

Betrayal of Democracy

(Text of Prof. Alemayehu Gebre Mariam's speech at the premier of the documentary "Betrayal of Democracy" at the University of California, Los Angeles, Ackerman Union, September 16, 2006. "Betrayal of Democracy," Obang Metho, Producer, in association with the University of Saskatchewan, Canada.)



*** This speech followed immediately after the showing of Betrayal of Democracy.***

Thank you Wassy [Tesfa] for your kind introduction.

I am overcome by emotion, of what I have seen in this documentary. Such crimes committed against our own people.

So as I try to collect my thoughts here, I hope you understand that such injustice must not pass unnoticed, or unpunished.

My young friend Obang, you have done a great service for our people. I am not sure how we can thank you, but I suppose you did not do it for gratitude.

But we thank you nonetheless.

Good evening everyone, and welcome.

I am honored to have the privilege of making a few remarks on the occasion of the premier showing of Betrayal of Democracy.

One of our best and brightest young people has exerted extraordinary energy and creativity to put together a documentary which will serve to inform us, teach us, and educate us on the betrayal of democracy in our homeland.

This documentary is done for a worthy cause: the cause of human rights, freedom and democracy in Ethiopia.

Before I offer my remarks on the betrayal of democracy in Ethiopia, I would like to take a moment to thank the Task Force on H.R. 5680, particularly Ms. Meron Ahadu, for helping to organize this event.

The extraordinary efforts of the Task Force in the struggle to pass H.R. 5680, the "Ethiopia Freedom, Democracy and Human Rights Accountability Act of 2006", is well-known and widely appreciated.

I thank the members of the of the Task Force for their unwavering commitment to human rights and democracy in Ethiopia, and for sponsoring this event.

With your permission, I want to take a few moments to share some personal thoughts about the young man who has brought us here today, and thank him for his work in this documentary.

This documentary has been a labor of love for him; and for us, his fellow Ethiopians, an object of singular pride and honor.

Obang is an extraordinary young Ethiopian. I first saw him at a hearing of the Subcommittee on Africa in Washington, D.C., last Spring when H.R. 4423 (Ethiopia Consolidation Act of 2005) was on calendar.

Obang was one of the scheduled witnesses.

I had no idea who he was, and what he was going to testify about.

As Obang took the witness chair, I sat nauseated in the back of the gallery in the hearing room having just finished listening to the lies and subterfuges of the Ethiopian Charge d'Affaires, Fisseha Tessema.

Mr. Tessema represented to Congress: "There is no single person I know of in Ethiopia who is incarcerated because they refuse to sit in parliament. There are elected parliamentarians who have chosen not to join the Parliament. They are living peacefully."

Peaceful life in Kaliti prison! Just imagine that!

That was why I was nauseated.

As Obang took the witness chair to testify, I had a vague feeling that this young man has not had a peaceful life. Pain was evident in his face.

And soon enough, I realized why this young man seemed to be in so much pain.

"I will talk today about the Anuak," he said, as he began his testimony.

"I am an Anuak. I grew up in Gambella. Please bear with me if I am emotional."

And he glanced towards the gallery of the large hearing room filled with spectators, and continued:

“As I am speaking, most of you may look at my face today and most of you would say I am not Ethiopian. To some Ethiopians, I could pass for German. I have been excluded even today. The only person who mentioned the word Anuak was Chariman Smith.”

I had barely propped myself up in my seat when Obang hit me with the truth. He said:

“The Anuaks belong in Ethiopia. They are Ethiopian citizens. Ethiopians have to accept that reality.”

Then he went on to plead the cause of the Anuak people with passion and fervor. He said:

“We are a very tiny minority. There are no more than 100,000 Anuaks. That is including me.”

He said he has appeared before Congress to have his cry for justice for the Anuak people heard by the American people.

He said he has come to seek the help of Congress to save his people from annihilation by the Ethiopian government.

He said 1,600 hundred of his brothers, sisters, relatives, friends and neighbors had been murdered, massacred by Ethiopian government troops. And countless thousands have become refugees.

He sat in that hearing room as the lonely voice of a tiny minority which now sits precariously on the precipice of ethnic annihilation.

Then he told of the despair of the Anuak people:

“Right now,” he said “the Anuak have lost hope. And the international community has failed them.”

No one could have made a more passionate plea for justice than Obang that day in Congress.

No one could have pled with more conviction and passion the cause of human rights for the Anuak people.

And I sat in the back of the gallery, I found myself in a state of shame.

I knew nothing about the Anuak, or the massacres that had taken place over the past few years, or the state of terror that had existed in Gambella for years.

I knew then why this young man's face was draped in pain.

It became clear to me that 1,600 Anuak victims were speaking in unison through his voice.

Obang was just their messenger in Congress that day. He had carried their solemn message from the grave.

And I thought to myself, what a cross for a young man to bear!

As he continued his testimony about the persecution of the Anuak, the moral force of his arguments, and my own sense of guilt became unbearable.

I wanted to stand up and tell him to stop. I wanted to protest:

“Obang, I didn't know. I had no idea the Anuaks were being massacred by the government. I had no way to find out. I have no responsibility.”

I wanted quick absolution. I wanted to be forgiven.

I felt if I could raise the defense of ignorance, I may be able to avoid moral responsibility, and avoid judgment for being willfully blind to the suffering of the Anuaks.

But I knew ignorance would offer me no defense, because in my case, it was a case of willful ignorance.

The atrocities committed against the Anuak were no secret. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the U.S. State Department Human Rights Report have been reporting them for years.

But as I thought about Obang's testimony in Congress, I began to think that perhaps it was not ignorance that kept me from knowing about the suffering of the Anuak. For ignorance can be cured with knowledge.

Perhaps I did not want to admit the real reason to myself.

Perhaps it was a malignancy of the heart.

Just may be, I did not care about the Anuaks. May be deep down, I did not think they mattered.

And so that day, I left that hearing room with a heavy heart and downcast eyes.

But as downcast as my eyes were, they were eyes wide open.

I took Obang's words at the hearing not as a condemnation, but a challenge. A challenge to learn more about the plight and suffering of the Anuak.

And as I poured over the human rights reports and newspaper reports and the very few books on the recent history of the Anuak, I learned more.

I learned that Obang had been very cautious in his report of the body count of the Anuak killed by government forces. It was not 1,600. No, No. It was much higher than that.

On January 25, 2005, Genocide Watch reported "Government defense forces, called the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), have killed as many as 2,500 ethnic Anuak in the Gambella region since December 2003."

I learned that an investigative delegation of Amnesty International had been turned back from Gambella and prevented from discovering the truth.

I learned that thousands of Anuak have been arbitrarily arrested and jailed. Many tortured. Anuak women raped. It was all there.

But the numbers spoke of the extent of the destruction of a society and a culture.

Obang spoke of the suffering of the individuals and families.

But Obang need not speak alone, any more. He need not protest alone, anymore.

We are all with you, Obang. The suffering of the Anuak people is the suffering of all Ethiopians. Their liberation, our liberation.

But I will never forget your words: "To some Ethiopians, I could pass for a German."

My friend, you are no German! You are a 24 carat Ethiopian!!

So, my young friend, thank you for pleading the cause of the Anuak people.

Thank you for this documentary. And thank you for all you do for Ethiopia.

And thank you all for letting me share this personal moment with you.

And now, let me say a few words about the documentary we have just seen.

Obang has chosen the theme of democracy and betrayal in producing this documentary, and so I thought I would share with you a few personal thoughts about democracy and betrayal, and for good measure, I have added a few words on tyranny as well.

Democracy, since its birth in Athens in 508 B.C., has undergone various transformations in diverse societies and cultures.

Churchill once said that “Democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

But I would wager to say, democracy has not had a more glorious rebirth than the one we almost witnessed in Ethiopia in May, 2005.

26 million of Ethiopia’s 74 million people were registered to vote for the May 15 elections.

30,000 polling stations were opened to receive their votes.

319 international observers were present to serve as midwives in the rebirth of democracy in Ethiopia.

And on May 15, 2005, an earthshaking event took place in Ethiopia.

90% of the eligible voters came out to vote. That is over 23.4 million Ethiopians who cast their votes.

That day, Ethiopians made themselves the undisputed heavyweight champions of democracy in the world.

Neither India, the largest democracy in the world, nor America, the longest enduring democracy could match that turnout of Ethiopian voters in May, 2005.

But as we all know, democracy was not born in Ethiopia on May 15, 2005.

It was aborted. It was stillborn.

And as Ethiopians held a wake for a stillborn democracy, I paused to contemplate what it was that democracy meant to them at precisely 6:00 a.m. on May 15, 2005, when the polling stations opened.

I wondered if, on that morning, they were thinking about the direct democracy of ancient Athens, or Jeffersonian democracy and popular government with constitutional safeguards for individual liberties, or parliamentary democracy, or social democracy, or any of the other variants of democracy.

And as I thought about this question, it seemed to me less likely that they were concerned about the ideals or theories of democracy.

They had far more practical and mundane concerns and problems.

And as I thought back on that fateful morning of May 15, 2005, I could imagine millions of Ethiopians marching to the polling stations at the crack of dawn from every hamlet and neighborhood, town and city with a fresh broom in one hand and a hammer in the other.

They had a job to do!

And it was a glorious Spring day.

It was house cleaning time!

It was time to sweep out 14 years of mismanagement, 14 years of misrule. 14 years of misgovernment. 14 years of malfeasance. And 14 years of corruption.

It was time to sweep out the EPDRF rascals.

And sweep out, they did. Out of every hamlet and neighborhood, town and city.

They scooped up the rascals and threw them in the dustbin of history.

And when dusk had arrived and the polling done that day, the people rested.

And their house was clean.

The opposition had swept across the Ethiopian political landscape like an F-5 tornado.

Addis Ababa was “addis” again. The people had scrubbed it clean from top to bottom.

Addis was ready for the new occupants.

Ethiopia was ready to accept its new representatives.

And so the following day, the people put down their brooms and picked up their hammers.

They had a job to do!

It was time to build a free society, a new future based on the rule of law, respect for civil liberties and human rights.

It was time to pick up the wreckage of the last 14 years and rebuild society, and heal the wounds of ethnic hatred and division.

There was a lot to build.

But when the people showed up on the job site to begin construction the following day, they were told the whole thing was make believe.

The elections did not happen. Nothing has changed. The rascals are still in charge.

And so overnight, the people's victory had changed to defeat, their hopes dissolved into despair, their aspirations transformed into a nightmare.

But the people refused to believe the elections were make believe.

The newly elected leaders refused to accept the elections were a game or a joke.

The people demanded that their judgment be respected.

But the rascals would have none of it.

The demand of people was answered with bullets.

Their new leaders were sent to the jailhouse, while the rascals sat comfortably in parliament house.

And so the people's hopes, desires and aspirations for democracy were betrayed.

When Judas Iscariot took 30 pieces of silver from the Romans to turn in Jesus that was the betrayal.

When unarmed young men and women who were protesting peacefully were shot by government soldiers, that was the betrayal of democracy.

When Meles Zenawi jailed the winners of the 2005 elections, the people's choice, that was the ultimate of democracy.

When Meles Zenawi paid his Washington lobbyists \$600,000 to defeat H.R. 5680, a bill whose only purpose is to advance freedom, democracy and human rights in Ethiopia, that is the ultimate betrayal of democracy.

But history shows democracy is always betrayed by tyrants.

From the first tyrants of ancient Athens to the present day, they are all afflicted by the same malady.

They all believe they can rule by force.

They do not believe it is necessary to have the consent of the people to govern.

They believe they can solve the problems of their society by jailing, killing and persecuting those who disagree with them.

And the rogue's gallery of tyrants in East Africa testifies to that. Al Bashr betrayed democracy in the Sudan. Said Barre in Somalia. Idi Amin in Uganda. And Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia.

In May 2005, Mr. Zenawi had a serious collision with democracy.

He was injured badly, and he will never be the same again.

Yes, he will limp along, and use his soldiers as a crutch to stay in power, but not for long.

For once you have been disowned by the people, there is no redemption.

Meles is now riding the caged tiger of democracy, and he will stay in power as long as he stays on the back of the tiger, and the tiger remains caged.

And neither he nor his party will ever gain the faith and trust of the people he betrayed.

But democracy will not remain betrayed. And all is not lost.

There is a glimmer of hope and resurrection. Democracy can yet arise from its grave in Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian people look to us in America, in Europe and wherever else on earth we have been scattered by the winds of oppression and persecution.

And so we face the question, how do we "unbetray" democracy?

How do we restore faith in our people? How do we reassure them deliverance is near?

Our people did their jobs on May 15, 2005. We now have ours to do.

And our job is to get H.R. 5680 (the Ethiopia Freedom, Democracy and Human Rights Accountability Act of 2006) passed.

But H.R. 5680 is in trouble in Congress. Deep trouble.

We are in trouble.

Democracy is about to be betrayed yet again. This time the cost of betrayal is not 30 pieces of silver. It's gone up. It is \$600,000 paid to the lobby firm of DLA Piper.

The mighty warrior of the DLA Piper lobbying firm has met us on Capitol Hill, the U.S. Congress.

Richard Armev, the former Majority Leader of the House of Representatives and lobbyist for the Ethiopian government, has arrayed his mighty DLA army against us and H.R. 5680.

Dick Armev, the trusted right hand man of Dennis Hastert, the Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Yes, Armev is a powerful man, and very well connected man in Washington.

And he has whispered in the Speaker's ears.

And so H.R. 5680 is stuck in the International Relations Committee. Speaker Hastert will not let it get to the floor for a vote.

When Joshua fought the Battle of Jehrico, he did not rely on bows and arrows, or swords and axes.

He had his army shout a great shout, and the walls of Jehrico came tumbling down.

My friends, we have only three weeks to save H.R. 5680. Like Josua's army, we must shout a great shout now. We must get our voices heard.

We have to call Speaker Hastert's office. Not just once, but as many times as necessary.

We have to write the Speaker. Email him, Fax him, Meet with him and his staff. Not just once, but as many times as necessary.

We need to make our case to him. We need to plead our people's cause before him.

We must tell him that our people hunger for democracy. H.R. 5680 will nourish them by helping them have honest elections.

We must tell him our people thirst for liberty. H.R. 5680 will quench their thirst by helping secure their human rights.

We must tell him our people demand justice. H.R. 5680 will help them get judges and prosecutors who serve in the interest of justice, and not just serve their own interests.

We must tell him our people demand the release of our leaders who are languishing in prison. H.R. 5680 will help free them and let them join their families.

And we must tell him our people thank the American people for their generosity, for their gift of \$20 million to make it all of that possible.

And so, in the end I say, let us shout a mighty shout, and bring down the walls of DLA Piper lobbyists.

Let us shout a might shout and pass H.R. 5680.

Thank you. God bless Ethiopia. God bless America.

www.ethiomeia.com