

## **In Memoriam Kassahun Berhanu Alemu (1955-2022)**

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On 22 February 2022 the shocking news reached us that Professor Kassahun Berhanu Alemu of Addis Ababa University (AAU) had passed away. He succumbed to an illness after two weeks of hospitalization, and his death came entirely unexpected. The feelings of sadness and loss are profound among all those who knew him – his many colleagues and friends. He was a unique intellectual and a great human being who will be missed by lots of people. Kassahun was well-known among the wider Ethiopian public for his many appearances in the media and his thoughtful contributions to public debates on Ethiopian affairs.

Prof. Kassahun was born in the Wollega region of western Ethiopia. As a student he became politically active in one of the revolutionary student movements<sup>1</sup> in the 1970s, in the time of the *Derg* military government, and suffered imprisonment and abuse. 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.

He did his PhD work under the supervision of myself and two colleagues at VU University Amsterdam, the Netherlands (where I was a research professor at the time). Kassahun gained his degree in 2000 on a very good and pioneering study of former refugee-returnee Ethiopians settling in northwest Ethiopia (in Mai Kadra and Rawyan, in the Humera area), based on solid empirical research. Since then he 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.

Prof. 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

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=grD9nY1ypP4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grD9nY1ypP4).

Ethiopia and the wider Horn of Africa, South Sudan, educational policy, international relations and resettlement issues in Ethiopia.

He was 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.<sup>2</sup>

Prof. Kassahun also was a beloved 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. Ethiopia has lost a great man who made a huge impact; an impressive, committed intellectual, and a voice of reason in troubled times.

While we 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 our planned meetings in the coming years will never be.

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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<sup>2</sup> See Donald Petterson, Kassahun Berhanu, Shadrack B.O. Gutto, Douglas H. Johnson & Godfrey Muriuki, *Abyei Boundaries Commission Report* (IGAD, 14 July 2005).

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