

# The Conflict between Human Rights and Western Interests in Ethiopia

Asnake Demena

Ethiopia is an ancient country with modern challenges. In the past forty years, endemic corruption, poor governance, recurrent drought, intense civil war and misuse of foreign aid brought severe famine and disaster to the country. On top of this, Ethiopia has lost its national port and became a landlocked country since 1993. Furthermore, the country is divided into nine regional states which are defined on the basis of ethnicity. Consequently, a number of ethnic conflicts erupted in different parts of the country and claimed thousands of innocent lives. There is also a large-scale land grabbing in Ethiopia in the name of development. Because of this, millions of indigenous farmers have been displaced from their livelihoods for several years. All these are legacies of the dictatorial regime of late Meles Zenawi and his alliances.

This article will explore the conflict between human rights and western interests in Ethiopia. It also attempts to address critical issues such as: Why Ethiopia drew international attention in the Horn of Africa? Where is the dividing line between human rights and Western interests in Ethiopia? Why do Ethiopians demand western countries to cut off their donation? Is there any connection between western donation and repression in Ethiopia? How much money Ethiopia has received from foreign aid over the past twenty years? Given the natural and human resource endowments of the country, what makes Ethiopia the poorest of the poor on the globe? These questions seem needless to ask, but important for critical understanding of the current political and human rights situations of the country.

Geographically, Ethiopia is located in the Horn of Africa. It is the water tower of the continent and much of the country is blessed with fertile soil and adequate rainfall. Because of its high average elevation, much of the country has moderate temperatures. In addition, Ethiopia contains several valuable minerals, including gold and platinum. This geostrategic location and natural resource endowment makes the fate of the country a matter of global interest and concern for several years. Historically, Ethiopia is the only proud nation on the continent of Africa that was never colonized by any European power. At the end of the nineteenth century, an Ethiopian army inflicted on the Italians the most severe defeat Europeans ever suffered at the hands of Africans (Gill, 2010). As a result of this unique history, Ethiopia became a crossroads of international organizations. In 1923, it became a member of the League of Nations. In 1942, Ethiopia has signed the charter of the United Nations and became one of the 51 original members of this international organization. Additionally, Ethiopia hosts the headquarters of the African Union, of which it was the principal founder of the

organization. This proud nation also hosted the United Nations headquarters in Africa before it was moved to Kenya in 1996.

Currently, Ethiopia maintains more than 35 Embassies as well as 35 consulates worldwide. According to the latest update of [www.embassypage.com/ethiopia](http://www.embassypage.com/ethiopia) (22 July 2014), there are also more than 100 foreign Embassies and consulates in Addis Ababa. This implies that Ethiopia is in a close relationship at least with one hundred countries on the globe. At this point, I will focus on economic support of western governments for the dictatorial regime in Ethiopia, in the form of foreign aid. More specifically, I will focus on generous donation of North America, Great Britain and European Commission to offer complete picture of the conflict between human rights and western interests in Ethiopia.

To begin with, Schareder (1992) stated that the “US foreign policy towards the Horn of Africa between 1945 and 1990 was guided by a series of Cold War rationales that viewed the region as a means for solving non-African problems. Specifically, US policymakers did not perceive the countries and peoples of the Horn of Africa as important in their own right but, rather, as a means of preventing the further advances of Soviet communism. As a result, US relationships with various regimes in the region evolved according to their perceived importance within an East-West framework. Emperor Haile Selassie, for example, was courted from the 1940s to the 1970s because of the importance of Ethiopia as part of a worldwide telecommunications network directed against the Soviet Union.”

After September 11, 2001, African foreign policy acquired a national security dimension for the Bush Administration as part of the War on Terror (Barouski, 2008). It is a recognized fact that the war on terror has an elusive and global nature that led to the adoption of counter terrorism initiatives with allied counties in the Horn of Africa. In some cases, military aid to dictatorial regimes with poor human rights records was initiated, sustained and increased on yearly basis. Ethiopia is an allied of the United State that fits to this description. According to Barouski (2008) the Bush administration was willing to overlook Ethiopia’s well-documented human rights abuses in order to maintain Ethiopia’s continued cooperation in order to achieve United States foreign policy goals in the Horn of Africa. This suggests that Ethiopia and the US desperately need each other to win the war on terrorism in East Africa at any cost. It has been said that when rich countries provide Dollars for the proxy war in the form of aid, poor countries such as Ethiopia contributed in terms of human life. In this case, Meles Zenawi was a powerful tool for westerns over the past twenty years.

However, in more recent years, the importance of these security interests has been increasingly questioned by critical observers of the Ethiopian government, who have tracked the regime’s descent into more repressive and authoritarian behavior (Lyons,

2011). Since dictatorial regimes have increased in the Horn of Africa, both domestic and regional human rights situation has deteriorated than ever seen before. More recently, a study conducted by the Oakland Institute (2013) indicated that donor organizations have failed to hold the Ethiopian government to standards of human and political rights, a neglect principally illustrated by the accounts of the forced relocations of entire communities in the name of development.

Indeed, it may seem that I am confused of the difference between foreign aid and foreign policy. Foreign aid persists as a vital instrument of foreign policy amid sweeping changes in world politics since 1989, encompassing the end of the cold war, a global economic recession, and the onset of the war on terrorism (Picard et.al, 2008). From the donor's point of view, foreign aid is designed to promote democratization and human rights, an objective seemingly based on recipient interests (Callaway and Elizabeth, 2008). However, there is conflict between policies based on the self-interest of the donor and policies based on human needs in the recipient state which may lead to disturbing consequences (ibid). To mention a typical example for this, when the EPRDF took power, Ethiopia could fulfill the need for port access because it possessed the coastal cities of Massawa and Assab. However, when Eritrea declared its independence in 1993 and separated from Ethiopia, both of the port cities were integrated within Eritrea's border and Ethiopia became landlocked. The United States countered this setback by establishing a military base at Camp Lemonier in Djibouti (Barouski, 2008).

In this Twenty first century, the US is not the only supporter of the dictatorial regime in Ethiopia, but also other western countries such as the Great Britain, Canada and a number of international institutions are part of the politics of foreign aid. To make this discussion more impressive, let us see the volume of foreign aid flow from the west to Ethiopia. Since coming to power in 1991, the dictatorial regime in Addis Ababa, has received some \$26 billion in development aid from Western donors including the US Agency for International Development, the World Bank, the European Union, and Britain's Department for International Development (Epstein, 2010). However, Ethiopia is still the only country that has grown steadily poorer over the last twenty years. And it is the only part of the globe where absolute poverty is fairly stable.

From the scenarios discussed above, it is safe to conclude that modern Ethiopia is paradox. It has ample natural and human resource endowments. Then again the country is named as the poorest of the poor. And its people are still suffering from recurrent drought and lack of good governance. Western donation can't change the life of ordinary people at all. It only serves as a means to sustain the life span of the dictatorial regime. As an individual, I don't have pessimistic views towards foreign aid; but still I am against the marriage of western donation with security concerns. It seems that the United States of America and other western countries use foreign aid as a tool to secure their interests in the Horn of Africa at the expense of human rights in Ethiopia.

Nevertheless, it has been said that it is not enough to preach the values of freedom, democracy, and human rights; one must also actively promote them practically. This is one of the main reasons that make concerned governments and human rights organizations as well as Ethiopians abroad to exert strong pressure on international donors to end or limit funding of the regime.