

With thousands of Ethiopian students recently arrested and currently detained and at risk of torture, Ethiopians studying at Canadian universities seek the support of their Canadian colleagues in ending the crackdown.

From June 6 to 8 a student demonstration at the Addis Ababa University campus resulted in police opening fire on students and arresting over 1,500 students who many fear are at risk of torture. The students were protesting the announcement of the provisional results from the parliamentary elections of May 15 and supporting demands for an investigation into alleged voting irregularities, including reported killings, arrests and beatings of opposition candidates.

Amnesty International calls the use of force "excessive and indiscriminate" reporting that the mass arrests and shootings of demonstrators in Addis Ababa has left at least 26 dead and over 100 injured. Police also conducted mass arrests and detained thousands of students and other protesters who are now believed to be at risk of torture.

In Canada, university students from Ethiopia not only fear for the lives of fellow students back home but also fear speaking out here in Canada. The Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group (VIPIRG) is an activist student group at the University of Victoria. When staff were told that student demonstrators were currently facing risk of torture in Ethiopia there was an urgency to respond in solidarity.

After talking to several Ethiopian students in universities in Vancouver and Victoria it became clear that none could openly question the Ethiopian government crackdown, for fear of their safety and the safety of their family and friends back home.

One student told me "Like every Ethiopian, I was optimistic that the elections of May 15 would be free and fair and my country would be free from the rule of force. But now after the post election violence it is clear that Ethiopia is sliding backwards into lawlessness and autocracy." Another student told me that "the whole notion of a democratic Ethiopia is obviously a fraud as it really is a police state. Democracy does not mean the elimination of the opposition and clearly opposition should not result in the penalty of death."

I was informed by the students that they are unable to speak out or be identified if they ever want to return to Ethiopia, which one called "a dangerous state". As Human Rights Watch reports, the bloodshed in Addis Ababa was not the first time that Ethiopian security forces have killed large numbers of protesters. In 2001, police killed more than 30 people and wounded an estimated 400 more in putting down a student demonstration at the same university. And in 2002, police opened machine-gun fire on protesters in Awassa, killing an estimated 38 people. Police have beaten and tortured large numbers of students over the last few years. Many students were kept in prison for weeks or months without ever being brought before a judge, a clear violation of international human rights and the constitution introduced by the ruling party.

Those of us not from Ethiopia have an obligation to speak out. VIPIRG is taking action in solidarity with the student demonstrators who have been detained. Student activism is a worldwide movement. Most will remember the role students played in pivotal events such as the fight for civil rights in the US, the opposition to the war in Vietnam, the demonstrations for democratic reform in Tiananmen Square and the pressure for fair trade over free trade through the protests of the WTO and anti-sweatshop campaigns. The student movement may be scattered across campuses around the world but it can also act in solidarity.

Recent BBC interviews with Ethiopian government officials reveal the government feels justified in shooting and killing student protesters. The government first blames the losing opposition parties for creating the crisis and then argue that their tough measures were necessary to maintaining law and order. These arguments are however irrelevant and do not provide indemnity for violating international human rights standards related to the use of force for crowd control.

Canadian citizens and our governments have a role in being able to use our voices to support those who live in fear. Canada has supported the creation of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and an Office of Ombudsman. Our federal government must now take an active role in ensuring that international principles of human rights are followed in handling demonstrations. There is an urgent need for international pressure to end the police violence; quickly release the detained students; and establish an independent and impartial commission of inquiry into the killings and make those findings public.

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