

## **Consistency or Hypocrisy?**

### **President Obama “Boosts” Ethiopia’s Dictatorship**

#### **Commentary**

**Aklog Birara (Dr.)**

**“To accomplish great things, we must not only act but also dream; not only dream, but also believe.”**

**Anatole France**

For more than 3,000 years, the Ethiopian people have shown fierce determination in maintaining a unified and independent geopolitical political entity and have embraced their country's fascinating diverse culture and identity that is matched only by a few countries across the globe. Ethiopia is therefore created and defended by Ethiopians and not by colonial powers. Today, the fabrics that tied Ethiopians together to defend their independence and identity and to forge ahead and join prosperous and modern nations are under stress. This despite infusion of massive foreign capital and unreserved support to the current government from Western and other nations.

Like other people, Ethiopians dream of achieving capability in removing the policy and structural hurdles that make them income poor and aspire to achieve great things for themselves and for their country. Until the collapse of the bonds that tied Ethiopians together, their sense of justice and fairness for one another is equally unparalleled. During the Great Famine, Ethiopians showed their humanity by abandoning their needs so that others can live. During the War with Eritrea from 1998-2000, neighbors defended the rights of Eritreans; offered them support. At each turn of ethnic cleansing, neighbors tried their best to stop wholesale removal of citizens. When Meles and his team agitated under the slogan of “**Interahamwee**”---Rwanda-like genocide in Ethiopia, Ethiopians were civil and civilized enough to recognize that this was a political ploy. They did not fall for it. Ethiopians share more commonalities than elites are willing to accept. Sadly, external forces exploit ethnic and religious divisions to achieve their goals.

It is these bonds that have deterred potential mass genocide that emanates from ethnic elite hatred, bigotry and polarization for which the current government and ethnic elites are accountable. Over the past four decades, Ethiopians have been consistent in advocating a transition from dictatorship to representative government, a dream the United States Government and other Western nations ought to encourage and strengthen. After all, it is the combination of Ethiopians' core values and sense of identity as people, Ethiopia's durability, resilience and independence and its place in history as a country not only in Africa but the world that drew America's interests to Ethiopia in the first place. These attributes have not

changed with regime change. Ethiopia was an active member of the League of Nations and the United Nations and has played a pioneering role in Pan-Africanism and the formation of the Organization of African Unity and its successor the African Union. Its armed forces showed remarkable bravery in Korea and the Congo.

#### **Ethiopian-American Relations beyond President Obama**

As a consequence, relations between Ethiopia and the United States span more than 100 years. These bonds have endured regardless of regime changes in Ethiopia and Presidential changes in the United States. Hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians and Ethiopian-Americans live and work in all parts of the United States today. The Washington Metropolitan area is home to one of the largest Ethiopian communities outside Ethiopia. More than 44 percent of Ethiopian immigrants possess college degrees and the majority have high school education. Between 1991 and 2006, 3,000 Ethiopia educated and trained medical doctors left Ethiopia and most came to the United States and Canada. This suggests America continues to be a magnet. It is the first choice of Ethiopian immigrants.

#### **Why is the United States such a preferred choice?**

Ethiopian immigrants are drawn to the United States more than to any other country on the planet for several reasons: continuity in people to people relations, a sense of shared values, access to opportunities, fulfilment of human potential, American core principles and values of freedom, justice and the rule of law, sense of fairness, commitment to civil society, free press, political pluralism and ultimately democratic governance. In other words, Ethiopians realize their dreams by abandoning their own homeland. Simply put, their home country is unable to meet their dreams. I should like to make a distinction between what we immigrants gain here in the United States and other countries, the loss Ethiopian society incurs as a result of massive exodus (brain-drain) on the one hand; and the contribution America makes to free Ethiopian society from the shackles of poverty and perpetual dependency on foreign aid. Nothing compensates for the loss. Is America making substantial difference to make Ethiopia the next Korea without recognizing that brain-drain endangers Ethiopia's future?

In physical and visible terms, American foreign aid has not resulted in the construction of rails, major roads, dams, conference halls or other infrastructure, manufacturing and industry or emancipation of Ethiopia from food aid dependency and or the pioneering of a smallholder green revolution that will make the country food secure and self-sufficient. It is true that American food aid and not the Ethiopian government has saved millions of lives. Aid has allowed the Ethiopian government to build more schools than ever before. There are more than 30 colleges and universities; more clinics and hospitals, etc. As Renee Lefort reported in a recent article, people "cannot eat roads or sleep in them." Massive aid and the growth it triggered have thus far failed to change the structure of the economy and to stop social and financial capital leakages. Whether in Tigray, the Ogaden, Gambella or Beni-Shangul Gumuz, the vast majority of Ethiopians are as poor as they were under previous regimes; some say

worse. It is true that Ethiopia has more new millionaires, including top generals, than at any time in its history. Appalling as it may seem, these generals buy homes in Western countries, most in the United States and live two lives. In case the society falls apart, they have a safety net. Against this concentration of incomes and wealth in a few hands in Ethiopia is the reality that Ethiopia's middle and upper classes are being formed and taking roots in Vancouver, the Washington Metropolitan area, Atlanta, Las Vegas, London, Oslo, Melbourne and other major cities around the globe. This is a systemic problem that will affect the country's future in dramatic ways. Not only is the system corrupt, it thrives by depriving the society of requisite educated and trained human capital that will strengthen competition and greater openness.

**Corruption, bribery and nepotism thrive in an environment of a social and political vacuum.**

Aid has compounded the problem. It tolerates graft, bribery, corruption and illicit outflow.

Corruption under previous regimes was petty and small compared to the current institutionalized plunder. Aid comes in to Ethiopia and is then siphoned off back to the donor country or others that serve as safe harbors.

To go back to the main point, America's contribution in the area of sustainable development with visible impact is not perceived to be high. The Chinese have done more than the Americans in transforming Ethiopia's physical infrastructure. It is this stark contrast between the United States, Ethiopia's long-time friend whose values I and millions of Ethiopians share on the one hand; and Ethiopia's new friends such as China, India and others that have made trade their primary goals and are investing at a massive scale on the other that will determine the extent to which Ethiopia moves towards democracy. In his bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn during the United Nations General Assembly meetings President Obama gave accolades to the Ethiopian government by noting among other things, that Ethiopia is on the verge of achieving "food security and food self-sufficiency" and is in fact on its way of becoming a net exporter of food. Do facts on the ground support this?

I wonder if he is contending that Saudi's Star's production and export of one million tons of rice to the Saudi market or Karaturi's production and export of food products to India and so on will make Ethiopia food self-sufficient and secure. Ethiopia will be the first nation in history to outsource its food and acquire food self-sufficiency and security. The structure of Ethiopia's rural economy and the technologies used by smallholder farmers remain primitive and state and party controlled. Each year, Ethiopia spends more than one billion dollars to import food. The United States continues to serve as the current government's "angel guardian" providing hundreds of thousands of tons of food each year. Ethiopia's manufacturing and industrial sector is among the least developed in Africa. Its contribution to employment is minuscule compared to Vietnam, a country with a comparable youth population and one that does not rely on massive foreign aid.

**What is America's Comparative Advantage then?**

I contend that America's comparative strategic advantage in Ethiopia and the rest of Africa is not development aid. Its advantage resides on the soft side that will have lasting impact. It is in

its unbridled commitment to promote good governance, the rule of law, equitable access to social and economic opportunities, advancement of civil society, independent and free media and political pluralism. It is for these fundamental principles and values that an untold number of Ethiopians have perished and tens of thousands are in jail and an equal number have been forced to leave their homeland.

**This leads me to the essence of this commentary. In order to make a lasting impact not only in Ethiopia but the rest of Africa, America's foreign policy must be based on the long standing people to people relationships between the two countries, on the hopes and dreams of the majority of Ethiopians, especially youth who stand and hope for a just and all-inclusive society; and on America's own distinctive values of freedom, justice, the rule of law and political pluralism that they also aspire. It is in the vigorous promotion and defense of these fundamental principles where America's contributions reside. This is not altruism.** Because it is these core principles that distinguish America's contributions to Africa's renaissance from other countries. In the long-run, it is only a just, fair, rule of law based, all-inclusive, democratic and prosperous Ethiopia that will serve Ethiopians better than the current repressive and corrupt state. I have no doubt that prosperous and democratic Ethiopia will serve as a buffer against extremist forces and Jihadists in the Horn. American policy makers need to recognize that there is a convergence of interests between what the majority of Ethiopians dream for, namely, good and just governance; and American values and long-term interests. It is smart foreign policy to make a clear distinction between the current dictatorial regime that assaults freedom while serving America's short term political and strategic interests in the fight against terrorism; and the Ethiopian dream of establishing good (representative) governance that will usher in a new era of lasting peace, sustainable and equitable growth and stability.

At the high level meeting with the Ethiopian delegation at which key players such as Secretary of State John Kerry, National Security Advisor Susan Rice and Samantha Power, Ambassador to the UN and other key officials were present, President Obama commended the Ethiopian government for standing firm and steady with the United States in maintaining peace, security and stability in the region. It is important to note that the key policy and decision-makers and implementers of America's foreign policy are National Security, Defense and Department of State. They operate as an almost seamless team on behalf of their country regardless of who is in the white House. Similarly, whether Democrat or Republican, whether African-American or Caucasian America's President are elected and are accountable solely to the United States. In contrast, the TPLF/EPRDF leadership's loyalty is first and foremost to the ruling party and not to Ethiopia. When President Regan went to Berlin during the Cold War and demanded that the Soviets "Tear that wall" he was speaking on behalf of the American people as a patriotic American and pushing for American self-interest. The Soviet Union collapsed owing to different internal factors; but America's actions cannot be discounted at all.

This anti-Soviet and anti-Socialism policy extended to other countries leaning towards Socialism, including Ethiopia, Chile and others. The point is that America's foreign policy has

been consistent with its own national interests. It is this self-interest that drives it throughout the world, especially in low income, poor and conflict prone and conflict ridden countries. Rebels and governments that side with American interests are rewarded through generous aid, intelligence, security and military assistance and advanced education and training. It makes very little difference whether the chosen are dictators, tribalists or other as long as they meet the criteria of supporting this interest.

On June 10, 1991, the New Federalist released a National Security Council declassified document that remains relevant today. In "**Secret NSC Documents Reveal**," authors Hasan Ahmed and Joseph Brewda said, "Recently declassified U.S. National Security Council documents dating back to the Ford administration, prove that U.S. government policy is to commit genocide against the non-white races of the world. This is the policy which led to the war against Iraq, the refusal of the Bush Administration to effectively aid the recent Bangladesh typhoon victims, and to trigger incessant civil wars throughout Africa and Ibero-America." At the time the NSC was concerned that "the continued population growth of certain countries (**Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand and Turkey**) would lead to an increase in the political, economic and military power of the developing sector, at the expense of the Anglo-American oligarchy." The argument went that even with population reduction tools such as birth control, "population growth rates are likely to increase appreciably before they begin to decline." They identified Nigeria as a trouble spot and suggested that as its population increases dramatically it will have a "growing strategic and political role at least in Africa below the Sahara." The prediction was right; Nigeria exceeded South Africa in GDP and plays a huge role in peace keeping efforts in Western Africa. It is still a failing state and beset by internal conflict emanating from extremist forces. The point of this example is straightforward. Even in the most sensitive area of population control, America's policy is dictated by what serves Western interests and not by the needs of less developed and poor countries necessarily. It is interesting that China was not a target of the policy. Why? China is led by a nationalist and strong government. It has a strong military establishment. It is a nuclear power and its economy was on the rise at the time. It was not dependent on American aid. Today, its GDP is the second largest in the world; and it is expected to exceed America's in the near future.

The declassified document shows that America adjusts its foreign policy strategy and its alliances in accordance with changes, challenges and opportunities across the globe--always to serve American interests. The post-World War era strategy focused on defeating and or at least in containing the Soviet Union and China. Once the Soviet Union collapsed, the New World Order emphasized promotion and institutionalization of free market economies (structural adjustment, privatization, foreign direct investment, trade liberalization, trading blocs) and greater globalization and democratization. 9/11 served as a turning point in American policy. Terrorists declared war on America and killed thousands of innocent lives. And America responded in kind. The War against Terrorism has become the foundation of U.S. foreign policy and of choices of alliances and collaboration with other countries. It is this strategy that also

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informs and guides not only bilateral humanitarian, security, military and development aid but also multilateral aid. Observers contend that American government humanitarian aid to save lives is conditioned by self-interest. On the other hand, the American people including youth have shown remarkable generosity in support of Famine victims in Ethiopia repeatedly. This people to people relationship will continue forever. In fact, it is this relationship that makes our argument for democratization of Ethiopian society credible.

In an unpublished doctoral dissertation by Edward Kissi, "Famine and the Politics of Food Relief in U.S. Relations with Ethiopia: 1952-1991" released in 1997, six years after the TPLF/EPRDF took power, the researcher argued food aid to Ethiopia is designed to serve American strategic interests. He discusses the Great Famine of 1984 and the initial reluctance of the U.S. government to respond until global cry for help triggered it. The U.S. offered assistance for three primary reasons: to show the world that it cared; to establish good and ongoing relations with the TPLF and EPLF projecting ahead that it will take over power; and to expose the disastrous policy of the Socialist Dictatorship that it accused as a gross violator of human rights. "Unpublicized American assistance to Anti-Government political groups (meaning, the TPLF and EPLF) gave the impression that the government of Ethiopia was in firm control of the country. On their part, anti-government groups sought and encouraged a visible American and international presence in the areas they controlled as indications of their hegemony" and possible victory. They considered visits as conferring legitimacy to overthrow the Socialist Dictatorship and replace it with a government that will be friendly to the U.S. An American response to the Famine was converted into an instrument of cementing strong relations with Anti-government groups led by the TPLF. The writer noted that President Regan's administration was instrumental in undermining the Mengistu regime.

America is adept at using crisis as an opportunity. Civil wars, famines, typhoons, disease pandemics, coups, economic collapse, financial crisis and so on. Some say that the U.S. creates problems in order to strengthen its positions. Ethiopia's civil wars and the Great Famine are no different. America played a prominent role in the Eritrean crisis to the detriment of Ethiopia, especially its access to the sea. One can project from the past that future civil wars (if and when they occur) will be the same. As the NSC document on population control showed, mini-states and countries with smaller populations are easier to control than large ones.

#### **Replacing one dictatorship by another**

In summary, the conversion of another country's tragedy into an opportunity in serving America's strategic interests has always been a critical component in shaping policy. From 1974 to 1991-- long before President Obama's tenure-- successive US Presidents opposed Ethiopia's Socialist Dictatorship under the pretext that it:

- a) Was pro-Soviet, anti-Western and anti-democracy
- b) Had committed crime against humanity
- c) Had used food as an instrument to starve opponents

- d) Had carried-out forced “villagization” thereby creating havoc for families and displacing indigenous people
- e) Moved Ethiopia dangerously to the Socialist Camp paving a dangerous trend for the rest of Africa and challenging Western economic and political interests.

The US was especially outraged by human rights violations (wholesale massacres of the entire leadership under Emperor Haile Selassie, an American friend, and a generation of Ethiopians) that defied the imagination; and by a new Villagization Program that was unplanned and considered cruel. Accordingly, cruel and repressive governance offered the U.S. the requisite rationale to punish the Socialist Dictatorship by denying it development aid. Washington used its overwhelming and decisive voting power in the Bretton Wood Institutions—the World Bank and the IMF-- to deny meaningful development assistance. As it turned out, the TPLF-led Front America assisted to dislodge the Socialist regime that took power in 1991 turned out to be no better than the Socialist Dictatorship that the West led by the U.S. denied development assistance to. A cursory review of development aid to Emperor Haile Selassie’s and Mengistu Hailemariam’s governments combined is minuscule compared to the TPLF/EPRDF government. The Socialist Dictatorship received tiny development aid even compared to its predecessor. Among other things, it stood for Ethiopia’s interests firmly. So, why the difference in treatment?

The simple answer is that the TPLF/EPRDF led government serves U.S. interests; and these interests converge with the political, social and economic interests and continued hegemony of the minority elite ruling clique. This argument is buffeted by consensus among Ethiopian and foreign observers that the TPLF/EPRDF is at least authoritarian; many suggest a dictatorship. Fear of persecution permeates Ethiopian society as never before. The network of spies (one spy for every five Ethiopians) is among the most pervasive in the world. Political, social and economic space is practically none existent. Civil society has been decimated. The will of the people is not expressed. All told, these restrictions and suppressions restrain human potential. As such the Ethiopian government is more akin to dictatorial leaders in Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Myanmar, Tunisia and Yemen that were overthrown through popular resistance and Syria that is being challenged. Sadly for those who cherish freedom, justice and the rule of law more than handouts; fortunes have been reversed at a pace that is frightening. The democratically elected President of Egypt is in jail awaiting trial for crimes against humanity. Similarly, the democratically elected President of Ukraine was forced to flee his country. Libya and Yemen have resorted to civil wars. The only country with a hopeful sign of democratization is Tunisia. It is the country that triggered the “Arab Spring.” These reversals are tragic by themselves for the people concerned; and detrimental to the long-term interests of Western democracies. It is only democratic nations that will be reliable partners of Western democracies.

I suggest that, regardless of accolades for good work by President Obama, the TPLF/EPRDF government is nowhere comparable to good and accountable governments such as Botswana, Namibia, Ghana, South Africa and others. It is not even comparable to China where deliberate

social and economic policy by a nationalist government has lifted hundreds of millions of Chinese from abject poverty; made them middle and upper income earners; and has given hopes to millions of youth who join the work force each year. China has invested heavily in neglected and poorer regions such as Tibet, thereby leveling the development field in spatial and ethnic terms. In contrast, Ethiopia's poorer and backward regions (Afar, Beni-Shangul Gumuz, Gambella, for instance) continue to suffer from Federal government neglect. Instead, the regime offers generous leases to firms from 36 countries depriving Ethiopians of ownership and user rights. What is good for globalization is not necessarily good for the Ethiopian people.

#### **President Obama's Accolades Lacked Balance**

Each year, the U.S. Department of States assesses and makes public the human rights situation in Ethiopia. Similar to assessments by major Human Rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Committee to Protect Journalists, Freedom House and others, the Department's latest assessment shows a dire situation getting worse not better. One is mindful of the fact that the Department of State is a critical arm of the U.S. government and possesses ground level knowledge of conditions in Ethiopia. However, these assessments have literally become paper exercises. Their social value is almost nil. Neither the U.S. nor the Ethiopian government takes them seriously. It is only top officials of the U.S. Government, including the President that would give them teeth. It is here we assess the President's message.

The Department's assessments more or less converge with the periodic review that the U.N. Human Rights Council conducts for 193 member countries. On September 18, 2014, the Council's Human Rights Experts asked the Ethiopian government to stop misusing the Anti-Terrorism Law to harass, intimidate, persecute, jail and force opponents to flee. "Two years after we first raised **the alarm**, we are still receiving numerous reports on how the Anti-Terrorism Law is being used to target journalists, bloggers, human rights defenders and opposition politicians in Ethiopia. **Torture and inhuman treatment in detention are gross violations of fundamental human rights.**" The Ethiopian government does not make any distinction between those who are real terrorists and those who stand for justice, the rule and due process of law, religious freedom, free press and free and fair elections. The CSO proclamation decimated civil society without which democratic institutions are impossible. Wholesale intimidation, persecution, incarceration and forcible evictions under the pretext of terrorism is producing the opposite effects. The Federal Government is unable to protect citizens from ethnic cleansing and ethnic and religious based conflicts. The systemic issues that trigger conflicts remain intact.

The Special Rapporteurs called upon "The Government of Ethiopia to free all persons detained arbitrarily under the pretext of countering terrorism. Let journalists, human rights defenders, political opponents and religious leaders carryout their legitimate work without fear of intimidation and incarceration." Like other independent human rights groups, the Council had asked the Ethiopian government repeatedly to allow a visit to Ethiopia by Special Rapporteurs

to examine “torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and the situation of human rights defenders.” The European Commission had made similar requests in July 2014 and the government has yet to respond. It would have been prudent to initiate similar hearings in the United States Congress or other forums.

The EU is a major multilateral donor to the Ethiopian government—a total of 52 million EUROS per year-- and has thus ample leverage in applying pressure on the ruling party. Thus far, in the words of **Ana Gomes**, the most prominent defender of human rights in Ethiopia, “It is not about issuing statements” anymore but about giving meaning to the statements. The EU has a responsibility to tie aid to human rights; as does the U.S. At a public hearing convened by the EU in Brussels October 2, 2014, representatives expressed deep concerns about the plight of political prisoners including bloggers, journalists and opposition politicians. It highlighted the fact that the Ethiopian government continues to apply “politically motivated censorship of the Internet” and other social media. It noted that the UNDP had a program for voter education and civil society in preparation for the 2015 election. However, the lack of political space for the opposition, harassment and persecution of contestants, the dearth of independent and free press and the rigidity and politicization of the Election Board etc. make it virtually impossible for a free and fair election to take place. This suffocating environment will make the next election a mockery. Speakers noted that there is no way to go forward with the election without opening up the political space; without releasing political prisoners; and without setting the preconditions that will make the election free and fair. If not now; when?

It is against the above dark and ominous setting that President Obama offered laudatory remarks to the Ethiopian government. He did this in a partisan and one sided manner. He neglected the notion that Ethiopia’s 94 million people need voice and representation in country where fundamental freedoms accepted by the global community do not exist. He did not give equal weight to the need of opening up political space, releasing political prisoners arrested arbitrarily, restoration of civil society and free press that have been decimated permanently, etc. It is predictable that without these, the semblance of peace, security and anti-terrorism imposed by force is temporal. People are dying and are being uprooted from their homes and farms in Gambella and security forces are killing innocent people in the Ogaden. Is this the definition of security and stability? Is it justifiable to use the anti-terrorism law to terrorize citizens ad infinitum? From whose perspective? What about the victims and Ethiopian society that have to live with the carnage? Is the conclusion conducted by an American think-tank that Ethiopia is a “failing state” consistent with the accolades given by President Obama?

### **Hypocrisy in Policy**

What is ironic is that during the same week, the President had spoken eloquently and persuasively on the need for good governance, a vigorous civil society and independent press in advancing the democratization process. In his assessment, Ethiopia is “one of the bright spots in Africa” that has made “enormous progress.” He appreciated the fact that by ordering additional Boeing aircraft, Ethiopia is “creating jobs for Americans.” Ethiopia has one of the

highest unemployment and underemployment rates among youth in the world. This was never raised. Instead, he gave special emphasis to peace, security and anti-terrorism. Ethiopia's peace keeping role "is one of the best in the world" and that Ethiopia is both "an economic and security leader." When endowed with ample financial and other resources and with the support of the world's superpower, any government would acquire the tools to be competent in maintaining peace, security and in combatting terrorism while suppressing what matters most, justice and the rule of law and those who struggle to achieve them. Ethiopia had a strong military establishment under the Imperial and Socialist Governments with less budget and less foreign military hardware. This says more about its capable people than the regime that leads the country.

I find the misreading of growth data equally troubling. It is true that more money floats in Ethiopia today than at any time in the country's history. It is as if the National Bank manufactures Birr at an alarming rate to meet demand. The country is awash with cash. Monetary and fiscal policies are not disciplined or transparent or backed by production of goods; and inflation is not contained. You need a bushel of money to buy a goat. One often wonders where the money comes from. Yet, per capita income is \$470 per annum; a third of the African average. There is another side to the growth story.

**There are ten countries across the globe called "fastest growing." Seven of them are in Africa and one of them is Ethiopia. It is true that Ethiopia is one of seven fastest growing economies in Africa.** This attribution of fastest growing countries carries no real meaning for the 90 percent of Ethiopians; they see no benefit. A third of the population earns less than \$1.25 per day. This is hardly enough to feed one person let alone a family of 5-6. In addition, Ethiopia's growth rates tend to be loosely tied to facts, figures and interpretations of government officials and their donor cheerleaders. The IMF and the World Bank had over predicted and overstated growth rates in Egypt and Tunisia before their revolutions. African Arguments Org. confirms this data bias. "Ethiopia is notable for having long-lasting disagreements with the IMF regarding their growth rates. Whereas the official numbers have been quoted in double digits for the past decade, a thorough analysis suggested the actual growth rates were around 5 to 6 percent per annum." The President's compliment that Ethiopia is a "star" performer does not take into account the welfare of the vast majority of the population at all. For a President who believes in youth, one finds it difficult why he wouldn't highlight the fact that Ethiopia's sustainability depends on its ability to strengthen the private sector and to generate employment for millions of youth each year. It seems that he was reading from a script prepared by a supporter of the TPFL/EPRDF that celebrates growth without equity and without broad participation. Whoever wrote the bullet points did a disservice to two stakeholders: **the Ethiopian people who are poor and dispossessed; and the American people who want and deserve to know the truth about the efficacy and the social impact of American foreign aid.** Are the Ethiopian people able to cope with daily necessities of life such as food, shelter, food, transport health, work and safe drinking water? If Ethiopia is a "bright spot" in Africa, why are Ethiopia's educated and trained workforce leaving the country in droves?

The President knows that dictatorial regimes overstate their accomplishments all the time; in terms of growth at least by one or two percentage points. They understate inflation by significant amounts. The narrative they offer to the public and their external benefactors is that they are doing their best to meet societal needs. To do this, they have to suppress free and independent institutions. Fabricating and lying with data is an art. It overstates the rate of poverty reduction. It is true that there are more buildings, more roads, more cars, more dams and more cranes that show growth. More than two years ago I called such growth glitz. It is this visitors such as Secretary of State and Security Advisors Rice see and report to the President. Not the dark side; they do not go there. Veer outside the trap of glitz and see the squalid conditions in which most Ethiopians live; then you will appreciate the truth. "There is no doubt that there are more goods leaving and entering the African continent today than 15 years ago, More roads and hotels are being built and more capital (FDI, remittances) is flowing in and out of the African continent than before. Does the volume in transactions in the Merkato and other places translate into "sustained increases in the living standards" of ordinary Ethiopians? Not at all.

The TPLF/EPRDF offers its sponsors and cheerleaders a "make believe" narrative to justify longevity, legitimacy and more aid. In short, citizens in donor countries and the Ethiopian people are misled by government statistics that underestimate social problems and overstate achievements. President Obama fell to this trap by not vetting the facts on the ground. In relations between governments, it takes two to celebrate success. PM Hailemariam responded to the accolades in kind and expressed gratitude by telling President Obama what he likes to hear. "We value this relationship and want to deepen it. American support is "critical in maintaining "peace and security" not only in Ethiopia but also the rest of Africa. Meles could not have done any better in twisting words and endearing supporters. The point of agreement is that relations between the U.S. and Ethiopia will continue because they are in line with America's interests and the interests of the ruling party.

The last two additional points President Obama made reinforced America's consistent and persistent policy anchor that began after 9/11. Western aid to the Ethiopian government has been rising each year since then; and has now exceeds \$4 billion a year, more than a billion coming from the United States. We do not know the amount of military, security and intelligence support. I suggest that given the current American war against the Islamic state and its affiliates in the Horn and the rest of Africa, the emphasis on Ethiopia's collaboration in fighting terrorism is understandable but incomplete and short-sighted. It does not address systemic issues that pose danger. "Obviously, we have been talking a lot about terrorism mostly focused on Islamic state, but Somalia and Al Shabab are also threats and counterterrorism partnerships with countries like Ethiopia are critical" to America's overall strategy.

Intentional or unintentional, the President failed to mention that the Ethiopian government uses the draconian Anti-Terrorism and Charities and Societies Proclamations of 2009 to clamp down on all forms of dissent: bloggers, journalists, human rights advocates, political opponents,

religious leaders. Ethiopia is the second worst jailer of journalists in Africa and among the top in the world. Practically all those in jail are sentenced or to be sentenced under the pretext of terrorism. As far as the Ethiopian government is concerned there is no distinction between Al-Shabab type of terrorism and political dissent, including peaceful protest and free expression. Anyone opposed to the dictatorial regime is considered to be a terrorist. There is no due process of law. As an afterthought, President Obama informed the Ethiopian delegation that their “meeting will also touch on civil society and good government in light of upcoming elections in Ethiopia.” If this happened, no one really knows. The U.S. Government needs to disclose it.

#### **What do I conclude from the accolades?**

The accolades lacked balance. President Obama’s unabashed shoring-up of the current clientele type and repressive Ethiopian state will deepen Ethiopian resentment against the United States. It will signal impunity to the governing party; embolden supporters and prolong gross human rights violations. In turn, this will add fuel to extremism in the Horn, encourage sectarian and secessionist forces and further weaken the democratic opposition and civil society. The President could have braved to push the road of dialogue for a genuinely free and fair election in 2015, the de-politicization and de-ethnicization of the judiciary, police and administrative management system to make it happen, the decriminalization of dissent and the pursuit of national reconciliation and peace involving all stakeholders. Such forceful intervention would have gone a long way in establishing America’s legacy in Ethiopia. America is the only country that can and should do this.

Those of us who expended our monies, energies and creativity in support of President Obama’s elections had hoped that he would stand firm for and defend America’s values of human dignity and rights, justice, fairness, equitable access to opportunities, the rule of law and political pluralism in support of Ethiopians and other Africans and the rest of the world. Africans who dream for justice and democracy are least likely to heed to America’s condemnation of dictatorial emerging powers such as China and or ultra nationalist nuclear powers such as Russia unless the U.S. leverages its enormous resources in strengthening civil society and political pluralism.

In a country where indigenous civil society and human rights organizations have been decimated, American and other Western civil society organizations operating in Ethiopia have given voice to the voiceless. They have demonstrated relentless commitment to the principle that freedom and justice are indispensable in achieving sustainable and equitable development in Ethiopia and the rest of Africa. It therefore makes sense for the U.S. to link its massive aid to the respect of human rights by the Ethiopian government. It is this direct link that give teeth to American’s own declared values and principles. Ethiopian and other observers find it hypocritical that U.S. foreign policy makers and implementers engage in active advocacy of political freedom and the role of civil society in Hong Kong while shoring up Ethiopia’s dictatorship.

The President could have advanced the cause of democratization in Ethiopia by defending the restoration of Ethiopian civil society, by encouraging democratic and social activists and the political opposition and by urging the Ethiopian government to release all political prisoners without preconditions. It through the institutionalization of these core values and principles that the United States can make an enduring impact not only in Ethiopia but also in the rest of Africa. It certainly is not by giving laudatory compliments to a dictatorship that the vast majority of Ethiopians reject and would not doubt eject from power if a free and fair election takes place today. By siding with Ethiopia's dictatorship, President Obama gave the signal that it is alright for Africa's dictators to get away with impunity as long as they serve America's short-term national security interests in the fight against terrorism.

One hopes and prays that the American people and fair-minded policy and decision-makers would air their voices in support of democratization in Ethiopia before it becomes a failed state,

**Commentary three will focus on donors, with special emphasis on the World Bank**