

Opinion – Biden's Blunder on Ethiopia

Written by Worku Aberra

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WORKU ABERRA, NOV 17 2021

The Biden administration claims to oppose dictatorship and to support democracy throughout the world, but in Ethiopia it is supporting an armed insurrection by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) against the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. The TPLF, a political group that claims to represent less than 6% of Ethiopia's population, controlled the Ethiopian army, security apparatus, and the economy for almost three decades from 1991 to 2018. It ruled Ethiopia with an iron fist through a coalition of four ethnic parties it created. Under TPLF rule, Ethiopia was "one of the most inhospitable places in the world, bearing the hallmark of crimes against humanity", according to Human Rights Watch. Similarly, the UN says "Ethiopia was the second-worst jailer of journalists in Africa" when the TPLF was in power. The Ethiopian people fought for their freedom and finally forced the TPLF to step down in 2018.

When the previous prime minister, who was really a figurehead while the TPLF held real power, resigned in February 2018, amid popular unrest, power struggle ensued within the TPLF-dominated ruling coalition. The TPLF wanted to continue its domination and nominated a surrogate, but representatives of the two largest ethnic groups within the coalition, the Amharas and Oromos, nominated Abiy Ahmed to be the leader of the coalition. He won by a large majority and was elected Prime Minister by parliament in April 2018. The TPLF, fearful that Abiy Ahmed poses a serious threat to its continued domination of Ethiopia's polity, has opposed him ever since.

Once he became Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed introduced political and economic reforms that were designed to reduce corruption, rent seeking, privileged access to resources; and to remove the strong link between the TPLF and the bureaucracy, the army, and the intelligence and security agency. He released thousands of prisoners and allowed exiled political parties to return to Ethiopia. The political reforms were intended to pave the way for a democratic transition in Ethiopia.

He laid out a plan to privatize state-owned enterprises, to deregulate certain markets, and to allow foreign investment in sectors that were previously restricted to Ethiopians. Although these "homegrown" economic reforms don't incorporate all of the policy recommendations of the IMF and the World Bank, they were endorsed as policies that promote economic growth, improve standards of living, and reduce poverty in Ethiopia by these institutions and by extension the US government. His policy can be described as a new liberal policy. The Biden administration's hostile attitude towards the Ethiopian government doesn't emanate from policy differences.

These reforms threatened the political and economic domination of Ethiopia by the TPLF. The TPLF controlled all sectors of Ethiopia's economy through its conglomerate called the Endowment Fund for the Development of Tigray (EFFORT). Although it is illegal in Ethiopia for a political party to own companies, the TPLF owned and managed EFFORT, a business going concern, that it classified as an endowment entity. EFFORT, with a capital value of US \$3 billion and employees of 47,000 in 2017 was by far the largest business entity in Ethiopia.

The TPLF, using its dominant political position, facilitated the transfer of loans from state-owned banks, foreign exchange from the National Bank of Ethiopia, land from the state, and various assets from government ministries and agencies. It enabled EFFORT companies to buy state-owned enterprises at low prices. Employing shabby accounting tricks with the various EFFORT companies, it embezzled a significant amount of resources from the various public institutions. According to a UN report, since the TPLF came to power in Ethiopia in 1991, it embezzled

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US \$30 billion and took it out of the country. It has also been reported that loans worth millions of dollars extended to EFFORT companies by the state-owned Commercial Bank of Ethiopia and the Development Bank of Ethiopia were classified as “non-performing”. In other words, the loans were never paid to the banks

Another contentious issue for the TPLF is Eritrea. Abiy Ahmed signed a peace treaty with Eritrea, ending the twenty-year war between the two countries, for which he won the Nobel Peace Prize. The TPLF opposed the treaty because it felt that it should have been included in the discussion, negotiation, and signing of the agreement, although international treaties are signed by national governments, not by regional governments. Ethiopians and Eritreans were ecstatic, and the world was supportive of his domestic reforms and peace initiative with Eritrea.

But the TPLF leaders, convinced that power had slipped away for good, fearful that their domination was in danger, and worried that they may face justice for the crimes they had committed while in power, chose to oppose his reformist agenda right from the outset. The Ethiopian government alleges the former head of intelligence, Getachew Assefa, a prominent member of the TPLF, organized the assassination attempt on Abiy Ahmed on June 23, 2018, just three months after Abiy Ahmed was sworn in as prime minister.

Between 2018 and 2020, the TPLF took a series of obstructive, provocative, and subversive actions. It withdrew from the coalition government and retreated to Mekele, the capital of Tigray. The TPLF blocked the federal police from serving court warrants to the accused former TPLF officials in Mekele. It prevented the central government from moving military equipment from Tigray to other regions of Ethiopia. It held military parades, declared Tigray a de facto state, and threatened to separate Tigray from Ethiopia.

The TPLF held regional elections in Tigray in September 2020, in defiance of the Ethiopian parliament, in violation of the constitution, and claimed to have won 98% of the votes. In October 2020, the TPLF rejected the new commanders of the Northern Command, appointed by the central government to oversee the military bases located in Tigray, and issued a statement that said, “... leadership changes and command reorganizations and the movement of troops or armaments, are unacceptable and will never be implemented.” Most importantly, the TPLF moved to overthrow the Ethiopian government through an armed insurrection and attacked the Northern Command bases in Tigray on November 4, 2020. Once the war started, the TPLF launched rockets on Asmara, the capital of Eritrea on November 10 and 27, 2020.

The Ethiopian government, supported by the Eritrean army and regional paramilitary forces, responded to the attacks decisively, removing the TPLF from power in Tigray, but facing resistance from the Tigrayan population and pressure from the US, the EU, and other Western governments, the government withdrew from Tigray in June 2021. The government says that it withdrew its army from Tigray for humanitarian reasons, while the TPLF maintains that it kicked out the army from Tigray. The TPLF regained control of Tigray and expanded the conflict beyond Tigray, with the aim of overthrowing the government, as it had originally planned.

Beginning from June of this year, the TPLF has invaded the neighboring regions of Amhara and Afar, where it has destroyed schools, hospitals, churches, mosques, and killed hundreds of civilians. According to a USAID official in Addis Ababa, “in every town they have gone into, they looted the warehouses, they have looted trucks, and they have caused a great deal of destruction in all the villages they have visited.” The TPLF has burnt down homes of farmers in the Amhara region.

In August, the TPLF took the town of Lalibela, a World Heritage site and home to the famous 12th century rock-hewn churches. Many Ethiopians are worried that the revengeful TPLF may destroy these churches, just as al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban have done elsewhere. The TPLF has looted invaluable artifacts, relics, and treasures from these historic national monuments. It has partially destroyed one of the 3rd-century churches. A recent report by Amnesty International reveals that the TPLF has engaged in gang rapes, extensive looting, and mass killing of civilians in the Amhara and Afar regions: war crimes.

The TPLF is now threatening to overrun the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, thanks to its superior organization, coupled with the incompetence, inexperience, and corruption of some of the military commanders and the civilian

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leadership of Ethiopia. But due to the war crimes the TPLF has committed in the areas it has invaded, the local population is fighting back the TPLF. The TPLF has overextended itself as well. The TPLF, facing stiff resistance from the population, shortages of military supplies, and war-fatigue from the people of Tigray, cannot sustain the war for long, although it may continue the conflict with sustained guerilla attacks. It is a matter of time before the TPLF is forced to withdraw from the Amhara and Afar regions, let alone enter Addis Ababa.

The Biden Administration's Plan for Regime Change

Biden administration officials, particularly those in the US State Department, are well aware of the nature of the conflict between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF. Tibor Nagy, the US Assistant Secretary for African Affairs and former US Ambassador to Ethiopia under the Trump administration says, "... it seems like they [the TPLF] were doing this more to depose the prime minister from power and to reassert themselves into the prominent position that they had atop the Ethiopian political spectrum for the last 27 years..."

Although the US government is fully aware of the TPLF's dictatorial past and current political ambitions, it has decided to support the TPLF diplomatically and politically by demanding a negotiated settlement, hoping that negotiation would result in a power sharing arrangement with the TPLF. The US wants to bring about regime change in Ethiopia, to install a repressive government headed by the TPLF, but most Ethiopians adamantly oppose the return of the TPLF to power.

Six months ago, the White House invited veteran Ethiopian politicians, some of whom have served time in jail for corruption, to a meeting to form a transitional government in Ethiopia. The meeting failed to achieve its objective because the politicians could not agree among themselves on the future direction of Ethiopia. Subsequently, the postponed election took place on June 23 in which the Prime Minister's Prosperity Party won a landslide victory, firmly establishing him as the democratically elected leader of Ethiopia.

The plot to replace the Abiy Ahmed government, however, continues in Washington. On November 5, nine political groups signed an agreement with TPLF in Washington to form a transitional government, most probably with the blessing, coordination, and facilitation of the White House, with much fanfare from some Western media outlets. The scheme was an orchestrated political spectacle to pressure the Ethiopian government, but it will not have significant political outcomes. The group excludes the two largest ethnic groups, the Amharas in the Oromos that account for more than 60% of Ethiopia's population; the group has little support inside Ethiopia; and its political agenda of establishing a confederation of ethnic states is an untenable political project that most Ethiopians reject.

US Pressure on the Ethiopian Government

No sooner had the Biden administration taken office than it started issuing orders to the Ethiopian government. Antony Blinken on February 27, 2021 ordered the Ethiopian government to immediately remove Eritrean troops and the Amhara militia from Tigray. He reiterated the same demand on March 2, in a telephone conversation with Abiy Ahmed, according to a State Department spokesperson. Blinken also pressed the issue with the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, on March 12 and appeared before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, where he repeated the same demands. In May, he demanded that the western part of Tigray be under the administration of the provisional government in Tigray, ignoring the historical circumstances under which this region was incorporated into Tigray.

In addition to issuing orders on troop withdrawal from Tigray and the keeping of Tigray's territory unchanged, the US has also demanded that the Ethiopian government provide unfettered access to humanitarian aid for the people of Tigray, end "ethnic cleansing" in Tigray, establish an independent, international, and credible inquiry into the abuse of human rights in Tigray; unilaterally end all hostilities, pursue a negotiated settlement to the armed conflict, and include all parties in the political process. The Ethiopian government has accepted most of these demands by the Biden administration, and yet the US pressure continues.

On May 24, the US imposed travel restrictions on Ethiopian officials allegedly involved in humanitarian abuses. On

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September 17, 2021, President Biden signed an executive order authorizing the Treasury Department to impose economic sanctions against selected government officials, saying that Ethiopia poses a “national security” threat to the US. Ethiopia has neither the capacity nor the intention to undermine US national security either in the US or elsewhere in the world. The President’s statement that Ethiopia poses a national security threat to the US is pure fabrication to justify his administration’s actions.

The Biden administration claims to support democracy, peace, and national unity in Ethiopia. The reality is the opposite. The US government is threatening the territorial integrity and stability of Ethiopia by supporting the separatist, terrorist-designated TPLF that has vowed to dismantle the Ethiopian state, to destroy the Ethiopian army, and to break up Ethiopia. The Ethiopian people see the Biden administration’s hypocrisy and disingenuity.

The White House is withholding US \$272 million in security and development aid appropriated by Congress for Ethiopia. On November 2, Biden threatened to withdraw Ethiopia’s duty-free access to the US market under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), at a time when the TPLF was claiming that it was ready to march on Addis Ababa. The removal of Ethiopia from AGOA, while inflicting considerable harm on thousands of workers, farmers, and their families, would have little impact on the Ethiopian government’s resolve to fight the TPLF.

The Democratic Party and the TPLF leadership

Despite the State Department’s familiarity with the TPLF’s history and its motivation in instigating, prolonging, and escalating the armed conflict, why has the Biden administration taken a strong stand against the Ethiopian government? Three major factors explain the Biden administration’s belligerent attitude towards the Ethiopian government: the historical alliance between the US and the TPLF, the Biden administration’s desire to project to the world that the US as “a shining city on the hill”, and the Abiy’ government’s refusal to obey US orders.

The US has had a close relationship with the TPLF, especially with the Democratic Party, since the late 1980s when the TPLF was engaged in guerilla warfare against the military government in Ethiopia. The US played a key role in imposing the TPLF on the Ethiopian people in 1991. Once the TPLF came to power, the alliance between the TPLF and the US, under both Republican and Democratic administrations, flourished, despite the TPLF’s egregious violations of human rights in Ethiopia. The TPLF-controlled government received billions of dollars in US foreign aid.

President Obama declared that the 2015 election was democratic, an election in which the coalition of ethnic parties controlled by the TPLF won 100% of the parliamentary seats. In return for US diplomatic, economic, and political support the TPLF, the TPLF became an obedient executor of US foreign policy in Eritrea, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and other African countries. The TPLF was a reliable, subservient, subordinate “partner” for the US.

A contributing factor to the Biden administration’s anti-democratic position on Ethiopia is that some Obama officials who have supported the TPLF leaders in the past are currently working for the Biden administration. These officials include Susan Rice, the Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council; Wendy Sherman, the Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs; and Gayle Smith, the former USAID administrator, currently responsible for distributing COVID-19 vaccines globally.

When Meles Zenawi, the late autocrat of Ethiopia, died in 2012, Susan Rice praised him as a brilliant leader and “the father of modern Ethiopia” in her eulogy. Most Ethiopians would disagree with her characterization. In 2015, Wendy Sherman declared that “Ethiopia is a democracy,” even though Ethiopia had a brutal dictatorial regime that exiled, imprisoned, tortured, and killed its political opponents, as well as journalists, professors, civil society leaders, and demonstrators. Rice and Sherman did not appear to be too concerned about human rights violations in Ethiopia when the TPLF was in power, other than occasionally making perfunctory remarks about the respect for human rights. Gayle Smith has provided material, diplomatic, and moral support to the TPLF since the early 1980s.

It is reasonable to assume these former Obama administration officials, with their well-disposed stance towards the TPLF leadership, have influenced the Biden administration’s stand on the conflict in Tigray. The TPLF has friends in high places in the Biden administration and their influence is significant in both policy formation and media coverage

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about Ethiopia.

Foreign Aid as Leverage

Ethiopia, one of the least developed and highly foreign-aid dependent countries, is vulnerable to economic, diplomatic, and political pressure from aid donors. Ethiopia receives the second highest amount of US foreign aid in Africa, next to Egypt, in absolute terms. On a per capita basis, Ethiopia receives less aid than many countries in Africa. In 2019, Ethiopia received US \$923 million from the US, most of which was humanitarian aid. Ethiopia also obtains substantial aid from the EU, the United Kingdom, and other Western countries. Ethiopia has also borrowed extensively from the IMF, the World Bank, and private Western financial institutions.

Further, Ethiopia relies heavily on foreign aid for its budget, rendering it highly susceptible to pressure from aid donors like the US. About one-third of Ethiopia's budget is financed by foreign aid. Ethiopia's vulnerability is considerable, and it is this leverage that the Biden administration has exploited to pressure, undermine, and threaten the democratically elected government of Ethiopia.

There is also Samantha Power, the current Administrator of USAID who is a member of the US National Security Council. Just as she advocated the bombing of Libya, Syria, and Yugoslavia in the name of "defending human rights", she is now threatening Ethiopia by saying "all options are on the table" unless Ethiopia negotiates with the TPLF. She has condemned the Ethiopian government vociferously for violations of human rights and "ethnic cleansing" in Tigray on numerous occasions while remaining silent about the war crimes committed by the TPLF in the Amhara and Afar regions. War crimes are intolerable by any party; selective allegations of human rights abuses are the ultimate hypocrisy.

Behind the Biden administration's supposed worries about human rights lies Abiy Ahmed's refusal to obey US imperial orders on three important issues of concern for the US administration: accepting Egypt's demands regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) that Ethiopia is building on the Blue Nile, reducing Ethiopia's strong economic ties with China, and sharing power with the TPLF.

Egypt and Ethiopia have a dispute over the GERD, which, when completed will be the largest dam in Africa. Egypt is primarily concerned about how the GERD and Ethiopia's plan for its water resource development in the Nile basin would affect Egypt's access to the waters of the Blue Nile. Egypt has demanded that Ethiopia guarantee water supply, especially during extended drought periods, and that Ethiopia sign a binding agreement not to undertake any type of water resource development that would reduce the flow of water to Egypt from the Blue Nile. The Ethiopian government maintains that it understands these concerns and is willing to discuss, but will not allow a foreign government to dictate its national policy on water management and economic development.

Negotiations are underway, but the US government, starting with the Trump Administration, has supported Egypt's position, and insists that Ethiopia accommodate Egypt's demands. The US considers Egypt a strategically important ally in the Middle East. Ethiopia has rejected the US demand to accommodate Egypt's request since the demand undermines Ethiopia's economic development. Ethiopia has become a pawn in the U.S. administration's Middle Eastern policy.

China's Rising Influence

As is well known, the Biden administration is concerned about the rise of China as a rival superpower and its influence in Africa, including in Ethiopia. Since the 2000s, China has been active in building infrastructure in Ethiopia, as it has done elsewhere in Africa. Ethiopia is one of the countries that is participating in China's Belt and Road Initiative in which China has financed and developed an extensive network of railways and highways in Ethiopia.

Beginning from the early 2000s, China has become more influential economically in Ethiopia than the US. China is now the largest importer of Ethiopia's goods and services, while the US is third. China accounts for 60% of foreign direct investment in Ethiopia. Between 2000 and 2018 China lent Ethiopia \$US 13.7 billion and the US, \$US 9.2

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billion. Most of China's loans to Ethiopia have been allocated to infrastructure development while U.S. loans have been allocated mostly to the health and educational sectors .

China's involvement in Ethiopia is more visible to the Ethiopian public than that of America's. Chinese investment in Ethiopia is much higher than US investment; there are many more Chinese businesspeople, engineers, investors, and even ordinary workers who are involved in the economic transformation of Ethiopia than Americans. China's extensive influence in Ethiopia has worried the Biden administration.

In a futile attempt to reduce China's growing influence in Ethiopia and the rest of the African continent, the U S has demanded that the Ethiopian government reduce its economic ties with China, according to an Ethiopian government official. Considering China's rising economic, military, and political power in the world, the Ethiopian government is justified in rejecting the US demand that Ethiopia reduce its economic ties with China. To obtain the most benefit from the two major economic powers, Ethiopia, like most of the African countries, would like to maintain a good relationship with both the US and China. It is not in the best interest of Ethiopia to reduce its economic ties with China or to become more dependent on the US, but the attempt by the Biden administration to undermine the Abiy government has in fact pushed Ethiopia even closer to China than ever before.

The Biden administration insists that the Ethiopian government negotiate with the TPLF on an equal basis, but the Ethiopian government contends that it cannot negotiate with a terrorist organization that is engaged in the violent overthrow of the democratically elected government and is committed to the destruction of Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government maintains that it is within its sovereign right to decide with which political party it can negotiate; the US has no business in insisting that the Ethiopian government negotiate with the TPLF, any more than China has the right to tell the US government that it should negotiate with the Proud Boy.

Human Rights Violation as a Pretext

The refusal of the Ethiopian government to heed US demands has angered the Biden Administration. Its diplomatic maneuvers in Africa, the EU, the UN, and among its allies; its punitive measures, and its incessant threats against the Ethiopian government is nothing but retaliation for disobedience and has little to do with human rights violations in Ethiopia.

The US has been conspicuously silent about the war crimes of the TPLF. If indeed the Biden administration were genuinely concerned about human rights violations in Ethiopia, it would have condemned the TPLF's war crimes in the Amhara and Afar regions, but the US is tolerating TPLF human right abuses as it has always tolerated abuses by its allies in developing countries. Its silence has led many Ethiopians to conclude that the US is ethnically biased and that its selective condemnation of human rights violations in Ethiopia rings hollow and exposes its real motivation: punishment for disobedience.

Some US commentators and politicians have suggested that the US send peacekeepers to Tigray or establish a no fly zone in Ethiopia. James Stavridis, a retired U S Admiral and former supreme allied commander of NATO, wrote an opinion piece advocating US military intervention in Ethiopia. It is most unlikely that the US will intervene militarily in Ethiopia, but until the military confrontation with the TPLF is over, the US seems resolute in pressuring the Ethiopian government.

Just as the US destabilized Libya by its military intervention and by supporting Saudi Arabia's military adventure in Yemen, the Biden administrations appears determined to destabilize Ethiopia by backing the TPLF, regardless of the adverse consequences of its misguided policy for Ethiopia, for the Horn of Africa, and even for US long-term strategic interest in the region. It seems that the Biden administration hasn't learned from US misadventures in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, and seems ready to repeat the same mistake in Ethiopia.

By supporting the TPLF, the Biden administration has alienated the majority of the Ethiopian people, both in Ethiopia and in the diaspora. In Ethiopia, the favourable public opinion towards the US is the lowest it has ever been, but by contrast support for China has reached its highest level, primarily because of China's refusal to impose economic

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and military sanctions on Ethiopia by the UN Security Council, as proposed by the US and its allies.

Ethio-Americans are upset with the Biden administration and have abandoned the Democratic Party in droves; many have decided to vote for the Republican Party for the first time. The Ethiopian diaspora in the US, albeit numerically small, can be politically crucial. In the states where Biden won by a narrow margin such as in Georgia, Michigan, and Nevada, Ethiopian immigrants could play a decisive role in whether the Democratic Party retains its majority in the House and in the Senate in the 2022 mid-term elections. As the recent victory of the Republican candidate in the gubernatorial race in Virginia indicated, many Ethio-Americans switched their support to the Republican Party. That should be a clear warning for the Democratic Party.

The US government should realize that the Ethiopian people will not allow the TPLF to come to power again, on its own or as a member of a transitional government. The US should note that the millions of people are currently demonstrating against the TPLF throughout Ethiopia. The US attempt to impose the TPLF on the people of Ethiopia once again, in one form or another, is an anti-democratic fruitless exercise. US support for the TPLF can only prolong the destruction, the bloodshed, and the suffering of innocent Ethiopians while damaging the international reputation of the US as a defender of democracy. The sooner the US realizes this fact, the better it is for all concerned.

About the author:

Worku Aberra (PhD) is a professor of Economics at Dawson College in Montreal, Canada. His research interests lie in the fields of child labor and regional economic integration.