

---A Tribute to Representative Elijah Cummings---

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For those of us of African origin who believe in the common cause of humanity and human dignity, the loss of Representative Elijah Cummings defies description. In defending the civil, democratic and human rights of African Americans the majority of whom live in cities like Baltimore where my son teaches and another son lives, he defended my rights too.

None of my family members, friends and acquaintances that hail from Sub-Saharan Africa would have succeeded in the United States of America without the sacrifices of Black Americans, without active advocacy for civil rights and the rule of by human rights giant leaders such Dr. Martin Luther King and disciples such as Representative Elijah Cummings.

I grew up in this remarkable land where diversity is a cornerstone of lives and riches. I witnessed the flourishing of numerous Ethiopian Orthodox Churches, Ethiopian and other African owned small enterprises in almost every large city in the United States and numerous in Baltimore, Washington and its environs. This phenomena of African cultural penetration and enterprise development would be virtually impossible in any other part of the globe where large numbers of Africans live and work.

The untold and underappreciated fact is that this transformation that beneficiaries take for granted would have been virtually impossible without the sacrifices of African Americans and without the pioneering work of leaders such as Representative Elijah Cummings of Biltmore. Disenfranchisement, poverty, the devaluation of human decency and human worth, theft, corruption and the lack of the rule of law and genuine democracy is a global phenomenon, especially for Black Africans irrespective of where we come from.

We left our home countries pushed by repression, oppression and cruelty by our own governments. We left our homes and families because of limited or no opportunities to find meaningful employment and or a favorable environment to create enterprises that sustain life and raise children for the 21st century. We left because of the pull factors of working hard and earning a living, buying a decent home and raising children and supporting our families in an environment where there is at least the institutional mechanism to defend civil rights and liberties in a court of law. But these rights require advocacy and legislative clout. It is here that Representative Elijah Cummings made a difference for all of us.

This is the reason why I will miss his wisdom, his devotion to humanity, his collected and calm personality, his intellect and his remarkable listening skills that is unmatched by any public figure I have observed over the years.

Although from afar, I watched Representative Elijah Cummings in numerous public meetings and said to myself that “America possessed remarkable and honest leaders who cared for human dignity and human worth; and spoke the truth at critical times when their country needed them.” For example, I recall his calm and thoughtful rebuttal with regard to the characterization of Baltimore. His reaction was well reasoned and truthful.

Ethiopia Lost an Esteemed Friend

“Those at the highest levels of government must stop invoking fear, using racist language and encouraging reprehensible behavior. As a country, we finally must say that enough is enough. That we are done with the hateful rhetoric.” Those of us who left our African countries know what ethnic, tribal and religious hate, division and conflict does to countries. It debilitates them to the core. In many cases such as South Sudan, Somalia, Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and others, ethnic hate and division results in failed states. In my country of origin, Ethiopia, millions are displaced because of ethnic division, hate and conflict. An estimated three to five million Ethiopians live across the globe.

In the countries that we left, we do not just protest, demonstrate, throw rocks and leave our homes and families in droves. Out of desperation, we also take up arms. Merchants of death are willing to sell weapons so that Africans kill one another. We use machine guns and rockets with abundance at a time in the 21st century when political and civic discourse should be the preferred option in settling conflicts. As Representative Elijah Cummings said rightly, whether here in the United States of America or back in Africa, no human being in the 21st century should be subjected to being “treated like less than a dog.”

The struggle for justice is a global phenomenon. Representative Elijah Cummings recognized this.

In 1997 and in succeeding years, Representative Elijah Cummings, Representative Christopher Smith and others played a huge role in advocating and championing respect for human rights, the rule of law and democracy in Ethiopia. In the summer of 1997, 6 years after the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) dominated ethnic coalition, the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) had taken power in Ethiopia, Representative Cummings addressed the whole House and said the following:

“At the time (the EPRDF replaced the Socialist Military Dictatorship) there was much hope that the country was finally entering a period of democracy and respect for human rights. Sadly, the removal of the Communist dictatorship of Mengistu Hailemariam in May 1991, has not yielded the fruits of a functioning democracy. The Ethiopian people are not benefitting from the so-called peace dividends of the new world order.”

With this compelling narrative of the reality in Ethiopia, Representative Cummings drew attention to the fact that one dictatorship was replaced by another sinister and divisive one. “Instead, the country remains locked in a Marxist time warp and saddled with a minority-based ethnic dictatorship. The government continues to divide the nation’s people into ethnic-Bantustans, or enclaves, each purposely pitted against the other with the goal of facilitating the dictatorial regime.” This architecture was defended by the TPLF and its supporters in the West as one that, for the first time in Ethiopia’s long and distinguished history, offered ethnic groups self-rule and preponderance over their natural resources.

“The ploy has endangered the Ethiopian people with the inevitable consequence of civil war with repercussions far worse than the tragedies that transpired in Bosnia and Rwanda,” Representative Cummings warned. He further foretold that “These ethnic enclaves (Kilil) may be taken over by Moslem fundamentalist groups. There is a danger that Ethiopia, or parts of it could turn into Iran-

like regime.....Now, all the democratically hostile countries surrounding Ethiopia, such as the Sudan, Somali, Iraq and Iran are seeking to exploit the chaotic situation in the country by exerting their negative influences.”

What an insightful and penetrating projection and prediction Ethiopia was and is still facing. Practically each of his examples have occurred and are occurring. Al-Shabab and other fundamentalist forces funded and supported by external powers including the government of Egypt externally and the now disgruntled TPLF in Mekele are doing everything in their power to trigger a civil war and to dismember Ethiopia.

The ethnic-federal system that the TPLF, the OLF and their external and internal backers institutionalized has proven to be anathema to human rights, the rule of law, national unity with diversity, stability, sustainable and equitable development and inclusive democracy all of which Ethiopia needs most.

“Chaos is likely to continue to reign as long as the ethnocratic government is allowed to continue to monopolize political, economic, military and police powers, and to pursue its policies of setting Ethiopians against each other.”

Representative Cummings uttered the above eternal works 22 years ago. H.R. 128 that was unanimously adopted by the US House of Representatives was made possible through the valiant and steadfast works of Representatives such as Elijah Cummings, Christopher Smith, Karen Bass and numerous others.

The struggle for human freedom, the rule of law, genuine equality among peoples, durable peace and stability and democracy in Ethiopia, and most African countries is an unfinished business.

I wish Representative Elijah Cummings lived long enough to witness a democratic Ethiopia and the rest of Africa. Nevertheless, it is his enduring legacy for human freedom and human dignity that my children, my wife, I and millions of Africans will long remember and cherish.

On my part, I shall do all I can to follow his lead so that our common humanity prevails over tribalism, ultra-nationalism, fundamentalism, terrorism, greed and corruption.

May God Bless Representative Cummings; and console his family.