

President of the United States of America
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500
United States

October 22, 2014

Dear Mr. President,

We are 19 Ethiopian Muslims writing to you from within the Ethiopian gulags. Since we were arrested and detained on fabricated charges under the country's notorious anti-terrorism laws more than two years ago, we have been going through Stalinist political show trial designed to intimidate and silence us into submission in the face of the government's audacious and grotesque program of re-indoctrinating Ethiopian Muslim.

We categorically reject the ridiculous allegations against us. Our only crime is to demand respect for the principle of secularism and the freedom of religion and conscience guaranteed by the Ethiopian Constitution and universal human rights. If there is a criminal in this whole saga, if there is a terrorist, it is the government that has the audacity to re-indoctrinate the entire Muslim community by transgressing and overstepping the limits set by our Constitution. Our struggle is a struggle for civil rights, for the protection of the principle of separation of state and religion, for the guarantees of freedom of religion and conscience. Our protest is a protest to keep our hope for a dignified life alive – to preserve the right to believe, preach, and practice a religion of our choice.

Mr. President, what goes on in the name of fighting terrorism in this part of the world is a stain on your conscience and the conscience of all those who value freedom and justice. The war against terrorism provided the normative language and the ethical framework for oppressive and silencing Anti-terrorism legislation being used to silence journalists, politicians, activists, and all those opposed to the policies of the state. Mr. President, the legal system in Ethiopia is being used as a weapon against innocent citizens whose only crime is to protest against the government's outrageous imposition of a little known sect of Islam on the more than 35 million Ethiopian Muslims. This is a fact thoroughly documented not only by major human rights organizations like Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch but also by governmental bodies including your own State Department's Bureau of Democracy and Human Rights and the bi-partisan United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Mr. President, the United States is responsible for defining, rationalizing, justifying and leading the 'global war of terror'. Indeed, the United States defined the war on terror as a war of good against evil and defended it as a 'war to protect human rights'. Just like the war against communism before it, this war too has provided the conceptual and political framework within which to code and decode the friend-foe distinction within autocratic systems that lacks independent institutions. Just like anti-communism laws were used to repress and silence black liberationist movements in Apartheid South Africa and other places, the Anti-terrorism laws are being used with the same logic and to obtain the same oppressive result. The 'strong men' of Africa that you spoke about in Accra are using the war on terror for a completely different end – to suppress and subjugate our voices from being heard, our claims from being recognized, and grievances from being acknowledged.

Mr. President, as a man of law who practiced and taught law, you know too well the unfinished character of legal rules, and how violent they can be. You know how they can be bent and used for entirely different

purposes even in a system that operates under the rule of law. You know too well how law has been used in Jim Crow South and Apartheid South Africa to quickly and efficiently smash the very possibility of dissent and opposition, to mute and paralyze the very possibility of protest and activism. Just like Apartheid South Africa used Anti-Communism laws to eliminate any form of resistance against its racist policies, today's Ethiopia uses Anti-Terrorism laws to smash those who oppose its oppressive and totalitarian policies. Ethiopia's war on terror is a war against freedom and justice: a weapon against all those who seek to demand the most basic of rights that many in the world take for granted.

We are neither the first nor will we be the last prisoners of conscience in this country. The legal system is used to tie the hands of justice and deliver a verdict in the image of the ruling party. Your own government has documented the procedural irregularities and undue interferences used to secure convictions of prominent politicians and journalists including Birtukan Midaksa, Eskindir Nega, Andualem Arage, Bekele Gerba, Olbana Lelisa, Reyot Alemu and many other victims of Ethiopia's thriving show trial industry.

Mr. President, you should be disgusted and outraged with the naked honesty with which the legal system is mobilized as a weapon to silence, intimidate, and eliminate those who raise issues that will one day turn into politically vital questions. You should be haunted by the specter of an innocent man tormented and dehumanized in Ethiopian prisons for no fault of their own, for believing and cherishing in the imperatives of human dignity, equality, and liberty. You should be troubled by the fact that your own actions are openly invoked in this country as a reference and as a justification for the greatest crime against innocent individuals and society. Imposing a new religion through coercion and violence is the greatest terror against society and to be denied the right to dissent this outrageous act, and then to be tried for terrorism is the ultimate travesty. You should be woken up by the cries of injustices done in the name of a war whose policy and strategy your country helped to formulate.

Mr. President, you stated on several occasion that America's commitment to freedom and human dignity is among the essential expressions of American exceptionalism. In your speech in South Africa, you talked about how the struggle against Apartheid opened your eyes at a time when "my government is supporting Apartheid." But Mr. President, your administration is doing the exact same things that your predecessors did. The situation under Apartheid South Africa is much different from our own circumstances. However, much like Apartheid South Africa deployed the 'Suppression of Communism Acts' and terrorism against black South Africans to delegitimize their struggle in the eyes of white South Africans and the broader West, the Ethiopian government is using its anti-terrorism laws to achieve the same results.

Mr. President, let me get to the germ of the matter. In your Accra speech, you said that 'Africa doesn't need strongmen, it needs strong institutions', and you promised to help build institutions. More recently in your speech at Nelson Mandela's memorial, you challenged the Heads of States and Governments from across the world to ask themselves a deceptively simple question: "How well have I applied [Mandela's] lesson's in my own life?" And you went on to say that "There are too many leaders who claim solidarity with Madiba's struggle for freedom, but do not tolerate dissent from their own people. And there are too many of us who stand on the sidelines, comfortable in complacency or cynicism when our voices must be heard."

Mr. President, insignificant as we are in the grand scheme of things, we wanted to ask you that same question: how well have you applied Mandela's lessons to your own life? As a leader of the most powerful state on earth and chief executive of a government that provides diplomatic and financial aid to my country – a country that deprived me of the most basic of legal guarantees, a country that, according to consistent reports by your own administration, abused every principle of fair play and scorned institutions of law and justice, how well have you applied Mandela's lesson in your dealings with Africa's strongmen? How well have you tried to use you power to build institutions of justice and the rule of law?

Mr. President, you often invoke the names of Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela and you emphasize the need to honor the legacy of these extraordinary men. And because you often spoke about them, commemorated and celebrated their legacy and the ideals that they left behind, because of the visions and ideas you outlined in your books and in your speeches, because of all those promises and undertakings, your name has become synonymous with the names of these iconic figures and the ideals and values they exemplify. Your speech in Accra and during Mandela's memorial was received as a promissory note issued by the leader of the "free world" to those under repressive systems. This promise is accepted by oppressed people all over the world, including us, as a binding undertaking. Mr. President, if your country has a role, direct or indirect, in creating the conditions of possibility for this oppressive weapon, that imposes on you a great responsibility to use the enormous resources at your disposal to ameliorate its unmitigated violence.

If your government cannot empathize with the suffering of people in this corner of the world, at least you have the ethical obligation not to aid and abet, not to legitimize and defend these strongmen. Ethiopians want the same rights and freedoms that "the free world" take-for-granted. As prisoners of conscience, we ask that you show some care to the millions of faceless and nameless victims of legalized violence in which you may have a direct or indirect part. We ask that you take steps to fulfill the promises you have made and to secure the freedom of all prisoners of conscience in Ethiopia. These are the cries constantly heard in the Ethiopian gulags. If you write them off as trivial distractions undeserving of your time; it will be a tragedy for the ideal of hope that so distinctively informs your own life.

Yours respectfully,
Addis Ababa
Ethiopia