

The Politics of Genocide – The Case of Sidama*

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Introduction

This paper uncovers a series of policies of the Ethiopian government intended to destroy the social, economic and political fabric of oppressed people who are demanding respect for their basic rights. There is no claim that this brief presentation, is a comprehensive study into genocide in Ethiopia, yet it sheds light into the processes that potentially and actually indicate to crimes against humanity and genocide.

Definitions of genocide

There are several definitions of genocide. Here are a few:

-- a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator. (Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide*, 1990).

-- the mass killing of substantial numbers of human beings, ... under conditions of the essential defenselessness and helplessness of the victims. (Israel Charny, in George Andreopoulos, ed., *Genocide: Conceptual and Historical Dimensions*, 1994).

-- sustained purposeful action by a perpetrator to physically destroy a collectivity directly or indirectly, through interdiction of the biological and social reproduction of group members, sustained regardless of the surrender or lack of threat offered by the victim. (Helen Fein, *Genocide: A Sociological Perspective*, 1993/1990).

-- the promotion and execution of policies by a state or its agents which result in the deaths of a substantial portion of a group [when] the victimized groups are defined primarily in terms of their communal characteristics, i.e., ethnicity, religion or nationality. (Barbara Harff and Ted Gurr, "Toward empirical theory of genocides and politicides," *International Studies Quarterly* 37, 3, 1988).

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The United Nations, Genocide Convention 1948, Article 2 defines genocide as:

-- any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. (in force 12 January 1951)

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which entered into force on 30 June 2002, in its Article 6 defines the crime of genocide in the same terms as the UN Convention (i.e. killings and other acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.)

There is a related term of relevance, namely crime against humanity. It consists of certain acts when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, in pursuit to a state or organizational policy to commit such attack. The acts in question include murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation abroad and forcible transfers within a state, arbitrary detention, torture, rape and other crimes of sexual violence, “disappearances”, persecution, the crime of apartheid and other inhumane acts. Such crimes may be committed in war or peacetime, by state agents.

Mention should also be made to linguistic genocide defined as “prohibiting the use of the language of the group in daily intercourse or in schools, or the printing and circulation of publications in the language of the group”.

Looking into the above definitions, one can conclude that the Ethiopian state has been perpetrating the crime of genocide, especially on people who aspire for national self-determination. There are indications of genocidal intent on the part of the state, very much similar to what happened in Rwanda in 1994. The following policies of the Ethiopian regime bear witness to the policy and intent to destroy peoples.

Examples/Styles of Genocide in Ethiopia

"Revolutionary democracy" as a policy of genocide

The ongoing policy of "revolutionary democracy" is a tool in which the regime of Meles Zenawi conducts genocide. The policy targets certain ethnic or national groups as narrow nationalists to be destroyed. In the name of establishing an empty notion, the regime is conducting endless meetings of information gathering and defamation of opponents -- perceived and real. Then the state controlled media spreads single-sided propaganda justifying the programmes of the regime and vilifying those opposed to it.

It is remembered that a few years ago, the regime pronounced its "Hizbawi Adera" in its party pamphlets targeting certain ethnic and social groups for elimination. For example, the document mentioned Oromo business people, intellectuals and conscious people as class enemies to be annihilated. This stated policy is nothing but the reasoning for genocide.

War as instrument of genocide

The recent barbaric and meaningless war with Eritrea and the human wave tactics employed by the TPLF government has targeted thousands of oppressed people's youth and used them as cannon fodder. TPLF commanders drove the youth over minefields to perish as minesweepers. Over a hundred thousand people are believed to be killed, most of which were the youth of the oppressed nations.

Environmental destruction

It is not only the peoples who are struggling for their national self-determination under attack, it is also their environment in which they live. Three years ago, vicious fires devoured Oromian and Sidama forests, coffee plantations, homes, and rare animals and plants. These fires are set off in territories where the regime fears the presence of liberation forces. The destruction of forests accelerates soil erosion and eventual desertification of an already fragile ecology of the region. First and foremost, the action harms the indigenous people, who are again the oppressed people of the south. It is a form of genocide.

Widespread neglect and the spread of deadly diseases

The TPLF/EPRDF is a discriminatory apartheid system. In this system, the welfare of large sections of societies is neglected in budgetary allocations or when emergencies including drought and epidemic diseases strike. The system is only interested in predatory taxation of poor farmers whose survival is at risk. The Sidama nation that has never seen famine, a land that has never experienced severe drought is now exposed to largely man-made calamities. This is the quintessential example that famine is not entirely natural, but man-made and political phenomena. Cases are many when hunger is used as a political weapon.

While deadly disease such as AIDs devastate societies, the most recent budget of this regime puts significant resources on warfare than on welfare. War budget is 18 times that of health, and five times that of education.

Large scale persecution and displacement

By creating conflict among neighbourly nations, the regime initiates and exacerbates the situation which lead to loss of life and large scale displacement of people. Now that tens of thousands of educated and able-bodied people fled to seek refuge abroad to escape persecution. This is another form act indicating to genocidal practices of the government.

The creation of amorphous regions and chartered cities

The establishment of creation of amorphous regions as in SNNPRs is part of an attack on people and their identity. A few years ago, in this region the EPRDF imposed a language called Wogagoda which has negative effect on the languages concerned. After sever protest from the artificial language was scrapped. The so-called chartered cities will remain hotspots of conflict in waiting.

Background to Genocide

As far as the oppressed peoples are concerned, the politics of Ethiopian empire has always been one of exclusion and discrimination. It is now developing into visible genocide. The state system is built on systematic denial of rights, use of famine as a tool. Without going to the remote past of over a century, one can see what happened in just over a decade of the TPLF/EPRDF rule.

Brief honeymoon and the politics of exclusion in 1991

In 1991, popular liberation fronts took part in the transitional coalition government of Ethiopia with cautious optimism that a resolution could be obtained in a century-old polity based on occupation and exploitation.

On the other hand, the TPLF used this period as an opportunity to set its foot in the soil of southern nations from its traditional homeland in Tigray with a view to perpetuate the system of domination. It has done this using its own creations or satellite organisations. For Sidama, it created the Sidama PDO to represent TPLF interest and to suffocate the Sidama movement.

In 1992, the main liberation oriented popular fronts were forced out of the “legal” political process and left the transition arrangement. The period of political cleansing had started paving the way for unfettered implementation of genocidal policies. The intervening years have seen years of ethnic and economic cleansing by ethno-national political organisation.

Dismantling the Sidama regional status

In 1991/92, the empire was divided into 14 regions/zones. Sidama was designated as Zone 8. In 1994, Sidama as a region was dissolved and it was included in the so-called Southern, Nations and Nationalities Region with the political seat in Hawassa. This city is also the cultural and economic centre of Sidama. Sidamas were not consulted about the dissolution of their own region nor about the merger with the SNNPR. The TPLF/EPRDF leadership imposed its undemocratic and wrong beliefs and policies on the people of Sidama.

The contempt harboured by the TPLF rulers about the people and the forced marriage of Sidama with the SNNPRs meant that the emergence of conflict was inevitable.

Even within this highly circumscribed atmosphere, Sidamas strived to record some degree of social and educational progress which unnerved the regime’s centrist elements who wanted any pretext to destroy Sidama nationalism.

The friction of February-March 2001 within the TPLF provided one such opportunity. Vicious revisionist elements of the past who harboured envy and hatred against Sidama national development have excarabated the recent massacre of innocent Sidamas. The programme of action of these centrists, whose thinking is heavily influenced by communist Maoism

and characterised by low politics of character assassination and public bullying, included promoting notorious cadres affiliated to the civil college of cadre school while demoting genuine nationalists from all levels of public offices. Few personalities who formerly were members of a centrist organisation, namely the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party, who are still its loyalists, were assigned key roles to dismantle the Sidama nation, even if that means genocide. But such an action can never proceed without protest.

The Sidama protest

Protest against the oppressive state is not new to Sidama. Since the conquest, protest and the struggle for freedom took different forms. The most recent protest, which is now widespread throughout Sidama, was organised by people who paid enormous price to the preservation of their culture or their land.

The decision to make Hawassa under direct control of the central government was made by the TPLF/EPRDF without consulting the Sidama public.

The dramatic development caught the members of the SPDO by surprise. The latter were divided about the decision. The government used different tactics to entice some elements of the SPDO to accept the decision. Those who were bribed or promised government positions signed up to the decision. Others, fearing the consequences of their action from the Sidama public, refrained from signing a document which forces Hawassa to be ruled directly by the central government and Sidama zonal administration to be moved to other location.

Sidamas heard of the recent action and the protest started in earnest. A week preceding the Looqe massacre, Sidamas were deliberating on the basis of their customs, on the issue of transferring the Sidama city to the central government.

The Looqe massacre: Genocide in action

The Looqe bloodshed of May 24 started when elders and students from colleges and high schools holding tree leaves symbolising peace marched towards the city. Armed soldiers in mechanised brigades opened fire using heavy machine guns on peaceful protesters. Over a hundred innocent people were killed including a ten year old boy. Some bodies

were eaten by wild animals, many more were wounded. Hundreds of innocent civilians are being targeted for harassment and imprisonment.

What happened in the Looqe village, in the outskirts of Hawassa is not only a separate incident; it is the culmination of calculated massacre and an important part of genocide. It should be remembered that brutal shooting at peaceful demonstrators of innocent Sidamas is not new to Sidamas. It has, indeed, its beginning in the conquest of Sidamaland and the formation of garrison towns where innocent Sidama had been tortured, robbed, and imprisoned. Most of these towns were dominated by northern settlers (such as Amhara, Tigreans and Gurages) whereas the Sidamas were denied to have their residence in their own lands, let alone practise leadership and control of their towns.

The Ethiopian apartheid system had always reserved the right to land, education, business, government office and other benefits to Abyssinians and their surrogates.

The town of Hawassa was established in 1960 when Sidamas of the then Adaare village were displaced to make room for a new settlement by the Haile Selassie government. For much of the last 40 years, Ethiopian rulers maintained the policy of discouraging indigenous Sidama people from land and property ownership in the city. For all these years, the city has been the seat of provincial and regional administration

The strategic location of Hawassa along the Addis Ababa-Nairobi road, the various development projects launched by a local NGO, and the relative increase in the number of conscious nationals residing in the city has become a headache for settlers who enjoyed economic benefit of Hawassa in the past. The TPLF government had been using these elements to attempt to evict the Sidama from their city for the last 11 years.

When the current regime has forced the merger of Sidama with the Southern NNP region in 1994, Hawassa co-hosted the Southern regional and Sidama zonal administrations. The EPRDF has started to remove the Sidama and their administration from their own city and put it under the central command of personal dictatorship. The language the regime used in this connection is upgrading the town to chartered city status. The Sidamas believed this is targeted at worsening their survival.

Since the declaration of Revolutionary Democracy and the spilt of the TPLF in 2001, centrist elements of the EPRDF, mainly those who

formerly belonged to the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party (EPRP) took advantage of the situation to advance their policy to destroy national aspiration of the oppressed people including the Sidama, Oromo and Ogaden.

The reaction to the massacre from the media and from human rights organisations is encouraging. The media, in particular, was prompt in replying to our call and broadcasting the massacre. Sidamas are thankful for this.

The official of the Human Rights Watch said that “There is simply no excuse for shooting into crowds of civilians. The Ethiopian government must take immediate steps to ensure that state and federal police cease such practices and prosecute those responsible for shooting demonstrators.”

For Sidama as for other oppressed peoples, the immediate task is to help bring the genocidal actions to book. This means identifying the perpetrators, recording evidence on genocide in accordance to the Rome Statue of International Criminal Court (ICC) which is ratified 30 June 2002 by 73 countries to date. This body will investigate and prosecute those accused of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes committed.

The Sidama protest is ever widening and the national solidarity among oppressed peoples is truly encouraging. Such is the manner to change the tragic scenario of genocide of oppressed peoples.

Conclusion

Successive Ethiopian regimes have subjected the oppressed people to genocide by means of physical extermination, killer diseases, abject poverty, and environmental degradation and by forcibly denying their right.

Sidamas are now threatened of ethnic cleansing. Today prominent Sidama professionals, businessmen, NGO leaders, elders and students are subjected to removal from their jobs, arrest and killings.

The signs of genocidal intent are already there. It is for those who have the wherewithal to determine what action to take in the face of unfolding human tragedy. The world is forewarned. It is necessary, therefore, to:

- Call upon the international community and to all government bodies currently engaged in the region, to respond seriously to the suffering peoples in Sidama, Oromia and elsewhere in Ethiopia.
- Demand governmental and non-governmental organisations and Human Rights bodies to exert the necessary pressure upon Ethiopian authorities for an independent investigation into the massacre and on-going destruction caused by the regime.
- Call upon the United Nations, European Union, African Union and all concerned to take all diplomatic and practical steps to investigate the acts of genocide.
- Demand that the International Community urge the EPRDF government of Ethiopia to respect different UN and Africa Union convention to which it is signatory.
- Urge all oppressed nations to join hands at this historical juncture and stand in unison to reject the evil policies of destruction and genocide conducted by the EPRDF regime.