

## **Interview with Bereket Simon, Ethiopia's information minister and a top adviser to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi**

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*Nick Wadhams and Zoe Alsop traveled to Ethiopia in the winter of 2007 on a Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting travel grant. For more information about this project, and to find related resources visit:*

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**Nick Wadhams: On Somalia, this was a success despite a lot of concerns that people had that this would be an Iraq situation or a quagmire.**

**Bereket Simon:** I can say there are a lot of reasons for this success. Primarily it is Ethiopia's correct foreign policy as well as domestic policy. Domestically we have clearly defined our number one enemy as poverty at home. Anything that hampers our fight against poverty will be dealt with. For instance, you can say, in order to rapidly develop our economy we need sustainable peace within us and around the region. We show maximum restraint on every issue, max patience and tolerance. We don't rush to internal conflicts, we don't rush to also trigger external conflicts because we need all the time under the sun to make use of this time for our development. This has given the government a comparative edge, at least.

Secondly, we have had a correct regional and foreign policy. Our foreign policy is based on mutual respect, peace and good-neighborliness and in the regional policy, foreign policy we have seen that Somali people had been the ones who were victimized by the anarchy. If anything, Ethiopia had to help the Somali people to get rid of this anarchy.

For the last 15 years, the Ethiopian government has been trying to help the Somali people out of respect for them, out of common brotherly and sisterly interests that prevail among us. Nevertheless, when these extremists of the Islamic Courts took over the Islamic Courts, they started to make Ethiopia a rallying point for their dominance and also they were attached to several external terrorist groups, like al-Qaida and they started serving once again others as a stepping stone for destabilizing us so after maximum restraint which we exhibited in the past, in spite of the repeated jihad they have declared against us, we showed maximum restraint and finally when we felt that it was time to counteract we took the counterattack measure.

That was not targeted against the Somali people because we knew for sure that at the Somali people wanted peace and to get rid of this anarchy, so if we got the chance we had decided to finish the war out of the urban areas if possible where only the contending military forces will test their strengths. Ultimately we were lucky and we got that chance and with no urban casualties the war was consummated.

This is one thing. Because this war didn't target the Somali people and they have seen the nature of Ethiopia in many instances in my opinion. For instance, you can say there are Somali refugees who live here, they have no differentiated treatment from Ethiopians. We have a Somali region, Somali-speaking people inhabiting our region, they are Ethiopians, they have enjoyed full rights. They can secede from Ethiopia if they want, their right is respected to this level so they have never enjoyed it better.

This has a very good impact that Ethiopia is not inherently against the interests of the Somali people or the existence of the Somali people. The people of Somalia, we believe, if given the chance they will go for peace, for sustainable peace and that's what they got. They were not against us, had they fought with us, that would have been a very difficult war, so one of the basic reasons is that the Somali people didn't act against the marching Ethiopian forces. Instead they were fed up with the war-mongering extremist wings of the UIC. They were fed up with anarchy, so if given the chance, they definitely would catch it and go for peace, so that's what happened.

**Zoe Alsop: The fear is that in the War on Terror, a place where there's anarchy is a good staging ground for terrorist movements. Some of the opposition groups within Ethiopia were also found at the border of Kenya right after the fighting. Do you have any idea how substantial the OLF presence inside Somalia was?**

**Bereket:** Well you know it had been a constant fight with the OLF. Usually what we find out is that 400 up to 800 soldiers go to Eritrea sometimes and they are trained there and whenever they finish their training they come, try to infiltrate, and confront with our soldiers or with border guards and then they are wiped out and then another round of insurgents come from Eritrea. This is how they continuously try to go.

They have never been able to build a big huge army. There were insurgents and definitely as I have told you earlier, the Oromo people in Ethiopia, they have every right, they administer themselves, they speak their language, they are equally represented at federal levels, they are nurturing their culture, their language, their history. The Oromo people in fact now they are benefiting from the economic growth that Ethiopia is exhibiting at this point.

Literally speaking, apart from some urban areas and apart from some of the elites, the rural peasants do not have any strong support per say to the OLF. So you know, we had to deal with these insurgents and I can't tell you the exact number but usually it's around 1,000, 2,000 combined forces of the OLF inside of Somalia, they have been fighting with the jihadists.

**Wadhams: We'd noticed in the law that passed parliament, there was this stipulation there that said the Somali war would also be concerned with groups inside of Ethiopia's borders that were terrorists groups. So was that part of the issue with this war, was to bring peace for the Somalis but also to clean up some of these threats to Ethiopia such as the OLF and the ONLF?**

**Bereket:** Basically we knew for sure there were other forces gathering around Mogadishu, and foreign forces were really interested in destabilizing us. We are also, if you have come up with the U.N. study, there were some countries who were supplying arms, ammunition, military uniforms, medical services, training services to the Islamic courts. Now, we had to deal with this Islamic forces, these extremists of the Islamic Union. Because they were the centrifugal forces here.

They were amassing all the rest of the forces around them. So if we deal with the main force, then the rest will be like subsidiary work that can definitely have an impact on the subversive groups that disturb. From inside as such, we tried to sep the two issues. From inside, whenever there are terrorist actives we deal one by one with them, but also we dealt with the extremists in the Union of Islamic Courts and thereby also we dealt with, you know, there had been fighting having one front line of their own, the Oromo Liberation Front fighters were having a formation of their own and they were fighting, so we got them there. It's like the Union of Islamic Courts served as a hub for all anti-Ethiopian elements.

**Alsop: Two questions. One thing the U.S. has been criticized for is intelligence problems, gathering accurate intelligence. I know you can't probably speak specifically about how, but are there intelligence lessons that you would have to teach the United States?**

**Bereket:** I'm not pretty sure whether we can teach the US on this aspect, but what we do is we care for the local sensitivities. We interact with the people, we care for the people and we build our information sources right from the people. If you have good relations, there's nothing that people hide from you, so that seems to me one of the best things we have in Ethiopia.

Secondly we are very close culturally, linguistically, historically, these are very close neighboring countries and definitely we know how our Somali brothers and sisters feel, what are the sensitivities of these people. We try to figure out and we try not to mess up with their lives. This has earned respect for Ethiopia among the Somali people and definitely they have been cooperative in every respect. I think the political approach is what made the difference.

**Alsop: The political approach?**

**Bereket:** That caring relationship, that relationship built on concern for their welfare, well-being is the basis for our cooperation, so we have very, very good cooperation from the people, so once you have good cooperation from the people, you can be as accurate as possible.

**Alsop: Had there been some sounding of waters in Mogadishu to say, OK, what's the sentiment of people here?**

**Bereket:** Yes. What I'm saying is, we believe of all the social forces in Somalia, Ethiopia's relationship must be built with the people of Somalia, no matter which political force is in power. We believe that we should build a very sound and lasting relationship with the Somali people, so we guide ourselves with this framework where anything that affects our positive relationship with the Somali people is dealt with seriously.

For instance any maltreatment of the people of Somalia, any discrimination here at home for those Somali refugees, all those things will definitely affect the relationship between us. So we continuously monitor these things and make sure that we have very good people to build relationship at the grassroots level, at the country level. By the way, the Somali people has helped this government during the hard times of the Mengistu regime. So we have had a very good backing by the Somali people.

**Wadhams: Speaking more generally about Ethiopia's relationship with Somalia and also with the United States, does Ethiopia provide the United States with information or intelligence that can help the US government better understand what the real situation is in Somalia, or do the Americans do that on their own and not turn to you for insight or analysis?**

**Bereket:** Basically, both countries depend on their own capabilities and abilities to perform, I think. But we know that we are partners in the fight against terrorism, so in this respect we have been helping each other.

Fortunately, Ethiopia has started this anti-terrorist movement long before the U.S. joined us. Long before September 11, we have had our own assassination attempts by terrorists here in Addis of President Hosni Mubarak, there have been several minor bombings which took place here in Addis, so we have had to fight our own anti-terrorist fight. Any cooperation with anybody that helps us to improve the fight against terrorism was welcome and we as partners in this fight had been contributing our own share also in many respects.

We have had good cooperation in this respect. Of course, the war in Somalia started by the extremist wings in Mogadishu and the counterattack measures that we took was purely Ethiopian action. The U.S. had its own concerns, you know probably based on their last experience they were not pushing anybody in this area to do anything. We were trying to fight our own fights and at last we have got the recognition that we have done it alone and that we have successfully finished the war.

**Wadhams: Maybe we could talk a little bit more about the internal situation. When the Somali resolution came about there was some resistance from some of the opposition groups in parliament. I know there was the decision by the CUD not to take their seats though some later did during the elections. In the year and a half since the elections, do you see the opposition as playing a constructive role?**

**Bereket:** There are quite mixed results around here. Def there are opposition parties who have started playing a very positive role, have started at least playing by the rules of the game.

**Wadhams: Who, for example?**

**Bereket:** For example, Ethiopian Democratic Union Party is working in that line. Others with varying degrees have started playing that role. There are sometimes attitudes that run counter to the constitution, relapsing on some occasions like the Somali issue.

But broadly speaking, the ruling party has accepted the existence of opposition parties in parliament as a fact of life and has committed itself to abide by the rules of the game recognizing that this is a multiparty democracy. Nearly 30 percent of the seats are held by opposition parties so one has to deal with them as representatives of certain constituencies in our society.

There are lot of progresses which has taken place. We have discussed, debated upon several issues, one being the rules of engagement in parliament, the rules of procedures and procedures of the parliament, and code of conduct of individual parliamentarians. We have discussed election law of Ethiopia.

We are jointly scanning the board members now for the National Election Board and we will definitely identify the right people and present a long list to the prime minister among whom he's going to present to the parliament. We have agreed that we will endorse them together.

So basically there are a lot of progresses. We will continue to do the dialog around the media law, around party financing by government and other issues. So I can say apart from some relapsing attitudes there are definitely progresses around this.

**Wadhams: Talking about these attitudes that run counter to the constitution, can you elaborate a little bit on that?**

**Bereket:** What was the prime conflict that issued after the election or the source of that conflict? Opposition parties, especially their leaders, wanted to undermine the whole society by acting out of the boundaries of the constitution. In our constitution it is stipulated that you only form a government if you win in elections.

Though opposition parties have made big inroads in the last elections they haven't won the seats to form the government. But they said we have won, 26 million out of 27 million voters have elected us, that was the assertion that they presented in order to mount violence and street actions. Street actions to usurp political power are not allowed by Ethiopian law.

So of course once that it is clear in practice that no power will be transferred out of the bounds of the constitution, this undermining of the constitutional system, this tendency

had been reduced to a much lesser level but there are times when they, for instance, contemplate of cooperating with the Eritrean government or contemplate working beneath the carpet with the OLF. There are such tendencies but they are not as severe as what happened during the election and the aftermath.

**Alsop: What you're saying is the demonstrations after the election were actually with the goal of (usurping the government). It's legal to demonstrate. I just don't understand that.**

**Bereket:** Just to give you a brief story of the background of election. One year before the election the leaders of the opposition parties gathered in Washington and they decided or resolved on several issues like regarding the election. They said in Ethiopia election is going to be conducted, two, this Election is not going to be democratic, three, we will take power by any means. These were their decisions.

**Wadhams: They decided not to make the elections democratic?**

**Bereket:** They are putting the onus on us, the government, but they are saying no democratic elections will take place in Ethiopia given the nature of the ruling party. The ruling party decided on the other hand that the next election should be free and fair, democratic, better than the previous ones, we should open up, open to the maximum because we wanted to avoid bloodshed. Their tactics are based on fomenting violence, so we just wanted to avoid this zero-sum game. They went for zero-sum game, we wanted to avoid that zero-sum game.

We said to ourselves, OK, if they win they will take this power, we're not interested. Once the Ethiopian people have not elected us we have no right to stay in power. So we opened up. We had more than 16 televised debates in Ethiopia. No televised debate has taken part in Africa as far as we know, not a single one. We gave 56 percent of the airtime for the opposition party while they have only less than 1 percent of parliamentary seats or around 1 percent. We just wanted to deny them any excuse to conduct violence, and then the election was conducted.

Let me give you a funny story. Here in Addis it was on May 15 that the balloting was taking place and leader of opposition party came and declared that the voting in Addis was fraud. This was on Sunday. On Monday the votes were counted and we went flat, the ruling party lost the election in Addis, they won but they were declaring that this election was rigged. You know, they never assumed that these people would elect them. So they assumed the ruling party would rig the election, so let's continue blackmailing and campaigning against it. Unfortunately the election was not rigged ... fortunately.

**Alsop: Fortunately.**

**Bereket:** Fortunately, yeah. Fortunately the election was not rigged, and they won. They won by a landslide, so such were the attitude by the opposition parties.

Finally, we have poverty here, we have unemployed here, they were trying to use these unemployed youth to rise up in arms against the government. It was not about demonstrations. Demonstrations are perfectly legal in Ethiopia. It is about undermining a system by use of force. There was clash in Addis city in more than 250 places and 193 people died but also seven among them were policemen, more than 300, 400 policemen injured and had very big casualties as well, physical damage. You can see how it was violent demonstration, violent street action, not peaceful demonstration.

**Wadhams: In the time since, some people say there's really been a tightening of the ruling party's control of the situation in Ethiopia in terms of the press and text messages on cell phones being outlawed. Why did the government feel the necessity to tighten up like that? And why, a year and a half later, haven't some of those restrictions been eased?**

**Bereket:** You know, this is a government who introduced free press. In the last 15 years there was no censorship and there is no censorship still now.

But unfortunately, we have had a press which is controlled by the opposition parties. Most of the press had been run by people with somehow a background of military personnel who were trained by the military regime so they started using the media to continue the war in other forms.

They were not ready to be responsible. We believe in responsible media, socially responsible media. We're not here expecting compliments from the media at all times. We only demand that objectivity, balanced reporting, all the ethical standards of journalism, be observed by the media practitioners.

But our media practitioners in most cases, not all of them, were bent on undermining society, this system. So that definitely played a very big impact in triggering this whole clash. The government said 'OK, look, the media cannot be immune from any accountability, so those who have transgressed the law of the land have to account for it.'

That's what we did but we haven't said anything against press freedom, we still have opposition newspapers, I mean newspapers who tilt toward criticism rather than support. There are newspapers who tilt toward support more than criticism but they survive and exist. The problem is the ethical standard has been so low that media has played a negative role in Ethiopia.

**Alsop: That must be a difficult line to draw, between someone who is critical and someone who is undermining the system. Someone that you deal with by a lawsuit or someone who you deal with by closing the organization.**

**Bereket:** Let me give you some examples. For instance, this is a country which has more than 70-80 languages spoken and the relationship between these communities in the past had not been smooth.

So there are old wounds, old feelings which we would like to redress. We're trying to redress these past mistakes done by past governments and yet sometimes media practitioners who are interested in attacking whole communities are there.

So these types of hate speech, war-mongering and the like are not allowed by the law of the land. What we are demanding from the media practitioners is not to keep quiet from criticizing the government. What we are demanding is to respect these basic laws like avoiding hate speech against communities, avoiding calls for war and the like. These are the fine lines, but we're not trying to be subjective here. There is the law which everyone should know and respect.

If one transgresses the laws, it is up to the judicial system to address that issue so the government definitely takes these people to court and if the courts say, 'Yes, you have transgressed the law' based on the evidence against them, then they will pass their verdict. That's how we approach it, so the basic law, the constitutions and the laws and the like will definitely be the yardsticks.

**Alsop: So you feel that in some ways that Ethiopia is that delicate in terms of ethnic relations or the relations between these communities, that a certain kind of writing could really ignite a problem?**

**Bereket:** Now, we have lived 15 years of new life, new relationships. This has changed attitudes by and large but there are still sensitivities.

For instance, let me tell you one thing. When the government banned the SMS text messages, one of the reasons was that using the SMS simply people were sending messages which were 'Resist.' There were calls to kill certain members of a certain community. So this type of rampant...

**Alsop: How were you able to pick this up?**

**Bereket:** I send the message to Nick and tell him, 'Pass it to three other persons.' So everybody...

**Wadhams: Who were they saying to kill? Members of a particular ethnic group?**

**Bereket:** Yeah, members of a particular ethnic group.

**Wadhams: Which one?**

**Bereket:** Tigrayans.

**Wadhams: So text messages were being used, you believe, to incite genocide?**

**Bereket:** Yeah, yeah. And everybody was pissed off here, you can ask the diplomatic community who have been following the situation closely. So you know, if one starts



attacking and another starts rise up against in self-defense there will be no end to it. But thank God, people of Ethiopia are very, very mature and wanted to avoid this and were able to avoid it.

**Wadhams: So do you have plans in the future to ease up on some of these restrictions, the SMS thing, for example?**

**Bereket:** I think many, many things have developed now, people have learned the lessons, I think, and hopefully we will openly discuss also the issue of elections, conflicts around elections, and come up with solutions. Ultimately, it is the people who decide who should govern them.

So they can streamline the whole conduct if they are given the chance. So we will definitely raise all the issues with the people and definitely not only ease up, but broaden the democratic rights of the people. That should be the future direction of Ethiopia.

**Wadhams: In speaking with some members of the opposition and other people in Ethiopia, they claim that some of the problems are in the regions, where, for example, they say they're not allowed to open offices, or to engage in politics. Addis seems to be a very vibrant place. In the regions, once you leave Addis, do you think there are problems in the Somali region, the Oromo region? Are there issues with democratization, human rights concerns that create a problem for the government?**

**Bereket:** Every Ethiopian citizen who has organized itself into some form of political organization has any right to go to any part of Ethiopia, that is constitutionally guaranteed.

In most cases there are no problems around this area. But you know this is an emerging democracy and one cannot be sure about everything. We feel there might be problems here and there because this is not a mature democracy like that of the West. It is an emerging democracy and we're bound to make mistakes. Recognizing this situation, you know, the ruling party in last election for instance, it designed its own code of conduct where we trained 600,000 of our members with this code of conduct.

We told them, 'The ruling party only wants a clean and competitive election. Anybody, any member of our own who messes with this decision of the party was going to be fired from the party and held accountable for what he has done publicly.' We have trained all our members knowing that their capacity, their understanding of the democratic nature of the election, their attitude toward opposition parties should improve and in many places we have been successful, in many places we haven't seen any problem.

Contrary to this, the opposition parties had never had such a code of conduct. We asked them, we have prepared this, it can be helpful, it is based on universal provisions of good conduct, you can use it. They told us, 'We only need a single page, not this bulky document. We're not going to train them because our members do not want it.'

I can obviously say, we have prepared our election. As I told you earlier our commitment was to avoid bloodshed and conflict, our interest, so we had to make sure our members were as much as possible as tolerant as possible because otherwise it will trigger a conflict.

The basic strategy of the ruling party was creating an enabling atmosphere for whole election. Sometimes we found that opposition parties were using this benevolent approach of the ruling party sometimes. The whole technique they used was to provoke our members, provoke even the government security forces, and when the patience of this government security or our members run thin and start getting provoked, then they will show them bad. So this is a whole tactic they have devised.

They have never had a clear program on how they could fight. You can ask here in Addis, if you ask them, 'Why did you elect the opposition party, nobody will tell you just because we have seen such a clear program.' No program for action was communicated to the people.

**Wadhams: So why did they elect them?**

**Bereket:** Our assessment is that in the urban areas we started the development activities late and people were not happy about daily life on economic terms. Secondly the issue of good governance was also at the center of it and both affected the attitudes of the people.

And thirdly the counterproductive ... based on hate speech, they campaigned and whenever there is poverty, the opposition will benefit from such things.

**Alsop: Were there specific problems with good governance?**

**Bereket:** Basically, in good governance, corruption... By standards around the continent we rate ourselves in a better situation. We have effectively controlled corruption, we have undermined it, we continue to struggle against it. Anyway we have been successful in many parts, regarding efficient services, there are a lot of improvements especially in the last few years but still we haven't satisfied the people. Hopefully the cumulative result of these improvements will definitely start to satisfy people. These are the areas where we feel especially the efficient service is an area where we need to see much more improvements.

**Wadhams: Some of the issues we felt it was really important to raise with you were things that happened since the elections. A particular concern was a sentiment in some of these towns, opposition leaders say that they have been intimidated or not allowed to open offices. Where someone \_ authorities or police or security or whoever it is \_ will tell landlords you cannot rent an office to them because that will get you in trouble. So the opposition parties say that in these towns, outside of Addis, they face fairly severe restrictions in terms of being able to conduct politics and even being able to open an office. How do you respond to those concerns?**

Bereket: There are complaints around these areas. I cannot hide that there are complaints. But I know for sure there are offices in many parts of Ethiopia as I have told you earlier there might be some isolated incidents around here which might be blown out of proportion.

Even at that, we don't condone that opposition parties should be denied their right to open offices because this is punishable by law. Anybody who denies any party from renting offices will do it at its own risk. It's not a government-sponsored thing if it has happened.

If individuals say we're not going to rent to you, then that's not the responsibility of the government. It is attitude of the individuals but I don't think people will say that, as long as they pay their rent they will rent to anybody. By the way, the government doesn't interfere in business relationships, that's the prerogative of the individuals.

**Alsop: We've seen reports in the international media of fighting in the Somali region of Ethiopia. I'm interested in your take on what's going on there. Is that all ONLF, is that an internal conflict that's separate from what happened in Somalia? Are those reports accurate?**

**Bereket:** You know, there were fights definitely. When we were going to Somalia some ONLF members crossed the border and infiltrated to Ethiopia. Knowing that our army was focusing on Somalia they were trying to nick in and they did, and they attacked and killed civilians but definitely the government is taking care of these subversive groups.

**Alsop: So those were forces that were based in Somalia?**

**Bereket:** They were based in Somalia.

**Alsop: OK, so it was the Ogaden tribe?**

**Bereket:** Not Ogaden. I'm not specifically sure about the nature of the tribes, but ONLF members.

**Alsop: Another thing I'm fascinated by is the history of the EPRDF and the prime minister and the TPLF and these groups that were working together at one point to fight the Derg. Coming from that background, how do you see... I know recently, some of the Anuak rebels, they've been working to put together a demilitarization program for them. What do you see to be the most effective way to bring armed groups into civil society, if there's likely to be more of what we're seeing in Gambella region, if that's likely to happen maybe with the OLF, maybe with the ONLF, or if there's just something that's completely different about Gambella?**

**Bereket:** We have tried this ever since we defeated the military regime. During the liberation movement days we have had three liberation fronts under the EPRDF and there

were others, more than 17 armed groups in Ethiopia, it was only four under EPRDF including the officers group.

What we did was to address the fundamental cause that pushed them to rise up in arms. The fundamental reason was denial of rights of freedom. We had to basically reinstate their rights and freedom. By so doing, we got rid of the basic reason, that's the first approach.

Secondly, despite our differences, we even allowed the OLF to enter into the campus. In beginning, the OLF had almost 20,000-strong army. We have given them military campus where they were supplied logistically by the government.

**Alsop: Really?**

**Bereket:** Yeah, when OLF was a member of the transitional government. And we said, 'OK, we will settle the issues and we continue with the rest of the process.' And then suddenly the OLF walked out of the transitional government on its own and it ordered its soldiers to abandon the campus and go into the bush. So we said OK. It was easy for us to encircle the campus and control the army, but it would be very unethical for us to do this because this is an army which has come in good faith and wants to leave. So we just opened the road and said, 'If you are going to the bush, go, go do it, and we will start fighting once again.' And they went, and we started fighting, and we counteracted, and defeated them.

That's why now you can see OLF members in small groups. They have changed into robbing rebels like 10, 15 in one group here and there. Not more than 400, 500, 600 soldiers. No 20,000-strong army now exists in the OLF.

Incorporating the arms into the mainstream is also another option which should be opened with equal rights, equal privileges. Otherwise they will be affected and they will resent the whole process, so one needs to make sure they have confidence in the process and do not resent it.

**Alsop: So you're saying that might be a possibility then?**

**Bereket:** Definitely.

**Wadhams:** We've done a little bit of traveling outside of Addis and one of the things that we had seen was that there seems to be some fear among people. We talked to them about their feelings, do they support their government, what's their sense about where this country is headed, and people seemed afraid to speak to us. People were quite nervous about talking to western journalists. Why do you think that is? Why are people afraid to speak, or to speak out against the government?

**Bereket:** You can guess for yourself. Here in Addis, we lost the election, OK? We lost the election and it's clear that the people haven't given us its trust, that's why they didn't

vote for us. And we respected their decision and invited the opposition who has won Addis to take their seats and run the city. Now, the opposition declined. Instead, it wanted to take the federal government as a whole, all the regions as a whole. They were not content with Addis.

Then we said, look, the ones who are elected by you are not taking their seats. We will try as much as possible to induce them to take their seats. Otherwise, we will form a caretaker administration. That's what we did. We were forced to form a caretaker government. This is a caretaker government which was not political. It cannot address the political demands of the people because it does not belong to any party, it's a neutral government.

They only have mandate to continue some of the administrative, economic and social work that were started by the previous administration. Sometimes when a caretaker administration is not responding, people feel the EPRDF, which is not legally governor of Addis, is accountable. We're not in power, you know. So there are some confusions around the mandate here. The ruling party knows exactly that it is not mandated here but the people still feel this is the mandate of ruling party where they haven't elected it. This can tell you how a bit complex the problem is in Addis. Lack of trust is there we believe, that's why they didn't elect us. Hopefully this trust will be built gradually, we believe, we're trying to reconnect with the people in many forms. Hopefully, come next elections we might see new terms.

**Wadhams: What about outside of Addis? As you get further from Addis it seems there is some distrust. What's your response?**

**Bereket:** This election has been instrumental in passing the message to the people that their vote counts. In significant, probably half or a little more than half, of the urban areas, people had the same attitude toward us like in Addis but we discussed immediately after the election, we asked the people all over Ethiopia to tell us what went wrong with us and they told us clearly where we failed.

We have been working hard to improve on this issue. That's why for four consecutive years we have registered more than 10 percent economic growth. Our rural economy is very dynamically growing.

**Alsop: Rural?**

**Bereket:** Yeah, and in the urban areas also, we're growing fast. So we have been trying to address these issues and we have done it in a very good way. We have had open discussions with farmers.

Let me give you one fact. Prior to the election, we had 600,000 members. Now after the election we have 4 million members

**Wadhams: Of the EPRDF?**

**Bereket:** Of the EPRDF. These are mostly rural. In the universities, 25 percent of the university students are our members. This can tell you that after open discussions and engagements, that we have succeeded in creating more understanding with our constituency as compared with the past.

**Wadhams:** **It's a difficult issue, but there was this very public and controversial report from Amnesty International about allegations of torture. We have also spoken with people who claimed that there had been torture in some prisons in Ethiopia. Is that a concern that you have or is this misinformation?**

**Bereket:** First, I just would like to check with your question. Did you say you have talked to people who were tortured?

**Wadhams:** **Who claimed to have been tortured.**

**Bereket:** Have they showed you any sign?

**Wadhams:** **One person showed what he said was a scar on his leg. He said he got it from an electrical shock.**

**Bereket:** No way. No way. No way. These are prohibited by laws, by Ethiopian law. Torture, any inhuman treatment. In fact, we have been improving our prison standards. We've been working hard to train the police forces, the interrogators, and I'm not sure how he can say this. I haven't seen it. If I had the whole profile of the person I would check, but I'm positively sure that every policeman knows torture was not allowed in this country.

**Wadhams:** **We asked the U.S. ambassador about some of these issues and he said there's a lot of misinformation out there, you have to be very careful what you hear when you talk to people about these issues. He's saying, if there are human rights abuses, we're concerned about it, but you have to be skeptical about what you hear.**

**Bereket:** I think he's right. Let me give you a story. Just before the election, foreign observers were going here and there to see what has happened. And finally in East Gojam Zone, they told us that there is a person who was tortured, and we were curious how this happened. This is against the code of conduct, against the law of the land. So we went and checked.

We found that person had contracted some disease which has made some marks here and there. But the opposition has shown the observers this person and they believed it of course. We feel that some of the observer groups were with missions.

**Wadhams:** **Do you feel the same about Amnesty and their report?**

**Bereket:** Amnesty definitely, we feel the same with Amnesty also. The reason why is that they quote the 40 persons which they claimed, I know the case. First they quoted them as CUD. They were not CUD, they were members of the patriotic front. Some of them came even from the U.S. And we got them having spent more than 1 million birr here for reorganizing and making the network of subversive groups coming from Eritrea. The police went to the court, got the permits and it was perfectly done in a legal way.

But Amnesty reported this was torture, no warrant made, whatever, whatever. So, we can only say this is a very lopsided report and it doesn't have any truth in it. We have taken into custody these people but the reports were not... They simply run it because, for us, it seems it has become an industry, you know?

**Wadhams: What do you mean?**

**Bereket:** These human rights groups mostly live by creating such stories and propagating them. That's what they do, we believe. This doesn't mean they don't report correctly at all times, but regarding us they have become simply politically motivated, that's what we can say.

**Wadhams: What's their motivation?**

**Bereket:** When I say politically motivated, this has become the institutional mindset. They can't deviate from it. They have to report abuse here and there. That is their reason for existence. So whether it is checked or not, whether it is verified or not, it doesn't bother them. They have simply reported what is told to them.

**Also: There had been some discussion whether or not different international observers, the government had the discretion to choose international observers for the next election. Is that the case, and if so, is it based on a problem in the past election?**

**Bereket:** What we said is, in the law, in that law we said basically Ethiopian election is observable, Ethiopian citizens have the right to observe. Foreigners can be invited to observe our elections. But the opposition said no, foreigners should have equal rights as ours. That was our difference. We said this is a right for citizens, it is a privilege given by the government to foreigners. So we didn't want to confuse between rights and privileges.

**Wadhams: Are you concerned that maybe that could cause some doubts among some international groups? In many elections that's not the case, the foreign observers have just as much access as the national ones.**

**Bereket:** Once you invite them, you cannot deny them that. They have every... Basically we believe that our election is going to be observable and should be observable. There is nothing to hide here. That should be the principle that guides our election. But sometimes observers are not perfect. There are a lot of observers who have messed up. Last time

there were observers, especially from the European Union who were not up to the standard, who have caused lot of problems around us. If such thing happen we have every right to say, 'No, we wont invite you. That is the prerogative the government has.

**Alsop: Is it possible that EU observers will not be invited back?**

**Bereket:** No, we're not saying that. We're only theoretically defining the right of the government. We're theoretically defining, this is the right of the government. We're not talking about a specific plan of action. We're only defining the principles. They might be invited, we have no qualms, or we might not for that matter. But I'm not talking about a single plan.