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Who is Sebhat Nega?



SEBHAT NEGA (Wolde Selassie Nega)

OUTLINE - Born in 1934 in Adwa (north) - School Director in Adwa — Chairman of the TPLF (Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, 1979-89) - Head of the Economic Affairs Department of the EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, 1991) - Member of the board of directors of EFFORT (Endowment Fund For the Rehabilitation of Tigray, 1995-2001) - Chairman of the board of directors of EFFORT (since April 2001).

"FATHER TIGRAY"

Sebhat Nega (his real name is Wolde Selassie Nega) was born in 1934 in Adwa, a northern town now in Tigray Regional State which was also the birthplace of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. When crisis broke out within the TPLF in early 2001, his support for the Prime Minister was decisive and important. He was rewarded by being named chairman of the board of directors of the Tigrayan holding EFFORT, replacing dissident Seye Abraha.

His father, who had the title of Fitawrari, or Commander in the front line in the traditional military order of Ethiopia, was a governor in Adi Abune, near Adwa, during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie. Known as "Aboi Tigrai" -- Father Tigray -- in recognition of his

hardline nationalism, Sebhat Nega is about 15 years older than most of the TPLF leadership and thus commands respect.

After primary schooling at Nigist Saba School in Adwa, Sebhat Nega completed high school in the Tigrayan town of Mekele, where he won a reputation as an agitator and a nationalist. He graduated from Haile Selassie I University (HSIU) in 1964 in Economics, but did not participate in the student movement. He worked for the ministry of finance in the south and then quit to take up teaching, apparently to become more involved in politics. He was subsequently assigned to Adwa where he became a school director, a position he held until he went into the battlefield with the first contingent of TPLF fighters.

FOUNDING MEMBER OF THE TPLF

Sebhat Nega was one of the seven members of the first TPLF Central Committee set up at the February 1976 "Fighter Congress", along with Aregawi Berhe (at the time elected president of the movement, now a dissident in exile), Abay Tsehaye (from Axum, became a dissident in 2001 but was reinstated within the Central Committee after renouncing his dissident beliefs), Seyoum Mesfin (from Agame, now Foreign Minister), Gidey Zeratsion (now an exiled dissident), Mahari Haile (whose nom de guerre was "Mussie") and "Suhul". A hardline Tigrayan nationalist, Sebhat Nega helped draft the 1976 TPLF Manifesto calling for the independence of Tigray and urging "the necessary breakup of Ethiopia into various ethnic based states". In 1979, Sebhat Nega played an instrumental role in the downfall of TPLF chairman Aregawi Berhe (or BeriHu, his real name) and his deputy Gidey Zeratsion (real name, Fantahun).

In 1979, Sebhat Nega took over Aregawi's position as the head of the TPLF and was only replaced a decade later in 1989, at the party's Third Congress, by Meles Zenawi. Although he appears to be on the fringes of the TPLF since losing its leadership, Sebhat Nega remains in the background as a key figure of the hard-core TPLF, and some TPLF members maintain that he himself asked to be relieved of the job of party chief. Sebhat Nega remains a Tigrayan nationalist who in 1988 said "the nationality question is a primary issue" and "we don't believe that the unity of Ethiopia should be pursued at all costs".

When the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) led by Meles Zenawi took power in 1991, Sebhat Nega was named head of the coalition group's Economic Affairs Department. Then in August 1995, when Meles was appointed prime minister of the new Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), he was placed on the board of directors of the Endowment Fund For the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT), a holding company formed of Tigrayan companies set up after 1991. Sebhat Nega thus chairs two EFFORT holding firms: Trans-Ethiopia SC. transport company and a new bank, Wegagen Bank.

THE "KINGMAKER"

During the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea (May 1998-December 2000), Sebhat Nega backed Meles Zenawi. He was one of 13 TPLF Central Committee members who voted in June 1998 to approve the US-Rwandan peace plan supported by Meles *. On the other side, 17 members (who would later become dissidents) voted against the plan.

But it was in March 2001, when it was time to vote to exclude opponents of Meles from the TPLF Central Committee, that Sebhat Nega played a key role. He convinced his sister Ms Kidusan Nega (who is chairperson of the Democratic Association of Tigrayan Women, the TPLF's women's organization) and her husband, Tsegaye Berhe, who were opposed to Meles, to switch sides and join the pro-Meles camp. Thanks to this move, the bloc of dissidents within the party's central committee was in the minority and reduced to 12 people more easily kicked out by Meles Zenawi. Sebhat Nega saved Meles Zenawi and in this way has been crowned "kingmaker". He was rewarded for his loyal support in April 2001 when he was named chairman of the board of directors of EFFORT, a holding formed from Tigrayan companies set

up after 1991 to recycle the "war chest" accumulated by the TPLF during the guerrilla years. Grouping a score of companies today valued at around 125 million dollars in capital, EFFORT is involved in every one of the country's economic sectors: agriculture (Hiwot Mechanized Agriculture), industry (Almeda Textiles Manufacturing SC., Mesfin Industrial Engineering SC.), import-export (Guna Trading House), transport (Trans-Ethiopia SC.), insurance (Africa Insurance SC.), mining (Meskerem Investment SC.), communications (Mega-Net Corporation), banking (Wegagen Bank). EFFORT is divided into several sectors directed by members of the TPLF Central Committee, like Abadi Zemo for industrial activities, Arkebe Oqubay Mitiku for construction and transportation, and Tewodros Hagos for mining. Sebhat Nega was married to Saadu, a Tigrayan captured by the TPLF in 1984 and accused of spying, and had two children before divorcing. After the EPRDF took office, Sebhat Nega graduated with an MBA from the University of London by correspondence, like many other TPLF leaders, including Meles Zenawi. One of Sebhat Nega's uncles, Haile Abai Nega, who was one of the leaders of the EPRP (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party), was killed in June 1991 by TPLF troops in Quara in the western region of Gondar.

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