



SMNE Urges Secretary Kerry to speak out on behalf of freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, independent judiciaries and open political space in Ethiopia.

Open Letter to Secretary of State John Kerry,

May 21, 2013

Secretary of State John F. Kerry,
US Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

VIA FACSIMILE

Dear Secretary Kerry,

We are pleased to know you will be one of the distinguished guests at the 50th anniversary of the African Union. This is a celebration not for Africans alone, but for the world. Sadly, the progress made over the last half-century falls substantially short of what could have been possible.

The formation of the African Union (AU) followed the liberation of many African countries from the minority rule exercised during the colonization of Africa. *At the AU's inception, the hope for Africa was that it become a continent where freedom of expression, freedom of belief, freedom of assembly, equality, impartial justice, and the rule of law would undergird all aspects of African life—just the same as what America's founding fathers had envisioned for the United States. However, if the founders of the AU were alive today, would they be celebrating?*

Today, most African leaders on the continent have not been elected through free and fair elections and their countries do not allow basic freedoms, independent judiciaries, open political space and multi-ethnic governments. Instead, corruption is rampant, the human and civil rights of the people are violated and ethnic and religious based conflicts have caused untold suffering in places like Darfur, South Sudan, the Congo, and Rwanda. The daily struggle for survival, the dislocation of the people, cronyism, ethnic favoritism and strong-armed leaders trump the maximization of human potential on the continent for all but a few. Yet, Africans have not given up their hope for the continent and continue to strive towards progress despite these obstacles.

The organization I lead, the [Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia \(SMNE\)](#), is an example of the desire of Ethiopians for such progress. The SMNE is a non-political, non-violent grassroots social justice movement of diverse Ethiopians whose mission is to advance the freedom, justice, human rights, equality, and reconciliation of all the people of Ethiopia, regardless of ethnicity, religion, political view or other differences.

The SMNE formed in response to the widespread human rights violations, injustice and repression perpetrated against the Ethiopian people by the TPLF/EPRDF an ethnic-based minority regime in power now for over 20 years. Instead, we seek a New Ethiopia where *humanity comes before ethnicity* or any other identity differences that can diminish the value of another human being. This is one of the SMNE's core principles. Although you are celebrating the anniversary of the African Union at its headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; ironically, *Ethiopia is one of the most repressive and undemocratic countries on the African continent. Ethiopia is an example of the failure of the implementation of the goals of the AU and its partners.*

For example, in the last national election of 2010, the unpopular ruling party claimed a 99.6% victory after using an assortment of repressive methods to block political opponents, including imprisonment and misuse of foreign humanitarian aid to bribe voters and punish those who resisted. *A few blocks away from the front door of the beautiful new building housing the African Union are journalists, political leaders, religious leaders and human rights activists who were convicted of terrorism and other crimes for simply exercising rights of freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of religion and thought as enshrined in Article 30 of the Ethiopian Constitution.* As this day is celebrated, there are those who have been taken away from their families and imprisoned just because they are asking for their God-given rights. Others have been shot and killed, tortured or driven from the country for doing this.

Mr. Secretary,

You should be aware that a protest is planned for May 25, 2013. Leaders of the Semayawi (Blue) Party, the Ethiopian opposition is calling for their supporters to come out on the anniversary of the AU to peacefully protest. *Some will be wearing black as a symbol of their mourning for the lack of freedom, the criminalization of political expression, government interference in religious organizations, government control of Ethiopian institutions and its control of all aspects of life in the country—the media, the courts, the economy, the military, telecommunications, national resources, banking, the educational system and opportunities.*

These protestors seek to show African observers of the AU's celebration that they, Ethiopians of diverse ethnicity, region, gender and religion, are under tyranny. They hope it will inspire the Obama administration and others present to not overlook what is going on in reality on the ground. *The protestors seek the release of all political prisoners, the restoration of freedom of expression, an independent judiciary, opening up of political space, halting the displacement of the people from their land and the rescinding of the Charities and Society Proclamation and the Anti-Terrorism laws, which both are used to silence civil society.*

We are unsure about what the autocratic regime in Ethiopia will do in response. Some, especially the leaders of the protest, may be beaten, arrested and locked up in jail. The potential also exists for violence, particularly at the hands of the current government. This was the case in 2005 when Ethiopian government security forces shot and killed 197 peaceful protestors and detained tens of thousands of others. The opposition leaders were then imprisoned for 18 months.

We in the SMNE support the people and their demands for freedom, justice and meaningful reforms. *We hope that the U.S., as one of the key donors to the TPLF/EPRDF regime, will not overlook this cry from the people, but instead will speak out on behalf of freedom and justice and against the use of any violence or other punitive repercussions against the people for simply exercising their God-given rights.*

Mr. Secretary,

We understand the importance the US places on maintaining a relationship with Ethiopia, but it should be on the side of the people, not in support of a dictatorship. Following the Arab Spring, the people remained but the dictators were no longer in power. We call on Obama administration to side with the Ethiopian people who simply want the same freedoms Americans enjoy.

Lack of African progress cannot only be blamed on the dictatorships, but also on those who shore up their power. Some of the most democratic countries in our world should not settle for shortsighted goals—advancing their own interests. Instead, they should seek long-term goals and relationships, which must include the people. Relationships between countries, like between the US and Ethiopia, will always be most sustainable when national interests coincide with the human interests of the people.

Mr. Secretary,

This is not the first time we have approached you. We, the SMNE, sent a letter to you when you were the [Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee](#). We also sent letters to: [President Obama](#), [Robert Gates](#), as Secretary of Defense, and to [Hillary Clinton](#) when she was Secretary of State. *If we want a freer, more vibrant, more peaceful and stable world, it cannot be done without including Africa. Our human value should rise above national boundaries for no one is free until all are free—one of our foundational principles. When this principle is followed, it will bring greater harmony between people, communities and nations.*

Mr. Secretary,

We should not feed the African people rhetoric of words while feeding the dictators with aid money. This kind of thing is unhealthy and will backfire. Will President Obama now choose to side with the democratic movement of the Ethiopian people or will he continue with the status quo, supporting a dictator who has stolen the votes of the people?

If President Obama wants to work on the side of the Ethiopian people towards peace, stability and prosperity in Ethiopia and in the Horn of Africa, now is the time to show such readiness. We are extending our hand to work with you Mr. Secretary, but leave the decision up to you.

We call on the Obama administration to speak out about the injustice in Ethiopia. As for us, we will carry on our struggle until we free ourselves. We are not asking anyone else to do it—the US, the EU, or others—but, we do ask the Obama administration to not be a roadblock to our freedom. It is time for Africa to progress and thrive! That would be cause for real celebration!

Sincerely yours,

Obang Metho,
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This letter has been CC to:

President Barack Obama
Vice President, Joseph Biden
Acting U.S. Assistant Secretary of African Affairs Mr. Donald Yamamoto
U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia Mr. Donald Boothe
U.S. Sen. Robert Menendez, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
U.S. Sen. Bob Corker, Ranking Member of Committee on Foreign Relations Committee
U.S. Sen. Christopher Coons, Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on African Affairs
U.S. Sen. Jeff Flake, Ranking Member of the Senate Subcommittee on African Affairs
House of Representatives, Mr. Christopher Smith, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Africa

UK Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs,
German Minister of Foreign Affairs
Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
European Union Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs

This letter has also been CC to major news media outlets such as BBC, the Guardian, New York Times, Washington Post etc,