

Minnesota Ethiopians rally to free an 'Icon of Democracy'

Written by Douglas McGill, The McGill Report
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MINNEAPOLIS -- In churches, schools and meeting halls around Minnesota, the state's sizeable population of Ethiopian refugees is rallying to free a political heroine who is wasting away in prison in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital.

The woman is Birtukan Mideksa, a 35-year-old mother and charismatic political leader who has been attracting millions of young followers – and who a year ago paid the price by being sentenced to life in prison by an Ethiopian government that is cracking down on all opposition ahead of national elections coming this May.

With representatives of virtually every one of Ethiopia's many opposition groups living in Minnesota, "Free Birtukan!" has become a rallying cry for many of them – and a unifying one among dissident groups that usually would not work together.

At a commemorative event marking Birtukan's first year in prison, held last month at the Longfellow Park Recreation Center in Minneapolis, members from many of those groups met to share a meal and discuss strategies to release Birtukan. Flyers were also distributed at the Medhanealem Orthodox Ethiopian Church in Minneapolis.

Political Potency

"Birtukan is a prisoner of conscience but there are many others, from many ethnic groups, who are also in prison because of their political opinions," said Asheber Worku, the organizer of the December event. "The issue of Birtukan embraces all these other political prisoners and we are working together to pressure Meles Zenawi," the Prime Minister of Ethiopia.

In October 2007, Birtukan drew the largest-ever crowd of Ethiopian refugees in Minnesota – more than 700 people – to a rally held at the First Christian Church in Minneapolis.

The excitement was an early sign of the political potency of a young icon of democracy – the "Obama of Ethiopia" or "the Aung San Suu Kyi of Africa" she is often called – that surrounds her still.

The comparisons were too close for her own safety.

In December 2008, while walking in downtown Addis Ababa, five cars pulled up and Ethiopian police jumped out, gun-butted Birtukan's companion, pushed her into a car and sped away.

According to Amnesty International, Birtukan is presently being held at the Kaliti Prison in Addis Ababa as a "prisoner of conscience" in a cell that is two-meters wide. She was "arrested solely for the peaceful exercise of her right to freedom of expression and association," Amnesty says.

Horrifying Replica

Ethiopian immigrants in Minnesota say that Birtukan's illegal confinement is only one of sweeping criminal acts committed by the Ethiopian regime, led by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, designed to quash all opposition in the May elections and to further secure Meles' grip on power.

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“They have imprisoned all opposition party leaders, the independent media has been closed, and many people have gone into exile,” said Berhane Worku, an engineer at the Metropolitan Council in St. Paul who is running an email campaign to pressure U.S. elected officials to push for Birtukan’s release.

Meles Zenawi took power in Ethiopia in 1991, overthrowing the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam, known for its ruthless suppression of all dissent. Hailed for several years as a hope for democracy in Africa, over the past decade Meles has instead transmogrified into a horrifying replica of Mengistu or even worse.

In 2003, a genocide carried out by the Ethiopian military against the Anuak tribe of western Ethiopia was uncovered. Over the past two years, similar widespread crimes against humanity have been documented in Ethiopia’s Ogaden region, where entire villages of Somali-speaking Ethiopians have been wiped out by Ethiopian soldiers in the name of fighting a supposed “terrorist insurgency” brewing in that region.

Young People

Birtukan’s troubles began in 2004 and 2005, when during a period of unprecedented political openness in Ethiopia she publicly emerged as a fiercely intelligent, pragmatic opposition leader who united enough votes to seriously threaten Meles and his governing party, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

When it became obvious that the EPRDF would lose substantially to an opposition led by a vital young woman drawing throngs of young people, the crackdown began.

The election results were nullified and when protesters gathered in Addis Ababa to express their displeasure, Ethiopian soldiers opened fire on them, killing at least 187.

Hundreds of opposition political figures, dissidents, journalists and human rights workers were imprisoned at the time – with many, like Birtukan, receiving life sentences.

Also like Birtukan, many of these were released 18 months later after a pardon was brokered. But when Birtukan kept up her political activity by founding the Unity, Democracy and Justice Party (UDJP) and started traveling overseas – to places like Minnesota to drum up support for her cause – that was too much for the regime. She was re-arrested, her pardon revoked, and returned to her closet-sized prison cell.

“What motivates me is the moral question,” Asheber Worku said. “What I see here in America is democracy. I want to see it in my home country, too.”

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