

Senator Feingold/Congressman Payne Versus The TPLF

By Girma Kassa (muziky68@yahoo.com)

January 22, 2009

"To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist."

President Barack Obama

US lawmakers calling for the release of Ms Mideksa

Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois, the US Senate majority Whip (the number 2 of the Senate), Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont, Chairman of the powerful Senate Judiciary Committee, Senator Russ Feingold of Wisconsin and Senator Johnny Isakson of Georgia chairman and ranking chairman of the Senate subcommittee for African Affairs, wrote a letter to Mr., Meles Zenawi, expressing their serious concerns over the deteriorating human right conditions in Ethiopia. The Senators explicitly indicated that they are concerned with the unfortunate arrest of Ms Birtukan Mideksa, chairwoman of the main opposition party the Unity for Democracy and Justice.¹

Congressman Donald Payne chairman of the House of Representative subcommittee for African Affairs, called for the immediate and unconditional release of MS Mideksa. "The Ethiopian government must realize that brutality and repression will never succeed in crushing the aspiration for democracy and freedom. Either one must embrace democracy and rule of law or face the same fate of the Mengistus's of this world" he said.²

Attacks on Congressman Payne and Senator Feingold by the Meles Zenawi regime

Senator Feingold, Congressman Donald Payne and their colleagues in the US Senate and the US House of representatives are all friends of Africa and long time

¹ <http://ethiopolitics.com/pdfiles/ethiopiaSenateJan172009.pdf>

² http://ethiopolitics.com/pdfiles/Payne_birtukan_Jan092009.pdf

advocate of human rights. Their integrity and commitment to democratic values, equality, justice and the rule of law is not questionable.

However their appeal for more democratic reforms in Ethiopia and the release of Birtukan Mideksa has been dismissed by the regime in Addis Ababa as "unwarranted accusation and criticism". Senator Feingold is categorized as "ignorant" and Congressman Donald Payne, a long time friend of Ethiopia, as "anti-Ethiopia" and "terrorist".

Ms Birtuan Mideksa is still in Kaliti notorious prison in a very harsh and difficult situation. For 23 days she was denied access to her lawyers, to doctors and the Red Cross. She has been placed in a solitary confinement and only her 73 years old mother and 4 years old daughter are allowed to see her for few minutes on Saturdays and Sundays.

- On January 20, 2009, as Voice of America James Butty reported, it was Bereket Simon, the Senior Advisor of Mr. Meles Zenawi, who responded to US Senators letter. ***"If anyone is breaking the law, it's their problem and not our problem. Ethiopian government believes government has a mandate and an obligation to ensure the rule of law in Ethiopia. So it's an unwarranted accusation and criticism.... No matter what the times might be, these Congressmen are telling us not to enact laws that are useful to Ethiopia. They are going to put pressure on us because we enacted our own laws. This Ethiopia; it's a sovereign state. I don't think any Congressman can tell us what to do,"*** said Bereket Simon.³
- In reaction to a speech of Senator Feingold at Georgetown University the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement entitled ***"Senator Feingold lack of Knowledge"***, on September 19 2008

"Inevitably, it comes as a considerable surprise when a US Senator, and one who is Chair of the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, sees fit to equate the democratic credentials of a prime minister duly elected in a successful multi-party election with a president who seized power by military force. It suggests a frightening level of misunderstanding at best; at worst....Senator Feingold's speech this week at Georgetown University, like his remarks introducing his recent bill on Ethiopia in the

³ http://ethiopolitics.com/news_1/20090120785.html

Senate, displays a serious level of ignorance." said the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁴

- On January 10th 2008, quoting the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ethiopian news Agency reported that the discussion Congressman Payne held in Asmara with President Issayas Afeworki of Eritrea is an indicator of the Congressman's anti-Ethiopia position. Questioning, as well, the call of Ethiopian troops withdrawal by Congressman Payne the Ministry said : "***The Congressman has expressed his position that the only solution for the Somali conflict is withdrawal of Ethiopian soldiers from Somalia, and such a position may emanate from lack of adequate knowledge about the fact on the ground or it is deliberately forwarded to bring terrorists to power by toppling down the Somali government that is recognized by the UN, AU and the whole international community ... Such a position brings one into the category of terrorists,*** and recommending the withdrawal of Ethiopian Soldiers from Somalia at this time should be equated with supporting remnants of Al Qaeda and the UIC to revive and disrupt the country's stability."⁵

Who is Right? Feingold/Payne or Mr. Zenawi?

Are Senator Feingold and Congressman Payne truly "ignorant and lacking knowledge "as the Meles Zenawi regime accused them?

So that it may be a good illustration, allow me to discuss and compare the position and judgment of Senator Feingold and Congressman Payne on one side, and that of TPLF officials on the other, when it comes to the Somalia crisis.

Senator Feingold met with Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in Addis Ababa a few weeks before the invasion of Somalia and was told that Ethiopia would withdraw from Somalia within weeks. The senator had big concern to what may happen once the initial battle is over, for he knew all along that "winning the peace" is not as easy as "winning the war".

4

http://abugidainfo.com/woyanne/www.ethiopiafirst.com/news2008/Aug/MoFA_19Sept08.pdf

⁵ <http://abugidainfo.com/woyanne/www.ena.gov.et/EnglishNews/2008/Jan/10Jan08/47589.htm>

Ignoring the advice of International experts and opposition leaders in Addis Ababa, Mr. Meles Zenawi ordered the invasion of Somalia. In few days the Ethiopian Defense Forces reached the Indian Ocean.

Senator Feingold, not impressed with initial victory of the Ethiopian Forces characterized the Ethiopian invasion as a strategic failure. "*While Ethiopia may have won a tactical success in Somalia, it failed to deliver a strategic victory because no one - not the international community, or Ethiopia itself - was prepared for the consequences.*" he wrote on January 16 2007 ⁶

Congressman Donald Payne opposed the invasion of Somalia all together. Once Mr. Meles Zenawi sent Ethiopian troops there, Congressman Payne publicly expressed his position that the only solution for the Somali conflict is the withdrawal of Ethiopian soldiers from Somalia.

When we fast forward the time from December 2006 to January 2009 one can clearly identify whose judgment has been right.

- The Ethiopian Invasion did not end in weeks as promised by Mr. Meles Zenawi to Senator Feingold and the Ethiopian Parliament. The Ethiopian Invasion did not squash radicals and brought stability in Somalia as Mr. Zenawi promised. The Ethiopian Invasion did not disrupt any activities of groups that Mr. Zenawi painted as "terrorists".

As Senator Feingold warned, Mr. Zenawi could not win the peace in Somalia and was forced out to pull out Ethiopians Soldiers from Somalia, with big humiliation, after the loss of many Ethiopian soldiers and thousands of Somali civilians.

- The Meles Zenawi regime was equating the withdrawal of Ethiopian Soldiers from Somalia as supporting remnants of Al Qaeda and the UIC (United Islamic Court), to revive and disrupt Somalia's stability. Those who called for the unconditional withdrawal of Ethiopians soldiers, like Congressman Donald Payne and opposition leaders like Ms Mideksa, were accused as "terrorists". However, one thing the presence of Ethiopians soldiers had accomplished was fuel the insurgency. The notorious Al Shabaab thrived under the occupation of Somalia and now controls a large chunk of southern Somalia. All these are direct consequences of the miscalculated action of officials in Addis Ababa.

⁶ <http://feingold.senate.gov/opinion/07/20070116.htm>

Now with Ethiopians soldiers out from Mogadishu, though big challenges await Somalis ahead of them, at least the prospect of peace and reconciliation has grown tremendously. Various factions of the old ICU and the TFG are negotiating to bring a solution and a lasting peace. Refugees who left Mogadishu are now slowly returning back.

As explained above, the Somalia Crisis has shown that Senator Feingold and Congressman Donald Payne were not "ignorant" and "lacking knowledge" as alluded by officials in Addis Ababa. They were all along right and have shown their understanding of the region. It was TPLF officials who made a big colossal mistake of historic proportion and displayed their ignorance, arrogance and lack of judgment.

Senator Feingold and Congressman Payne are not alone

As their good judgment of Senator Feingold and Congressman Payne is clearly manifested in the crisis of Somalia, their assessment of the current situation in Ethiopia is also reflective of the truth. The Zenawi regime is claiming that Ethiopia is a country where the law is ruling and the number of political prisoners is "zero". However facts on the ground are telling us otherwise.

One characteristic of the regime in Addis Ababa is to be humble and show hospitality to those whom they think may be easily deceived. If not successful, then their next tactic is to demonize any officials that stand in their way. That is what they did against the Honorable Anna Gomez of the European Parliament. That is what they are doing against Senator Feingold and Congressman Donald Payne this time for the latters do not buy anymore their deceitful stories.

Senator Feingold and Congressman Donald Payne are not the only ones who have raised red flags when it comes to the lawlessness, bad governance and human right abuses in Ethiopia. Whatever attempts the Meles Zenawi regime uses to discredit these US lawmakers, everyone knows what is going in Ethiopia.

- In its latest resolution the EU Parliament stated that it is **outraged at the imprisonment of Birtukan Mideksa**, leader of the opposition party Unity for Democracy Justice (UDJ), and demanded her immediate and unconditional release.⁷

⁷ <http://www.abugidainfo.com/?p=7155>

- In a letter to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi German Development Minister Heidemarie Wiecezorek-Zeul called for the release of opposition politician Birtukan Mideksa. **"I see the latest development in Ethiopia with great concern. This applies to the arrest of Mrs. Birtukan Mideksa and also true for a new law governing the work of NGOs that threatens to hinder development"** said the minister.⁸
- **"The imprisonment of Birtukan Midkesa is a source of great concern, both for her personally and for democratic development in Ethiopia,"** says Gunilla Carlsson the Swedish International Development minister. She added that the imprisonment of Ms Mideksa and the recently adopted law regulating the activities and funding of NGOs are clear evidences that the scope for democracy and pluralism is shrinking in Ethiopia.⁹
- Various human right groups including Amnesty international and Ethiopian Human Right Council condemned the arrest of Ms Mideksa and called for her immediate release. **Amnesty called Ms Mideksa a prisoner of conscious and the Ethiopian Human Right Council, clearly laying out the law of the land, called the arrest of Ms Mideksa an illegal and unconstitutional move by the Ethiopian Government.**
- Opposition parties in Ethiopia and exiled political groups all have condemned the arrest of Ms Birtukan Mideksa and equated this unfortunate action against the UDJ (unity of Democracy and Justice Party) to an attack on the peaceful struggle and the constitution.

When TPLF officials are refusing to unconditionally release prisoner of conscious like Ms Mideksa, Artist teddy Afro, Bekele Jirata, and defiantly fail to recognize that the political space is closing, then what they are telling us is that US senators, congressmen, human right groups, the EU parliament, the German and Sweden governments ... all are wrong BUT there are right.

Let not the Somalia blunder be repeated in Ethiopia

Skillfully dispositioning itself as an "ally" in the war of terrorism and exploiting the 9/11 attacks to its advantage, the Meles Zenawi regime received massive financial support from the US (in billions of dollars).

⁸ <http://www.abugidainfo.com/?p=7122>

⁹ <http://www.abugidainfo.com/?p=7116>

Though human right abuses, killing of civilians, mass detentions, burning of villages etc are reported in Ethiopia, the Bush Administration basically gave Mr. Meles Zenawi a pass mainly because the counter-terrorism issue was the issue that trumped and dominated all other issues.

However what has become obvious now is that even in the counter-terrorism measure, the Meles Zenawi regime has not made the US safer. What was promised was not delivered. The groups and elements Mr. Meles Zenawi said he would cripple down and destroy are now in Charge in most of southern Somalia. The regime once considered as an "ally" and trusted by the Bush administration has become a liability and embarrassment to the US.

Opposition leaders, elders, human right groups, western diplomats all have been calling for the regime to come to the table. They hoped Mr. Meles Zenawi would refrain from its downhill rush towards total dictatorship and selfdestruction, and come to the middle so that Ethiopians will have the opportunity to solve their difference in a dialog and with a ballot box.

However, as was clearly illustrated with the arrest of Ms Birtukan Mideksa, the Meles Zenawi regime is not listening. They tend to pursue their own agenda regardless of what the people of Ethiopia and the International community are saying. If permitted to use President Obama's words, **officials in Ethiopia are not "willing to unclench their fist"**.

I strongly believe that officials in Ethiopia must not be allowed to take back Ethiopia into chaos as they did in Somalia. They must not be given free ride to deceive again as they lied and deceived the US policy makers and the international community for long.

As repression intensifies, as popular leaders are locked up in solitary confinement denied access to the Red Cross and lawyers, as the regime attempt to create an atmosphere of fear and terror against the 76 millions people, the country becomes more polarized. Those in turns will create walls of hate and mistrust and ultimately destabilize the whole country and possibly take us to a scenario that will make the Somalia crisis a piece of cake.

