

MEETING WITH YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS¹

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A. Why Meet Your Member of Congress

Meeting with Congress or the key aides who handle your issues is of vital importance in developing a relationship with your representative or senator and getting HR 5680 through Congress. Use the excellent opportunity to start a great relationship with the Congress or aides. Developing a good relationship with congressional aides can open the door for a face-to-face meeting with you. Get the ear of a good aide, and you've got the ear of the Congressperson! The tips below will help you in making your contact with Congressional members as effective as they can be!

B. How to Secure a Meeting with Your Member of Congress

1. **Make a list** of what you want before you try to schedule a meeting with your member of Congress.
2. Call the Capitol **Switchboard at (202) 224-3121** and ask to be connected to your member of Congress's office or dial the number directly if you have it, or dial their local (constituency) office number to schedule a local meeting.
3. If you don't know who your representative is, visit www.congress.org and enter your zip code in the box in the top left area of the website.
4. If you do not find any one to make your schedule, **leave a message** with your name and phone number requesting a meeting. Most likely someone will return your phone call; however, if you do not hear back from the office by the next day, call again the following day. **Keep making follow-up calls** until you speak to someone directly. This could take eight or ten calls, so don't get discouraged. When you speak with the person making the schedule, ask to have a face-to-face meeting with your member of Congress and the aide/s who work/s on the issues concerning Ethiopia (e.g. human rights, international relations, African affairs, national security, etc.).
5. Be ready to tell the person who assists you in **making the schedule** what the **meeting will pertain** to. For example, if you are calling about HR 5680, you may

¹ Adapted from www.results.org

inform them that this is a bill to promote democracy and stability in Ethiopia, and that it is important to you that the congressperson supports this bill. Inform the scheduler you will be faxing or emailing a request for the meeting with all of the pertinent information they required.

6. **Thank the person** who assists you in making the schedule for his/her time and let him/her know you will be reconfirming your meeting the week before.
7. If you secured the meeting, the hard part is over! Last, but certainly not least, make a note in your planner to **reconfirm your meeting** a few days before your appointment is scheduled.

C. Tips for a powerful meeting with your member of Congress

(a) Before the meeting:

1. If possible, go to the meeting in **small groups of 2 – 5**
This has several advantages: You can divide up roles for the meeting (see 3 below), prepare for the meeting together with others, and draw on your combined abilities and strengths to get the most out of the meeting and leave a greater impact on the congressperson or aide.
2. **Do your homework**
Find out what issues, which could be related to the cause for Ethiopia, your representatives or senators care about and put out as their priorities. For example, what is their stand on promoting human rights? Democracy abroad? Foreign policy and national security? Economic development in Africa? Etc. You can find out about their issues and positions by going to their website (available through www.house.gov or www.senate.gov).
3. **Be prepared—practice speaking**
After you create an agenda for your meeting with your Congress, make sure each person going with you who will have a speaking part should create a brief two or three minute laser talk for their section and practice it with at least one other person. Be brief, clear and to the point. For example, if you plan to talk with the congressperson about HR 5680, be prepared to explain in a few words a) what this bill is about, b) why this bill is important to you, c) what the legislative status of this bill is, i.e. which committees it has already passed and where it is due to be presented next, d) what you would like the congressperson to do with regards to HR 5680, and e) why he or she should care that HR 5680 gets passed.
4. **Choose a secretary and manager** for the meeting
Choose one person who will be responsible for taking notes and writing down any commitments your member of Congress made and any follow up that needs to be

done after the meeting. Also, choose someone who will “manage” the overall meeting, keeping the group on task and making sure all the requests are covered.

5. Inspire yourself

Prior to the meeting, spend at least a few minutes having each person speak about why (s)he cares about this issue and why you are going to this meeting.

(b) At the meeting:

1. Connect with your representatives, senators and aides

Establish a personal connection with your member of Congress and their aide in the meeting by asking them to share their goals on issues such as the advancement of human rights, democracy, fostering long lasting stability, economic freedom and development in Africa and share with them your own vision and concerns.

2. Acknowledge your member of Congress

It is rare that our representatives and senators hear the words “Thank You” from their constituents. Always thank them for the supportive actions they have taken or just be sure to thank them for taking the time to meet with you. Most likely your point person in the office will be a legislative aide, but sure to take time to thank them as well. Praising a good legislative aide in front of their boss is always a good thing.

3. Be concise

Summarize your request in 5 minutes or less.

4. Be prepared to summarize opponents’ arguments on the issue

Familiarize yourself beforehand with the key arguments brought forth by opponents of democracy in Ethiopia. For example, know what reasons TPLF supporters marshal on why HR 5680 should not be passed. Some of these arguments will include the claim that a) HR 5680 will compromise America’s national security, b) Meles Zenawi is an important ally on the war on terror and hence the US should support Meles, which entails voting No on HR 5680; c) Ethiopia is already on the path to democracy and hence the bill is unnecessary, d) HR 5680 will do much to harm the fight against poverty in Ethiopia, etc. Be prepared and do your homework to any of the positions that your opponents may bring. Have talking points prepared to defend you position. However, never attack. If you don’t know the answer or how to respond tell the aide or Congressperson you will get them further information.

5. Make sure not to come across as a zealot or a fanatic

Even if you are very passionate about the issues you went to see the congress member for, it is critical to uphold fair, balanced and thoughtful conversations. This will keep the door to your member’s office open even if you don’t find common ground. Always leave with a thank you and a commitment to follow up with relevant information.

6. Don't be a know it all or talk down to an aide

Given the wide range of issues aides work on, and given that Ethiopia is not a number one policy issue in the media or in politics in the US, please be aware that many aides may not know that Ethiopia is ruled by a regime that has held on to power through undemocratic means for 15 years and has engaged in gross human rights violations. While clearly you will be better informed on Ethiopian affairs than the aides, make sure to relay the political situation in Ethiopia without talking down to them. Tell the aides that Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and numerous other international organizations have reported on the harassment, detention, assassination, beatings, ethnic cleansing, suppression of independent media vital to any democracy, and torture of critics of the Government. Bring with you, and be ready to provide, documentation such as reports by international human rights organizations, articles by the international media, and statements by US government agencies or officials. Use your professionalism and knowledge to inform as effectively as possible.

7. Make the issues real

One of the most powerful ways you can advocate for your issues is to have someone speak who has been directly affected by these issues and can tell their experiences. For example, bring someone along who is directly affected such as family members or friends of the jailed politicians or activists). Another possibility is to tell the story of a specific family or to show a video during your meeting that puts your legislator in the shoes of the Ethiopian victims for a few minutes and makes the issues real.

8. Paint the big picture and the small picture

For example, one person could tell their story about how the repression in Ethiopia has affected her/him personally (the small picture); then, someone else could flesh out the current ramifications of the Ethiopian regime's continued practice of violating its citizens' basic rights, such as possible regional instability, compromised national security, etc. (the big picture).

9. Make specific, clear requests and ask for an answer

Often, the main reason groups have unsatisfactory meetings is that their requests were not clear and specific enough. Your members of Congress need to know what you want them precisely to do (e.g. that you want them to sponsor HR 5680, and what other representative or senator you want them to speak to, how you want them to vote). In addition to the specific requests you bring, don't be afraid to ask the senator or congressman what else they see they could do on the issue (whether they say yes or no to your original request).

10. Know your next steps

In the meeting, ensure that the next steps for follow up are clear (what you will do next, what the legislator/aide will do next) and that you know which aides to contact for follow up. After the meeting, send a prompt thank you note and follow up on requests with the aide.

D. A Typical Format for a Meeting with a Member of Congress

1. **Introductions.** One of you should facilitate the opening section. Prior to your meeting, be prepared. Make sure you practice speaking beforehand.

- Introduce yourself briefly
- If there is more than one participant allow each to say who they are and what they do in the community
- Ask the member of Congress and aides to introduce themselves
- Overview the issues you would like to discuss and ideally give the member of Congress and aides a typed agenda and requests for the meeting

2. **Acknowledgements.** Thank your member of Congress for any previous actions.

3. **Presentation of your issues and requests.** Strategize which issues you would like your member of Congress to take more of a leadership role on. Choose one or two issues to feature and work with your group to come up with powerful, specific requests.

Issue #1: e.g. HR 5680

Specific request: Ask that the congress member vote Yes on the bill when it comes to the House floor / Senate. Ask that (s)he write the Speaker of the House to urge him to introduce the bill to the floor.

Issue #2: e.g. Political Prisoners

Specific request: Ask that the congress member, perhaps joining forces with other congresspersons, write a letter to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to request the immediate and unconditional release of the political prisoners and prisoners of conscience jailed after the November 2005 demonstrations. Again prior to your meeting be prepared practice speaking on the issues you present.

4. **Plan for follow up.** During the meeting set a specific timeline for follow up with the Congressional staff. Be sure to have someone record your plan for follow up. Without follow up, your effort in scheduling a meeting and speaking powerfully about our issues could be wasted.

Issue/Request: _____

Congressional staff: _____ Follow Up Date _____

Issue/Request: _____

Congressional staff: _____ Follow Up Date _____

5. **Send a “Thank You” letter!**

If you or your groups have any questions about the information in this toolkit, please feel free to contact us: Ethiopian American Civic Advocacy (EACA) (703) 665-4042; PO.Box 1292; Lorton, VA 22199-1292; eacadvocacy@gmail.com.

www.ethiopolitics.com