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Introduction

I would like to thank Chair Christopher Smith and Ranking Member Karen Bass for organizing this timely hearing. It is a great pleasure to speak with the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organization on “Democracy Under Threat in Ethiopia.”

I have been a student of Ethiopian politics since my first visit in 1987 for my doctoral dissertation research. I have had the privilege of serving as the senior advisor to the Carter Center’s 2005 election observation mission, as a lecturer at Addis Ababa University and Bahir Dar University with the support of the Fulbright Specialist program, and as a consultant to USAID regarding issues of conflict, democracy, and governance. My thoughts below are elaborated in a number of academic publications. They reflect my best judgment as an independent scholar who regards himself as a friend to a diverse range of Ethiopians on all sides of the political spectrum rather than as an advocate for any specific constituency or policy.

The Stakes

Ethiopia is in its most profound crisis since the current government came to power in 1991. The stakes are enormous, for the people of Ethiopia, for the larger Horn of Africa region, and for US national interests.

Ethiopia is the inevitable center of gravity of the Horn of Africa region. Its population of 100 million (second only to Nigeria in Africa) is larger than all of its neighbors combined and its central location involves it in the security concerns of the entire region. As the headquarters of the Africa Union, as the largest contributor to UN peacekeeping operations and to the AMISOM mission in Somalia, and as the convener of peace talks on South Sudan, Ethiopia is a major regional diplomatic player. It has been a state that has seen dramatic economic development and reduction of poverty. This may be seen in the real estate and construction sector boom in Addis Ababa but also in regional cities such as Hawassa and Bahir Dar, new rural roads that connect small towns to markets and services, new regional universities, and new health posts across the state.

Washington has long had important interests in Ethiopia. As a development partner, the United States has invested heavily in humanitarian assistance and programs to promote health and education. Washington and Addis Ababa both have concerns about violent regional groups such as al-Shabaab in Somalia, although each focuses on different aspects of the perceived threat. Washington has regularly criticized the lack of democratic space and violations of human rights in Ethiopia. The recently released 2016 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices states “The most significant human rights problems were security forces’ use of excessive force and arbitrary arrest in response to the protests, politically motivated prosecutions, and continued restrictions on activities of civil society and NGOs.”

The Current Crisis

Predictions that the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was heading toward a crisis have been common over the years. The EPRDF, however, has demonstrated greater resilience than many analysts – this author included – understood. The EPRDF's system of governance includes two contradictory logics that have been held in balance since seizing power in 1991 by a strong central executive. On the one hand, the Ethiopian Constitution sets forth a decentralized federation composed of ethnically defined states ruled by ethnically defined political parties. The EPRDF is a coalition of four ethnically based parties – the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) – and each party has a distinctive history and relationship to the armed struggle that brought the coalition to power. At the same time, the center is very strong, with a disciplined, hierarchical structure that links the central committee down to the most remote villages. Resources are distributed from the center and economic policies designed to create a Developmental State further emphasize the centralizing tendencies at the expense of the ethno-federal autonomy forces. In 2016, however, this balance of contradictory logics seemed to falter, as central authorities sought to re-establish their dominance over regional states that sought to advance their own local agendas.

While the crisis is real, it is important to recognize that the ruling party retains considerable strength. Following the 2005 elections and subsequent crackdown, the regime successfully expanded and institutionalized its system of authoritarian control, virtually eliminating independent space for opposition political parties, civil society organizations, and non-state media. The party has approximately 8 million members. The EPRDF controls mass organizations for women and youth, humanitarian and development organizations, and large economic enterprises. This domination was made symbolically clear in 2015, when the ruling coalition and its affiliates won 100 percent of the parliamentary seats. This system survived the death of its long-time leader, Meles Zenawi, in 2012 and a major el Niño drought that left 10 million in need of international assistance in 2015.

On the other hand, in 2016 an unprecedented wave of protests erupted in Oromia and later in the Amhara National Regional State. These two states account for over half of Ethiopia's population, making this crisis an existential threat to the Ethiopian state. The underlying grievances were not new, but the intensity, scale, and duration were extraordinary. While preceded by important peaceful demonstrations by Ethiopian Muslims in 2012, these protests were spontaneous or mobilized by ad hoc decentralized structures loosely coordinated through social media. They were triggered by often quite local, parochial concerns but tapped into deeper grievances and a sense that the central government was vulnerable. The protests received widespread international attention when marathoner Feyissa Lilesa crossed the

finish line at the Rio Olympics marathon and flashed the crossed arms symbol to show solidarity with the demonstrators.

Reports that the regime was planning to take over Oromo lands as part of an expansion of the Addis Ababa region sparked protests in late 2015 that spread quickly throughout Oromiya. On December 23, 2015 security forces arrested Oromo Federalist Congress leader Bekele Gerba and charged him under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation. The protests continued through 2016 despite widespread arrests and considerable violence. By some estimates over 24,000 were arrested and “at least 800 killed.”¹ In some cases officials from the ruling coalition’s Oromo wing, the OPDO, seemed unwilling to act against demonstrators. In other cases protestors targeted international investments or property associated with the ruling party. The mobilization of dissent was also transnational, with links to a growing sense of Oromo nationalism as articulated by new diaspora-based social media platforms and news organizations such as the Oromo Media Network. The tragic climax of this phase took place in October 2016 when significant casualties occurred when a huge traditional thanksgiving holiday ceremony in Bishoftu ended in a deadly stampede that killed at least dozens after security forces acted to disperse the crowd.

Protests were not confined to the Oromo region. In August 2016, protests broke out in the Amhara region as a dispute over whether the Welkait zone should be part of Tigray or Amhara region erupted in violence. When authorities tried to arrest the local leader of the Welkait Amhara Identity Committee, violence broke out and massive demonstrations quickly organized in Gondar and Bahir Dar. Demonstrations were followed by boycotts and stay-at-home protests. As in the Oromo protests, there seemed to be involvement by some high-level members of the Amhara wing of the ruling coalition.

The Ethiopian regime has followed a pattern in responding to protests. In Oromia and the Amhara region, but also in Konso over concerns about changes in wereda borders and in earlier protests among Ethiopian Muslims, in Ambo, Addis Ababa University, Hawassa and elsewhere, the regime typically refuses to consult or open dialogue with protesters but rather launches mass arrests, particularly of young men. Allegations of torture of those arrested are widespread and credible. On some occasions, live fire has been used to disperse crowds, resulting in the deaths of demonstrators. Not surprisingly, those sufficiently aggrieved to launch the protests are often further inflamed by the government’s reaction, thereby generating additional escalatory dynamics. While in the past repression has served to demobilize protests, in 2016 they continued to spread and escalate.

The EPRDF generally seeks to categorize the protesters as “anti-peace” and “anti-development” forces, working on behalf of regional enemies such as Eritrea and

¹ This estimate is from Amnesty International, “Ethiopia: After a Year of Protests, Time to Address Grave Human Rights Concerns,” 9 November 2016. Estimates on casualties are contentious and extremely difficult to verify, given the limited access to the countryside and restrictions on the media.

“radical Islam” or allies of armed exile opposition groups such as the Oromo Liberation Front, Gimbot 7, and “extremist” diaspora networks. The EPRDF argues that the fundamental interests of the rural majority relate to ending poverty and that the 2016 demonstrations therefore are merely a “hiccup.” If pursued without distraction, the developmental state would transform the countryside and end dissent through “better governance” and service provision.

In November 2016, the government imposed a State of Emergency. This entailed creating military “Command Posts” to impose order and suspending constitutional provisions relating to freedom of assembly and expression. Access to social media and the internet was shut down for a period of time. This move was in part a strategy to discipline the ruling coalition’s constituent parties (the ANDM reportedly voted against the declaration). The scale of the crackdown was large and successfully suppressed the protests, for a time at least. The regime released 11,000 detainees between November 2015 and January 2016, following what officials called “rehabilitative detention” that included trainings and lectures so that those detained would not return to protest. While insisting that they wished to open dialogue with the opposition, the regime arrested Merera Gudina, a university professor and leader of one of the few opposition parties operating legally within Ethiopia, upon his return from meetings at the European Union. By early 2017, martial law had succeeded in reducing violence on the streets but there are few indications that the regime is prepared to engage in serious reform efforts.

These popular protests and the regime’s response may indicate growing fissures within the ruling party. As noted above, the EPRDF is a coalition of four distinct, ethnically defined parties and has always had significant (if opaque) internal contention and rivalries between the varied constituent parties. The TPLF, ANDM, OPDO, and SEPDM have different social bases and distinct relationships to the history of the armed struggle. This coalition was held together for 25 years by a strong Executive Committee, dominated by the TPLF.

In 2016, however, it appears that elements of the ruling coalition are willing to more-or-less publically side with protestors who are opposed to EPRDF policies. The OPDO was also accused of being too soft on the protests and as a consequence saw purges across all levels of the party and the appointment of leaders with experience in the security services. This gutting of party leadership raises questions regarding whether the Oromo wing of the ruling party can reconstitute itself as a viable part of the ruling coalition. The ANDM is in a stronger position than the OPDO and has reportedly resisted purging its leadership. There have been a series of moves by the ANDM to create distance between itself and the TPLF that has dominated the EPRDF since its origins

Ethiopia appears to be at an important crossroads. The protests and State of Emergency suggest that the political dispensation put in place by the EPRDF in 1991 is unlikely to remain the basis for a stable political order. The path toward a more

open, participatory, and stable political system requires serious steps by the ruling party. The first steps seem clear:

1. End the state of emergency and reduce the role of the Ethiopian Defense Force in domestic political affairs;
2. Release political prisoners, notably Bekele Gerba and Merera Gudina as well as journalists and other prominent activists, and initiate an all-inclusive political dialogue with all political parties.
3. Scrap the civil society proclamation and replace it with regulations to encourage non-governmental organizations to engage in advocacy, rights based development, and monitoring on human rights and democracy;
4. Recognize and protect the space for legally registered alternative political parties to articulate their policy positions and critique of the incumbent regime.
5. Engage in dialogue with all stakeholders on revising the electoral law, reforming the National Election Board, allowing domestic election observation, and allocating state-owned media time to all political parties.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence to suggest that the EPRDF shares this perception of the way forward or is interested in this kind of deep reform. The current State of Emergency has succeeded in suppressing protests but has not resulted in a serious effort to address the root causes of the conflict. In fact, there are reasons to worry that the top EPRDF leadership will become complacent and think that they have avoided the crisis and that they can go back to business as usual.

This would be a miscalculation, and quite possibly a very costly mistake. The underlying grievances remain and the crisis within the ruling party seems far from settled. If there is another round of demonstrations, they may well escalate more quickly and violently than the 2016 protests, leading the EPRDF to return to the use of central military power to govern restless areas such as the Oromo and Amhara regional states. In the unstable but strategically important Horn of Africa, instability in Ethiopia has broad implications.

US Policy Toward Ethiopia

The United States faces a series of dilemmas in constructing policy toward Ethiopia. It has strong interests in Ethiopia's continued stability and its continued role in UN peacekeeping and US-supported counter-terrorism programs. Ethiopia is regarded as a strong development partner that has seen significant progress in reducing poverty, promoting health, and broadening access to education in recent years. At the same time, Ethiopia is a state with a human rights record that challenges core US principles and a political system that is both authoritarian and increasingly at risk of instability.

Washington must be modest in its assessment of its ability to shape dynamics within Ethiopia. Internally driven political, social, and economic processes are far more important than the marginal influence of the United States. Other investors from China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and India are often more important than Washington. However, it is essential that Washington speak as plainly as possible about its concerns regarding Ethiopia's human rights record, its systematic efforts to restrict democratic space, and the deeply rooted nature of the current crisis. Many senior diplomats argue that such messages are best passed to Ethiopian officials privately. But there is value in speaking publicly and in solidarity with what remains of Ethiopia's civil society, independent media, and members of legally registered opposition parties.

The United States should actively and vigorously engage its Ethiopian partners at all levels in a serious discussion regarding the political reforms outlined above. Washington should be ready to support such reforms, if the Ethiopian leadership demonstrates a willingness to engage. Various leaders and spokespersons of the EPRDF have suggested that the government is ready to open a discussion of political reform around questions of the electoral law and perhaps the electoral commission. Such steps deserve attention and have been demands from the opposition since at least 2005. But these narrow technical changes are insufficient to address the deep crisis facing the regime. The agenda for a peaceful path forward must entail serious discussion of opening political space and allowing independent civil society, media, and alternative political parties to operate. Beyond the short-term imperatives of ending the State of Emergency and releasing political prisoners, Washington should stand ready to work with Ethiopians in a long-term process of institutional reform and dialogue among the diverse constituencies and stakeholders in Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian diaspora, many of whom have joined us in the hearing room today, have an important role to play. As a result of the closing of political space since 2005, a significant number of Ethiopian intellectuals, journalists, and activists now live outside of Ethiopia. While the current leadership in Addis Ababa regards the diaspora as a threat, and some in the diaspora engage in irresponsible encouragement of armed resistance, it is essential that peaceful and democratic ideas and leadership be invited to play a role in Ethiopia's future. A process of deep and sustainable political reform is likely to require the engagement of members of the diaspora.

It is past time for Washington's narrative about Ethiopia to shift from an emphasis on counter-terrorism and regional security to a longer-term agenda based on participation and rule of law. Long-term stability cannot be built upon repression of debate and the marginalization of those who disagree with the ruling party. The United States needs to advance policies that are designed to work in partnership with a broad range of actors in Ethiopia to advance toward common goals in 2025 or 2030, not just the next election or fiscal year. The future of Ethiopia and the larger Horn of Africa requires that friends of Ethiopia speak plainly and seek

constructive partnerships with Ethiopians to find a path to a more open, participatory political environment.

Conclusion

Ethiopia faces its gravest crisis since the current ruling party seized power in 1991. It is a crisis that will not be solved by technocratic tinkering of the electoral law or by cabinet reshuffles. Rather, a new relationship between the ruling party and other constituencies is needed. The United States should seek to become a partner in such a reform process, if the current leadership demonstrates a sincere interest in making the needed changes. But Washington and Addis Ababa both must recognize that reform will require ending that State of Emergency, releasing political prisoners, allowing civil society to operate in ways that include advocacy for human rights and democracy, and provide the secure political space for diverse views to engage in determining their future.

I would like to thank the subcommittee for this opportunity and look forward to any questions you may have.