China and Human Rights Protection in Ethiopia

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The influence of China on Human Rights protection in Ethiopia

To what extent does China's principle of non-interference contribute to the weakening of international human rights in Ethiopia?

Introduction

In the last decade, China's engagement with Africa intensified significantly, sparking debates over its implications on governance, development and

human rights. While Chinese financing and infrastructure projects have contributed to the economic growth across the continent (SCIO PRC, 2021), concerns have emerged that this growing economic interdependence, together with China's diplomatic leverage, may reduce international pressure to address the rising number of human rights violations in the region (Hassan, 2024). China's expansion is of particular interest in Ethiopia, defined as "the major recipient of Chinese investment" (Fiala, 2021), due to its position as the source of the Nile, its role as a robust regional player in the Horn of Africa and its status as the seat of the African Union (Thakur, 2009). Therefore, this article aims to assess the extent to which China's engagement contributes to the weakening of international human rights pressure in Ethiopia, contextualizing this phenomenon within the Chinese growing economic and diplomatic involvement with this nation.

Overview of China's current influence on Ethiopia

After the 1955 Bandung Conference, China began deepening its ties with African countries, presenting itself as an anti-colonial partner by providing military, economic and technical support (Muekalia, 2004). During the 1962-1963 period this relationship was further consolidated through the "Five Principles Governing the Development of Relations with Arab and African Countries" and "Eight Principles for Economic Aid and Technical Assistance to Other Countries", which laid the foundations for future cooperation (Hanauer and Morris, 2013). Within this context, the Sino-Ethiopian diplomatic relationship was officially established in 1970 (Tesfaye, 2019), grounded in the principles of non-interference and mutual respect (Wondie, 2018). These principles continue to shape China's contemporary foreign policy toward Africa. From a diplomatic perspective, Beijing focuses on a partnership of equals based on mutual political trust, non-interference, and support for African control of regional issues, particularly through the African Union and sub-regional organisations (SCIO PRC, 2021). Through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (Taylor, 2011) and extensive bilateral partnerships, China reinforces long-term strategic ties and presents itself as a reliable partner of the Global South, rather than a traditional Western actor.

From an economic perspective, China stands for development, cooperation and infrastructure investment as key tools of its foreign policy. As affirmed by the 2021 white paper released by the People's Republic of China (SCIO PRC, 2021), involvement in transport, energy, digital infrastructure, and industrialisation has become central in the Sino-African discourse, concentrating on concessional loans, investment financing, and trade facilitation (SCIO PRC, 2021).

Within this broader policy framework, Ethiopia emerges as a central case for evaluating how China's diplomatic and development engagement intersects with ongoing human rights concerns in the region. As reported by

UNDP, by 2023 China had become the "major bilateral, non-Paris creditor for Ethiopia, accounting for 30% of total external debt" (UNDP, 2023). Data from the China Africa Research Initiative indicate that Ethiopia received approximately USD 14.5 billion in Chinese loans across 66 projects, predominantly in transportation, energy, and ICT sectors (Global Development Policy Center, 2023), making Ethiopia the second most indebted country in Sub-Saharan Africa (Tarrósy, 2020) and giving Beijing significant creditor leverage.

This financing has been directed primarily toward Belt and Road Initiative projects, including the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, major energy infrastructure, and urban transport systems such as the Addis Ababa Light Rail Transit (Smed et al., 2024). Furthermore, financial aid has proven to be sufficiently powerful to influence voting behavior in the United Nations, as evidenced by the support of African states that enabled China to suppress a critical statement by the UN Human Rights Council on Tibet (Smed et al., 2024). Considering Africa's collective voting power of 54 states, this support gives China substantial diplomatic leverage.

Human Rights under attack in Ethiopia

Human rights deterioration in Ethiopia has intensified over the past decade, with the Tigray, Amhara, Afar and Oromia regions among those most affected and at greatest risk of future atrocities (OHCHR, 2023a). The primary cause of human rights violations is armed conflict: the clashes between government security forces and armed militants or groups such as "Fano" and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLF Shene) result in civilians bearing the cost of the conflict, facing killings, sexual violence, arbitrary arrest and detention, indiscriminate drone strikes, and forced displacement (OHCHR, 2023a; EHRC, 2024). Furthermore, armed conflict has severely undermined economic and social rights in affected areas, as production disruptions have led to rising food prices and food shortages, increasing food insecurity and ultimately eroding basic rights (EHRC, 2024). Together, these patterns show a continued erosion of civil, political, and socioeconomic rights but also make clear the emergence of an "acute risk of further atrocity crimes" (OHCHR, 2023b) as a result of the ongoing violence and the collapse of basic protections for Ethiopians.

Case Study: Tigray and the declining influence of the West

The conflict in Tigray, in northern Ethiopia, has had wide-ranging impacts on various human rights and on the influence of the West in the region. Following the power shift in 2018 to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his Prosperity Party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) felt politically marginalised and rejected federal decisions (Istratii, 2021). Large-scale violence broke out in November 2020 when the Ethiopian government launched a military operation against the TPLF. The postponement of

national elections due to COVID-19 also contributed to the escalation of violence (Jima, 2023). Subsequently, Tigray held regional elections without the permission of the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), further increasing tensions. Structural rivalries, Eritrean motives of revenge, the removal of TPLF members from federal positions, and territorial ambitions of Amhara caused the conflict to escalate fully into genocidal violence (Blanchard, 2024; Jima, 2023).

The crisis in Tigray abruptly ended thirty years of developmental progress. Even before the outbreak of the conflict, 1.6 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance, out of a total population of approximately six million (Pellet, 2021). Before the war, between 600,000 and 950,000 people faced food insecurity. During the conflict, this number increased to 5.2 million, or 91% of the population (Gesesew et al., 2021). This was partly because the violence started during the 2020 harvest season, which caused the loss of more than 90% of the crops. In addition, the already fragile sanitation infrastructure was largely destroyed, severely limiting access to clean drinking water. Medical personnel were unable to cope with the consequences as the healthcare system completely collapsed due to looting and deliberate attacks (Gesesew et al., 2021; Pellet, 2021), as well as the humanitarian blockade imposed by the Ethiopian government (Gebregziabher et al., 2022). As a result, approximately 180,000 chronically ill patients were unable to continue their treatment, and the risk of widespread disease outbreaks increased significantly. Beyond these severe human rights violations and mass killings, women were systematically targeted. In the first five months, an estimated 10,000 women and girls were raped (Insecurity Insight, 2021).

The international response to the conflict in Tigray was deeply divided. Western actors, including Europe and the United States, acted mainly out of strategic self-interest, such as preventing large-scale migration to Europe and combating terrorism (Ezugwu, 2025; Gesesew et al., 2021; Caruso & Akamo, 2024). They tried to apply pressure by suspending financial aid and imposing sanctions and visa restrictions on Ethiopian and Eritrean officials. The EU linked further assistance to conditions like unrestricted humanitarian access to Tigray, but internal divisions among member states delayed and limited its effectiveness (Caruso & Akamo, 2024). At the same time, countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Iran, and China provided military support to the Ethiopian government, including supplying drones. Within the United Nations, China consistently supported the Ethiopian federal government, showing clear political backing without direct military intervention (Caruso & Akamo, 2024). This foreign military involvement made the conflict more intense and longer, turning it into a proxy war and slowing down the peace process (Ezugwu & Duruji, 2025). China publicly emphasized the importance of African mediation through the African Union while simultaneously evacuating dozens of Chinese citizens from the Tigray region and strongly opposing economic sanctions

that could harm its own interests (Ezugwu & Duruji, 2025; Gesesew et al., 2021). Even after serious human rights violations, such as the massacre in Axum and violence in Maikadra, China largely remained silent, giving the Ethiopian government additional room to resist Western pressure and maintain alternative international partners (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Western aid to Ethiopia suffered from poor coordination (Caruso & Akamo, 2024). Limited transatlantic alignment only emerged after Joe Biden's inauguration. In November 2022, a ceasefire was achieved through the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, leading to a reduction in violence. The United States played a key role in applying diplomatic pressure to help end the conflict (Ezugwu & Duruji, 2025), but relations between Ethiopia and the West remain seriously strained (Blanchard, 2024).

The Role of the West in Contemporary Ethiopia to protect Human Rights

Ethiopia remains far from peaceful due to tense regional relations, including conflicts with Eritrea, a diplomatic dispute with Somalia over sea access via Somaliland, and disagreements with Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (Blanchard, 2024). Human rights continue to be violated and could quickly come under pressure again. Research shows that the rapid restoration of healthcare, food supply, and civilian protection is a high priority (Gesesew et al., 2021). Western countries also emphasise this, but they have little influence and often lack reliable information due to strong state control and the absence of independent journalism in Ethiopia (Tofa et al., 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2024). At the same time, China is using its influence in the region and actively countering Western attempts to bring about behavioural changes in the Ethiopian regime through sanctions. As a BRICS member, Ethiopia is becoming increasingly dependent on China, which imposes no governance or human rights conditions (Amare, 2025; Grokipedia, 2026).

Ethiopia, like it was during the Cold War, seems to be controlled by major powers such as Russia, China, and Iran (Blanchard, 2024). At the same time, after the Cold War, it became a strategic partner of the United States, particularly in the context of the global fight against terrorism, and until the outbreak of the civil war in 2020, it was the largest contributor to UN peacekeeping missions (Blanchard, 2024). Even today, Trump remains involved in the region. On January 16, 2026, he offered to mediate again in the long-standing dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia over the distribution of Nile waters (Hunnicutt, 2026). Despite a slight reduction, aid programmes are still ongoing. Europe primarily focuses on protecting human rights. Last year, the European Union announced a humanitarian aid package of €40 million for Ethiopia. Since 2020, the European Commission has provided a total of more than €436.5 million in humanitarian assistance (Bicer, 2025).

The relationship between the West and Ethiopia is seriously damaged, and it seems unlikely to be restored anytime soon, partly due to China's growing influence in the region. Nevertheless, Europe and the United States continue to make efforts to protect human rights.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Human rights are being violated in Ethiopia, and China's influence makes it difficult for the West to bring about change. Meaningful progress will require support from the West. The foundation for this change is set out in a three-part package of recommendations:

1. It is crucial that Western countries, such as the United States, continue to play a mediating role in the region around Ethiopia to prevent ongoing violence and promote lasting peace. Active diplomatic engagement can help reduce tensions between conflicting parties, prevent further escalation, and thereby protect human rights (Jalloh & Schwikowski, 2021).

2. It is also important to have eyes and ears on the ground once the surrounding environment has stabilised. The Ethiopian government imposes many barriers on independent journalists and does not tolerate critical reporting. Tofa (2022) highlights the importance of training local journalists in the region to enhance the documentation of crimes and ensure that the voices of affected communities are heard.

3. Real change within a country begins with society itself and must come from within (Pinckney et al., 2022). Therefore, it is essential to intensify targeted and strategic support for local human rights organisations, human rights defenders (Amnesty International, n.d.), and (previously trained) independent media. Their work enhances civic participation and the flow of information.

This will provide more reliable information to hold those responsible for human rights violations accountable and raise awareness within Western societies. At the same time, China's influence can be limited and its actions challenged more effectively by strengthening the civil society of Ethiopia. This will help protect human rights much more effectively.

References

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