

Strategic Advocacy: Human Rights is Everyone's Business

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During her visit to South Sudan at the end of October, 2017, U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, questioned the wisdom and return on investment of more than \$11 billion to this troubled, violence-ridden and unstable country. On October 30, 2017, the Washington Post quoted the Ambassador who told South Sudanese President Salva Kiir this. "I basically said the United States had invested well over \$11 billion in South Sudan and into him and that we are now questioning that investment."

Ambassador Haley also visited Ethiopia, a country where the U.S. has invested close to five times the amount invested in South Sudan. To her credit, the Ambassador was blunt in telling Ethiopian Prime Minister and his team as well as officials of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (the DRC) of the limits of American "patience, funding and diplomacy" to dictatorships. She said, "We don't care about what they say and how pretty they say it. We care about what they do and how effective it is." Ethiopian officials are clever and "pretty" in presenting a positive image of themselves to their enablers. They no doubt defend their loyalty to the U.S. in the war against terror. However, their actions within Ethiopia are more telling about them than their loyalty to the U.S. and the U.N. They take extrajudicial measures and blame these measures on dissidents, on farmers and pastoralists, on spiritual leaders and journalists, on opposition groups and civil society, on the opposition, on foreign governments etc. They instigate division and civil conflict between and among ethnic groups. Most notable is the TPLF narrative that Amhara and Oromo cannot live together. No one is spared from blame except TPLF high officials at the district, regional and federal levels who instigate divisions and brutalize ordinary citizens almost on a regular basis.

The root cause of Ethiopia's problems are not the Ethiopian people whose historical bonds are unparalleled in Africa. Fortunately for the country, the Oromo and Amhara people are reestablishing their historical and unbreakable bonds.

In terms of U.S. foreign policy towards Ethiopia, it is Ethiopian government actions that should be questioned by American policy makers including Ambassador Haley. The bias should be in favor of the hopes and aspirations of 105 million people rather than bankrolling thieves of state. This is because official graft, nepotism and corruption undermine the fabric of society and the stability of Ethiopia. In turn, this creates fertile ground for fundamentalism and terrorism.

The purpose of this short commentary is to pin-point the two major hurdles Ethiopians face in making a compelling case on human rights to U.S. policy and decision-makers.

On the plus side is the growing collaboration of the Amhara and Oromo population, especially youth that is changing the political narrative in Ethiopia. Intellectuals, civil society and regional political leaders of the two communities are changing the narrative in defiance of the Tigray

People’s Liberation Front (the TPLF) in power for 27 years. “የአሮሞው ደም ደማችን ነው፤ ጣና ኬኛ፤ የወልቃይት ጉዳይ ያገባናል” ወዘተ. are compelling and galvanizing slogans that motivate each and every one of us to rethink the TPLF narrative of ethnic “divide and rule.” This growing and deepening relationship of the Oromo and Amhara people at the grassroots level has, for all practical purposes upended the Orwellian state and government dominated by the TPLF. No longer would the TPLF have a free ride to pit one ethnic group against another.

Who would have thought barely 6 months ago that the regional leaders of the Amhara and Oromo states would hold a joint conference in the city of Bahir Dar, assert commitment to Ethiopia’s national unity and sovereignty and recommit to the unbreakable bonds of the Ethiopian people, especially the Oromo and Amhara people? Behind this latest and unexpected development is the remarkable and insightful leadership of Oromo and Amhara youth. They broke the Himalayan wall of fear and segregation and demanded accountability from leaders regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation.

Sadly, the world community, especially TPLF enablers have not either caught up with the dramatic youth led and popular resistance on the ground or they have ignored what is happening on the ground. In part, this is because they figured that the resistance is sporadic and divided. They are also convinced that Ethiopia’s opposition parties are still fractured, factional and weak and lack a national unity of purpose.

From President Bill Clinton to President Donald Trump, the U.S. Department of State has been vocal in its admonition of Ethiopian officials with regard to human rights, the rule of law and democracy. For example, after Donald Trump’s election as President in 2016, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said this. Ethiopian “Security forces used excessive force against protestors throughout the year, killing hundreds and injuring many more. The protests were mainly in Oromia and Amhara regions. At the year’s end, more than 10,000 persons were believed to be detained. This included persons detained under the government declared state of emergency. Many were never brought before a court, provided legal counsel, or formally charged with a crime.”

Most recently and as the resistance deepened, the TPLF instigated civil conflicts between Oromo and Somali Ethiopians. Scores and scores of people, primarily Oromo Ethiopians were killed and thousands forcibly evicted from their homes and livelihoods. In a piece entitled “Ethnic strife in Ethiopia threatens a key U.S. ally,” the Washington Post explicitly and vividly depicted TPLF’s asinine policy of ethnic conflict as an instrument of governance. “A largely hidden war in remote areas of Ethiopia has killed hundreds of people, displaced more than 100,000 others and raised the specter of ethnic cleansing, potentially destabilizing and important U.S. ally in the fight against terrorism.” Despite death, displacement and destruction, the war against terrorism and not the welfare of 105 million Ethiopians is still the center-piece of U.S. policy. Similar killings and displacements have been taking place in Gondar, Gambella and other regions of Ethiopia for decades. Tragically, these “hidden wars” and ethnic cleansing were never reported by the Western press.

Ironically, the TPLF took power in 1991 under the pretext of liberating “nations, nationalities and peoples from oppression and subjugation.” The Post article of October 23, 2017 underscored this point. “In an attempt to recognize the aspirations of the country’s main ethnic groups, the rebel movement of the Tigrayan ethnicity that overthrew the Communist regime in 1991 reorganized Ethiopia into a federal state made of nine ethnically defined regions with a degree of autonomy.” From its conception the ethnic federal system was fraught with conflict. It offered ethnic elites unprecedented power and wealth while denying fundamental freedom, human rights, economic and social opportunity and democracy to the vast majority of Ethiopians. It lent itself to manipulation by federal, regional and local authorities to

serve their narrow economic, financial and political purposes; and gave them carte blanche authority to erode bonds among Ethiopia's diverse population. As a consequence, Ethiopia's territorial integrity and sovereignty and the social, spiritual, economic and political bonds of the population was diminished severely. This is the reason authoritative sources such as the Fund for Peace, Freedom House and the Crisis Group report that the country is sliding into a failed state. Despite this, the TPLF refuses to address the root causes of the problem.

In a deliberate attempt to prolong political and economic domination, the TPLF instigated more murders, hackings, maiming and displacements of the Amhara population in Illubabor and Beni-Shangul Gumuz. The argument by the governing party, especially the TPLF controlled media that ordinary Oromo committed these crimes is indefensible. The Oromo and Amhara population are among the most integrated in the country. They have a long and distinguished history of intermarriages, peaceful coexistence and unified resistance against foreign intervention spanning hundreds of years. The TPLF tried and has now failed to continue to sow seeds of hatred, suspicion and fear among these two substantial populations. It is this remarkable strength and resiliency among Ethiopia's diverse population that Western governments, especially the U.S. must recognize and support.

So, it is time that we ask the question "Why are the human rights, good governance and democracy anchored legislations, namely, H.R. 128 of the House and S.R. 168 of Senate in Limbo?"

It is not because Ethiopians do not have American friends. We do. More than 70 Congressmen and women co-sponsored H.R. 128. On November 2, 2017 Congressman Mike Coffman addressed the U.S. Congress on human rights violations in Ethiopia. He urged his colleagues that it was time for the U.S. to live up to its cherished values of freedom, the rule of law, respect for human rights and democracy. Similar sentiments have been expressed by a number of Senators as well. Despite these sentiments, passage of the draft legislations remains uncertain.

There are two lead reasons:

The first and primary reason is that it is not U.S. legislators or the State Department that determines American foreign policy. It is the Pentagon and National Security. Their arguments are pivoted on the primacy of fighting terrorism. The TPLF led regime is America's policeman in the Horn. In order to scuttle the legislations, the TPLF deployed thousands of Ethiopian soldiers to Somalia. It showed unwavering loyalty to President Trump's government by sending Ethiopians to their deaths. We should therefore resolve that this cunning posture is not in the long term interest of the American or Ethiopian people.

Our collective and unified effort should be to campaign more vigorously than ever before in each district and in each state. Ethiopian-Americans in the Diaspora must identify credible Ethiopians and empower them to meet with and speak with Pentagon and National Security officials on behalf of the Ethiopian people at the earliest opportunity. The recently established CSO Consortium (ትብብር) will serve as a bridge and facilitator on this important matter.

Second, the strategy and effort of fragmented advocacy has not worked. Those of us in the Diaspora must decide once and for all to speak with one voice; to send letters of appeal jointly and collaboratively; to go to hearings sponsored by different human rights organizations and governments together as Ethiopians. We need to stop fragmented advocacy as Amhara, Annuak, Somali, Oromo or other. The potential outcome of unified advocacy is far greater.

Last but not least, it is time that Ethiopian think tanks, academics, experts and others take the initiative to prepare a well-documented and reasoned position paper on human rights violations in Ethiopia, providing the arguments that siding with the hopes and aspirations with the Ethiopian people far outweighs bankrolling an illegitimate, corrupt and cruel TPLF regime.

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