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**President Obama's Visit to Ethiopia:  
Advancing Democracy or Legitimizing Dictatorship?**

The purpose of this commentary is to provide the American and Ethiopian public a birds eye view of Shengo's assessment of President Obama's visit to Ethiopia; and to recommend a set of concrete actions to the governments of the United States and Ethiopia; as well as Ethiopians to take appropriate actions in order to advance respect for human rights, the rule of law and democracy.

Shengo embraces the fundamental governance principle of direct relationship between democracy, sustainable and equitable development and the struggle against all forms of extremism and terrorism. Repressive governance incubates friction, discord, instability and terrorism. Accordingly, it is in America's long-term interest to advance human rights, the rule of law and democracy; and not legitimize one of the most repressive regimes in the world. It is unfortunate that President Obama undermined his own legacy by pronouncing the Ethiopian government as "democratically elected"; not once but twice. The Ethiopian state is a dictatorship. The deliberate deepening of ethnicization of socioeconomics and politics has created volatile conditions that could potentially lead to the Balkanization of Ethiopia; and to ethnic civil war with far reaching consequences.

Shengo believes that the lead responsibility for preserving Ethiopia; for averting civil war and for establishing a genuine democratic national state in place of the current ethnic elite-led dictatorship resides with the Ethiopian people. Only they, together, can preserve this ancient land; and change the society for the better. In this regard, we commend Ethiopian democratic activists who continue to struggle for the country's survival, for justice and the rule of law, too often risking their lives. An independent national survey of public perceptions would no doubt show that the Ethiopian government is neither popular nor trusted. Fear of government permeates the entire society. The ruling party pities one ethnic group against another and fuels hate more than solidarity.

[\(<https://www.hrw.org/africa>;](https://www.hrw.org/africa)  
<https://www.freedomhouse.org/article/ethiopia>;  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/mikegonzalez/obama's-true-legacy>;  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/28/world/africa/obama-calls-ethiopian-government-democratically-elected>

There isn't an iota of evidence to suggest that the Ethiopian government is "democratically elected." Ethiopians have no choice but to struggle for justice and democracy. Equally compelling is the notion that foreign governments, especially the United States, the donor community and others can no longer afford to shore-up Ethiopia's dictatorship and justify its repressive governance solely on national security grounds. The security of Ethiopians should drive policy.

It is common knowledge that America's foreign policy towards Ethiopia is predicated solely by America's national interest. These interests include

collaboration in the fight against terrorism and extremism, trade and investment, competition with China, alleviation of poverty and advancement of human rights, the rule of law and democracy. We contend, however, that, respect for human rights and advancement of strong democratic institutions should no longer be subordinated to the struggle against terrorism. The Ethiopian and American governments would be wise to balance containment of terrorism with the release of all journalists, bloggers and democratic activists, religious and political leaders who believe in peaceful democratic change; and advancement of democracy.

Shengo states at the outset that President Obama's 'unceremonious' visit to Ethiopia is historic in more ways than one. First and foremost, it validates Ethiopia's unique and long history as an independent and sovereign country and underscores its importance in Africa and among the community of nations. In 1903, Ethiopia and Liberia were the only Sub-Saharan African countries; and among the few Asian and African nations that had established diplomatic relations with the U.S. Regardless of regime change, this relationship spanning more than a century has bipartisan support in the United States and a sound popular foundation in Ethiopia that should be nurtured and not squandered.

We find it incredible that the government of Ethiopia did not signify this important bond between the two nations by a welcome ceremony fit for the President of the United States. Given a relationship established long before the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) dominated ethnic coalition, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power in

1991, it was appropriate for President Obama to address the strategic importance of good governance in Ethiopia and the rest of Africa in accelerating sustainable and equitable development, strengthening trade and foreign investment and deterring terrorism. Ethiopia's and America's long-term interests will be well served by advancing and institutionalizing freedom, human rights, broad-based socioeconomic and political participation, the rule of law, equitable distribution of incomes and democracy.

Shengo would have liked to see President Obama address the Ethiopian people the same way as he addressed the people of Kenya. Nevertheless, we recognize the President for his compelling and courageous address of the 54-member African Union where he reminded his audience that "Africa does not need strongmen, it needs strong institutions." We agree with him that "Africa's progress will depend on unleashing economic growth--- not just for the few at the top, but for the many, because an essential element of dignity is being able to live a decent life." This won't happen without participatory and empowering governance. While Ethiopia's infrastructural growth is noticeable; its Human Development indices show that the TPLF/EPRDF has failed to "unleash" equitable growth and enhance human dignity for the vast majority.

The growth model is not socially or people-oriented. It is skewed in favor of the few. The median age in Ethiopia is 18 years. And this group bears the brunt of exclusion and marginalization. Limited jobs are accessed on the basis of ethnic and party affiliation. Human capital exodus has reached a tipping point.

Corruption and illicit outflow are institutionalized.

"Nothing will unlock Africa's economic potential more than ending the cancer of corruption...Here in Africa, corruption drains billions of dollars from economies that can't afford to lose billions of dollars...that's money that could be used to create jobs..." Each year, Africa loses more than \$300 billion. Ethiopia has lost tens of billions of dollars in illicit outflow. Aid, investment and trade contribute to corruption and illicit outflow. These twin cancers won't end without a government leadership that is accountable to the public; and without professionally led and independent institutions. Countries "grow faster with younger populations" only if youth is empowered and free. Internet access in Ethiopia is lower than the failed state of Somalia. The ruling party has diminished opportunities for Ethiopia's youth by suppressing freedom and by restricting access to information and communications technology that other African youth enjoy.

Shengo recognizes the dichotomy in U.S. policy between talking and doing. It takes President Obama at his word when he says "I believe Africa's progress will also depend on democracy, because Africans, like people everywhere, deserve the dignity of being in control of their own lives." Standard measurements of democracy "include free and fair elections, but also freedom of speech and the press, freedom of assembly. These rights are universal." We remind President Obama, these "universal rights" and freedoms are "denied" to Ethiopians and millions of other Africans. Occasional elections are a sham. "And I have to proclaim,

democracy is not just formal elections. When journalists are put behind bars for doing their jobs, or activists are threatened as governments crack down on civil society...then you may have democracy in name, but not in substance."

Although he did not make direct reference to the problem; President Obama referred to blunt instruments such as the Anti-terrorism and CSO Proclamations routinely used as instruments to put "journalists," bloggers, members of the opposition and other dissenters behind bars. Verbally at least, the President did the right thing when he said to Prime Minister Hailemariam that claim of and conversation on democracy is not the same thing as genuine democracy. Using his own measurement that "democracy is not just formal elections," we find it contradictory that he called the Ethiopian government "democratically elected." His reference to the ruling party as "popular" is equally unjustified and untrue. Similar to communist parties and other one party states, the TPLF/EPRDF uses the power of the state and its resources to mobilize and fund party membership. Members have very little choice but to obey the party. It is a matter of survival. This can hardly be characterized as grassroots level "popularity."

The value of democracy for sustainability and sheer national survival was underscored at the July 27, 2015 joint press conference where Obama said, "Sustained and inclusive growth, development, security gains depend on good governance...When all voices are being heard, when people know they are being included in the political process, that makes a country successful and more

innovative..Ethiopia can take steps to show progress on promoting good governance, protecting human rights, fundamental freedoms, and strengthening democracy." We should like to add that strong democratic institutions benefit everyone including ordinary members of the ruling party.

Today, Ethiopia is both dependent and stuck structurally. It is more dependent today than it has ever been in its history. By the World Bank's reckoning, tens of millions of Ethiopians are destitute. Poor people cannot save for tomorrow; their preoccupation is mere survival. Investment in infrastructure alone won't improve their lives. If the ruling party wishes for Ethiopia to be independent and self-reliant, it must commit itself to improving the lives of the vast majority; and to accelerating participatory democracy. No developing country creates a solid foundation for sustainable and equitable development unless it commits itself to a homegrown private sector in which each citizen has a chance to work, save and invest. If "all voices are not being heard or included" in policy and decision-making, their contribution to employment, income and savings generation and sustainable productivity is diminished several fold.

As the Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz continues to argue, in development, investments must have substantial "social returns" to create sustainability and equity. Any form of marginalization and exclusion is detrimental to development. "I believe Ethiopia will not unleash the potential of its people if journalists are restricted or legitimate opposition groups can't participate in the campaign process." This admission



alone makes the statement "democratically elected" incredible.

Despite what most foreign experts call "double talk," the message is clear. It remains to be seen whether the one party state machinery would reform itself willingly and allow the emergence of an independent and free press, civil society, a robust home grown private sector and political pluralism. President Obama knows that dictatorships do not honor the law. Under democratic governance, "The law is the law. And no one person is above the law...When a leader (or a party) tries to change the rules in the middle of the game just to stay in office, it risks instability and strife...And sometimes you hear leaders (and parties) say, well, I am the only person who can hold this nation together."

Ethiopians hear this propaganda of self-perpetuation all the time and are sick of it. "Nobody (no party) should be president (or group) for life. "Africa's progress will depend on upholding the human rights of all people." The TPLF/EPRDF feels that it is entitled to rule perpetually; and American support gives it a legitimacy it does not deserve. It has run parliamentary elections and won each one by deterring others from competition. Consequently, this party for life won't care for human rights or democracy. In this regard, Shengo agrees with a commentary by Mike Gonzalez of the Forbes Magazine, Obama's True Legacy: propping up dictatorships. "By praising Ethiopia's repressive regime for being "democratically elected,"...President Obama was driving home once again something that should be abundantly clear by now: His



administration marks a radical departure from previous ones when it comes to democracy promotion."

In other words, despite rhetoric, President Obama's legacy won't be unreserved commitment to democracy. "On the contrary, the Obama legacy will be one of propping up dictatorial regimes around the world. His praise for the government of Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn merely took to Africa what Obama and his foreign policy team have already done on grander scale in Iran, Cuba and Burma." We may disagree with the parallels; but not with the essence. We agree with Gonzalez that President Obama was not obligated "to make excuses for Hailemariam Dessalegn government's horrendous human rights record by recalling the country's past hardship and the relative infancy of its constitution." Justifying the status quo by drawing parallel to the uncelebrated past removes any form of accountability for the current tragedy.

President Obama's justification of the status quo and characterization of a "democratically elected" government is largely influenced not by American values but by the expediency of short term interest. In large part, it is a result of his National Security Advisor's well established relationship with the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and his party. "Rice has "had a long-standing interest in Ethiopia and...was a huge fan of the late Prime Minister, who was no democrat, to say the least...Ms. Rice's sympathy for African despots is well known

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/10/opinion/susan-rice-and-Africa's-despts>."

President Obama's visit revealed substantial differences between the U.S. and Ethiopia in one substantive area, namely the definition of terrorism. During the press conference, he said this. "I know that there are certain groups that have been active in Ethiopia that, from the Ethiopian government's perspective, pose a significant threat. Our intelligence indicates that while they may oppose the government, they have not tipped into terrorism. And we have some very clear standards in terms of how we evaluate that." In stating this position, Obama debunked and discredited TPLF's/EPRDF's politically motivated edict of lumping and defining journalists, bloggers, human rights activists, religious leaders and political opponents, etc. as terrorists. "If they are just talking about issues and are in opposition and are operating as political organizations, we tend to be protective of them even if we don't agree with them..And we think that's part of what's necessary for democracy."

President Obama's narratives on the need for good governance for Ethiopia and the rest of Africa is commendable. However, Shengo does not agree with his his assertion that the Ethiopian government is "democratically elected." The vast majority of the Ethiopian people do not identify or share this view; nor do reputable human rights groups such as Human Rights Watch and Freedom House. In no country does a completely flawed electoral process result in a "democratically elected" government. "Elections, open, free and fair, are the essence of democracy, the inescapable sine qua non," wrote Samuel Huntington in

"Dead Souls: the denationalization of the American elite," in the National Interest, 2002. Ethiopia's latest election does not meet this fundamental benchmark by one of America's leading thinkers. At a press conference before the President's departure, his own National Security Advisor ridiculed the governing party's outrageous claim that it had won "100 percent" of Parliamentary seats. Words and concepts matter. The Whitehouse owes the Ethiopian people and the global community a credible explanation of what President Obama meant by "democratically elected."

This major mis-speak aside, President Obama's visit has resulted in 'soul searching' within the EPRDF; and stimulated vigorous conversation among a cross-section of Ethiopians within and outside the country. We believe that the survival of the country and the prosperity of Ethiopia's 100 million people depend on the establishment of a genuine democratic state and government; and not on "propping up" Ethiopia's dictatorship. During this American election season, we urge the candidates to embrace and promote American values of freedom, the rule of law and democracy in Ethiopia and the rest of Africa. This, in our estimation, is America's singular contribution.

What do we recommend?

For the Government of the United States

Shengo believes that it is in the long-term interest of the United States to move from words to deeds by providing teeth to President Obama's convincing message that Ethiopia needs good governance in order to achieve

sustainability. We repeat our July 14, 2015 recommendations that the U.S. begin to leverage its enormous resources and influence in order to effect the following action steps by the Ethiopian government:

- Release all political prisoners, journalists and bloggers
- Rescind; at minimum modify, the draconian Anti-Terrorism and CSO Proclamations
- Initiate national dialogue towards national reconciliation and peace involving all stakeholders
- Provide funding for democratic leaning institutions and persons

For Friends of Ethiopia in the U.S. Congress

- Consider legislation on human rights, the rule of law, economic freedom, democracy and security
- Provide funding for the democratization process in Ethiopia

For the Ethiopian government

- Allow unrestricted freedom of expression, movement, association, assembly, protest and religious belief
- Provide ample political space to opposition groups
- Ensure that each citizen receives equitable treatment under the law
- Allow independent and free media and invite journalists who fled the country to return
- Reform the CSO law and invite independent civil society organizations to re-emerge, resurface and flourish

- Revamp the Anti-Corruption Commission; make it totally independent of party and government control; staff it with high calibre professionals; and empower it to take action on all levels of corruption, including illicit outflow
- Move from an adversarial to a consultative model and save the country from potential risks
- Be open to new and innovative political ideas and entertain an All-inclusive dialogue on reconciliation and peace that would lead to a transitional government of National Unity without delay
- Entertain alternatives offered by opposition groups; stop making excuses; desist from demeaning and diminishing the opposition

For the opposition and the rest of us

- Move from fragmentation to collaboration and advance the democratization process
- Be bold, innovative and create synergy among opposition groups
- Collaborate with one another on diplomatic and advocacy work
- Pull together to avert Ethiopia's fragmentation and civil conflict

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