

Washington Doubles Down in Ethiopia

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How the US plunges into the defeat of its own and Western interests in the Horn of Africa

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Analysis

From GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs in Addis Ababa.

It is significant that, even by mid-January 2022, most US politicians and strategic think-tanks were unaware that the US Biden Administration's State Department had been engaged in fostering and conducting a war in Ethiopia.

No apparent strategic logic or US vital interests had been cited for the discreet US actions, which began with the start of the Joseph Biden Administration in January 2020. And in December 2021 and January 2022, the US State Department doubled down on its support for the Ethiopian marxist rebel militants, the Tigré (Tigray) Popular Liberation Front (TPLF), actively promoting the break-up of the Ethiopian state.

A parallel can be seen in US policy toward the break-up of Yugoslavia and of the Serbian state in the 1990s, and, significantly, many of the US officials engaged in that Balkan process were now back in the US State Dept. The 1990s Balkan misadventures of the Balkan Clinton Administration, in fact, damaged US interests in Europe, possibly irrevocably.

On December 23, 2021, the US terminated Ethiopia's eligibility for benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) citing its disapproval of the war in the Tigré region. This was the State Dept. response to the reality that the TPLF forces it supported had been finally driven out of the Afar and Amhara regions of Ethiopia, where it is now documented that they had committed extensive humanitarian atrocities. A significant TPLF-funded international information warfare campaign had, for a year, consistently reported that the atrocities had been committed against Tigreans by Federal Government forces, but, as access to the battlefield was now possible for independent observers, it was clear that the TPLF had engaged in classical "blame the victim" psychological operations, and that these information dominance operations had been actively and wittingly supported by the US State Dept.

US Horn of Africa envoy Jeffrey Feltman showed little sensitivity to the celebration in Ethiopia of Orthodox Christmas on January 6, 2021, insisting on a meeting that day in

Addis Ababa with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. The next day, Prime Minister Abiy announced Christmas political pardons for a number of key Tigrean and Oromo opposition leaders who had been imprisoned. Whether this was response to Feltman's visit or not is unknown, but it was clearly insufficient for the State Department. Even the release of TPLF co-founder Sibhat Nega, 88 (pictured), who had been in prison for about a year, failed to win any relief from Washington.

To say that Sibhat was a hard-line Tigrean nationalist and committed marxist-leninist would be an understatement. He was regarded by members of other Ethiopian nationalities, particularly the Amhara people, as a ruthless bigot who was a strong advocate of the TPLF's genocidal warfare operations against them. He was head of the TPLF from 1979-1989, and then was replaced by the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi at its Third Congress. Sibhat's son, Tekeste Sibhat Nega, took up arms for the TPLF, but was killed in fighting in Tigré on December 19, 2020.

Amnestied detainees included TPLF leaders Sibhat Nega, Kidusan Nega, Abay Woldu, Abadi Zemu, Mulu Gebregziabher, and Kiros Hagos. All had been arrested in late 2020 after the TPLF began its war against the new Government. The amnesties, in the name of "national reconciliation", also included other opposition figures, such as Jawar Mohammed, a former Abiy ally who headed the Oromo Media Network. Another amnestied individual is Eskinder Nega, a long-time activist. The expectation is that their release would "make the upcoming national dialogue successful and inclusive".

None of this was enough for US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and, in the face of an earlier failed pressures on Ethiopia and a failure to mobilize a pan-African political isolation of Abiy's Government, he had US Pres. Joe Biden make a direct telephone call on January 10, 2022, to Prime Minister Abiy. This, too, failed to get Washington's desired results.

Dr Abiy called the telephone talk "candid" — diplomatic language for disagreement and lack of progress — but did Pres. Biden even notice that he had not gained the trust of the Ethiopian Prime Minister? An official White House statement that day said that Pres. Biden had commended Dr Abiy on the release of "several political prisoners" and other things. Even describing the amnestied detainees as "political prisoners", when they were arrested and charged with actual criminal behavior, was part of the Washington dismissal of the Abiy Government's legitimacy, and did not go unnoticed.

And Abiy, in any event, faced a domestic backlash from Ethiopians who resented the release of the TPLF figures who had been engaged in systematic suppression of non-Tigreans from 1991 to 2018.

Prime Minister Abiy was also getting some public pushback against his set of promotions on January 8, 2022, of a number of senior Ethiopian National Defense Force officials, many of who were seen by the public as having performed poorly against the military campaign against the TPLF and other terrorist and militia organizations which had joined with the TPLF during the past year.

The ENDF suffered massive setbacks at the hands of the TPLF for almost a year before it recovered sufficiently, with the help of Amhara and Afar militias, to drive the TPLF back into Tigré. What was publicly questioned most was the promotion of Army Chief of Staff Gen. Berhanu Jula to the rank of Field Marshal, the first military officer in Ethiopia to attain the rank. Emperor Haile Selassie I was also a field marshal, but not of the Ethiopian Army. Queen Elizabeth II made him an honorary field marshal in the British Army.

Prime Minister Abiy promoted Gen. Berhanu “in light of his extraordinary acts in the face of a national crisis”. The Prime Minister Abiy created four full generals including Gen. Abebaw Tadesse, who was victim of forced retirement during TPLF control of the Federal Government (until 2018). As well, 14 major-generals were also upgraded to lieutenant-general rank, and 24 brigadier-generals were promoted to major-general, and 56 colonels were promoted to brigadier-general. In all, some 100 officers were promoted as a result of the still-incomplete military operation against the TPLF, an act made all the more significant because the TPLF was an internal adversary of the Government. The promotions were nominally announced by the Governor-General as head-of-state.

But, on balance, Dr Abiy was being seen by Ethiopians to be making progress against both the TPLF and the external opposition. Moreover, there is no other potential leader visible within the political structure and Ethiopians in general were happy that they had made strong progress back toward credible elections in 2021.