

September 17, 2010

President Lee C. Bollinger
Office of the President
Columbia University
202 Low Library
535 West 116th Street
New York, NY 10027

By Fax: (212) 854-9973 and
Email: officeofthepresident@columbia.edu

Dear President Bollinger:

On September 22, 2010, Mr. Meles Zenawi is scheduled to deliver the keynote address at an event sponsored by Columbia University's Committee on Global Thought. There is widespread belief among Ethiopian Americans that Mr. Zenawi's invitation to speak at this event necessarily implies the University's endorsement and support of Mr. Zenawi's views, policies and actions in Ethiopia. I am writing to request your office to issue an official statement clarifying your position concerning Mr. Zenawi as you so eloquently did when Mahmood Ahmadinejad of Iran spoke on your campus on September 24, 2007.

Let me say at the outset that I believe Mr. Zenawi has a "right" to speak at your university, though he is not a United States citizen or lawful resident. I firmly believe, though others may reasonably disagree with me, that any individual who is present in this great country has the right to free expression under the protective umbrella of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. I make no exceptions for Mr. Zenawi.

In your prefatory remarks preceding Mr. Ahmadinejad's speech in 2007, you offered an exposition on free speech that is instructive to all who believe in freedom of expression.[1] You said that the "genius of the American idea of free speech" is to empower us not "to retreat from engagement with ideas we dislike and fear" and "to have the intellectual and emotional courage to confront the mind of evil." Nowhere is your statement true than in a university where the denizens "have a deep and almost single-minded commitment to pursue the truth." I believe, as you do, that there must be no obstruction to the free exchange of ideas in the university setting. . As you correctly pointed out to Mr. Ahmadinejad, open inquiry, debate and dialogue are "required by existing norms of free speech in the American university."

In your remarks you specified five substantive issue areas for which Mr. Ahmadinejad deserved just condemnation and censure. One of them was Mr. Ahmadinejad's "brutal crackdown on scholars, journalists and human rights advocates" in Iran. Citing Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch

reports, you deplored the execution of more than 200 persons in Iran in 2007, including at least two children. You also expressed just outrage over his denials and mockery of irrefutable facts about the Holocaust, his failure to adhere to international regimes on nuclear power and his support for terrorism. In righteous indignation, you told Mr. Ahmadinejad: "Mr. President, you exhibit all the signs of a petty and cruel dictator."

Petty and cruel dictators, Mr. President, have also infested the African continent and threaten the lives of African peoples on a daily basis. In Ethiopia, for nearly two decades, Mr. Zenawi has lorded over one of the cruelest dictatorships in the modern world. Let the facts speak for themselves:

In 2005, security forces under the personal command and control of Mr. Zenawi massacred 193 unarmed protesters and inflicted severe gunshot wounds on 763 others.[2] Today, the murderers walk the streets free.

In May 2010, Mr. Zenawi made a travesty of democracy by claiming that his party won the parliamentary election by 99.6 percent. The European Union Election Observation Mission described the same election in its preliminary report as "marred by a narrowing of political space and an uneven playing field." [3]

In December 2008, Mr. Zenawi arrested and reinstated a life sentence on Birtukan Midekssa, the only woman political party leader in Ethiopian history. He kept her under extreme conditions in prison. In describing Birtukan's situation, the most recent U.S. State Department Human Rights Report stated: "She was held in solitary confinement until June [2009], despite a court ruling that indicated it was a violation of her constitutional rights. She was also denied access to visitors except for a few close family members, despite a court order granting visitor access without restrictions." [4] Birtukan is considered to be a political prisoner by the various international human rights organizations. "Amnesty International considers her a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned for peacefully exercising her right to freedom of expression and association." [5]

A couple of weeks ago, Mr. Zenawi shut down *all* distance education programs in the country, including those providing higher education and technical training to over 75,000 students in flagrant violation of the applicable laws of the country on the pretext that such programs were interested "only in collecting money." [6]

For the past several years, Mr. Zenawi has misused the legislative process in Ethiopia to institutionalize repression and legitimize gross human rights violations. According to Human Rights Watch [7]:

In 2009 the government passed two pieces of legislation that codify some of the worst aspects of the slide towards deeper repression and political

intolerance. A civil society law passed in January is one of the most restrictive of its kind, and its provisions will make most independent human rights work impossible. A new counterterrorism law passed in July permits the government and security forces to prosecute political protesters and non-violent expressions of dissent as acts of terrorism.

Mr. Zenawi has shuttered private newspaper in Ethiopia and effectively eliminated the independent press. The Committee to Protect Journalists in its recent report stated[8]:

The government enacted harsh legislation that criminalized coverage of vaguely defined "terrorist" activities, and used administrative restrictions, criminal prosecutions, and imprisonments to induce self-censorship... The government has had a longstanding practice of bringing trumped-up criminal cases against critical journalists, leaving the charges unresolved for years as a means of intimidating the defendants... Ethiopia as the only country in sub-Saharan Africa with 'consistent' and 'substantial' filtering of web sites...

In your remarks, you challenged Mr. Ahmadinejad on his abuse of the Press Law to ban writers for criticizing the ruling system and rhetorically asked: "Why are you so afraid of Iranian citizens expressing their opinions for change?" You need to pose the same question to Mr. Zenawi: "Why are you so afraid of Ethiopian citizens expressing their opinions for change?"

Mr. Zenawi has jammed the Voice of America, the official external radio and television broadcasting service of the United States Government, claiming that the 68 year-old service is the equivalent of the Radio Mille Collines, which coordinated the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Mr. Zenawi said: "We have been convinced for many years that in many respects, the VOA Amharic Service has copied the worst practices of radio stations such as Radio Mille Collines of Rwanda in its wanton disregard of minimum ethics of journalism and engaging in destabilizing propaganda." [9]

When Mr. Ahmadinejad outrageously denied the occurrence of the Holocaust, you told him without mincing words: "You are either brazenly provocative or astonishingly uneducated." Mr. Zenawi needs to be similarly rebuked for equating the Voice of America with the wicked and loathsome Radio Mille Collines.

Mr. Zenawi runs one of the most repressive regimes in Africa. Human Rights Watch in its recent report stated[10]: "Ethiopia's citizens are unable to speak freely, organize political activities, and challenge their government's policies--through peaceful protest, voting, or publishing their views--without fear of reprisal." The report described Mr. Zenawi's regime as one masquerading in "a veneer of democratic pretension hiding a repressive state apparatus."

Since 2006, a number of bills have been introduced in the United States

Congress to restrain Mr. Zenawi from engaging in gross and sustained human rights violations, and to help him move towards democracy. H.R. 2003[11] ("Ethiopia Democracy and Accountability Act of 2007") co-sponsored by 85 members passed the House of Representatives in 2007, but failed to clear the Senate. That bill sought to

support human rights, democracy, independence of the judiciary, freedom of the press, peacekeeping capacity building, and economic development in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia; strengthen U.S. collaboration with Ethiopia in the Global War on Terror; secure the release of all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience in Ethiopia; foster stability, democracy, and economic development in the region; support humanitarian assistance efforts, especially in the Ogaden region; and strengthen U.S.-Ethiopian relations.

Just last month, Senators Russ Feingold and Patrick Leahy introduced S.B. 3757[12] ("Support for Democracy and Human Rights in Ethiopia Act of 2010") to

to ensure the autonomy and fundamental freedoms of civil society organizations, to respect the rights of and permit non-violent political parties to operate free from intimidation and harassment, including releasing opposition political leaders currently imprisoned; to strengthen the independence of its judiciary, and to allow Voice of America and other independent media to operate and broadcast without interference in Ethiopia [and] to promote respect for human rights and accountability.

It is vitally important for academics to speak truth to power. When you stood up and spoke truth to Ahmadinejad on September 24, 2007, you proved to the world the value of "hav[ing] the intellectual and emotional courage to confront the mind of evil." On September 22, 2010, you have another golden opportunity to show the world that you and Columbia University will "confront the mind of evil" regardless of its origin on the planet. As millions of Iranians and others rejoiced hearing your words on September 24, 2007, so now millions of Ethiopians eagerly await your statement on September 22, 2010 that Columbia University condemns all violations of human rights, repression and theft of elections in Ethiopia by Mr. Zenawi and his regime.

Permit me to conclude my letter by paraphrasing your eloquent words when you expressed your disgust for Mr. Ahmadinejad's actions: "I am only a professor and a lawyer, and today I feel all the weight of the Ethiopian people yearning to express their revulsion for what Mr. Zenawi has done to them over the past two decades."

Sincerely,

Alemayehu G. Mariam, Ph.D., J.D.
Professor and Attorney at Law

Department of Political Science
California State University, San Bernardino

Cc: Profs. Joseph Stiglitz, Jeffrey Sachs, William Easterly (NYU)
Columbia Daily Spectator