

HR 5680 is a futile attempt to impose democracy!

By Mekonnen Kassa

“Freedom by its nature cannot be imposed; it has to be chosen.” President George Bush. 61st UN General Assembly.

After spending hundreds of billions of dollars, deploying tens of thousands of American soldiers, and wasting thousands of American and Iraqi lives, President Bush has finally realized America cannot export and impose its version of democracy on other sovereign nations.

I hope the American Legislative body will also realize what the Executive has come to belatedly understand and decide not to waste valuable time on HR 5680. Because HR 5680 is nothing but an attempt to impose democracy on a sovereign nation Ethiopia, and it will likely fail on implementation. If three years, 150,000 soldiers, and over \$300 Billion does not do it in Iraq, it is naïve to expect a stroke of a pen to do it in Ethiopia.

American legislators, the primary beneficiaries of the most successful democracy in the world, should know better that a successful implementation of a democratic political system cannot be imposed from outside. Instead, the system has to be chosen and the process of implementing it has to be owned by the stakeholders themselves. The experiences gained through the trials and tribulations will harden their resolve, and the lesson learned in failures and successes will help perfect their system. That is how America managed to form its democracy in over 200 years and still continues to refine it.

Creation of a sustainable democratic society and political system mandates a tremendous amount of patience as the process takes its course, requires a high level of tolerance for differing opinion, necessitates a tradition to respect individual right, and demands a keen consensus building and negotiation skill. Most Ethiopians, including those who are living in America and helped introduce this legislation, not only suffer from the lack these qualities, but also have only a token commitment to and skin-deep knowledge of other democratic ideals. As all Ethiopians, the populace, the government, and the opposition go through this exercise of creating a democracy, they need to be given ample time and opportunity to develop a firm commitment to and deep understanding of democracy. They are bound to make mistakes, but we have to let them learn from their mistakes, and work with them to do it better next time around. Not attempt to impose our will on them.

It would be to our liking if respect for human right were to happen overnight or even in short five years. But that is not the reality. It took America more than one hundred years to respect the human rights of its Black citizens. President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Declaration in 1863 to set Blacks free from slavery, but the human and civil rights of Black Americans were not started to be respected until Lyndon Johnson signed the civil right bill one hundred years later in 1964. It took a long time and countless sacrifices, including the assassination of prominent Americans such as JFK , MLK, Malcolm Shabazz, Medgar Evers, and Bobby Kennedy for Blacks to secure the same human right that was enjoyed by their White counterparts for hundreds of years.

Ethiopia should be treated the same and not be mandated by an American legislation that purportedly enforces human rights. It should be left to the responsibility of the Ethiopian people and their government, through patience and dialogue, to ensure that the rights of every Ethiopian are respected according to the constitutional law of Ethiopia.

Now, considering all the attention HR 5680 continues to receive from all Ethiopian political corners, it is important to analyze this impending legislation from America's prior legislation track record of dismally failed attempts to prescribe a political system in other sovereign nations.

More than three and half years ago, the American legislators gave permission to Bush to depose Saddam and form a democracy in Iraq. The result of this mandate is what we see unfolding before our own eyes on a daily basis: a tragic civil war taking place as a result of America's failed foreign policy and "democracy" building exercise in Iraq.

According to Bob Woodward author of *The Plan of Attack*, before launching the war against Saddam, the only knowledge President Bush had about the Iraqi opposition was a brief one time meeting he had with Mr. Chalabi and his friends. Bush didn't know nor did he care to find out the ethnic makeup of the Iraqis and the historical contention and animosity existed among them for centuries. The CIA Director, George Tenet, told him it was going to be a "Slum Dunk" and he simply sent a CIA operative with \$30 Million cash into Northern Iraq, hired Iraqi spies to do the leg work before sending the US Army and toppling Saddam. It took five SUVs to transport the money from Turkey to Kurdish Iraq. The American leadership spent all time and resources planning the attack and the logistics of the war than understanding the Iraqi political, social, religious, ethnic, and economic make up.

The American Congress works the same way. The Representatives hardly read or understand most legislations that come to a vote. In the movie *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Michael Moore is seen reading the Iraq War legislation to members of congress because, as he found out, most of them voted for the legislation to send our beloved nation to war and our soldiers to harms way without bothering to read its content. What makes us think all 435 members of Congress and 100 members of the Senate take time to read and fully understand the problems faced by Ethiopians and prescribe the right solution?

HR 5680 legislation claims to "advancement of human rights" policy in Ethiopia. Well, we had a similar legislation passed for Cuba, China and many other countries before. None of them changed the behavior of the respective government against which the legislation was passed.

After Fidel Castro came to power, the Cuban Diaspora opposition and some Americans have had American legislation to sanction Cuba for more than 50 years. Castro is still in power and the legislation resulted in hurting the majority of Cuban people by restricting tourism and import and export trade. This legislation only end up hurting the average Cuban. The same will happen in Ethiopia, poor Ethiopians will get hurt not the people in Ethiopian government.

As for China, it continues to be certified by American Congress as Most Favored Nation (MFN) and has become a member of WTO. At the end of the day, the guiding principle behind American Executive and Legislative government policy is the American ambition of economical hegemony and the protection of its national interest.

In different times, when faced with choices of doing the right thing or not, the American congress has chosen what it believed, sometime with disastrous consequences, benefitted America the most even when it was clear the choice resulted in inhumane treatment of Africans. Do we need to refresh the memory of our distinguished Congressmen about the South African human rights legislation that was voted down (including by Ronald Reagan and Dick Cheney) while the Black South Africans were suffering under White apartheid rule?

Further, the legislation requires “Independence of the judiciary.” Where in the world is the judiciary fully and completely independent? How would America assure the independence of the judiciary while the justice system in America is not fully independent. The judiciary in America is often under the control of the political elite. It jails and executes innocent African Americans to make the voting segment, upper class and retired Americans, feel safe and secure. Many White Americans who murdered Blacks in cold blood have been set free during the civil rights movement. Also, The justices in the highest court of the land, the Supreme Court, some with a questionable record, are appointed for life by Presidents after a theatrical Senate hearing and confirmation process. Wasn't it some of these same justices, appointed by President George H. Bush, who selected his son, President George W. Bush to the presidency of US in 2000, after ordering to stop the vote counting mostly casted by Democratic Party supporter Blacks in Florida? Where were members of Congress when mostly Black legislators needed a single Senator to sponsor a legislation to stop Bush from becoming President?

The legislation also calls for “Unconditional release of all political prisoners.” This requires a proper definition of a political prisoner. But who defines a prisoner as a political prisoner? America has several such prisoners in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay. Are they freedom fighters, terrorists, unlawful combatants, prisoner of war, or political prisoners? The answer depends on who you ask. If one calls for discrimination and isolation of a certain group of people because of their political views, is this a political prisoner? How about if a person is promoting the overthrow of a government through violence and is then imprisoned, is that a political prisoner? What would happen in the United States of America if one promoted and conspired the discrimination and isolation of people with a certain political persuasion or the overthrow of the American government? It is simplistic to promote a legislation that states that prisoners have to be released “unconditionally”. There must always be an evaluation of why one is imprisoned and exactly how much of it may have been related to politics.

Finally, the legislation ignores the Ethiopian Government's quantifiably verifiable progress in good governance, education, health, and food security areas. The government has also solicited and implemented electoral and parliamentary amendments to further improve the democratic process. Instead of promoting American legislations, a timely lesson to the Ethiopian Diaspora to invest their energy and resources towards achieving a sustainable political and economic condition is in order. The American legislators and the Ethiopians Diaspora should refrain from scripting American legislation against the current Ethiopian government and must choose to

work with it to assure Ethiopian government continues the democratization process; does everything it can to engage in dialog and find a negotiated political solution; does not operate with impunity; and make the Judiciary body become efficient to help speed up trials of suspects.