

Ethiopia and Horn of Africa Migration: *Push or Pull?*



By

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In a theory of migration, the forces that cause people to move around the globe can be seen as either push or pull forces. At present the world is very concerned with defining the forces that drive human movement in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. What extreme circumstances would make Ethiopian young people undertake the dangerous and difficult journey from Ethiopia to distant countries as undocumented immigrants?

Compelling forces that pull people to move from one place to another include simply when people seek change in their lives, or when they would like to experience a new culture. It can also include pursuing better opportunities like work or service in other parts of the world. The forces that push people to move from one place to another are fundamentally different. They occur due to the forceful pressure of human will. This pressure might come in the form of psychological, emotional or physical imposition. War, political oppression, severe poverty, social and cultural marginalization or religious persecution are examples of push factors to migrate.

We have seen an increase in migration through the years as parts of the globe experience rapid growth and modernization. The contributing factors to this migration will necessarily vary from case to case and country by country.

An estimated 232 million people around the world currently live away from their homes. More than 25 million Indians and around 7 million South Koreans live away from their homelands. It is believed that 3 to 6 million United States citizens live outside of their country at any given time. Interestingly, the US has also become the chosen destination of millions of immigrants from all parts of the world. More than 3 per cent of the global population lives outside of their native country at present.

Migration in the Ethiopian and Horn of Africa context are characterized by economic and political pushers. Let's look more closely at some of these factors to more clearly understand the current migration crisis in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa at large.

The Ethiopian government has maintained a claim of double digit growth for the last decade while the number of young migrants has increased year after year. In any real world situation when a country experiences exponential growth gainful employment and income must also increase. If this were truly the case then you would expect to see the numbers of undocumented migrants decrease. It is difficult to eliminate migration all together, but it would have to decrease if economic opportunity were to increase. The truth is that there must be something wrong with how this growth has translated for the working youth.

The unemployment rate is expectedly high in Horn of Africa countries, especially in Ethiopia and Djibouti. For example Djibouti registered unemployment at 60 percent which is the highest from Horn of Africa countries and one of the highest in the world. The irony is that Ethiopia and Eritrea report better employment rates than some of the countries young people are trying to emigrate to. For example, Greece reports an unemployment rate at 26.8 percent, Spain at 24.3 percent and South Africa at 25 percent while Ethiopia reports an unemployment rate at only 17.5 percent and surprisingly Eritrea at 8.6 percent which is among the lowest unemployment rates in the world. As we can see the unemployment rate is not always one of the obvious indicators of migration from Horn of Africa countries. It is more likely uncertainty about the future and low income which spurs migration.

Another big problem for young Ethiopians, especially those who reside in the Capital City of Addis Ababa and other major cities, is the negative psychological impact of the 'glitz economy'. Countries which experience 'glitz type growth can't meet the economic needs of young people because the gap between demand and supply is too broad. Young people unfairly see new recreation centers, new homes and new hotels but they can't afford them. They see luxurious cars but they can't even afford taxis or buses and the like. This dilemma can damage the psychology of the new generation and as a result they may wish to escape to a world where opportunities are accessible. So again, this type of growth might be a reason for young people to make the dangerous journey abroad.

A big push factor for young people is expectations of parents and extended family. Since poverty is a social problem in the Horn of Africa one of the main pushes for Ethiopian young people is the need to support themselves and their extended families. There is no social welfare system or support for the young or aged from the government. Parents will expect care from their children once they have grown. The saddening fact for young Ethiopian people who are eager to work is that they don't have opportunity enough to meet their need. This reality puts pressure on them to sacrifice their safety in order to help their families to survive.

When we talk about family responsibility women are at great risk to destitution by migration. We see millions of young Ethiopian women emigrating to Arab Gulf countries to be housemaids. Aware of low wages, physical abuse and sexual harassment they still choose to take risks and make sacrifices for their loved ones. Men are also at great risk to destitution by migration. We see millions of young Ethiopian

men emigrating to European countries in search of opportunity. Many young Ethiopian and Eritrean men have risked their lives on the treacherous deserts of the Middle East and smuggler ships of the Mediterranean Sea in order to find economic opportunity abroad.

In general, the economic pushers in this region can be seen as one of the major factors for young people to leave their country and make the dangerous journey of an undocumented migrant.

Political push, like economic push, is one of the major factors for Ethiopia and Horn of Africa migration. In fact, it is often hard to distinguish a clear difference between the economic and political pushers in the Ethiopian context as you will see. More worryingly, economic opportunities are often withheld or unavailable for many citizens due to political interference.

During a recent political debate in Ethiopia, Foreign Minister Dr. Tedros Adhanom commented that Ethiopian migration is recently regarded as a “world phenomenon”, coming back with the reply that “migration happens everywhere”. While I agree that migration happens everywhere, my argument is that the forces behind migration have to be examined. In the case of the US and other wealthy countries, the main forces of migration are characterized by a willingness or choice to migrate. For example, some people live abroad for military service, some for humanitarian work and some to teach English in Asia or the Middle East. In the case of Ethiopia and other poor countries, however, the main forces of migration are characterized by the fear of an uncertain future and a lack of freedom. In the least, the Ethiopian government should examine these forces more carefully.

On the same stage, Dr. Tedros expressed that one of the main reason for the increase in emigration is the attitude of the new generation. He gave the example of a group of 66 young people living in Kenya who contributed 4.2 Million Birr to travel to another country. I have doubt on the reality of the story. First of all the money is not big It is only around 200,000 US dollars. I did not think that 66 people left their home to make business with this money outside Ethiopia. Did it really happen?. Anyways, I have many problems with the negative characterization of young Ethiopian entrepreneurs. A more likely scenario is that young people are desperate because the government has monopolized business operations throughout the country. They get no support from the government in the form of business loans and other investment incentives or subsidies are non-existent. If the market were free and young people had access to loans or government support for business, then they wouldn't leave the country.

In Ethiopia and Eritrea the national economy is actually supported by the contribution of monies transferred to family members from young people living abroad. In fact, the Eritrean economy is highly dependent on remittance at the national level. It seems these governments even purposefully push for migration for just such economic gain. In Ethiopia, instead of being advocates of worker's rights government backed agencies actually sell workers to Arab Countries in exchange for ongoing support. Moreover, instead of being advocates of migrant's rights corrupt government backed agencies actually work together with human traffickers to collect fees for illegal immigration.

There is enormous evidence that the Ethiopian government violates human rights. Young people are one of the targeted victims through repression of freedom of expression and the free flow of ideas. This social reality can be seen as one of the main reasons for migration. Political migration began in Ethiopia

during the Derg Regime during a period called the Red Terror. Many young Ethiopians fled the country to escape the emerging Socialist-Military Government in the 1980s. We have seen the numbers of asylum seekers and refugees in foreign countries increase since the EPRDF (*Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front*) came to power in 1991.

Many studies show that there is a very high occurrence of 'brain drain in Ethiopia today more than ever. The national symposium of Ethiopia Diaspora presented that in the past decade Ethiopia has lost a shocking 75 percent of its trained professionals. Mostly, physicians, engineers and scientists leave Ethiopia to seek asylum in developed countries. The government is saying that this is happening as a result of people pursuing better lives in homes outside of Ethiopia. The truth is, however, that these professionals are pursuing careers outside of their chosen paths and they do not work in their related professions. Some of the physicians are taxi drivers, some engineers are waitress and the like in the countries they live in. If there were a better political environment in Ethiopia there is no doubt that this shocking figure would significantly decrease and those professionals would serve their country.

Ethiopian young people do not have confidence in their government enough to wait for a better future. The hope to change an unwanted government by ballot box is almost unthinkable for many young Ethiopians. There is no doubt that this will have a negative impact on their dreams and future planes. In the recent 2015 election, preliminary reports show that the EPRDF and its local ethnic party partners swept the country with a 100 percent win. These results clearly show that Ethiopia is not experiencing democracy. Such results would never happen in a country building genuine democracy. Election site results show just such realities.

The evidence is seen below where I have translated it to English. In the Sodo Region of Southern Ethiopia Mr. Hilemariam Desalegn ran. Mr. Desalegn is the current Prime Minister and the current Head of the ruling EPRDF party. See the election results for yourself below.

Serial Number	Name of Candidate	Number of Votes	Rank
1	Mr. Hailemariam Desalegn	46,154	1
2	Artist Desta Dea Gojele	2	2
3	Mr. Kagnu Seba Hirboro	2	2
4	Mr. Tesfaye Haile Zeke	0	4

Another sample in Southern Ethiopia resulted as this.

Serial Number	Name of Candidate	Number of Votes	Rank
1	Aster Dawit Toshe	724	1
2	Mr. Berbane Baza Bine	0	-
3	Mr. Wochafo Sadom Salte	0	-
4	Arega Abeta Ashabo	0	-
5	Shitaye Zara Helana	0	-
6	Mr. Tekle Boranba Urke	0	-

This result, for me, is an insult to democracy. At the same time it reiterates and reaffirms the stance of the European Union Election Observation Commission led by the esteemed Ms. Ana Gomes to doubt the results of the 2015 election, or any other election in Ethiopia for that matter. The results show how their stance is appropriate and stands for justice and democracy.

In a country where there is very little hope of change through government election there is a greater push for young people to leave the country in order to pursue the barest of dreams. They might even think it better to leave the country all together since no real hope exists anywhere. With exposure to the outside world being high young people long to enjoy democracy and respect for human rights. However, in a country where opposition party members are harassed and alternative ideas are counted as the enemy, it seems inevitable that young people are decided to leave their homelands for good. Needless to say a number of studies show that the level of trust Ethiopian people have in government institutions is low and this factor can be a political push for Ethiopians to emigrate.

When we look at the number and frequency of internally displaced persons in Ethiopia we see that the condition of human rights is very bad. Due to land grabbing over a million people have been displaced. This harsh reality is directly related to government policies and it is as well a further political push.

Generally speaking, Ethiopia and Horn of Africa migration is very much characterized by the push type influence. Among these push influences it seems that even the economic pushers are highly associated with political problems either directly or indirectly. I think Ethiopians have to come together and change their government. The international community and my own country the US have to come together to support political change in Ethiopia.

May God Be with Ethiopia

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