party in Ethiopia. Is this mere coincidence that Birtukan and Berhanu are targeted?

Second, splinter groups within our communities may be making transitions difficult, undermining, in the process, our common and long-term interests.

Third, in their eagerness to secure U.S. support, groups may be out-bidding each other to irreparably compromise our national interests.

**What can we do to minimize the damage to our collective well-being?**

First, stop meddling in roles assigned to *Kinijit* leaders. Too many cooks spoil the broth; or ግርግር ለሌባ ያመቻል Those of us living abroad need to limit our input to enabling the

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<sup>1</sup> Speaking of Dr. Hailu, I suggest that his moving and historic Amharic poem ያገር ፍቅር ልክፍት be entered into textbooks and students made to memorize.

process and not to making organizational and policy decisions. We should not be acting like the absentee landlord of yesteryear or some donor groups of today.

Second, administer a “freedom lock-up treatment”: interrupt the itinerary of opposition leaders and lock them up in a hotel for as long as it takes to settle their differences and come up with a united public face. Disband most *Ad-hoc* committees; their proliferation is only a recipe for confusion.

Third, Ethiopia-related website editors have the duty to not send out contradictory, unchecked, and divisive messages. Such messages include vilification or veneration of members of the Opposition. Repeated statements of “clarification” project the unthinking mode and do not induce confidence. It is a general rule that no one individual or group adequately represents our collective aspirations and interests. In other words, organization and discipline is our salvation in situation like this.

The question we ought to be asking is who among us best articulates our collective hopes and is best equipped to provide leadership. Having identified one, the rest of us should fall behind to lend our undivided support. That entails adhering to compromise solutions the opposition leadership might reach with incumbents and such entities. We ought to trust the judgment of the leadership and hold our fire to help stabilize the fluid conditions. Followership, after all, is no less important than leadership.

Fourth, the fact that there are disagreements within the opposition group is evidence of the treacherous political terrain they are treading. And given the background of the leadership and what they have been through that may not be surprising at all.

Fifth, handlers of opposition delegates should pace meetings in such a way that personal opinion is not mistaken for the official word; that the official word is uniformly and clearly articulated; and that pressures that arise because of travel and speaking engagements will not lead to avoidable misstatements.

Sixth, Ethiopian intellectuals should stop playing ethnic hide-and-seek in matters of truth and conscience and having done so search for ways to devote their energies to issues of democracy, justice and human rights.

Finally, the promise to include in the national conversation any group that is willing to abide by essential democracy (of voting rights and rule of law) may be a good idea but not necessarily practical at this juncture. It could be time consuming. And the possibility of losing momentum and, with it, an electorate base should force improvisation. Obviously, some will fall by the wayside. Compromises will have to be made where possible in order to realize a larger and more immediate goal. That is where real leadership is needed. And that is where we hope the two-year ordeal and contemplation could make a difference.

## **The road ahead**

I have serious doubts that the proposed deal between moderates and the ruling minority party will be handled in good faith. A scandal of national proportions may be in the offing. A major point of contention will be on who should take the top job. One could *conjecture* at least three personality traits for contenders for the post (assuming PM Meles will forego his position, though I strongly believe he will retain his power.) The choices will more than likely revolve around a political ape (with no principles whatsoever); an “outsider” (to give an air of impartiality but really intent on disempowering contenders); and a credible and competent individual. The first choice will be hastily rejected; the last, alas, will be sidelined. The second choice will assume power, albeit, as a detached and impotent functionary.

Democratic practices will continue to elude us as long as an ethnic minority party is in power. In other words, it is futile to think for a moment that TPLF-led government will ever reform itself to accommodate the demands of a democratic society for the same reason that the Derg government by its very design could not entertain an alternative to its rule. There are issues of transparency, accountability, rule of law, etc, which incumbents have consistently failed to abide by. Democracy by its very nature upholds majority rule and hence rejects minority rule of every stripe. Public distrust and disdain for the party in power is rampant. Removing these roadblocks will inevitably drive incumbents out of office. I don’t see that happening in the immediate future short of a schism within the ruling party ranks. After all, a lot is at stake for the ruling minority—not least of which is loss of personal and “party” fortune and revelation of secret deals undertaken in the name of a long suffering and unsuspecting Ethiopians.

Here is what I am getting at: the unreformable Derg had to disband for a new condition to emerge. That episode, sadly, was squandered because foreigners mediated the process, or, perhaps because there was no organized group to oversee the transition. Likewise, the current regime must dissolve before a semblance of democracy takes root. The next moment will be salvaged only if Ethiopians take full charge of their nation’s governance. There may be hope for us this time around. History will judge them harshly if opposition leaders fail to narrow their differences—to the point of sacrificing personal ambition—in order to confront a bigger and more urgent national issue.

In the meantime, the ruling party will continue to stoke the embers of “war on terror,” “Eritrea,” and “peace-keeping” in Africa. Sending Ethiopian troops to intervene in Somalia (about 8,000), and 5000 to Sudan (SudanTribune.com, 14 September 2007) fall in the latter category. Such acts have been effective in forestalling the democracy project, which if vigorously pursued could mean term limits and possibly even legal action against excesses perpetrated by incumbents.

In the end, it appears the Ethiopian public is on its own in its yearning for democracy; the rest of the world, including the ruling minority party, is busy with its own power and survival. Who shall lead us out of this morass? The struggle is not going to be easy but we might just be up to the challenge.