

OPENING REMARKS

Prof. Sossina Haile, *Northwestern University, U.S.A.*

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I applaud you for accepting our invitation to participate in substantive and nuanced discussions about the challenges Ethiopia faces and the kind of constitutional structure its people desire. Ethiopia is at a critical juncture, and the world is watching where the winds of change will take us.

As some of you know, I grew up largely in the U.S. after fleeing the horrors of the Derg. In many ways, we were the lucky ones.

Over the years as an Ethiopian-American immigrant, I have thought a great deal about identity. As a young refugee I both embraced and ignored my Ethiopian identity. When strangers passed me by in a small town in America and insulted me with their famed “n-word,” I protected myself by believing the insult was misguided because it could not possibly apply to me. My Ethiopian identity gave me refuge, thus the unconscious embrace. On the other hand, when I received my permanent residency card (the coveted green card) from the U.S. federal government, I found that my nationality was listed as “stateless” and I was truly delighted. I somehow felt this meant I was a citizen of the world with limitless freedoms, and thus, the rejection of identity.

As an adult, what I know now is that identity matters much more than I realized and was willing to consciously accept. As a scientist, I find the importance assigned to identity troubling. Any one human being is no more or less than another based on national or ethnic identity. I used to ask my father why he felt such devotion to Ethiopia. He couldn't explain it. It was emotional and there was

nothing more to be said. I told him I could not take credit for the Ethiopian victory at Adwa, just as I could not take credit for his accomplishments simply because I was his daughter. But deep in my heart, I feel a certain pride in telling strangers that Ethiopia was never colonized, just as I feel pride in telling strangers that my father was a winner of the coveted McArthur Genius Award. It is irrational. These accomplishments are not reflections of who I am, my integrity, or my achievements, yet they contribute to my identity. Rationally, I have also come to conclude that, given how much identity informs community, those who attempt to abandon such a framework unwittingly create an unfair playing field. To put this in concrete terms, if I feed all the children in my Evanston neighborhood equally, and others do not do the same, then my children will receive a much smaller meal than the rest. Which is the morally and ethically correct choice: feed all the children or feed my own? I think most would argue that one should feed one's own children first. But therein lies the conundrum. Where does my family end, and the neighborhood begin?

You are about to grapple with these questions in earnest, and indeed many of you have already done so through your professional and scholarly works. My admittedly irrational desire is that Ethiopia can remain the pride of Africa, even the pride of Black people all over the world. I also truly hope that there can be an open and fair discussion of past grievances and how to create a society where such grievances are not repeated.

Before I close, let me thank my co-organizers, Prof. Tom Geraghty of Northwestern University Law School, Dr. Abadir Ibrahim of the Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School, Dr. Mizanie Abate Tadesse of Addis Ababa University Law School, and Seife Ayalew of George Mason University. This group of individuals has done tremendous work in guiding the program. I also wish to thank the College of Law and Governance Studies at Addis Ababa University for co-sponsoring this important event and providing additional guidance. Vital logistical support was provided by the staff at the Northwestern Buffett Institute for Global Affairs. Finally, none of this would be possible without generous financial support from the Buffett Institute and from the U.S. government. With that, I wish you a tremendously successful conference.

Dr. Getachew Assefa, *Dean, College of Law and Governance Studies, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia*

I welcome you all to this very important conference. On behalf of the College of Law and Governance Studies of Addis Ababa University, I would like to reiterate that we want to engage in discussions that will help Ethiopia move forward as a peaceful democratic society. As an academic community we want to contribute to the betterment of the life of Ethiopians and the well-being of the Ethiopian society and promote the civilized undertaking of political discourse in the pursuit of stability and peace. So, I take this conference as one of the activities moving toward this goal; we are happy to be part of it. We look forward to more of these kinds of discussions as, I think, this is a very momentous time for Ethiopia. Of course, we have had such moments in the past which, unfortunately, were not seized upon to meaningfully improve the political culture of Ethiopia. Now again we are at a very good juncture; there are initiatives and ideas for constitutional reform informed by looking back at what has gone wrong in the past thirty years and make some changes to the Constitution and other fields that affect public policy and public life. So, I hope the discussions in this conference and the papers that will be made public from it will contribute to informing policy makers and anyone who wants to benefit from these theoretical discussions. We plan to do more of this in the future. I welcome this conference and hope that it will contribute to the furtherance of the discourse on the subject. I thank Northwestern University Law School and the Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School for initiating and organizing the conference and the Buffett Institute for financially supporting the conference.

I look forward to fruitful discussions in these two days.

Thank you!

