

Ethiopia and U.S. Geopolitics in the Horn of Africa

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The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

1. Ethiopia Needs a Face-lift. The United States needs a more stable, militarily capable ally in the Horn of Africa.

Although it is not clear that President Donald Trump even knows where Ethiopia is on a map of Africa, or that it is in Africa – as it qualifies in his vulgar language as one of the world’s “shit hole” countries – his administration, that is [the Defense Department and what is left of the State Department – have been actively engaged in the American version of geo-political social engineering there](#). Why should he? After all there are no Trump Towers in Addis Ababa.

Still, no doubt, despite the president, his Administration is trying to reshape the Ethiopian political landscape in order to give it a new, more “democratic gloss” after 26 years of supporting what was one of Africa’s most repressive governments in exchange for its doing Washington’s dirty work in Ethiopia. If Ethiopia’s image to the world might be polished up, the underlying power relations of “the new Ethiopia” will remain unchanged.

Putting make up on the corpse that has been Ethiopia since 1991 means playing down Washington’s unflinching support for its dictatorship whose military and security forces it has financed, armed and trained. It means playing down such current embarrassments like the Obama Administration’s claim that the 2015 elections in which the ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) won 100% of the vote was “democratic”, the U.S. creation and training of Ethiopian death squads, the Agazi units, etc.



There are a number of working models of what Washington hoped to accomplish in Ethiopia, among them Algeria, where the ruling military/security clique hides behind a facade of democracy with a powerless leader, in its case the moribund toothless president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika. As a part of Algeria's own facelift – given the military/security cliques vicious war against its own people in the 1990s – in exchange for lending badly needed credibility to its own murderous reputation – the United States acquired a key security asset in North Africa. In fact, other than the fact that Algeria has oil and natural gas, Ethiopia coffee, the parallels between Algeria and Ethiopia couldn't be greater – murderous, repressive governments intent on maintaining power at any cost and willing to use force against their own people, sizable militaries with close ties to the United States, impoverished populations that see virtually none of Algeria's benefits from their countries' growing wealth, much of which is squandered.

If Algeria's image couldn't be reshaped with a little help from its friends in Washington (and in its case, also France), why couldn't Ethiopia's?

The ruling coalition, which really isn't a coalition but a dictatorship run these past 27 years by the Tigrayan-dominated EPRDF will remain ensconced in power. But after decades of corruption, fierce repression and pervasive nepotism (of placing Tigrayans in power in every key sector of the country's government and economy) the EPRDF is badly in need a facelift, a new image, [lest Ethiopia's opposition forces that have been coalescing into more unified national movement for some time, sweep them from power as the Tunisians did Ben Ali in 2010-2011](#). And as with the Tunisian changes, the goal is that they will entail those changes necessary to maintain the status quo.

The Ethiopian government was fully aware: a situation revealed by the fact that even before he was deposed, Prime Minister Hailmariam Desalegn had planned to institute the same limited reforms that his successor, Abiy Ahmed, instituted almost immediately after his appointment. Despite the fact that over the Desalegn years Ethiopia had experienced six years of double digit economic growth – at rate of from 9 to 12% – his reputation was tarnished by the severe repression meted out to one and all in the country, a country whose

jails were filled with tens of thousands opposition figures, journalists, bloggers, frankly anyone who dared criticize [“the iron fisted state.”](#) The reform program might work, but Desalegn had to go.

Intense pressure from Washington for change began to take shape late in 2017. After nothing short of a media drought on Ethiopian government repression and human rights violations, concerned articles began to appear in U.S. and European media decrying these actions, about which, until then Washington had remained mum. The pressure was increased in early 2018 with the introduction of House Resolution 128, an extraordinary development if you think about it, as it was a damning indictment of the Ethiopian government’s human rights violations, and this being pushed by a Republican Party dominated U.S. House of Representatives.

One of its sponsor’s was U.S. Representative Mike Coffman of Colorado. [As Alemayehu Mariam noted in an op-ed published in “The Hill,”](#) the bill read like “an ultimatum” to the Ethiopian government: change or else. In an effort to accomplish the near impossible task of recasting his image from Iraq invasion ardent war-monger to African human rights advocate, and to the delight and gratitude of Colorado’s sizable Ethiopian Community – some 35,000 strong – Coffman is quoted as warning:

“For too long the United States has looked the other way on the human rights abuses of Ethiopia in favor of their security cooperation while Ethiopia is terrorizing its own people; and it is time the United States acknowledges the problems of Ethiopia to respect human rights and become a pluralistic democracy.”

Coffman is a conservative Republican who can be counted on to support increases in military spending, deep social spending cuts and for an overall aggressive U.S. foreign policy. But he was taking the lead, on challenging the human rights policy of a key U.S. ally – no the key U.S. ally in the Horn of Africa? Smart move, and consistent with U.S. hegemonic interests in that part of the world.

He is part of a coordinated effort of those who understand that unless the Ethiopian government changes its tune, becomes a bit less repressive at least temporarily, that it will be swept from power by popular acclaim as Ben Ali and Mubarak were in Tunisia and Egypt. Should such an event occur, and the stars were lining up that it might, U.S. East African policy would suffer the kind of set back that U.S. Middle Eastern geopolitics suffered when the Shah of Iran was swept from power in 1979.

Some kind of preemptive political action was in order, a small change as symbolic but otherwise meaningless as possible was in order, but one that would capture the hearts and minds of Ethiopians at home and in the diaspora: dump one prime minister, replace him with a young Kennedy or Gorbachev replacement, make a few gestures to the population, heavy on symbol, light on substance. Exit Desalegn, enter Abiy Ahmed.

At least at the outset, it’s worked like a charm, both in Ethiopia where it appears already that the opposition has split over the new leadership – exactly what Washington intended.

2. The Geo-politics of Ethiopia’s “New Normal”

The changes in Ethiopia – the forced resignation of Hailemariam Desalegn as prime minister and his replacement by Abiy Ahmed – were in large measure forced on Ethiopia's EPRDF ruling junta by a concerted campaign in the United States as an integral element of a broader campaign to reorganize the Horn of Africa in such a way as to strengthen the American hegemonic grip on the region that includes safeguarding the integrity of the current government, neutralizing the domestic opposition, reducing tensions with Eritrea.

Washington's goals are several-fold.

- Give the United States and its allies full control of the Bab El Mandeb Straits which connect the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean beyond. The maritime route that passes through Bab El Mandeb is one of the world's key choke points through which oil, natural gas pass through on their way up through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean and Southern Europe. It is also one of the key maritime routes for the burgeoning maritime trade between Europe and East Asia, especially but not only, China.
- Among Washington's allies, or one could say, partners are crime is crafting this regional landscape are Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Consolidating control over Bab El Mandeb explains one of the main reasons that Washington – be it the Obama or Trump Administrations – has supported the Saudi, UAE-led genocidal war against Yemen, being fought with U.S. arms, advisers and intelligence, while feigning that the Yemeni opposition is controlled by the Iranians, which it isn't. The U.S. backed Saudi-UAE blockade and war against Yemen is the Arab version of the Israeli blockade of Gaza, just as heartless, vicious and cruel. If Yemen is brought to heel, than Washington, through its allies controls both sides of the straits.
- The United States sees the strengthening of what is essentially a U.S. led coalition that includes Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Ethiopia (with Israel playing a supporting role) as a way of checking or at least managing China's growing considerable economic and commercial influence in the Horn of Africa. China has become one of Ethiopia's major trading partners. U.S. strategists understand that there is no way that they can compete with China *economically* East Africa, but instead, through proxies (Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda) it hopes to manage Chinese strategic and political influence. In the same vein Washington hopes to restrict Iranian influence in the region, ie, through possible oil and natural gas sales.
- If Washington can strong-arm both Ethiopia and Eritrea into honoring the 2000 Algeria-negotiated "Algiers Agreement", Ethiopia, Eritrea and the United States would benefit. Should such an arrangement succeed, political commentator Daniel Runde considers such a development ["an enormous strategic win for the West."](#) Such a breakthrough would lead to increase economic activity for both countries, provide Ethiopia with what it lost when Eritrea broke away from it: access to maritime ports. It could also result in the opening of a U.S. military base at Red Sea ports of Assab and Massawa.

The Ethiopian Connection

Where does Ethiopia fit into the greater scheme of things?

It is a key player (or could be) on the African side of the Red Sea and is a part of what has shaped up to be a U.S.-Saudi-UAE-Ethiopian joint effort which is already well coordinated.

For example, although it is no secret, still, it is not generally publicized that the UAE has made an arrangement with Eritrea in which it is paying rent to Asmara to use its Red Sea port of Assab as a springboard for Saudi-UAE naval military operations against Yemen, just twenty miles across Bab el Mandeb. As in the U.S. orchestrated failed effort to bring down the Syrian Assad government and partition the country in which Saudi and UAE played key roles in recruiting, funding and arming mercenaries, in these same two retrograde – but oil and natural gas rich Arab nations – are strategic allies in Washington's efforts to strengthen its strategic hold over the Horn of Africa.

Ethiopia has long been integral in U.S. plans to dominate Africa politically.

It's strategic value can be measured in hard cash. Propping up one of the most repressive governments in Africa, the EPRDF ruling junta, [the United States has proven more than generous. Ethiopia has received more U.S. aid than another sub-Saharan African country, some \\$5 billion between 2010 and 2016.](#) In 2017, at the height of the Tigrayan-led repression of its domestic popular opponents, as a reward, it received an additional \$933 million. Only Egypt, as a result of the Camp David Accords, neutralizing its role as an Arab nationalist vanguard, received more. The lion's share of this aid has been used to buy (surprise!) U.S. military equipment.

As a result of this militarily oriented foreign aid, [Ethiopia today maintains a permanent military of 162,000 members; it is the largest and strongest military in East Africa. The Ethiopian armed forces includes an air force of 80 planes \(of which 48 are attack or fighter jets\), 33 helicopters \(8 of which are attack helicopters\), 800 tanks, 800 armored vehicles, 85 self-propelled artillery pieces, 700 towed artillery pieces and 183 rocket projectors.](#) During the height of the Ethiopian-Eritrean War, the military was expanded to some 350,000, to be reduced shortly thereafter to its present strength.

The ethnic make up of the military has shifted from a largely Oromo-based officer corps – (which has been largely purged) to one in which Tigrayans dominate. An analysis done in 2011 and cited [in Bronwyn Bruton's recent article in Foreign Affairs.](#) He noted that while Tigrayans make up 6% of Ethiopia's population, that 57 of 16 generals in mission critical positions" were ethnically Tigrayan.

In that demented language of the Congress and military contractors, U.S. investment in the Ethiopian military has "paid off."

Ethiopia contributed some 4000 uniformed personnel to AMISOL, the African Union Mission to Somalia. [Put another way, at U.S. beckoning, in late 2011, using Somali terrorism as a pretext, Ethiopia invaded Somalia.](#) Between 2011-2016 a U.S. drone base was active in Ethiopia used primarily for bombing strikes in Somalia. It is the United States primarily that has trained the Ethiopian military as a whole and what is referred to as [the Agazi Special Forces](#), whom the U.S. employed in Somali and [who are have been responsible for many massacres of Ethiopian political opponents.](#)

Expect no changes, none whatsoever in these strategic relations. However, should the new government's more liberal face prove more enduring, at least on the surface, it could result in an increased flow of foreign investment from the West, that would counteract Chinese investments that worry Washington. The new liberalism, shallow as it might be, has an even more important function. It has ignited a new spirit of hope for national unity among the peoples of Ethiopia. Already some expats are speaking of returning home, feeling safe

enough in the new environment to contribute to the national well being.

Yet as I look at from afar, there is also a potentially explosive political cocktail in the making. Hope betrayed or unfulfilled can lead to dark passages. In the end, there are no messiahs, even when the intentions are honorable. Just ask Mikhael Gorbachev, the Tunisian and Egyptian protesters who brought down their tyrants ... or for that matter, Barack Obama.

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This article was originally published on the author's blog site: [View from the Left Bank](#).

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