



Will 2009 Become the Year of Ethiopian Independence from Dictators?

Solidarity Movement for New Ethiopia | January 4, 2009

Human rights cannot be fought alone, but will require all people to come together... Ethiopians should stand in solidarity and fight together against the human rights abuses committed against all of them... Ethiopians deserve a much better government than what they have now, but Ethiopians have to speak with one voice and then we will help them if they do this. (Mr. Chris Smith, U.S. Congressman)

Will 2009 be different from 2008—a year filled with increasing misery, repression and violence in Ethiopia and of apathy, disillusionment and division in the Diaspora? I say, yes, but only if we Ethiopians now demonstrate that we are prepared for new solidarity around shared goals, principles and values so we can speak with “one voice” that Congressman Chris Smith says has been missing!

During this period in 2008 of our relative inactivity, the Meles regime has dared to become increasingly more repressive and abusive. Why? Because Meles has continued to get a free pass on criticism despite UN claims that the Ogaden in southeastern Ethiopia and Somalia have become a “silent Darfur.” Robert Mugabe, Hugo Chavez and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad have been widely condemned in the news, but not Meles Zenawi.

At the same time, disillusionment with Ethiopian politics resulted in Ethiopians replacing their passion for Ethiopian freedom and justice with a focus on the Obama campaign in hopes that a “President Obama” would “free the country.” Unfortunately, our neglect of Ethiopia has further enabled Meles and his regime to operate with impunity in 2008. It is now up to us Ethiopians to make sure 2009 is not the same.

Now the election is over and suddenly, the grim realities of Ethiopia have forced their way back to the forefront with the high publicity imprisonment of Birtukan Midekssa. She is not the first. Look at the case of Teddy Afro. He has many supporters rallying for him. There were Oromos who were arrested last month and I have spoken to concerned Oromos who are seeking their release. I am sure there were also many others in unknown places who were arrested and detained for political reasons. Think of the additional hundreds or thousands who have been there for many months or years!

The question is—who should rally for them—their own independent groups, their own ethnic groups, their own political parties, their families or all of us? Do we pick just one or a few of them or do we speak up for all political prisoners? What if we combined our efforts and spoke up for all political prisoners? How you answer these questions makes a world of difference to what kind of year 2009 will be!

Injustice in Ethiopia is everywhere and it is an astounding testimony of EPRDF arrogance—how they seem to believe they can continue to operate as they please within their self-established *“culture of impunity,”* even boldly imprisoning leaders on absurd grounds such as Birtukan. Let 2009 be the year we say, **“We have had enough!”**

Birtukan has modeled courage and conviction. I do not think she is asking the Ethiopian people to personally rescue her; but instead, on behalf of others, she is challenging this corrupt government by becoming a representative example of its injustice. She challenged this corrupt system knowing that she would be imprisoned, but her goal is bigger than her own personal freedom or she could have stayed in Europe or recanted her statement. Now, as a known public leader, she has called international attention to the fact that there is no freedom in Ethiopia.

It is surprising that some have been blaming her, the victim, for her own imprisonment, but that is probably out of guilt or fear for not demonstrating the same moral courage. Instead, I am convinced that selfless and brave actions, on behalf of others, are exactly what Ethiopians must do **to make 2009 the year of change for Ethiopia.**

Let this be the rallying cry for Ethiopians to join together in solidarity to call for the release of every political prisoner being unjustly detained within Ethiopia from every ethnic group, political group, region and religious background.

What has held us back before now? According to a recently Canadian parliamentarian, it is not about proving Meles unfit, but is about “us” and our divisions. In a recent conversation with him he told me:

“Canada gives lots of money to the Meles regime, but we know very well about how brutally Meles is treating his own people; however, the division of the Ethiopians and other Africans based on tribal lines, gives policy makers in the West, reason to not do anything. When one political party and one ethnic group asks for help, we, the policy makers, always ask, who are we going to accommodate when there are many? It becomes a reason for us not to do anything; but, with solidarity and one voice, we have no choice but to respond. I wish Ethiopians good luck!”

We, in the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE), are willing to take the initiative to call on policymakers to ask for their support in exerting pressure on the Meles regime for the unconditional release of all political prisoners, but the greater the backing, the more likely it is that the effort will be successful.

In order to strengthen this request, **we will be drafting a letter, summarizing the key points of this case. The letter will then be made public and an invitation will be extended to Ethiopians—political groups, community organizations, religious organizations, women’s groups, student and youth organizations and other interested parties to sign this letter in support of this joint action, requesting the EPRDF regime to free, not just Birtukan and Teddy, but all political prisoners within Ethiopia.**

We will then present the case, accompanied by the signed letter of supporters, to policymakers in key donor countries, including to the new Obama administration, asking them to no longer ignore what Meles is doing, but to expose it and take action against it. The more signers, the more it will show our solidarity of purpose.

A UK parliamentarian who is known for speaking out against injustice in Ethiopia recently made the following comments in regards to the Solidarity Movement:

“Solidarity is the only way out for Ethiopians. The westerner will not bring peace and security to the Ethiopian people, but the Ethiopians must do it and when they succeed, there is no question about it, but that the west will support it.”

Solidarity is also the way to gain the support of the new Obama administration. Less than three weeks are left until Obama’s inauguration and we Ethiopians should be ready. We already have some connection to the incoming Obama administration and believe there will be opportunity to follow up.

In a recent conversation with an Obama representative, someone who is fully aware of the problems with the Meles regime, he emphasized to me the importance of Ethiopians presenting their case to this administration with one voice. He explained that Obama was someone really inspired by the Civil Rights Movement in America and as a university student, he was an active advocate against apartheid in South Africa. He further explained that Obama knew firsthand about ethnic politics in Africa from his own father who was very opposed to tribalism. He is also someone who is highly concerned about human rights, genocide, corruption and dictatorship.

Based on these views, this Obama representative explained the need for Ethiopians to put forward their plan in a clear manner; Obama will not need a translation and will know how to respond. He already fully understands the strategic importance of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.

Therefore, it is our responsibility to provide a strong case for changing US policy from the bankrupted or the cowboys’ one of George W. Bush that is closely tied to Meles to something better not only for us Ethiopians, but for the US as well. We can do it, but it will not be convincing if proposed by competing factions. We must go above politics to free the country first so political parties can be free to operate later.

My fellow Ethiopians, the job ahead of us is not easy, but will be very difficult and require hard work and sacrifice. There is still a long way to go and I assure you, it cannot be done by any one group that is not representative of all Ethiopians. God-given principles, values and human rights—not leaders—must undergird such a movement or we can easily lose our way. We must all be held accountable to uphold such standards.

Additionally, it will require the widespread participation and support of Ethiopians from all different backgrounds. Obama was not supported and elected by only one group, but from people of varied race, region, religion and background. Here is what a previous Congressional staff person recently said in support of the concept behind the formation of the Solidarity Movement:

“This is a great step—the Solidarity Movement being not a political party, but a bottoms-up approach—to bring all the Ethiopians together in unity is what has been needed to fight this brutal regime. The only way to fight Meles is with a united front. He will come to negotiate or to accommodate the opposition who want change only through this means. Look at what he did during the election, when he saw that the CUD was so strong. He called to negotiate with the Oromo who he had previously ignored and mistreated for years. If this Solidarity Movement is nurtured very well, it could be an example, not only to Ethiopia, but to the whole continent that desperately needs change.”

We are calling on any of you who think we may not have a country if Meles continues in power. Let us come together, help as each is able and do something never before done in Ethiopia!

The following are some of the planned action steps of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia and beyond your words of encouragement; we need your financial contributions and action to make it happen:

1. **Contact key people to check on Birtukan's health:** We will contact the US Ambassador to Ethiopia, other key donor country ambassadors who have embassies in Addis Ababa, Amnesty International and the International Red Cross to check on the condition of Birtukan Midekssa due to reports of health problems related to her hunger strike.
2. **Draft letter with Ethiopian signatures for Obama and other key leaders:** We will draft a letter asking for the unconditional release of Birtukan, Teddy Afro, and all prisoners of conscience within Ethiopia and then extend an invitation to Ethiopian groups to sign it if they are in support of its content so it can be presented as a collective request from the Ethiopian people to key public policymakers in the US, Canada, UK, EU and in other donor countries. We will also organize or assist other interested groups in advocacy efforts in other countries where opportunities become available.
3. **Creation of SMNE chapters:** We are asking Ethiopians to help create SMNE chapters in your area, combining with other local groups in a joint effort. The SMNE is planning on developing a website with roles, guidelines and ideas for chapters. Groups have already begun in Oakland, Minnesota and in London, but all that is needed to begin a group is a few interested and committed persons who support the principles of the SMNE and agree to abide by them—recognizing that this is non-political movement to free the country, not for political office.
4. **Launch media campaign:** We will campaign the western media to not ignore the Ethiopian crisis like has been done over the last several years, informing them that:
 - a. their silence is not only hurting Ethiopians, but is killing them,
 - b. that the War on Terror should not be reason to align with dictators who deny their own people their basic human rights, security, justice and freedom, and
 - c. to let them know that Ethiopians are standing in solidarity.
5. **Compile a comprehensive human rights report:** We are initiating a project to compile existing and newly documented human rights reports allegedly perpetrated by the EPRDF into one comprehensive summary report to present to Obama and donor countries to show if a pattern of human rights violations exists and if Meles has created a system of impunity. The purpose would be to convince them to withhold support, to enforce sanctions or to exercise other measures in support of restoring the rights of the Ethiopian people.
6. **Organizing a 100,000 person Ethiopian March for Freedom, Justice and Peace in Washington D.C.:** In September of 2009, we are calling for a 100,000 Ethiopians to march in Washington D.C. to bring world attention to expose the tyranny and oppression of Ethiopians. The purposes of this rally are:
 - a. To unify Ethiopians because participants will be coming as Ethiopians, not as members of a tribe, political party, certain religion or as members of certain educational or economic classes.
 - b. To motivate and empower the people within Ethiopia. Each of the 100,000 participants will have at least one family member back home and the message will get home whether Meles tries to stop it or not.
 - c. To show Meles we have had enough and are ready for change! We know he will hear our voice if we can bring these people together. It alone would be a powerful statement that no one could deny.

- d. To tell the western donor countries that we are on our way, to not continue to support this government, to not be a roadblock to our freedom, to isolate this government and to treat them like Zimbabwe or Sudan.
- e. To gain news coverage in the western media so that the world knows that Ethiopians are ready for change and that such a demonstration must take place outside of Ethiopia, because it would never be allowed within the country.
- f. To let the Obama administration and other donor countries see 100,000 Ethiopians in solidarity in Washington DC, so he will know that Ethiopians are ready “for change we can believe in” before it is too late, just like when he saw 100,000 or more show up for a rally during his campaign, he was assured that Americans were ready such change.
- g. To invite participation from non-Ethiopians from different religious groups, social justice groups, student groups and civic organizations to join in support of freedom and justice for Ethiopians.

I am convinced that these plans are achievable, but only through the efforts of Ethiopians. The commitment to be at this march has already been made by some Ethiopians in London who told me they would be there and would bring family members as well.

If every Ethiopian in the Diaspora, capable of getting to Washington D.C. in September, would devote themselves to be there, we can meet our goal of 100,000 people. Religious leaders, community leaders, political party leaders, civic organizations, women’s organizations, student and youth organizations can organize their members, even planning group transportation for those unable to fly as well as assist in planning for lodging and meals while there. What a celebration this would be!

We in the SMNE will try to find volunteers throughout the world who would be willing to be coordinators of this event. It is our goal to start such planning this month of January.

If there are people willing to volunteer to collect funds, to organize and to eventually arrange to rent buses or caravans of cars from all over North America, please let us know and start acting on it. We will be coming up with firm dates; hopefully by the end of this month.

Overall, if Ethiopians are ready and willing, it can be done. **The rally will not be the end of the struggle, but will be followed with calls for other actions until Ethiopia is ready to choose their own government the way the Americans did with Obama.**

Until we have that, **we in the SMNE will continue working with a final goal that SMNE become an Ethiopian institution committed to being watchdog for Ethiopian truth, freedom, justice, equality, civility and human rights—a “voice for the voiceless” of Ethiopia.**

As 2009 begins, we have a chance for a different kind of year than last. **Are you ready?**

We cannot undo the past, but we can change the future through reaching out to others and through acting as agents of reconciliation between alienated people and groups. **We have to stop blaming, accusing, attacking and devaluing each other in order to move on. This does not mean that we do not hold each other to high standards of accountability, but it is done with respect and civility.**

If you are willing to move on and to embrace the principles of **“humanity before ethnicity”** and that **“no one is free until we are all free,”** come and join us.

As one European union parliamentarian said to me recently:

“This idea of coming together around principles is long overdue. I hope now that Ethiopians will come to it for what is in it for ALL Ethiopians, rather than coming into it for who is leading it or what it means to “my tribe” or “my political party.”

The SMNE is ready to lead in these proposed actions, but we cannot do it without the support from Ethiopians, especially financial support. I would hope that people would understand the need for such support without having to even say it, for everyone knows that without basic financial support we can have “great ideas” that go nowhere!

You can help make it happen or in waiting for someone else to do it, make it fail! It is your choice! No major movement has been possible without people making sacrifices for a greater purpose!

“Much has been documented about the gruesome human rights abuses by Meles; for example, the massacre of the Anuak, the massacre of the innocent people protesting in Addis and the ongoing killing in the Ogaden region. Everybody knows very well about the human rights crimes committed by Meles, but so far, there is no one mobilizing body fighting back. I hope that the Solidarity Movement will be that body that is missing—like the Civil Rights movement that stopped the abuse and brought our country back to justice. I hope it can be like what Ghandi did in India and the ANC did in South Africa. I hope the Ethiopians will nurture the principles of the Solidarity Movement and reclaim the justice they deserve. We on the outside will always support whoever is fighting for justice. (United States Senator)

This is a life and death decision of saving the country. It is in the interest of all of us to have peace, security, justice and stability in the country. *What we have in the free world is possible in Ethiopia if Ethiopians devote themselves to it. All we ask is that you step up and do your share. Will you?*

Depending on your answer, you may be able to answer the question posed in the title of this article—“Will 2009 become the year of Ethiopian independence from dictators?” What will you say? **Yes or no?**

Our prayer for Political prisoners:

May we cry out to God for His help in releasing all our fellow Ethiopians being unjustly held as prisoners throughout the country. May He nurture, comfort and strengthen the weak and hurting, reassuring them of his love.

Our prayer for Ethiopians:

May God help us overcome our divisions, hatred and apathy towards others, forgive us and transform us. May God open our blinded eyes to see the precious humanity of each person we encounter. May God free us in our minds, hearts, souls and bodies. May He overcome the darkness over Ethiopia with His light and make the Ethiopian people become a blessing to others!

Our prayer for Meles and the EPRDF:

May God help Meles and the TPLF respond to our call by releasing all political prisoners, by halting all human rights abuses, by agreeing to a genuine mediated dialogue and a national reconciliation effort that might lead to a transitional government until a fair and free election process can be established. We present this in hope of finding a win-win solution before the situation worsens beyond remedy.

May God bless Ethiopia!

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