

We Will Never Cave In

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There are perhaps 250 private organizations consistently active across borders that take as their reason for being (*raison-d'être*) the advocacy of some part of the international law of human rights and/or humanitarian affairs on a global basis.

From this group a handful have the requisite budget, contacts, expertise, and reputation to get the global media and major governments to pay them at least periodic attention across a range of issues and situations.

Most INGO can be said to be liberal or pragmatic-liberal actors, in that they emphasize policies for the betterment of individuals under legal norms, rather than emphasizing the collective national interests of states as pursued through the application of power.

Amnesty International

The recent annual report published by the Amnesty International (AI) accuses and condemns the Ethiopian government on many issues. Amnesty International (AI) and its kith and kin are ever keen to trigger diplomatic and economic sanction against the Ethiopian government. They are tirelessly urging western governments to take diplomatic measures to influence Ethiopian government to abandon CSP and other policies that they think unacceptable.

Unfortunately, many international agencies and Western states have serially approved and signed grants and loans with the government of Ethiopia. International donors and Western states are continuing to ignore their appeal. Thus, I believe AI would censure donors for “not taking human right seriously” as the west deiced to pour money in to the coffer of the Ethiopian government.

Amnesty International (AI) has admitted that “Economic growth continued apace, along with

significant foreign investment including in the agriculture, construction and manufacturing sectors, large-scale development projects such as hydroelectric dam building and plantations” (page: 1).

However, like other human rights NGOs, Amnesty International (AI) is engaged in the “naming and shaming” game. For it believes that sometimes public pressure can be productive, it opted to publish and republish its hackneyed “model report.”

Of course, pressure made by giant western states and human rights NGOs on Third world states would have some effect. We can cite a number of situations in which pressure brought some gains over time. Regrettably, until now, this is not the case in Ethiopia. Nonetheless, these human rights NGOs keep on the game of “naming and shaming.”

In its 2014/15 annual report, Amnesty International has rendered the usual clichéd opinion that Ethiopian readers are familiar with in the last two decades, that is, since EPRDF took power. The only new thing one could get from reading the recent annual report published by Amnesty International (AI) is the date on which the botched report is published or republished. The mere truth one could find from this report is the posted date -February 28, 2015. The report simply is the latest version of the old Amnesty International (AI) condemnation, which it often leveled against the Ethiopian government. The Ethiopian readers have no option but to ignore it once again. As for me, I do not want to ignore but like to take some issue with it.

Some Issues

Amnesty International (AI) tried to dance different with the same old song. Hence, I am not writing this article to rectify the wrongs of this report and put facts in the right light. Rather I want to send a message that we do not surrender to the continued barrage of Amnesty International and its likes.

Amnesty International (AI) clearly knew that its potential and actual subscribers are throwing the reports it published into a dustbin. Nonetheless, it continued to produce negative representation of the Ethiopian government.

NGOs such as *Amnesty International*, *Human Rights Watch*, and *Physicians for Human Rights*, among others, are highly active in human rights matters and generate some influence. AI report on Ethiopia claimed, "Freedom of expression is subjected to serious restrictions." It also alleged "excessive use of force and extrajudicial executions, arbitrary arrests and detentions" etc.

However, states that sometimes claim to channel or manipulate foreign assistance in relation to human rights and democracy continue to have various engagement and different treaties, and Ethiopia continued to have cordial relation relations with all important international donors and western states.

History has repeatedly proved to us that international NGOs do not only pressure states to do the right thing. In fact, they are victims of various pressures that would prompt them to take wrong actions. As usual, AI report on Ethiopia is embedded with the insidious motives, which this organization always harbors against Ethiopia. It is full of baseless criticisms aimed to discrediting and discouraging the success registered by Ethiopian government.

We have three prominent mechanisms states employ to influence another government's human rights policies: diplomatic, economic, and military means. States usually calculate the instruments available, the expected effect of the action taken and anticipated reactions. For instance, the United States, the most important actor in the current international relations, has a foreign policy that allegedly has a particular slant to human rights. However, according to some critics, Washington is more prone to preach to others than to take international rights standards very seriously in its own policies.

Washington is full of private groups that lobby for some version of human rights abroad. The national communications media also report on international human rights issues with some regularity. But many of the human rights NGOs in the 1990s bemoaned their inability to stimulate more action, and more consistent action, for rights in US foreign policy.

Public opinions have reflected that the American society may (or may not) support costly humanitarian intervention or ventures, i.e. in terms of soldiers' lives, of their government and

also have shown that Washington is not always moved to action by media coverage of human rights violations and humanitarian hardship.

For instance, Samantha Power has shown that throughout its modern history, when the USA has faced situations of genocide or near-genocide abroad, there has never been a powerful domestic push from public opinion or the Congress forcing the President into a decisive involvement.

It is clear that the USA continues to emphasize a narrower national law rather than a broader international law of human rights. Even some of its international partners, like the Netherlands, have criticized this US orientation. It is well known that a number of Canadians view the US version of market democracy as unnecessarily harsh, overly individualized, and lacking in a sense of community.

The second among the soft spots in U.S foreign policy on human rights is its undecided posture on authoritarian, and otherwise illiberal development. Rhetorically, Washington supports development via liberal democracy. It has joined with other western states in the World Bank to occasionally manipulate loans in relation to human rights issues and democratic governance.

Officially, it provides economic assistance for democratic development in Russia and other formerly communist states in Europe, as well as in the Western Hemisphere. Political conditionality with a liberal flavor has been applied, in bilateral and multilateral channels, to states such as Cambodia, China, Croatia, Burma, Guatemala, Kenya, Malawi, and others.

But where the USA has important economic or political interests, Washington has not sought to link human rights performance with either multilateral or bilateral economic transactions. This is clearly the case in current Sino-American relations, where Most Favored Nation trading status was de-linked from China's human rights record. It has always been the case that key oil-producing states like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were exempt from US pressure on human rights. Under its "democracy assistance" program, more funds have gone toward market restructuring and related economic and security concerns than toward support for civil and political rights.

USA it talked about democratizing the Arab Middle East and did not exempt the oil-rich authoritarians from that discourse. But it continued to support various dictators, like Musharraf in Pakistan, and in 2005 concluded a deal to sell jet fighters to that government which had arrived in dictatorial power by way of an unconstitutional *coup de tat*.

Futile Attempt

We read the non-stop vilifying reports AI has been publishing and republishing on Ethiopia. It is engaged in a futile attempt to sever and block development aids to Ethiopia. But that has, until now, bear no fruit.

The report has alleged that the Ethiopian government is crushing political opposition and eviscerates independent media and civil society, and the use of arbitrary detention, torture, and other repressive measures to suppress dissent.

It also claimed, “The government was hostile to suggestions of dissent, and often made preemptive arrests to prevent dissent from manifesting. Independent media publications were subject to further attack. Peaceful protesters, journalists, and members of opposition political parties were arbitrarily arrested. The Charities and Societies Proclamation continued to obstruct the work of human rights organizations. Arbitrary detention and torture and other ill-treatment were widespread, often used as part of a system for silencing actual or suspected dissent.”

As always, it is trying to wind up, tease and lead donors to believe the fabricated stories it is publishing and republishing. But it “consumers” regularly and uniformly turned its reports down. As a matter of course, when presented with such fabricated findings, the reaction of donors is usually to try to investigate the facts on the ground. Sometimes they respond that they had no evidence to support the allegations. These reactions could disappoint these international organizations, but they keep on doing it with a hope that they will one day change their mind.

As AI presented report after report of “compelling evidence of human rights abuses,” donors

sometime publicly dismissed their findings and denied that the alleged problem exists. If this is the case, then, I bet its consumers will never take it seriously. It must take a moment and see itself with eyes open. If it continues to come up with the same old story, it will be received with the customary abject rejection. I guess, at this junction, reports published by AI do not cherish the hearts and minds but the trash-dustbin its consumers.

I found some of the allegations to be an insult to intelligence. Allegations made can be fact-checked and consumers can make informed judgment. Hence, they will throw the report in to the dustbin. I advise AI to change the way “it walk its walk.” Its perseverance on false allegations does not adorn it with the monopoly of truth; it will rather be a more concrete evidence for its dishonesty and mischievous trait. This time the incessant demonization of the AI tend to be perceived by its consumers, as an “Ouch!” advertisement.

Its report would simply tell us more about AI disposition than the Ethiopian government, which it tries to vilify. This would harm the credibility of the institution and the validity of its report. However, in as much as we opted to ignore the negative advertisements of AI on Ethiopia, we get more of it than less. As usual, we do not take AI report seriously, but we are becoming fatigued and no longer can bear any of it any more. Honestly, the report will no more do any harm on Ethiopia, but displease its consumers and forced them to press the mute button.

Of course, the Ethiopian government cannot be held accountable for the hollow criticism of AI. The intriguing thing is, while we are living witnesses to the transgressions of the so-called “independent publications,” AI’s report had vainly tried to dismiss the findings of the study by tangentially implying hidden government orchestration to stifle the private newspapers concerned.

The report says, “Early in 2014, a “study” conducted by the national Press Agency and Ethiopian News Agency and published in the government-run Addis Zemen newspaper targeted seven independent publications, alleging that they had printed several articles which “promoted terrorism”, denied economic growth, belittled the legacy of former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, and committed other “transgressions.” It also claimed, “The government is hostile to suggestions of dissent, and often made pre-emptive arrests to prevent dissent from

manifesting.”

The motive revealed in this report counts for everything in the well-orchestrated vilification of the AI or HRW on Ethiopia. In my opinion, these NGO’s have failed to live up to their commitment and had developed a blind spot to legitimate concerns that the government routinely raises.

What AI and HRW are unable to accept is that, the Ethiopian government would never accept being a “weak puppet” for any outside persons – legal or natural. There was never a time when Ethiopian government had accepted being a “weak puppet.” This the motive revealed in human rights groups report and this counts for everything in the well-orchestrated vilification of the AI or HRW on Ethiopia.

There was never a time when Ethiopians saw pleasure in a variant dancing of neo-colonialism, i.e. the dull songs of neo- liberalism. Ethiopia is a country of dignity, a staunch defender of its freedom and a country that symbolizes the end of the contemptuous attitude of the European slave masters. Ethiopia remains to be an icon of independence and a fire that ignite the torch of freedom that will last burning forever. Rather than being accountable to the constitution, if the Ethiopian government tends to be infirm and surrender itself to the dictates of the donors, then rule of law and democracy will fritter away.

Ethiopians were not, are not and will not be subservient to any foreign body -be it AI or HRW. If it fell to its knee for the donors pressures and interfere with the independent adjudication of the courts; then rule of law and accountability will vanish. Paradoxically enough, AI in this report is demanding the Ethiopian government to live within the limits law as enshrined in the constitution.

It further added, “Independent media publications were subject to further attack. Peaceful protesters, journalists, and members of opposition political parties were arbitrarily arrested. The Charities and Societies Proclamation continued to obstruct the work of human rights organizations. Arbitrary detention and torture and other ill-treatment were widespread, often used as part of a system for silencing actual or suspected dissent.”

Sidetracking all other issues that could be controversial, the presses concerned bent on subverting the constitutional order and eulogizing politician convicted of terrorist acts is too obvious for everybody to see. Nonetheless, AI capitalizes the imprisonment of journalists and politicians for it suitably serves it as a good chance to demonize the Ethiopian government. Customarily, AI is waiting avidly for every opportunity that would come in its way to demonize the ruling party. The report did not dare to criticize what it would routinely denounce in other cases.

I believe that the sovereignty of every country should be respected without considering their being small or big in terms of the territorial expanse or wealth. Ethiopians never cave in to Uncle Sam hypocritical attitudes. The proudly Ethiopian political party -EPRDF- exponentially represents this historical legacy and avidly protects the sovereignty of the state.

As early as 1994, a certain IMF official tried to dictate the course of action of the Ethiopian government. Then, the late PM Meles told him straight in the face, "I did not fight for solid seventeen years just to be instructed by any international bureaucrat." This is a witness account of the renowned noble prizewinner economist, Joseph Stiglitz, as he relates in his book - "Globalization and its Discontent."

Though they are vigilant on issues of sovereignty, the Ethiopian people have been economically poor that would invite such excesses by the international bureaucrats, which would tend to compromise their pride and dignity.

We had been suffering in abject poverty. Now, we start to see the light at the end of the tunnel. We are yet out of the dark tunnel; slowly but surely we will be in the open light. Even now, the skillfully perpetuated and manipulated image of Ethiopia by the ablest media professional of the West is beginning to fade by the fastest economic growth we manage to register in the last ten consecutive years. Today we have the largest economy in the Eastern Africa region with a promising prospect ahead.

As the Ethiopia government expressly declared in all its policy documents human rights and democracy are priority agenda for the Ethiopian government. In the last two decades, we have

meticulously learned two things: the vulnerability of our democratization process and the way to become free of it. By contrast, Westerners, with their long cherished culture of democracy and open discussion, strong democratic institutions would be less inclined to appreciate our problem. Instead, they took every failure from the standards of democratic governance, as a lack of political willingness in building vibrant democracy and in respecting human rights. Therefore, we sometime tend to view the demonization of advocacy groups like AI or HRW as a conspiracy to subvert our effort in consolidating our democratic system.

Concurring

There are cases when we see discrepancy. What the Ethiopian government saw as an instance of strengthening the system; the west would take it as an example of weakening. What the Ethiopian government perceived as broadening of the political space, the NGOs (both local and international) and some development partners would perceive as case of tightening the political space. What the Ethiopian government perceived as a bill that foster freedom of speech, some NGOs (both local and international) and some development partners would perceived it as a draconian law that fetter the exercise of the right.

At times, we may have a convergence. The single issue that commands consensus of all parties is the relationship of democracy and stability. On the issue of security, sovereignty and accountability, AI or HRW and the Ethiopian government are apart as heaven from the earth. Nevertheless, as exception to the rule, they have a concurring opinion on the recognition of the role that human rights play in underpinning stability. Granted, rapid economic progress is impossible without putting in place a system that respect democratic and human rights of citizens.

We deeply understand that our economic progress was made possible by the conducive political environment we put in place. The political environment would continue to be conducive so long as the democratic and constitutional system of governance stayed intact and further consolidated, being dynamic all the time. We are committed to create a fettered democratic system with an ever-driving motto that can be rephrased as “when we begin to be

loose in our commitment to democracy and human rights the Armageddon scene will creepily ensue.”

This is a wake-up call posted in wall of the office and the minds of our leaders. The Ethiopian government as it clearly expressed in its policy document, has pragmatically analyzed the general environment in which it operate. Distancing itself from being inflated with hollow patriotic feeling or chauvinistic ideas, it realized the poor position the country has as it stands today. Apart from being complacent by reiterating the grandeur of its history, it brings to focus that this generation has the lowliest place in the eye of the global community.

The coffer of the government is empty and it cannot go any far without the securing aid and assistance from the wealthy nations. This is an underlined assessment of the government. However, without a successful mobilization of our domestic resource to effect progress in all sectors we would not be able to secure aid and assistance. If we simply wish development without doing our “home work”, it will always remain a mirage.

The most important sphere of performance must be the domestic, which would eventually attract the foreign intervention we wanted to have. However, the bottom-line is fostering a “with or without them” kind of spirit. Hence, EPRDF does not consider democracy and human rights as cosmetics that it applies with conceit to attract foreigners. This is a principle that circulates in the political veins of EPRDF as a life giving blood.

We know that stability and prosperity cannot be founded on repression, forced displacement, interference in the courts and closing down the opposition, media and civil society. We acknowledge that economic development and human rights go hand in hand.

The Ethiopian government is clear in this regard. It has a more articulated concepts of the democratization process of our country. Any chance to peep into the policy documents of the FDRE would glaringly indicate what valuation has the Ethiopian government in this regard. The documents capitalizes that democracy should be held as a centerpiece of every effort the government made in realizing its objectives in all sectors.

AI wanted

AI wanted to have in Ethiopia a condition where a foreign body could get a chance to meddle itself in the internal affairs of Ethiopia. But the Ethiopian government denied this chance to anybody who wish to interfere in the internal political activities. Foreign elements would not be allowed to manipulate and maneuver the course of political events in Ethiopia they please.

Like AI the opposition political party leaders have similar miss-calculations in this regard. Opposition political party leaders count most on donors, Western embassies and international bureaucrats. Alas! That does not work with EPRDF. That is why both of them are against the CSO law. No, Ethiopian government would never be accountable to any foreign organization but to its citizens.

Some international agencies are trying to use their money as an excuse to meddle in the internal political affairs of the country. The CSO law promulgated by the federal parliament is primarily denied these international agencies the chance to meddle in the internal affairs of our country. EPRDF never allow this. But as indicated above, do not mistake this position of EPRDF as exception to the rule, as it is a core value embedded in the socio-cultural and historical tradition of the Ethiopian people.

However much I tried, I could hardly see a well-intentioned move in the effort made by the advocacy groups of the West in this regard. Nonetheless, I would be morally obliged to give them the benefit of the doubt to these advocacy groups and presume that they have a well-intentioned course of action marred with unintended caprice.

Looking to their past records with in this orientation, I found myself faced with all sorts of enigmatic problems wherever I turn my eyes on. This is because; they have contradictory premises of action and aims, on the one hand; and a wrong means of attaining their aims on the other.

The so-called advocacy groups and development partners have reiterated why they are interested in doing what they are doing. The alleged objective of these advocacy groups in

monitoring and investigating the human right situation in other countries is simply an altruistic fraternal solidarity. They wanted to see the rights of their fellow human being respected.

They may also argue that human right issues knows no boundary, as fraternity among the people of the world requires them to sympathize and show solidarity to their fellow human being. Hence, they hold a self-imposed mission of seeing a world free of human right abuses. These really justify their “honored” interventions.

With this rightly justified mission, they are expected to do what they are doing and continue to do so. I have no contention what so ever in this regard, but respect to the noble mission they have set for themselves. However, I would never endorse the means they employ to accomplish these noble ends. Hence, I have contentions.

In many instances they came to the open with a strongly politicized position that would compromise their vowed neutrality that would endowed them with a morally justified and magnanimous bearing over their contenders. They should employ a means by which they could solidify their credibility and give them an upright disposition in the eye of the public. Objectivity is their priceless asset. Falling into a political pit would really tarnish their dignity and their public image. This would in turn affect their cause badly. As Fredrick Nitech said, “defending a cause badly is defeating a cause.” The recent annual report could be tangible exhibit of the entire generic problem the advocacy groups have indulged themselves.

The first point that I would like to note here is their confusion in their role in the Third World democratization process. I remember a discussion, held five years or so ago in America. That was discussion prepared by CSIS African division. On that discussion, all but a representative from the Ethiopian government was invited. This I think is the default setting of panels organized by international advocacy groups.

On that occasion, a certain Human Right Watch expert (a persona non grata) and Yesuf Mulugeta of EHRCO have attended the forum as panelist. The Ethiopian government was not invited. It was an arrangement that justify its means by the end it set. I believe that was a perfect setting to barrage the Ethiopian government, for they hate it for simple ideological

reasons. I do not want to go in to the details and complex spirit of the discussion that was cunningly staged to accuse the government that is listed in their black book.

The often-heard word in that panel was “leverage.” Many of the panelists recognized the fact that “the west has no leverage on the EPRDF government.” That was the fact that disposes some Americans (who seem to have attended the panel with some overt political agenda) an easy. No “leverage” with regard to the Ethiopian government who never yields to the dictates of the so-called super-powers gets on their nerve. Participants who were so much disappointed by the conclusion of the 2005 election, had criticized the government for laying heavy hand on the protestors; and the opposition parties leaders for blowing their success to the wind.

The most pressing issue for those who were nursing their grudge with the hollow rhetoric was “how a transition of power could be effect.” The other important point of concern was the alleged “tightening of political space” following the 2005 election. In this regard the press law, the law that govern charity organization and societies and the anti- terrorist law were concern. These laws were deemed as frustrating setbacks in the democratization process that begin after the downfall of the *Derg* regime. One may come up with a number of arguments for or against these laws, however, no one would reasonably argue that democracy could be exported or imported to any country.

Out Source

There was this naïve notion on the part of the opposition leaders to “outsource” the democratization effort to international NGOs and embassy or state department personnel. I resiliently argue against the absurd position held by some advocacy groups and activists who presumed to effect progress in the democratization process by an arm-twisting pressure, vilification and intimidations.

This “false hope” must be abandoned in order to see a vibrant democratic progress in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government has been repeatedly reminding the opposition party leaders that no embassy personnel or foreigner would be a rescuer in matters that involve rule of law. A crystal-clear position of the government is that the granter of a free political participation is not

the foreigners but the constitution. It is the only insurer of our freedom. We must respect and protect this supreme law of the land as an apple of your eyes. Being oblivious of this fact would disturb the rule of the game.

However, the opposition party leaders and some of their members tend to relay on international NGOs and embassy officials of Western countries. A marriage between the wrongly channeled attitudes of both the local politicians and foreign elements has created a bad imprint on the overall political development of the country.

That was an important lesson we have drawn from the electoral process of the 2005 where we saw the local and international NGOs (including some religious institutions and EU election observers) attempted to dominate the political activities in Ethiopia.

The EPRDF led government, in as much as it labored to make a clear demarcation to its state and party functions; it requires international NGOs to distance themselves from an apparent political involvement that would be a contravention to their stated objectives. The CSO law enacted (as many would admit), has role to rectify bad tendencies of the local political party leaders and foreigners as well. It has created a legal framework that would allow a home grown and organic civic society activism.

Like the effort going on to substitute imported industrial goods for the last decade with the aim of fostering an indigenous economic development, we must substitute the “import of political agendas” by international NGOs and others.

Party leaders who entrained a false hope, and expect a miracle from AI or the US State Department should learn the fact that Ethiopia is a sovereign entity. True power lies in the hands of their constituency not in hands of international NGOs or government officials in the West.

It is also true that a country that came out of a dictatorial regime, of necessity, should make painful adjustments in many respects. “Ancient philosophies have to be scrapped, old social institutions have to disintegrate, bonds of caste, and creed and race have to burst.” In this process, large numbers of persons who cannot keep up with the changes and progress have to

have their expectations of a comfortable life frustrated; as very few communities are willing to pay the full price of democratization. Hence, the struggle of the progressive and reactionary forces ensues.

The leaders of the ruling party EPRDF are not only among the few who are willing to pay the full price of democratization but they are also the fore-bearer of the torch of freedom and democracy. However, our decades of energetic effort to promote “revolutionary democracy” have received little attention from the West, for it has been a bloodless process.

Today, few would hesitate to admit that the task of building democracy is more challenging than enthusiasts twenty years ago expected it to be. Well-intentioned efforts have not always produced the expected results. The democratization effort of our country has brought much success, but it has also a much sobering experience. In the initial rush to democratize, little thought was given to the terrain on which democracy was to be planted or the time required for it to take root. The lessons of the recent and earlier history were often ignored.

In the 1990s leaders, many of whom succeeded communists, were eager to gain international acceptance as democrats. Some simply "changed clothes" and gave their parties new names; others thought more deeply about creating new, open societies. But most were so eager for international acceptance that they rushed to commit themselves to new constitutions, political parties, elections, and the other trappings of mature democratic systems, not realizing how complex these processes could be.

Too often, the foundations on which a dynamic democracy must be built, that is, an educated public, a rational economy, a dependable legal and judicial system, and a flow of pertinent information at all levels of society were taken for granted, until their absence forced the realization that democracy could not go far without them.

Ethiopia's experience in establishing democracy in the 1990s is enlightening for both would-be democrats and democratizers. In some ways, its present leaders' efforts to establish democracy have succeeded to a remarkable degree. The administrative structure of the country has been transformed, and a new form of government -ethnic federalism- has been adopted. The

peasants who make up approximately 85 percent of the population have been freed to make their own decisions about which crops to plant and when and where to sell their produce. In fact, Ethiopia's new leaders have been conducting a more dramatic experiment in governance. However, the process has received little attention because it has been comparatively peaceful. The dog barks, but the camel keeps on moving.