



## **Open Letter to Ambassador Vicki Huddleston**

(Birtukan Mideksa, Kaliti Prison)

When I was a young law student who took myself too seriously but lacking compass, chart and rudder to grasp the dry bones of the subject matter I studied, I used to dash to the law library looking for a lighthouse to steer by. It was there, in the squalid and dump depot of books, that I met the quintessential American hero, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes with all the breadth of his intellect and pithy wit. His classic letters and books were larger than the law. The great man inspired a belief in greatness, the existential necessity of thinking and acting under fire, the courage to change without being irreverent to tradition. I still remember some of his wise verses heartily. "Death plucks my ears and says live - I am coming," he said in one of his late speeches.

On the scorching morning of May 15 last year, Ethiopians who had lived like soldiers, who had seen the end of the story too often and knew that its only novelty was in its surprise, chose to live in hope. They gained a hearty confidence in the political system and patiently lined up to decide their destiny. The political space which was opened then wasn't as wide as some would want to make it. Yet Ethiopians nibbled off the precious little they were given. I was in one of those noisy line ups waiting my turn to vote. Behind me was a stout, elderly, intensely respectable-looking man. His eyes were filled with tears, his body shaking and quivering. That man had seen it all. But the experience of that day was new to him. There was also an extraordinary scene of a young woman, known in my village for take-life-easy attitude, helping the sick and elderly to vote. It was a profoundly moving moment. I found my truest peace and delight in the experience of the day. The magnitude of victory that my party subsequently achieved (or was prohibited from achieving) was secondary to the civic culture and hope Ethiopians displayed on May 15.

Political creeds are usually the rationalization of experiences. At Kinijit our positions in the international community-mediated negotiations and discussions with the government after the election controversy ensued were greatly affected by the experience of May 15 and the



peaceful demonstration a week before. We couldn't let the hope of Ethiopians die. Madame Ambassador, that was what I told you when you congratulated us for canceling a scheduled public demonstration on our first meeting in mid September.

You were well-intentioned, business-like and graceful that day. I went home, checked your record and learnt that you were a great diplomat who had served your country for a number of years with distinction. And I thought you could be an honest and even-handed broker. We also let you in our Urgent Executive Committee meeting when we debated on whether or not we should cancel the stay home strike that was called for October 3. You had seen how the party functions; you had seen how democratic it was; you had seen how well-meaning and peaceful its leaders were. You had also witnessed the trust which was accorded to you. I wished you would have remained that - an honest and trustworthy broker. America had (and still has) a tremendous political capital in Ethiopia. Its values are cherished and the inner workings of the government, the checks and balances, the powerful judiciary, the media are all admired. On May 15 Ethiopians hoped to have the government of the people like Americans have for more than two centuries. They thought if your country intervenes in Ethiopia, it would do so on the side of the people. America is the only country whose formation was driven by ideals. "By the naked fact of existence, we are an eternal danger and an un-sleeping threat to every government that founds itself on anything but the will of the governed." So wrote Dr. Holmes.

Subsequent to our imprisonment, I found the one-handed position that you pushed and the statement you made quite disheartening. First, it was a call for our free, fair and speedy trial, knowing full well the circumstances of our arrest. Then it was a declaration that democracy was a process. What does a democratic process imply? Where is the free press in Ethiopia? Where is the right of assembly and demonstration? Where are the independent (even quasi-independent) political institutions that are the pillars of democracy? In Kantian terms, is a process merely the idea-of-process? The process as essence? Or is a process a fact? Something to be measured and tested?

You had also tried to assist the take over of the Addis Ababa City administration by Kinijit in spite of the unwillingness of a large number of elected councilors and the interest of Addis



Ababans to get an all-encompassing political solution for the impasse. It was stomach-churning to hear that some city councilors were detained, tortured and intimidated to take over the council. If you had heard the stories and suffered no spiritual torment, I should re-check my books on American Constitution. Lately, your efforts were directed to a fervent championship for the creation of another Kinijit to continue the political process; a political process which would leave the people alienated. You and I know that there is not much in a name; and a long term solution for the country's political problem will only be furnished when the government starts an honest dialogue with all Ethiopian political forces, inside and outside of the country. Such a distinguished American diplomat as you are shouldn't facilitate the politics of alienation which has been the scourge of this ancient country.

Last week, I listened to your VOA interview in my cell (If there is one at kaliti). I was flattered that you compared our ordeals with that of one of our continent's greatest heroes, Nelson Mandela. What the comment impliedly suggested about the nature of our government was also telling. I was sad, however, that you seemed to take our deplorable situation as an acceptable state of things and suggest that we should be content in being requited by martyrdom. You should have concluded in the spirit of John Stuart Mill that humanity should mourn our situation "with sackcloth and ashes."

Madame Ambassador, the United States may favor order over justice in this region as long as the war on terror is on course. The pragmatic choice might be occasionally holding your nose when the government of the region's biggest power committed human rights abuses. But order wouldn't be served when the government turned into alienating and disfranchising a big chunk of its population. I haven't yet lost hope in your capacity to invest your country's political capital and help solve the political problem in Ethiopia.

**With great respect**