

Ethiopia Overview

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Environment

Ethiopia is located in the north-eastern extension of Africa known as the Horn. It is bordered by [Eritrea](#), [Somalia](#), [Djibouti](#), [Kenya](#) and [Sudan](#). Ethiopia features geographic diversity: from highland plateaus and mountains, to the Great Rift Valley and arid lowland steppes. The area's susceptibility to drought and soil erosion has been worsened by widespread deforestation over the past century.

Peoples

Main languages: Amharic (official), Tigrinya, Oromo, Afar, Sidama, Somali

Main religions: Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, Protestant Christianity, Islam, indigenous beliefs

Minority groups include [Oromo](#) 24.5 million, Amhara 23 million, [Somalis](#) 4.6 million, Tigrayan 4.6 million, Berta 4.6 million, Gurage 3.1 million, Sidama 2.3 million, Wolaita 1.5 million, [Afar](#) 1.5 million, Hadiva 1.5 million, Gamo 765,000, Gedeo 690,000, [Anuak](#) 46,000, Hamar and Banna 43,000, Burji 36,000 and Adare (Harari) 21,000 (1994 Census; 1994 Government Population figures 67.9 million)

More than 80 languages are spoken, with the greatest diversity found in the south-west. Amharic (a Semitic language), Oromo, Tigrinya and Somali are spoken by two-thirds of the population. About 40 per cent of the population adheres to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and 33 per cent to Islam. The remainder are Protestant, Roman Catholic or followers of traditional religions. Historically the Semitic, Amhara and Tigray peoples of the northern highlands have dominated political life in the region. They are largely Orthodox Christians, while most Muslims and followers of indigenous beliefs tend to live in lowland areas in the country's south and east.

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History

The earliest humans evolved in parts of what is today Ethiopia. Ethiopians are proud of their history of empire - in the ninth century BC, the Kingdom of Axum (centred in present-day northern Ethiopia) dominated the region stretching into Yemen and Somalia - and of resistance to domination by others.

Ethiopia was never colonized. In 1896, it defeated Italy in war, six years after the Italians had established a colony in neighbouring Eritrea. In 1936, the Italians tried again, capturing Addis Ababa and ruled Ethiopia as part of Italian East Africa, together with Eritrea and Italian Somaliland. But their rule was short-lived, and in 1941 Ethiopian resistance fighters joined British and Commonwealth forces to restore Emperor Haile Selassie to the throne.

Britain recognized Ethiopia's full sovereignty in 1944, and in the following year Eritrea became a protectorate of the United Nations. In 1950 the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for Eritrean autonomy and legislative, executive and judicial authority over its own domestic affairs with all other matters falling under federal, Ethiopian jurisdiction. In September 1952, after a two-year interim period, Eritrea became a semi-autonomous self-governing territory in confederation with Ethiopia. The Haile Selassie regime gradually encroached on Eritrean rule, however, and in 1962 rendered it an Ethiopian province like any other.

From his restoration in 1941 until his fall in 1974, Haile Selassie strove to undermine the identities of non-Amhara nations and nationalities in the name of Ethiopian unity, continuing the subjugation of the south established by his predecessors' imperial conquest. Amharic and Amhara culture became the essential attributes of being Ethiopian. As a result, peoples of the south in particular suffered comprehensive domination - economically, politically and culturally. From 1969, the Ethiopian government also faced a strong armed separatist movement in Eritrea. For much of the population, a sense of Ethiopian identity may never have been stronger, but Selassie's methods were sowing the seeds for ethnic discord.

While Haile Selassie and his court lived lavishly, his autocratic rule brought only economic ruin to Ethiopia. In the drought of 1973 and 1974, the out-of-touch emperor sat idly while some 250,000 Ethiopians perished in the northern province of Wallo. Many of the victims were Wolloyea Amharas, Tigrayans, Afars and Oromo. During these Cold War years, Haile Selassie enjoyed the strong support of the United States and its western allies. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, domestic opposition to Selassie took the form of pro-Soviet Marxism-Leninism.

The Dergue

Students and the military revolted in 1974; a military junta - the Dergue - came to power, led by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. Mengistu consolidated his control to become Ethiopian head of state in 1977. He launched a brutal offensive - known as the 'Red Terror' - against government opponents, including rival Marxists, as well as a catastrophic programme of forced collectivization and resettlement.

The military dictatorship sought to maintain the imperial state and to modernize and secularize the country by first breaking down the social and economic power of the Church and landed aristocracy. But the breakdown of authority and erosion of the social institutions on which it had rested encouraged the proliferation of regional nationalism directed against the central government in Addis Ababa. The Dergue sought to purge all members suspected of harbouring ethnic loyalties, mainly Eritreans. It recognized the right of all nationalities to a form of self-determination, defined not as a right to secession but as regional autonomy. A Somali invasion in 1977 put a quick end to even this concession.

After the Ogaden War against the Somalis in 1978, Mengistu exploited clan differences between the two largest dissident pastoral communities, Somalis and Afars. A third, smaller group, the Boran in Sidamo, were driven into the arms of the Dergue by opposition to Somali expansion. The largest ethnic group, the Oromo, also failed to create an effective national movement despite a history of ethnically based rebellion and the existence of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). Other local peoples of the south, such as Gurage and Sidama, also wanted to create separate states, but the complicated patterns of residence

would make the drawing of boundaries an insoluble problem.

Mengistu's fall

Like Haile Selassie before him, Mengistu proved uninterested in acting to mitigate drought-induced famine. In 1984-5, hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians perished as the government instead focused energy and resources on the military campaign against the growing Tigrayan and Eritrean separatist movements. In 1989 a shift occurred in the power balance due to the Eritrean People's Liberation Front's (EPLF) defeat of the Dergue army at Afabet, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front's (TPLF) capture of Mekelle, the low morale of a largely conscript and increasingly teenage Ethiopian army, and an abortive military coup. These factors coincided with the end of the Cold War and, in 1991, the end of Soviet arms shipments to the Mengistu regime. In May 1991 the EPLF took control of Eritrea and, one day after Asmara's fall, the TPLF entered Addis Ababa with the assistance of Eritrean tanks and soldiers. Mengistu fled to Zimbabwe.

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TPLF in power

Meles Zenawi, the TPLF leader, set about organizing the state as an ethnic federation. This was done by ensuring that parties dominated by the TPLF and their allies controlled the political life of each nationality. These co-opted representatives of other ethnicities were organized under a single-party umbrella: the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). This proved a particularly difficult undertaking as Tigrayans comprise only around 6 per cent of the Ethiopian population.

After 1991, EPRDF government forces took control in all rural areas, with few exceptions, putting EPRDF parties in positions of administrative power. Initially offering cooperation with the other liberation movements, the issues of nationality and landownership remained contested and gradually groups other than the TPLF were eased out of the transitional government. There was considerable opposition to EPRDF policies. The government countered with administrative techniques as a weapon of regulation and discipline. In the 1992 elections the EPRDF controlled the electoral commission and allegedly prevented the registration of opposition candidates. That same year, the EPRDF used military force to subdue an uprising by the secessionist OLF, which had been shut out of the political process.

Afar, Oromo, Sidama and Somalis supported secessionism, while the All Amhara People's Organization and other groups opposed the break-up of the nation state. Many Ethiopians disliked the idea of splitting the country along ethnic lines, and yearned for the kind of unity that had been established under the Amharic emperors Menelik and Selassie. Eritrea's move towards independence in 1993 (see entry on [Eritrea](#)), increased the burden on Meles and his government to square demands for greater ethnic and regional autonomy with the resentment that Eritrea's departure caused those favouring unity. The EPRDF was poorly equipped to handle this challenge, both due to its base in the small ethnic Tigrayan community and its rigidity in governing style. Meles had abandoned Marxist-Leninist ideology, but maintained the authoritarianism with which he had espoused it.

Eritrean-Ethiopian border war

Meles quickly fell out with erstwhile EPLF ally and Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki. Clashing personalities sharpened disputes over Ethiopian access to Eritrean ports, the price of Eritrean refined oil to the Ethiopian market, and Ethiopia's refusal to conduct trade in Eritrea's new currency. Facing resentment over Tigrayan dominance in Ethiopia, Meles took a hard line against Eritrea, rallying

Amhara and other peoples within Ethiopia who were bitter over its loss.

Border tensions developed in late 1997, and in May 1998, Eritrean and Ethiopian border patrols clashed in the desert, at the disputed town of Badme. To the surprise of many in the international community, the conflict rapidly escalated into mutual bombing campaigns and trench warfare. Ethiopia expelled 77,000 Eritreans from its territory, and the fighting displaced hundreds of thousands more at various points during the conflict. By the time Ethiopian forces broke through the Eritrean lines and the conflict ended in 2000 with the Algiers Agreement, some 100,000 Ethiopians and Eritreans had been killed. The agreement led to the deployment of UN peacekeepers and the establishment of a border demarcation commission. The commission ruled in 2003 that Badme lies in Eritrea, but Ethiopia has refused to accept that ruling. As the stand-off has continued, Meles and his Eritrean counterpart, Isaias, remain ensconced in power despite, or perhaps because of their desert border dispute that has cost tens of thousands of lives.

The war devastated the economies of both countries, primarily by cutting off cross-border trade and by diverting resources to massive military purchases. It also provided Meles with ample pretext for domestic human rights violations and delays in the implementation of democratic government.

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Governance

After Eritrean independence, a new Ethiopian Constitution was adopted in 1994 with negligible public consultation. It replaced the country's 14 regions with nine ethnically based states in addition to multi-ethnic Addis Ababa. In theory, these were permitted secession from the federation, but there were no provisions for the protection of minorities and ethnic groups dwelling outside their own administrative regions. A federal council was created to ensure 'equality' in the states. In practice, government remained highly centralized, dominated by the EPRDF and Meles.

Ethnic tensions were heightened by government restrictions on political competition. Under the provisions of the new constitution, multi-party elections were held in 1995. The EPRDF took 548 seats in the Council of Representatives and seven regional state councils, either directly or through EPRDF-sponsored parties. In three out of ten regions where a genuinely ethnically based opposition existed, elections were postponed for security reasons. Despite a façade of multi-ethnicity, most Ethiopians continued to regard the government as being dominated by Tigrayans - a view bolstered by Tigrayan predominance in Ethiopia's security forces.

Parliamentary elections in May 2000 exhibited significant flaws. The independent monitoring group Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) reported election-related incidents of abuse of opposition candidates and supporters, including killings, the arbitrary detention of opposition candidates and their transfer or dismissal from employment, and incidents involving the wounding of opposition supporters by gunshot. Opposition supporters faced harassment and detention, particularly in rural areas, and the media showed heavy bias in favour of the government. The EPRDF won overwhelmingly and elected Meles to a second term as prime minister.

2005 elections: violence, arrests and human rights abuses

Ethiopians returned to the polls on 15 May 2005 to elect a new parliament, but EU observers concluded that, in light of intimidation of opposition officials, as well as irregularities with regard to voter-registration lists and election administration, the elections failed to meet international standards. When

preliminary official results were released in June 2005 that indicated significant opposition gains in parliament, but another EPRDF victory, violent protests erupted in Addis Ababa. The opposition felt they had won outright, and were supported particularly by the Amhara diaspora, some of whom sought to turn the protests into a general uprising against Meles.

The government responded with a new crackdown that resulted in the killing of some 40 people by the security forces, the mass arrest of around 4,000 opposition supporters, and the banning of demonstrations.. Ongoing protests over the disputed elections flared again in November 2005.

An independent report conducted by Ethiopian judge Wolde-Michael Meshesha later found that election violence in June and November had resulted in the killings of 193 people and the wounding of 763, mostly in the opposition strongholds of Addis Ababa and Oromia. Much of the violence was directed at Amhara and Oromo people, who are prevalent in the opposition. Meshesha termed the violence a government 'massacre'; after refusing government pressure to amend his findings and receiving death threats, he fled to Europe in 2006. In July 2007, 30 opposition leaders were jailed for life over election protests - but released days afterwards, after being officially pardoned. The government denied the releases had been the result of US pressure.

Invasion of Somalia

In late 2006, Ethiopia moved back to war footing, with an invasion of Somalia. The presence of Ethiopian troops in Somalia had been rumoured - but denied months previously. The Ethiopian intervention came after the Islamic Courts Union seized control over swathes of Somalia. Ethiopia, which is a backer of Somalia's weak transitional government led by President Yusuf, managed to dislodge the ICU from Mogadishu. It was assisted in this by the support of the US - both diplomatically and militarily. But the warfare continued through 2007, as supporters of the ICU rallied. The action in Somalia helped to destabilise the South-Eastern flank of Ethiopia - home to Ethiopia's ethnic Somalis.

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Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

Since a new constitution was drawn up in 1994 following the overthrow of the oppressive Derg regime, the country has followed a unique system of ethnically-based federalism. But whether this structure actually helps minorities realise their rights, or whether it has been subverted by the present government to consolidate its hold on power, is now of urgent concern to minority rights activists.

The crack-down against opponents of regime following the elections in 2005, the 2006 invasion of Somalia and its subsequent fall-out, as well as the 2007 heavy-handed security action in the Ogaden, have set the scene for an increasingly repressive and intolerant atmosphere.

Two major assessments of Ethiopian government's recent record came in 2007 - one from the UN Committee which monitors the implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), and the other from the UN's Independent Expert on Minority Issues.

ICERD's report - issued without the co-operation of the Ethiopian government - gave an extremely critical assessment of the country's record, noting that, among other things, it was 'alarmed' at information that military and police forces have been 'systematically targeting' certain ethnic groups, such as the Anuak and the Oromo.

It had - it said - received information about "summary executions, rape of women and girls, arbitrary detention, torture, humiliations and destruction of property and crops of members of those communities"

Other concerns expressed by ICERD, included the lack of information on minority representation in local and national government, in the judiciary and security services, and the establishment of national parks without the participation or informed consent of the indigenous peoples.

The latter point followed criticism of the transfer of the Omo National Park in South-West Ethiopia, from government to private control. Indigenous peoples' organisations - including Survival International - complained the deal had gone through without prior consultation with the pastoralist tribes in the area, and that the government had obtained 'consent' of the communities to the boundary demarcation of the park, by asking them to sign documents with a thumb-print.

In February 2007, the Independent Expert on Minority Issues, Gay McDougall, published her report on Ethiopia, following a country visit. Among her findings were that some smaller minority communities were considered to be on the verge of disappearing completely, due to "factors including resettlement, displacement, conflict, assimilation, cultural dilution, environmental factors and loss of land." She noted that, "An unknown number of minority communities are believed to have already disappeared completely."

While praising certain aspects of government policy - such as the re-establishment of local languages in schools and local administrations - she also found much of concern. She reported a perception that the political system was biased in favour of ethnic parties created by the ruling faction, rather than genuinely representative movements.

In a visit to the Gambella, where an estimated 424 people were killed by Ethiopian Security Forces and other groups in 2003, Ms McDougall found many Anuak still being held in prison without trial. She also highlighted the case of the Karayu pastoralists who had been displaced from their traditional land and water source in Oromia, because of the establishment of a national park, and industries, in the area.

Among her key recommendations were that the government take steps to depoliticize ethnicity, and promote the policy of inclusion, and those urgent steps be taken to protect the existence of some small minority groups. Moreover, she also called for an inclusive national conference to examine the federalism system.

The Independent Expert's report was roundly rejected by the Ethiopian government in its response to the Human Rights Commission, which said it was 'littered with information based on hearsay and unfounded allegations.'" Meanwhile the unfolding crisis in the Southern Ogaden region left the impression that the IE's recommendations for political inclusiveness had gone unheeded.

In September 2007, a public plea by the international aid agencies, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Medicins Sans Frontiers, galvanised the world's attention to the security crack-down in the desert Ogaden region. Bordering Somalia in the South-East, the biggest ethnic group in the region is ethnic Somali.

In April, a sputtering rebellion by the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) flared into life again. Rebels attacked an oil installation, killing 74 including some Chinese workers. Security forces responded by blockading areas suspected to be government strong-holds, denying international aid agencies access to supply humanitarian relief.

Food prices soared, livestock prices halved. Many people were forced to flee their homes - amid witness testimony that the government was burning villages. As a result, hundreds of thousands were left dependent on food aid. There were also reports of abuses by ONLF as well - including punishments for civilians who failed to provide food or shelter.

The Horn of Africa Group based at the UK think-tank, Chatham House, said the government's response was disproportionate and counter-productive. Its report, 'Conflict in the Ogaden and its regional dimensions' concluded 'Ethiopian action is leading to a revival of Somali national sentiment and a sense of common destiny that cuts across the clan divide'.

In June 2008, Human Rights Watch criticized Ethiopia's major donors, Washington, London and Brussels, for failing to condemn what it said were clear cases of Ethiopian government war crimes and crimes against humanity perpetrated against the civilians of Ogaden. HRW documented abuses through over 100 interviews with victims and eyewitnesses.

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