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## Scholar At Risk Joins Faculty

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— When militaries overrun governments and dictators rise to power, it is most often the universities and centers of learning that are the first to become targets, said Taye Woldesmiat, visiting associate professor of political science at Illinois Wesleyan University. “Education is key to any democratic process. Education leads to questions and to knowing your rights. Autocrats are always against education. It is their way of defending their powers.”

Woldesmiat should know. He spent six years in an Ethiopian prison after speaking out openly against the government, and now comes to Illinois Wesleyan as a Scholar at Risk (SAR). “Any armed group who comes to power is not going to give it up with an election,” said Woldesmiat, who joined the IWU faculty this fall as a visiting professor. “They can always try to come back with a bogus election, but an educated electorate will refuse that. That is why autocrats are afraid of education.”

Illinois Wesleyan is a founding member of the Scholars at Risk Network, an international group of over 80 colleges and universities in the U.S. and around the world that promotes academic freedom and defends the human rights of scholars worldwide. Scholars at Risk institutions provide sanctuary for persecuted educators, such as Woldesmiat, by hosting them as visiting professors, lecturers, researchers or students.

Woldesmiat always knew he wanted to be a teacher, and studied in Ethiopia. Through a government exchange program, he came to the United States and Illinois State University in Normal, Ill., where he earned his degrees in political science – a bachelor’s degree in 1982 and master’s degree in 1984. It was in Normal that Woldesmiat forged the connections that would later help save his life. “I stayed in the International House at ISU, and suddenly I knew people from 107 different countries,” said Woldesmiat. “It was here I learned the importance of understanding other cultures. We learn through opening our minds to others.”

After earning his doctorate in political science from the University of Missouri-Columbia, he decided to return to Ethiopia. “The government had paid for me to go to school, so I felt I owed them. I wanted to give back,” said Woldesmiat, who joined the Ethiopian Teachers Association, and soon became president of the group with more than 150,000 members. He taught for several years, and then the Addis Ababa government came to power. “Many teachers were fired, and threatened with imprisonment. I became a target, especially with my background of a Western education,” he said.

Woldesmiat said he received warnings to not speak against the government, but that was not his way. “I was an activist, and the head of an organization under fire. I was given many warnings, but I did not listen,” said Woldesmiat. “I was spoiled here in America, knowing what it means to speak out.”

In 1996, Woldesmiat traveled to Germany for the conference of the International Teacher’s Union. While there, the Addis Ababa government began a trial to convict him in absentia of terrorism and armed conspiracy. “That was my signal to stay in exile,” said Woldesmiat, “But I refused. I told people, ‘I am innocent. I have done nothing wrong. I will not be treated like a criminal.’” Upon his return to Ethiopia, he was arrested. “The trial was a joke,” he said. “They showed one automatic weapon, saying it was mine. That was their evidence that I was a terrorist. I laughed and asked the judge, ‘Ethiopia has the second largest army in Africa. Do you think one machine gun will overthrow it?’” Woldesmiat said the judge could not even look at him. “He had no power. He knew what was right, but also knew what the government had already decided.” Found guilty, Woldesmiat was sentenced to 15 years in prison. The first four months he served in solitary confinement and for three years he was shackled 24 hours a day, spending much of his time in darkness.

Outside the walls of the prison, the world was taking notice. Immediately, his contacts in the International Teacher’s Union began to protest his imprisonment. His former International House classmates from ISU also joined the fight all over the world. In 1999, Amnesty International took on his case. “When Amnesty took notice, that is when I was moved to a place where there was more light, and I could read books again,” said Woldesmiat. His case even gained the attention of Capitol Hill, where 82 Congressmen signed a petition for his release. “Never underestimate what people can do when they work together for good.” Even with international pressure, it wasn’t until 2002 that Woldesmiat was freed.

Now, in his classrooms at Illinois Wesleyan, Woldesmiat tries to convey more than his personal struggle, but the message of hope his story conveys. “Education is a human right, not a luxury or a privilege,” said Woldesmiat. “It is vital to the development of a society. Governments may be cruel and unjust, but it is people who can make the difference, and an educated people who can make it right.”



*Taye Woldesmiat*