

Urgent Appeal to the Global Community

Re Ethiopia's 'Lottery' Based Election, May 2015

“A strategy based solely upon the narrow pursuit of American interests will not fill an empty stomach or allow someone to speak their mind. Moreover, failure to speak to the broader aspirations of ordinary people will only feed suspicion that has festered for years that the US pursues our interests at their expense.” **President Barack Obama**, Bahrain, 2011

Our organization, Shengo, and most people of Ethiopian origin believe that long-term Western interests in Ethiopia are being undermined by one of the most repressive regimes in Africa to which the donor community has granted and or loaned \$40 billion in development assistance over the past 24 years. This has been done without a modicum of accountability. While aid has induced growth in infrastructure, this largesse has not created the foundation for sustainable and equitable development. Millions of Ethiopians depend on emergency food assistance year after year. Millions of Ethiopia's youth are unemployed. Ethiopia's private sector is among the least developed in the world. The regulatory system favors state and party owned enterprises and endowments.

At the end of 2013, per capita income was estimated at \$470, one-third of Sub-Saharan Africa. Last year, 160,000 Ethiopian migrant workers were expelled from Saudi Arabia. Because of limited job opportunities, thousands have returned to the Middle East and the Gulf. Each year, tens of thousands of educated Ethiopian youth, including girls leave Ethiopia and join the millions who have fled. Ironically, Aid dependent Ethiopia is also a source of billions of dollars in illicit outflow, most of the stolen reportedly ending up in Western, East Asian and the Pacific and Caribbean banks and financial institutions. The World Bank had conducted two major studies on State level corruption without meaningful policy changes. The vast majority of Ethiopians believe that increase in income and wealth assets and dramatic improvement in livelihood is dependent on political power and connections to the governing party. The old African adage that the most 'direct route to riches' is to take over the state and collect rent is prominent in Ethiopia today.

In early February this year, an expert panel sponsored by the African Union and the Economic Commission for Africa chaired by the former President of South Africa, Mr. Thabo Mbeki, disclosed that Ethiopia is one of the top ten Sub-Saharan African countries from which billions of dollars have been stolen from the society in the form of illicit outflow. Between 2010 and 2014, Ethiopia lost a staggering billion. This follows a series of similar findings by Transparency International, UNDP, Global Financial Integrity (GFI) and the University of Massachusetts. According to GFI, during the period 2000-2009, Ethiopia lost \$11.7 billion. No poor and aid dependent country can afford to lose investment capital of these amounts and expect to achieve sustainable and equitable growth. Global Financial Integrity put this reality boldly and rightly. “The people of Ethiopia are being bled dry. No matter how hard they try to fight their way out of absolute destitution and poverty, they will be swimming upstream against the current of illicit capital leakage.”

We are dismayed by the fact that the donor and diplomatic community watches with disinterest as Ethiopians continue to bleed in multiple ways. At a political level, they are denied fundamental human rights and dignity. At a social level, the limited job opportunities are granted on the basis of ethnic and party loyalty. At an economic level, the vast majority of Ethiopians do not own real assets, including the lands on which they survive and live. Widespread state level and private corruption and illicit outflow of capital rob them of resources that would improve their lives. Tragically for them, no party or government official is held accountable for breaking the law. There are no checks and balances that would redress these governance anomalies. Disclosure and transparency are virtually impossible under a party, government and state model the Guardian calls "Orwellian." We add to this the fact that, each year, the Ethiopian government spends hundreds of millions of dollars of tax-payer money supporting hundreds of thousands of cadres and spies whose role is to monitor dissent and challenge to the regime.

Shengo recognizes the fact that the donor and diplomatic community acknowledge the devastating impacts of the draconian Charities and Societies Proclamation of 2009. It is a blunt state instrument to degrade and decimate civil society organizations that in most countries strengthen democratic institutions. Equally, the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation of the same year criminalized all forms of civil, religious and political dissent. Anyone who "speaks his or her mind" is accused of terrorism. Most of those accused land in jail or flee. The Committee to Protect Journalists has documented assaults on journalists.

Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Freedom House, the U.S. Department of State, the International Crisis Group, numerous Ethiopian civic and political organizations and intellectuals provide a plethora of evidence concerning human rights abuses by the Ethiopian government. Sadly, the donor and diplomatic community, especially leading bilateral donors and Ethiopian government supporters such as the U.S., U.K. and the EU community give a blind eye to this ongoing tragedy. At best, they issue occasional press releases. Donors and the diplomatic community know that Ethiopia is home to one of the largest political prisoner populations in Africa. It is one of the leading jailers of journalists on the planet. Ethnic and religious conflicts and dispossession of indigenous and other people from their lands are widespread. Domestically, there is no single independent institution to defend the "broader aspirations" and human rights of ordinary Ethiopians.

You will agree with us that Africa's second most populous country with an estimated 100 million people and growing deserve a free and fair election. Unfortunately, this will not occur this time either. Ethiopia's fifth national election since the ruling party took power in 1991 will be won by the same party. We therefore understand the reason why the European Union decided not to send election observers.

Shengo believes that the TPLF that dominates the ethnic coalition, the EPRDF, has foreclosed the electoral process by marginalizing competitors and legitimizing numerous, largely ethnic-based, political parties that do not pose challenge. The "lottery" system, the first of its kind anywhere in the world, has been adopted for the sole purpose of exclusion and to ensure that the ruling party wins again by any means necessary. This in itself makes a mockery of the electoral process in Africa. The ruling party is able to marginalize competitors by politicizing and or by subverting the roles of key institutions in the

electoral process. The Election Board, the Judiciary, Federal Police, State Security and Defense are controlled by the governing party. Political space is completely closed. There is no independent and free media. Human rights groups are disallowed from operating independently and freely. Multiethnic opposition groups that pose challenge to the ruling party have been disenfranchised; and some have literally been replaced by “loyal” opposition groups subservient to the governing party. This makes the outcome of the election a sham and illegitimate.

In Shengo’s estimation, this recurring repression and suffocation of basic human rights inflicted on all segments of Ethiopian society will not stop the human quest for freedom, justice and genuine equality under the law and representative governance. Ethiopia’s youth is more determined and committed to democratic change today than it was 5 years ago. Harassments, jailings, killing, persecutions, forced migration out of the country etc. are unlikely to stop the democratization process. Equally, opposition parties that have been disbanded are most likely to use the current opportunity as a game changer in favor of democracy.

The least the donor and diplomatic community can do is to signal its support for democratic change and do all in its power to build independent civic organizations. In this regard, Shengo would like to go on record that regardless of massive aid that ends up enriching the few or in illicit outflow, the TPLF/EPRDF is not capable of resolving Ethiopia’s myriad of problems---the high cost of living, unemployment and underemployment, income and social inequality, the misuse of the country’s natural resources including farmlands and waters, mineral resources, the plight of women, bribery, nepotism, corruption and illicit outflow of capital, etc. These core policy and structural issues can be solved only through a just, fair, rule of law based and democratic government in which all stakeholders will have a say. It is time that the donor and diplomatic community acknowledge the adverse consequences of a sham election.

Given Ethiopia’s high dependency on foreign development and humanitarian aid, the donor and diplomatic community has a special moral responsibility to use its substantial leverage by insisting that all future aid will be conditioned on Ethiopian government commitment to respect human rights and the rule of law. We see no social justification in shoring up a government that has lost legitimacy.

Shengo is convinced that Ethiopia’s interests and the interests of the global community are compatible. A just, democratic, unified and prosperous Ethiopia is in the interest of Western and African democracies. It will serve as a beacon of hope not only for the Horn but also for the rest of Africa. This is the reason why we urge the global community to make a concerted and genuine effort to speak up against Ethiopia’s “Orwellian,” Surveillance and Corruption-ridden State. At the same time, we wish to take this opportunity to commend parliamentarians, leaders of governments, human rights groups and prominent individuals for their tireless efforts in advancing human rights and the rule of law in Ethiopia.

Sincerely,

Aklog Birara (DR), Chairman, Diplomatic and Foreign Relations Committee, Shengo