

A discussion on Ethiopia's role in Somalia

11 October 2008

The following correspondence was received on the September 22 article, "Ethiopia threatens to withdraw from Somalia". Below is a reply by its author, Brian Smith.

Dear Brian,

Your article about Ethiopia withdrawing from Somalia was very wrong. You seem to blame Ethiopia only. You say Islamic Court Union militants have the support of most Somalis but you ignore the clan factor in Somalia and the fact that the ICU united only the Hawiye clan and never controlled more than 50 percent of Somalia. You are also ignoring many factors, including the role of Arab nations and Egypt in helping the ICU and the fact that the ICU declared jihad on Ethiopia.

Please be balanced. I am an Ethiopian and I would like to see you give a balanced assessment of my country's actions and challenges.

I know your web site WSWs.org is for socialists. As you know our former Ethiopian leader Mengistu was a socialist. But the policy we have today in Ethiopia is the same policy we had during Mengistu. We always protect our country from threats.

So I hope you will be balanced.

Thank you.

ST
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Dear ST,

Thank you for your interest in our web site and for your comments.

We do not blame Ethiopia as a whole or the people of Ethiopia for the ongoing illegal occupation and

humanitarian crisis in Somalia. However, the Ethiopian government of Meles Zenawi and the puppet Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia, which it supports, are both pawns in the predatory aims of US imperialism as it seeks to control the sea-lanes and resources of the region.

All sides in the ongoing conflict are guilty of crimes against the civilian population. This includes the TFG, the occupying forces of Ethiopia, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) and the US military, as evidenced in the recent Amnesty International report that we cite. However this report laid greatest blame on those supported by the United States, i.e., the TFG and the Ethiopian troops.

We do not determine our attitude toward this or any other conflict based upon who carried out the worst atrocity. Rather, we start from the social character of the regimes and parties, their programmes and their trajectories.

We have no illusions in the ICU, which advocates a reactionary programme based on religious chauvinism. However, it is still true that it received substantial popular support when it ousted the US and warlord-backed TFG. This does not mean that the Somali population needed or desired Islamic fundamentalist rule. Far from it, but the ICU takeover brought relative peace, stability, and law and order, following 15 years of civil war and decades of looting by the warlords.

There are strong nationalist pressures bearing down upon the peoples of both Somalia and Ethiopia, but neither regime is waging a struggle against imperialist oppression or fighting to defend or extend a more progressive social order against reaction. Their class character makes them incapable of carrying out a genuinely progressive development of their economies and overcoming imperialist domination. Rather these regimes of the national bourgeoisie seek to divert the social aspirations of their respective peoples into chauvinist hatred.

We have previously drawn attention to a report by the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia, which noted that the ICU has been supplied with arms and military training by Eritrea, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Syria, as well as Hezbollah of Lebanon. The report also warned that Somalia could turn "into an Iraq-type situation replete with roadside and suicide bombs, assassinations and other forms of terrorist and insurgent-type activities." (See "US backs Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia")

We observed that these allies of the ICU could not allow the Ethiopian advance to go unanswered, and that Eritrea in particular could not afford to allow Somalia to come under the domination of Ethiopia, with which it fought a bitter war in which hundreds of thousands were killed between 1998 and 2000. We also observed that US imperialism's aggressive policy threatened to ignite an all-out war in the region, which could draw other African and Middle Eastern states into the conflict.

You call Mengistu Hailie Mariam a socialist and imply that we may have supported him, but Mengistu's regime, the Derg, was in no sense "socialist." A number of military dictatorships and bourgeois nationalist regimes at the time, including Mengistu's in Ethiopia, Siad Barre's in Somalia and Nimeiri's in Sudan, adopted the rhetoric of "socialism" and even "Marxism-Leninism" to justify their own rule and the suppression of all opposition, as well as to curry the favour and patronage of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow as a counterweight to the US and other imperialist powers. In this way these regimes were able to extract limited concessions by vacillating between both sides in the Cold War.

The roots of the present conflict are to be found both in colonialism's historical legacy and also in imperialism's ongoing machinations in the region. The Horn of Africa has long been viewed by the US as a strategic area of the globe because of its proximity to the sea-lanes linking the oilfields of the Persian Gulf with the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. Washington initially sought to assert its hegemony over the region by backing Haile Selassie until his ouster, when the US administration adopted the Somali dictatorship of Siad Barre, and the Soviet Union switched its support from Somalia to Ethiopia.

In 1992, under the pretence of famine relief, the US deployed tens of thousands of combat troops in Somalia, which were driven out after the "Black Hawk Down" incident. Washington has since attempted to forge closer ties with the warlords it previously condemned in Somalia, and with the former guerrilla leaders holding power in Eritrea and Ethiopia, both of whom have long since shed their socialist pretensions and embraced free-market policies and foreign investment. Meles Zenawi has become something of a favourite of Washington and also of London, famously sitting with ex-Prime Minister Tony Blair on the Africa Commission.

Whilst recognising that clan ties play an important role in the daily lives of many Somalis, we naturally reject clan politics as reactionary and divisive. Only a programme that seeks to unite all workers, peasants and those oppressed by imperialism, rejecting clan, race, religious and national divisions, is capable of a progressive answer to the historical problems blighting Africa. We call on the working people of Somalia, Ethiopia and the United States to unite with their brothers and sisters throughout Africa, the Middle East, Europe and the world in a common struggle against imperialism and their local oppressors as part of the worldwide struggle for socialism.

We urge you to read other articles we have posted, when it will become clear that our reporting and analysis is balanced. We do not favour one nation over another, but we do oppose all manifestations of colonial-style oppression--even when conducted by proxy. Our bias is toward the political, economic and social liberation of the working class and of all those oppressed by imperialism.

Best wishes,

Brian Smith



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