***Elections are unique events. They entail huge promises. This, however, does not mean that all promises will be kept. What will be kept or not, considerably depends on the realistic grounds on which the promises are based. Often, elections in developing countries involve castles in the air.***

Election Promises

***Castles in Air?***

T

oday, Ethiopians will go to the polls for the fifth time since the downfall of the military regime. Some 36.8 million people are said to have been registered this year.

The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) likes to attribute this increment to the growth of democratic political awareness of Ethiopians. But gurus in the field of statistics do not rule out the natural demographic growth over the last five years, which is rather alarming.

There is no denying the fact that the ruling party's tactical binding of the people in ‘one-to-five cells’ and developing patrimony by certain privileges and benefits amongst the society cannot be ignored, not to mention the massive use of the state and party media both in print and electronic modality. The ruling party obviously has had the lion's share in the allocation of debate time in front of the camera, often wasted on trading accusations over policy alternatives.

Be that as it may, it is now the turn of the people to speak Though not expecting to be declared winners under the prevailing situations there are indications that they have started to speak out in an attempt to have their voices heard.

Members of the opposition parties and their leaders as well as journalists and bloggers have been detained, harassed, intimidated and kept behind bars for no reason other than speaking or writing out their thoughts as per the democratic rights inscribed in the constitution. These allegations, often voiced by the opposition parties, may or may not be right, even if facts on the ground reveal the truth.

The ruling party has exerted all efforts to invest in so many mega projects worth billions of dollars over the last 24 years. The government has been able to secure loans and grants at this time, more than any time before. This is in addition to the revenue collected from taxpayers, and the foreign exchange earnings from the export trade.

The budget deficit, however, is on the rise. The forex reserve is reported to have reached the lowest in many years. The critical problems include unemployment and uneven investments between regions, which lead the youth to flee abroad.

A recent campaign by the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) seems to attest to the fact that here and there the silent but suppressed people have begun to speak. The tumultuous tsunami of a reception when Merrera Gudina (Prof.) went to his constituency on a campaign tour may be a sign of that. Come what may, he was received with more enthusiasm and impulsive support by the people.

Reviewing the political development of uneven distribution of investment from the Oromia perspective, it can be seen that most of the export earnings, be it in terms of coffee, horticulture or gold mines, come from the region. The capital city was founded on land formerly held by early Oromo settlers.

When students at Ambo University and elsewhere tried to voice the plight of the displaced people, they were unfairly gunned down, leaving their loved ones in grief, while many are still languishing in prison. Oromos are complaining that they are being sent to jail everywhere in the country to the extent that it has become a standing brand that the communication *lingua franca* of prisoners has become Oromiffa.

Last week, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn and his followers went to Ambo, partly to pay tribute or express his condolences to give some solace to the bereaved families of those killed, or even to comfort them by assuring them that those responsible for the murder shall face trial and justice shall be served.

But he apparently realised that he can heal the wounds by promising to extend the railway line project to the Western part of the country, establish an airfield, generator factory and most of all an iron ore mining project at Biklal. Other projects including the second windmill at Adama have been inaugurated.

The metallurgy sector, in particular, is nothing but a game changer in transforming the development of the region. I hope that it will just be a matter of time before the promised economic development is realised, and trickles down as political freedom.

The ongoing campaign has even stretched to the extent of putting cornerstones of tantalising projects like an airfield in a town like Nekemtie, though the location of the project has not yet been identified, never mind studied professionally. But such lulling foundation-stone syndromes of building castles in air are nothing but seeds that brew mistrust between citizens and rulers that can backfire.

Considering the acute problem of unemployment in the country that contributes much to the running away of the youth from their country, these projects ought to have been commenced before the people of the regional state had begun to voice their concerns and switched sides at the 11th hour

Cynics allege that it does not matter at all which party wins the contest as long as the people have voiced their desires, hoping that ballots are not reined in. The promises by the Prime Minister are welcome even if they are too little too late. The battle is not yet a lost war.

In any case, whichever party wins the vote of the people it has to face the challenge of living up to its words, coming to grips with the facts on the ground - facts that may be swimming against the tide.