



We Have Power as Constituents—Let's Use It!

This is Part Two of UK Parliamentarians' Advice Regarding Ethiopia: "Let Us Hear the Voices of Our Constituents!"

July 3, 2009

In this second part, I will share with Ethiopians what I have learned in following up with British parliamentarians and members of the Third World Solidarity. In addition to that, I will also share with you, similar responses from my follow-up with Canadian and American elected officials who have already acknowledged a commitment to helping Ethiopians in their pursuit of freedom, justice and the respect of human rights. Their advice is worthy of passing on, but the most important purpose of this advice is to **act on it!**

What I have learned in London is that there are some very committed British parliament members who are ready to help and are already extending their hands to us; but to shake hands in a partnership, it takes two. This is an important concept to understand. Here is an example of how it applies to us.

One supportive parliamentarian explained very clearly what he thought Ethiopians must do to engage the widespread support from members of the House of Commons and foreign policy officials in the UK. He told me, *"I know, as you do, that things are terrible in your country. Go to your people and if they contact me, we can work together, but if they don't, we will lose the momentum from this meeting that gives us an advantage right now. If Ethiopians do not grab this opportunity—where the issues of Ethiopia have been raised in Ottawa, in Washington DC and in London—you will have little clout to tell Meles 'if you do not follow a fair system, your time is over.' Some massive scale action must happen where these three governments will coordinate a concerted effort."* [Conversation summary]

Another parliamentarian said, *"If Ethiopians do not do this, the westerners who want to help, will not have the means to do so. The time frame is from now until January. If Ethiopians do not do anything to shift policy and attitudes among donor countries, it will be another five years of torture, injustice and suffering for the people of Ethiopia."*

Three months ago several Canadian parliamentarians told Ethiopians there that if they could gather 25 signatures on a petition, calling for the Canadian government to re-examine their policies towards Ethiopia, they could introduce the matter in the parliament. The Ethiopians are the ones to do the footwork on this, but time is running out and still there is no petition.

One parliamentarian from the UK told me, ***“Obang, if we can get Ethiopians to get thirty parliament members interested in Ethiopia through pressure from their constituents, we can introduce a motion in the House of Commons. Better than that, UK policy towards Ethiopia can be further pressured to change if Ethiopian British citizens or their friends make those connections with one hundred of their local elected representatives. At this number, the floor of the Parliament will be opened and time will be scheduled for debate. One hundred parliamentarians would be able to pass a resolution for a bill and could also invite the Minister of Foreign Affairs to explain their policy, plans and objectives for Ethiopia in front of Parliament. The Minister would not have any choice but to come under these conditions.”***

He then explained that although many Ethiopians may not know, but that this was exactly the way the system of representation worked; however, he emphasized that it would require some social activism on the part of Ethiopians who had to engage additional Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians to also advocate for such change with their respective parliamentarians if this approach was going to work.

He said it would greatly help if the word could be spread through student organizations, faith communities, civic groups and through other associations because the sheer numbers of calls or letters from constituents would make a difference. He said that it did not matter if the parliamentarian was passionate about justice in Ethiopia, because simply seeing pressure coming from their constituency would motivate them to get interested if they want to be re-elected. These parliament members could then introduce and support bills that could help Ethiopians in response to such an outpouring from their constituents. I heard this same message in Ottawa, Edmonton, London, and in Washington DC.

In Britain, parliament members, who are part of Third World Solidarity, told me that the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) must become part of the Third World Solidarity. He explained that such a partnership with them was enhanced with having the new SMNE chapter in London. For example, SMNE could ask Third World Solidarity to complete a study to identify the key influential groups within the UK with whom we might collaborate in raising up this issue. If a coalition of influential groups partnered in taking the message to the mainstream people who could then become educated about how terrible the conditions are in Ethiopia, their consciences could make them the foot soldiers of this movement as they pressed even more elected parliament members for action.

He continued to explain that Third World Solidarity was already doing a lot of good work in other places and was in a position to help increase interest in the issues of Ethiopia among the British who could then exert an influence in the European Union and within other European countries. If this effort were successful, the SMNE could urge Ethiopians living in other EU countries, like Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, to work together to pay more attention to the coming election in Ethiopia, to releasing political leaders, to opening up political space and to other key issues. He said, ***“Meles cannot ignore this.”***

He then said, ***“All of this comes back to the Ethiopians.”*** I do not think they [Ethiopians] can say that there is not an organization in place to do it or the educated Ethiopians needed to pull it off, but at the end of the day, the work comes back to the Ethiopians. Some of us British parliament members already understand the issues, but others simply might not be interested because they do not know. Someone has to go tell them; the same in other countries. The responsibility comes back to the Ethiopians to tell us elected officials; wherever Ethiopians are spread out in the world.

Another UK parliamentarian stated, *“The Americans, the British and the Canadians are all cousins—get us together!” A hearing should take place in Ottawa and if need be, invite some parliamentarians from the Third World Solidarity to come to share what we are doing in the UK. Do the same in the US so we all know what each other is doing. You also need hearings in other European countries now like in Norway, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands. There are those interested people in each of these countries who could be linked together and together it would become much more effective.”*

In a conversation with Congressman Chris Smith, he told me, *“I met Birtukan in person and now that she is in jail, the people go silent. Pressure must be put on decision makers to call for action. This 100,000 person march in Washington DC that you are talking about could make a difference—if the people participated in it. It would only take a few hours for them, but Birtukan is locked up in prison—for who knows how long? I cannot exactly say why the US is not changing their policy towards Ethiopia, but if Ethiopians really want change, the Ethiopians have to work for it, putting pressure on their elected officials. Look, what is happening in Iran is a lesson for Ethiopians. You have to fight back and stand up for your rights or you will not be heard.”*

Senator Russ Feingold’s staff assistant said, *“If Senator Feingold gets seven calls on the same day from his constituents in Wisconsin, he will respond.”*

Canadian Parliament Member Peter Julian, with whom I met in Ottawa told me, *“If I receive ten to fifteen calls on an issue, I will respond.”* He went on to say, *“It is the same in the UK and wherever there are elected officials receiving calls from constituents. The entire thing is in the hands of Ethiopians.”*

The time is running out and Meles knows it because he is also trying to use this same pre-election time period to recruit more people for EPRDF membership in Ethiopia. Most of us know that in order to do most anything within the country, it demands EPRDF membership, but the allegiance to the EPRDF is shallow, with little foundation to it. These people will abandon the EPRDF when the opportunity comes; not over time, but in a day or in an hour, if they get the chance.

The release of Birtukan and our many political prisoners will not be easy right now unless we create more *“bargaining chips.”* When you want to negotiate with someone, the other person has to know that he will lose something significant if he does not make concessions; but, when that person feels he has more control, negotiation will not be an option unless he *“smells an opportunity”* to get something from you without giving up much himself—a manipulation.

There must be pressure that can be exerted. Right now, Meles is working on shoring up his reserves. He is telling the World Food Program that there are nine million people needing food, but we all know that much of the aid never reaches its target and can end up as new revenue to fund more repression or as additional assets for him and his cronies to put in foreign banks. Yet, if enough pressure comes from a coordinated effort of donor countries—through the work of Ethiopians and others—he will have more reason to open up political space and release prisoners. Remember, this effort will only succeed with a high degree of coordinated pressure from Ethiopians.

From what I learned, there are some very interested politicians right now who are willing to work with us if we respond swiftly, forcefully, effectively and in an organized manner. One UK parliamentarian said, *“Ethiopians have no excuse anymore that there is nothing to unify Ethiopians for injustice is something that should unite all, regardless of political affiliations.”*

These parliamentarians see increased opportunity to work with Ethiopians as a whole, wherever they are driven by shared principles, goals and objectives. From what these elected officials are saying, Ethiopians should be able to find common ground around issues like human rights, for no one should be against human rights or against the correcting injustice that affects everyone. The same is true about instability as it is a universal threat to all Ethiopians.

If we think through the most important issues, we will see that we already have achieved much agreement on issues; now we just have to collaborate better together. This would make it much easier for elected officials to come along side us on shared issues rather than alongside one leader or another to the exclusion of others. It goes beyond factions, groups and ethnicities. We have started to move forward, but there is still a long ways to go on our journey towards putting **humanity before ethnicity** and caring about others since **no one will be free until we all are free.**

March to Stop Genocide and Dictatorship in Ethiopia/Africa

Just a week ago I spoke with someone from Human Rights Watch regarding our plans for a large scale March to Stop Genocide and Dictatorship in Ethiopia/Africa in Washington DC on September 13, 2009 where we hoped to gather thousands of Ethiopians and friends of Ethiopia together in front of the Capitol. He told me, *“This is a big vision! Do not make it about democracy, but make it about human rights. If even 30,000 people showed up, it would bring great hope to changing US policies towards Ethiopia!”*

I also talked to a representative from Amnesty International who said, *“If Ethiopians can pull this [march] off, it will make Ethiopian issues something to talk about! Right now, the issues of Iran are being highlighted because of the current events going on there with the people. If nothing like this goes on pertaining to Ethiopia, you will not see any media interest until after the election of May 15, 2010, unless something newsworthy is done. You can create a major news event through this 100,000 person march so that the media starts talking about Ethiopia now, before the election takes place, and before it is too late.”*

He continued, *“This is something Ethiopians can do right now and it is doable. What is required is some money, funding and logistics, but there are many capable Ethiopians. Through it, Ethiopians can make the western media talk about repression, about genocide, about Birtukan and about the election, now, rather than in 2010. The only way it cannot succeed is if Ethiopians fail to finance the march or to take the time to show up. This is the easiest thing for Ethiopians to do. There are enough Ethiopians to contribute the money to make the logistics possible and enough Ethiopians to make up the 100,000 people, even without reaching out to non-Ethiopians. It is not an unthinkable goal, but would easily show the world that Ethiopians want and deserve to live peaceably like everyone else. This is the easiest thing to do for themselves. They do not need AI, HRW, or others to pull it off. It is a way to attract more friends of Ethiopia, but it is up to the Ethiopians.”*

Mr. Mushtaq Lasharie, from Third World Solidarity also endorsed the march, saying, *“If this could be done, it would pressure Obama to make Ethiopia a priority. He has put African issues on the back burner and still has not appointed a special envoy for Africa. The Ethiopian election is coming next year and Meles should not be given a free ride.”*

One message I learned from these genuinely caring people within the power structures of these countries is that it is up to Ethiopians. If I could sum up their basic message it was this, *“Do not expect only others to free you or sacrifice for you. You must do most of the work and then we will be enabled to do ours.”*

In other words, if you care about Ethiopia, show up for this **March to Stop Genocide and Dictatorship in Ethiopia/Africa on September 13, 2009 from 12:00 to 5:30 PM**. We need 50,000 to 100,000 people or more. If only 100 people show up, it means you do not want the freedom. It means you are giving Meles another five years and betraying your families, friends and communities back home, another five years of pain and suffering. Your response will show what you want. **Words are meaningless unless they are lived out. If you do not participate or support this effort financially or in some other ways, stop complaining and let us all be slaves of Meles for as long as he wants.**

If you want change, you are in charge!

In summary, we must make the connections and be prepared to make our case with the facts. We in the SMNE, as well as a number of others of you, can assist in preparing documentation and sample letters to use in contacting these elected officials and then it would be great if you could work together to make such contacts to make sure it is done in a methodical way, contacting as many parliamentarians as possible.

It may not always be possible, but wherever Ethiopians are attempting to make contacts, it would be advantageous if several people representing diverse ethnicities, backgrounds, genders, religions and political groups could merge together. These teams could be from one district or region or could be from a variety, visiting each others' elected officials with a united focus and common goals.

We will attempt to provide a skeleton letter that individuals and groups might be able to use if they so desired. The members of the SMNE chapter in London can assist as they are able, but those from outside the SMNE should also be included.

Let us be motivated to do the footwork now so we have no regrets because of the lack of effort on our part. We are working for the suffering and repressed brothers and sisters of Ethiopia. Let us be the hands and arms of our people, going to places they cannot go and speaking where they cannot speak!

May God empower us to accomplish more than we can ask or imagine!

=====

Please do not hesitate to email me if you have comments: Obang@solidaritymovement.org,