

Hailu Shawel and et al – on a foolish journey to martyrdom.

By Mekonnen Kassa

It is to be remembered that Ethiopia had an election in 2005 where close to 90% percent of the eligible electorate casted their vote and elected their leaders. The National Election Board of Ethiopia, a legally authorized body, declared EPRDF, the incumbent ruling Party winner of majority seats in Ethiopian Parliament, effectively giving it a license to form a government and elect a Prime Minister.

The opposition had a success of its own as well. For the first time in Ethiopia, an opposition Party was declared a landslide winner of the capital city of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa. Furthermore, the combined opposition Parties managed to increase their seat in Parliament from a previous 12 to a new 179 members, a sizable number considering the total 549 seats available.

After that all went downhill primarily as the result of the mis-calculated and selfish decisions and acts of some of the opposition leaders. After exhausting the appeal process within the legal system, the opposition leaders were coerced by their expatriate supporters (mostly in US and Europe) and decided not to join Parliament. Subsequently, they started making inflammatory speeches at public meetings, called for a boycott of businesses allegedly owned and operated by the ruling Party supporters, and issued a decree that called for an outright isolation and discrimination of individuals suspected of supporting the ruling Party.

Some enthusiastic young people took to the street to protest what one opposition leader called “highway robbery” of his winning by the incumbent Party. The government claimed the rioting youth fired hand guns and hurled hand grenades killing six and wounding over a hundred policemen. We are told the policemen fired in return at protesters and killed 193 youth and wounded many others. The government says it had no choice but use deadly force to stop the violent youth bent on following through an insurrection called by the opposition leaders.

Immediately afterwards, the government arrested the opposition leaders including the chairman Hailu Shawel and charged them, among other things, with treason and inciting violence. It took the government over a year and half to gather evidence and prepare its case. After looking through the evidence, the Federal court of Ethiopia decided the prosecutor may charge the accused and proceed to trial.

Naturally, the opposition leaders cried foul and labeled the charges politically motivated, and they accused the government regularly interferes with judicial matters and claimed judges are in cahoots with the government. All this is understandable and it has been part of politics since time immemorial: powers that be jailing and killing any real, suspected, or imagined adversary. But I was hoping this time things will turn out differently, and the accused opposition leaders will line up the best defense money can buy, as they are talked about of being rich or having rich families with lots of money and having a well of monetary reserve from their Ethiopian Diaspora supporters. I thought they have a chance to prove to the world that they are innocent by refuting every evidence the government exhibits, cross-examine witnesses until they cry and tell the court that their testimony was bought by the government and ask for forgiveness, a sort of

“Perry Mason” moment. They will have their day in court and their lawyer will have the opportunity to rebut every argument of the prosecutor, and to finally deliver a one-of-a-kind closing argument that will be remembered for generation.

The opposition lawyer being Cochran’s caliber, as it was in the OJ trial, when the “glove did not fit”, the Ethiopian Federal Court judge would not have any choice but to declare the opposition leaders not-guilty and exonerate them from all charges and to send them home to their loving families. That would have made the gods of democracy and freedom smile on Ethiopia.

Sadly, all this was not meant to be, not because the Ethiopian government is undemocratic or the judiciary was sympathetic to the government, but because the opposition leaders elected not to defend the charges against them. Their chauvinistic and stubborn attitude got the better of them. It was under the nature of these circumstances that the court had no choice but to find them guilty as charged. Absent of the defendant offering a defense, any other court anywhere in the world would have done the same thing. And the Federal court in Ethiopia is no different.

In the US, when Clinton was sued many times while still in office, though he claimed the charges were instigated by his political opponents, he always had his lawyers go to court and defend his case at the cost of millions of dollars. Congressmen Delay, a Texas Republican and Jefferson, a Louisiana Democrat are currently fighting legal battles in court while each claiming the charges against them are politically motivated. The civil right leader Martin L. King and freedom fighter Mandela had lawyers defending their case. Can you imagine the outcome had all these people decided not to defend the charges against them?

I was disappointed by the action, or the lack there of, of the former leaders of the now defunct Coalition for Unity and Democracy. I was hoping unlike their decision not to enter Parliament, this time around they do things different. I guess not. It seems to me that the decision not present a defense is prescribed to them too. Just like the Islamic Extremist Sheikh who tells a suicide bomber that he will be met by 72 virgins when he goes to heaven, the Ethiopian extremist politicians are telling Hailu Shawel and his friends that they are heroes and “have a ‘mandate from heaven’ to rule Ethiopia.” This kind of language is once again a prescription to make a foolish martyr out of them.