

# **Better Late than Never: *The Imperatives of Immortalizing our Martyrs***

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## **Martyrdom**

Martyrdom is the suffering and death of a martyr. Who is a martyr? A martyr is a person who sacrifices himself/herself so that truth prevails for the benefit of those who remain. That is a person who fights for freedom, justice, and equality in all spheres of life (health, education, political voice, all-inclusive development, etc.) for the well-being of all citizens of a given nation. A martyr is a Samaritan, a humanitarian, and a compassionate. These human traits are naturally incarnated in a martyr's flesh and blood. Our martyrs embodied all these and more special traits.

But, the people of Tigrai had to wait patiently for 25 years (since the Hawzien massacre of June 15, 1988) to witness an official declaration of a memorial day. This is a day when the present and the future generations will pay their respect to the martyrs every year; and to uphold and to fight for the principles for which they were martyred. *Martyrization* of our heroes and heroines will be a social norm in Tigrai for eternity. That is, *martyries* (unique shrines) will be erected at the historic locations where victories were scored against the barbaric military regime of Mengistu Hailemariam.

## **June 22, 2013 (Sene 15, 2005) Martyrs Day**

On this day, it was emotionally unbearable to watch the ceremonies on *ETV's Tigrigna Program* and to listen touching narrations of several historic events that took place during the bitter struggle. I summarize these historic ceremonies that took place in Mekele as follows:

- ❖ Portraits of our latest martyr, Tegadalai Meles Zenawi, had graced the celebration area. Many were vividly moved to tears looking at those portraits of the hero.
- ❖ President, Ato Abai Woldu, and other patriots placed wreaths under the *Martyrs' Monument*. This was followed by speeches and patriotic songs.
- ❖ A very small sample of the more than 60,000 martyrs was read-out eloquently.
- ❖ Viewers all over the world watched bodies of some of the martyrs lying in the battlefields. Some of them were buried partially.
- ❖ Several video clips of the human tragedy, what I call "the *Tragic Tigrayan Exodus of 1984/85*", were shown. The military junta's barbaric-policy was to scorch the Earth in order to derive the people out of their homes. It bombed homes; burned food-grain crops ready to be harvested; and poisoned rivers. These inhuman acts caused famine, starvation, hunger, and endemic diseases. About a million families walked away from their homes in search of food and safety. The abled ones reached

refugee camps in Sudan, while the children and the old, who were very weak and ill perished along the way. That was the time when Tegadalai Meles Zenawi answered to a question of a journalist with heartfelt emotions and watery eyes, “**My people, the people I am fighting for, are dying for no mistake of their own.**” In addition, the military junta resettled thousands of Tigraian families forcibly in malaria infested environment in southern Ethiopia. The overarching goal of this package of cruelty was to depopulate the Tigraian landscape by all means. That was a foolish strategy. Although Mengistu and Co. designed it with a dream plan of ***drying the ocean in order to kill the fish***, meaning to force TPLF into submission, it backfired. The junta was ignorant of the administrative and military prowess of the TPLF; and the determination of the Tigraian people to fight back any enemy, be it a European invader force (e.g., the immeasurable contributions to the *Victory of Adwa*) or an African intruder (e.g., the Egyptians’ debacles, utter defeats, in the hands of Yohannes IV in Nov. 1875 at the *Battle of Gundet* and from Mar. 7 to 9, 1876 at the *Battle of Gura*)<sup>1</sup>.

- ❖ Most importantly, video clips of the Fascist Derg’s act of savagery at Hawzien were shown for the whole world to watch the horror our people had to be subjected to for the whole day of June 22, 1988 (Sene 15, 1980). This is one of the sickening major historic events of savagery. On this cruelty, books must be written; and it must be taught in schools as part of the history lessons’ package pertaining to the *bitter struggle*. Remember, it was at the market town of Hawzien on June 22, 1988, “The Ethiopian air force bombarded the town for the whole day by airplanes and helicopters; and killed more than 2,500 civilians”<sup>2</sup>.

## The Prize of Victory

The only prize all martyrs wanted was victory of justice for all Ethiopians. Their comrades promised them just that and made it reality. TPLF was not a vindictive organization. It invited other democratic forces to join in building a *democratically united, peaceful, and prosperous Ethiopia*. To make that a reality, a brand new Ethiopian Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was proclaimed and enshrined in May 1994. The following introductory paragraphs capture the full spirit of that historic Constitution, many features of which make it one of its kinds in the world (emphasis added):

***We, the nation, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia:***

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<sup>1</sup>Paul B. Henze (2000), an American diplomat who lived in Ethiopia for a long time writes passionately about Ethiopian history in his book, *Layers of Time: A history of Ethiopia*. Pages 146 -148 are worth reading to understand the outdated international political tricks of the Egyptians, who tried then and are trying now, to force Ethiopia to remain poor and weak so that they continue being the sole beneficiaries of our precious endowment, the Blue Nile (Abai) water resources. Dr. Henze details the disastrous adventures of the Egyptians against Ethiopia. We cannot say for sure that they wouldn’t dare to repeat similar adventures to stop Ethiopia from completing the *Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*. The Ethiopian Government must watch all their machinations very closely; and be prepared militarily for any eventualities. A proxy war through the northern frontier should not be ruled out.

<sup>2</sup> Human Right Watch/Africa, Nov. 1994, Vol. 6, No. 11, provides substantial details of the atrocities.

**Strongly committed**, in full and free exercise of our right to self-determination, to building a political community founded on the rule of law and capable of ensuring a lasting peace, guaranteeing a democratic order, and advancing our economic and social development;

**Firmly convinced** that the fulfillment of this objective requires full respect of individual and people's fundamental freedoms and rights to live together on the basis of equality and without any religious or cultural discrimination;

**Further convinced** that by continuing to live with our rich and proud cultural legacies in territories we have long inhabited, have, through continuous interaction on various levels and forms of life, built up common interests and have also contributed to the emergence of a common outlook;

**Fully cognizant** that our common destiny can best be served by rectifying historically unjust relationships and by further promoting our shared interests;

**Convinced** that to live as one economic community is necessary in order to create sustainable and mutually supportive conditions for ensuring respect for our rights and freedoms;

**Determined** to consolidate, as a lasting legacy, the peace, and the prospect of a democratic order which our struggles and sacrifices have brought about;

Have, therefore, ratified, on 8 December 1994, this constitution through representatives we have duly elected for this purpose as an instrument that binds us in a mutual commitment to fulfill the objectives and the principles set forth above.

### **Article 39**

In my view, this article makes the Constitution a unique foundation of revolutionary democratic governance:

#### **Rights of Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples**

1. Every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession.
2. Every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its language; to express and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history.
3. Every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia has the right to a full measure of self-government which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits and to equitable representation of regional and national governments.
4. The exercise of self-determination, including secession of every nation, nationality, and people in Ethiopia is governed by the following procedure: (a)

when a demand for secession has been approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of legislative council of any nation, nationality or people; (b) when the Federal Government has organized a referendum which must take place within three years from the time it received the concerned Council's decision for secession; (c) when the demand for secession is supported by a majority vote in the referendum;(d) when the Federal Government will have transferred to the people or to their Council its powers; and (e) when the division of assets is effected on the basis of law enacted for that purpose.

5. A nation, nationality or people for the purpose of this Constitution, is a group of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture, or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, and who predominantly inhabit an identifiable, contiguous territory.

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To sum up, the shining victories of *Woyane II* over the murderous regime of Mengistu Hailemariam should not surprise our friends and foes alike. Our foes ought to swallow the bitter pill of defeat and live with it for the rest of their lives. Our friends, on the other hand, should be proud and place their trust in the Tigraian *magnanimity* (...”the quality of being magnanimous: loftiness of spirit enabling one to bear trouble calmly, to disdain meanness and pettiness, and to display a noble generosity”, Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, eleventh edition, 2003). In effect, one thing should be clear. The people of Tigray *may forgive, but will never-ever forget*. Let that be clear to all who are badmouthing (spreading malicious utterances of gossips and criticisms) against Tigray and Tigrayans.

**Rest in peace our martyrs; you will be immortalized!**

**Eternal peace, unity, and prosperity for Ethiopia!**

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