

The “New Breed” of African Leaders and the Future of Human Rights and Democracy in Africa

Event Date: Friday, April 6, 2007

Time: 9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Location: Room 25 Mondale Hall, 229 19th Ave S., Minneapolis, MN 55455

I. Context

The collapse of the Communist Bloc in late 1980s and early 1990s was considered by many scholars and policy makers to be the dawn of democracy and respect for human rights in Eastern Europe and Africa. Many African rebel leaders came to power after long and bloody civil wars promising democracy and respect for human rights. This new group of leaders -- principally in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Uganda -- prompted the Clinton Administration to coin the term “The New Breed of African Leaders.”

This notion was further supported with new waves of aid, trade incentives, and debt relief policies both by multilateral and bilateral donors. The United Nations Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals, as well as the G-8 poverty eradication policies, also gave further platform and opportunity for these countries to advance in economic development and good governance.

II. Concept Focus

Unfortunately, this “New Breed of African Leaders” failed to achieve the intended goals and wishes of its own citizens and the international community. Their countries remain mostly one-party states with autocratic leaders who are often hostile to differing political opinions and criticism. Many of them are now best known for their gross violations of human rights, corruption, and repression of political opposition, as well as repression of civil society associations and the free media.

The case of Ethiopia is a clear example of this trend. It conducted a much expected and internationally monitored election in May 2005. The elections were highly competitive and drew 90% voter turnout. In the initial vote count, opposition parties swept parliamentary seats in the capital city of Addis Ababa and other major cities. Results in the rural areas were hotly contested and the electoral process quickly deteriorated. The opposition parties cited irregularities and the government delayed the announcement of the official results.

This delay resulted in two major public protests in which hundreds were killed or injured, and tens of thousands of people were detained. Many opposition leaders, principally those of Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party, journalists, aid workers, and intellectuals were detained and charged with high crimes such as treason, genocide, and subverting the constitutional order. The ruling party declared itself the winner. The situation in the country is continuing to deteriorate with continued unrest and many high ranking army generals, government officials, and diplomats leaving the government.

The political situations in most of those countries under the leadership of the so-called “New Breed of African Leaders” are similar to that of Ethiopia. In Eritrea, the state retains tight political control and is intolerant of dissent; journalists are routinely jailed and the government does not allow opposition parties to operate. While the situations in Rwanda and Uganda are not quite as severe, there are still numerous human rights and democracy concerns in those countries regarding issues such as government intolerance of criticism and voting irregularities. The prospect for democracy and good governance in these countries requires fresh thinking, academic research, and multiple policy perspectives. This series of panel discussions will attempt to work toward addressing the problems of the region by encouraging participants and speakers to think critically.

III. Event Overview

The University of Minnesota Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, the Law School, and the Human Rights Center will invite policy makers, academicians, and human rights advocates to present challenges facing the African political landscape. The panel is intended to stimulate discussion of policy options and possible practical guidelines in promoting good governance and respect for human rights in Africa. While framed in the broader context of the “New Breed” concept, the discussion will also focus on the Ethiopian Election of May 2005 as a case study.

IV. Structure of the Discussion and Issue Highlights

- The Evolution of the Concept of “The New Breed of African Leaders” and U.S Foreign Policy.
- General Overview of Country Conditions under the Leadership of “the New Breed of African Leaders” and the Future of Democracy and Human Rights in those Countries.
- Case Study: The Ethiopian Election of May 2005 and Its Implication for the Democratization Process in Africa.
- Rethinking U.S. Policy in Africa: Thoughts on New Approaches to Promoting Human Rights and Democracy