

Washington Update

October 6, 2009

Quiet before the storm.

Based on recent meetings with key policy makers, it is clear that although the Obama administration and Congress have been silent regarding possible changes in U.S. policy toward Ethiopia, this does not mean they have been inactive. In fact, sources in the administration, on Capitol Hill and Washington think tanks indicate that a major review of U.S. policy on Ethiopia is underway. This includes reconsideration of fundamental aspects of the relationship, such as whether the U.S. should continue to consider the Meles regime an ally in the war on terror. An alternate view is gaining ground in Washington policy making circles in which the Meles regime's actions in Somalia, its suppression of legitimate political dissent, and human rights abuses in Ogaden have the potential to further destabilize the region and to fuel terrorism. The regime's censorship, its suppression of non-governmental organizations, and its refusal to date to create the infrastructure that is needed to support free and fair elections, clash with the Obama administration's goals in Africa, which include promoting democracy and civil society. The pervasive corruption in Ethiopia is also at odds with the Obama administration's attempts to foster clean, competent governance and economic development in Africa.

During the Bush administration, U.S. policy to Ethiopia was dominated by short-term security concerns. Congress, especially influential Democrats, eventually grew frustrated and the House of Representatives passed H.R. 2003, legislation that called on the administration to make non-humanitarian aid to Ethiopia contingent on improvements in human rights and democracy. The current Congress is unlikely to take the lead in pressing for change in Ethiopia. Rather, the congressional Democratic leadership will wait for the State Department to complete its Ethiopia policy review, and will then act to support the administration. Senior State Department officials and members of Congress who have worked on Ethiopia issues in the past are well aware of the deteriorating human rights and security situation in the Horn of Africa, as well as the upcoming elections in Ethiopia. The administration's new Ethiopia policy should be ready soon, though it is unclear whether it will be publicly announced or if it will be more quietly implemented. The appointment of a new ambassador to Ethiopia will be a good indicator of the kind of policies the U.S. will be pursuing in the run up to the Ethiopian elections.

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