



## Ethiopia: An Overview

Ethiopia is Africa's second most populous country and its oldest independent state. The United States considers the Ethiopian government to be an important development and regional security partner, but also a source of concern regarding human rights and democracy. Good relations with the United States are rooted in cooperation on efforts to counter terrorism and respond to instability in the volatile Horn of Africa region, and on shared efforts to alleviate Ethiopia's endemic poverty. The country has been plagued by frequent drought and chronic food insecurity and is one of the largest recipients of U.S. foreign aid, primarily in the form of health, food, and other humanitarian assistance.

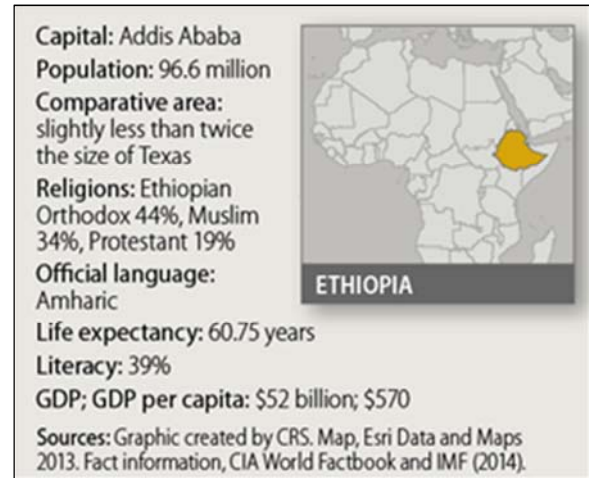
Ethiopia plays a key leadership role in the region and on the continent. It hosts the African Union (AU) and contributes significant numbers of troops to U.N. peacekeeping operations. Ethiopian peacekeepers play a critical role along the volatile Sudan-South Sudan border and in the U.N. Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). Ethiopian forces also play a critical role in efforts to counter the Al Qaeda-linked terrorist group Al Shabaab in Somalia. As a member of the East Africa regional body known as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Ethiopia hosts various peace negotiations, including the ongoing dialogue between the governments of Sudan and South Sudan and talks between Sudan and its armed opposition groups. An Ethiopian diplomat is the lead mediator for talks between the opposing sides of South Sudan's civil war.

### Background

Ethiopia is one of only two African countries to have avoided colonial rule, and the diplomatic relationship between the United States and Ethiopia dates back more than one hundred years. In the past century, Ethiopia's politics have been largely dominated by three leaders. Emperor Haile Selassie ruled from 1930 to 1974, when he was deposed by a socialist military junta known as the Derg. The Derg was accused of massive human rights abuses (dubbed the "Red Terror"), and of ignoring a famine that caused hundreds of thousands of deaths. An army officer, Mengistu Haile Mariam, became head of state at the helm of the Derg in 1977. In 1989, several ethnically based opposition groups merged to form the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Front (EPRDF), and in 1991 they overthrew the Derg and Mengistu, who fled to Zimbabwe, where he remains in exile. The EPRDF allowed Eritreans to vote on secession, a key demand of the Eritrean faction of the anti-Derg struggle, leading to Eritrean independence in 1993.

EPRDF leader Meles Zenawi served as President of Ethiopia and then as Prime Minister from 1991 until his death in 2012. He was considered a powerful figure in both Ethiopian and regional politics. Meles was widely credited with spearheading the economic reforms that have made

Figure 1. Ethiopia: Key Facts



Ethiopia one of Africa's fastest growing economies. As leader of both the EPRDF, an alliance of four ethno-regional parties, and one of its components, the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), however, he also was accused by critics of stifling dissent and ensuring that his minority Tigrayan ethnic group dominated the government.

### Current Political Issues

Hailemariam Desalegn (deh-sah-LEEN) became Prime Minister in 2012, after Meles' death. As a Protestant, he is Ethiopia's first non-Ethiopian-Orthodox head of state, and is from a small ethnic group, the Wolayta. Hailemariam was also elected chairman of the EPRDF coalition. In 2013, the EPRDF-dominated parliament elected Mulatu Teshome Wirtu as President, a largely ceremonial post.

Despite regular elections, Ethiopia's tradition of authoritarian rule continues to impede participatory democracy. The EPRDF has dominated successive elections since 1995. Elections in 2005—in which the opposition had been expected to make significant gains—were marred by violence, as the government responded to post-election protests by detaining thousands of opposition members, journalists, and civic activists. An estimated 200 people were reportedly killed by security forces during the protests, and top opposition leaders were put on trial. The disputed elections led to a broader tightening of democratic space as the EPRDF reconsolidated control. Opposition parties boycotted local and by-elections held in 2008. Elections in 2010, won by the EPRDF with 99.6% of the vote, were generally peaceful, but the electoral environment did not meet international standards of fairness, according to U.S. and European election monitors and governments. The EPRDF is widely expected to again dominate the next parliamentary elections, scheduled for May 24.

Critics contend that the EPRDF has stifled dissent through laws and electoral regulations that give the coalition a significant advantage. Two laws enacted in 2009 have heightened concern about the government's intentions with respect to democratic space. The Charities and Societies Proclamation created stringent reporting requirements and government oversight for civil society organizations; it limits foreign funding and prohibits anonymous donations. The Anti-Terrorism Proclamation is criticized for its expansive definition of terrorism, harsh penalties, flexible rules for evidence, and the broad legal authority it grants to police and security forces. Opposition leaders, activists, and journalists have been imprisoned on national security charges, amid concerns of torture and ill-treatment in detention facilities. Ethiopia has the largest number of imprisoned journalists and bloggers in sub-Saharan Africa and ranks fourth on the Committee to Protect Journalists' list of most censored countries in the world.

Ethiopian Muslims, who make up about a third of the population, have staged protests in recent years in response to perceived government interference in Muslim religious affairs. The government has responded by detaining protestors and charging some under the anti-terrorism law.

## Security Concerns

Instability in neighboring Somalia has contributed to Ethiopia's security concerns, and Ethiopia has repeatedly intervened there militarily. Ethiopian troops deployed to Somalia in 2006 to oust a network of Islamist court militias that had seized control of the Somali capital. This led to a prolonged military engagement against one of the militias, Al Shabaab, and other insurgents. Ethiopian forces officially pulled out in early 2009 after the U.N.-mandated African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) was established, but periodic Ethiopian incursions continued, and Ethiopia has reportedly provided support to Somali armed factions. Ethiopia joined AMISOM in January 2014.

Aside from Somalia, the Ethiopian government's main strategic concern has been its antagonistic relationship with Eritrea, which seceded from Ethiopia in 1993. The two countries fought a border war in the late 1990s, and parts of the border remain in dispute. Both governments have accused one another of backing rebels in their respective countries. Ethiopia also faces several simmering domestic insurgencies, including in the Ogaden area near the Somali border, which has a significant population of ethnic Somalis. The security forces have been accused of committing serious human rights abuses in the context of their counterinsurgency efforts in the Ogaden.

## The Economy

The economy has grown on average over 10% per year in the past decade, almost double the regional average. Yet per capita income remains among the world's lowest. Structural challenges include a growing "youth bulge" and high unemployment. Development indicators, including high rates of birth and infant mortality, low literacy levels, and a short life expectancy, are poor, but improving.

Agriculture composes almost half of GDP and 85% of employment. Coffee is the largest export. The government

has sought to transform the economy through controversial projects to lease large swaths of agricultural land to foreign investors and create new infrastructure for electricity production. The government argues that the land leases bring in critical foreign investment and large-scale agricultural production that will spur economic growth and improve living standards. However, such leases have also displaced Ethiopian farmers. Officially, the relocations are under a separate, nominally voluntary program known as "villagization," through which the state seeks to better serve the health, education, and infrastructure needs of rural populations by grouping them close together. Human rights groups contend that the displacements are forced and are driven by the commercial value of the land.

Concerns have also been raised about forced relocations and potential negative environmental impacts related to hydroelectric projects, notably the Gibe III and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance dams. The latter, expected to be finished in 2017, would be Africa's largest power project and, the Ethiopian government argues, will enable Ethiopia to sell excess electricity to its neighbors, strengthening regional development. The dam has been a source of contention with Egypt, which is concerned that the dam could divert a critical water supply on which Egypt relies.

## U.S. Policy and Foreign Assistance

Given regional volatility, Ethiopia's size, and its susceptibility to food insecurity, the United States has identified Ethiopia's stability and prosperity as key priorities for U.S. engagement. The State Department describes economic growth and development; democracy, governance and human rights; and regional peace and security as the three pillars of the bilateral relationship. However, little U.S. aid is provided for democracy promotion, and U.S. concerns about Ethiopian restrictions on political and human rights complicate diplomatic engagement and security cooperation. Undersecretary of State Wendy Sherman drew criticism from advocacy groups in April 2015 when she declared that "Ethiopia is a democracy that is moving forward in an election that we expect to be free, fair and credible." Congress, while appropriating funding for Ethiopia's sizable aid package, which is one of the largest in Africa, has conditioned some security assistance based on human rights concerns.

Bilateral aid, most of it directed to development, health, and food aid programs, totaled more than \$580 million in FY2014. The United States has provided more than \$356 million in humanitarian aid in FY2014 and FY2015. The State Department's request for \$404 million for FY2016 does not include food aid, which is allocated during the year according to need. The Obama Administration's Feed the Future initiative supports Ethiopia's food security strategy to reduce hunger, improve nutrition, and promote broad-based economic growth. Ethiopia is also a participant in U.S. regional programs to counter terrorism and promote African peacekeeping deployments.

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