

# Politics, Profits and Human Rights

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## Interest in human rights is superficial

Public and stated political interest in human rights is greater than ever before. Bodies concerned with human rights abound; within foreign ministries, the European Commission and Parliament, United States Congress, Senate and Department of State, the United Nations and among national and international Non-Governmental Organisations.

The State Department, European Union and the British Department for International Development have publicly stated their commitment to linking aid and investment to human rights and democracy. (1,2,3)

Despite the abundance of human rights bodies, the commitments to human rights made by the West and the availability of reliable information about human rights abuses, there appears to be little evidence of western powers putting their stated policies into practice. Western institutions and politicians pay lip service to human rights, but continue to allow short term economic and strategic interests to dominate their thinking.

The United Nations and the US Department of State are perceived to be the two most reliable international arbiters of human rights. The human rights mechanisms of the UN are bound by signatory states to be politically independent and the State Department country reports on human rights practices are used as reference material by asylum and immigration departments throughout the western world.

The independence of the human rights mechanisms of the United Nations is threatened by the political manoeuvring of member states which abuse human rights (4) and by politically motivated voting tactics of other states whose economic and strategic interests are served by abusive regimes (5).

According to the Geneva-based International Service for Human Rights, because of *dominance of commercial relations over human rights concerns*, the UN Commission on Human Rights has *almost become irrelevant in protecting victims* (5).

The reports on country human rights practices prepared by the US Department of State are biased and misleading according to the New York-based Lawyers Committee on Human Rights. Selective reporting and carefully crafted phraseology create very different impressions of the regime in question, depending on the strength of US economic and strategic ties.(6)

The cynicism which some commentators have expressed regarding support given by western powers to African governments is illustrated by the comment from the director of the Washington-based Africa Research Project concerning the African Growth and Opportunity Bill, currently before the US Senate; *This bill reduces obstacles to African trade with the US, but only if African countries open their economies to being taken over by American firms and if they eliminate virtually all social programs. . . . Africans are therefore justified in believing that the new attention that the United States is devoting to their continent arises chiefly out of an interest in getting control over a larger share of its abundant natural resources, cheap labor and growing markets, rather than any real desire to help promote economic development that will lift them out of poverty and meet their basic needs.* (7)

## **Human rights are good for business**

However, there are sound economic reasons for sincerity in western interest in human rights.

### **Stability**

Systematic human rights abuses are not committed by stable, freely elected governments. Only where there is public dissatisfaction and resentment of those in power are human rights violations necessary to impose their authority. Abuse engenders further resistance until the regime is replaced, as happened recently in Indonesia.

Human rights violations are therefore an indication of instability. They signal the unreliability of returns from investment and of access to markets and resources.

### **Effects on markets and resources**

Inequity of wealth distribution, an inevitable accompaniment of prevalent human rights violations, reduces the size of markets for western manufacturers. The presence of conflict, with associated impoverishment further reduces returns, and also impedes access to valuable resources.

### **Refugee costs**

The refugee crisis is another consequence of human rights violations, according to Amnesty International's research. The crisis incurs significant cost in human and material resources. It interrupts and ultimately reduces returns for western investors, whether or not the developed world has a significant host function. Amnesty International studied the refugee crisis in Africa during 1997 and concluded that nearly all refugees are fleeing from human rights violations. (8)

### **Economic growth and human rights**

Even in situations, such as the Asian Tiger economies, where massive investment has enabled rapid economic growth, this can not be maintained without a foundation of democracy and respect for human rights. The Asian economic crisis is no precedent. The International Monetary Fund and World Bank praised the economic policies of Mexico, just prior to its financial collapse in 1994, as they did those of the Tiger economies, including Indonesia. (9)

Media comment on the collapse of Asian economies in late 1997 was that lack of political development was one of the principal causes of the crisis (10). Lack of transparency and accountability of government, rule of law and respect for human rights are all characteristics of those economies worst hit by the crisis.

The serious effects of the Asian economic crisis on stock markets and employment across the world are a clear warning to those who ignore the interdependence of western and other economies. Recent events in Indonesia illustrate the short-sightedness of investing in abusive regimes.

Human rights are good for business, and not only for business in the developing world.

There are economic advantages of real rather than rhetorical interest in human rights by western powers. However, human rights appear to continue to have little relevance to western foreign policy. To illustrate this point, it is instructive to examine the relationship of western countries with the current Ethiopian administration.

## **Ethiopia; an example**

### **Background; democracy and human rights**

In 1991, at the invitation of the, then, US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, Herman Cohen, the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) set up a transitional administration including representatives of liberation fronts which had toppled the communist military regime. Herman Cohen stated that US assistance was conditional on democratic reform, saying, *No democracy; no co-operation.* (11)

Elections have been strongly criticised by observers (12, 13, 14, 15, 16), but have been given western approval (17,18).

All parties except the EPRDF have been expelled or have withdrawn from government. The administration, security and armed forces are totally under the control of the EPRDF, which is dominated by the Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) (19).

Since 1992, human rights organisations have been increasingly critical of the Ethiopian government. Extra-judicial political killings, disappearances, arbitrary detention and torture and rape of detainees have been reported by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch/Africa (20, 21)

Ethiopia has imprisoned more journalists in the last three years than any other country in Africa and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi ranks among the top enemies of the press in the world according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. (22)

The *socio-economic substructure has been transformed into a web of ideologically 'correct' organizations subservient to the [EPRDF] party.* (23)

Central committee members of the ruling party and their friends are the dominant shareholders in newly privatised companies. (24)

### **Relations with the West**

Ethiopia enjoys a warm relationship with the West.

Apart from a few months after a street killing by policemen, in which a British-donated Land Rover was used, the British Department for International Development has continued its police training programme in Ethiopia. (25)

Although the European Parliament has passed resolutions criticising the government for human rights abuses (26), Ethiopia receives more aid from the European Union than any other country in the world (27).

Dr Susan Rice, Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, has stated that Ethiopia is the second largest recipient of US aid in sub-Saharan Africa and is to be applauded for its progress in human rights and democratisation (28). The State Department report on human rights practices in Ethiopia claims that abuses are few and include no confirmed disappearances or political killings (18).

Ethiopia is part of the, US-sponsored, Africa Crisis Response Initiative, whereby pro-US states in Africa are provided with military training and equipment for peace keeping purposes. The delivery of military aircraft from the USA began in April 1998. (29)

Shortly after Dr Rice stated that one of the most important US foreign policies is to provide anti-terrorist intelligence and training (28), the Ethiopian government announced a crackdown on terrorists, openly killed three unarmed Oromo in Addis Ababa and arrested 31 others, including journalists and human rights defenders, regarded by Amnesty International as prisoners of conscience. If found guilty as charged, of conspiracy, they could face the death penalty. (30)

### **Future relationship**

The European Commission delegate in Ethiopia has expressed a wish for a closer development partnership with the country. He emphasised the value of Ethiopia's resources to the European Community. (31)

The US ambassador to Ethiopia at this year's annual conference on US Trade and Investment in Africa, exhorted American businessmen to work in Ethiopia, stressing the investment potential and the potential market for their products. (32)

Neither mentioned Ethiopia's human rights problems or the instability and inefficiency which they signify.

The Lomé Convention, governing trade/aid relations of the European Union with African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, states that respect for human rights and democracy are prerequisite to development partnership.

The Africa Growth and Opportunity Act in the USA, similarly emphasises that aid and investment are conditional on human rights observance.

### **Constructive engagement**

A policy of 'constructive engagement' is pursued by the European Union and the governments of Britain, the USA and other countries. Responses of these governments to critics of Ethiopia's human rights record all claim that the partnership approach will benefit human rights and democracy in Ethiopia better than any other approach.

In defending the continuation of British training for Ethiopian police despite pledges to the contrary in the absence of an inquiry into the police killing of an unarmed human rights defender and trades unionist, a spokesman for the Department for International Development wrote; *The Ethiopian Government felt unable to meet our desire for a full enquiry. . . . Since then, we had a productive exchange of views with the Ethiopian Government. . . . We want to help the Ethiopian Government improve its human rights record. We believe we can best achieve this, together with promoting democracy and good government, by remaining engaged.* (25)

An African reporter wrote in January; *The US defended its continued involvement with some African dictators as 'constructive engagement', ironically the same policy used to justify contact with apartheid South Africa in the 1980s.* (33)

A consequence of this constructive engagement is increasing unpopularity of western powers, especially the United States, in Ethiopia. As well as delaying development in human rights and democracy, and associated economic benefits, western policy may drive the oppressed and disaffected youth of Ethiopia toward Militant Islam, and lay the foundation for the souring of future 'economic partnership'.

Taking their relationship with Ethiopia as an example, it is clear that developed countries have yet to assimilate promotion of human rights into their foreign policies. Despite systematic and

gross violations of human rights in Ethiopia, its government enjoys disproportionate moral and financial support from the European Union and USA.

It remains for western foreign policy to develop a real rather than rhetorical interest in human rights.

### **Why such short-sightedness?**

There are no home electoral benefits to explain the myopia of western foreign policy.

Maintaining the economic disparity with the developing world has been a cornerstone of US foreign policy since at least 1948 (34). However, western investors and traders will benefit from democracy and respect for human rights in developing countries, *pari passu* with the populations in the developing countries. Disparity will be maintained.

As there is no justifiable reason for not linking aid and trade with performance on human rights and no reason to suspect deliberate malign intent on behalf of western powers, it is interesting to speculate on reasons for the lack of real western support for human rights.

Necessarily, the momentum of large political institutions precludes rapid shifts of policy.

Politicians in the era of the slave trade were immersed in a social milieu which saw nothing immoral in it. The milieu of western politicians includes business and media moguls whose perspective, as proponents of continued profit and growth, is necessarily acquisitive and committed to short term gains.

Information which argues against inertia for change has to pass through filters and screens before reaching political decision makers.

In huge institutions, such as the US State Department, decision makers are trained to defend policy. All information which reaches them passes through functionaries who are also trained to defend present policy. Thus policies are difficult to change.

Altering the course of thinking in the Pentagon and White House may be compared, in more ways than one, with steering the Titanic through a ninety degree turn.

### **Corporate concerns; reasons for optimism**

At the UK Royal African Society conference in Cambridge, UK, 28-30 September 1997, the importance of the rule of law, democracy and respect for human rights was stressed; not by human rights defenders, but by managing directors and officials of large business corporations.

It would be perversely ironic if trans-national companies, the very fabric of the global economic system which is responsible for Africa's plight, were the organs of real development and democracy in Africa.

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Dr Trevor Trueman, Chair, Oromia Support Group, Malvern, UK, 29 May 1998.

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