

The tale of two elections

Bereket Simon (2011). *The Tale of Two Elections*. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: 314pp,

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Review by Mekonnen Kassa, Seattle, WA.

Please allow me to first apologize for writing a review in English of a book written in Amharic. I have many excuses but decided not to share them in public as none of them may be convincing enough to readers.

Bereket Simon (nom de guerre) aka Mebrahtu Gebrehiwot was born and raised in Kebele 01 Ambajine neighborhood of the historical city of Gonder, Ethiopia. I also grew up in the same neighborhood like Bereket. I am told by other kids I grew up with (see picture) that I may have missed meeting Bereket because he was among the very first young Ethiopians who rebelled and joined the fight against the brutal murderous military government in Ethiopia.



Back row L to R: Sisay Worku, Abreham Beyin, Asnakew Eshete, Abay Zeleke, Mesfin T/Mariam, Abaynesh Kiflom, Eneyish Kasse, Abeba Gorfu

Front row L to R: Teferi Jejaw, Gashaw Zeleke, Mekonnen Kassa, Elisabeth Jejaw, Birkea Worku, Adanech Eshete, Assefa Jejaw, Alemanchi Jejaw, Maru Mekonnen

Bereket and his friends spent over 20 years struggling and battling against the brutal military government and successfully defeated it in 1991. Since then Bereket has held many senior level government positions and currently serves as the Ethiopian Government Communication Affairs Office minister.

My first contact with Bereket was through an email he wrote to me around January 2006 after reading one of the articles I posted on the internet. That specific article was mainly about the third Ethiopian national election that was held in 2005 and its violent aftermath, but it included a backdrop tragic story that took place in our Ambajine neighborhood around 1971 when nine youngsters with whom Bereket grew up were mercilessly executed and how their dead bodies were left lying on streets throughout the town.

I felt his email to me was extremely unusual to do for any government official, let alone a highly visible senior government official, to acknowledge reading articles posted on the internet and contacting the writer to share a personal feeling, to offer a personal thank you note and words of encouragement. It was then that I developed a great respect for Bereket and recognized him as one among many EPRDF members whose story I want to read. I know he and his comrades have a wonderful personal and valuable professional story to tell. I have been asking (more like nagging) him and others to write their memoir every time I see them. I am glad that he has started writing with this “final chapter” and I hope, like the Star Wars Trilogy, he will continue writing backwards to the beginning chapter.

“The Tale of Two Election” is a book about Bereket’s personal account of the political events that unfolded in the third and fourth national elections of Ethiopia in May 2005 and May 2010, respectively. Bereket started his tale with the historical opportunity that has been bestowed on the EPRDF members and the commitment and sacrifices of the EPRDF leadership not only to eye-witness but also to effect the transformation of Ethiopia out of the long debilitating poverty.

Bereket does a magnificent job narrating the political events that transpired in their appropriate chronological order. He has assembled the sequence of the stories to show the cause and effect relationship of the events that determined the outcomes of both the 2005 and 2010 elections. He meritoriously guides the reader through the intricate and often puzzling Ethiopian political spectacle. He presents facts and clarification that debunk fairytales, speculations and baseless allegations that were used by opponents to discredit the two elections outcomes.

In this book it becomes readily apparent that Bereket has accumulated a wealth of experience and knowledge during the 20 plus years he spent in the rural parts of

Ethiopia. He commendably put to use his literary eloquence to beautifully marry his experiences and the events he witnessed in to the stories he told in the book. He has spiced the otherwise boring political office election stories by sprinkling Amharic maxims throughout the chapters. He admirably took the painful exercise of finding a fitting Amharic word for concepts that are foreign and difficult to translate. Bereket has enviably succeeded in reducing the complex pre-election, election, and post-election narratives to an easy to follow stories even by pedestrians or those who occasionally follow Ethiopian politics.

Bereket stepped out of the long practiced EPRDF modus operandi and openly discussed weaknesses of his political party. He gives the reader a rare glimpse in to the thinking and working guidelines of the leadership circle that is rarely made public. Bereket laid out a laundry list of the shortcomings and failures of EPRDF. EPRDF often failed to appreciate the importance of election time debates and his party members were never well prepared believing that their economic and political accomplishments on the ground are witnessed by the population. EPRDF crafted and tried to implement well-intended policies without a “two-way” consultation and communication with the public. EPRDF leaders labeled all unemployed youth a “menace to society” and ended up angering a significant constituency. But Bereket credited and admired EPRDF for its ability to learn from its mistakes and shortcomings and becoming more successful the next time around.

Bereket also clearly pointed out opposition party weaknesses and does not hold back on his criticism of the opposition leadership either. The relentless political machination of opposition leaders where one always trying to upstage the other. Oppositions always try to find excuses and blame others instead of correcting their mistakes and as the result ended up becoming habitual losers. Declaring proclamation and engaging in practices that are an antithesis to the tenets of democracy including a call to the public to isolate and excommunicate alleged EPRDF supporters are the few opposition problems he mentioned among others.

As part of his criticism of the opposition Bereket wrote that “...if there was a chance to negotiate on the fate of Assab, Atse Haileselassie and Derg did not have to remain immersed in a 30 year war and would have negotiated and made Assab their own.” I think the first one is factually inaccurate. Atse Haileselassie successfully negotiated the Eritrean situation and had the UN committee that investigated the Eritrean situation to declare an outlet to sea for Ethiopia an existential matter, and if and when Eritrea becomes an independent nation, Ethiopia’s right to access to sea should be protected. I am not sure about the Derg ever trying to negotiate on Assab. I know that the Derg has made Assab a special administration with the intention to create a future legal case for Ethiopia in the event Eritrea becomes independent. Dr. Yakob Hailemariam’s book “Assab YeManNat” puts forward historical, legal and moral facts that put Ethiopia’s

interest and right to claim Assab on a firm ground. It would be interesting to read an EPRDF version spelling out the reasons why a negotiated solution including coownership, purchase, or exchange is not feasible.

On the role the Ethiopian Diaspora played during both elections, Bereket only briefly mentioned the situation with the Carter Election Observation Center. I think the role the Ethiopian Diaspora played to influence both elections was significant and deserved its own chapter.

Bereket finally discussed the already started transition of leadership to the young generation of EPRDF members and promises to find time to write more stories. Amen to that.

Bereket concludes the book with my favorite quote that I heard on the 9th ANDM congress in Bahirdar, Ethiopia. One mother farmer congress participant from South Gonder was very agitated because she believed some participants were wasting time on irrelevant questions. She raised her hand was given an opportunity to speak. She enumerated all the improvements realized in her own life and her community in the last twenty years. She then said “Instead now we should have been thinking about what award to given to the EPRDF leaders who have brought major progress in our community. But now I know they don’t need anything because for them seeing our changed and improved life is their greatest reward.” Amen to that as well.