

## The past of Seye Abraha et al in perspective

By Eskinder Nega |

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Seye Abraha's commanding presence and well delivered speech on foreign affairs in last week's televised debate between political parties has vexed EPRDF leaders, say sources. Their only solace is Seye's rather brash characterization of the recent row between the EPRDF and the Obama administration as "staged drama"; which went down well with the public but will hardly endear the opposition with the diplomatic community in Addis.

"The row between the Ethiopian government and the US," said Seye in the debate, "is really a staged drama. America has outsourced its war in Somalia to Ethiopia, saving American lives. That is what matters to them the most. The jamming of the VOA and the consequent row are no more than a staged drama. Ethiopians have not only died in Somalia for a war that is not theirs but our national security has been endangered as well. There are reports, for example, that the Ethiopian Airlines that crashed in Lebanon was bombed by terrorists." (Abridged.) But of course Seye could not offer real evidence that the spat was faked as he had alleged, and it will remain a stain on his otherwise impressive performance; the best so far, reckon many pundits, by the opposition.

Seye's criticism of the Algiers Agreement and the subsequent Boundary Commission ruling are popular themes, particularly in Tigray, where he and many of his friends are challenging the EPRDF. The EPRDF's muted response is indicative of a divided leadership over the issue; with Meles and his allies in favor of a closure of the issue largely—but not exclusively—on the basis of the ruling; and the rest, part half heartedly part vehemently, against any change of the reality on the ground.

And this division cuts across the whole spectrum of the governing elite, which is why the threat of Seye Abraha et al -- bounded to the governing elite by a common history at its finest hour -- is menacing to Meles Zenawi. Arkebe Ekubay's brazenly opportunistic attempt to drive a wedge between Seye and the military by charging that Seye had characterized the Ethiopian army "as a mercenary force in Somalia" in last week's debate, which Seye made a point of refuting, amply demonstrates the anxiety that pervades in the midst of Meles Zenawi and his allies.

No other political personalities but Seye Abraha et al bring in to opposition politics this kind of dynamism, blurring the argument that their past undercuts their present importance to the democratic cause as has been suggested by some people in Seattle last weekend. "Some speakers mistook Negasso and Gebru perhaps for Meles Zenawi and Bereket Simon and tormented them like they were convicted criminals," said an Ethiomedia news report on the meeting held in Seattle over the weekend. "It has been over ten years since we quit EPRDF, but some folks never get that; and keep asking questions as if we are still active government officials, the former EPRDF leaders said with a tone of remorse. Others accused them that the reason they have joined the opposition is because they are power thirsty."

The importance of this issue to a post-EPRDF national road map cannot be understated. The broad consensus for a plural democratic order is beyond doubt now, but if there is ever to be a chance for its realization, how Seye Abraha et al will be treated as they venture into opposition politics will either foster trust and confidence or entail a continuation of the abhorred legacy of vendetta and victimization. Of crucial point here is that none amongst Seye Abraha et al is being asked to account for substantiated and specific violation of human rights, as was the case, for example, with Kelbessa Negawo from the Derg era, who was unsympathetically deported from the US to Ethiopia to serve a life sentence; but are being decried for serving a regime with broad shortcomings, including of course extensive human rights violation. But almost all of them have at one time or the other addressed the issue, publicly expressed regret and are now challenging

their former party at the height of its power. Only two days before the meeting in Seattle, Seye Abraha had acknowledged his share of responsibility for what he termed as EPRDF's fiasco on the Eritrean issue in nationally televised debate between political parties: " Medrek will peacefully opt for Ethiopia's outlet to the sea; this is one of our national security objectives. The EPRDF has committed a grave mistake in handling the Eritrean issue, and I concede my share of personal responsibility."

And so the questions loom: Is there room for redemption in the political space? Could there be a moral imperative to deprive the capacity to forgive and reconcile? And on a more practical level, would the nation be able to bear the human and emotional cost of the alternative? The answers are too obvious to merit detailing here. They have also been thoroughly addressed on numerous occasions by others and to entertain them further here will be to merely repeat the same arguments. What is of importance is that Seye Abraha et al are test cases, carefully being watched by all political actors, and how they fare will for a long time determine which way the nation goes.

The fall of the EPRDF is not an end by itself. It is desirable only insofar as it is a means to an end, in this case, a means to a pluralistic democratic order. The quest for such a political setting in Ethiopia has to date not closed its door on ex-WPE (Derg) officials and members untainted by personal violation of human rights; it can not fairly do so against ex-officials and members of the EPRDF held to the same standard.

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