

Foreign policy convergence between Ethiopia and America

By Melaku Mulualem

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia was established during the reign of Emperor Menelik II in 1900. The diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and the United States was established after three years in 1903. During the monarchical period of Ethiopia (1931-1974) the relations between the two countries was in a good condition, but during the military regime (1974-1991) the relation declined. Now, under the present government the relations have once again revived.

The US opened its consulate in Addis Ababa for the first time in 1906. The first official Ethiopian delegation to the US was sent in 1919 and later Ethiopia opened a consulate in Washington DC in 1943. In 1949 both countries agreed to upgrade their relationship at an ambassadorial level and then Ras Imeru Haileselassie became the first Ethiopian ambassador to the United States of America. After World War II, both countries signed agreements that strengthened their ties. The cooperation program of 1952, which is known as Point Four technical aid agreement, can be regarded as a base for future good relations. The Ethiopian Airlines, Highway Authority and Mapping Agency were established with the help of Americans.

On May 22, 1953, both countries signed an agreement that gave the United States a place to establish a communication station in Asmara called Kagnev. They also signed a Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement, by which the United States gave military equipment such as small arms, artillery, vehicles and training to Ethiopian soldiers.

Emperor Haileselassie I visited the US in 1954,1963,1967,1969 and in 1973. In his visit in 1954 the Emperor had addressed the joint session of the US Congress. The relationship between Imperial Ethiopia and the United States reach at its peak point in the 1960s in which many Ethiopian soldiers also got training in the United States. One of the trainees in the US was Mengistu Hailemariam (Col.) who later overthrew the Emperor and established the military government and sided with the then Soviet Union's communist ideology against the capitalist ideology of the US.

Starting from 1976 onwards the relations between the Derg regime and the US declined. Especially the visit of President Mengistu Hailemariam to the Soviet Union in December 1976 and the subsequent arms agreement became a turning point for the worst relation between the military government and the US government. Consequently, the Derg began to look for other alternative sources of military assistance. Among the countries Ethiopia turned to were China and the Soviet Union.

As a result of the ideological difference and the above mentioned problems in 1977 the Kagnew station was closed and the Americans left the country. On the other hand the Soviet Union and other few East European countries began to support the military regime. Starting from 1980 the Ambassadorial relationship of the US Embassy in Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Embassy in the United States were replaced by Charges d'Affaires.

In the second half of 1980s president Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost ("openness") and perestroika ("restructuring") policies had negative impact on the military regime by which the president abandoned his support to Ethiopia. The crumble of communism in the Soviet Union and East European countries meant that the Derg Regime, which was also a socialist country at the time, could no longer rely on its former allies in military and other economic assistance. Moreover, the radical change of 1989 in Eastern Europe had prompted Ethiopia's ideological allies such as German Democratic Republic

(East Germany), Czechoslovakia, and Romania to withdraw all military agreements with the Ethiopian government.

As a result, the Derg Regime of Ethiopia was seeking alternative sources of military assistance from nations such as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) and Israel. Parallel to this global change the rebellion against the regime became stronger than ever before which led to the overthrow of the military government in 1991.

After the downfall of the military regime in May 1991, the diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and the US has been upgraded to the ambassadorial level as of 1992. With this development the assistance of the US to the Ethiopian government resumed. The present support of the United States to Ethiopia focuses on health issue (HIV/AIDS), humanitarian assistance, strengthening democratic institutions and good governance.

Both Ethiopia and the US have mutual understandings on security issues especially anti-terrorism in the Horn of Africa. The late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi visited the US in 1994 and 1995. However, except foreign ministers and senators there is no any visit to Ethiopia by presidents of America while they were in office. Many American presidents visited Ethiopia after they finish their terms as president. For instance former president Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and George Bush(Jr.) visited Ethiopia after finishing their term in office.

According to the government of the United States, “Ethiopia is an important regional security partner of the United States” It is also stated that “Ethiopia has good relations with the United States and the West, especially in responding to regional instability and supporting counterterrorism efforts”. Because of security interests of both countries, the US has been supporting Ethiopia in stabilizing the region.

The foreign policy of Ethiopia focuses on national security i.e. survival. The government believes that other national issues may be raised only if national

existence is ensured. According to the foreign policy of Ethiopia toward the United States, “the US plays a decisive role in the world in matters relating to peace and stability...securing the political and diplomatic support of the US has a great bearing for the success of our efforts to achieve peace and security.” The policy also underlines the importance of economic relations with the US, especially trade, investment and other assistances. The policy document also considers the presence of many Ethiopians and Ethiopian origin who live in the US and to use them for strengthening the bilateral relations between the two countries as well as to utilize their potential for the economic development of the country. According to a study conducted in 2003, an estimated one million Ethiopian-Americans are living in the United States.

The September 11, 2001 attack of Al-Qaeda against the US is a turning point in the foreign policy of George W. Bush’s Administration. After this event Africa was taken as one of strategically important areas in fighting international terrorism. As many countries in the world, many African countries had also shown support to the so called Global War on Terrorism. This support and sympathy of African leaders contributed to the better partnership between the US and Africa.

After the international community ignored the issue of Somalia, the country became a breeding ground to international terrorism as well as piracy activities. In due course Al-Shabaab, an Islamic militant group emerged in the war-torn Horn of Africa nation. The militant group declared its alliance with Al Qaeda. Before the emergence of Al-Shabaab, the likes of Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya (“the Islamic Union”), which is the predecessor of the Islamic Courts Union, was established in the 1980s and sought the creation of an expansive “Islamic Republic of Greater Somalia”. The 1998 Al-Qaeda attack on US embassies in Nairobi (Kenya) and Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) simultaneously were critical signals that made the US government revisit its policy towards Africa. It was believed that those terrorists, who attacked the embassies, have taken refuge

in Somalia. Considering this fact the US government turned its face towards the Horn of Africa for security and safety.

Thus the US showed interest to work with Ethiopia which has a similar policy to fight terrorists. For instance, on June 26, 1995 there was an assassination attempt in Ethiopia against former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak while he came to Addis to attend the Summit of the Organization of African Unity. Even if there were shootings against him by terrorists he was saved by the security troops of Ethiopia. The policy of Ethiopia in fighting terrorism is in line with the foreign policy of the US. In 2002 the late Prime Minister Meles and President Bush discussed about international terrorism and reached a common understanding on countering terrorism.

The other foreign policy convergence is electrification of African countries. The foreign policy of Ethiopia underlines the generation of hydroelectric power and selling to many African countries. Egypt, the Sudan, Djibouti, Kenya and Eritrea are mentioned in the policy document as beneficiary of electrification policy. In this vein, recently, the Obama Administration disclosed its policy of supporting electrification projects in Africa. At this juncture we noticed that there is foreign policy convergence between Ethiopia and the US.

Electrification project of Ethiopia will generate both money and peace to the country and the region at large. In implementing the foreign policy, Ethiopia has already started exporting electricity to the Sudan and Djibouti. In the near future, Ethiopia will also export to Kenya. The relationship between electrification project and peace in Africa is well discussed in my previous article on The Reporter newspaper under the title “Democratic peace theory vis-a-vis ‘energy peace theory’ ”.

Based on this policy, the US has allocated large amount of money to support electrification projects in Africa. This project will minimize the use of fuel energy which has a negative impact on the environment. Similar with the US,

other developed countries should also support electrification projects in Africa that have positive role for sustainable development in the continent.

Finally, Ethiopia and the US have a hundred and eleven years old diplomatic relations. Since Ethiopia was not colonized by colonial powers, the diplomatic relations between them existed for successive years. Even if the present Ethiopian government and the US have their own policy differences, there are foreign policy convergence on the issues of fighting terrorism and expanding hydroelectric energy in Africa.

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