



Obama's Emerging African Legacy: Will African Strongmen or the African People Benefit?

PRESS RELEASE.

July 24, 2015. Washington, DC,

This week US President Barack Obama will visit his father's home country of Kenya, followed by Ethiopia, where he will address the African Union and meet with Ethiopian government leaders. The trip is garnering much attention among Africans, especially Ethiopians, who see his plans to meet with members of the current authoritarian government, in office for over 24 years, as a disturbing alignment with Ethiopia's strongmen, contrary to his strong statements of the past on behalf of the people of Africa.

In his famous speech to Ghana's parliament in July 2009, Obama won the enthusiastic response of Africans when he said, *"Make no mistake; history is on the side of these brave Africans, and not with those who use coups or change Constitutions to stay in power. Africa doesn't need strongmen, it needs strong institutions."*

How will Obama live up to these statements in meetings with autocratic Ethiopian leaders who manipulate elections, the law and the Constitution to suit their needs or when he addresses the strongmen in the African Union? In the years 2015-2016, some thirty national elections will be held in Africa. Out of these, Nigeria may be one of few success stories where there was a peaceful transition between a sitting president and a newly elected leader. African strongmen continue to dominate the continent, starting with Ethiopia, and continuing with the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Equatorial Guinea and many others. He ended his speech in Ghana with assurances of US responsibility *"to support those who act responsibly and to isolate those who don't, and [promising] that is exactly what America will do."*

The enthusiasm Africans once felt for President Obama is waning as they see such incongruous actions follow the lofty rhetoric. This is Obama's fourth trip to the continent, but Africans wonder what has been accomplished for the people. They had placed great hope in President Obama, believing he would speak up for them as a *true son of Africa*. In his speech in Cairo in June 2009 he urged leaders in the region to *"place the interests of your people and the legitimate workings of the political process above your party."* Yet, in Ethiopia nothing is allowed to interfere with the interests of the ruling party and its top elite.

The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) recently won its fifth election since taking power by force in 1991. *After closing down all political space, decimating civil society, criminalizing dissent, politicizing the judicial system, and brutally cracking down on opposition leaders, journalists, human rights activists, religious leaders and virtually any critics; they claimed a 100% victory in the May 2015 national elections. They "won" all 547 seats in parliament and made a sweeping victory of the same proportions in local and regional elections.*

The EPRDF is a coalition party in name only. It is tightly controlled by one ethnic-based political group from one of nine regions, the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), which is dominated by the TPLF Central Committee made up of members from the same ethnic group, representing only 6% of the population and only one of ninety or more ethnic groups. Every sector of society is now controlled by this apartheid government that doles out jobs, opportunities and perks based on ethnicity and party loyalty.

Two new laws have undermined freedoms guaranteed in the Ethiopian Constitution—an *Anti-terrorism law* used to silence any opposition and a *Charities and Societies Proclamation law* that led to the closure of over 2,600 independent civic organizations. It outlaws the advancement of human and democratic rights and the promotion of rights for children and the disabled among other critically important work of civil society, if the organization receives over 10% of its budget from foreign sources.

Ethnicity, religion, and ancient grievances have been exploited to divide the people as never before, but the law prohibits conflict resolution and the promotion of equality of nations, nationalities, peoples, gender and religion under the same guidelines.

In Ghana, Obama declared that defining oneself in opposition to someone else's tribal, ethnic, or religious identities "has no place in the 21st century." I agree; it is time for Africans to put *humanity before ethnicity* or any other differences, for we all are created in God's image with inherent worth. The old African adage of "one tribe take all" will not work for *no one will be free until all are free*. Our neighbor's freedom will sustain our own.

As Obama meets with leaders in Ethiopia, he should exercise caution towards a regime that is grounded on blatant ethnic favoritism, corruption, and the repression of the majority. Many fear the growing rumblings of discontent, just below the surface, will erupt into violence. A perception of support may send the wrong message with unknown repercussions.

The verdict of the jury of Africans is still not settled in regards to Obama's legacy in Africa. Who will be the real beneficiaries of his legacy? Will it be African strongmen or the African people? Africans are watching. It will take much more than words this time. Mr. President, it is time to come through on your promises!

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