

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR ALEMAYEHU GEBRE MARIAM ON H.R. 5680

Interviewer's Note: Prof. Alemayehu has written various pieces on H.R. 5680, most recently, a widely read analysis entitled "Could the Somali Crisis Affect Passage of H.R. 5680." The H.R. 5680 Task Force recently caught up with him to get his insights and sense of the legislative process on H.R. 5680 as members of Congress gear up for the midterm elections.

Here are snippets of some of his thought-provoking observations. **On the Ethiopian government's opposition to the bill:** "Meles and the Ethiopian government have been proclaiming for years that they support human rights, democracy, the rule of law,...I would have thought that they would be leading the parade in trying to get this bill passed since it would help them practice what they preach and give them the international legitimacy they so desperately crave." **On chances of passage of H.R.5680 this legislative session:** "I think the chances of passage in the House are very good,... My concerns are really about what could happen in the in the Senate." **On the time pressure to get the bill to the Senate floor before the midterm elections:** "When we look at the few weeks left in this session of Congress altogether and the October recess and all of the other pressing issues vying for Congressional attention,... I am very concerned about the fate of the bill in the Senate." **On his special concerns about what could happen in the Senate:** "My main concern is the possibility of the government's lobbyist persuading a senator to put a secret hold on H.R. 5680, and running the clock on it so that it will not get to the Senate floor for a vote this legislative session.... In other words, one senator can block H.R. 5680 from coming on the floor for a vote and keep his or her identity secret. This is something that causes me great concern." **On the political power of Ethiopian Americans:** "For the past three decades Ethiopians have not registered on the American legislative or political radar. With H.R. 5680, formerly H.R. 4423, they have opened their eyes to the kinds of political power and influence they can exert in the American political system to help the country of their birth." **On the lobbying fees paid by the Ethiopian government to DLA Piper:** "It is an outrage,... that a country on the list of the top ten poorest countries in the world should spend such an enormous sum on lobbying firms, and then turn around and beg for international handouts to support public services and projects because they do not have money. In this case, it is criminal for the Ethiopian government to spend over \$600,000 a year to make sure that it will not get the \$20 million designated for implementation of H.R.5680." **On the work of the government's lobbying firm:** "The lobbying firm has another important job as well, and that is repairing the badly tarnished image of Mr. Meles in the U.S. Congress and the American media. For some time, Mr. Meles has been successful in maintaining the image that he was a leader in the pack of a new breed of African leaders dedicated to democracy, human rights and so on.... But his actions after the May, 2005 elections have shown him to be just another 'two-bit dictator' in the African continent." **On the strategy of the government's lobbyists:** "The DLA Piper lobbyists know all too well that there are just a few weeks left to this session of Congress, and if they can delay action in either or both houses, they would win without fighting." **On what immediate steps should be taken by Ethiopians in the U.S.:** "If you really look at what needs to be done objectively, it is really very simple. There are only 2 senators from each state. It takes may be ten minutes to contact their senatorial offices and bring up the issue. The rest is follow up by letter, email, and telephone call. So, the real question is can we spare 10 minutes for the country and people that have given us so much."

INTERVIEW

Meron Ahadu: Prof. Alemayehu, thank you for doing this interview. We appreciate the time you have taken to talk to us.

Prof. Alemayehu: It is my pleasure. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss H.R. 5680 with you.

Meron Ahadu: Let me start by asking you to briefly summarize the purposes and main elements of H.R. 5680?

Prof. Alemayehu: I think the alternate description, “Ethiopia Freedom, Democracy and Human Rights Advancement Act of 2006” best captures the essence of the bill. H.R. 5680 is intended to achieve certain clear objectives, that is, advance specific goals that will help Ethiopia become a thriving and stable democratic society functioning under the rule of law. These goals include the immediate release of political prisoners, institutionalization of democratic practices and processes, protection of human rights, including protections for free speech and press, and local and international groups involved in human rights work, improvements to the court system and judicial process, and insulating judges from political pressure or interference, economic development with emphasis on water resources development and improvements in the management of economic institutions, and strengthening the Ethiopian American partnership in the fight against international terrorism. The bill provides \$20 million USD to cover the cost of technical training and support, and other expenses related to the implementation of these efforts over a two year period.

Meron Ahadu: How did this bill come about?

Prof. Alemayehu: The bill was authored by Representative Christopher Smith of New Jersey, who is also the chairman of the House Committee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations. Later it was co-sponsored by numerous members of Congress, including such prominent democrats as Donald Payne, former chairman of the Black Caucus and Africa expert, and Tom Lantos, founder of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus.

In public statements, Chairman Smith has explained that he decided to introduce the bill after he became aware of disturbing facts following the May, 2005 elections. He stated that the human rights situation in Ethiopia deteriorated significantly after the elections, marked by the killing of scores of demonstrators by government security personnel. He was distressed by the arrest and detention of tens of thousands of government opponents, including opposition political leaders, human rights activists, community leaders, journalists and youth. He traveled to Ethiopia to investigate the situation and had an opportunity to meet with Mr. Meles Zenawi to discuss the disturbing developments. When his efforts to address these issues with the Ethiopian government proved futile, he introduced the bill, which was designated as H.R. 4423 while it was in his subcommittee.

Meron Ahadu: Is this the first time such a bill has been drafted or enacted by the U.S. Congress?

Prof. Alemayehu: Hardly. It is important to understand that this is not a bill that singles out Ethiopia for unfair treatment or punishment, or designed with the intention of undermining Ethiopia’s sovereignty. There are many precedents where the U.S. government has made grant of economic and military assistance to other countries contingent upon the recipient country’s compliance with human rights standards and democratic practices. For instance, the Foreign

Assistance Act of 1961 and the International Security and Arms Export Control Act of 1976 require termination or suspension of U.S. aid to any country that is involved in gross violation of the human rights of its citizens. These two laws are based on the idea that the U.S. can not proclaim and preach democracy throughout the world while supporting tyrants and dictators with the tax dollars of the American people. Congress felt that the U.S. as a constitutional democracy was obligated to put into practice overseas the same principles it claimed to hold dear at home. H.R. 5680 is consistent with longstanding U.S. law and policy on human rights.

Meron Ahadu: Are there examples where the U.S. has cut off, threatened to cut off or made U.S aid contingent upon improvements in the human rights records of aid recipient countries?

Prof. Alemayehu: Yes, there are many examples. Cutoff of U.S. aid to countries with a record of gross violations of human rights is common. Recently, the U.S. cut \$18 million in military and economic aid to the government of Uzbekistan because it failed to implement measures to improve its human rights record. In the past few years, similar actions have been taken against the governments of Colombia and Indonesia, among others.

Meron Ahadu: If H.R.5680 is about human rights, democracy and economic development, why do you think the Ethiopian government is fighting “tooth and nail” to defeat it?

Prof. Alemayehu: And, let’s not forget, the release of political prisoners. It is stupefying to think of the reasons why the Ethiopian government would even consider opposing this bill, let alone expend thousands of dollars on lobbyists to defeat it. Mr. Meles and the Ethiopian government have been proclaiming for years that they support human rights, democracy, the rule of law, freedom of speech, press and so on. I would have thought that they would be leading the parade in trying to get this bill passed since it would help them practice what they preach and give them the international legitimacy they so desperately crave, in addition to a cool \$20 million over two years to implement provisions of the law.

But your question raises intriguing possibilities, particularly in light of the manifest benefits and advantages to Ethiopia if the bill were enacted into law. I suspect there are several reasons why the government is spending well over a half million dollars to defeat the bill. Clearly, if the bill should be enacted into law, it would amount to an indictment of the Ethiopian government, particularly for its gross and consistent violation of human rights as documented in the annual U.S. human rights report and other reports over the past decade. I suppose the Ethiopian government desperately wants to avoid the judgment of the U.S. Congress. There is also accountability in the bill for the Ethiopian government with sanctions for failure to implement steps to improve human rights. I don’t think the Ethiopian government or its top leaders particularly like or are accustomed to the idea of accountability. The government has also claimed that H.R. 5680 is a product of individuals and groups in the United States opposed to it. If the bill should pass, that would be a clear victory for the Diaspora opposition. I don’t believe the Ethiopian government wants to see such an outcome, or see an awakened and emboldened Ethiopian community in America working together through the American political system to apply pressure on them on other issues as well. They probably want to “nip in the bud” any sense of political empowerment by Ethiopians in America. But in all candor, I do not know why the government is fighting to defeat the bill. I would love to see an official government analysis or position statement on H.R.5680.

Meron Ahadu: Are you suggesting that Ethiopians in America can use their new found political empowerment to work for change in Ethiopia?

Prof. Alemayehu: Positive change, yes. For the past three decades Ethiopians have not registered on the American legislative or political radar. With H.R. 5680, formerly H.R. 4423, they have opened their eyes to the kinds of political power and influence they can exert in the American political system to help the country of their birth. And this is nothing new. There are thousands of groups and organizations in the U.S. advocating on behalf of their countries of national origin in the U.S. Congress and the executive branch. We are just getting to the game a little late. The difference between us and other groups, I suppose, has to do with the level and quality of participation. I think those of us eligible to vote should register and vote. We should make contributions according to our abilities to the candidates of our choice, and volunteer to provide non-monetary support such as campaign work, and maintain linkages with our representatives at the national level. That's how the game is played in America. You must participate to get the benefits. It can't be done from the sidelines.

Meron Ahadu: What is the current status of H.R. 5680?

Prof. Alemayehu: As you may recall, the bill passed with the unanimous support of the members of the House International Relations Committee in late June, and is now awaiting floor action; that is a final vote by the full House before referral to the Senate for further action. Hopefully, by mid-September, it will be sent to the floor for a final vote, and expedited along to the Senate for consideration and vote before the October recess; that is before members go back to their districts to do final campaigning before the November midterm elections.

Meron Ahadu: What is your sense of the chances of passage of this bill this legislative year?

Prof. Alemayehu: Well, before H.R.5680 is enacted into law, it requires separate action by the House of Representatives and the Senate. I think the chances of passage in the House are very good; and I say that based on the facts that H.R. 5680 is a non-controversial bill for the House, that it is authored by Chairman Chris Smith, who is highly respected inside and outside Congress for his work on global human rights, that the bill has been co-sponsored by numerous members of Congress, including Donald Payne, regarded to be a policy specialist on Africa and the former chairman of the Black Caucus, and Tom Lantos, the founder of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, and that it was reported out of the International Relations Committee with unanimous bipartisan support. My concerns are really about what could happen in the in the Senate. But the bill has yet to clear the House, and so there is a critical timing issue in both the House and Senate.

Meron Ahadu: When you say a “timing issue,” do you anticipate problems in the congressional legislative process in getting timely action on the bill?

Prof. Alemayehu: I do have serious concerns about timely legislative action in the Senate, but to a limited extent in the House as well. There are just too many hot political issues that compete for congressional attention before the November elections such as immigration reform, national security issues, Pentagon and domestic security bills and so on. Also, Congress will be taking another recess before the middle of October. So, time is of the essence for the bill.

Fortunately, H.R. 5680 is not a hot political issue in the House. It is one of those bills they call “non-controversial.” I expect it will be sent to the House floor by a procedure called “suspension of the rules” because it is a “non-controversial” bill. If this happens, floor debate on the bill will be

limited to a maximum time of 40 minutes, no floor amendments will be allowed and a favorable vote by a two-thirds majority is required to pass the bill. My guess is that Chairman Hyde of the International Relations Committee will bring the bill to the floor as a “suspension” before the middle of September for a final vote.

Meron Ahadu: And what are the timing issues in the Senate?

Prof. Alemayehu: Well, the Senate can not act on the bill until it is first acted upon in the House. An equivalent bill was not introduced in the Senate, and so the House must have a final vote before the bill is taken up in the Senate. When we look at the few weeks left in this session of Congress altogether and the October recess and all of the other pressing issues vying for Congressional attention and the rather lax Senate procedures, and so on, the timing issue for the bill takes a dimension of its own. That is why I am very concerned about the fate of the bill in the Senate.

Meron Ahadu: What is your analysis of the Ethiopian government’s overall legislative strategy to defeat H.R. 5680?

Prof. Alemayehu: This is a somewhat difficult question to answer definitively as neither the Ethiopian government, its lobbyists nor local supporters have articulated their reasons for opposing the bill. But one can make logical inferences from the available evidence. The government has hired DLA Piper, Rudnick, Cary, one of the most powerful lobbying firms in the United States at an annual cost exceeding \$600,000 USD. It has mobilized its supporters in the United States who have been lobbying members of Congress to defeat the bill principally based on the argument that the bill is the product of former Derg members, ethnic malcontents, elites and others who have an axe to grind, and showcasing the Somalia-cum-terrorism argument. There is also evidence that recently parliamentary representatives have been sent under assumed covers to supplement the lobbying effort.

Meron Ahadu: You indicated that the government’s lobbying firm will be paid over \$600,000 per year for their work to defeat H.R. 5680. What could the lobbyists possibly do to earn such a huge sum for one simple bill?

Prof. Alemayehu: It is an outrage, and personally distressing to me, to see that a country on the list of the top ten poorest countries in the world should spend such an enormous sum on lobbying firms, and then turn around and beg for international handouts to support public services and projects because they do not have money. In this case, it is criminal for the Ethiopian government to spend over \$600,000 a year to make sure that it will not get the \$20 million designated for implementation of provisions of H.R.5680. But such ghastly expenditures for political influence are not uncommon among tyrannical governments. Mr. Meles’s government would be upholding a longstanding tradition among dictatorships. The apartheid government in South Africa, Ferdinand Marcos of the Phillipines, Mobutu of Zaire (Congo), Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua and many other dictators have used powerful lobbies and spent such vast sums in their efforts to maintain influence on the U.S. Congress.

Meron Ahadu: And for what services do you think the DLA Piper lobbyists are getting \$600,000?

Prof. Alemayehu: That is rather difficult to quantify. I believe the work of the lobbying firm is made more difficult by the leadership role taken by Chairman Smith who has a stellar reputation for human rights globally and the co-sponsorship of influential democrats such Donald Payne and Tom

Lantos, whom I mentioned earlier. I doubt the government's lobbying firm, DLA Piper, will try to attack the bill head on. Their likely strategy will be to use the old "run-the-clock" trick and rehabilitate the tarnished image of Mr. Meles. The DLA Piper lobbyists know all too well that there are just a few weeks left to this session of Congress, and if they can delay action in either or both houses, they would win without fighting. I suspect they will try to get their congressional members to use whatever available procedural techniques and tricks to keep the bill from getting to the floor of either house for a vote.

But I don't think they will put all of their eggs in just one basket. The lobbying firm has another important job as well, and that is repairing the badly tarnished image of Mr. Meles in the U.S. Congress and the American media. For some time, Mr. Meles has been successful in maintaining the image that he was a leader in the pack of a new breed of African leaders dedicated to democracy, human rights and so on. He has been able to dupe many European governments, and to some extent has successfully hoodwinked the U.S. government as well, that he is Ethiopia's savior. This despite the fact that the U.S. Department of State Human Rights reports for the last ten years have shown him and his government to be among the elite group of gross violators of human rights. But his actions after the May, 2005 elections have shown him to be just another "two-bit dictator" in the African continent.

Meron Ahadu: But how will the lobbyists present the Ethiopian government's case to Congress?

Prof. Alemayehu: Well, I suppose DLA Piper has a dual task, one of presenting an opposition to the bill on the merits and another one, as I indicated, rehabilitating Meles' and his government to members of Congress. I don't believe the lobbyists can make a persuasive argument to members of Congress on the merits of the bill. The bill speaks for itself, and has legitimacy on its face by virtue of the fact of the stellar reputation of its author and co-sponsors. I think the lobbyists will focus their efforts in Congress on rehabilitation of Mr. Meles as a strong leader, and his party as the best alternative for Ethiopia under the present circumstances for U.S. policy in the Horn.

I suspect they will try an argument that will portray Mr. Meles as a victim of internal and external circumstances; that he is really a progressive guy who wants to change and help Ethiopia transition into democracy. They will likely point to the fact that Mr. Meles allowed for free and competitive elections, free press, and so on. That he is willing to release the prisoners if they would agree to join the parliament as some of their counterparts had done, and the ones that remain in jail are really street criminals, and other similar nonsense. Members of Congress will probably be told that Mr. Meles has been victimized by extremist members of his own party who do not want to liberalize or achieve a negotiated settlement with the opposition. On the other hand, the opposition, including those in the U.S., will be accused of being uncooperative, uninterested in negotiation and hellbent on destroying the regime and the country, and so on.

The second part of their work is likely to be along the lines of the old adage: "It's better to deal with a devil you know than an angel you do not know." They will try to persuade members that the opposition is disunited, disorganized and will plunge the country into chaos and anarchy. They will probably try to convince members that Mr. Meles is America's best ally in the region in the war against terrorism. They may try to emphasize that given the rise of Islamists in Somalia, Mr. Meles is America's best bet. Just the same old tired arguments. For the record, I'd rather deal with an angel I don't know than the devil I know.

Meron Ahadu: Do you believe the government’s lobby will succeed in defeating the bill?

Prof. Alemayehu: Well, as you know, in the American federal system, a bill must be passed by both the House of Representatives and Senate, and signed by the president before it becomes law. I do not think the Ethiopian government lobbyists and local opponents of the bill can defeat the bill on the floor of the House when it comes up for a vote, hopefully in the first half of September, for the reasons I have previously stated. My concerns are really about what could happen in the Senate.

Meron Ahadu: You have repeatedly indicated that you have concerns about the fate of the bill in the Senate? Could you be more specific about your concerns?

Prof. Alemayehu: Gladly. My anxiety about the Senate reflect more tactical than strategic concerns. What I mean is that but for the abbreviated congressional session, the November midterm elections and so on, the strategic outcome of enacting H.R. 5680 into law would not present any insurmountable problems. My concerns are tactical in the sense the government lobbyists will try to use delaying tactics in the legislative process so that the legislative session will run out before the bill is presented for a vote in the Senate. That is my principal concern, delaying tactics in the Senate to prevent consideration of the bill. I also think that the government is using the old “rope-a-dope” tactic to tire out H.R. 5680 supporters, and deliver the *coup de grace*, that is, the death blow in the Senate.

Meron Ahadu: Could you explain a bit more about how you think the Ethiopian government will use what you referred to as “rope-a-dope” tactic?

Prof. Alemayehu: Rope-a-dope is a tactic used by boxers in the ring. During a fight, a boxer using the rope-a-dope tactic would lean against the ropes defensively and roll with his opponent’s punches. He would let his opponent exert all of his energies throwing ineffective body blows and tire himself out. In the latter rounds, the defensive boxer would apply the energy he has conserved on the rope against the exhausted opponent. I am using the phrase metaphorically to show that the government probably knows that it does not have much of a chance to defeat the bill in the House, but will pretend to fight the battle in the House to the bitter end on the House floor. Yet, its lobbyists are laying the knockout punch in the Senate. I don’t want to see H.R.5680 supporters lead decisively by points and suffer a technical knockout in the Senate in the 15th round.

Meron Ahadu: Do you feel that H.R. 5680 supporters are tiring after the House International Relations Committee passed the bill?

Prof. Alemayehu: Not quite, but I am somewhat concerned that supporters of H.R. 5680 may be taking out too much time to “regroup” after their victory in the International Relations Committee. What I am saying is that H.R. 5680 supporters need to re-energize themselves for the final battle in the Senate. They should be prepared to deflect the government’s planned knockout punch in the Senate by careful planning and tireless work with the offices of their senators. If you will allow me to be candid, I am not sure supporters of H.R. 5680 are ready for the government’s offensive in the Senate; and I am not sure if they are showing signs of fatigue after swinging so many solid punches in the House.

Meron Ahadu: When you say “offensive in the Senate,” what are you referring to exactly?

Professor Alemayehu: Well, it is important to understand that the U.S. Senate is a very unique institution. It has only one hundred members, unlike the 435 in the House of Representatives. Senate rules, practices and traditions give the individual senator enormous power. For instance,

there is a special procedure called “filibuster” that allows a single senator or few senators to block a vote on a proposal or delay consideration. There is another procedure called “unanimous consent” which allows an individual senator to request the permission, that is the unanimous consent of all members to expedite or delay proceedings. These tactics allow an individual senator to control the fate of a piece of legislation. My main concern is the possibility of the government’s lobbyist persuading a senator to put a secret hold on H.R. 5680, and running the clock on it so that it will not get to the Senate floor for a vote this legislative session.

Meron Ahadu: I do not think many Ethiopians are familiar with the Senate practice of putting a secret hold on legislation. Could you explain more?

Prof. Alemayehu: Sure. A secret hold is one of those quirky traditions in the U.S. Senate. Just a few days ago, in a highly publicized event, one or two senators put a secret hold on legislation that promoted government transparency and accountability in U.S. government contracting practices. A secret hold is basically a one-senator veto. That is to say, a single senator can inform the Senate majority leader of his or her desire to place a hold on any voting on a bill, while keeping his or her identity a secret. According to Senate rules, a bill with a secret hold will never come to a vote as long as the hold continues. In other words, one senator can block H.R. 5680 from coming on the floor for a vote and keep his or her identity secret. This is something that causes me great concern.

Meron Ahadu: If such a hold is possible and the identity of the Senator is kept secret, what can really be done to save H.R. 5680 in the Senate?

Prof. Alemayehu: There is quite a lot that can be done. The first and immediate step that can be taken by H.R. 5680 supporters is to engage their senators in every state in the United States. What I mean is that supporters should take immediate steps to contact their senators and their staffers, and get a commitment, preferably in writing, that the particular senator will not put a secret hold on H.R. 5680. Second, of course, is to ask their senators to support H.R. 5680 and vote for its passage when it comes to the floor for action. Let me just add that supporters should understand that they are up against DLA Piper, one of the most powerful lobbying firms in the world. If they are not prepared and ready to carry on the fight in the Senate, they will surely be steamrolled by DLA Piper. I hope supporters will not underestimate the immense power and influence of the Ethiopian government’s lobbyists.

Meron Ahadu: Is there a way to find out the identity of a senator who has put a secret hold on a bill?

Prof. Alemayehu: Yes, but it is not going to be easy. That is why it is important to be proactive and “head off the lobbyists at the pass.” When I say supporters should be proactive, I mean to suggest that they should act before the situation becomes a crisis. There is no point in gathering forces in October to find out the identity of a senator who may have put a secret hold on H.R. 5680. It would be too little, too late then. The time to act is now, that is get senators to commit their support for H.R.5680, and promise not to put a secret hold on it.

Meron Ahadu: What can grassroots organizations and advocacy groups do to counter the power of the DLA Piper lobby?

Prof. Alemayehu: Well, I suppose H.R.5680 will set the stage for the battle between David and Goliath in the Senate. DLA Piper is formidable lobbying organization with tremendous power and influence in Congress. Supporters of H.R. 5680 consist of individuals and groups, principally

Ethiopian Americans, who want to see democracy flourish in their motherland and the human rights of their countrymen and women respected. If H.R.5680 supporters are to win against the might lobbying army of DLA Piper, they would need to work in coalitions, pool their meager resources and avoid duplicating each other's efforts. As David slew Goliath, I believe H.R.5680 supporters will win in the end because their cause is a righteous one, and history and truth is on their side. There is a difference when you work for a "few pieces of silver" or labor improve the lives of your brothers and sisters and countrymen and women. DLA Piper does not care about Ethiopia or Ethiopians. It cares only about its lobbying fees.

Meron Ahadu: What kind participation or support has been shown to H.R.5680 by Ethiopians living in America? Do you think the level of participation by Ethiopians in support of H.R. 5680 has been sufficient?

Prof. Alemayehu: The support for H.R. 5680 in the U.S. has been enormous, and let me underscore that participation has been across-the-board. There are individuals and groups from academia, there are private business owners, physicians, engineers, students, young professionals, transportation workers, those in the personal services sectors and others who actively support H.R.5680. These individuals, groups and organizations have been active with their members of Congress writing letters, sending emails, making telephone calls, arranging personal meeting in Washington and the local district offices and so on. I am really proud of the work my Ethiopian brothers and sisters have done on this bill.

I think it is important for Ethiopians living in America to understand that we can play a positive role in improving the lives of our people in Ethiopia. But some of our people have difficulty seeing the value of their participation and take a defeatist attitude. All I can say is that President Bush won the 2000 presidential elections by 537 votes in the swing state of Florida. So, the participation of each and every Ethiopian in the United States is vital and critical to passage for H.R.5680. But we do not need to "go it alone." We have our American friends, neighbors, coworkers, classmates, church members, professional associations, and so one who are willing to help us advocate for 5680. They will only be too glad to help, but it is our duty to ask them to help us.

Meron Ahadu: Is there a coalition of Ethiopian groups and organizations working to pass H.R.5680?

Prof. Alemayehu: I'd say there is a loose coalition of various groups and organizations. What is needed is a more formal kind of arrangement that will help the various groups avoid duplication of effort, achieve greater coordination, pool their resources and have a cumulative impact on the legislative process. I think an effort to achieve such purposes is underway and will likely be made public soon.

Meron Ahadu: Some critics of H.R. 5680 have suggested that the bill was the product of a small group of elite Ethiopians in the U.S. and that their purpose is to wreak havoc in Ethiopia and not promote democracy, human rights or any other positive outcome. What do you think of this criticism?

Prof. Alemayehu: It is not much of a criticism. It is the old smoke and mirrors trick. To argue that a human rights bill is drafted by former Derg loyalists, Amharas who lost their power under the current regime, elites and opposition elements is not to argue the merits of the bill. Since neither the government nor its supporters could articulate or defend their position on H.R. 5680 publicly, they'd have to look for distractions. The questions we should all ask, regardless of who is behind

the bill, is what is wrong with protecting human rights in Ethiopia, or helping establish democratic institutions, or promoting freedom of speech and press, or insuring equal protection of the laws of all citizens. We should be careful not to fall into this trap, get distracted and engage in irrelevant personalized recriminations.

Meron Ahadu: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Prof. Alemayehu: Well the only thing I would add is to urge H.R. 5680 supporters to intensify and redouble their efforts in the Senate. They have all worked so hard for so long, it will be a shame for them to let victory slip from lack of attention or overconfidence. If you really look at what needs to be done objectively, it is really very simple. There are only 2 senators from each state. It takes may be ten minutes to contact their senatorial offices and bring up the issue. The rest is follow up by letter, email, and telephone call. So, the real question is can we spare 10 minutes for the country and people that have given us so much. The answer to this question is something we need to face in the privacy of our individual conscience. So, let me just say to the supporters of H.R. 5680, "Remember the Senate!"

Meron Ahadu: Thank you for giving us this interview. We appreciate your time.

Prof. Alemayehu: It's been a real pleasure talking to you. Thank you.

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Interviewer's Note: A complete discussion of the issues raised in this interview as well as other grassroots advocacy materials can be accessed online under the title, "Could the Somalia Crisis Affect Passage of H.R. 5680?" The analysis is also available online at Prof. Alemayehu's blogsite: <http://almariamforthedefense.blogspot.com/>

Contact information for members of the U.S. Senate are listed at: http://senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm