

## Ethiopia and US Relations on a Rocky Path

By Getachew Metaferia

### An overview

This short essay reflects on the diplomatic relationship between Ethiopia and the US which has recently veered onto a rocky path. Like all relationships between countries, the long one between Ethiopia and the US (one hundred and eighteen years) has not always been smooth and amicable. Even countries that are in the best of terms are bound to face misunderstandings, conflicts, suspicions, and reach low points in their diplomatic relations. There are no permanent allies, only permanent national interests. The current acrimonious relation between Ethiopia and the US is, therefore, not unusual, unique, or unexpected. However, it is totally unnecessary and could have been avoided.

During the Cold War, Ethiopia was given comparative attention by the US and other NATO powers in the struggle against the Warsaw Pact, the bipolar global politics of the time. Ethiopia's geographic location and the pro-US government of Emperor Haile Selassie largely abetted and furthered the US's geopolitical strategy. Ethiopia controlled the western littoral of the Red Sea which was an important sea lane through which ships transported Middle East oil, a key mainstay of Western economy and security. During the Korean War and Nigeria's Biafra conflict, Ethiopia's role was laudable, and Ethiopia stayed a strong ally of the US and the West in general. During Emperor Haile Selassie's government, its UN voting record also aligned with that of the US and Western countries and advanced their mutual national interests. Likewise, they all aided Ethiopia's development efforts in the economy, politics, military, and education spheres.

During the Derg regime that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie's government, gross human rights violation led the Jimmy Carter administration to place an embargo on Ethiopia and cut all, except humanitarian, aid. The message of the time, which was also leveled at Chile and Nicaragua where human rights abuses were rampant, was "No human rights, no foreign aid." The US policy towards Ethiopia led the military regime of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, to take a drastic foreign policy shift. Some diplomats and embassy personnel were told by the government to leave Ethiopia, and the US also reciprocated. Ethiopia then changed camp, allied with the USSR, and adopted the Marxist ideology and development policy. That was a loss to the US. A strong and enduring relationship between the two countries and a dependable ally that controlled a strategic geopolitical location was lost. Despite the US complaints, however, human rights abuses continued during the military regime.

Interestingly, the Derg regime extended unwavering support for the total independence of African countries such as opposition to the apartheid regime in South Africa and Namibia. The military regime also received support from African countries. On the other hand, the US

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supported and abetted groups such as the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU), Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), and Tigre People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that challenged the military regime even as the latter two waged wars of secession that threatened the very fabric of the country. Finally, the US extended both overt and covert supports to the TPLF to unseat the Derg and take control of Ethiopia.

Initially, Ethiopians supported the TPLF because they totally rejected the Derg and its gross human rights abuses. The TPLF also presented itself as the best alternative to Derg's authoritarian regime. The TPLF convinced Ethiopians that its agenda was to bring democracy and equality and to uphold human rights in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian intelligentsia gave TPLF the benefit of the doubt and supported it. On the other hand, those who were knowledgeable of the TPLF's acts during its guerrilla years were not optimistic. Nevertheless, Ethiopians who were generally opposed to the Derg helped and guided the TPLF to finally overtake Addis Ababa and overthrow the Derg.

Eventually, however, the TPLF leadership began to show its true colors. The TPLF tried to shape Ethiopia in its own ethnocentric image, downplaying the country's long history and rich culture. Its leadership tried to downplay the glorious history of Ethiopia and exploited it only when it advanced its interest. The peaceful coexistence of the diverse Ethiopian population, the rich culture, national symbols, and ethos which had captured the imagination of outsiders were denigrated. Its rule became synonymous with gross human rights abuses, and its personnel and institutions became looting machines that embezzled the national coffer. In 2015, the UN reported that more than \$30 billion, equivalent to the foreign aid Ethiopia receives, was looted.

The TPLF's security network seemed most formidable as it kept close eyes on all citizens. Elections were rigged and the regime claimed to win 100% of the vote in 2015. Ironically, while its claim of election "win" baffled most Ethiopians, foreign observers and officials accepted the claim and declared that the election was free and fair. Evidently, even such flawed election results were in the eyes of Western powers good enough for Ethiopia if the regime showed allegiance to their interests. Such actions only encouraged corruption and the regime's illiberal tendencies to flourish all over the country.

The TPLF's goal was only to extract the country's resources for the benefit of its small cadre of elites, with familial and regional ties, and it remained detrimental to the nation it claimed to stand for and represent. In such an environment, Tigrayans were disproportionately given positions, irrespective of their skills, and only in return for their loyalty. The TPLF fragmented the country along ethnic lines and used the colonial ploy of divide and rule as it diverted national resources to the Tigray region. Thus, a numerical minority (a population of 6 million in a country of over 100 million) became politically, economically, militarily, and socially unchallenged in its rule.

With the support it received from the US and others, TPLF's crime against the country seemed to be durable. Its primary divisive tool was encouraging one ethnic group to agitate against another,

or concocting or exaggerating differences to fan suspicion and hatred. It created an ethnic and linguistic-based delineation of territories, called *Kilil*, designed specifically to fracture the nation and make Ethiopians mistrust each other. People who used to identify themselves as Ethiopians, and who gave prominence to their overarching national identity were told by authorities to identify themselves by their tribe or ethnic group first. That status, reminiscent of apartheid techniques, went directly on every Ethiopian's identity card. Those who tried to hold on to their claim to be Ethiopian were ridiculed and ultimately considered unacceptable under the TPLF rule

All along, Ethiopians, especially those in the diaspora kept on reporting the gross human rights abuses, the extra-judicial killings, and the atrocities committed on prisoners. Such mounting concerns, however, were dismissed by the US. Some American officials even hinted that these concerns were voices of aggrieved Derg sympathizers, Amhara chauvinists who had been kicked out of power, and anti-Tigre ethnics. Hence, the US and most Western countries sided with the TPLF even as they were made aware of the nature of the regime and the demeanor of its leadership. The TPLF's rule in Ethiopia was quite appalling. Yet, the TPLF leadership played the American bidding. The TPLF leader, Meles Zenawi, along with Isaias Afeworki, Mowery Museveni, and Paul Kagame, was glorified by President Clinton, as one of the African Renaissance leaders. These conditions compel one to be reminded of President Roosevelt's words about Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic --- "He may be a bastard, but he is our bastard." The Biden administration's policy towards Ethiopia has not been different from those of earlier administrations. Because of such inconsistencies and discriminatory foreign policy, Ethiopia-US relations are now at their lowest point.

### **Ethiopia: A torchbearer in Africa .**

One major issue that needs to be mentioned is how the rest of African countries and Africans in the diaspora see Ethiopia. Its long history of independence, the glorious Battle of Adwa, and the efforts it undertook in support of the liberation of African countries from European imperialism are not lost on Africans and their narratives.

Currently, Ethiopia's bold effort to harness its water resource and build the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) to help spur the country's development and extricate its people from abject poverty is exemplary. The fact that it is being built and paid for by its own people (at a cost of close to \$6.00 billion), without any aid from donor countries and institutions, as Egypt and its allies blocked all efforts by Ethiopia to borrow funds from international organizations, proves Ethiopia's sense of independence, resolve and considerable ability to develop itself. Egypt's bellicose attitude towards Ethiopia and the fact that it downplayed the role of the African Union to mediate the disagreement preferring instead to ask the US and the EU, shows it has no regard for the continental organization of which it is a founding member. And the thoughtless and undiplomatic utterance of former President Trump who signaled Egypt could bomb the dam is registered in the minds of Africans and their friends. The GERD has much to say about Ethiopia and Ethiopians. It shows that developing countries can chart and achieve their own

goals, remain independent, write their own history, and break out of the vicious cycle of dependency. African countries must closely follow what is happening in Ethiopia. It is a harbinger of what can come their way if they uphold the spirit of Pan-Africanism, stand in unison to protect their singular and collective interests, and try not to be client states.

Today, Ethiopia is fighting the TPLF, an organization that brutally ruled her for twenty-seven years. The TPLF's long-standing policy goes against the grain, wishes, and aspirations of African countries. It discourages a cooperative national ethos and encourages ethnicity that divides all between "us and them." This emphasis on tribalism and ethnicity has the potential to tear apart the social fabric of any country. It does not help forge a democratic and pluralist society where religious, ethnic, and cultural differences are accepted, and equality in diversity is celebrated.

### **National sovereignty and intervention**

The TPLF's attack on the Ethiopian federal military base of the Northern Command in the dead night of November 4, 2021, killed only those who were not from their region. In addition, within a week of the attack on the Northern Command, on November 9, the TPLF's youth group, called Samri, massacred about 600 ethnic Amhara in Mai Kadra. In such a situation, any government, worthy of its grain of salt would take the necessary measures to keep, peace, security, and ensure the rule of law prevails. Ethiopia's action against the aggressor TPLF is clearly in self-defense which is permissible under Article 51 of the UN Charter.

After the outbreak of the conflict, the actions the Ethiopian government took have also caused rancor between Ethiopia, the US, European countries, and the UN. The Ethiopian government wanted to check vehicles that transport food to the affected area in other rebel-held areas. The government complained the vehicles were being used to transport military equipment for the rebels. Eventually, when vehicles were allowed to transport food aid to the region, none were allowed to come back and, instead, were seen being used by the rebels for military purposes. The government also alleged that foreigners were seen fighting with the TPLF who were provided with satellite-based information gathering devices to point positions and movements of government forces. Ethiopians say this is a de-ja vu all over again as the same tactic was used in overthrowing the Derg's military regime and ushering the TPLF's twenty-eight years at the helm of government.

To avoid a Rwanda-type of genocide, the African Union (AU) has intervened in countries such as South Sudan and Somalia. Such intervention is unlike the position of its predecessor the (Organization of African Union (OAU). Under the OAU Charter, intervention in domestic affairs of member states remained sacrosanct. Under AU Charter (Article 4(h), intervention is permissible when "grave circumstances" occur. These include war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. This is a bold policy. In the case of the UN, the authority to authorize intervention is delegated to the Security Council.

Based on the writing on the wall, it seems that the UN Security Council is angling to intervene in Ethiopia claiming a threat to peace and human rights abuses. In an unusual way, tabled by the US

and Ireland mostly, the UN Security Council held meetings a dozen times to discuss the situation in the Tigre region of Ethiopia. In all the meetings, two countries with veto power, China and Russia, insisted that it is a domestic issue but must be left to AU to find an amicable solution to the problem. Thus, the desire of the US and Western members of the Security Council to invoke the responsibility of the international body to intervene and protect human rights abuses in Tigre were derailed. Meanwhile, the independent Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the Office of UN International Human Rights Commission (OHCHR) found human rights violations to have been perpetrated by all parties in the conflict. The Ethiopian government was not the only violator of human rights. The Ethiopian government accepted, for the most part, the verdict of the two Commissions and vowed to bring the violators on its side to justice. On the other hand, the TPLF claimed total innocence of the crime and would not even acknowledge the report. Interestingly, the report seems to be accepted by the US and others.

Given these unfolding events, Ethiopians, by and large, have questioned US neutrality. The US first supported and enabled the autocratic TPLF leadership, and now the Biden Administration seems to want to bring it back to power. Thus, in the off-year election of 2021, for example, Ethiopian voters aligned themselves with the Republican Party and voted against the Democratic gubernatorial candidate in Virginia resulting in a republican winning the governorship of Virginia. This is the extent to which Ethiopians disapproved of Biden's support for the TPLF. It shows the deep public opposition among Ethiopians in the US to the misguided foreign policy of the US.

### **Searching for solution**

At last, to find a solution to the conflict in the region, the Biden Administration has set up a Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa under Jeffrey Feltman. Feltman seems to be a seasoned diplomat with unusual tasks to North Korea and experience in troubled countries such as Lebanon, and Iraq. His shuttle diplomacy has already taken him to Ethiopia several times. His mission, however, could be quite arduous. The US's recently discovered "neutrality" both in the conflict in Tigray as well as regarding the GERD stands in stark contrast to sanctions imposed on the Ethiopian government

While diplomacy, like politics, is the art of the possible, I hope peace will ultimately come to all our people. Ethiopia continues to be an anchor of regional stability and will be more so when the GERD becomes fully operational. It will integrate the region economically and will bring meaningful development to a volatile region. Given an enabling political environment Ethiopia's industrious population, could live up to its role as a linchpin to the Horn of Africa and beyond.

In its part, the African Union has nominated the former president of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo, to serve as its special envoy in the Horn of Africa. Although some point that he used to be close to the TPLF, he has an impressive background, and we hope he will be dutifully neutral as he gathers the facts on the ground and works to bring about peace to Ethiopia. His country, Nigeria, has faced similar experiences during the bloody Biafra War of secession. In that, I hope he can identify, and empathize with, Ethiopia. He must be given full support to engage all parties.

Let us hope he succeeds in this complex mission. Ethiopia has a long history of nation-building, laudable achievements to refer to, and can overcome all odds.

Finally, both friends and foes are closely watching Ethiopia now. Our hard and soft power are being followed and evaluated. The military maneuvers, flexibility, effectiveness, valor, and leadership are all under the microscope. So also, there are those who scrutinize how cohesive, focused, purposeful, and nationalist we all are. There are issues, questions, and misgivings about the government. But it would be wise and behooves all of us to put these concerns on the back burner for the moment and focus on peace. National survival must be the priority. In the end, I hope the US and others will stand with the people of Ethiopia and help her overcome this unfortunate situation. That will be for the long-term interest of these countries. In this increasingly interdependent and intertwined global order, we must not lend hands to those who undermine peace, human security, and dignity. I am hopeful that successful results in Ethiopia, marshaled by her own people, will revibrate in all corners of the world.