

Congressional Testimony

Democracy Under Threat in Ethiopia

Abaguya Ayele Deki
Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition (TASSC) International,
Member and Volunteer

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Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and
International Organizations

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My name is Abaguya Ayele Deki, I am a survivor of torture from Ethiopia. I would like to first thank the Subcommittee for inviting me to testify at this important hearing. After arriving in the United States in 2013 to save my life, I never imagined I would be speaking before members of Congress on what the Ethiopian government has done to me. I also want to thank Congressman Chris Smith and Congresswoman Karen Bass for introducing House Resolution 128 on human rights and inclusive governance in Ethiopia.

I am here today representing the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition, TASSC International. TASSC is a small organization located here in Washington DC that provides services to more than 300 torture survivors a year, mostly from Africa. Two-thirds of TASSC survivors are from Ethiopia—they are journalists, accountants, medical doctors, nurses, priests, engineers and marathon runners, people who were brutally tortured and raped for criticizing the government, refusing to join the ruling party, exposing government corruption, or participating in a peaceful demonstration.

This is my story. I was born 50 years ago in a town in northwestern Ethiopia, near the Sudanese border. After I contracted polio at age 3, my father decided I needed an education to survive. He sent me to an orphanage in Addis Ababa where I completed high school. I did very well in school, especially in physics, and graduated at the top of my class. When I was 17, I became the first student in a wheelchair to enroll at Addis Ababa University when —students used to call me “wheelchair man.”

There was and still is lots of prejudice against people with disabilities in Ethiopia. But since I was very young, I decided to fight for my rights instead of feeling sorry for myself. I became an activist for disability rights when I was at the university, I remember having to crawl up the stairs to get to my classes. I started demanding more accessibility to the dining room and bathrooms. After the United Nations declared a Decade of People with Disabilities in 1982, I helped found the disability rights movement in Ethiopia. We pressured the government to

provide more educational and employment opportunities for disabled people and equal access to public transportation and housing.

Ethiopia has one organization for the blind, another for the deaf, and one for the physically handicapped like me. When I was in my twenties, I became *General Manager of the National Association of the Physically Handicapped*. The organization had almost half a million members— mostly people who contracted polio and also those who were injured by exploding land mines; we still have land mines because of all the wars in Ethiopia. I was chosen to be General Manager by the members of Ethiopia's nine regions. Because I was the leader of such a large independent organization, the ruling party—the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front or EPRDF -- wanted to control and manipulate me.

Ethiopia is a one-party ethnic dictatorship ruled by cadres from the Tigray ethnic group, which makes up only six percent of Ethiopia's population; Ethiopia's largest ethnic groups are the Oromo and the Amhara. The EPRDF has held power since 1991 and wants control over the entire civilian population to solidify and maintain power. They want to control women's associations, youth associations and all the associations representing people with disabilities. They will not allow any independent organization in the country. Because I was the leader of a disability rights organization, the government tried to force me to join the ruling party. They wanted me tell the media and my community what a great job the ruling party was doing for disabled people. But none of this was true. I wanted to serve physically handicapped people and not be forced to tell lies that would benefit the ruling party. This is why I refused to join the party. The government punished me by detaining me nine times, torturing me and forcing me to flee Ethiopia in 2013.

I hated how the government manipulated and used disabled people for propaganda. I remember a time in 2005, right before elections, when government cadres took wheelchairs that the United States, Sweden and the Netherlands had donated and put them on a truck. They drove the truck through the city telling people the wheelchairs were a "gift" from the ruling party and about how the party helped disabled people. But it was all a big lie—the government did nothing for us, it was America and the other foreign donors who helped us.

The government became much more repressive, especially in Addis Ababa, after losing the 2005 election in the capital city. They changed the results to stay in power, and then started attacking people who supported peaceful opposition parties. I remember what happened in my neighborhood. These commandos called the Agazi invaded my neighbors' homes and dragged the men to hidden prisons. Then Agazi threatened the women, saying their husbands and children would be killed if the women did not have sex with the Agazi. These Agazi are not part of the police or army, they are special forces trained to be killing machines. They speak only the Tigray language, so they cannot communicate to the Oromos or Amharas. I saw with my own eyes what the Agazi did in 2005 because they allowed me circulate outside in my wheelchair. They thought I was harmless, but I watched everything they did. And now I am telling the U.S. Congress what they did.

I was continually harassed and intimidated by the government because I refused to participate in activities to promote the ruling party. The security forces kept warning me: “You are defaming the ruling party. You are agitating people with disabilities against the government.” In 2007, security forces abducted me in a van and took me to a forest called Ashewa meda, in the Burayu area, about 25 kilometers from Addis Ababa. They threw me and my wheelchair out of the van, breaking one of my fingers and badly bruising my shoulders. They thought I would be killed and eaten by hyenas, the area where they threw me was known as a forest with lots of hyenas. But I made a fire from the dry grass using my lighter—I was a smoker at that time and luckily had a lighter with me. Local families from the Oromo ethnic group found and rescued me. After that I returned to Addis and continued working with the disability association but on an informal basis instead of the as the official General Manager.

But the EPRDF knew I was still volunteering with the National Association of the Physically Handicapped and in 2010 they arrested me again. They picked me up in a taxi. The driver punched me in my mouth with his pistol, and I lost my two lower teeth. They kept me for three days in solitary confinement in a tiny dark cell. I had to crawl on the ground outside the cell to lift myself up to get to the toilet. And I was only allowed to go to the toilet twice a day. My hands were tied to a chair and my mouth was wrapped up with dirty wet socks. Friends and Board Members of my Association visited me, brought me food and negotiated with the police to release me.

Finally I got released, the government wanted me to go into exile instead of killing me, because then I would have become a martyr for people with disabilities. My supporters would have become even angrier at the government.

The government wanted to force me out of the country. Finally I decided I had to leave Ethiopia, I had no choice. So I got an invitation from the American Embassy to visit American cities and learn how they made their subway systems accessible to disabled people. That is how I came to the United States, where I found TASSC, the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition. TASSC found a lawyer for me, who helped me prepare my application for political asylum. I was granted asylum in 2014, so I could begin a new life in the United States. Last year I was certified as a Computer Support Specialist, and I hope to enter university to study computer science. At the same time, I plan to continue volunteering with TASSC by speaking out against the atrocities the Ethiopian government is committing against its own people.

I would like to conclude by making some recommendations.

1. House Resolution 128 calls on the U.S. government to punish individuals or entities responsible for killings, torture and other gross violations of human rights committed by Ethiopians according to the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. I hope that House Resolution 128 passes Congress. But even if it does not, the Magnitsky Act should be applied to leaders of the Agazi killing machine, and to leaders of the security forces such as Wondatir Hiluff. He is one of the leaders who occupied my home for one week, threatened me

and warned me repeatedly to “appreciate and support the ruling party.” He did not actually carry out the torture, but he was behind it.

2. House Resolution 128 also calls on the Secretary of State and the Administrator of USAID to improve oversight and accountability of United States assistance to Ethiopia. Ethiopia is still one of the poorest countries in the world – the people need the assistance provided by the United States especially preventing and treating HIV/AIDS and other diseases, to improve education and combat food insecurity. This aid is essential to people like me. But the government diverts far too much of this aid for political purposes, to promote the ruling party, pay off government supporters. There needs to be a stronger monitoring mechanism to ensure American funds are used wisely, and not to strengthen Ethiopia’s one-party ethnic dictatorship.

3. Finally, ask Mr. Girma Birru, Ethiopia’s ambassador to the United States, to tell his government to immediately stop harassing the families of asylum applicants in the United States. Many torture survivors from TASSC are very worried that representatives from the government may punish them for seeking asylum in the United States by attacking their families now in Ethiopia. I hope you will protect me if the government goes after my family members once they hear about my testimony today. So many Ethiopian torture survivors and Ethiopian activists in the Washington DC area and all over the United States are frightened about how their families could be harmed because they criticized the Ethiopian government.

Thank you very much for listening to my testimony today, and to the other people who testified. I hope that the Ethiopian government will pay attention to this hearing and change its policies, and that the U.S. Congress will be watching closely to see what happens after this hearing.