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Abbink, G.J.

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Remembering Kassahun Berhanu Alemu (1955-2022) – the Man and his Work

Jon Abbink¹

The unexpected death of Professor Kassahun Berhanu, long-time professor of political science of Addis Ababa University (AAU), on 22 February 2022 was shock to many. His reputation and popularity in the university and among wider Ethiopian audiences was high. Feelings of sadness and loss befell all those who knew him –his many colleagues and friends, and the larger public, to whom he was known from media appearances and televised debates. His contributions to these public debates on the political and societal challenges of Ethiopia were thoughtful and much respected. He was a unique intellectual and a great human being who will be missed by lots of people, especially at a time that armed conflicts, international pressure and unresolved domestic discord had put the country in serious problems.

Prof. Kassahun Berhanu Alemu was born in the Wollega region of western Ethiopia. In the time of the revolution and the *Derg* military government (since 1974), he became politically active in one of the revolutionary student movements, the MEISON², a movement whose history- like that of the its rival the EPRP – ended very badly. Kassahun suffered imprisonment and abuse. He looked back on his membership in that movement with very mixed feelings.

After his release he completed his BA in political science at AAU (1986), and later an MA (gained at the ISS in The Hague in 1991) and then pursued an academic career.

¹Senior Researcher at the African Studies Centre, Leiden and Professor of Politics and Governance in Africa at Leiden University, Email: g.i.abbink@asc.leidenuniv.nl, Tel.: +31715272727, Leiden/the Netherlands

²Cf. www.youtube.com/watch?v=grD9nY1ypP4

Jon Abbink

He did his PhD work at VU University Amsterdam, the Netherlands (where I was a research professor at the time and with two colleagues supervising him). Kassahun gained the doctoral degree in 2000 with a very good and pioneering study of former refugee-returnee Ethiopians from Sudan settling in northwest Ethiopia, in Mai Kadra and Rawyan (in the Kafta-Humera area, in 1991 annexed to Tigray). His study was based on solid empirical research on location. He concluded that the resettlement of returnees from Sudan was unmistakably as much a humanitarian-developmental as a political enterprise (as the subtitle of his book reveals). Bitter irony has it that those places were tragically involved in the violent clashes between the TPLF and the federal government.

Since obtaining the PhD degree Kassahun continued building his career at the AAU Department of Political Science and International Relations, eventually gaining the rank of professor. In addition to research and teaching, he provided often exemplary services to the university community as Department chair, Assistant-dean (twice), and Head of the External Relations Office of AAU. In addition, he served as Resident Vice-President and Executive Committee Member of the Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA), in 2005-2007 and as Board Chairman of the Center for Policy Research and Dialogue from 2004 to 2010. Lastly, he was a leading member of the Social Science and Humanities working group of the Ethiopian Academy of Sciences.

Kassahun published many articles, papers and edited books. His scope was wide, as he wrote on agricultural policies, civil society, political developments and governance in Ethiopia and the wider Horn of Africa, South Sudan, higher education policy, international relations and resettlement issues in Ethiopia. His bibliography reveals this broad scope and great knowledge.

He was also involved in diverse editorial boards of scholarly journals and participated in several international research projects, next to being a recipient of numerous international scholarships - in the USA, Norway, Japan, China, various African countries, and the Netherlands. Twice he was a visiting fellow at the African Studies Centre Leiden (in 1999 and 2009). In 2005 he was a member of the international five-member Abyei Boundaries Commission, installed by the IGAD, co-writing the report proposing what is likely the best solution for the Sudan vs. South Sudan border dispute in the Abyei area.³

³See Donald Petterson, Kassahun Berhanu, Shadrack B.O. Gutto, Douglas H. Johnson & Godfrey Muriuki, *Abyei Boundaries Commission Report* (IGAD, 14 July 2005).

Professor Kassahun's university service was outstanding. He was a popular teacher and supervised scores of MA and PhD students in the past decades. As a member of numerous AAU committees he was much sought after in cases of disputes and problems: his reasonable and agreeable attitude towards people made him popular and effective as a mediator and problem-solver, but he was also forceful and no push-over. Among his civic commitments at the time of his death were his membership in the Administrative Boundary and Identity Affairs Commission of the Ethiopian government and in the Foreign Relations Advisory Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Kassahun was also involved in training courses for Ethiopian diplomats on foreign policy issues. In the current violent disturbances in Ethiopia of the past one-and-a-half years he often gave balanced and astute comments in the media.

Kassahun was a man of outstanding integrity, sense of civic duty, and wit. He had an incomparable and great sense of humour. He kept this even after several personal tragedies struck his life. A conversation with him always brought not only new insights and new ways to look at a problem, but also great jokes and anecdotes that had you laughing long afterwards.

His deep humanity and honesty made him unique. His commitment to his country and to furthering its social harmony and progress was strong and sincere. Ethiopia has lost a great person who made a huge impact; an impressive, committed intellectual and a voice of reason needed in troubled times.

While we personally always remained in contact, I had not met him in the past two years, due to the COVID-19 disturbances and travel restrictions, and it is distressing to realize that there will.

Kassahun was buried on 23 February 2022 at the Yeka Michael Church cemetery in Addis Ababa. He is survived by his wife Elsa and his daughter Yanet.

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