

Op-ed

“If the dignity of the individual is upheld across Africa... Americans will be freer as well... I believe that none of us are fully free when others in the human family remain shackled by poverty or disease or oppression.” President Obama, June 30, 2013

This is true in my country of origin, Ethiopia where a single party has ruled for 25 years and intends to rule perpetually. This “Orwellian” state receives over \$4 billion annually, the largest in Africa and the U.S. is the largest bilateral donor. Imagine one party winning elections every 4 years in the U.S. by barring or intimidating contestants. Imagine candidates being clubbed, jailed and or forced to flee if they protest peacefully. Imagine an election without meaningful policy debates. Imagine the notion that despite \$40 billion in development aid, Ethiopia is ranked as one of the poorest and most corrupt countries on the planet; per capita income is a third of the African average. This food aid dependent country supported by the U.S. lost \$10 billion in four years through illicit outflow. Imagine how many factories this would build in a poor country.

It is not the stolen money that forced this American voter to write this op-ed. It is gross violations of human rights and degradation of Ethiopians, decimation of civil society and criminalization of free expression and political contest, values Americans cherish the most. In “Journalism is not a crime” Human Rights Watch had forewarned donors “The Ethiopian government’s systematic repression of independent media has created a bleak landscape for free expression ahead of the May 2015 general elections...at least 22 journalists, bloggers and publishers were criminally charged, and more than 30 journalists fled the country.” The Ethiopian government uses the 2009 Anti-Terrorism and the Charities and Societies Organizations (CSO) legislations as blunt instruments to punish those who stand up for freedom, democracy and the rule of law. Employment opportunities are guided by ethnicity and political affiliation. Don’t you think these conditions contribute to instability and terrorism? Is this in America’s long-term interest?

Freedom House’s Freedom in the World Report 2015 ranks Ethiopia “43 out of 49 Sub-Saharan African countries” that are not free. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) identifies Ethiopia among the “two top jailers of journalists in Africa and among the top four in the world.” It is my genuine belief America’s long-term security and trade interests and the interests of the Ethiopian people will be best served by promoting and defending respect for human rights and freedoms, civil society, accountable and representative governance in Ethiopia unconditionally. At minimum, the U.S. should stop providing aid dollars to a regime that decimates independent media, obstructs the participation of opposition parties and jails or forces critics to flee in droves. These requests are consistent with America’s own core values of political pluralism, free expression and freedom of the press, respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law. No free, fair, open and credible election would take place on May 24, 2015 under this suffocating environment. I do not believe Americans want dictatorship over democracy.

Consider an editorial comment on May 6, 2015, “Elections, Ethiopian Style” by Human Rights Watch. “Since the last election, the ruling party has exerted more control and increased its repression of basic liberties, including the rights to free expression, assembly and association...As Ethiopians go to the polls in late May, 2015, prospects for the opposition to fully and fairly campaign are grim” and a similar editorial by the Washington Post on May 1, 2015 “Make-believe in Ethiopia” rebutting remarks by the Department of State’s Undersecretary for Political Affairs, Wendy Sherman that “Ethiopia is a democracy that is moving forward in an election that we expect to be free, fair, credible, open and

inclusive." I commend the post for stating the facts. "The regime's repression deserves condemnation, not praise, from Washington." I fear genuinely that the Ethiopian government has created a suffocating environment of disempowerment engendering terrorism that may lead to the fracturing of an already polarized and volatile country. I urge the Government of the United States and American voters to help avert another failed state in the Horn of Africa.

Would you urge your representatives in Congress and Government of these United States to do all they can so that your taxes no longer shore up one the most oppressive governments in Africa?

Aklog Birara, Ph.D. is a retiree from the World Bank and is President of the Center for Inclusive Development

Email address: Ssemegn@yahoo.com

Telephone: 301-814-0340

Address: P.O. Box 250, Ashton, MD 20861