

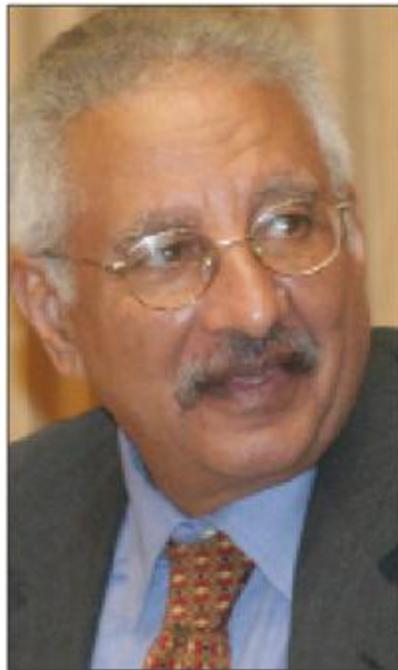
# Haile Launches Nation's First Economic Council

Elected government officials to serve as members of the new separate entity



Photo by: Kalkidan Mihretu

■ Resurrected from a political debacle within the ruling party in the early 2000s, Debretsion Gebremikael (PhD) has evolved and become an influential politician, in the areas of policy making, and supervising federal agencies with jurisdiction in the economic domain.



■ A British educated economist, Neway Gebreab is an old hand in the nation's macroeconomic policy making, serving as chief economic advisor, with a rank of minister, and head of a semi-autonomous think-tank, Economic Development Research Institute (EDRI).



■ Sufian Ahmed is perhaps one of the long-lasting finance ministers the country has had. Head of Customs Authority before his elevation to ministerial position in the early 1990s, Sufian is known to have survived the thick and thin of Ethiopia's economic life for close to two decades.

A national body, styled on the United State's National Economic Council, has been launched by the administration of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, aka Haile, comprising of two ministers and one senior advisor, to begin with, Fortune learnt.

Debretsion Gebremikael (PhD), minister of Communications & Information Technology, has been appointed to chair the country's first such council, which has been on blue print since the beginning of the last days of the late Meles Zenawi.

Sufian Ahmed, minister of Finance & Economic Development (MoFED), and Neway Gebreab, chief economic advisor to the Prime Minister, have been selected to serve as members. Both are old hands in the EPRDF government, serving the administration up at Lorenzo Te'azaz Road for nearly two decades. They are also members of the macro-economic team, chaired by the Prime Minister, and responsible for fiscal and monetary policy making.

Such decisions have been made based on studies produced by various ministries and federal agencies, including the Ethiopian Development Research Institute (EDRI), housed inside the blue building of the Road Transport Authority, near Yidenekachew Tessema Stadium, and chaired by Neway.

Established in 1999, as a semi-autonomous policy research think-tank, and funded by both the federal government and donors, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), EDRI was a source of whitepapers that influenced the policies of the late Prime Minister.

It is the first time for the administration to set up a separate entity, with elected officials serving as its members. However, it was decided earlier on that the National Economic Council should not be chaired by the Prime Minister, and neither by a minister whose portfolio is directly related to economic policy implementation, sources inside the Administration told Fortune.

The practice in the United States, from where the idea was borrowed, is slightly different. The National Economic Council (NEC) was founded in 1993, under the Office of Policy Development in the White House, by the executive order of former President Bill Clinton. NEC advises the President of the United States on “US and global economic policy” and coordinates “policy-making for domestic and international economic issues; ensures policy decisions are consistent with the President’s economic goals; and monitors implementations” of said goals.

Heads of federal departments and agencies, whose jurisdictions impact the national economy, sit in the Council, whilst its director is largely appointed from the academia within the country. But it is the president who chairs the Council.

Ethiopia’s Prime Minister is not to chair the Council, however. Rather, Debrestion, who was recently elevated to the rank of deputy prime minister, with the responsibility of leading the cluster of ministries within the finance and economic jurisdictions, who is to lead the Council as its first chairman, according to sources.

Debrestion is a veteran fighter of the TPLF, joining the then clandestine organisation back in the early 1970s, straight from engineering college. His first government position was in the Ministry of Interior, during the transitional government in the early 1990s, where he was responsible for various departments. He has been a key political figure, elected to the TPLF central committee since the seventh congress of the Front, in 1999.

Debrestion had a brief political fallout with the leadership, following the split in the ruling party in the early 2000s, and was thus sent to the Tigray Regional State, as a cabinet member, but heading the zone in Raya, southern Tigray. He was rehabilitated back into the federal political machinery after he was appointed his current position, in 2010. He is known within his closest circle as “modest, easy to talk to and very intelligent”.

As chairman of the Council, he will probably increase the number of ministers who are to be members, including, perhaps, Mekonnen Manyazewal, minister of Industry, the lone non-party member in the cabinet and the person credited for the architecture of the Growth & Transformation Plan (GTP), according to sources.

Mekonnen has served under Sufian as state minister for Finance & Economic Development, before his current portfolio. Elected to the executive committee of the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization OPDO in 1999 during its second congress, Sufian had served as a minister of finance for eight years up until 2001. A merger of Ministry of Finance with what was then Economic Development & Cooperation, under Girma Birru, now ambassador to the United States, saw Sufian consolidate his position as minister of MoFED, for the past 12 years.

The Council will also have a technical team, to be chaired by Hashim Ahmed, an American educated economist, who has been working as a macro-economist under Neway, in the EDRI, since the mid 2000s. Hashim studied economics at the University of South Florida, in Tampa, United States, and has authored a series of policy papers on Ethiopia’s economy, sometimes alongside well acclaimed economists, such as Professor Sherman Robinson (Prof.) and Dr. Paul Dorosh (PhD).

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