

Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed: From Poster-boy of the West to Poster-boy of the Left

By [John Young](#)

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From both his public statements and the view of many on the global left, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is not only fighting Tigrayan 'terrorists' but also fending off a neo-colonial West that wants to undermine Ethiopia's sovereignty. But the problem with portraying Abiy as a valiant African fighter against Western neo-colonialism is that only recently he was a poster-boy of the Western establishment.

There is no higher Western endorsement than Abiy's award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for making peace with Eritrea, a validation that puts him in the same company as Henry Kissinger and Barak Obama. Abiy's international status was further confirmed by being named African of the Year in 2018, one of Time's 100 Most Influential People, and one of Foreign Policy's 100 Global Thinkers in 2019. It thus beggars' belief that a person who has received some of the highest accolades of the West can pass himself off as an anti-imperialist opponent of the West.

Abiy's past did not give any indication of democratic values or opposition to the West. He served in the former Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government as a lieutenant-colonel in the intelligence services where he founded and led the Information Network Security Agency. This agency targeted diaspora-based dissidents with sophisticated intrusion and surveillance software which led to the arrest of many journalists, politicians, and activists who were subsequently charged with treason and terrorism. In 2015 he was appointed a minister.

After becoming prime minister in late 2018, Abiy announced that the EPRDF developmental state which had produced growth rates of 9.3% a year between 1999 and 2019 according to the World Bank would end, and a new commitment to the market would begin. He then announced a major privatization program and rejected the EPRDF's opposition to neo-liberalism. And contrary to the EPRDF's refusal to take out international loans on its signature development project, the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, the largest dam in Africa, so as not to be blackmailed by the IMF, Abiy has gone to the international money markets to pay for the dam.



These actions should have been red flags for leftists, but Abiy's other policies were more alarming. Although self-identifying as an Oromo, a people who have long supported local control if not outright secession, Abiy is opposed to the EPRDF's national federalism and supports a return to centralized administration. National federalism had its faults, but it held together the polyglot of peoples who have never easily fit within Ethiopia. Indeed, Tigray and Oromia might well have seceded from Ethiopia in 1991 when the ruling military cabal was overthrown were it not for the EPRDF commitment to radically devolve powers to local governments. The same uneasy fit led Eritreans to vote overwhelmingly in a 1993 referendum to secede from Ethiopia.

As bad as Abiy's centralized Ethiopia is, its inspiration in the capture of much of what now constitutes Ethiopia in the late nineteenth century by Emperor Menelik II. Menelik made slaves of some of those he brought into his empire, sent armed Amhara backed up by the national army to enforce his rule, and was the lone African ruler to compete with Europeans in the scramble for Africa. The Amhara empire of Menelik and his successors is still a source of pain for many Ethiopians.

Tigrayans became alarmed when Abiy began claiming that EPRDF rule was an unambiguous dark period in the history of Ethiopia in which the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) – who Abiy and people close to him called daylight hyenas, a cancer, and weeds – had imposed its authoritarian will on the country for the sole benefit of Tigrayans. Moreover, the routine characterization by Abiy and the global left of the TPLF as 'terrorist' should logically also be applied to the entire Tigrayan people since they are collectively wedded to the Front. And that raises comparisons to the pre-genocide period in Rwanda. The subsequent invasion of Tigray in November 2020 and holding tens of thousands of Tigrayan citizens in concentration camps further stoked those fears.

Equally alarming is the backstory to Abiy's Nobel Peace Prize for making peace with Eritrea. Normally both parties that make peace, Abiy, and his Eritrean counterpart, President Isais Aferwerki, would be awarded the peace prize. But Isais is the leader of a country which has never held elections since independence in 1993 and does not allow opposition political

parties or a non-government media. The regime forces youth from age 14 to complete schooling in a military camp before they are inducted into the army for an indefinite period. Forced conscription has led many young Eritreans to risk their lives to escape the country and cross the Mediterranean to Europe.

Integral to the many secret meetings between Abiy and Isais that produced the Ethiopia-Eritrea peace agreement was the long planned joint attack on Tigray. Simultaneous with the Abiy and the Amhara militias' attack on Tigray on 4 November 2020, US election day, the Eritrean army crossed the border at multiple points and continues to occupy western Tigray and other parts of Ethiopia. According to Abiy the attack on Tigray was because the TPLF took over the northern army's camp on 3 November, but it begs the question of how the forces of Abiy, Isais, the Amhara militias, and even a component from Somalia, could be mobilized within a few hours to launch their attack? More plausible is that the TPLF knew that invading forces were on Tigray's border and launched a pre-emptive raid on the army camp.

Since Abiy is no fighter for African sovereignty, why do many on the left assume that he is? It is primarily due to ignorance of actual conditions in Ethiopia, appreciation of an African leader speaking out against neo-colonialism, and fall back to a view that the enemy of my enemy is my friend based on a misunderstanding of the positions of the West versus Russia and China.

The US and many countries are aghast at the disaster Abiy has created, but that does not mean they support the TPLF. Indeed, why would the US support the TPLF which pursued statist policies and viewed liberal democracy as inappropriate for Ethiopia when in government in contrast to Abiy's privatization of the economy and espousal of Western democracy? Why would the West support the TPLF when in its quest for national self-determination for Tigray and support for disaffected Oromos could bring about the dissolution of Ethiopia? And against the background of the US military humiliation in neighbouring Somalia in 1993, is it believable that the US could impose its will on Ethiopia with ten times the population? The US is a world power in decline and what is most significant about US engagement in Ethiopia isn't its interference, but its impotence and the growing role of neighbouring Middle Eastern states.

Russia and China have blocked efforts by the US and other members of the Security Council to demand that Eritrean troops leave Ethiopia and Abiy be condemned for his humanitarian aid blockade. But instead of viewing the Russian and Chinese position on the Ethiopian conflict as matters of principle, it is better to understand their positions as reflecting national interests. China is the largest investor in Ethiopia, has lent Ethiopia \$14 billion, Ethiopia serves as a hub for the Belt and Road Initiative, and when confronted with an independent minded Taiwan, China emphasizes its commitment to a stabilizing central government.

What the left gets wrong in Ethiopia is to attribute the potential dissolution of Ethiopia to the TPLF and its Oromo allies and instead of to the policies of Abiy Ahmed.

John Young is the author of Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: Tigray Liberation Front 1975 to 1991 (Cambridge University Press, 1998), books on Sudan and South Sudan (2012 and 2019) and numerous articles on the Horn, the Sudan uprising and Sudan-Ethiopia relations.

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