

## Film Producer Flaherty's Landmark Interview Exposes Zenawi's Tyranny: Words of Wisdom for the Opposition and the Diaspora

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While much has been written and said about the egregious crimes committed by Zenawi, the recent interview of film producer and director Chris Flaherty reported by *Foreign Policy Journal's* David Calleja [1,2] is unsurpassed in the clarity, objectivity and boldness with which the brutal nature of the dictator is exposed and his vulnerabilities are laid bare.

The interview, which must be read and discussed by all Ethiopians in the run-up to the 2010 elections and beyond, gives a factual representation of the crimes of the tyrant, the path to be taken by the opposition, the untapped potential role of the Diaspora, and the opportune conditions in the country to replace the ethnocentric regime by a representative government.

The interview is remarkable in its audacious and authoritative articulation of many of the fundamental misconceptions about the ruthlessness and savagery of the crimes committed by the tyrant and the difficulties that have plagued and paralyzed the popular movement over the years. In this paper, we will highlight only a few of the points illuminated so elegantly in the interview, with particular emphasis on:

- The comparability of the human rights records of Zenawi and Mengistu Haile-Mariam.
- The necessity for the Obama administration to unequivocally express its support for Democracy in Ethiopia and to officially denounce of the tyrant's authoritarian record.
- The need for the opposition to stand in unity and to refrain from thwarting the popular movement.
- The responsibility of the Diaspora to utilize its immense resources and play a more active and constructive role.

In addition to the above, Flaherty, whose much anticipated documentary, "*Migration of Beauty*," is being screened in the US, has also made other eloquent remarks about the impact of the Red Terror of the 1970's on the general psyche of the Ethiopian people, and the imperative to elevate to a national agenda the revulsion and hatred the vast majority of the population have internalized and harbored against Zenawi and his deplorable policies.

## **On the Similarities of the Regimes of Mengistu and Zenawi**

Many genuine Ethiopians have held for too long the tragic misconception that Zenawi's brutal regime might be an improvement over that of his predecessor. This belief has contributed in significant ways to the failure of the opposition to rally the entire population against the despot. It has also confused donor nations and groups who have been reluctant to effectively use aid to promote democracy in Ethiopia.

In his interview, Flaherty correctly declared that Zenawi's regime is a mirror image of Mengistu's, and indicated that the differences lie only in the manner in which the two brutal dictators achieved their goals of suppressing human rights. As he put it:

*"... if your freedom has been taken away the end result is always the same no matter who takes it away, whether it's Adolf Hitler, Mao Tse-Tung, Mengistu Haile Mariam or Meles Zenawi. And while ... Meles Zenawi has not committed acts as open and obvious as his predecessor Mengistu Haile Mariam, he is still repressing democratic ideas and has committed numerous human rights abuses."*

The establishment of the similarities between the two tyrants is of paramount importance for a number of practical and symbolic reasons.

- First, it will form a legal basis to prosecute Zenawi using the same allegations his kangaroo court has used to sentence Mengistu.
- Second, it will deny the despot international forums that he has shamelessly exploited to conceal his atrocities and gain legitimacy.

Indeed, the crimes committed by Zenawi are among the most heinous in modern history. As reported elsewhere, he has used famine as a weapon of mass repression [3], massacred unarmed civilians [4], and promoted genocide and ethnic cleansing [5].

## **The Obama Administration Should Denounce Zenawi's Tyranny**

The silence of the Obama Administration on the human rights abuses by Zenawi has been deafening.

An administration that has been hailed for its promise of a foreign policy based on the ideals of the Founding Fathers should not hesitate to send a clear message to the despot that his repressive government is incompatible with the will of the vast majority of the American people.

Flaherty recalled, "[I]t was the Bush Administration that justified dealing with any despotic regime in the name of fighting the war on terror," and compellingly affirmed:

*"This policy has proven to be disastrous for the U.S. .... This is a special time in U.S. history. We stand at a precipice. We are forced to decide who we are as a nation in the eyes of the world. So often we have preached the virtues of*

*democracy and freedom to virtually everyone. And now more than ever we are understandably challenged on those core beliefs. It is my hope that the Obama Administration will understand and adapt our foreign policy with this in mind."*

In his remarks of June 4, 2009 in Cairo, President Barack Obama reiterated [6]:

"But I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. Those are not just American ideas, they are human rights, and that is why we will support them everywhere."

The Obama Administration need only refer to the reports of its own policy makers to see that the people of Ethiopia are deprived of these human rights by a government that the U.S. has supported for too long. For example, according to the recent 2008 US State Department Human Rights Reports on Ethiopia [7]:

"Human rights abuses reported ...included limitations on citizens' right to change their government in local and by-elections; unlawful killings, torture, beating, abuse, and mistreatment of detainees and opposition supporters by security forces, usually with impunity; poor prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention, particularly of suspected sympathizers or members of opposition or insurgent groups; police and judicial corruption; detention without charge and lengthy pretrial detention; infringement on citizens' privacy rights including illegal searches; use of excessive force by security services in an internal conflict and counterinsurgency operations; restrictions on freedom of the press; arrest, detention, and harassment of journalists; restrictions on freedom of assembly and association; ...; and government interference in union activities, including harassment of union leaders."

So, as Flaherty noted, the preaching of the virtues of democracy and freedom should now give way to credible actions, and the Obama Administration must lead the way by dissociating itself from a criminal government and siding unequivocally with the people.

### **Toward a Coherent Strategy by the Opposition**

In the aftermath of the 2005 elections, opposition leaders demonstrated a costly lack of vision and determination to stand in unison, and to provide leadership to a movement that had the resolution to pay any sacrifice to win freedom from the tyrant. Zenawi effectively and brutally exploited the lack of organization, decisiveness and commitment to a single cause among the opposition, and squashed once again the aspiration of the people for freedom.

Reflecting the sentiments of many Ethiopians, Flaherty observed:

*"Many felt let down and betrayed when the CUDP failed to stand their ground after their arrest in 2005. Many felt that they made deals selling out the cause of*

*democracy and freedom simply to get out of jail. ... Like Aung San Suu Kyi, [Birtukan Midekas's] status could become legendary as long as she remains unwavering in her peaceful struggle for true democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Ethiopia."*

In a desperate effort to avoid a repeat of the embarrassing defeat he suffered at the polls in 2005, Zenawi has been conducting a multi-pronged campaign characterized by terror, violence and deception. As Flaherty noted:

*".... the party in power has been doing a good job at intimidating any possibility of viable opposition against themselves in 2010. With the re-arrest of ... Birtukan Mideksa and the recent announcement by the Ethiopian government that they have launched an investigation against people suspected of overthrowing the government, the prospects look grimmer by the day."*

Flaherty's observation is corroborated by the US State Department [7] report, which confirmed:

*".... there were numerous credible reports that security officials tortured, beat, or mistreated detainees. Opposition political party leaders reported frequent and systematic abuse and intimidation of their supporters by police and regional militias, particularly in the months leading up to the local and by-elections held during the year .... In Makelawi, the central police investigation headquarters in Addis Ababa, police investigators reportedly commonly used physical abuse to extract confessions."*

In a campaign of deception, Zenawi has stepped out of his cocoon, and has uncharacteristically been seen crisscrossing the oppressed regions of Central Ethiopia, spreading mind-numbing propaganda and empty promises of fertilizers, electricity and drinking water in return for mandatory votes for his party.

Ironically, the despot has also hinted the possibility of stepping down and continuing his criminal policies indirectly by placing a dummy figure in the office of the Prime Minister. His rhetoric to step down is, at best, a tired tactic that dictators always use to dodge eventual charges for the crimes they have committed while in power, or, at worst, a sinister design on the part of the dictator to deceive and divert the attention of voters in the run-up to the elections.

The dictator knows all too well that he will suffer a devastating loss in any elections in which the people are given a choice. He will, therefore, predictably use all means at his disposal to bar potential opposition, and declare phony victory for outside consumption.

Opposition leaders must take to heart the bitter lessons of the 2005 elections, stand for a common cause, and demonstrate unwavering leadership to the people. Great leaders are distinguished by their determination to fuel the momentum of a movement for a just cause in the face of potential risks to themselves. If opposition leaders are determined to stand with the people, the 2010 elections will undoubtedly mark a turning point in the history of the struggle of the people of Ethiopia for freedom and social justice.

It will, therefore, be a duty of all opposition groups to deprive the tyrant of another election coup by taking decisive and proactive counter measures in the lead up to the elections. More specifically, effective immediately, all genuine opposition leaders and groups should form a united front and:

- **Demand the establishment of an independent election board.**
- **Rally the people in the cities to steadily engage in peaceful demonstrations demanding free and fair elections, even if requests for such demonstrations are rejected.**
- **Invite international election observers to monitor the situation in the lead up to the elections without any preconditions.**
- **Demand free access to all means of communication.**
- **Persistently and vigorously demand the unconditional release of all political prisoners as a requirement for participation in any electoral process.**

### **A Historic Role for the Diaspora**

Despite the massacre of innocent civilians, the stealing away of the people's victory, and the imprisonment of thousands of opposition supporters, the 2005 elections have produced lasting and substantive gains that would stand the test of time.

The elections have exposed the brutality of the despot and have left him with crippling vulnerabilities.

So that the struggle will continue in 2010 and deliver a final blow to the oppressive regime, the Diaspora has a historic role to act as a catalyst from afar. In particular, the Diaspora should:

- Nudge the Obama Administration to take an unequivocal stand on the side of democracy, and lobby Congress to resurrect and pass a version of HR3000 that the tyrant fought so hard to thwart.
- Influence opposition groups to put their differences aside, and to stand together to deal a final blow to tyranny, ethnocentrism and corruption.
- Resist the temptation to fall for Zenawi's trap of "homeland investment" and deny him a source of hard currency for his cash-strapped repressive government.

The recently launched *Ethiopian National Priorities Consultative Process (ENPCP)* [8], as well as the initiatives taken by the various pro-democracy Websites and other advocacy groups, are encouraging developments that should enjoy the full support of the Diaspora. By systematically excluding the vast majority of the population from virtually all vital economic, military and political arenas in the country on ethnic grounds [9], Zenawi's regime has shamelessly distinguished and alienated itself as the most racist government in the world today. A minority regime that is thus built on violence, racism,

corruption and deception cannot and will not have longevity, and its speedy demise should be a primary concern of all genuine Ethiopians all over the world.

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- [1] <http://www.ethiomeia.com/adroit/2380.html>
  - [2] <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2009/06/03/migration-of-beauty-exposes-risk-of-ethiopian-descent-into-tyranny/>
  - [3] <http://www.ethiomeia.com/all/6098.html>
  - [4] <http://www.omct.org/pdf/Observatory/2006/report/>
  - [5] <http://www.genocidewatch.org/THE%20ANUAK%20OF%20ETHIOPIA.htm>
  - [6] <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html>
  - [7] <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/af/119001.htm>
  - [8] <http://www.enpcp.org/>
  - [9] <http://www.ethiomeia.com/adroit/2373.html>