

Letter from Kaliti Jail

By Bertukan Mideksa

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A specter is haunting the EPRDF--the specter of Kinijit. Reports are seeping through the prison walls into my cell that cities and towns all over the country are exploding, furiously burning with the quest for freedom. In schools and colleges people of tender ages are articulating and demanding their liberties with extraordinary air of confidence and dedication. Priests are dumbstruck when young men approach and ask them to tell and live the truth as God requires. The tormentors couldn't muster up enough courage to face and address these heroic men. Instead they decry them as Kinijit and try to exorcize the specter.

These protestors are 'romantic' youths. They may not be partisans of some clearly articulated ideology or world view. Rather, their romanticism consists in a dedication to freedom, adventure, risk, emotion and living life to the hilt. These men and women are fearless. When they are beaten and jailed, they come back for more.

On the first day of November, EPRDF's security men dragged the leaders of Kinijit away from our homes and assigned us a new home, at prison, hoping that the ignited flame of liberation would have stopped flickering soon. In a political soap opera that could only compare with the Salem witch hunting, false charges were heaped against us, evidences fabricated and witnesses trained. The institutions which are traditionally entrusted with safeguarding the rule of law are now being used to suppress all shades of dissent. Re-energized by the suffocating inaction of some powerful members of the international community, the authoritarian regime now gloats over the so-called wisdom of the repression.

Indeed, living behind bar is painful. I have felt pain when hearing about the struggle of my fellow country men; for being forced to experience it all vicariously, for being near but far away from the terrain of the fight. Yet the pain ends right there. Our incarceration hasn't liquidated the spirit of freedom. Instead, it degrades those who are fighting against it into something hateful and undignified. Toughened by the crackdown on dissent and other forms of oppression, other democrats, genuinely committed to the cause of liberty and equality are emerging. I am hearing that when the political space for free speech is closed and the free press banned, Internet journals are mushrooming, creating avenues for free exchange of ideas. Talented young writers, passionate about their own freedom, are blogging in the cyber space. The perfidious and loveless treatment of the seekers of freedom and justice is getting the victims more and more resolute. Thinking of that, even within the confinement of my cell, is a pleasant captivity.

The struggle is an emphatic confirmation of the statement that I made four months ago--Kinijit is a spirit. It is a spirit of freedom, a spirit of love and unity. This spirit engulfed the lives of many during the election debates. Kinijit then became an amazing confluence of people with different ideas and experience, and yet united in their compulsive quest for freedom. From Laptop savvy professionals to daily laborers, the spirit has left none untouched. There must be times when even our haters would have asked themselves as to why they are opposed so passionately. Like all dictators they would, of course, carefully steer themselves from the truth. They are, nonetheless, affected by the spirit.

In a sense, Kinijit is like the Polish Solidarity movement of the 1980s. Solidarity began its protest with a demand for economic reform. It then metamorphosed into being the leader of the struggle of the Polish to liberate themselves from the Soviet indirect rule. Kinijit was just an alternative political party before the election debates. Its transformation to being the spirit of resistance against tyranny was both dramatic and intense.

Kinijit leaders are, in the Lockean sense, trustees of the spirit. Our relationship with the Ethiopian people is merely contractual and representational. Prison may disable us from fulfilling our duties, but the cause will continue to live on.

In 1981, General Wojciech Jaruzelski's government started a crack down on Solidarity, formally dissolving it in 1982. Its leaders were arrested. But the movement persisted as an underground organization. In 1989, the people of Poland forced the government to legalize Solidarity. In the election contest that followed, it swept parliamentary seats all over the country ending decades of communist rule.

The parallel with our situation is worth considering. A few days after our arrest, the Election Board declared that Kinijit didn't exist. Aided and abetted by Lidetu Ayalew and the editorials of The Reporter, the government tried, in vain, to divert the nation's attention from the quest of freedom to administrative matters--to the "which group will take over Addis Ababa?" nonsense. Well intentioned diplomats in Addis Ababa, unaware of the nature of Kinijit and the resistance of the citizenry, innocently subscribed to the government's plot. What the EPRDF, Lidetu, and The Reporter failed to grasp is the nature of our fight, the fight for liberty. What is man without his freedom?

Ms Bertukan Mideksa is vice-chairperson of the Coalition for Unity & Democracy Party. She sent out this letter from her prison cell in Kaliti, the suburb of Addis Ababa