

American Power and the Struggle for Democracy and against Terror in Africa¹

I. Introduction

It was a clear Thursday evening in March 2006 when two prison guards armed with their AK47's called me outside my prison cell. The sky was full of beautiful sparkling stars. I and my colleagues in the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) had been in prison already for five months by then. Since prisoners were herded inside their cells at about 5:30 every afternoon, we didn't have a chance to see the stars at night. At the time I was in a warehouse converted into a prison cell with some 350 inmates, most of them common criminals. The guards told me to get dressed and cleaned up because I had "important" visitors waiting for me at the main prison office. Followed by my two escorts and enjoying the stars that I had not seen for months, I went to the office to meet these "unknown" guests. But, when I got to the office, I saw the familiar figures of Vicky Huddleston, the Charges d' Affaires for the U.S. Embassy along with her young assistant and the French Ambassador. Since we all knew each other from previous meetings and Embassy functions, we shared a few pleasantries before we started with the more serious business that brought them to the Kaliti prison.

I was happy to see them initially, thinking that the West had finally seen the madness of the Meles Zenawi government and might be looking for a negotiated way out of the political crisis. Even after these five months in prison, the political instability had continued unabated and some important small rural towns in Oromia were being rocked by demonstrations. I knew the U.S. was nervous about the instability and wished it to end. What I didn't know was how far they were willing to go in pushing the government to clean up its act and respect its own laws, since that was really what was at issue here.

In their introductory remarks Mrs. Huddleston, followed by the French Ambassador, told me how worried they were about the ongoing instability in Ethiopia and said that if we didn't put an end to this, it might spiral out of control. I told them that I agreed with their assessment and said that we were all worried about the situation. Certain that they would agree with me, I said that the easy way out would be to pressure the government to abide by its laws and to negotiate on

¹ **Berhanu Nega, Bucknell Speech, February 26, 2008.**

the 8 points that we put forward before the crackdown, which asked for allowing the independence of the institutions necessary for a democratic political order, such as a free media, an independent election authority, an independent judiciary and a neutral police, security and military apparatus.

Mrs. Huddleston's response to my statement went directly to the crux of the matter. She said that while she agreed more or less that our plan was most likely the ultimate solution, the US and EU governments have no way to force the government to abide by its own laws. Yes, she said, we could impose some economic sanctions, but sanctions are usually not very effective. So, since the Meles government was not willing to do the right thing and was willing to risk instability, it was up to the moderate forces in the opposition to avert this potentially dangerous instability. The way to do this, she suggested, was for me to **abrogate my Mayorship** and tell the public to accept as Mayor the person chosen by the government. Since the public listens to you, she said, they would accept that outcome, peace would return and the government would be stable again. Maybe once everything was stabilized, and the government felt less threatened, she continued, we could slowly cajole the government to jump start the democratization process and release you from prison. Otherwise, you are going to be in prison for a very long time.

At first I could not believe my ears. If this was the official US position, (as she suggested it was) then it was contrary to everything that the US government has been proclaiming in support of freedom and democracy around the world. I knew from history that the US had done some pretty nasty stuff around the world to protect what it deems to be in its "national interest." I was also not so naive as to trust every pronouncement by politicians. But I was still totally bewildered by what I was hearing from the US representative. First, I was directly experiencing the kind of hypocrisy that I had only read in books, and it was powerful and shocking to encounter it so directly. Second, I could not fathom what "national interest" made the US take such a blatantly unjust position after the cold blooded murder of hundreds of unarmed civilians following a stolen election that had been witnessed by international observers. I was totally outraged by what was going on in Ethiopia and I felt that every freedom loving person who knew these events would be equally outraged. I also knew that the US and European governments knew in minute detail what had happened in the country. Furthermore, I knew full well that the US and the EU had such a strong influence on the Meles government, that they could actually

force the government to change its ways. So, I realized that they must have taken a cold, calculated position not only to keep the government in power, but also to grant its wish of staying in power without the burdens of democratic accountability.

What made me really angry at that moment, in that small office, knowing that in a few minutes I would be sent back to my stinking overcrowded cell was not so much the positions that these countries, that anoint themselves as bulwarks of democracy around the world, had taken. It was rather their audacity to turn my friends and me into accomplices to the government's wicked schemes. I felt that the visit was deliberately arranged to convey the message that we should not expect any real pressure on the government from the West and that if there was any pressure it would be on us to surrender. I had heard a couple of weeks before that Ambassador Huddleston had invited our families to the embassy to ask them to pressure us to accept the government's demand to secure our release. So, I guessed that this visit might be a continuation of this psychological pressure to weaken our resolve. I must admit my response was angry and maybe not very diplomatic. But, at that point I was not trying to be diplomatic. In brief, I told her what a shameful position she and her country were taking. I said that I would rather die in prison than be a party to the destruction of democracy in my country. I also told her that I knew that her words and action were not representative of the position of the average American, whose love of liberty and justice I had experienced firsthand as a US resident for 15 years. The position of the Administration she represents, I told her with certainty, did not reflect the decency of the American people that their government supposedly represented. She and the French Ambassador shamelessly tried to convince me to do what they asked, during which time I became angrier and angrier. After things calmed down and I was about to get escorted back to my cell, Mrs. Huddleston gave me a few copies of the *New Yorker* to read in my "spare time" and the French Ambassador asked me what kind of chocolates I liked so that he could send me some through his driver the next day [I did not take it as a form of bribery!]. I was simply amazed by the brazen and crude nature of big power diplomacy. As I walked back to my cell, what hit me powerfully was my realization that for these diplomats and the policy makers in their capitals giving them orders, **we are nothing. We are not even human beings properly speaking.** We are just pawns in their global game, and it was not a good feeling at all.

It was only after about eight months that I figured out the reasons behind the US position, when I started to hear the escalating rhetoric on the government media about the danger posed by the Islamic Courts Union of Somalia to Ethiopia's security. The arguments presented by the government made no sense. Nobody in Ethiopia felt threatened by this shabby bunch of amateur militias. I knew it would be absurd for Ethiopia to invade Somalia for a number of reasons. When the full scale invasion of Somalia by Ethiopian forces occurred, quickly followed by the bombing of Somali militia targets by the US military, I understood very well the calculation behind the unconditional support of the US for the dictatorship in Ethiopia. After 14 months of nonstop conflict claiming thousands of lives and at least a million Somalis displaced, Somalia is slowly but surely resembling Iraq, without any clear settlement in sight. But, Somalia is not what I want to talk about tonight, although the tragedy that is unfolding in that country merits a serious discussion in its own right. I wish rather to focus more on the Global war on terror and US foreign policy in relation to human rights and democratization in the Horn of Africa region.²

Before I get to that topic, however, let me say a few words as an antidote to this story that I have just recounted. While official US policy in the Horn region lacked any moral center and thus was deeply disappointing to democratic forces inside Ethiopia, particularly those of us in prison, we were also hearing from various short wave radio sources that gave us hope and strength. We were hearing about the various reports of human rights organizations based in the US and Europe, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, condemning the atrocities perpetrated by the Ethiopian government and calling on Western governments to stand up for moral principles. Many American citizens were active in sending letters to Congress and the State Department asking for our release and trying to influence their governments to do what is morally right. At the center of this drive were my friends and colleagues from Bucknell University. I want to use this opportunity to thank the administration, the faculty and staff and the students of Bucknell University for everything you have done on our behalf. I specifically

² That the war in Somalia is not going well is not contested any more. In fact, it is getting more and more absurd and frustrating to the invading force. It was reported recently in a Somali Website that one of the commanders of the Ethiopian Army, twice slapped the president of the Somali Transitional Federal Government in whose name the invasion has taken place in the first place. Although there is no way to confirm this, the main point is that the strains between the invading army and the TFG's cannot be doubted.

want to thank President Brian Mitchell, my friends John Rickard, Charles Sackrey, Jean Shackelford, Jan Knoedler and Marty Ligare as well as the students who worked on this project especially Jannele Nodhturft and Amy Bruno for their efforts and unwavering support. Many of you in this room worked on our behalf and we thank each one of you very much.

I know some of you did raise your voice out of friendship and because you know me. But, most of the people involved in supporting our cause did it because of the moral principle they hold dearly. The principle of freedom that you believe in is the natural right of every human being, wherever they are. This is the principle that the average American shares with the forces in Ethiopia who have struggled with their sweat and blood to establish a democratic political order in our country. I sincerely hope that this value that you have, this value that you share with most of your citizens, will also inform the policies of your government so that this great country can once again reclaim the moral high ground that it once occupied in international relations. I am hopeful that this will happen as I hear the speeches of the presidential candidates. It is clear that, at least, some of them recognize the declining respect for this country in the international community, not so much because of its declining military power, but because of the perception that the world that it wishes to forge with its military might does not promise a life of freedom and prosperity for the majority of the world's population. In any case, your support was not only a source of strength for us but also a reaffirmation of our hope and belief in human solidarity for liberty. So, I thank you in the name of all prisoners of conscience not only in Ethiopia but anywhere there is dictatorship around the globe.

II. A reversal of the democratic experiment in Africa:

Let me now broadly relate the experiences of a few African countries that parallel the Ethiopian case. Not long after our incarceration, I heard the news of the imprisonment of the Ugandan opposition Leader Kisa Beisige, as he returned from exile to challenge President Yoweri Museveni in the coming election. (*Remember that he along with Meles of Ethiopia, Issayas of Eritrea, Kagame of Ruanda and Nigeria's Obasanjo were praised as the new progressive and democratic leaders of Africa by President Clinton in the 1990s*) President Museveni had earlier succeeded in changing the Ugandan Constitution to allow him to run for the Presidency for the third time against the will of the public and ignoring pressure from the international community. Fearing that the public's anger over the change in the Constitution, he started to harass Mr.

Beisige, from the time he returned to Uganda to compete against the president. The government accused him of treason and put him in prison in order to keep him from competing. It was only later, following significant pressure from the public and the international community, that the Ugandan High Court granted him bail at the last minute to allow him to compete. Of course, by then he had lost significant time to compete effectively. As expected, Museveni won the election, which was considered neither free nor fair by election observers. Although the US and the EU protested the change in constitution and the fraudulent election, they continued business as usual including massive foreign aid to the Museveni government.

The Nigerian President, Olisegun Obasanjo was not as lucky as Museveni, however. A former political prisoner himself, he came to power in a democratic election in 1998 promising to clean up Nigerian politics and its legendary corruption. After being elected to his second term as President in a fraudulent election, Obasanjo desperately wanted to stay in power. The route he took was similar to that of Museveni. He wanted to change the constitutional provision for term limits to allow him to run and then steal the election. Unfortunately for him, his own Vice President, who wanted his turn at the helm, waged a fierce and successful struggle in the Nigerian Senate against the proposed change in the Constitution. Angry at this turn of events, he implemented plan B: hand the presidency to someone, anyone who would serve as his instrument while he maintained his power behind the scenes (as did Yeltsin and Putin in Russia). He picked a completely unknown Northern local politician, Yara Dua and handed him the presidency on a platter in a sham election that both local and international observers considered absolutely useless, even by Nigerian standards. The “independent” election authority, that is simply an instrument of Obasanjo, declared Yara Dua a winner even before all the votes were counted. After the death of hundreds of Nigerians who protested this arrogant usurpation of power and a meek initial condemnation by the West, business continued as usual and the West continued its relationship with Nigeria as if nothing had happened. A frustrated Nigerian Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, condemned the false democratic experiment and said that the only way to bring genuine democratic polity in Nigeria is to have a revolution to completely remake Nigerian politics.

In Kenya, after creating a wide coalition against the corrupt Daniel Arap Moi regime, Mwai Kibaki was chosen as the standard bearer of the opposition, whose main election plank was to

stamp out corruption and institute genuine democratic order in the country. The broad coalition that helped elect Kibaki in 2002 represented a wide range of income groups and ethnic identities. After failing to deliver on his promise, Kibaki again tried to change the constitution to make it favorable to himself and his political cronies. A broad coalition (the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM)) was formed that successfully opposed the new constitution and challenged Mr. Kibaki. During the December 2007 election the new movement not only handily won the majority in Parliament, but was clearly leading in the presidential polls. So, Kibaki's people kicked out all election observers in the remaining constituencies and pulled enough rabbits out of their hats to hand an unlikely victory to Mr. Kibaki that amazed observers in its brazenness. Soon, the "independent" election commission declared Mr. Kibaki a winner and in a private ceremony in the State House, Mr. Kibaki anointed himself the new president and asked the opposition to go to court if they had any problem with the results. All the international observers called the election result fraudulent, and after seeing the resistance and anger of the population, even the national election commission Chairman said he could not confirm the result of the election.

As in the case of all such African elections, the United States government initially indicated that it would accept the election as flawed but acceptable, asking the opposition to challenge the election in the courts, if it so wished. This is the familiar line that the US has adopted in all the stolen elections in Africa, including the one in Ethiopia to which I will return in a few minutes. In short, African dictators have discovered that stealing an election is not a big deal as such. It is how you do it and the degree to which you can make the stealing palatable to the West that matters. To make it acceptable to the West, you need to give it some legal cover. The way to do so is to make sure that the formal legal institutions, particularly the election authority and the courts, declare you the winner at the end of the process. For that to happen, though, you have to make these institutions so weak and subservient to the executive branch that they will do whatever you tell them to do. In this process, it is not only the election process that is mocked. All the institutions necessary to make a real democracy work, particularly the institutions that are there to check the power of the executive, are made essentially useless. The opposition that knows that there is no legal redress from these weakened or nonexistent institutions is either forced to accept the results of an obviously fraudulent election or take their opposition to the streets, creating instability in the country.

Reflecting back on my own experience in the democracy movement in Ethiopia, the similarity of the US position in these examples and many more in Africa leads me to believe that the U.S.'s and to a lesser extent the EU's position on African democratization has emanated from the same flawed rationale, that I fear, will only lead to further instability in the region without providing the expected benefits for US national security interests. Because I was more or less at the center of all the discussions and negotiations between the opposition and the government, mostly mediated by US and EU diplomats, I believe I now have a better sense of the way Western governments look at democracy in Africa. I do believe the problem emanates from the cynicism of Western policy makers (and unfortunately, most Western NGOs) about the possibility of real democratization in Africa and I will try to make this point using my own story. Before I go to the argument, however, I think it will be useful to share with you the main highlights of my own experience in the failed democratic experiment in Ethiopia.

III. Ethiopia and the 2005 Elections

Let me now speak briefly about my own experience in Ethiopia.

When I left the calm and comfortable life of an academic at Bucknell in 1994, I was trying to answer for myself the thorny question that I suspect every exile must ask himself to give a larger meaning to his/her existence. The question is how do you justify your continued existence in exile once the main reason for your exile in the first place is there no more? When the reason for migration is voluntary and purely economic, this is less a nagging problem. But, for political refugees, it is such an emotional issue that most fail to take advantage of the opportunities provided by their new home, living instead a meager day to day existence, afraid that they will become attached to their new country and forget their country of origin. Such a scenario is usually considered a betrayal of the cause that they fought for before they were forced into exile, even worse, a betrayal of some of their less fortunate comrades who died for the cause.

As some of you who knew me back then would know, I left my country as a political refugee to the Sudan in 1978 and resettled here in the US in 1980. Until 1991, the issue of going back home was not something I could even consider and was completely out of my mind. When the Mengistu dictatorship was overthrown in 1991, all of a sudden the question appeared. I knew that the main threat to my life was gone, at least in the short run. The existential question I had to

answer was: Where could I have a more useful and meaningful life both for my family and the larger community? Could I have peace of mind if I didn't at least try to contribute to the improvement of the life of the millions of Ethiopians by providing the skills that I have acquired? Although I knew that I could not trust the declared intentions of the new government, shouldn't I at least try and do what I can before I give up totally on the idea of going back to my country? These were not questions I could ignore. So, in 1994 I took a leave of absence for one year and went back home with my family to give it a try.

My idea was to go back and do what I could within my own field and steer clear from politics, other than being an active and engaged citizen. I managed two businesses, taught at the University, ran the association of Ethiopian economists, started a weekly newspaper and established the Ethiopian Economic Policy Research Institute.

But I knew that all this activity, while personally satisfying, was not enough to generate the kind of social transformation that I believed Ethiopia needed if it were to improve the miserable condition it is in. I deeply believe that durable economic prosperity can only come about when people take responsibility for their own lives. This, in turn, requires an atmosphere free from fear, a confidence in one's own abilities, and the courage to take risks. From all the research we had done at the institute, I was convinced that Ethiopian society was and is a traumatized society because of the terror it experienced during the Mengistu era. It was what Nathan Sharansky has called a fear society. It was clear to me that the new government was purposely continuing this policy of fear, albeit not as crudely as the previous government. It penalized political opponents through a combination of economic pressure (for example firing 40 university professors, disbanding the army, letting some 300,000 families starve, forcibly closing businesses when the owners were deemed hostile), manipulation of the legal system (such as falsely accusing its political opponents of corruption and imprisoning them illegally) and crude violence when necessary (mass killings, torture and the like) to instill fear and terror.

While still at the Economic Institute, I started to contribute a regular op-ed piece to a weekly newspaper to raise issues of democracy and development. I argued the importance of liberty in general and academic freedom in particular and the need to democratize our society. In my columns I criticized many government actions and policies regarding human rights abuses not only as important values in their own right, but also to effectively combat poverty. While these

contributions were well received by the academic community and the general public, it did not buy me a lot of friends within the government, although I tried to make these articles moderate enough to appeal to the more enlightened government officials. I continued to do this even after my arrest, for 29 days in 2001, for preaching academic freedom to University students. After 10 years of such relentless engagement, I finally decided that the only way to effect serious change was to work towards changing the political system itself. That is when I resigned from the Economic Institute in September 2004, to concentrate on the upcoming Parliamentary election due to take place on May 15, 2005.

The three elections before the 2005 election were essentially a farce. The ruling party of the rebels was essentially running by itself with some token “opposition” candidates running to give it some color for the benefit of the international donor community. In both previous elections, there were a dozen or so opposition party or independent parliamentarians allowed to win seats in a 545 seat Legislature. Please understand that not once in the rule of the EPRDF regime has this Parliament ever taken the initiative to enact a law that was not submitted by the Prime Minister. It has been a rubber stamp Parliament that no one respects. Rural people bother to vote in these elections only because EPRDF cadres threaten to deny credit to peasants if they don’t vote for the ruling party. In urban areas the poor were compelled to vote to avoid eviction from government owned houses, which this government has maintained despite its professed free market policies.

This total marginalization of the population from the political system was threatening to destabilize the society as more and more frustrated people resorted to armed struggle to change the government or in some cases, sudden mass demonstrations occurred, leading to confrontations with the police or the army with a loss of dozens of lives. In some far away provinces these conflicts were claiming **hundreds of lives**, as in the Gambella region for example, where over 1000 people were killed by the army in what some dubbed a genocide of the Agnwak tribe. I also noted, while in prison in 2001, that thousands of people from the Oromia region were imprisoned unjustly in the government’s attempt to stamp out support for the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). The already tense ethnic dynamics in Ethiopia were becoming increasingly explosive. I was afraid that unless something was done to democratize our society, these contradictions would blow up in a short time, threatening the very stability of

the country. I, along with many academics and international observers believed that our best chance to change the situation was to make the 2005 election serious and to enfranchise the population by using the opening that the election could create.

Accordingly, a small group of academics decided to participate in the election to signal the general community to take this election seriously. We formed a political movement that we called Rainbow Ethiopia. We urged all the non-ethnic parties to create an umbrella organization to coordinate the election effort and to forward only one candidate per district. Thus was formed the CUD. I was selected to run the campaign and we ran a spirited campaign that took full advantage of the government's wish to look democratic in the eyes of its foreign donors. The government was so confident that people would not risk voting for the opposition for fear of government reprisals, that the ruling party did not even have any campaign rallies until the last week of the campaign. It was simply sending government operatives (development agents and the like) to tell peasants who to vote for, confident that they would do what they were told. Their calculation was that even if they lost the urban vote, which they did not expect to lose, the rural vote that they believed, fear had secured for them, would be enough to give them a landslide victory. What they did not suspect was that **the spirit of freedom** that had been unleashed by our campaign could **transcend the deep fear that has rendered the population powerless and submissive for centuries. But, that was exactly what happened.** The election fever permeated even the most remote areas of the country. People were ready for freedom and they wanted to change their circumstances through their votes. **And the result was simply miraculous.**

The ruling party started to panic a few weeks before the election after seeing the large number of crowds our campaign was attracting, even in rural areas. Government thugs started to disrupt rallies in rural areas, sometimes firing shots into crowds. A week before Election Day our long planned campaign finale in the main square in Addis Ababa attracted an estimated 2-3 million people. A day before, the ruling party's rally, which literally bribed and forced residents could not attract even a tenth of the numbers who came to our rally. The government was now in a complete panic. They knew they would lose the election if they let the process continue untainted. That whole week, they started arresting those whom they suspected would be our election observers to ensure that there would be no witnesses when they rigged the election. All our protests to the Electoral Board and to international observers (including the EU and the

Carter Center) could not persuade the government to stop. By Election Day, we lost over 30% of our election observers to various local prisons.

Despite all this, however, Election Day, May 15, was comparatively peaceful. What was surprising was the incredibly heavy turnout. Lines started forming in various polling stations as early as 3:00 AM on Sunday, although polling was not supposed to start 6:00 AM. By noon, it was clear to everyone that polls could not close at 6:00 PM as planned. In some polling stations that I, myself, visited people were voting as late as 2:00 AM the next morning. The atmosphere was **festive**. People were really excited by the process and felt part of a very important moment in their country's history. **I saw a young girl of 19 crying her heart out at one of the polling stations, when she was told she could not vote because she had lost her voter registration card. I heard 80 year old citizens declaring that they were ready to die now that they had seen this day in their country.** The day after the election, the head of the EU Observation Mission, Mrs. Anna Gomes, **said she had never seen such a commitment and enthusiasm to democracy by any people as in Ethiopia that day.** By the time the last polling station was closed, the turnout **was over 90%** of the registered voters.

Regardless of all the problems that occurred before Election Day, everyone was ready to ignore those irregularities as minor compared to what was achieved on Election Day. But, the real trouble was yet to come. The signs of trouble ahead started to show on the night of the election. The Prime Minister appeared on television at 8:00 PM **even while voting in many parts of the Capital was still taking place**, and declared a state of emergency in the capital city. We knew then that there was going to be serious trouble. **There was no obvious reason** to declare a state of emergency as the election had been very peaceful. Foreigners were told by the Prime Minister that he took this measure because he was afraid of what his own party supporters would do when they found out that they had lost the election, which the foreigners thought was really reasonable, although we knew it was a complete lie. I was in our party office following the election in the wee hours of the morning contacting election observers in the capital and all over the country. The votes were supposed to be counted the same evening, the results certified, a signed copy given to party representatives and posted at the polling station for the public to see no later than the next morning. While this rule was followed in the urban areas, we started to hear reports

from our representatives in many rural areas and even from international observers that the election authorities told them to leave as the counting would not take place that night.

Party representatives who refused to leave the polling stations without getting their certificates were arrested by the police and the special military unit dispatched to do the vote rigging. By the end of the evening less than half of all the electoral districts had issued certificates and more than half the districts did not even count the votes. In these places, our party representatives were either arrested by the local police or chased from their homes at gun point by the military and local militia. In most places, the military was working with the National Election Board (NEB) representatives. In some sites, however, even the NEB representatives were kicked out of the polling stations until the whole ballot box was taken, the contents cleared and replaced by **new and fictitious ballots** announcing the victory of the ruling party candidate. **But, it was a messy affair.** Because they did not expect such a trouncing, they were ill prepared to steal the election cleanly. It took about two weeks for the government and the ruling party to finish this process of rigging and announce official “preliminary results.”

In the meantime, on Monday May 16, the day after the election and before more than half the districts had even started counting the ballots, the ruling party appeared on television and declared an overall victory in the parliamentary election, claiming close to 70% of the votes. The postmodern coup d’ etat African style was complete. What remained, so far as the ruling party was concerned, was to give this blatant usurpation and daylight robbery the necessary legal cover to make it palatable to the complicit international community. As always, the Americans were quick to call it a day and “look forward”. They started to consult with international observers to see if they could certify the election as flawed but acceptable. They also started to talk seriously to us for the first time. The two diplomats who came to my office a few days after the election asked me a series of questions about the party and its positions on a variety of issues of interest to the US. They told me that they did not expect this outcome and that their policy was “**fluid**” at that point. The then ambassador, Aurelia Brazil, in a private conversation with me in her office a few days later indirectly informed me that the US was not prepared for such a drastic change and that she suspected the government would not accept defeat. She suggested that we take what we were given by the government, call it progress, and hope for a better election next time.

Otherwise, the situation might get nasty and our personal security could be at great risk if we

contested the government's official result through any form of public protest. As an African American herself, she told me, it took African Americans hundreds of years to get their rights, and she asserted they got these rights by peacefully working through the system. She said, that is what we should do. The US would help in this effort by increasing funding for the strengthening of the institutions necessary for democratization. Ethiopia, she suggested, was not yet ready for full fledged democratization. I reminded the Ambassador that the Civil Rights movement in the United States was fought with blood and sweat and that if not for the determination of those involved in the movement through street demonstrations, sit-ins and boycotts, the system would not have granted them these basic rights enshrined in the Constitution.

This US effort faced two problems, however. The first was in the person of the head of the EU observation mission, Mrs. Anna Gomes. Because the EU had the largest foreign observation mission, they were able to canvass the country more broadly compared with the Carter Center's 50 observers limited to urban areas. Mrs. Gomes' team was alarmed by the total opacity of the vote count after Election Day. They, like opposition party representatives, were denied access to the counting after the first night. In all the regions where they had observers and vote counting took place on the night of the election, they saw the opposition winning. They did a statistical analysis of a representative sample of the voting (80% rural and 20% urban constituencies) and concluded that CUD would win a plurality, followed by EPRDF and other opposition parties. The combined opposition vote without a doubt would have given them the majority of seats in Parliament, in turn electing the Prime Minister. Mrs. Gomes' secret exit poll was made available to the international community, making it difficult for the US representatives and other supporters of the status quo to push openly for acceptance of the ruling party's declaration of victory. The second problem came from the population. The anger generated by the stolen election was such that ordinary people were ready to come out on the streets to protest, defying the Prime Minister's illegal ban against public demonstrations. Things were becoming tense and any open support by the international community of this blatant usurpation of power was bound to inflame the situation. Instead, the international community chose to quietly pressure the opposition to accept the results, as indicated in my conversation with the US Ambassador above. After two weeks of delay, when the ruling party was finished with changing the ballots to reflect exactly what it had declared a day after the election, the so called "independent election authority" released its "preliminary results" more or less confirming the ruling party's earlier declarations.

The anger this generated among the public led to the first open and spontaneous demonstration, resulting in the **military killing over 40 unarmed civilians by live bullets.**

To make a long story short, things went downhill from then on. Mass arrests, beatings and torture of opposition supporters and open surveillance of opposition party leaders became the norm. For the next five months I was openly followed by plainclothes security men 24/7 with three cars with an average of three men toting guns and shouting insults until I was imprisoned in November 2005. I simply could not travel with my wife and kids for fear of endangering their lives. When these **goons** were given special instructions to increase the harassment, one of the cars would pass me at a very high speed, cut me off and stop the car in the middle of a busy road and stay there blocking me and all the traffic behind me for a few minutes. If this happened during the day, my response would be to simply open a newspaper and pretend to read, ignoring them. Since their aim was to make me angry, I felt that the appropriate overt response was to keep my cool, although I was **livid** at the obscenity of their actions. The international community was not even willing to openly condemn such outrageous actions by the government. I say here openly because when you ask diplomats why they are not outraged by these actions, they tell you they are and that they are communicating their outrage to their government in private.

I remember in July 2005 when Congressman Chris Smith (R- NJ) came to visit Ethiopia on a fact finding mission. He was then Chair of the House Africa Sub Committee and like the Bush Administration very friendly to the government of Meles Zenawi. In his meeting with some opposition leaders at the US Embassy, he asked us what we wanted him to communicate with the Prime Minister when he met him later in the afternoon. After we raised the need to have an independent investigation of election fraud and the massacre of the June killings (*after which he gave us a long lecture about how we should all stand up for life and against abortion*), I broached the subject of harassment of opposition leaders and I told him the above story. He simply refused to believe that the government could do that and said that I must be exaggerating. He said that he knows Meles and he believes that he is a polished person who would not allow this to happen. He was looking at the local diplomats for confirmation of his views and they told him that they had heard these allegations but could not confirm them. I told them that they could step outside of the Embassy right then and see it for themselves. He took me up on it. He asked one of his aides to go in my car for a few minutes and come back and report to him what he saw.

The minute my car came out, not seeing or caring about the cargo I had, the security people came with their three cars following us and harassing us. The aide was quite flabbergasted by the crudeness of it all. After **just a few minutes**, he asked me to take him back. He was quite shaken. He could not understand how I could take this with a smile on my face. I told him that was simply my cover. I also told him that if they planned to raise this issue with the Prime Minister, he would totally deny it to their faces and that they should not tell him that they saw it, at least, before he told them it was a complete lie fabricated by the opposition. **I know my dictator very well, including how he manipulates the Ferenjis (foreigners).** When the Congressman raised the issue with the Prime Minister later that afternoon, the PM confidently stated that he knew every detail since the security forces were directly under his command after the election and that he could assure the Congressman that this accusation was a complete lie. Congressman Smith was so disgusted by the lie, and I guess totally betrayed, that he became more or less the first US official to fully understand the nature of the beast we were dealing with. He ended up being a vocal opponent of the government and the first, along with Congressman Donald Payne to introduce a bill in Congress condemning the Ethiopian government's human rights violations and calling for Ethiopian government officials to account for the atrocities committed by the government following the election and for the establishment of an independent commission to investigate these atrocities. Unfortunately for Ethiopian democracy, the key is in the hands of the Bush administration and its security agenda whose implementation requires cooperation with the government at the expense of human rights and democratization in Africa.

Between June and November, all attempts to push the government to moderate its position failed. Although there was no doubt that the election was stolen, our call for a rerun of the elections, the formation of a transitional national unity government to conduct another election in a couple of years (in line with what has been proposed by Kofi Anan and more lately Bush in Kenya) simply fell on deaf ears. Fearing that the public anger would lead to bloodshed, we even proposed an 8 point plan to allow the ruling party to stay in power for the next five years but to negotiate on restructuring the various institutions necessary for democratization and future free and fair elections. All of this was automatically rejected by the ruling party. The only measure that remained for us was to call for a peaceful public protest. We called for a three day stay at home strike to avoid confrontation with the army and the police in November. Before the strike even started, the government used the army to brutally crackdown on the opposition, shooting and

killing some 193 unarmed civilians in Addis Ababa and arresting over 50,000 suspected supporters of our party including almost all the leaders of the main opposition. The Kangaroo court whose judges were handpicked by the ruling party to try our case (we were charged with genocide, among other things) was so embarrassing that it was extremely painful to sit through the trial and watch this travesty of justice. When the government finally decided to release us after 21 months, (partly, I suspect, because of the impending bill in Congress) the formal court proceeding was suddenly cut short, a swift conviction and sentence passed followed by a pardon to release us.

The court's blatant disregard even for ordinary procedures in our case, let alone to substantive issues of the law, vindicated our argument that these institutions have no independent existence whatsoever. Thus ended the Ethiopian democratic experiment, that had started with such high hopes, leaving the country in the **darkness of totalitarian rule.**

The ability of the Meles regime to maintain its close relationship with the US even with a modicum of respectability despite what it has done to the democracy movement has generated interest in Africa both from dictators and the democratic opposition. Olisegun Obasanjo visited Ethiopia about a month before he openly stole the election in Nigeria. Meles was also visited by his comrades in crime, such as Mwai Kibaki of Kenya and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda. **While in prison, we used to quip that these dictators were coming to get tips about "how to steal an election, murder hundreds of people and still continue to be a great ally and friend of the West."** But the lesson was also for the democratic opposition in the continent. Under these dictatorships, you don't get redress from the courts, because they are just simple instruments of the executive, irrespective of what the Constitutions says. African dictators have replaced the army with the election boards and the courts to carry out their coup d'états. That, I think is why Mr. Odinga in Kenya refused to heed Western advice to go to court to settle the election irregularities. Instead, his supporters fought on the streets. **The international community seems to listen to power more favorably than to justice. The result, unfortunately, is generalized instability.**

IV: The rationale of US policy makers. Why ally with dictatorships?

So, why is the West so indifferent to democratization in Africa? Even more pointedly, why do Western governments willingly turn a blind eye to human rights abuses and the lack of democratization to work so closely with dictatorships? There are no simple answers to these questions, and some might argue these are not new and unique problems related to Africa. There is some truth in that. Anyone who reads Samantha Power's meticulously documented recent book "*A problem From Hell*³" could see that Western reaction to the egregious crime of genocide from the Turkish massacre of Armenians in the turn of the century, the Holocaust during the Second World War, Polpots' massacre of his own people in Kampuchea in the 70s, Saddam Hussein's massacre of the Kurds in the 80s, the more recent Rwandan Genocide of 1994, all the way to the current genocide in Darfur, has been lame and amazingly delayed. From this, it is not totally unreasonable to surmise that there is nothing unique about the West's benign neglect of the African humanitarian and democratization crisis. It is simply in the nature of international diplomacy to give a high premium to the issue of sovereignty.

Although I don't want to simply dismiss this position as unprincipled, from my various discussions with diplomats on the ground, I really believe there is a slight difference in Western policy in Africa that merits careful consideration. Let me very briefly outline some of the main arguments I have heard to justify Western policy before I close with a brief alternative suggestion that can address both the issues of principle and the other presumed interests of the West, particularly those of the United States.

The first argument that one usually hears from otherwise well meaning Westerners is that the continent is beset with so many economic, health and environmental problems that democracy is not really a very important priority in the region. At best we should hope for a government that provides stability and is relatively ("**by African standards**") clean from corruption. Through rapid economic growth and the emergence of a large middle class, the argument goes, democracy will eventually follow. Implicit in this argument, of course, is that rapid economic growth and poverty alleviation can be achieved without necessarily democratizing society. The examples of China and other East Asian countries are invoked to show that democracy is not necessary for growth, or can even be inimical to economic progress. This is an argument usually borrowed

³ Samantha Power, "*A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide.*" New York, Harper Collins, 2002.

from economists at the World Bank and IMF who have an interest in lending money to these governments without any consideration of such “minor” political issues. What is interesting is that after prioritizing market reforms to the neglect of these issues of good governance and failing to show noticeable economic progress, economists in these institutions have now realized that, at least in the African case, good governance and democratization are crucial for good economic performance, as are market reforms. Political conflicts and the ensuing instability are now recognized as key obstacles to economic progress and poverty alleviation in the continent.

The second argument is the sovereignty argument that is ubiquitous in international relations. Interference in the internal affairs of countries, especially poor countries in Africa, is likened to the Western imposition of its rule during the colonial period. This is the favorite argument of African dictators to scare away Western critics from their malfeasance. The problem with this argument is both in its principle and in its selective applicability. First, the central issue here is not imposition by force. Donors cannot be coerced to dole out their tax payers money in the form of foreign aid to dictators when they know that the governments are no good and will use their money directly or indirectly to suppress their own populations. By simply refusing to give their money to these governments, they can effect change within these societies in an important way consistent with their own democratic values. Second, most proponents of this argument do not shy away from imposing neo liberal economic policies on these countries, even against the wishes of the majority of the people. It is inconsistent to say the least to invoke the principle of sovereignty when the issue involves human rights and democratization and completely ignore it when it comes to the question of economic policy. A related argument is the issue of the impossibility of imposing democratic rule (that is, democratic values) on another country. That sounds reasonable on the face of it. I am one to argue that democracy in Africa has to be home grown and must come by the struggle of the African people themselves. The problem here is that African democratic forces are not asking the West to hand them a democratic political order. That, they will fight for themselves. What they are asking is for the West to stop supporting dictatorships, and there is **a big and obvious difference** between the two.

Here, another issue crops up related to penalizing the victims of dictatorships. The argument is that Western support for these governments is largely humanitarian, and any cessation of such support will hurt poor people more than it hurts the government. In any case, Western support is

argued to be ineffective in bringing about behavioral change on the part of governments. This is an argument usually supported by international NGOs and other well meaning folks who are really concerned about the welfare of the poor. This is a much more difficult argument to dismiss and that is why some times democracy activists in Africa shy away from advocating such measures. There are two countervailing arguments against this. The first is the horrible record of foreign aid in reaching the poor, especially in countries with bad governance. Some African kleptocrats are known to have used aid money to enrich themselves rather than help the poor as such. Also, using foreign aid (such as food aid) to buy peasants' political acquiescence is not an uncommon practice in Africa. A more important argument in my view is that if there is a political will, there are numerous ways of effectively targeting these governments without hurting the poor. The West is not seen to seriously follow that route either, questioning the veracity of that claim.

Another commonly made argument is similar to the one proffered by the US ambassador to Ethiopia that I earlier related: The idea that Africans are not yet ready for democracy and democracy could actually be destabilizing bringing ethnic hostilities to the fore. That it takes time for democracy to take root is not a controversial point, in my view, although the parallel that is usually drawn to the US⁴ is widely off the mark. The point about time, however, is relevant only when there is a genuine attempt by the governments to democratize. Here financial or technical support to strengthen the institutions is legitimate and the argument valid. However, when the government is the main obstacle to democratization through its own actions of stealing elections and making the relevant institutions deliberately weak and ineffective, the issue is not about time. It is rather about the unwillingness of dictators to step down. Democratization will never happen unless these governments are forced to accept democratization.⁵

⁴ I was once sitting along with a group of Western ambassadors when Meles Zenawi gave a long rendition about how even the US election is imperfect referring to the 2000 election in Florida, while the ambassadors were nodding their heads in agreement.

⁵ I remember a retired Parliamentarian from Canada who came as a consultant to CIDA to provide technical assistance to the Ethiopian Parliament. He was very enthusiastic about providing training, computerizing Parliamentary functions...etc. He believed the problem was a capacity building problem. He was puzzled after a while that the entire request he was getting from the Parliamentarians was a paid educational trip to visit parliament in Europe or North America. I keep telling him whenever we meet that he is wasting his time and that it has nothing

I think the much deeper problem that encourages inaction among Western diplomats is that they really don't believe Africa is ready for democracy. Some even unabashedly argue that democracy is a uniquely Western tradition that other people could not emulate. Africans are more comfortable in their traditional societies, giving total power to their chiefs to do as they please in their public life. Contemporary presidents or Prime Ministers are nothing but a modern version of traditional tribal chieftains. In fact, democratization will actually destabilize these societies by expanding traditional ethnic differences, the argument goes. This is an argument that is forwarded by some African scholars to defend the status quo or, sometimes, to decry the obviously false democratization process and the cynical use of ethnic differences by ruthless dictators in periods of election. I have also heard this argument from some respectable commentators and academics in the West, particularly in relation to the Middle East.

I don't believe this argument holds water. **I for one believe that the yearning for freedom is a universal human value.** The inability of some societies to break away from their bondage early should not be misconstrued as a lack of desire for freedom. Africans' yearning for democracy has been repeatedly manifested whenever people get a chance to exercise their freedom. They have indeed fought for it on many occasions. Having seen and being part of the 2005 elections in Ethiopia, having observed how ordinary men and women fought for liberty there and having also seen the events in Kenya, Nigeria and other countries on the continent, I don't have the slightest doubt that **people in Africa not only want democracy and freedom, but that they deserve it.** To condemn them to lives of subjugation and to justify this circumstance by saying that they are not yet ready for it is downright cynical if not racist. It is to be a willing stooge for all kinds of corrupt dictators who would lie, cheat and kill to get Western support to stay in power.

I have heard some diplomats say that Western governments have very little leverage to change the character of dictatorships. I have heard Meles say repeatedly that he could care less about Western aid and can live without it rather than accept Western interference on the country's political affairs. This is repeated with bravado whenever dictators are put under pressure for their

to do with capacity. No matter what he does, the institution will never operate as a real parliament unless the government accepts genuine democratization and thus separation of powers. Four years and millions of dollars in foreign aid later, he went back home totally frustrated but, I suspect richer.

criminal behavior. Trust me, this is not true. A determined and coordinated action by Western donors, has a much greater chance of success than it may appear from the outside. Invariably, these governments are weak internally because they are deeply unpopular. Their economy's dependence on foreign aid is not insignificant. But, even more important, a loss of political and diplomatic support makes them extremely vulnerable to democratic pressures from within. If the West has any influence in making changes, I believe it is in the African continent. **A stern refusal to go to bed with dictatorships in Africa** will have significant positive consequence.

Finally, there is the all important argument of Western self interest, particularly the global war on terror. The claim here is that the top priority for Western policy makers is to fight terrorism and whoever is an ally in this fight is a friend, no matter their record on human rights or democratization regarding their own people. **Let me make something clear from the outset.** Fighting terrorism is an important priority and Western governments are justified in doing so. I really believe this is an important issue not only for the West, but, for all people around the world. My problem is with the premise that we can fight and win the war against terror by allying with governments that routinely terrorize their own people. **These kinds of governments are breeders of terrorists.** Alliance with them is not principled, it is ad hoc. If, and, when they believe it is in their survival interest to ally with terrorists, they will do so.

Believe you me! Empowering ordinary people is the real antidote to the war against terror. Democracies have a principled interest to fight terrorism. The recent election in Pakistan, I think, is a perfect example. In almost all the places where Islamic extremists were expected to win, people have elected more moderate forces. **In contrast, terrorists hide in places where people have lost hope and are disenfranchised. They take advantage of the anger of subjected people for their extremist ends. That is why, I really believe that, even for the legitimate security interest of the West, promoting democracy and standing with the struggle of people for liberty, will provide a more durable victory against terrorism. I will stop here.**

Thank you.