



## **The Politicization of Food Aid Under One-Party Rule in Ethiopia**

By Seeye Abraha

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The West has provided hundreds of millions of dollars of food aid to Ethiopia in the past several years. However, donor countries have placed few monitoring and accountability mechanisms to ensure that the aid provided is delivered to the target populations. As a result, the ruling party has been able to effectively use relief aid to mobilize support for itself and undermine support for its opposition.

The politicization of food aid in Ethiopia operates crudely in the open. Members and supporters of the ruling party and their families are given top priority in the delivery of ample relief aid. Relief aid is dangled in front of non-party members who are presented with the option of joining the ranks of the ruling party if they want to receive aid. Opposition party members are forced to make the choice of going hungry or involuntarily joining the ruling party by abandoning their own. The intense pressure to join the ruling party is reinforced through family, community and peer pressure. Those who speak up against such practices or openly protest are targeted for persecution, intimidation and harassment.

The people forced to make the impossible choice between life and liberty choose life and do the best they can under the circumstances. Western donors are fully aware of the misuse and abuse of the unfortunate situation their relief aid has caused in the country. For some inexplicable reason, they have chose to remain deaf, blind and mute.

The opposition coalition, Forum, has raised this issue repeatedly with the Western diplomatic corps in Addis Ababa. Forum has provided eyewitnesses to provide corroboration for the misuse and abuse of relief aid. Recently, eight residents from Tigray who were members and supporters of coalition member Arena were brought to Addis to provide eyewitness testimony on the political use of relief aid experience. These brave individuals who risked their lives to tell the truth were picked up by plainclothes policemen and detained on Dec.23, 2010. They were forcibly returned to Tigray after five

days of detention and interrogation and were given stern warnings that they would face severe consequences if they testified.

On January 4, 2010 Jason McClure, the American journalist for Bloomberg, went to Tigray to investigate the allegations of politicization of relief aid. Shortly after he arrived he was taken into custody and detained for in a prison in Mekele before being whisked back to Addis where he was served with a notice of expulsion, which was latter retracted, from the country in 48 hours. The story of Mr. McClure, a highly respected journalist, and his harrowing experiences in trying to investigate this matter are yet to be told in public.

Over the past two weeks, I have travelled to Tigray and visited Kola Tembien election district. I spoke with Teklezgi W/Gabriel and Zenawi Asmelash, two of the eight eyewitnesses who had agreed to speak to Mr. McClure during his visit there. They told me that they are labeled as traitors and their life is under threat since their return from Addis Ababa. I also talked to others in the community. The story is much the same. If they want to get relief aid, they have to join.

Hunger, food aid and politics have been intertwined in Ethiopia since the 1973 Ethiopian draught which caused the downfall of Emperor Haile Selassie's regime. As a veteran politician and an ex-commander of an insurgent army that brought down the Derg military regime, I know relief aid could be misused to purchase ammunition, weapons, spare parts, fuel and other materials. Grain and cooking oil can be converted into cash to buy any thing including voting cards.

Forum has raised its concerns about the danger of relief aid driven vote buying as early as August 2009. The issue was included as an agenda item in the inter-party dialogue that was initiated through the good offices of the UK Ambassador, Norman Ling, here in Addis Ababa in September but was rejected by the ruling party.

I was a member the leadership of the core of the ruling party coalition in Ethiopia, the TPLF, for about twenty five years. I served as an elected member of the Parliament for two terms until I was illegally denied my seat in Parliament in 2001, following a split within the leadership of the ruling party. In this context, it is instructive to look at the way the Meles-led clique used food grain to stage manage my “recall” from my parliamentary seat and that of eight other colleagues.

In 2001 the farmers of Kola Tembien, my electoral district in Tigray, were ordered to collect their wages in food grain for work done in soil and water conservation activities. This was the usual method of dispensing food aid to the able-bodied citizens experiencing food shortage. When the farmers showed up at the designated sites to receive their grain allotments, they were asked to put their names and signatures on sheets of paper as evidence of receipt. Incredibly, the list of names and signatures was later presented to the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) as a petition of my electorate to effect my recall from Parliament. The so-called recall petition was sustained and we were forced out of our elected offices. We sued the NEBE but to no avail since Kemal Bedri, the Chair of the NEBE, was also President of the Supreme Court of the country. Victimized by such dirty tricks, we were illegally barred from entering the premises of the Parliament and effectively dismissed from our elected positions.

The use of food grain as a weapon for sidelining dissidents has been perfected by the ruling party ever since. It is their preferred weapon of choice to squeeze the farmers and rural residents into following their one-party system lockstep.

My recent visit to Tembien was to assess the political situation in the context of the coming election. I visited many villages in the district, but limited my contacts to friends, relatives and acquaintances. Although I have visited Tembien many times, the way the local officials treated me this time around was quite different. I visited Tembien as a member of the Unity for Justice and Democracy Party (UDJ), another opposition party active in Tigray and member of Forum coalition. I would not be surprised if my visit was viewed as sort of a political debut by the local administration. Unlike other times there was an intense interest and activity in the security apparatuses in the villages I visited. Security forces were fully mobilized to put all my activities under security surveillance, including open harassment of my visitors and relatives. It was deeply saddening to be treated a fugitive and security threat in my own hometown, amidst my relatives and friends.

As soon as I arrived at Abiy Adi town, the capital of Kola Tembien district, my father-in-law's house was surrounded with plain clothes policemen and informants who tried to dissuade people not to enter the premise and speak to me. Those who ignored the warnings, and many did, were later harassed by the police and given strong warnings not to speak to others favourably about me.

In Adiha, my birth place, where I stayed for two days, a Lieutenant and three other policemen were dispatched from Abiy Adi town to augment the resident policeman. They sort of created a makeshift police station to monitor my activities. The residents were so disgusted by the level of intrusion that the local administrators told the Lieutenant: "As much as Meles Zenawi is entitled to visit and run for election in Adwa, Seeye is equally entitled to do so in Tembien and will take it as out duty to facilitate his participation."

The surveillance procedures used against me revealed great concern on the part of the officials. Before I visited every village, the local security police officials would coordinate by mobile phone my expected itinerary. Local leaders and members of the ruling party in the villages were instructed to maintain surveillance of the locations and individuals with who I met. When I arrive at the location, these party hacks would openly tell people not to have contact with me or speak to me. Those who met with me were blacklisted. They would hang around collecting information and taking notes on what I said, what others said and any activities that occurred. Once I left the villages, the district governors would call public meetings, collect information and warn them not to associate with anyone connected to me. Despite the surveillance and false propaganda against me, I am grateful to the people for their affection and support.

There is little distinction to be made between the ruling party and the local police institutions. The security institutions are in effect appendages of the party. Their principal purpose is to neutralize any opposition to the dominance of the ruling party. Lawful political opponents are viewed as a security issue and treated in the same way as criminals. I did experience this personally; but the vast majority of the people view me as their son, brother or friend and would not abandon or ignore me despite the risks of not getting relief aid, or the price they have to pay for associating with me. They have my everlasting respect and appreciation.

Some people may believe Tigray to be the "backyard" of the ruling party. That is simply not true. People in Tigray want change and genuine multiparty democracy as much as their compatriots in other parts of the country do. There is general consensus in

Tigray that a united democratic opposition could be a major positive factor in forcing the TPLF to re-evaluate its present course and out of enlightened self-interest pursue a democratic process that meets the urgent and critical needs of all the people. This is a view widely shared by the majority in Tigray. They welcome the coming of Arena and UDJ to compete openly for the votes and support of the people of Tigray.

The 800 pound gorilla in the room is of course election rigging. There is general consensus in Tigray that the TPLF will rig the election and declare itself the winner in May. Many have asked me to make sure and get enough independent international observers to monitor the elections. Forum does not have the ability to guarantee the presence of an adequate number of international observers in any part of the country. I have nevertheless decided to present myself as candidate of the Forum in Kola Tembien district. The reason is simple. I know that the ruling party can not field a candidate who can beat me in most of the election districts of Tigray, let alone in Tembien. I also know that the ruling party with its complete monopoly over the electoral process and security apparatuses will not hesitate from rigging the election in broad daylight. If it declares victory, no one will be surprised. But the people of Tembien will know their voice has been stolen and the declaration of victory, by the ruling party, would only serve as a proof that it stole the election.

As to the West's commitment to democracy in Ethiopia, the big talk needs to be backed up with at least a little action. There is a viable alternative in Forum, and the West should do what it can to help level the playing field.

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