

## **From the Frying Pan to the Fire: Biden's policy on Ethiopia is misguided and counterproductive**

**Derese G Kassa (Ph.D.), July 2021**

A month or so ago, I finished reading Obama's "Promised Land" amused to learn that he did not devote a single page to tell the story of his administration's policies and involvement in Africa. Not even a mention of his inaugural trip to and resounding speech in Accra, Ghana. Africa is considered as an afterthought when it comes to the US foreign policy architecture. That happened to be the case even when the first Black president of America whose father hailed from Kenya was elected. In fact, the Obama White House waited till the June of his reelection year (2012) to announce its Africa policy document.

Through the Obama years, US assistance to promote democracy, human rights and good governance (DRG) initiatives did not even account 5 percent of the general aid in the most populous nations of Africa. The only exception was Egypt (2014) which was then going through a tumultuous popular revolution and a reversal. A year later (2015), Ethiopia was bracing for its national elections but the US spent less than a percent on DRG initiatives. The volume of aid to Africa did increase in the last three years of the Obama presidency. But even so, the US spent less than a-dollar-a-year per person in Nigeria, Ethiopia, Egypt, the DRC, and Tanzania.

Interestingly, the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw the rise of strong men and electoral authoritarianism throughout the continent. In Ethiopia, for instance, the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) regime led by Meles Zenawi, which was in power for 24 years raised eye brows by "winning" all the 547 seats of the parliament in a farce election. Much could be attributed to the political economy of African states themselves on why authoritarianism lingers. But US emphasis on security cooperation enabled autocrats to repress freedoms, undermine the rule of law, embezzle public funds and criminalize dissent. Ethiopia is a good case in point.

The US maintained strong ties to Meles Zenawi's government in Ethiopia and funneled resources which were siphoned to oil the wheels of repression in the country. Some were even enamored by the doctrine of authoritarian developmentalism that Zenawi espoused. On his funeral (2012), Susan Rice eulogized him saying "He was uncommonly wise-able to see the bigger picture and the long game, even when others would allow immediate pressures to overwhelm sound judgement". This while opposition party leaders were languishing in prison; journalists and activists were getting tortured; and the nation's military and security apparatus was populated by ethnic Tigrayans alienating others. Washington misread Zenawi's ethnic chauvinism and iron clad authoritarianism as a sign of strength. To quote from Rice, Meles "had little patience for fools, or "idiots", as he liked to call them."

Things went downhill on US-Africa relations during the Trump era. Trump's rejection of multilateralism meant there was little to no bandwidth on African issues. He also spoke of the need to cut US aid to developing countries. Even more troubling were Trump's contempt and thinly veiled racism toward Africans. The infamous Muslim travel ban targeted many African countries. Then came his reference of African nations as "shithole countries" which was met with indignation and uproar throughout the continent. And on many occasions, Trump singled out congress woman Ilhan Omar, a Somali American, questioning her patriotism and citizenship. He even "suggested" that she should "go back to her country" if she does not like the way America was run.

Trump also had a soft spot for African strongmen. He dubbed President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt his "favorite dictator". In fact, US relations with Ethiopia coarsened when Trump sided with Sisi and exerted diplomatic pressure on Ethiopia to sign a tripartite treaty on the management of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). When Ethiopia resisted, the World Bank suspended an already earmarked aid package to the tune of 130 million dollars. Later, Trump floated the idea that Egypt will "blow up" the dam if Ethiopia does not succumb to American pressure.

Many Ethiopians and Ethiopian-Americans hoped the Biden administration will break away from this legacy of enabling strongmen in Africa peddled both by the Obama and Trump administrations. We felt Biden could start from Ethiopia where popular demonstrations and pressure by reformist voices inside the government brought change in 2018. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's administration then released political prisoners, invited exiled opposition leaders, reformed the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia, and revoked draconian laws that stifled freedoms of expression and association. These despite relentless resistance and sabotage by the TPLF old guard that resented Abiy's reform measures and regrouped in Mekele, the capital of Tigray regional state.

Between 2018 and November 2020, TPLF leaders resorted to recruiting militia and special forces in the hundreds of thousands. The operation was undertaken by senior military generals that retired from the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF). Tigray's radio and TV broadcasts became platforms for agitation and mass mobilization for a final showdown against Abiy Ahmed. The TPLF also attempted to coopt leaders of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and other ethno-nationalist entities in a bid to forge a new front of resistance against Addis Ababa. The straw that that broke the proverbial camel's back, however, came following the parliamentary decision to postpone the national elections to 2021 because of the pandemic.

The postponement was proposed by Ms. Birtukan Mideksa, the chairperson of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE). Ms. Mideksa is a highly respected former judge who was thrown into prison by Zenawi

twice and was exiled in the United States until her appointment by Prime Minister Abiy to head the NEBE. Initially, both the TPLF and Abiy Ahmed's Prosperity Party (PP) were against NEBE's proposition for postponement. The TPLF, however, established its own Electoral Board (an unconstitutional measure since all elections are to be organized by NEBE) and fielded some makeshift parties as opposition to win its own 'election'. It then officially denounced Abiy Ahmed's government as illegitimate and severed Tigray's political ties to the center. It finally launched an armed insurrection by attacking the Northern Command of the government forces on November 4, 2020. Ethiopia is now reeling from the crisis of this intractable conflict.

The Biden administration rode roughshod over these facts prior to the start of the war in Tigray, and began to portray the TPLF as the victim of the crisis. The statements and press releases from the State Department were devoid of the history and context of the conflict and the role of the TPLF as the instigator. True, the war has caused immense suffering to Tigrayan people and reports of alleged human rights violations by all actors need to be investigated and accounted for. The Biden administration, however, insists on highlighting alleged atrocities by Ethiopian troops, the Eritrean troops and Amhara regional forces, and not the TPLF fighters. For instance, western media outlets, human rights agencies and the US government barely discuss the Mai Kadra massacre, where according to the independent Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) more than 600 Amhara civilians were massacred by TPLF's youth militia at the outset of the conflict.

Reports of killings of non-Tigrayans, Eritrean refugees and Tigrayans who collaborated with Abiy's interim administration are coming out, following TPLF's takeover of Mekele after the Ethiopian government's unilateral ceasefire declaration and evacuation. Here again, the US government deferred from speaking up and holding the TPLF accountable. Even more disturbing is the TPLF's use of child soldiers in combat. On July 12, 2021 the New York Times carried a report of TPLF's march into Mekele where pictures of these child soldiers bearing arms and marching were published. The New York Times reporter disturbingly referred to these child soldiers as "young recruits". We are yet to hear from the US government about this potential war crime being committed by the TPLF. But this selective outrage of the international community and lopsided accusations of the Ethiopian government made many question the real intent of the Biden administration.

Even more controversial and unhelpful is the US position regarding the highly contested provinces of Wolqait and Tsegede. These provinces were annexed from Gonder into Tigray back in 1991 when the TPLF came into power. Since then there were repeated attempts by residents in Wolqait demanding that these provinces be part of the Amhara regional state. The leaders of the Wolqait movement were jailed, tortured and assassinated by the TPLF for almost three decades till 2018. Following the outburst of conflict in

Tigray, Amhara forces have advanced to control these provinces. Instead of understanding the historic context of the dispute or suggesting a win-win solution, the US government gave its tacit support to the TPLF repeatedly stating that Amhara forces should leave the disputed area. And in doing so, the US has emboldened the TPLF to continue the fight.

There is more to the dispute on Wolqait and Tsegede. These provinces used to serve as TPLF's clandestine corridor into the Sudan where arms and logistics was funneled into Tigray to fight the Derg. For the government, vacating these provinces therefore means throwing a life line for TPLF's armed resistance. Addis Ababa is therefore adamant that these strategic provinces would not fall back into the hands of TPLF. The United States could have taken a much more nuanced and conciliatory position on the dispute given the history of the provinces and their strategic relevance. Instead, the US government doubled down on supporting the TPLF's position.

Scores of Ethiopians now perceive the US position as a brazen attempt to interfere and meddle in the country's domestic affairs. Even more, many suggest that the US position on Wolqait is a harbinger that the US is vouching for regime change in Addis Ababa, and not for a negotiated peaceful settlement between the warring parties. If the US is indeed bracing to effect "regime change" insisting on its "responsibility to protect"; it will have disastrous consequences for Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa as it will be for Europe and the US.

First, the administration's support for the TPLF has already created popular discontent and a palpable anti-American sentiment in Ethiopia. Second, US travel and upcoming economic sanctions would force a large segment of Ethiopia's population further into abject poverty and make the state weaker and more fragile. Given the fact that Ethiopia's political landscape is a garden variety of conflicting ethno-nationalist elites, a weaker central state could give way to state collapse and disintegration. State collapse, as witnessed in neighboring Somalia, Yemen and Syria means: massive displacement, intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts, warlordism, and radicalism in the Horn of Africa. None of these are desirable outcomes for Washington DC. Rendering Addis Ababa to undue economic and political pressure will, therefore, ultimately hurt US national interests in the Horn of Africa. This far, Biden's policy on Ethiopia is plainly misguided and counterproductive for both countries and it sure needs sober rethink. To borrow from President Biden, now is time to lead "not by the example of America's power but by the power of America's example".

Dr. Derese Getachew Kassa is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Iona College, New Rochelle, NY.

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