



An Open Letter to U.S. Congressman Chris Smith, Members of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and Members of the Committee on Foreign Affairs

March 18, 2015

Congressman Chris Smith
Washington, DC Office
2373 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Smith, members of the Subcommittee on Africa and members of the Committee on Foreign Affairs:

Thank you for the work you have done in standing up for human rights and the well being of the people of Africa. This hearing tomorrow March 18, 2015 on the subject: U.S. Election Support in Africa is another example of your ongoing interest in seeking information from experts regarding Africa to make it a more just environment for its people. Over the last ten years, I have had the privilege of working with you, your office and other members of the Subcommittee on Africa on behalf of the *Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)* (<http://www.solidaritymovement.org>), as its executive director.

As you are aware, the SMNE is a non-violent, non-political grassroots social justice movement representing the diverse people of Ethiopia. The SMNE is committed to bringing freedom, justice, human and democratic rights, accountability, and reconciliation to the people of Ethiopia and beyond. Our organization is based on the principles of putting humanity before ethnicity—or any other distinctions that dehumanize or devalue others; and secondly, on the belief that no one is free until all are free in that true peace results when we uphold the freedom and well being of all others.

As an organization, we are very concerned with the current deplorable lack of democratic and political rights across Africa that can create seeds of future instability, violence, and chaos; possibly creating a training ground for terrorist groups desperate for change or simply angry. In the year 2015, more than 27 elections will be held in African countries; yet, attributes of healthy democracies—free and fair elections, political space, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, transparency, accountability and democratic institutions—are all in serious decline in many of these same countries. This is an important fact to be considered by legislators in making decisions regarding U.S. involvement in these elections.

Sadly, the fervent aspirations of Africans for governments for, by, and of the people have been too frequently stalled or stolen by African strongmen, seeking power—not for a term or two, but for decades. As such leaders face resistance from disenfranchised opposition groups; they often look to foreign sources for aid to shore up their power.

A good look at the African Union will show a preponderance of strong armed leaders, unwilling to let go of power that nearly always is accompanied by high levels of corruption, the pillaging of resources, widespread human rights abuses, the suppression of democratic rights, internal conflicts with opposition groups—sometimes violent, and the crushing poverty of their own people. Flawed elections, repression of opposition groups and the overall lack of political space leading up to elections are the rule. With this in mind, let us look at Ethiopia.

Ethiopia's national election is scheduled for May 24, 2015. To most Ethiopians, the election is already decided. In the last election in 2010, the current one-party government of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), essentially controlled by one ethnic-based party, the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), in power since 1991, claimed 99.6% of the vote. Out of the 547 members in parliament, only one opposition member was elected.

Ethiopia is a strategic country in the Horn of Africa, but also on the continent. It is the headquarters of the African Union and many other key organizations. It is the most stable country in an unstable neighborhood; however, its own repressive policies, exacerbated by the upcoming election in May, have become a threat to its own stability. All the values that make for a healthy society are non-existent. For example, only a few kilometers from the AU in Addis Ababa, one may find some of Ethiopia's most courageous voices for truth and democratic change, locked up. They have been silenced under anti-terrorism laws that criminalize dissent. Independent civic institutions have been decimated by another law, the Charities and Societies Proclamation, which resulted in some 2,600 groups shutting their doors in 2010. Many strategic ones among them were quickly taken over by government-controlled look-alikes.

Following the last election in 2010 where the highly unpopular EPRDF claimed to win, Human Rights Watchⁱⁱ in its October 2010 report: "Development Without Freedom: How Aid Underwrites Repression," documented the widespread misuse of food and humanitarian aid from the US, UK and other western democratic countries. Distribution of aid was linked to political support for the ruling party; those unwilling were regularly denied help including emergency food, humanitarian supports, seed, fertilizer and agricultural supports.

As mentioned, only one opposition member from the Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) party was given a seat in the parliament. That member, Girma Seifu Maru, has only been allowed three minutes in any debate and has been isolated by others. He was the only one to speak for those seeking democratic change in the country, but he will not be running in the upcoming election. His party has been hijacked by the government who have disqualified UDJ's own candidates, arrested leadership, beaten those who have spoken up, and replaced previous UDJ candidates with their own, all under the usurped name of the UDJ. In a country where many have no access to information, where many do not read, and where the government controls all media sources; a name like UDJ will bring votes, but the voters will not be getting what they think.

Members of the current National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) were all nominated by the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and were subsequently approved by the parliament. The Board has erected barriers of requirements to prevent opposition groups from entering their own candidates into political races. Even when groups have attempted to do so, the NEBE has denied the results. For example; the three major opposition groups were given only four days advance notice to bring together members of their parties to elect candidates. One of the three major groups, the Blue Party (Semayawi) decided not to carry out the process due to the lack of agreement on pre-conditions to assure a genuine process.

However, when the two other major opposition groups, the UDJ and the All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP), decided to comply and heroically achieved this task, the NEBE and the EPRDF undermined them all along the way. Most notably, each party was told that the NEBE had to be present at their meetings; but remarkably, when asked to attend, the NEBE claimed they had other commitments. This in itself nullified the results.

Secondly, when each party attempted to elect candidates; pro-government candidates had infiltrated their meetings to seek election. When some pointed out their presence, those who spoke up were later attacked and beaten in the streets of the capital city by recognized EPRDF party thugs. One was a pregnant woman who later was hospitalized and ended up losing her baby.

Thirdly, when each party's members successfully elected candidates that legitimately represented their party's interests, despite efforts by the infiltrators; when the results were presented within the proper time range to the NEBE they were declined for non-compliance and instructed to complete the process again. Both groups did so with the same result. Subsequently, the entire organization of UDJ was taken over by candidates who were pro-government, essentially turning the election into a contest among EPRDF supporters. However, to outsiders, the EPRDF will use groups like the UDJ and AEUP as examples of how the government gives political space to the opposition.

In a recent article in the Wall Street Journalⁱⁱⁱ, they report that Mr. Girma, the sole opposition parliament member is now a man without a party. However, in that same article they report that a government spokesperson, Shemelis Kemal, told them: "Replacing the party leadership of the UDJ party was legal and served to endorse a faction of the party that proved itself more legitimate."

As the election approaches, the risk of increasing frustration and boldness among Ethiopians, who are starting to feel they have little to lose, has created a tense situation in Ethiopia. Added to that is the desperate poverty many are facing despite government claims of double-digit growth. These statistics are highly questionable; however, what is unequivocally true is that regime cronies are becoming millionaires at one of the fastest rates in Africa and control entry into most every economic, financial, vocational, educational, and other opportunity in the country. At the same time, large numbers of marginalized Ethiopians are being pushed from their homes and land to open up opportunity for these same regime cronies.

As the U.S. considers how they might encourage free and fair elections on the continent of Africa; and in particular, with its strategic partners in the War on Terror, like Ethiopia, we encourage legislators to work for the best interests of the people, a source of long-term stability. Security is a priority in this world, but when that security is tied to repressive governments, especially those who are known to terrorize their own people, the investment may be risky.

Just like the elections in Ethiopia, foreign aid meant to increase stability and to confront terrorism in places like the Horn of Africa and Africa can be hijacked by governments controlled by groups like the TPLF/EPRDF who misuse such aid and alliances to fortify repressive mechanisms and exploitation. In the case of Ethiopia, there is rising agreement by groups like International Crisis Group and Genocide Watch that actions by the current ethnic-based authoritarian government have become the source of the its own instability in this strategic country in the Horn of Africa.

The government of Ethiopia has made it impossible for people inside the country to both compete in the next election as well as to speak out for democratic reforms. It is the reason why groups like our own, the SMNE, must do a major part in raising awareness and advocating for change from outside Ethiopia. Many other countries on the continent will have similar elections.

Congressional hearings like this renew the dreams of the million African people. As a result, *we hope the U.S. and other donor countries with strategic interests in Ethiopia and in other countries in Africa will not remain silent but instead will lead to the U.S. Congress taking actions to promote free and fair elections and other democratic and human rights in Africa—siding with the people, not the strongmen.*

Below are some of the recommendations we made to President Obama in a [recent letter](#) to him last month that remain the same:

Recommendations for meaningful US action regarding Ethiopia:

US silence or only symbolic gestures regarding the evolving crisis in Ethiopia may work for the short-term, but no one knows for how long. In fact, continued US support or meaningless action may inadvertently exacerbate the crisis and undermine stability. Instead, the US should use their leverage to bring democratic change and sustainable stability to the country; both of which would enhance long-term US interests in Ethiopia and the Horn.

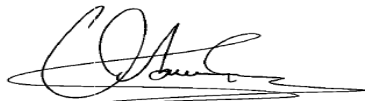
Meaningful actions include:

- Calling for an independent election commission
- Implementing the Omnibus Bill 2015 concerning Ethiopia
- Releasing imprisoned political prisoners
- Freezing security cooperation with the regime
- Implementing travel bans on key regime officials and freezing their assets

It is not in the interests of anybody to wait for an explosion. *Ethiopia is in crisis. Our goal is to bring peace even as some are beating the drums of violence. We strongly encourage you to put pressure on this regime. Condemn these actions.* The US should not be silent when such a stance could undermine the future wellbeing and stability of this strategic country of over 90 million people.

As always, I am available for any further questions. Thank you!

Sincerely yours,



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ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2010/10/19/development-without-freedom-0> ; Development Without Freedom: How Aid Underwrites Repression

ⁱⁱⁱ Wall Street Journal, *Ethiopia's Growth Program Cuts out Dissent*, by Heidi Vogt, March 9, 2015