

ESAT: A Dilemma of Independent Media in Free Society

By Ewnetu Sime |

I have been watching on 12/11/13 the brutal dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam, who repressed Ethiopians for nearly two decades and became a symbol of notorious human rights abuse, making comments about Nelson Mandela's legacy on Ethiopia Satellite Television (ESAT). The SBS radio also conducted similar interview with Mengistu. As it is well known, under Mengistu's Red Terror killings campaign, disappearances and killings, beatings, mutilations, drowning, electrocutions etc. were a daily horror. In short period, the death toll was estimated as high as 500, 000 people. It is the worst act of state-sponsored terrorism in history of Ethiopia.

With full knowledge of the above facts, ESAT and other media outlets should have known interviewing and displaying his image on TV screen of this condemned man is disrespectful for his victims. A free press is all good but free for whom? It should be done based on genuine journalism principle, trust, moral responsibility and passion for general public's concern. In light of this, I am expressing my dissatisfaction to ESAT's producers and SBS radio owner. They failed in self-regulating of the free press media principle. ESAT expected to be credible, newsworthy and to be a voice to the Ethiopian people who had none on past or the present. We cannot forget that his victims were innocent peasants, ordinary workers, opposition groups, students etc. It is bad enough he was not brought to justice for his crimes to this date. It is worse when ESAT invited him in the name of free press. Allowing a tyrant a comfort zone on free media to spin his bad history into "good news" is very troubling. This could not be taken as educating the public or new information. There is no important lesson learned from his interview. It is just reminder of painful era for many of us.

As the current regime forces advanced to Addis Ababa, Mengistu fled the country and he now lives in luxurious place in Zimbabwe. From his luxurious location he wrote a book with full of lies and deceptions. In his book, he never regrets or takes responsibility for damage he has done as a result of his dictatorial rule. Fair-minded people are always demanding seeking his extradition to international court to stand trial on charges of Red Terror campaign and human rights violations.

I considered ESAT is public owned entity. It is well known fact that ESAT's artist and human rights activist Tamagne Beyene and others travelling in various parts of the world in fund raising campaign and raised significant amount of money from the Ethiopian Diaspora. The response to support ESAT has been successful. The irony is most of the Diaspora whom ESAT requesting support is wounded generation by Mengistu's regime. Our neighbors, relatives were killed in the streets of the Addis Ababa and other cities by Mengistu's thugs. I urged ESAT and SBS radio always to put the interests/feeling of the public.