

Why the European Union (EU) Should Take a Principled Position in Ethiopia

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“For 60 years, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy here in the Middle East-and we have achieved neither...Now we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people.” Cairo, Egypt

Condoleezza Rice, Former National Security Advisor under George Bush

The same is true for Ethiopia and the rest of Africa. Western donors and the diplomatic community have achieved “neither democracy nor stability” in Ethiopia and the rest of Africa. Nor have these pillars of support that bank roll repressive regimes helped African societies establish sustainable and equitable growth. This is especially the case in Ethiopia, a darling of the donor community for more than a quarter of a century. It is illusory for the EU and other donors to think that Ethiopia is stable and prospering. I wish both were true and real. You don't need to declare a 6 month State of Emergency and extend it by 4 months unless you figure that you are incapable of addressing the root causes of popular revolts in Oromia, Oromo and Konso that emboldened and mobilized millions.

The EU is among Ethiopia's largest multilateral donors and thus possesses ample leverage to advance the democratization process. However, leverage requires political will and a steadfast commitment to fundamental democratic values. So far, the EU has failed in critical areas that matter most to the lives of Ethiopia's 104 million people.

My thesis is this. After 26 years of massive Western bilateral and multilateral aid that now exceeds \$40 billion; and tens of billions more in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Diaspora remittances, Ethiopia is still among the poorest and least developed countries on the planet. It is also food aid dependent. This reality on the ground is not because of the notion that the country is not endowed with enormous natural and human resources capital. It is. It is not because Ethiopians are lazy and unwilling to change their lives for the better. Ethiopians are among the hardest working people in the world. It is not because of climate change and the vagaries of weather. Most countries are affected by climate change and seasonal and periodic environmental changes in rainfall etc. It is primarily because democratic institutions that empower people to prosper do not exist. Ethiopia's **politics and economics are essentially captured by** ethnic elites. The cost of entry into this club is high and unattainable. The population is among the most repressed, crushed and dispirited in the world.

In development, what matters in creating resiliency that can withstand the quirks and vagaries of natural phenomenon is freedom and empowerment; and a competent, nationally-oriented, people-centered, pro-poor, pro-youth, pro-women, pro-indigenous private sector and empowering government and leadership that do not crush, steal or waste human and financial capital. Such governance creates a regulatory framework that enables rather than crushes freedom; and debilitates human potential, creativity and innovation.

Following the 2005 flawed elections that crushed the democratic hopes and aspirations of the vast majority of the Ethiopian people, the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi gave a “Millennium” speech worth repeating even if we do not agree with the many things he and his

party stood for including the establishment of an ethnic and linguistic based federal system that works against national cohesion and shared prosperity. In 2007, Meles offered a national rather than an ethnic narrative in political economy.

While we can justly be proud of the fact that every generation of Ethiopians during those centuries have paid in blood to maintain our independence, we cannot but feel deeply insulted that at the dawn of the new millennium ours is one of the poorest countries in the world. Over the course of our second millennium we have gone from being one of the most advanced nations on earth to that of being one of the poorest. Throughout this process we have not been colonized by any foreign nations and hence we have always been the authors of our destiny, both our successes and failures.”

This subscription to a “proud” and glorious past; and rebuke of a miserable, poverty ridden, technologically and materially crushing, demoralizing and dependency prone present begs a rational explanation. Did Ethiopia follow a developmental model that empowers the population and expands employment opportunities and stimulates sustainable and equitable growth or did Ethiopia’s rulers follow a top-down or trickle down developmental state model that transfers wealth from the poor to the new political elite? It followed the later. So did donors. A country that prides itself in not “being colonized by any foreign nations” is now facing hurdles that deter Ethiopians from being, to use Meles’ term, the “authors of their own destiny.” You can’t control your own destiny if you beg for food aid.

I say this because Ethiopia is more dependent on foreign aid today than at any other time in its long and distinguished, albeit, poverty-ridden history. The development model is exclusionary rather than participatory. The donor community, especially the EU does not seem to care. The reason is this. Its primary community and national interests and goals are well served. For example, the EU was persuaded that the avalanche of migration from the Horn of Africa to Europe can and must be reduced if not stopped by financing the Addis Ababa regime that hosts hundreds of thousands of refugees from Eritrea, Sudan and Somalia. By definition, a country that can’t feed itself cannot feed hundreds of thousands of refugees unless there is a political and diplomatic reason behind the generosity. The EU failed to recognize that each year, thousands of Ethiopians are pushed out of Ethiopia because of repression and lack of employment opportunities. Thousands are housed in refugee camps in Yemen, Kenya and other locations.

The trade-off the EU has in mind lacks human concern and development logic. Why should Ethiopians pay an enormous price to stem the tide of migration from the Horn to the EU while the EU leaves policy and structural governance hurdles untouched in Ethiopia?

Even if we find logic to the trade-off on containing African migrants to Europe, there are two other critical areas on which the EU has failed:

- 1.It has failed to help deepen and broaden sustainable and equitable development using its largesse. The famous Provision of Public Basic Services (PBS) multi-donor program initiated by the World Bank following the 2005 elections has done little to change the structure of the rural economy. PBS is another form of transfer from tax payers to the regime. It does not empower the poor. It has done little to make the country food self-sufficient and resilient.

2. It has abandoned to commit itself to the fundamental values that distinguish Western democracies from dictatorships: **freedom of the press, association and assembly, the rule of law**, fair and free elections, a vibrant civil society and a competitive indigenous private sector.

The policy argument that donors cannot apply conditionality is no longer credible. The notion that Ethiopia is more stable than its neighbors and that the repressive regime in power is an ally of the West against terrorism and extremism had outlived its utility function. By all accounts, Ethiopia is more repressive, conflict-ridden, corrupt and unstable today than it was when Meles spoke almost ten years ago. When Forbes Magazine chastises both the ruling elite in Ethiopia and the government of the United States whose entire aid of “\$30 billion was stolen and taken out of the country illicitly” by thieves of state and non-state allies, both the US and the EU fail to exercise moral authority by not asking themselves if their largesse is making a difference to the lives of the vast majority of Ethiopians?

Where there is no accountability, aid is not effective.

Is there any form of political accountability on the part of the EU leadership or is accountability less important because Ethiopian lives matter less than the lives of others? Or is the EU telling the Ethiopian people that it has no power to exercise conditionality? Let me accept that it cannot impose conditions on the regime even if it wants to do so. Certainly, the regime cannot force the EU to provide aid. Allocation of aid is the prerogative of the EU leadership and not of elites in Addis Ababa.

As a consequence of non-accountability and no transparency on how aid is used, billions of tax payer monies have ended-up in the pockets of a narrow band of political elites who have become instant millionaires. Billions of dollars have been siphoned-off and deposited or invested abroad by a **band of state and non-state thieves** abroad. The EU and other donors cannot make a compelling argument that a bulk of their tax payer monies do not contribute to this massive theft and illicit outflow of funds from one of the poorest countries in the world; while shoring one party dictatorship for a quarter of a century.

The EU and other donors cannot make a meaningful argument against the truth on the ground that their tax-payer monies serve as one of the **pillars of a brutal regime** that kills, maims, imprisons, forcibly evicts, pits one ethnic group against another to prolong its own life; and impoverishes millions of Ethiopians by grabbing their lands and dispossessing them. It is this same regime they bankroll that rejects a request from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to investigate massive killings in the Oromia and Amhara regions. How low a threshold does the EU want?

The EU and other donors fail to pose at least one critical question to a regime that takes their monies but refuses to hold any public official accountable for theft and repression. Why does Ethiopia continue to suffer from recurrent debilitating droughts? Is this not inexplicable?

On May 4, 2017, the Washington Post wrote “**Ethiopia is facing a killer drought. But, it is going almost unnoticed.**” The UN had earlier reported that 20 million people faced the prospect of starvation in Nigeria, South Sudan, Somalia and Yemen but did not mention Ethiopia. “Yet, as donors struggle to meet the severe needs in the war-torn nations of Nigeria, South Sudan, Somalia and Yemen, another crisis, more environmental in nature, is taking place nearby—nearly unnoticed.”

No donor agency that I know of including the EU asked the question of why Ethiopia’s looming catastrophe went “unnoticed? Ethiopians abroad have been mobilizing funds in support of famine-victims in the Ogaden and other localities. The reason the drought induced famine goes “unnoticed” by the global community is because of Ethiopia’s State of Emergency proclamation and severe restrictions on independent reporting. The donor community has a huge presence in Ethiopia; but fails to look.

The problem is donor representatives do not go out to the rural areas where human suffering is most pronounced. In Chad and Cameroon and other countries where I had the privilege of working, I had observed that the donor community lived a sheltered and privileged life often distancing itself from the poor it was supposed to understand and help. It is tragic that the poor are the reason for this opulence and luxury.

As the Post article confirmed, the number of victims of the “killer drought” in Ethiopia keeps rising, from “5.5 million to 7.7 million. The figure is expected to rise further as Southeast Ethiopia confronts another fierce drought....There could eventually be as many people in Ethiopia needing emergency food assistance as in Somalia and South Sudan combined.” The best estimate is that Ethiopia needs \$1 billion “to confront the crisis.” To its credit, the government of Ethiopia has allocated \$400 million to the famine effort.

However, the bottom line is this. After 26 years of massive EU, the World Bank and other multilateral and bilateral aid later, Ethiopia is unable to feed itself. The donor community failed to anticipate recurrent famine, push for substantial investments in land reform and rehabilitation, investments in smallholder ownership and productivity, irrigated farming, alternative employment generating activities etc.

While I subscribe to the notion that humanitarian aid saves lives, aid is not the panacea or medicine that changes the structure of any economy in a meaningful and substantial way.

As Human Rights Watch put it succinctly and boldly, unconditional aid granted to a repressive and corrupt regime serves as a critical pillar to repress rather than to advance human development. In “[Ethiopia: Donor Aid Supports Repression](#) | Human Rights Watch confirmed that EU and other foreign aid is used by the Ethiopian regime to suppress and exclude the political opposition including farmers and pastoralists.

The EU’s continued support to the Addis Ababa regime is self-serving. It is therefore time for the EU leadership to question the moral and or value compass that guides it to support a command economy that serves a narrow band of elites or thieves of state and non-state actors while maintaining an economic structure that keeps the poorest of the poor trapped in a cycle of poverty. Ethiopians deserve better than platitudes.