

Ms. Birtukan Mideksa's Imprisonment...

A sad aspect in recent political arena in Ethiopia is the imprisonment of the leader of an opposition party, Ms. Birtukan Mideksa. One asks, 'What purpose was this intended to serve?' Was it to disrupt the regrouping of the opposition parties and for the governing party to gain ground in preparation of the coming elections? If that was the intention, it seems to have already backfired and produced the very opposite effect. Ms. Mideksa has now become a rallying point and a heroin for many people that oppose the government.

The whole world read the clemency letter and saw the signatures of imprisoned political leader before they were released. If Ms. Mideksa should now choose to deny that she never asked for clemency and never signed any such letter, there should be no reason to arrest her again and demand a withdrawal of her statement. The government like a good parent should use sophisticated methods and techniques to discredit her as a leader of the opposition without resorting to imprisonment or any such punishment.

We are now in the Twenty First Century where politics should be seen as no different from any other official duty, and leaders of opposing parties should socialize and eat and drink together afterhours without resorting to personal animosity. One needs to learn that as a basic of professionalism in politics. If there is an attack, it should be aimed solely at the views and policies of the opponent and not at the person who espouses those views.

Furthermore, the full formality and respect of the opponent and to the office he/she holds should be accorded in addressing each other, and that should be the manner and decorum of all communication. With that in mind, I was disappointed to hear Professor Mesfin talk of Professor Ephraim, calling him by his first name, as if he was referring to some little boy. That is neither our Ethiopian tradition nor the talk of a savvy politician. One should always respect opponents even during disagreements in order to be respected in return.

Democracy, at its very minimum, requires a good deal of tolerance and mutual respect. Tolerance however seems to be in short supply these days largely due to the watershed that unfolded after the election of 2005. Many democratic venues that had opened up before that time have been shut down since. That is very sad indeed.

A major bulwark of democracy is the freedom of speech. The only restrictions to that freedom: 1) A person has no right to cry, 'Fire!' in a crowded theatre; and 2) A person has no right to make a speech that incites the public to riot. That is all.

Freedom of speech gives the right to tell lies, as well as all types of jokes one cares to tell, and the government should respect and tolerate that freedom. After all, are politicians and lawyers known for always telling the truth? Especially here in the USA, one may be hard pressed to find a politician who does not tell a lie from time to time; this so much so that a joke goes: 'Mommy, Mommy, do all fables start with: Once upon a time? No my daughter, there are some fables that start with: "If elected, I promise...!"'

I therefore call upon the Attorney General to reconsider his decision and I strongly urge the Ethiopian government to show magnanimity and release Ms. Birtukan Mideksa.

G. E. Gorfu