

US POLICY AND DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

ETHIOPIA: A test case for US policy

by Imru Zelleke

1 December 2004

With a population of sixty-seven million, Ethiopia is the second largest nation in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. Christianity adopted since the third century of the Christian era and Islam as of the sixth century. Its geopolitical sphere spans over East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Middle and Near East. It holds a special place in the African context as a symbol of independence and for its active role in the liberation of the continent from colonial rule. It is the seat of the African Union, the UN Economic Commission for Africa, and many other International Organizations. Ethiopia was a member of the former League of Nations and later a founding member of the United Nations, the World Bank and IMF and similar organs. Ethiopian and US relations were established in 1902, centenary of which was celebrated recently in both countries.

In the past thirteen years Ethiopia has been the beneficiary of over 13 billion US dollars in emergency aid, financial and economic assistance from the US, Donor countries, World Bank, IMF and other sources. Billions of US dollars have been also granted to Ethiopia in debt relief. Some 240 NGO's are active in Ethiopia. The promise of all this political and material assistance was the establishment of a plural democratic system of government, the rule of law, transparency and a free market economy. Few of these basic reforms have materialized so far despite the adoption of a fairly liberal constitution and the constant tutelage of the US, donor countries and international institutions.

Regardless of all this enormous aid and support Ethiopia remains one of the poorest and destitute countries in the world. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) report on 'Governance 2004' shows Ethiopia failing to equate with the average level of 28 other African countries, lagging so far behind that it is one of three at the bottom of the line. With regards to freedom of the press Ethiopia ranks 122nd. From amongst the least developed countries Ethiopia ranks 167 out of 173. This enormous infusion of foreign aid has also created an extraordinary disparity of

US POLICY AND DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

ETHIOPIA: A test case for US policy

by Imru Zelleke

1 December 2004

income, concentrating an enormous amount of wealth in less than half (0.5) percent of the population, mostly in business enterprises owned by the ruling party and its ethnic affiliates. For instance, in spite of a glittering prosperity, a glaring example of such exceedingly unequal development is the disastrous downfall of the Ivory Coast.

In Ethiopia the first national elections held in 2000, where the ruling regime claimed to have obtained ninety percent of the popular vote, although regarded to be 'generally fair' by certain observers, were rigged and could hardly have been considered open and free. The opposition parties were forced to boycott the elections because of the serious restrictions and violations exercised by the regime. The second national elections in Ethiopia are to be held in May 2005. A Bill HR 5321 'urging the Government of Ethiopia to hold orderly, peaceful and free and fair national election and authorizing Ten million US dollars for elections related activities' has been introduced in the US Congress.

However, the premise that there will be a fair and free election is utterly false. Primarily because the political clique in power is a minority within a minority that is highly unpopular, even amongst its own ethnic constituency in Tigray. There is absolutely no way that it can win a national election except by fraudulent means. Moreover, in view of the regimes complete control over:

- a) the national and governmental resources, the media, the army, the police and security units,
- b) the state ownership of the land, and therefore control over the peasantry which forms 85 percent of the population,
- c) the ruling party ownership of the major sectors of the economy, and control over all foreign aid funds,

the conduct of a fair and free elections is illusory at best.

For the Ethiopian people these elections are looked upon with great hope and expectations and as defining their future governance. Another rigged-up election will

US POLICY AND DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

ETHIOPIA: A test case for US policy

by Imru Zelleke

1 December 2004

provoke a great popular disappointment that might cause turmoil and instability in the country and surrounding areas. It will also undermine US and donor countries policy for the development of democracy and free society in Africa and elsewhere. Resulting ultimately in another cycle of mayhem and violence, leading to the proliferation of radical and extremist elements.

The present US policy towards Ethiopia seems to confer the highest priority to the stability of the country, rather than the achievement of successful democratic elections. Strangely enough this notion is based, first on the assumption that the country will disintegrate if free elections are held and a multiparty government will emerge, resulting into a chaotic situation; and secondly that the opposition is weak and ill organized. Despite opinions expressed by would-be experts in support of this hypothesis, I argue that these assumptions are completely misleading and out of touch with the country's realities. The experts have given little attention to the public mood and to the concerns of ordinary people, who are looking for freedom and justice to conduct their daily lives, without the government's denial of their basic rights to property, and control of their livelihood through party owned monopolistic corporations. The experts have not given weight to the mismanagement and corruption of government officials; at the inefficiency and incompetence of the administration. No account is taken of the frustration and sorrow caused by such abuses, and to the grinding existence of people who have to pay bribes at every step of their daily life. Neither have they asked why the regime is so pervasively unpopular across the land.

Threats of civil strife by separatist political factions are taken at face value, despite the fact that their claim to represent this or that ethnic group is generally unsubstantiated. The very large majority of people in Ethiopia oppose the ethnic division of the country. They have proven it clearly throughout ages and as recently as in the recent conflict with Eritrea, when the whole nation rose in defense of the country. Then, why is it that no importance is given to the evident popularity and

US POLICY AND DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

ETHIOPIA: A test case for US policy

by Imru Zelleke

1 December 2004

increasing growth of pan-national parties? For instance the All Ethiopian Unity Party has chapters in four hundred woredas (districts), out of some five hundred twenty, in which it will run for national parliamentary seats, in addition to eight hundred and more candidates for sub-districts zonal elections. Yet, reliance is placed on a minority clique, whose mainstay in power is very doubtful against an inevitable popular uprising. On their part the opposition parties are firmly and unanimously committed to democracy and its tenets, and to peace and stability, neither they will tolerate any kind of terrorism. Moreover, they are perfectly able to mobilize all the human resources required for a good and efficient governance. In spite of the ceaseless harassment and violence exerted by the regime on their members, they are creating alliances and building very large constituencies.

I understand and share fully the concern for stability that worries policy makers; particularly at the present time when a global anti-terrorism war is being fought. However, in view of past experience in Africa and elsewhere, I firmly believe that a democratically elected popular government can guarantee lasting peace and stability, instead of a dictatorship imposed by force and economic pressure. Recent developments in Serbia, Ukraine, Ivory Coast, have clearly demonstrated the non-viability of strong-arm politics in the present world. Thanks to the extraordinary broadening of communications, there is a new world wide awareness amongst people about the dire conditions in which they are living, and about what conditions could improve their future plight. It is mostly out of hopelessness and the desperation ensuing thereof, that incites people to extreme acts of violence on others and on themselves.

As the world leader the US must demonstrate clearly and actively that it stands unequivocally for the principles of democracy and freedom that it advocates. Successful democratic elections have been carried in several countries, in spite of ongoing wars and serious tribal and political frictions. In contrast to that in Ethiopia the situation is momentarily stable, with no major crisis and imminent terrorist threats.

US POLICY AND DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

ETHIOPIA: A test case for US policy

by Imru Zelleke

1 December 2004

The sole opponent to democracy in Ethiopia is the ruling EPRDF party, who after thirteen years of misrule and corrupt governance still seeks to remain in power at all costs. The regime is universally unpopular with the Ethiopian people; the only way it has ruled so far is by coercion, unmitigated violence and indiscriminate foreign support; conditions that may not last much longer. It is hoped that the US and other democratic powers will do their utmost to do justice to the people of Ethiopia, who so far, have endured with exemplary patience the abuses and injustices bestowed upon them.

Ultimately it is up to Ethiopians to forge their own destiny, an exercise in which they have not excelled lately, because no one can do it for them.

Imru Zelleke
(Former Ambassador of Ethiopia, Ret.)