

Birtukan Mideksa: Ethiopia's Freedom Supernova

By Abebe Gellaw, January 1, 2010



Throughout history, so many rulers have risen and fallen from the pinnacles of power. Among a long list of rulers that have cruelly risen to eventually fall in the pits of history for causing unimaginable misery, bloodshed, destruction and massive displacement only within the last six decades, Meles and his predecessor easily join their peers like Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Pol Pot, Mobutu, Milosevic or Idi Amin.

It is rare to find leaders that offer themselves as sacrificial lambs in defiance of injustice and in defence of freedom. Our history has indeed been graced with leaders that have contributed so much flesh and blood to unify Ethiopia and fend off external invaders to preserve the independence and territorial integrity of this tragic country. Nonetheless, Ethiopian history had never been blessed with people like Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr., Mandela or Aung San Suu Kyi until very recently.

Dictators like Meles undoubtedly believe that they are born to rule, brutalize, dictate, define and redefine the destiny of their victims. It defies logic how people who have mobilized so many good-intentioned children of peasants and fought extremely bloody and destructive wars in the name of equality and liberty have become freedom's worst enemies. Contrary to what narcissists like Meles may believe, "Leaders are made, they are not born," as Vince Lombardi once said. "They are made by hard effort, which is the price all of us must pay to achieve any goal that is worthwhile."

Birtukan Mideksa is the only leader known in the entire history of Ethiopia that has risen to defy tyranny without raising arms or advocating violence in a rare show of character and grace. In a poem she penned while languishing in Kaliti jail and read it aloud after her release, the visionary young lawyer openly broke bad news that the future does not belong to the dictator. Birtukan reminded him [Meles] that the future belongs to our children who must live not like slaves in bondage but in liberty as free people. She defiantly offered her bosom for his bullets.

This is the kind of leader Ethiopians have been waiting for. She has never committed a crime. Unlike the woman beater dictator, who has condemned her to life imprisonment while he enjoys the lap of luxury in the imperial palace sucking the blood of poor Ethiopians, she has never been out to rob, kill or maim fellow citizens. In stead, she has conscientiously chosen to rise up against a regime drenched with blood and offered herself for the ultimate sacrifice so that her fellow citizens held hostage in their own country will eventually live as free people. She is a rare inspiration to millions who have been faced with mounting despair as almost all the false Mandelas have fallen one after

another. At a time when some self-anointed leaders are calling Ethiopians to surrender and break asunder, she emerged as the real symbol of Ethiopia's epic resistance against a regime whose ideologies seem to have been copied from the books of fascism and Apartheid.

Birtukan could have easily avoided her current predicament by simply succumbing to the threats of the dictators. She could have appeared on TV and fulfil the despot's vain desire by heaping praise on him as the almighty, gracious, merciful, magnanimous and visionary ruler as he had expected her to do. She could have said that her inalienable rights and freedom were not God-given but derived from his fake pardon and forgiveness for the grave crimes that no one but he and his cronies have committed with arrogance and impunity. Defying his expectations and hurting his feelings, she preferred to suffer the consequences of telling the truth in stead of validating and dignifying a fake pardon, which never was without the crimes that she never committed.

Separated from her little daughter and elderly mother, the heroine freedom fighter has not only posed a challenge to the Ethiopian people, who have yet to unite to finish the rough march to freedom, but also to civilized nations who have preferred to turn blind eyes and collude to Byzantine tyranny in stead of living up to their true creeds.

As Martin Luther King Jr. once said: "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." King's words still echoes from the jails of Ethiopia as leaders of the free world who have been preaching about liberty and making promises to support the struggle against tyranny anywhere in the world have preferred to befriend a brutal tyrant. They wine and dine with the dictator messing up our homeland. They say he is a strategic ally that helps to fight terrorism while they know full well that he is terrorizing and brutalizing the poor people of Ethiopia.

While we join others to celebrate Birtukan as person of the year, we should also recognize the fact that she is an exceptional woman who will go into history as the freedom supernova of our generation. Like a supernova, she is a rare phenomenon, an explosion of a star that emits vast amount of energy.

Ethiopians, in and outside of country, need to support this woman of extraordinary courage and leadership that has given hope at a time of despair, courage at a time of fear, unity at a time of divisive bickering and vision at a time of myopia that has brought down those who have failed to live up to their own promises. Our destructive politics, which is dominated by cynicism and self-mutilation, will certainly change when leaders clearly know what they stand for.

Those who have been consumed with self-destruction and bickering even within her party in stead of unifying against the rise of Stalinism and Apartheid in our homeland should remember a woman, who has chosen to suffer in harsh jails than kneeling down to despotism. They ought to remember her words: "Indeed, living behind bars is painful. I have felt pained, when hearing about the struggle of my fellow country men; for being forced to experience it all vicariously, for being near but far away from the terrain of the

fight.” Her comrade-in-arms should take inspiration from her and set their differences aside to finish the rough march to freedom that they have chosen her to lead. If they fail to live up to their own sermons, history will harshly judge them.

Election without the woman who can be overwhelmingly elected to lead Ethiopia into a new era of deliverance and freedom is unacceptable, unfair and illegal. Let freedom be a rallying cry and the single most unifying cause against oppression, injustice, discrimination and exploitation.

The Burmese pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi once said: “It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.” Ethiopia’s Aung San Suu Kyi is fearless, courageous and unyielding.

Shackled in the dictator’s harsh and cold jail, Birtukan has challenged us all. “I am ready for sacrifice. How about you?” It is a question that will resonate throughout Ethiopia’s darkest seasons under tyranny. With humility, she has disarmed so many and have proven that a single woman can make a huge difference. Birtukan symbolizes the fact that tyranny and liberty are always irreconcilable.

Tyranny should not be obeyed. It should be defied and rejected. In the end, the tyrants who have been abusing the poor people of Ethiopia will be held accountable. History is a witness to this inevitable fact as freedom eventually prevails over dictatorship. Let all freedom loving Ethiopians draw resolve and energy from Birtukan Mideka, who is undoubtedly, Ethiopia’s freedom supernova that symbolizes our jailed aspiration for freedom and dignity in our own country. She is the one who has proven herself to be worthy of being called a leader as all the false prophets and Mandela’s have disappeared into oblivion. Let freedom ring from coast to coast! Happy New Year!

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