

COMMENTARY by NES



By the Network of Ethiopian Scholars (NES) - Scandinavian Chapter
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Title: The Second Anniversary of the May 15, 2005 Historic Election and the Elected are still in Jail: Shame on all of us!

"All of us who are concerned for peace and triumph of reason and justice must be keenly aware how small an influence reason and honest good will exert upon events in the political field." By Albert Einstein

1. Democracy still in jail

It is exactly two years since Ethiopia experienced one of the most open elections in its history. All of us who expected finally our country is going to make it by seeing a lawful, legitimate, citizen anchored, citizen choosing, citizen voting change from one set of parties and persons to another found ourselves in the unhappy situation where the usual mind set of those in power refuse to concede to the citizenry.

Today those that have been elected are still in prison. Far from democracy fully blossoming in the veins, arteries and soul of this ancient nation, we have democracy itself in prison. How else can one describe the difficulties of putting those who have done nothing but run in elections to express the highest form of citizenship, except to say in bewilderments **continuing to imprison them is to continue to imprison democracy itself.**

The space that was open in Ethiopia in the pre-election phase undoubtedly created opportunities for some 25 million Ethiopians to manifest a will to self-govern. One can understand that the fight, the debate, the commotion and excitement to be unusually electrifying and vibrant. There is no doubt also given the context of a free election any reaction can spill into overreaction. But nothing can justify the regime's action to convert a vibrant political process where the stakes have been so high to use the subsequent killings effected by the overreaction (if not wilful) actions of its own security services into a legal wrangle against the popularly elected citizens such as Engineer Hailu Shawl, Weizero Birtukan, Dr. Berhanu and all others that are still unjustly in jail. Changing the political process into a criminal legal process is hypocritical and unfair. The regime cannot prove that those in jail now have even an iota of criminal intention. They never had. They never will. They had the noble intention of seeing their nation achieve what it never had in its long history: enter the era of the rule of law where those in power submit to law, respect for democratic freedoms and human rights and democratic political system and governances, and not use trickery and deception to practise dictatorship while talking democracy!

2. VICTIMS OF DOUBLE-STANDARD

Exactly a year ago in May 2006, there was a self-initiated momentum of world wide protest, and the unity of the opposition despite many attempts to disrupt it was the highest it has perhaps ever been. After May 2006, the opposition groups started disagreeing and the momentum slowed down. There is a need for the opposition to unite and agree in making sure that those in jail are released long before the Ethiopian millennium. It will be a shame on all of us and above all on the Meles regime to enter the next 1000 years with democrats in jail which is tantamount to democracy itself being in prison! There are those who say calling for the prisoners to be released is not the same thing as calling for the release of democracy that has been symbolically jailed with their imprisonment. There is no doubt that calling for the release of the prisoners is the same as calling for democracy to be released. All the opposition forces, if there is anything that they can unite on must be on this issue of the prisoners to be released in order to release the incarcerated democracy in our country. It will be shame on all of us not to see this dialectic and call for the unconditionally and earliest possible release of those citizens freely voted and chosen by Ethiopians who manifested a will to govern themselves through their legitimate representatives.

It is also a shame on those who drive world politics and who say they stand for the values of freedom, human rights, the rule of law and democracy to fete those who continue to jail those whose record speaks a million for standing for the same values. Prof. Mesfin has stood for these values by educating citizens through ERCHO and other press for a very long time. There is absolutely no justification to put a man of his distinction who stood to implement such lofty values in jail. For the world to remain silent and look the other side when such injustice is visited to an elderly man is indeed a failure of will and a triumph of narrow interest. Ever since the US policy thinkers have used the Cold War paradigm to frame that country's National Security Strategy by differentiating enemies and friends with the language of those who are not with us are against us, it has been possible for opportunist politicians to lure the USA to serve its current strategic concerns. On 20 September, 2001, President Bush addressed the joint session of Congress and the American people outlining the defining doctrine of the post September 9/11 worlds: "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, you are with the terrorists" (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>). The problem with this formulation is that whoever claims to fight terrorism whether that regime upholds democracy, human rights and rule of law or not is open to be feted by the Bush Administration. The doctrine, just like in the Cold War days, opens the opportunity for those who run into domestic trouble to entice the US Government to back their misdeeds by getting US power to look the other way. The US Government also opens itself to the legitimate charge that it follows a double standard. One of its standards is to uphold values of freedom and democracy and the other standards are to pursue its interests. For the US Government especially the Bush Administration fusing the two and finding sustainable allies based on principles and values have since become a huge problem. Ethiopia's search for a democratic history has been influenced by the Bush's contradictory posture inherent in the tension of the current post September 9/11 doctrines.

Our own election has suffered from the context of double standard from the international community. Our prisoners are still in jail mainly for two reasons: internal opposition division and not being able to unite on a minimum programme, and the double standard from the international community.

3. A RENEWED CALL!

Always in the middle of crisis lies opportunity. We call for the opposition to unite and redouble its efforts to get the prisoners released without delay.

Ethiopia has before it a millennium coming. It will be a shame to enter the millennium divided: the church is divided. The political parties are divided. Communities are ethically divided. There is alarming talk of a growing religious divide. Ethiopia may not avoid these divisive fissures, but it can never afford it. It is a challenge to all of us in Ethiopia and the region from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean to make sure that we promote rule of law, democracy and human rights and institutionalise democratic governance as a sure remedy to deal with the myriad conflicts and create a community of security and development not only in Ethiopia but in the entire Horn of Africa region as a whole.

We call on the international community to stop using double standard and demand that it privileges and prioritizes values of democracy, human rights and rule of law over narrow national interests and global projections of narrow paradigms to distinguish enemies from friends. We call them to use every possible influence and the Ethiopian millennium to get the imprisoned democrats released and demand that they express outrage against the criminalisation of those who have been duly elected freely as part of a consistent upholding of the values they say they hold dear.

If both the unity of Ethiopians for democracy, human rights and rule of law and the international community to respect these same values above any narrow national and foreign policy concerns and interests evade us then Einstein is right in his statement above and also in the statement here:” **Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity, and I’m not sure about the universe.”**

NES challenges us all to show the limitless capacity to human stupidity is not infinite!!! Act and unite to release the prisoners now!!

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