

CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH

4TH DISTRICT, NEW JERSEY

CONSTITUENT SERVICE CENTERS:

MONMOUTH
112 Village Center Drive
Freehold, NJ 07728-2510
(732) 780-3035

OCEAN
405 Route 539
Plumsted, NJ 08514-2303
(609) 286-2571; (732) 350-2300

MERCER
4573 South Broad Street
Hamilton, NJ 08620-2215
(609) 585-7878

2373 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-3004
(202) 225-3765

<http://chrissmith.house.gov>



Congress of the United States House of Representatives

SENIOR MEMBER, FOREIGN AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE

CHAIRMAN, AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH,
GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS, AND
INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE

WESTERN HEMISPHERE
SUBCOMMITTEE

CO-CHAIRMAN, COMMISSION ON SECURITY
AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

CO-CHAIRMAN, CONGRESSIONAL-EXECUTIVE
COMMISSION ON CHINA

DEAN, NEW JERSEY DELEGATION

Democracy Under Threat in Ethiopia

*Excerpts from Rep. Chris Smith (NJ-04)
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights and International Organizations
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As we begin today's hearing to examine the troubling conditions for democracy and human rights in Ethiopia, let us stipulate that this East Africa government is a prime U.S. ally on the continent. Ethiopia is the primary troop contributor to peacekeeping operations such as UNISFA along the Sudan-South Sudan border, UNMISS in South Sudan and AMISOM in Somalia. Ethiopia joined the UN Security Council in January and is one of three African members on the Council, along with Senegal and Egypt.

During a series of private negotiations in the last months of the previous Administration, Ethiopian officials acknowledged that the tense situation in their country is at least partly their government's fault. There have been discussions with opposition parties and consideration of changing the electoral system to use proportional representation, which could increase the chances of opposition parties winning Parliamentary and local races. Late last year, the government released an estimated 10,000 prisoners despite maintaining a state of emergency.

However, there are at least 10,000 more people held in jail who are considered political prisoners, and the government continues to arrest and imprison critics of its actions. In January, two journalists from the faith-based station Radio Bilal, Khalid Mohamed and Darsema Sori, were sentenced to 5 and 4 year prison terms respectively for inciting extremist ideology and planning to overthrow the government through their coverage of Muslim protests about government interference in religious affairs. The journalists were arrested in

February 2015 and convicted in December under the 2009 anti-terrorism law alongside 18 other defendants.

In late February, Ethiopian prosecutors charged Dr. Merera Gudina, chairman of the Oromo Federalist Congress (a registered opposition party) with rendering support to terrorism and attempting to “disrupt constitutional order.” Merera had been arrested upon his return to Ethiopia after testifying in November at a European parliament hearing about the crisis in his country, Dr. Merera had testified alongside exiled opposition leader Prof. Berhanu Nega (sentenced to death on terrorism charges in 2009) and Olympic medal winner Feyisa Lilesa. Other senior OFC leaders, including OFC deputy chairman Bekele Gerba, have been imprisoned on terrorism charges for more than a year. Both are viewed by many as moderate voices among Ethiopia’s opposition.

According to the State Department’s newly released Human Rights Report on Ethiopia, security forces killed “hundreds” in the context of using excessive force against protestors in 2016. “At year’s end more than 10,000 persons were believed still to be detained,” according to the report. Many have not been provided due process. The government has denied the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights access to the Oromia and Amhara regions.

The lack of due process in Ethiopian courts also affects foreigners. Israeli businessman Menasche Levy has been in jail for nearly a year and a half on financial crimes charges. The government officials accused of being involved with Levy in illegal activities have had their charges dropped and have been released from jail. Yet Levy’s next court proceeding won’t be for several more months. We cannot determine his guilt or innocence of the charges, but it is clear that he has been denied a trial in a reasonable time frame and has been beaten in jail by other prisoners and denied proper medical care. These circumstances unfortunately apply to all-too-many people who come in contact with the Ethiopian court system.

My staff and I have discussed with the Government of Ethiopia the possibility of working cooperatively to find ways to end the repression without creating a chaotic transition. Officials in Addis and Ambassador to the U.S. Girma Birru have been very positive in their response. The previous Administration found the Ethiopian government similarly willing to be cooperative.

Unfortunately, there is a significant variance in how that government sees its actions and how the rest of the world sees them. That is why I and several of my colleagues have introduced House Resolution 128 – to present as true a picture of the situation in Ethiopia as possible. It is also why we have convened today’s hearing.

In our first panel, we have witnesses who will provide an overview of the current state of democracy and human rights in Ethiopia. They will present the facts as the rest of the

world sees them. Our second panel consists of four Ethiopians representing various ethnic groups and organizations created to help the Ethiopian people. We have no opposition parties appearing before us today, despite the tendency of the government and its supporters to see anyone who disagrees with them and their actions as supporting terrorists seeking to overthrow the government.

It is my belief that, until the Government of Ethiopia can squarely face the consequences of its actions, there will not be the genuine reform it has promised. For example, government officials say we are mistaken to state that the ruling coalition holds 100 percent of the legislative seats. We have said the coalition holds all the seats, whether in the name of the coalition itself or as affiliate parties. If the government cannot be honest with us or itself in such an obvious matter, it is unlikely that the conditions for reform can exist.

The government does appear to realize its precarious position. We have discussed the frustrations it creates by not fully allowing its citizens to exercise their rights of speech, assembly and association. In a June 20, 2013, hearing of this subcommittee, Berhanu Nega said the government has created a situation in which there is no legitimate means of redress of grievances. Although the government jailed him after he won the 2005 race to become Mayor of Addis Ababa, he was not known to have begun his campaign of armed resistance until after that time.

The recent increased protests in Oromo and Amhara regions have alarmed the government, but if it can't find a way to relent in its refusal to allow genuine competition for political power and to respond to the cries of its people for the services they deserve, there will be more Berhanu Negas.

But this is preventable. Rather than spend hundreds of thousands on consultants to try to mislead Members of Congress on the facts and inciting e-mail form letter campaigns by supporters, the Government of Ethiopia can acknowledge their challenges and work with the U.S. government and others in the international community to seek reasonable solutions. We are prepared to help once they are ready to face the ugly truth of what has happened and what continues to happen in Ethiopia today.