

My Lifelong Quest for Change

(Summary)

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Introduction

The idea of writing this book is not mine. It is the idea of some of my friends who used to come to visit me when I was in prison. For them, to be in exile for 16 years and come back home and end up in prison for no other reason except for differences of political opinion with the ruling party. At first, I was not sure that I would be willing to write about myself. My friends insisted that I write my story because my life was full of ups and downs from underground life in Ethiopia to exile in Somalia, Italy, and the United States, and then coming back home only to end up in prison was something that should be recorded and shared.

Likewise, my Dutch teacher who came to know about my background, one day came to class with blank pages bound in a book form and handed them to me and challenged me to write my story.

In chapter I, I describe my diverse family background: a father from Eritrea in the north, and a mother from Shewa (Amhara) in the center, born and brought up in a remote gold mining village in southern Ethiopia. Then I talk about my college days in Ethiopia and here in Europe, my activism in the student movement and my involvement in the Ethiopian left movement. (1963-1971).

Chapter 2 is about the Ethiopian revolution of 1974 and my participation as an active member of the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement (Meison). Here I talk about the background to the Ethiopian revolution, the overthrow of a social-political order that had existed for over 1000 years, the establishment of a provisional military government called Dergue, and my involvement in drafting the radical land reform program of 1975, still in force.

Initially, the Dergue introduced many radical reforms and including the radical land reform program mentioned above that completely transformed rural Ethiopia. However, the civilian left was divided into two camps, for and against the government. My organization pursued a political line it called *critical support* that supported the government conditionally. The other important left group, Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), opposed the military. The relationship between these groups became acrimonious and soon turned violent.

Chapter III. Once the Dergue consolidated its power it became increasingly dictatorial and my organization was forced to break its relationship in August 1977 and go underground. That was when, after a brief attempt to organize an armed resistance in Sidamo province in southern Ethiopia, we were forced to cross the border into Somalia. There, we stayed seven months under detention, and eventually, the UN High Commission for refugees helped us travel to Rome, Italy, and then to the US where I stayed for 14 years.

Chapter IV describes my political activities among the Ethiopian Diaspora in the US and Europe which led to the formation of the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (COEDF), a broad-based coalition of Ethiopian political parties in exile. The chapter also covers my travels to northern Ethiopia in 1989 to meet with the then rebels TPLF (Tigray Peoples Liberation Front) and EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front) and to Kenya and Uganda seeking support for the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces. During that time, I met the late Meles Zenawi, who ruled Ethiopia for 21 years from 1991 until he died in 2012.

Chapter V Return to Ethiopia and 17 years of imprisonment.

After the TPLF took power in 1991, the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces, together with other political groupings within the country, organized a peace and reconciliation conference in December 1993 in Addis Ababa. I flew to Addis Ababa at the head of a delegation from the US and Europe and our group was arrested on arrival at the airport. After a lengthy process of negotiation, other members of the delegation were freed two months later, and I was kept under detention. I was first charged with subversion and anti-peace and anti-state activities. In March 1994 the court set me free declaring that no substantive evidence has been presented by the state prosecutor against me. The government, however, refused to release me and kept me in prison for 4 years without either releasing me or taking me to court. Of these four years, I spent 2 years in a maximum-security isolation room together with persons who were sentenced to death. While there, I contracted tuberculosis (TB) and nearly died of a lack of medical treatment. In 1998 I was charged with genocide and six years later I was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Since I had been in prison for 12 years already, I walked out of prison without any need to apply for probation. However, 12 days later when I had only five hours left to board the plane to Washington DC to rejoin my family I was again arrested in the streets of Addis, forcibly taken back to prison without even an arrest warrant from a court and sentenced to 25 years. Eventually, I was freed on probation in November 2011. While I was waiting for my re-entry visa to the US I fell ill, and I was admitted to a hospital where I stayed for 40 days. Since my condition was deteriorating my friends here arranged for me to get a visa to come to Belgium. I arrived in Brussels on 6 April 2012. Six months after my arrival I was still waiting for my visa to the US. Then, I gave up and applied for Asylum in Belgium and two years later I was granted citizenship.

In the concluding chapter, I discuss the developments in Ethiopia since 2018, the horrifying conflict going on between the TPLF and the federal government, the growing insurgency in the central parts of the country, and the way out of the current crisis.

Thank you very much for coming.