A New Book Dealing With the Dergue Regime

Book title: “Misekerenet Bebaale Seltanatu Andebet”
Author: Captain Tesfaye Riste, XV + 348 pages (in Amharic)
Published: May 2009; Price: 35 Ethiopian Birr

The author is a captain who used to serve as an intelligence officer during the Dergue regime. He was thrown into prison following the seizure of power by the TPLF regime. The book is based on an extensive interview which the author conducted with some of the highest ranking military and civilian officials of the now defunct Dergue regime both inside and outside the prison walls in Addis Abeba. Under difficult circumstances, the author interviewed key informants running the whole gamut from top Dergue officials such as Fikre Selassie Wogderes, top security officials like Tesfaye Wolde Selassie, civilian officials like Yesuf Ahmed (former vice president of Ethiopia), Welle Chekol (former minister of finance), to lower ranking individuals who worked under the Dergue regime. The author relates how he was constantly consumed by anxiety lest the evidence he was gathering to write this book falls in the hands of the TPLF prison officials and be used to incriminate those former officials held in custody. The book contains quotations from these high ranking former officials who are currently in prison or out of prison (some have been released just like the author). The author had also shown the draft of this book to those who were supporters of the Dergue, Meisone and EPRP and has asked them for their feedback and comments before he published his work.

Among others, the book deals with the outbreak of the 1974 revolution, the process that led to the creation of the Dergue (how it was constituted), the various forces which were trying to use the Dergue in pushing their respective, if sectarian, political agendas. A table containing the names of the Dergue members, their military ranks upon the creation of the Dergue in 1974, their subsequent ranks at the end of the Dergue era (in 1991), their ethnic background (although this is incomplete as it does not list the ethnic background of all the Dergue members), their present status (dead or alive) and whereabouts is included in the book. The metamorphosis of the Dergue from a coterie of soldiers, non-commissioned and junior military officers with an inchoate political goal of “Ethiopia Tikdem” (i.e. Ethiopia First) into Africa’s most radicalized Marxist regime are captured in the book. The process which led to Mengistu Haile Mariam’s emergence as the strongest man within the Dergue since February 1977 following the brutal elimination of those elements within the Dergue who sought to curb a one-man dictatorship is documented. The author mentions the two Marxist radical groups (i.e. the Meisone/Wez League groups) who had worked in cahoots with the Dergue in those days as having been instrumental in convincing Mengistu Haile Mariam to reject the peace initiative suggested by General Teferi Benti which tried to bring all progressive forces around the negotiating table. According to this author it was by allying with the Meisone/Wez groups that Mengistu Haile Mariam brutally eliminated in February 1977 the meek General Teferi Benti and his associates (Alemayehu Haile, Moges Wolde Michael, etc) the latter of whom were identified with the oppositional EPRP that used to enjoy wide sympathy and support among the urban youth and elite at that time. Rightly, the author
believes that even if General Teferi’s words were heeded, the EPRP was on its part not ready to accept the peace initiative suggested by General Teferi. According to the evidence provided by the author, Mengistu was able to eliminate those who challenged his dictatorial ambition thanks to the help he got from these radical Marxists in Meisone/Wez League, etc.

The book captures also the process of cannibalization (dubbed Red/White terror\(^1\)) that ensued following the radicalization of the Dergue under the influence of the civilian left. The role played by the civilian left in radicalizing the military, the pernicious influence of the civilian left (EPRP/Meisone, etc) and its disruptive role on the conduct of the Ethiopian military on the eastern/southeastern (1977-1978) and northern war fronts is discussed in the book. The author depicts the unpatriotic stance of the civilian left (Meisone, EPRP, Wez League, etc) that was blind to the national interest of Ethiopia, its sovereignty and survival in the face of massive military onslaught by external (Somalia) and internal (Eritrean secessionists) forces bent on the deconstruction of Ethiopia as a united country. Instances of alleged sabotages made on the eastern/southeastern and northern fronts by members of the EPRP, who according to the author, worked within the Ethiopian army and undermined it are mentioned in the book.

The gruesome manner in which the late emperor Haile Selassie was suffocated to death by the notorious military officer colonel Daniel Asfaw (who was himself later gunned by Major Yohannes Miskier in February 1977) is documented in the book.

The book also deals with the May 1989 coup d'etat, its genesis, goals, weakness and failures. The decapitation of the Ethiopian military’s top brass that came right on the heels of this attempted coup d'etat and the disintegration of the Ethiopian army following Mengistu's vindictive Elimination of the coup leaders and all those suspected of collaboration with them is graphically presented.

Horrendous accounts of the dehumanization process to which coup leaders such as the late General Fenta Belay were exposed are found in the book. The uncharacteristic burning of the corpses of alleged coup leaders and supporters based in Eritrea, in utter violation of the cultural practice of Ethiopians, is mentioned in the book. At one point, the book mentions an account of a Dergue member (General Woubishet Dessie) who recounted the story of the 270000-men strong Ethiopian army stationed in the north that was bereft of military leaders who could lead it on the war fronts. This lack of able military leaders was precipitated by the coup d'etat and the subsequent death or imprisonment of many top army officers thereby rendering the Ethiopian army leaderless. As illustration of this fact, the author cites the cases of 64 army brigades of which 63 had no leaders as all of them were either killed or imprisoned after the coup d'etat. Equally, 256 (64X4) Shaleqa units that formed part of the 64 brigades were without any able and experienced officer to lead them. According to General Woubishet Dessie, the 270000 uniformed soldiers were nothing more than a collection of individuals with no army leader to lead them in wars they were supposed to fight against the Eritrean secessionists and the Tigrean ethno nationalist rebels. The 17000 men strong Ethiopian army that was wiped out at Massawa\(^2\) for lack of military leaders is cited as an example of the total disarray.
the Ethiopian army found itself in following the decapitation of the Ethiopian army leadership in the wake of the May 1989 coup d’etat. Such defeats were later duplicated on the various war fronts in the north thereby leading to the disastrous defeat of the Ethiopian army and the eventual assumption of power by the rebel forces of EPLF and TPLF in May 1991 in Asmara and Addis Ababa respectively. The fact that foreign elements were implicated in the coup d’etat of 1989 is mentioned in the book and individuals such as Dawit Wolde Giorgis are implicated in the coup effort.

The book also documents the total lack of army discipline that made its foray into the Ethiopian army ranks in the wake of the 1974 Revolution thereby replacing the top-down military leadership by a triangular command structure composed of a military leader, a political cadre and an intelligence officer. The latter three component elements which constituted the triangular command structure were competing with each other (often undermining each other) than working together by way of providing a unified leadership to the Ethiopian army they were supposed to lead. The mutual suspicion that ensued from this triangular command structure caused great damage to the moral of the fighting force on the ground leading to repeated losses on the part of the Ethiopian army. The consequence of the new triangular command structure within the army was such that it rendered the military leaders of the army units powerless and frustrated. Professionalism within the military structure was replaced by a system run by riffraff political cadres whose sole qualification was their blind loyalty to the Dergue regime. This led to apathy and indifference on the part of the army officers on the ground and adversely affected the command chain within the army. It also led to the dramatic decline of fighting moral among the rank and file members of the Ethiopian army and its leaders both of which were ultimately rendered leaderless.

The insecurity of tenure the military leaders of the Ethiopian army felt, the frequent reshuffles, demotions, public humiliations in front of soldiers and even assassinations (General Tariku Ayne is a case in point) to which the Ethiopian army leaders were exposed, sapped the stamina of the Ethiopian army and led to massive defections and surrender to the enemy camp. Corruption became rife within the ranks of the military leadership. The virtual absence of audit and the wide-spread frustration and resentment felt by the rank and file of the Ethiopian army are well documented in the book.

The information provided to readers in this book is of utmost importance as it gives a rare, if hitherto, unknown account of the Dergue period as told by those who were in the highest echelons of power. Accordingly the book provides to potential readers insight into the working mechanisms of the Dergue regime, the decision making process, the personalities of some key figures who served as Dergue members and senior officials within the Dergue regime, etc. In this book one comes across rare confessions by some of the Dergue members about the inept character of the individuals who led the Dergue regime. One such confession made by General Woubishet Dessie (a Dergue member) in an interview which the author conducted with him on March 13, 2003 (Megabit 21, 1995 EC) reads as follows:
"I am always surprised when I think of the goals of the Dergue and how it was constituted. The officials of emperor Haile Selassie were individuals (such as Akililu Habtewold, Endalkatchew Mekonnen, Ketema Yifru and Minase Haile from among the ranks of the civilians; Generals Abiy Abebe, Assefa Ayana and Kebede Gebre from the among the ranks of the military) who adequately met international standards of political maturity. Equally when we look at the officials of emperor Menelik II, we come across great individuals such as Fitawrari Habte Giorgis and Ras Mekonnen Wolde Michael. On the other hand those of us who formed part of the Dergue leadership are individuals who had no strong goals. The army units which elected us did not assign to us clearly defined tasks. They have not instructed us to promote a certain political goal. All of us were young people who were not equipped with enough knowledge and life experience. The majority of us were very much hated individuals by the army unit members that elected us. We were sent away by them because they wanted to keep us away from them. There was no one who was famous among our ranks (i.e. Dergue members). We were simply hodge-podges. I am really surprised by the fate Ethiopia faced (under the Dergue). The people of Ethiopia simply tolerated us for 17 years. The fact that we stayed in power and leadership position is a miracle". According to the author, this view of General Woubishet Dessie is also shared by two other Dergue members i.e. Birgadier general Girma Ayele and Major Kassaye Aragaw.

The reader of this book encounters also rare account, coming as they are from the horse’s mouth that has bearing on the personality profile of some leading Dergue members such as the former Dergue chairman Mengistu Haile Mariam. In one such an account, the personality profile and character of Mengistu Haile Mariam has been summarized as follows by Mengistu’s best friend within the Dergue i.e. Major Endale Tessema. Here is what Endale Tessema says about Mengistu Haile Mariam:

"Major Mengistu Haile Mariam sounds like some one who very much likes Ethiopia and some one who has a strong love for his country. But he has no love for any one except for himself. He appears to be some one who has dreams for the growth, development and prosperity of Ethiopia. However, he does not know how development and prosperity come about. He is extremely cruel person. He does not know pardon, forgiveness and kindness. He easily listens to what others tell him about some one and acts upon that information without verifying the truth. He defends those who favored him as witness his treatment of individuals such as Generals Wolde Selassie Bereka, Gizaw Belayneh, Kefelegn Yibza and Dr. Geremew Debele. He is very happy when he is flattered. He does not trust any one and is even suspicious (afraid) of his own shadow. He will do anything to promote his personal interest. He has the good habit of carefully listening to some one else's ideas and subsequently presenting those ideas as if they were his own (as if these ideas originated from him). He is very jealous and some one who suffers from inferiority complex. My dear friend Major Mengistu Haile Mariam lies a bit too".
One reads also the following rare confession by a former Dergue member Major Kassaye Aragaw:

"We (Dergue members) are really useless creatures. We killed individuals like prime minister Akililu Habtewold who was a great national asset. Mengistu is a barbaric and cruel creature who becomes happy with the death of human beings. Among those in the meeting, some of us protested and saved the lives of individuals like Kassa Wolde Mariam (the former university president). But Mengistu later killed them by taking them out of prison. One is powerless after being imprisoned. If there was a genuine Ethiopian government, not only imprisonment but even being hacked into pieces would not have been a big deal for us".

This penitent or contrite view of Major Kassaye Aragaw sharply contrasts with the view of another Dergue member Major Melaku Teferra (otherwise known as the butcher of Gondar) who thinks that he committed no mistakes and did nothing wrong. As such Melaku does not regret any wrong doing on his part. During the past several years, I have opportunity to read several books dealing with the Dergue regime, the Ethiopian military and its disintegration. Many of these books have been written by those who worked with the military regime in various capacities i.e. as military officers or civilian political actors. I have to admit that the book by Captain Tesfaye Riste provides a rare and relatively balanced account of the Dergue regime which depicts the damage caused to the Ethiopian people and Ethiopia as a country. The author has successfully tried to highlight the mistakes that were committed by all protagonists without tending to side with one protagonist against the other. The failure of the various political protagonists (ranging from political groups, government officials down to individuals who were jockeying for power) to see beyond their narrow political agendas of power and prestige is well captured in the book. In this book, the reader also comes across words of self-confession and remorse by some of the highly-placed former Dergue members in regard to the damage they caused to Ethiopia during the 17 years in which these Dergue members ruled Ethiopia with an iron-fist.

One Achilles heel of the book is its effort to attribute the initial moves of the Dergue (in hastening the downfall of the Haile Selassie regime) to the alleged advice and guidance provided to the Dergue by Dezazmatch Kebede Tessema. The latter is allegedly depicted as a relative of Mengistu Haile Mariam and is presented in the book as having given advice to Mengistu Halie Mariam, Dergue’s strongest man. Personally, I find this alleged role and influence of Dejazmatch Kebede, who is believed to be master of palace intrigues, very far-fetched and as lacking in evidence and substance. It sounds like a make-believe story which fails to take into account the dynamics of the various forces which sought to influence the Dergue committee in the initial phase of the Ethiopian Revolution. In addition to this misrepresentation of the Dergue, some minor mistakes are evident in the book with regard to the current whereabouts of some of the Dergue members. For example Demisse Alamrew, a former Dergue member is presumed to be dead by the author. However, Demisse Alamerew currently lives in Holland where he has sought asylum. Equally, contrary to what the book purports, General Zeleke Beyene lives in Germany and not in Kenya (he used to live in Kenya several years ago.)
In spite of such minor warts, it is a good book. I recommend readers to get hold of this important book and read an account of a painful period in the annals of recent Ethiopian history as it captures the events under the Dergue regime that finally led to the secession of Eritrea and the descent of the rest of Ethiopia into an ethnic dictatorship. The process of destruction which has been pursued vigorously by the ethnic dictatorial regime of TPLF during the last 18 years has further launched the country on the path of deeper political fragmentation with all disastrous consequences thereof.

**Thoughts which the content of this book provoked in me**

After I read this book, I could not help asking myself how and why, during the last 35 years (although I am not discounting the political deficit caused by the imperial regime), the Ethiopian society allowed itself to be at the mercy of riffraff, if contemptible, elements of society who do not command wide respect and popularity among the majority of its ranks? An answer to this question may partly help us disentangle the riddle of our current impotence and help us loosen the dictatorial hold on Ethiopia of groups such as the TPLF that continue to ride roughshod over our people. Equally an answer to this riddle can help us diagnose the problems within the Ethiopian oppositional movement, its inability to tame personal and group egos of opposition leaders who, more often than not, have put their narrow interest before the purported public good they claim to promote. An answer to this riddle will also help us disentangle why the oppositional politics in Ethiopia frequently attracts individuals of dubious social standing & checkered political track-record as we are currently witnessing both among the Diaspora and home-based opposition political groups. What is it that explains the inability of the great majority of the Ethiopian people, who had a history of repulsing repeated foreign incursions by foreign invaders, to tolerate an apartheid-like rule by a group which represents a minority ethnic group and has been able to ensconce itself in power by mobilizing famished, if spiteful, peasants from an ecologically degraded part of Ethiopia who were catapulted into political action by TPLF by drumming up a patently anti-Ethiopian ethnicist ideology?

Assefa Negash, M.D.
Amstelveen, Holland
Debesso@gmail.com

---


3. Books dealing with the Dergue and the Ethiopian military include the following:

- Zenebe Feleke, “Neber” 1996 E.C.

- Yohannes Mullugeta, “Atifto Metfat”, (year of publication is not mentioned in the book)

4 - Brigadier General Kassaye Chemeda, “Ye Tor Meda Welowotch Ke Misrak Eske Semen”, 1997 E.C.

-Tadesse Tele Salvano, “Ye Anabest Mider”, 1999 E.C.


- Dawit Wolde Giorgis, “Khidet Bedem Meret”, 2006