

THUS SPOKE ESKINDER NEGA



“MUSINGS ON THE BATTLE OF MICE” Eskinder Nega Kality Gulag (Ethiopia)

Eskinder Nega’s handwritten letter (below) from Kality Prison Gulag (a/k/a Meles Zenawi Prison) was released in the second half of 2015 in anticipation of President Barack Obama’s visit to Ethiopia.

The letter is an extraordinary statement of political philosophy, a prophesy on the inevitability of freedom and democracy in Ethiopia, a reflection on the poison of ethnic politics in Africa, the promise of America and the trail of broken promises of Barack Obama, the politics of terrorism and American counter-terrorism and many other issues.

Eskinder employs the “battle of (frogs) and mice” as an aphorism for African politics and superpower politics in Africa. In the original story attributed to Homer, the “battle of frogs and mice” is about betrayal, revenge, war and destruction over trivial matters with supernatural supporters. It is a cautionary tale about how Ethiopia and rest of Africa have become battlegrounds for superpower politics and various international forces.

Eskinder Nega is an extraordinary Ethiopian journalist and an unapologetic defender of press freedom in Ethiopia. He has been a fearless critic of the ruling Thugtatorship of the Tigrean People’s Liberation Front (T-TPLF) since 1993. Over the years, Eskinder and his wife Serkalem Fasil launched a number of newspapers in Ethiopia that were swiftly shuttered by the T-TPLF, including Ethiopis, Asqual, Satenaw and Menelik. Before his imprisonment on trumped up “terrorism” charges, Eskinder was a tireless blogger who had a wide readership in the Ethiopian Diaspora. Eskinder often called out T-TPLF abuse of power, corruption, and maladministration in his blogs. The T-TPLF has jailed Eskinder on bogus charges so many times, it is hard to keep count.

On the personal order of the late T-TPLF leader Meles Zenawi, Eskinder was arrested and jailed in September 2011 on trumped up charges of “terrorism”. His “crime” was 1) criticizing the T-TPLF for its repression of press freedom, 2) condemning wholesale arrest and detention of journalists and 3) discussing the implications of the “Arab Spring” for Ethiopia. The T-TPLF organized a campaign of smear and fear against Eskinder in a futile attempt to portray him as a member of a “terrorist group”, a “spy for foreign forces” and as a “facilitator of terrorist attacks in Ethiopia.

Eskinder Nega was sentenced to a term of 18 years in T-TPLF kangaroo (monkey) court along with 23 other political party leaders and journalists in July 2012. While in prison, Eskinder has received a number of the most prestigious international press awards for his defense of press freedom in Ethiopia.

Alemayehu G. Mariam
Brother, Friend and Defender of Eskinder Nega

chance lies squarely with what has worked for India's democracy. This was a message Obama should have stressed more ardently in Kenya. Democracy is more than good governance and accountability in Africa.

Ethiopia, Obama's next destination, is a distinct polity for many reasons — religion, history, language, cuisine, culture, topography. But this has in no way eased the burden of state and nation building. In fact, so traumatic had been the Ethiopian drive to forge a national identity the American way, ~~en~~ through assimilation of variegated ethnic groups into the dominant indigenous culture, rather than a neutral common colonial heritage, as is the norm elsewhere in Africa, Eritrea, the northernmost province, seceded to establish the 53rd member state of the African union. The threat of further disintegration continues to haunt the Ethiopia Obama visited.

For reasons of kinship, Obama had to visit Kenya while still in the White House — even if, as it turned out, it was to be at the twilight of his presidency. Had he lost his bid for a second term, Kenya would ~~be~~ have pricked his conscience. He is indeed a lucky man.

His responsibility as president, however, took him to Ethiopia. The Horn of Africa harbors Islamic terrorists who aspire to attack the US. Obama has to diffuse the threat in the bud. And for the moment, this threat can be contained through a proxy — for a multitude of reasons, chief amongst them the efficiency of their militaries, this has entailed a partnership with authoritarian Ethiopia rather than precariously democratic Kenya.

But while Obama travelled to Ethiopia to showcase, as he phrased it, "how to fight terrorists (through proxies) without putting American boots on the ground," he was at his best at the presidential palace responding to a question about Iran. His

reflection on the debasement of American presidential politics, as highlighted by the debate about the Iranian nuclear deal, was a stark reminder not only to Americans but also to a larger global audience that democracy can never be taken for granted. It has to be carefully ~~maintained~~ nurtured in both new and old democracies alike.

The axiom for the American anathema to "putting boots on the ground" is the "Vietnam Syndrome," the post-traumatic stress to the fantastic debacle of the American military in Southeast Asia.

But there is more than post-traumatic stress to explain the reluctance of the Americans to commit troops. There is also, in the words of John Stuart Mill, the "shrinking (of democracies) from even the shadow of pain," observed as far back as the 19th century. Vietnam was not a cause, whatever happened there only activated a latent spirit common to all democracies. Forty years later, the sentiment has hardly diminished. In a sense, Obama has to fight with his hands tied.

Few would dispute that the threat of jihadist terrorism is more important to the world than the question of democracy in Ethiopia. Viewed through an American prism, the world's lone superpower, Ethiopian politics — or even African politics — is to the US what the wars between Greek city states was to Alexander the Great — he called them a "battle of mice" — when he was busy conquering the mighty Persian Empire.

However inconvenient to Ethiopian democrats, Obama can not be plausibly criticized for prioritizing the dismantling of the terrorist's virtual state in Somalia. This is best not just for the US. While what threat America faces is no more than that

In God we trust.

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of law and order — though a serious one — the danger is existential for Ethiopia. This is an alliance for mutual benefit, with more at stake for Ethiopia.

Unfortunately, there is also more than just containment of terrorism to the engagement between the US, under both Democratic and Republican administrations, and authoritarian Ethiopia over the past two decades. That the Fabian idea of evolutionary change, which was described by George Bernard Shaw as "sordid, slow, reluctant, cowardly path to justice (democracy)" is best for Ethiopia has dominated American thinking and determined the content of policy. Despite gross human rights violations, America is focused on the long term.

While Edmund Burke, the godfather of conservatism in the West, ultimately lost the debate about democracy, the same could not be said about his aversion to revolution. His eloquent criticism of the Jacobin excesses of the French ~~revolution~~ revolution had associated revolution with virtual anarchy to Europe's middle class in the 18th century, a sentiment which has persisted in the West with surprising vigor to present ~~times~~ times.

Burke, here as quoted in Raymond Williams's book, *Society and Culture*, advocated the kind of change which many in the West's foreign policy circles would approve of for Africa:—

"By a slow but well-sustained progress, the effect of each step is watched; the good or ill success of the first gives light to us in the second; and so, from right to right, we are conducted with safety through the whole series. We see that the parts of the system do not clash. The evils latent in the most promising contrivances are provided for as they ~~may~~ arise. One advantage is as little as

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maturity, reinforced with a strong civic society, is attained, and, on the other hand, the revolutionaries, who insist that state oppression has limited the average individual from maximizing his innate possibilities, one of which is the upholding of democratic responsibilities, and is thus worthy of immediate freedom.

Evolution has not really worked anywhere. Without the impetus provided by the French revolution, liberalism, let alone representative government, would have not advanced in Europe. Even in Britain, where movement towards limiting the absolute power of the monarchy, if not the political emancipation of the peasants, had been in the offing since the Magna Carta in the 13th century, Chartism, a peaceful quest for political and social reform, was being suppressed violently in the 19th century.

Indeed, as noted by William Morris, no authoritarian government is able "to suffer itself to be dismembered, nor to lose anything which really is its essence without putting forth all its force in resistance."

In our age, of course, this ^{resistance} ~~evolution~~ has to be overcome entirely through the peaceful disobedience of Gandhi, Martin Luther King and their square. Even in the world's worst dictatorships, such as North Korea and Equatorial Guinea, the conditions for peaceful revolution can be marshalled through satellite television, the internet and mobile phone. The sun has set on Mao, Che Guevara and Fanon. On this count at least, a convergence of ideas is possible between evolutionists and non-violent revolutionaries.

However good the Ethiopian army may be, there is no military solution to the terrorist threat in the horn. Absent a viable Somali state, one that encompasses both the ex-Italian and British ~~Somali~~ Somalilands, the horn will continue to breed an ample supply of embittered terrorists. And amongst the large Somali communities in the West, there is a tiny, but disproportionate

