

France and Press Freedom

“The pen is mightier than the sword” (Edward Bulwer-Lytton -1839)



One of the momentous events in world history is the French Revolution of 1789. It led to the overthrow of the *ancient regime* and heralded the Age of Enlightenment. The French political philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1769-1820) published The Social Contract in 1762 during the peak of the French Enlightenment. He believed that sovereignty rests in the people. He was the prophet of both democracy and nationalism. The clarion cry of

the French Revolution was *Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite*.

Thirteen years before was the American Revolution, which declared its independence on the 4th of July 1776. The French nobleman Marquis de Lafayette had volunteered to fight with the American Revolutionaries. But the American Revolution was markedly different from the French in that it was merely a war of independence from the British, their colonial masters and their country was then referred as the 13 colonies. In practice, their slogan of *Life, Liberty and Pursuit of Happiness* falls short of the Enlightenment Project. But the linchpin of the Declaration that “**all men are created equal**”, (i.e. “men” was supposed to mean “persons”) did not include the men and women in slavery, since most of the framers of the Declaration **own** slaves. The most famous among them, Thomas Jefferson, had hundreds of slaves. Nor did it include white women. So, in practical terms, it was not as universal as the wording implies. The vast expansion of the US to the South and West happened after this.

What makes the French Revolution as the most significant event in history is that it was the most prominent manifestation of the new power of intellectuals in shaping public opinion. Robespierre was the leader of the revolution. He was a member of the *Estates-Generale, Constituent Assembly, Jacobite Club* and the *Committee of Public Safety* – all aspects of the Revolution. The monarchy was abolished and on July 14th the revolutionaries stormed the notorious prison of the imperial era, the **Bastille**, and freed all political prisoners. To this day July 14 still remains French National Day. Mainly influenced by the works Rousseau, Baron de Montesquieu, and the American Declaration of Independence, the French revolutionaries proclaimed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen which advocated liberalism, nationalism, socialism and secularism.

The new French Republic was proclaimed on 21st September 1792 and a new calendar and new dates created the following day, 22 September 1792 proclaiming a new era and a new beginning for the republic

of the people. A new national anthem *Le Marseillaise* was declared and the Committee of Public Safety was established on July 28, 1792 to guard the strapping young democracy with a flavor of deep nationalism. Freedom of the press was declared and about 2000 newspapers mushroomed, overnight it seems, all over France. But events did not turn well for the Republic. The rest of Europe was ruled by Monarchies and they were deeply troubled and intrigued by this new “beast” called democracy that has appeared in France, and the French nobility was up in arms. In 1774 the Republic appointed its first general the 25 year old Napoleon Bonaparte to defend it. The **white Terror** broke out by the royalists and they were crushed by Napoleon on *13 Vendemiere Year IV (October 5, 1795)*

[**Red Terror** was a name given by the Bolsheviks of Russia in 1917 which was a mass killing they conducted for about a month that year in which an estimated one million people died]

Things got steadily worse and a new era known as the Reign of Terror was instituted to hunt down and eliminate the enemies. The main instrument was an efficient device to chop heads off known as the *guillotine*. During the 10 months of the Reign of Terror 300, 000 were arrested and 17,000 executed excluding those who died in prison. The King Louis XIV and his Queen Maria Antoinette (of ‘why they don’t eat cakes’ fame) were the first to be guillotined. The killing machine continued until the revolutionaries were overthrown and they in turn were imprisoned.

It was Danton, the celebrated French revolutionary leader who said at his trial “*the revolution devours its own children*” He was found guilty and guillotined. So also the charismatic leader of the revolution, Robespierre. In 1799 Napoleon took power and installed himself as First Consul. One year later he fought and won the famous Battle of Austerlitz, against the combined forces of Europe, a victory he considered his greatest achievement as a military leader. Things changed for the press. He closed almost all of them and allowed only four to continue to publish. However he made major achievements. “He codified the law and “*Code Napoleon*” which became a blue print for many countries. He also instituted the metric system also widely accepted by many countries (both systems were adopted by Ethiopia). He created the Legion de Honor, for meritorious service. In 1804 he was crowned by the Pope as Emperor. Napoleon was very short and people in power of similar stature are said to suffer the “Napoleonic complex” i.e. the feeling of grandeur which Napoleon is supposed to have had.

Let me digress here to the Ethiopian “revolution” of 1974. The intellectuals who advised the brutal Derg came mainly from France and the Soviet Union. They armed the intellectually challenged Derg which can only communicate with a barrel of a gun such phrases as *white terror, red terror, collectivization, villagization, the revolution devours its children, not only humans but we can control nature* etc. etc. The genocide perpetrated by the red terror has been amply documented. The Derg had a prominent placard in a public sphere which proclaimed ‘not only humans but we can control nature’ When the 1982 famine which killed millions became public, the Derg quietly brought don that placard. Eventually what the Meison advisors of the Derg may have regretted is teaching the Derg that the revolution devours its children. That is what happened; the Derg devoured them as well.

Returning back to my narrative, finally Emperor Napoleon was ousted from power and imprisoned in the island of Elba, across the bay of the Italian city of Napoli. In 1815 he escaped from prison and headed to France. This is what one Parisian newspaper reported the incident blow by blow

That dwarf Italian corporal from Corsica has escaped from Elba and says he is coming back to France

When Napoleon landed in the south of France and it became obvious that many soldiers have decided to follow him - it said

General Napoleon has landed in the south of France and is advancing towards Paris with a huge army.

When Napoleon reached the outskirts of Paris, the paper wrote

Our beloved Emperor Napoleon has reached Paris and will claim his legitimate throne which has been taken from him by renegades.

Napoleon regained his power and ruled France for 100 days. He was eventually defeated by the British at the battle of Waterloo (near Brussels, Belgium). Napoleon fled on horseback crying to his loyal followers "flee those who can" He was eventually captured and sent to the Island of St Helena in the middle of the Indian Ocean. He died there six years later. He was 51.

Notwithstanding the above quote, the French press has been and continues to be the freest in the world. Take the case of the essayist Emily Zola (1841-1907) Alfred Dreyfus, a Captain of the French Army and a Jew, was accused of selling military secrets to Germany. He was court marshalled, convicted of treason and sent to the notorious Devil's Island prison in (formerly) French Guinea Emily Zola wrote an article *Je accuse* (I accuse) denouncing the military of anti-Semitism .The article was published in the Paris daily **L'Aurore** on 13 January 1898, and it became sensational dividing the French society. The case of Alfred Dreyfus became a *cause celebre* in the 19th Century France and beyond. He was eventually freed from prison and exonerated.

A few days ago Muslim terrorists assassinated 17 people in Paris claiming that a satirical magazine has been disrespectful to Islam. The editors and writers of the magazine **Charlie** were massacred by two brothers while they were at their daily morning meeting. Another massacre happened at a *kosher* supermarket at about the same time. The people of Paris and other cities went out in mass to support freedom of expression. One and a half million in Paris alone, the highest in Paris since the Liberation Day in 1944. About 60 heads of states and government marched hands locked along the iconic Champs Elyse Boulevard. Most of the demonstrators held placards which read **Je suis Charlie** (I am Charlie) in support of the freedom of expression of the magazine. They also held up huge pencils to declare that the pen is mightier than the sword. Except for one or two bad apples who dared to come to the Paris demonstration, the leaders who attended were more or less supports of press freedom. It was an impressive, unprecedented and magnanimous support for the freedom of the human spirit. Those dictators, whose countries have totally stifled press freedom and imprisoned prisoners, like Ethiopia 'wisely' kept away. The French The magazine said that it will print three million copies tomorrow in six languages including in

Arabic. Today the French parliament rose in unison and sung the national anthem *Le Marseilles*. The last time it has done so was over a hundred years ago.

Now that freedom of expression has grabbed world attention, it is the duty of democratic countries that came out in support of France should put their money where their mouth is and openly and insistently denounce regimes that trample freedom of expression. France should be the vanguard in denouncing countries like Ethiopia who totally deny freedom of expression. Journalists like Eskinder Nega, Reyot Alemu and the rest while still residing in the Belly of the Beast had the courage to stand for democracy and are now languishing in Meles Zenawi prison. The Ethiopian people need to affirm that the sword IS NOT mightier than the sword and continue the good fight.

Venceremos – we shall overcome