

US Congressional Bill - HR - 4223

and its impact on our struggle for freedom and equality

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With the marking of Congressional Bill HR-4223, on 6 April 2006 (the Bill is called – Ethiopian Freedom, Human Rights and Democratic Act) all democratic forces of Ethiopia in general and supporters of the opposition in particular rejoiced. From the legal and procedural point of view, the celebration is too pre-mature because the Bill has to pass through the Foreign Services Committee and the full House debates before it is blessed with the signature from President Bush to become a law. Notwithstanding this fact Ethiopians from all corners of the globe continued calling and informing each other about this historical Bill and urged to read it. Indeed, it worth reading and analysing. Some of my friends and professional colleagues with whom I discussed the content of the Bill seem to be overjoyed and pre-maturely assumed that the Bill issued a death sentence to the TPLF rule. Be as it is, I decided to take the liberty to put my thoughts in form of this note and briefly analyze not necessarily the content of the Bill *per se* but its impact on the struggle of the Oromo people. In doing so, I would like to remind readers that this is my personal opinion and views expressed in this note are mine and I remain responsible for its content.

Global political set-up:

We live in an era where people's will and aspiration to freedom and to elect leaders of their choice is not making sense any more unless it fits in their pre-designed parameter of the developed world – the self appointed standard setters. Exercising democratic rights like free and fair election does not necessarily entail global support anymore. Hamas won a landslide victory and the election was considered by all international observers as the most fair and efficient election in the region ever. But, the USA and EU decided to cut assistance to the government led by Prime Minister Ismail Heydin of Hamas allegedly for the latter's refusal to recognise Israel. Although the people of Palestine democratically voted for Hamas, the Western world refused to recognise the new democratically elected government of Palestine simply because it did not match their national interest. The fate of millions of Palestinians who are under occupation since 1967 is not relevant for the "standard setters" but the status of the Occupying power i.e. the State of Israel is. The same is true for all those in the developing world who are fighting for freedom and equality. Subsequently, we are left with no choice but to re-design our strategies so that we can get the support of the developed world.

That is where we are today. No matter what and how just a cause may be, what matters is not the content and the nature of the cause one fights for but rather the national interest of the developed world. In any case, one is left with no choice but to be flexible in politics because there is no such thing as being absolutely right or fighting for a just cause. Everything is relative and unfortunately the standard of measurement to gain support is not necessarily being right or advance justice but whether the objective of ones struggle fits within the national interest of the developed world or not. Both Hugo Chavez and Mugabe were democratically elected but because they do not fit in the standard of measurement of the West they are categorised as dictators. But Meles killed or detained more people than any of the living dictators and yet, the West is still reluctant to categorise him as a dictator. They still consider him as a friend and as Congressman Smith (Chairman of the House Sub-Committee where the above Bill is discussed) making reference to Meles said during the opening of the Hearing on March 28, *"Friends don't let friends commit human rights abuses."* Even though Meles violated and continue to grossly violate the fundamental human rights (arbitrary detention, prolonged detention without charges or trial, summary execution etc) of hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians, he still remains as "a friend" – at least for now.

The Bill itself:

Congressional Bill - 4223 is the result of an excellent lobby by the opposition group both at home and diaspora. Supporters of the opposition especially the CUD were seen organising rallies after rallies and making noises in Europe, America and Australia. They reconciled their petty differences and capitalised on the bigger picture – it being the TPLF regime. An excellent piece of work and a success story. As a precursor to the marking of the Bill, the (USA) Congressional Sub-Committee on Africa organised a Hearing in Washington DC on 28 March 2006 and invited key figures both Ethiopians and foreigners – individual supporters and members of the opposition including the representative of the Anuak to come to Washington DC and testify. The representative of the USA chapter of Amnesty International, the US deputy Assistant Secretary Bureau for African Affairs of the US department of State, and of course the Ethiopian ambassador Mr. Fiseha Tessema were among the invitees who were requested to testify in front of the Congressional Sub-Committee.

It is very saddening to see that not a single representative of the Oromo nation is invited to testify. I don't know if the leaders of our numerous Oromos organizations both at home and diaspora were invited but my gut tells me that they were not. Assuming my guess is right, let me further guess possible reasons why they were not invited. I can think of **four** major reasons.

a) we did not have a strong lobby and hence organisers of the Hearing did not find it important to invite representatives of our people;

b) the Congressional Committee does not appreciate the Oromo organizations mode of struggle i.e. armed struggle (as a matter of fact armed group were always not welcomed to testify in front of the sub-committee) and found it wrong to invite “people who are advocating violence” to the Congressional Hearing;

c) the sub-committee did not think that the presence of representatives of the oromo organizations have any impact whatsoever on the ongoing search for solutions for the political chaos in Ethiopia; and,

d) possibly because there are too many oromo organizations both at home and abroad thus making it difficult for the organizers of the Hearing to chose from among them.

Otherwise how can one explain the fact that even professor Mesfin’s daughter (an un-known actor in the field) is invited to testify at the Hearing whereas our “leaders” who reside just few blocks across the Congress were left out. I am not condoning what ambassador Fiseha said at the Hearing but I still find it difficult to understand how a representative of such a small group like the Anuak is invited and not a representative of the Oromo people.

It is so embarrassing not to see any of our “leaders” at the Hearing. Taking in to account the nature of our cause, the 30+ years we have been fighting and the population we claim representing, at least one or two “Oromo leaders” should have been invited. Really embarrassing! The Abyssinian organization (Qinijit) which has a history of less than two years, managed to get the audience in the Congress whereas we, the oppressed people of the empire could not even be among the audience in the hall. Then again, who to blame, except ourselves. While the Abyssinians were busy organising each other and reaching for negotiated compromises to face their adversary (TPLF) we were engaged in mudslinging, character assassination and libelling each other – most of the time for something which has taken place a decade or so ago. The Abyssinians were gathering their acts together to fight the bigger enemy whereas we opted to dwell upon a small “enemy” not even an outsider but an “Oromo enemy”. They were devoting their time and energy in extensively writing on their web pages and letting the world know about their “problem” whereas we were engaged in writing to humiliate and destruct each other. If one closely looks in to the contents of the writings on our only forum – ONA, most of the time and energy is spent on criticising the OLF (and for whatever reason Lencho Latta) for political crimes the Organization committed 14 years ago. But no one seems to bother raising a question “what have we done since then”. It is very legitimate to raise questions regarding the “crimes” committed by OLF in 1992 when it left the legal forum but then it is also equally legitimate to ask ourselves what have we done to rectify that “wrong”, to correct that mistake and embark on a new stage of fighting for our freedom and equality? In my opinion, the only thing we did since then is that we succeeded in creating numerous Oromo organizations. If success is to be

measured by the numbers of organizations we managed to create since the departure of OLF from the legal forum in 1992, then indeed we succeeded.

Be as it is, the Bill is Marked to be discussed at the next stage and possibly to clear the hurdles to become a law. No doubt, if signed by the President it will definitely be implemented in Ethiopia but with a far reaching effect on our struggle be it positive or negative. So what is this expected impact?

Now that the Bill is marked, let us first see how Legesse (sorry, Meles) Zenawi will react to this. Two possible scenarios, a) he will shrug off and pretend to continue business as usual or b) accept the verdict and release all political prisoners, allow the UN Special *Rapporteur* on Torture to visit the country and agree to negotiate with and accept OLF as a political party in the country. Taking in to account the international pressure applied on him, and the current economic crisis in the country, it is very likely that he will go for the second option. But then again, and like all of us who grew up in that empire, he may continue being stubborn and decide to face the consequence. That is not what we all want. If he opts for confrontation with the West then the country will continue to remain in turmoil and many more Oromos will be killed and tortured. I only hope that he will be wiser than that.

For us Oromos, the most important part of the Bill which is of most relevance is the one which talks about OLF. Under a sub-title (e) – Support for OLF Reintegration, the Bill states that *“In light of recent reports that the Oromo Liberation front in Ethiopia may be prepared to abandon its armed struggle and participate in the democratic process, it is the sense of the Congress that the Government of the United States should encourage the Government of Ethiopia to take advantage of this opportunity to enter into discussions with the Oromo Liberation Front to bring them into full participation in the political and economic affairs of Ethiopia, including their legalization as a political party, and the Government of the United States should provide such assistance as is warranted and necessary to help achieve this goal”*.

In a simple diplomatic language the Bill states that a) armed struggle is condemned and therefore OLF should renounce armed struggle, b) Meles should negotiate with the OLF, c) OLF should return to Ethiopia and become a political party and d) the government of the USA will provide assistance for the implementation of the Bill. That is it and take it or leave it!

The Bill is written in a very clear language and the “verdict” is in the making. We are told by “the jurors” to simply stop the armed struggle, negotiate with Meles, return to the legal forum, become a political party and participate in the upcoming election. That is it. It is very unlikely that once the Bill cleared all the remaining hurdles there will be a room left for possible negotiation of alternative route. Then, how should we react to this? For sure we cannot afford to tell the

USA “go to hell...who are you to tell us what is good for our people”! That will be tantamount to committing political suicide. Although we were not party to the decision making process, we have no much choice left but to swallow our pride and implement the expected “decision”. The question is not whether to implement it or not but rather *how* and *when* to implement it. The “how” and “when” should be the centre of our discussion for the next few months. In my opinion, and if we carefully decipher the Bill, leaders of our Oromo organizations have only one option – renounce armed struggle, negotiate with Meles, return to Ethiopia to become a political party and engage in preparation for the next election in four years. Let us look decipher it further.

Renouncing armed struggle: I have written in the past on the reasons why we should give up armed struggle. I don’t want to return to that but to say it in a plain language, to days global political set up especially the mood after September 11, is not favourable for those who are engaged in armed struggle, regardless of the outlined objectives. Today, armed struggle is almost equated to terrorism. The “standard setters” already issued a *fatwa* “you are either with us in the fight against global terrorism or you are against us.” And the ultimatum seems to work. With the exception of very few states like Eritrea most nations complied with the “ultimatum” and kept their territory free from any armed group. Hence, the earlier our Oromo organizations renounce armed struggle, the better it is to achieve our goal – freedom and equality.

Negotiating with Meles: This is the toughest part. Knowing the stubborn nature of all of us who grew up in that nation, and knowing that Meles, during his 14 years of terror, killed, tortured and jailed hundreds of thousands of Oromos of all walks of life and subsequently we are rightly holding grudges against him, it will be very difficult to negotiate with him. But that is the reality and there is no other choice. Two principles of conflict resolution should be invoked here: a) in politics there is no enemy but an opposition/opponent, and b) if you are part of the problem then you should be part of the solution. In short we should negotiate with Meles and there can be no solution without his involvement in the search for solution. What we have to worry about is a) who should negotiate on behalf of the Oromos and b) who should mediate the negotiation.

Who should negotiate with Meles?

Assuming that my arguments above are endorsed, let us proceed and see what is next on our plate. In my opinion, the next but the most important task should be the identification of those who should represent the Oromos and negotiate with Meles. But wait! Which organization is going to represent the Oromo people and negotiate with Meles? The OLF, OFDM, ONC, ULFO etc? In my opinion, none of these Oromo organizations should presume to be mandated by the Oromo people to negotiate on their behalf. Accordingly, all Oromo organizations from home and abroad should be engaged in negotiation among themselves

before they go out and negotiate with Meles. In practical terms, this should be the case that leaders of our numerous Oromo organizations (both the home-based and those in diaspora) should undertake a two-pronged approach: **first** they should be engaged in negotiating among themselves with the objective of creating an all inclusive umbrella organization and then as a **second** step, embark on selecting the negotiators to negotiate with outsiders – be it with Meles or the international community. And only in this order!

In my opinion, and knowing the concern many of us still raise regarding the way OLF had been handling issues so far and taking in to consideration the existence of numerous Oromo organizations both at home and abroad, the best way forward is to form an all inclusive umbrella organization which will sit at any negotiating table representing **ALL** Oromos. For me, this is a **MUST**. Any attempt by an Oromo organization or a group to be engaged in negotiation with Meles without the full support of other Oromo organizations will be a futile exercise. Everyone should be represented and the only way we can have that universal representation is through the formation of an umbrella organization. Once it is agreed upon in principle, then we should all be part of the preparation of some sort of Oromo National Convention which will officially declare that renunciation of armed struggle and that all Oromo organizations are united and formed an umbrella organization which by the way, could as well be transformed in to a political party and represent the Oromo people at the upcoming election in year 2010.

There are serious issues in the way the negotiation should be conducted with Meles but we will come back to that once the umbrella organization is created and an agenda is set to start the negotiation with Meles. It does not hurt though to already draw an outline of the terms of the negotiation like – the status of the umbrella organization in Ethiopia, amnesty to all supporters and members of all organizations to not being prosecuted for political crimes they committed, a guarantee to be registered as a political party and to open offices all over Oromiya and as a matter of fact all over Ethiopia, etc.

Regarding as to who should mediate or facilitate the negotiation, one can think of the already known executives of conflict resolution centres or mediators from the EU or AU. Although parties to the negotiation are the ones to select the facilitators/mediators, in my opinion, it is advisable to have diplomats from the strongest nations who have the capacity to persuade parties to adhere to the letters and the sprits of an expected Agreement.

What is our role in all this?

First and above all, my plea is to the manager(s) of ONA. It being the only forum for wider consumption by Oromos both at home and abroad, I urge that the management of this forum take the lead in creating a discussion forum whereby

views of different groups and individuals on how to create an umbrella organization is entertained. *(I have no access to O-Net and hence cannot judge its coverage)* I personally do not see any added value of all these latest series of exchanges of notes on ONA forum where seemingly old foes are settling an unsettled scores from their previous lives as supporters of this or that Oromo organization. In my opinion, ONA it being the “**Oromian National Academy**” should live up to its name. Let us make it an academic forum and not a tabloid where individuals write about who did what and when. Let us learn from other web pages for example those managed by the Abyssinians. They write issues. They mobilise people and raise funds. They are targeting the common enemy. I profoundly believe that the Oromo people deserve more than what the ONA forum is currently catering for. If we really mean what we preach, this type of cleaning our dirty laundries in public, as lately seen on the ONA forum should stop. We have an impending catastrophe and all our efforts should be geared towards overcoming our adversaries for example by creating an umbrella organization which will reflect the interests of all Oromos. I also appeal to the few frequent but vocal minority users of the ONA forum to change their direction from using their ammunition against fellow Oromos and concentrate on a constructive engagement. Let us forget about the mistakes done by the OLF in 1992 and concentrate on what we can do today in year 2006. So much water has passed under the bridge since then and so many lives have been lost for the same cause we claim to fight for. This is the time to act and not to complain. The motto of the day should be **now** or **never!** For now we are simply not invited to the Congressional Sub-Committee Hearing but next time we will definitely be the target of the “Coalition of the Willing” in their fight against “global terrorism”, unless we grab this opportunity.

I also urge the OSA to take into consideration this changing circumstance in global politics and design its agenda of the upcoming annual meeting to meet these needs. A special discussion forum should be created to deal with this new development where representatives of different Oromo organizations (from home and abroad) are invited to participate and exchange views. Time is against us and we should capitalise on this. Otherwise we will remain a reference for Meles who very arrogantly said few months back that “the dogs are barking but the camels are passing by”. In my opinion, those of us who live in peace and tranquillity in the Western world should take the lead in facilitating the creation of such a forum.

Let us capitalise on what unifies us rather than on what is dividing us. If we look in to the dividing element, we can find billions of factors but we have one major unifying factor – Oromumma and the freedom of our people. That is indisputable and as such it is a common denominator for all of us Oromos regardless of our affiliation. Let us say **No** to those who are sowing discord amongst us and say **Yes** to those who are promoting our unity and fight for the creation of an umbrella organization. Our mother Oromiya is equally mother to all of us – the believers,

the agnostics and the atheists; the heroes and the cowards; the conservatives and the progressives. We all have the right to be her children and no one is more a child than the other.

An all-inclusive umbrella Organization Now!

United we shall triumph!

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