

**Democracy in Ethiopia, Unplugged:  
Reflections on a Dream Deferred<sup>1</sup>  
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Thank you Kinijit-Oakland Support Chapter for organizing this Town Hall Meeting and for inviting me to speak on the second anniversary of the May, 2005 elections in Ethiopia. And thanks to all of you who have taken the time to attend this event.

I am happy to be here at Samuel Merritt College. And it is always a pleasure to visit Oakland, a city which a generation ago was the epicenter of the African American struggle for equality and dignity.

It is truly inspiring to see Kinijit-Oakland Support Chapter continuing this tradition of struggle in the cause of democracy and human rights in Ethiopia.

Let me make a special note of the fact that we assemble here today on a special Memorial Day weekend. We are fortunate to have the opportunity to remember American servicemen and women who gave up their lives for their country, while honoring our brothers and sisters in Ethiopia who sacrificed their lives in defense of democracy and human rights in Ethiopia. We are eternally grateful to all of them.

When you invited me to speak here today, you said I should feel free to share my personal views and thoughts on the 2005 elections, and the prospects for democracy in Ethiopia in the foreseeable future. That is exactly what I plan to do today.

Let me just say at the outset that I am here today to celebrate the advent of democracy in our homeland two years ago. Just so you know, I am also here to exalt the virtues of democracy, and to join you in making joyful noises in celebration of one historic day in May, 2005. So, there will be no words of commiseration and despair spoken here today; may be words of solace, but never words of surrender.

Those of you accustomed to my usual messages on human rights may find my talk today slightly different. And because of the political nature of the subject matter of my remarks, I shall speak as a political scientist, and not as a lawyer.

So today, I will talk plainly about the ghost of democracy past in Ethiopia, and the spirit of a new democracy yet to come to Ethiopia.

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<sup>1</sup> Speech given at a town hall meeting on the campus of Samuel Merritt College, Oakland, California on May 27, 2007 on the occasion of the second anniversary of the May, 2005 elections in Ethiopia.

## **Anno Domino 2005: A Very Special Year**

But first, what manner of year was 2005 in Ethiopia? Well,...

2005 was the best of times, and the worst of times.

It was a year of hope; and it was a year of despair.

It was a year of celebration; and it was a year of sorrow.

It was a year of the sublime. It was a year of the ridiculous.

It was a year democracy triumphed in Ethiopia. It was a year tyranny triumphed over democracy, and over Ethiopia.

It was a year of the criminals. The election thieves. And the murderers.

It was, above all, the year of the Great Patriots. The Defiant Ones.

Today, the criminals sit comfortably in Government House, while the patriots languish in the jailhouse.

2005. It was a year to remember. It was a year to forget.

It was the year of Democracy. It was the year of betrayal of Democracy.

2005. It was a very special year. It was a year when 26 million Ethiopians registered to vote. It was a year 30,000 polling stations were opened to receive their votes. And on May 15, 2005, over 23.4 million Ethiopians cast their votes, and made history.

2005. It was a year of 75 million hopeful dreams. It was a year of a dream of Democracy deferred.

## **Remember the 15th of May, 2005 -- A Day That Shall Live in Glory!**

Let us travel back in time to May 15, 2005.

Dawn was just breaking. The morning air was filled with hopeful anticipation, and the people enraptured by the spirit of democracy.

Imagine! Imagine 24 million of your brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers up at the crack of dawn, marching to the polling stations, single file, in every hamlet and village,

neighborhood and town, city and region -- yes, imagine a whole nation on the march -- carrying a fresh broom in one hand and a hammer in the other.

They had a special job to do on May 15, 2005. It was Government House cleaning time!

It was time to sweep out 14 years of mismanagement. 14 years of misrule. 14 years of misgovernment. 14 years of malfeasance. And 14 years of corruption.

It was time to sweep out the EPDRF rascals!

And sweep out they did, out of every hamlet, village and neighborhood, town, city and region.

And when dusk fell and the polling done that day, the people rested. And their Government House was clean.

Yes, Kinijit had swept across the corrupt political landscape like an F-5 tornado.

Addis Ababa was “addis” (new) again. The people had scrubbed it clean from top to bottom. The Mayor’s Office was clean. The City Council was clean.

Addis was ready for the new occupants. Ethiopia was ready to accept its new leaders.

### **The Morning After: Democracy Betrayed, Democracy Unplugged!**

And so the following day, the people put down their brooms and picked up their hammers. They had a job to do!

As the great American civil rights leader Harry Belafonte would sing, it was time to “hammer out love between the brothers and the sisters all over the land”, called Ethiopia.

It was time to begin building a free society and heal the wounds of ethnic hatred and division. It was high time to start construction on a new society based on the rule of law, respect for civil liberties and human rights.

But when the people showed up on the job sites in every hamlet, village and neighborhood, town, city and region to begin construction, they were told the whole election and Kinijit’s victory was make-believe.

The elections did not happen. It was all a dream.

And so overnight, the people’s victory had changed to defeat, their hopes turned into despair, their aspirations dissolved into a nightmare that has now lasted for two years.

But the people said, yes, it was a dream of democracy all right. But they are not going to sleep until their votes were respected. And they made their demands known in the streets.

And their newly elected leaders blew the whistle and called the international cops to report the international crime of stolen elections.

As the great Ana Gomez, the European parliamentarian and Chief of the European Union Election Observation Mission noted: “In the May elections one year ago [2005], the voice of the Ethiopian people was loud and clear: they wanted change. But the current rulers of the country did not care to listen, and that is why the democratic will of the people of Ethiopia remains unfulfilled. The Ethiopian people have been, therefore, betrayed by those who continue to govern in their name without their proper mandate.”<sup>2</sup>

Yes, the Ethiopian people were betrayed, but their true elected leaders refused to sell out. They too insisted the people’s vote be respected.

But the rascals would have none of it.

And they answered the people’s ballots with bullets. They gunned down and imprisoned the young and old, the men and women, by the thousands and indiscriminately, in an attempt to intimidate them into submission.

In the end, the defiant new leaders were sent to the jailhouse, while the rascals sat comfortably in parliament house, in government house.

And so democracy was betrayed, and the people were cheated out of their cherished aspirations and hopes for a government of their own choosing.

Democracy was unplugged from its source of power supply, the People.

### **May, 2007: What Time is it?**

So here we are now, and it’s May, 2007. But really, what time is it?

It is time to un-betray democracy. It is time to rekindle the spirit of democracy from the smoldering fire of popular anger and loathing of a tyrannical regime.

Since the elections, I have heard time again grim assessments of the political situation in Ethiopia. Some of us sing melancholy songs of resignation and despair about the future. I have heard some say: “All is lost. Our chance for democracy is gone. It is hopeless.”

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ethiomeia.com/carepress/ana\\_gomez\\_speech.html](http://www.ethiomeia.com/carepress/ana_gomez_speech.html)

But that is not true. Yes, one great opportunity to cherish the blessings of democracy may have been lost, but democracy has been around for 2500 hundred years and it will be around for many more. Democracy lost can be regained, if we know what time it is!

It is time to re-ignite the flames of hope and cast away the demoralizing spirit of despair.

I hear some who lament the artificial ethnic divisions in the country and say, “The regime has fragmented and divided the society along ethnic lines. It will be difficult to heal the wounds of ethnic hatred.”

As Christ, Gandhi, Martin King and Mandela have taught us, hatred can be overcome by love, ill will with good will, strife with harmony, rancor with understanding, brutality with civility, distrust with faith, ignorance with wisdom, cruelty with compassion, and inhumanity with humanity.

So, I do not believe ethnicity will be an insurmountable obstacle because as a people our historical bonds are much stronger than the power of those who want to put us asunder.

The bonds of family relations, our long-standing traditions and cultural ties and the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood we share are infinitely more powerful than a faddish policy of ethnic separation. So, I believe any ethnic differences imposed upon us are superficial and ephemeral, and can be overcome. But we must know what time it is!

It is time to reconcile, to bury the hatchet. Time to set aside differences and work for a common cause, the holy cause of human rights and democracy in Ethiopia.

It is time to say No to ethnic politics, and Yes to human rights and democracy. For once you ensure respect for the human rights of every citizen and guarantee respect for the inherent worth of the cultural diversity of all groups, few will be concerned about their ethnic, linguistic or regional origins. I believe our communal impulses will overcome any vestigial ethnic allegiances we may have, any day of the week.

I also see some of us engage in the politics of personal and organizational destruction, demeaning and accusing each other of crimes of moral turpitude. We must know what time it is.

It is time to engage in constructive dialogue over the important issues facing the people, and turn our attentions away from our petty differences. Particularly for those of us in the Diaspora, it is time to build bridges between groups. Let's tear down the walls that keep us isolated in our little camps. There is no reason to split up an organization that was built with the blood, sweat and tears of untold numbers of our brothers and sisters, our mothers and fathers. Please, please, please, there is no need to throw dirty laundry at each other while the

enemies of democracy and human rights fall off their chairs with belly full of laughs. It is time to come together. Get together.

I hear some say, “A bill in the U.S. Congress is not going to make a difference. It will not change anything.” I beg to disagree.

The human rights bills before the U.S. Congress will get the attention of those who abuse their powers and the human rights of their citizens. After all, as American tax payers, our dollars are used to bankroll the tyrannical regime over there. Yes, a human rights bill will make a big difference. Otherwise, they would not be fighting it tooth and nail to stop it, to defeat it. We must know what time it is!

It is time to pass a human rights bill in Congress which ensures accountability and respect for the rule of law, and promotes good governance in Ethiopia. It is time to unite and push for passage of this bill.

Not infrequently, I hear some say in resignation, “I should keep quite. My voice will not make a difference. I am not a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer or whatever. No one will listen to me.”

But that is not true. It is 2007, but we must know what time it is. It is time to speak up. It is time to shout a mighty shout for human rights and democracy in Ethiopia. It is time to get up, to stand up for the rule of law and accountability in Ethiopia.

### **The Decline and Fall of Regimes**

Let me shift gears here and say a word or two about a topic that I frequently encounter in town hall meetings such as this one.

Some people say to me that democracy will not take root in Ethiopia unless the current regime respects the people’s vote and stands down, or embraces democratic principles and the rule of law and submit to the collective judgment of the people. They say that since the ruling regime will try to remain in power at any cost, it must be resisted by any means necessary.

I even hear some arguing that regime change in Ethiopia can not come through the ballot box. There must be armed struggle, and so on. And I suspect there are some groups who are engaged in such activities.

My theory on the rise and fall of regimes is based on the simple notion that all regimes have “lifecycles”.

In democracies, regimes last during their fixed term in office. Change comes through periodic and competitive elections, or the diligent efforts of the loyal opposition.

Consider, for instance, the regime life cycles of the Bush and Blair Administrations. Tony Blair became prime minister in 1997 after delivering a decisive defeat to the Conservative government since 1832. In less than a month, Blair will make an ignominious exit from the English political landscape and fade into history in no small part because of his reckless misadventures in Iraq.

And the Bush Administration is in its last throes. The principal architects of the “neocon revolution” and their sidekicks have been thoroughly discredited and fallen by the wayside -- Don “Rummy” Rumsfeld, Paul “Slimeball” Wolfowitz, Richard “Prince of Darkness” Perle, John “Let’s get ’em” Bolton, Lewis “Perjurer” Libby, George “Slam Dunk” Tenet, Al “I don’t recall” Gonzalez, etc. -- and are long gone, or heading out the door. The Bush train is running on empty -- without much credibility, no vision for America, and precious little popular support.

And in 2008, the last two men standing in the twilight of the neconservative revolution, George Bush and Dick Cheney, will be headed to pasture, concluding the life cycle of the Bush Administration.

Such may be the decline and fall of democratic regimes in the West. But what about regimes in Africa? Ethiopia?

In the early 1970’s we saw the gradual collapse of the imperial regime after decades of autocratic rule.

In 1991, we witnessed the complete disintegration of the Dergue following its ruinous experiments in socialism, and reckless military adventurism.

History would predict that it is only a matter of time before a regime that is so brutal and repressive as the one in power today in Ethiopia undergoes a complete meltdown, despite its current efforts to project a veneer of invincibility.

The “meltdown” metaphor borrowed from the behavior of an uncontrollable nuclear reactor core is an appropriate one in explaining the life cycle of this regime.

The political “core” of this regime, I believe, is overheating from structural failures and breakdowns in its internal processes.

What are the root causes of the meltdown? I believe there are many.

Let me just mention a few: the regime’s policy of ethnic fragmentation, the absence of the rule of law and an independent judicial system to ensure minimal conditions of justice, violent suppression of dissent and opposition political parties, disruption and impairment of

general civic associations and organizations, inability of regime elites to adopt to structural change requirements, indiscriminate use of brute force or military power to meet political challenges, interventionist adventurism in the affairs of a neighboring country, a manifest lack of popular support for the regime, lack of regime legitimacy, increase in internal and external opposition, regime isolation from the vast segment of the population, arrogant unwillingness to address the issue of the release of all political prisoners, and particularly the leaders of Kinijit, among others.

If you factor in the “fuel” that sustains the political core -- rampant corruption, nepotism and cronyism -- you have a perfect brew for a regime meltdown. So you now have a regime that is trapped in a containment chamber that is beyond repair with pressure building from within and without.

Yet the normal safety relief valves in society that allow for the release of pressure in the political system -- basic democratic rights in the form of free speech, free press, the right to demonstrate, etc., -- have all been closed. People can not complain or protest, only suffer in muted silence. And the pressure keeps on building up in the containment chamber.

It has been said that "A state which can only coerce its subjects is not governing them, it is at war with them." Today, we have a regime in Ethiopia that rules with brute force, and is at war with its people.

But in the indiscriminate use of force and violence, I see a regime in a state of political decay which generally occurs before a meltdown. I am using the concept of political decay here to describe the regime's lack of capacity to maintain a stable political order, provide a substantial measure of security to its citizens and command their respect, and its inability to reconcile with important political actors over the past 2 years.

I believe we are now witnessing the life cycle of a moribund regime that has little connection or even shared values with the majority of the population -- a regime that is systemically dysfunctional and severely malfunctioning in its political “core”. A meltdown is inevitable.

But this phenomenon may not be unique to Ethiopia. I'd say it has been the fate of all despotic African regimes over the past several decades. Arrogant and self-centered African “leaders” from Idi Amin to the new breed, all believe they can remain in power for eternity by force of arms alone.

### **So Much for Theory: Why Do Corrupt and Dictatorial Regimes Fall?**

Enough of theory! Really, why do oppressive regimes fall?

They fall because they make no effort to win the hearts and minds of the people they want to rule. Because they are arrogant and disdainful, they try to rule by breaking the spirits and hearts of the people using the instruments of fear and intimidation.

They fall because of moral bankruptcy. They lack popular consent to govern. So, they try to rule by imposing their will and manufacturing consent and legitimacy from rigged elections.

They fall because they are unable to build a political base beyond their own ethnic groups, and in the alternative they create make-believe ethnic alliances and bogus coalition political parties. Using such political devices, they wind up dividing their societies while sharing the political spoils among themselves, and inviting resistance from groups and segments in society that are left out and marginalized.

They fall because of sheer incompetence. They do not have the manpower, expertise or vision to manage the economy or govern the country. Now, you know why a single chicken costs 80 birr!

They fall because they can not stand. They can rule, but not govern. They can direct, but not guide. They can command, but not persuade.

They fall because they think they can fool all of the people all of the time. They are willfully blind to the facts around them. By the time they find out that they have fooled no one but themselves, they also find out that they are isolated by themselves.

And they fall because of terminal political decay.

Ultimately, they fall because tyrants always do! As Gandhi said: "I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers and for a time they seem invincible but in the end, they always fall -- think of it, ALWAYS."

### **The Road Ahead: Winning the Hearts and Minds of the People**

As I reflect on the road ahead, I am reminded of a statement made in a letter written by John Adams, the second president of the United States: "The [American] Revolution was effected before the War commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations.... This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people, was the real American Revolution." I believe the wisdom of this statement has applicability to our situation.

When the people of Ethiopia voted in May, 2005, an irreversible revolution had taken place not just at the polling stations and in the ballot boxes, but most importantly, in the hearts and minds of the people. On May 15, 2005, a radical change occurred in the principles, opinions, sentiments and affections of the Ethiopian people.

How else can you explain the fact that in the seat of national government, the capital city, Kinijit was able to sweep the election slate clean?

How else can you explain the fact that an opposition that had merely 12 seats in parliament, *by the regime's count*, increased its number to 173?

How else can one explain the fact that an estimated 3 million people inundated the capital city to show their support for change and say enough is enough?

So, the battle for the hearts and minds of the Ethiopian people was won on May 15, 2005. The real Ethiopian Revolution had taken place on that historic day.

But really, why did Kinijit decisively win the elections? There is no mystery there: It won because, as Ana Gomez simply said, it was time for a change!

### **A Word or Two About Us in the Diaspora**

Now, I would like to say a few words about how we can do things better or differently in the Diaspora.

I believe one of our major shortcomings in the Diaspora is our failure to articulate a clear political vision and a coherent political agenda for our homeland. We have loose and divergent coalitions that often appear to work at cross purposes.

But for the moment, I want to focus on specific deficits that need to be remedied in the foreseeable future.

First, we have a mobilization deficit. Because of lack of coordination, we have not done a good job of mobilizing and engaging a substantial part of Diaspora Ethiopian community in the struggle for human rights and democracy.

Second, we have a message deficit. We must do a better job educating our brothers and sisters about what it is that we want in our homeland. We must make it clear that our message is not about ethnicity or personality or ideology.

I believe our message should be strictly about accountability regardless of who may be in power. We must spread the gospel of accountability and never compromise on the principle that those who have the responsibility to govern must be answerable for their actions and policies to the people. We must convey the message that our aim is to help develop a free society with robust protections for human rights and civil liberties, and an economy free of government interference and intervention. If we have to put it all in one sentence, what we want is to help develop a social order that is fundamentally just and equitable to the greatest number possible.

## **Restoring Democracy in Ethiopia**

I am often asked by some who look at the current repressive situation and wonder when democracy will come to Ethiopia, and whether what we do here will make any difference at all in Ethiopia.

It is true that the situation for the restoration of democracy in Ethiopia appears a bit grim, for now. There are few tools available to promote democracy internally in the face of brutal repression, and fewer internal measures that can be taken to compel the regime to restore democracy, improve governance and observe human rights.

But, let me mention a few necessary preconditions before we can even talk meaningfully about restoration of democratic governance in Ethiopia. These are all well known to you: All political prisoners throughout the country must be released, NOW! The peoples' elected leaders languishing in Kality jail MUST be released, NOW! Human rights abuses must stop, NOW! Human rights abusers and violators must be apprehended and brought to justice, NOW. All of those involved in the massacre of innocent people after the elections must be held accountable, NOW. Civil liberties and human rights must be secured, NOW. And freedom of speech, and freedom of the press must be restored, NOW.

Now, let me turn to the larger question: "When will democracy come to Ethiopia?"

My answer is a simple one: "Democracy has been in Ethiopia since its arrival on May 15, 2005. It never left. I suspect you have not seen it much lately. But that's because it has been forced to take up residence in Kality jail. Yes, democracy is held hostage in Kality jail. So, if you want to know when democracy will come to Ethiopia, don't ask me. Go to Kality jail and make an inquiry.

"But along the way to Kality jail, please look lovingly into the eyes of the people in the streets. You will see the spirit of democracy etched in the distressed faces of young people who stand by the street corners watching their youthful lives pass away without getting an education to help themselves and their families. You will see democracy written in the faces of our elders walking to church to pray for an end to the unspeakable suffering inflicted upon our beloved homeland. And you look down, you will even see it in the joyful smiles of the shoeshine boys.

"But if you are like some people I know, democracy may be altogether elusive to you. Because democracy is invisible to those who have eyes but do not want to see. It is silent to those who have ears and do not want to hear. It is mute to those who can speak but choose to remain speechless.

"So, I say to those who want to know when democracy will come to Ethiopia, open your eyes and you will see it the tears rolling down the faces of the people. Pull your shoulder along the grindstone, and you will see it in the sweat of a nation trapped in a daily struggle for survival.

Kneel down by the lifeless bodies of the young people cut down in their prime, and in their spilled blood, you will see a dim reflection of democracy and yourself.

“But it is also a joyful time for democracy now. Talk and you will hear democracy in whispers of the people. Listen and you will hear it in the cacophony of voices of the old and young, the men and women, the peasants and the laborers, the students, the unemployed masses, and even the street beggars. Yes, you will even hear it in the gossips of the enemies of democracy and human rights.

But, I say, look towards the heavens, and there fixed among the stars for eternity, you will see the Spirit of Democracy smiling upon you.”

### **H.R. 2003 and H.R. 2228**

I said at the beginning of my talk that I will not be talking much about human rights today. I may have to break that promise just a little bit. Most of my professional life has been committed to the defense of civil liberties and human rights, or teaching young Americans about the blessings of liberty. And as you know, old habits die hard. So I will momentarily digress and briefly talk about the Ethiopia human rights bills in the U.S. House of Representatives.

As you are aware, in the past month Congressmen Don Payne, a democrat, and Chris Smith, a republican, have reintroduced replacements for H.R. 5680 (Ethiopia Democracy, Freedom and Human Rights Act), which passed the International Relations Committee unanimously before it was stonewalled by Speaker Dennis Hastert. The current bills are very similar to H.R. 5680, and will be reconciled in committee to form a single piece of legislation.

You may also know that the regime has mounted a concerted onslaught against any Ethiopia human rights bill in Congress. They are waging an unprecedented lobbying effort by high profile public-relations and lobbying firms. And, of course, they have an unlimited amount of money to spend on lobbying.

So, we in the Diaspora are up against the DLA Piper Goliath lobbying firm. And like David, we are fighting Goliath with a sticks and stones. We do not have millions of dollars to spend on lobbyists.

So, in this fight for the holy cause of human rights, we are the little people of God facing the mighty Army of DLA Piper. But have no doubts, in the end we will prevail because the Almighty is on our side in our fight with the mighty Army of DLA Piper. We will prevail because justice is on our side. We will be victorious because Good always triumphs over Evil. Always!

## **So, My Friends, What Happens to a Dream Deferred?**

The subtitle for my remarks today is “Reflections on a Dream Deferred”. So before I conclude, let me ask you: What happens to a dream deferred?

I think I know, but let me tell you what happens to a dream deferred in the poetic words of Langston Hughes, the great African American poet, and my personal favorite:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over--

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

So, my friends, tell me: “What happens to a **democracy** deferred?”

Thank you!