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Respect for Human Rights and Democratization Central to Ethiopian-American Relations

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Shengo joins millions of Ethiopians in thanking President Barack Obama for his hopeful message to the Ethiopian people and bold message to the Ethiopian ruling party. During a joint press conference with Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn on July 27, 2015, President Obama said what Ethiopian activists have been demanding for almost a quarter of a century. “When all voices are being heard, when people know they are being included in the political process that makes a country more successful.” His emphasis on human rights, freedom of the press, broad-based participation, inclusion and other aspects of good governance showed a bolder approach that mirror American values and reflect the hopes and aspirations of the second most populous country in Africa.

Given keen interest in the messages he would deliver, Shengo has followed the President’s visit to Kenya and Ethiopia very closely. Before his departure to Ethiopia, Shengo had written a letter to president Obama asking him and his administration to use the opportunity on this trip to push for democratization and freedom for Ethiopians. Additionally, three members of the leadership of Shengo met with congressional staffers and provided our perspective on the situation in Ethiopia and what needs to be done in order to enhance democracy and freedom and strengthen the historical relationship of the USA and Ethiopia; as well as to promote the common interest of the two countries and people.

Shengo is especially encouraged by president Obama’s critical comments, about the human and democratic rights situation in Ethiopia that were expressed at the joint press conference on July 27th and during his address to the AU on July 28, 2015. We agree with his notable statement that “sustained and inclusive growth, development and security gains depend on good governance.” Ethiopia’s sustainable and equitable growth has been severely handicapped by exclusionary, discriminatory and restrictive policies and programs. We are therefore gratified by the “frank” discussions the President had with Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn and other senior officials. These “frank” discussions show substantial differences between the governments of the United States and Ethiopia. As President Obama put it, “Nobody questions our need to engage with large countries (such as Ethiopia) where we may have differences on these issues,” meaning human rights, free press, political pluralism, the definition of terrorism and others. Inclusive governance is essential not only to advance equitable development, but also to avert civil conflict and instability.

In this connection, we take the President and successive American Presidents at their word when they say that the U.S. “intends to deepen our conversations and consultation because we strongly believe in Ethiopians promises and its people.” Shengo has confidence in Ethiopia’s future and in the determination of the Ethiopian people to improve their lives, maintain their country’s unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty. We have no doubt that a democratic, prosperous and strong Ethiopia will serve as a bulwark against extremism and terrorism not only in the Horn of Africa but in the rest of the continent.

In this regard, we are pleased to note President Obama’s courageous position that the government of the United States does not agree with the TPLF dominated government’s reckless and careless definition of “terrorism” that includes opposition parties and individuals who struggle for freedom, justice, equality and democracy. The label of “terrorist” has been used as a camouflage to go after peaceful dissenters including journalist, bloggers, religious leaders and human rights activists.

In his address of the AU, President Obama focused on the dearth of good governance, the menace of corruption, exclusion, repression and lack of press freedom, all of which contribute to Africa’s instability, poverty and backwardness. The President was gracious to state the following. “Our host, Ethiopians have much to be proud of -- I've been amazed at all the wonderful work that's being done here -- and it's true that the elections that took place here occurred without violence. But as I discussed with Prime Minister Hailemariam, that’s just the start of democracy.”

It is generally true that there was no violence. However, the absence of violence says more about the systemic nature of country wide surveillance and repression than popular participation. Most notable contestants were either in jail, barred from competing, forced to stay home or had fled. By any standard, this election was neither democratic nor free and fair. Hence the government too was not elected democratically.

Most notably, we welcome and applaud President Obama for saying this. **“I believe Ethiopia will not fully unleash the potential of its people if journalists are restricted or legitimate opposition groups can't participate in the campaign process. And, to his credit, the Prime Minister acknowledged that more work will need to be done for Ethiopia to be a full-fledged, sustainable democracy”.**

For years, the Ethiopian people have endured untold misery and repression. Many Ethiopians have sacrificed their lives struggling for the respect of their basic rights. Thousands continue to suffer in unbearable conditions in jails throughout the country. Thousands have been displaced and thousands of others have left their country and joined the ranks of other refugees.

The continued narrowing of political space and the unbearable repression on the legal opposition and civic society is forcing people to explore for other means in securing their rights. In short, the contradiction between the rulers and the general public in Ethiopia has reached a critical stage.

Shengo calls on the Ethiopian government to stop its repression and mockery of “democracy” and engage in good faith with all stakeholders to bring about a durable solution within a United Ethiopia. Ushering a system that truly represents Ethiopians and guarantees full respect of the rights of all Ethiopians is the duty of ALL Ethiopians. However, in this interdependent world, the international community too has a lot to contribute to the democratization process.

Prime Minister Hailemariam’s bogus statement during the joint press conference that ““Ethiopia is a fledgling democracy that is struggling to embrace broader freedoms,” is utterly not true. We wish the government was trying to work hard on “its limitations” in collaboration with all stakeholders; we urge it to do so without delay..

In this regard, we urge president Obama and the administration to continue to pressure the government of PM Hailemariam to take concrete actions that show its commitment to democracy by releasing political prisoners, stopping the harassment and repression of the members of the free press and political opposition and engaging with all stakeholders in a meaningful national dialogue in order to bring about a comprehensive and lasting peace in our country.

We also urge other donor nations such as EU, Canada, Japan etc. to coordinate their effort in order to bring the desired change concerning respect of human rights, commitment to the rule of law, equitable distribution of income and wealth, advancement of democracy, and preservation of Ethiopia’s unity and territorial integrity. Such a scenario will be in the interest of all of the Ethiopian people; and would serve the common interests of the global community.

Shengo continues to be committed to collaborate with other Ethiopian groups that are committed to democracy, justice and equality of all Ethiopians under the law, Ethiopia’s national independence, unity, territorial integrity and the sovereignty of its people. We intend to play a positive role in materializing the dream of a new era in Ethiopia through national dialogue, peace and reconciliation where the rights of all of its citizens are fully respected.

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