

# **You mess with my citizen, you mess with my sovereignty!**

**By Kiflu Hussain**

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## **Introduction**

This piece is prompted by the recent unlawful arrest of an Ethiopian born British citizen in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen while on a transit flight from Dubai to Asmara, capital of Eritrea. The arrested person named Andargachew Tsige was handed over by Yemeni officials to the security agents of the Ethiopian regime who whisked him away to his country of origin in order to subject him to a grueling torture.

Andargachew was one of the founders and top leader of a group called Ginbot 7, named after the May 15, 2005 polling day that saw unprecedented voter turnout. The results of that election were blatantly rigged by the ruling party which subsequently gunned down hundreds of civilians in broad daylight. Thousands were rounded up throughout the country and confined in various detention centers and concentration-like camps. A considerable number of them were subjected to torture and inhumane treatment. Among the victims, was Andargachew Tsige who was beaten up badly to the extent of losing one of his eyesights.



Like the majority of Ethiopians, Andargachew too became disillusioned with the idea of contesting the repressive regime through a ballot box. Unlike the majority of his fellow countrymen, however, he not only remained disillusioned. Thus, he chose a different path to make a difference in Ethiopia whereby he founded Ginbot 7 that embraced all means available to dislodge the current rulers who hailed from a minority ethnic group called Tigre under the guise of liberating it.

Although, Andargachew's Ginbot 7 never achieved a level of posing a mortal dread to the regime in Ethiopia, the rulers know very well how determined and committed Andargachew was

to bring Ginbot 7 to that level no matter how long it took. Hence, to them he was not an individual but an institution to be demolished at all costs. They even arrested his octogenarian father who suffers from a serious cardiac condition in 2009 to make Andargachew desist from the activism he carries out from abroad.

That is Andargachew Tsige, the high profile activist whom apparently the Ethiopian regime goes to great length to incarcerate and even attempt to eliminate.

Is the Ethiopian regime, however, only confined to targeting high profile dissidents wherever they are? Is it only preoccupied with those who claimed to have espoused armed struggle to unseat it from the throne the regime itself occupied and sought to sustain by gun?

For answer to this question, I refer you to regional and global human rights watchdogs' incessant reports wherein the unabated human rights violations and growing culture of impunity is documented ever since this regime took the mantle of power in 1991.

### **Assassination, deportation & rendition; to be grateful to Uganda or not**

Up until the fateful 2005 election, the Ethiopian regime's target of repression focused only on dissidents living in Ethiopia. Except badmouthing Ethiopians living abroad, for their criticism of its divisive ethnic politics and tyranny in the name of democracy, the regime had never dared to harm Ethiopians living abroad.

That changed drastically and officially with the advent of trumped up charges leveled against Ethiopian/Americans working for Voice of America and some individuals who run critical websites from abroad. They were charged in absentia alongside Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) opposition party leaders who won the 2005 election. The trumped up charges called for the death penalty. The regime also found an opportune moment globally to extend its instrument of repression abroad with impunity. It did so by ingratiating itself with Washington and the entire West as an ally in the so-called War on Terror. Its monopoly on the country's natural resources and key economic sectors also enabled it to cut deals with regional greedy powers who do not hesitate to hand over Ethiopian asylum seekers and refugees in violation of the international law. Djibouti, Sudan, Yemen and Kenya are notorious in this.

In July 2005, the government of Djibouti handed over two Ethiopian Air force pilots named Behailu Gebre and Abiyot Mangudai. They defected with the assault helicopter they were flying as conscientious objectors against the regime that uses lethal weapon on civilians. Last time I checked, these asylum seekers who were unlawfully returned were kept incommunicado at the Air force Headquarter and had been subjected to torture that might have caused their death.

Taking advantage of the rotten Police Force in Kenya, the Ethiopian regime has been using the Kenyan territory as its backyard to abduct and assassinate Ethiopian dissidents who sought asylum. Notable among the Ethiopian refugees who were arrested by Kenyan authorities and handed over to the Ethiopian regime around 2009 were two young Engineers named Mesfin Abebe Abdissa and Tesfahun Chemedha Gurmessa. At the time the duo sought asylum, they were sentenced by a Kangaroo court in absentia to life imprisonment and death. As a result of their forcible repatriation, they were subjected to severe torture which ultimately caused the death of Tesfahun while Mesfin is still languishing in death row. He was the one who had been sentenced to death.

In a bid to give unlawful repatriation of asylum seekers and refugees as well as extraordinary rendition of other individuals a legal cloak, these banana republics of the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region later signed a sort of extradition treaty under the auspices of IGAD. Since the Ethiopian regime is almost the sole beneficiary of that extradition treaty, it was initiated by its diabolic architects of repression.

Despite hosting a considerable number of Ethiopian refugees since the early 1990s, Uganda by contrast had never exposed Ethiopian exiles to the regime they fled from. On top of having reliable information as to how Ugandan officials resisted and even rejected requests of deportation of certain Ethiopian refugees, I myself, as a former refugee in Uganda until recently, survived a deportation request alongside two fellow refugees.

In November 2013, my exiled journalist friend and I received a strange summon by phone from the Internal Affairs and Immigration Office of Uganda. To cut a long story short, both my friend and I went to the office. After being received politely, we were asked questions, separately, about our exile life such as how we came to Uganda, what we do and used to do for a living, etc. Both of us find it very odd, that we were summoned to the Immigration office to be asked for information which we already availed when we lodged our asylum requests. We also couldn't accept the fact that four officials, out of whom three, came from another office outside of the Immigration compound, to simply waste their valuable time on information already obtained and available on the public domain.

Refusing to believe the cock and bull story they gave us for our summons and the line of questioning; as well as refusing to be lulled by the polite and civilized way they talked to us, we contacted our source to find out the meaning of the summons.

Surprise! Surprise! Our source revealed to us that the Ethiopian regime requested for our hand despite our being the most insignificant and ineffectual exiled dissidents. But the biggest element of surprise came from the reason the Ethiopian security agents requested their Ugandan counterparts for our hand. They accused us of being attached with Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) which made me doubt the accuracy of our source. While I came from a diverse background, ethnically and religiously and was born and grew up in Addis Ababa as a cosmopolitan Ethiopian with little knowledge of Oromiffa, Girma Tesfaw, my friend who was summoned with me and who was Addis Neger's deputy editor came from what you call a predominantly Amharic speaking ethnic background. Yet, we've been informed that the "logic" of the Ethiopian regime illogically linked us with OLF. A few days after this unusual encounter which we reported to all human rights groups and agencies working on refugee issues, I received a call from another fellow refugee from Ethiopia. He told me that he received a call from the same gentleman who summoned us to Internal Affairs and Immigration Office. Unlike us, this refugee named Mulatu Abera is from the Oromo ethnic group. He was arrested twice and severely tortured by the Ethiopian régime. I translated his harrowing testimony for the benefit of Amnesty International and UNHCR. Mulatu's traumatic experience of torture had been published by Amnesty International in 2009. Now that the Ethiopian regime leveled one of its most farfetched trumped up charge against Zone9 Bloggers as being members of OLF among other things, I regret doubting the reliability of our Ugandan source.

On the other hand, despite being shielded by Ugandan officials from deportation, I found myself in a dilemma as to whether to be grateful to the government of Uganda or not. Because I know fully well if and when Uganda finds it "geopolitically" compelling to hand over Ethiopian refugees like it does Rwandan refugees, it will not blink an eye over a higher principle of "non-refoulement" meant to protect pathetic refugees like me from forcible repatriation. Already, some elements from the Ugandan regime had started making life very hard for Ethiopian refugees who wanted to form a refugee association. I have reliable information that Ugandan Police guided by Ethiopian security agents in Kampala prevented the refugees from holding their meeting in hotels. And so it's a matter of time for Ethiopian refugees to meet the same fate like Rwandan refugees who run the risk of mass deportation and targeted forcible repatriation and even assassination like Charles Ingabire, a Rwandan exiled journalist who was gunned down in Kampala in 2011. Of course, Ugandan officials can cynically defend their inability to protect the Rwandan journalist by equating it with the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko, a Russian dissident who turned a British citizen.

Meanwhile, rogue regimes like the Ethiopian one continue to expand their impunity beyond their borders like they demonstrated recently in Yemen with the abduction of the Ethiopian-born British national, Andargachew Tsige. That carrying impunity to an international level is the motto of the Ethiopian regime is also evidenced in Alexander Betts excellent book “*Survival Migration; Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement*.” In a chapter sub- titled “Yemen” on page 166, Alex, the author tells us that when he puts allegations of kidnappings and even assassinations of Ethiopian migrants to Minelik Alemu, Attorney-General for International Law and Consular Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he was simply told that “we reserve the right to pursue people we deem to be criminals, both within and beyond the boundaries of the state.” And so, with devil advocates like this, the regime will not only confine itself to targeting poor asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. It also goes for those Ethiopians who adopted foreign nationality like it did on Mr. Okello Akoy, the Ethiopian born Norwegian citizen and others to be followed.

## **Conclusion**

In order to show why banana republics such as Ethiopia dare to taunt the First World that props it up, by jailing citizens of Sweden, Norway, Canada, Britain, USA etc, Prof.Alemeyahu Gebremariam asked a simple question “war on terror or war on international law?” Thereby demonstrating how United States and its Western cohort’s double standard on international law emboldened regimes like Ethiopia not only to do the same but to take advantage of the situation and stamp out all legitimate dissent. Recently in an interview on BBC, even Hailemariam Desalegn made a mockery of Britain by claiming that Ethiopia sends dissidents to jail according to anti-terror bill copied from Britain. He also threatened the BBC journalist with imprisonment if he doesn’t stop questioning about jailed dissidents.

A case of unequal concern for citizens of the First World whose safety is jeopardized at the hands of rogue states such as Ethiopia is also clearly being seen. One seriously doubt that a British government that went out of its way to have Alan Johnston, the BBC journalist, released from his captivity in Gaza by meeting a Hamas member for the first time, will do the same for Andargachew Tsige, a naturalized British citizen.

Also when one expects that the United States government will express outrage against the Ethiopian regime upon receiving information on the latter’s plan to “stop, arrest and detain “all Somali origin American citizens traveling to Ethiopia for “an extended period of time with no charges” by saying “you mess with my citizens, you mess with my sovereignty “or “you disrespect my citizen, you disrespect me as a nation, “the United States merely released a statement of warning to its “citizens” who originated from Somalia. So such is the state of the

world where the so-called big democracies and outright dictatorships colluded to trample on human rights and international law.

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