

Information suppression and the Ethiopian Diaspora

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The Ethiopian government attempts to influence the Ethiopian diaspora in support of its political objectives. Its success, however, is contingent up on the alignment of political interests and outlooks between the government and diaspora actors.

Summary

The Ethiopian government's engagement with its diaspora is an extension of its regime survival strategy. The government faces an international legitimacy crisis amid a devastating civil war and multiple insurgencies. It also occasionally faces pressure to end armed conflicts in the country through a peaceful negotiated settlement. The Ethiopian government sees the large Ethiopian diaspora as a potential asset that can mobilised to ward off such criticism and resist pressure. It particularly experienced international condemnation during the devastating Tigray war of 2020-2022, suffering a reputational cost in Western capitals. The Ethiopian state relied on its diaspora in Europe and the U.S. to push back against criticism.

The primary aim of information operations targeting the diaspora is thus transnational legitimisation aimed at regime survival, a modest compared goal to established autocracies. A key objective is also to undermine opposition and dissent within the diaspora, which is historically a hotbed of anti-government politics. The government's efforts to mobilise the diaspora for legitimisation purposes succeed only when its actions align with the diaspora's preexisting political outlook.

The Ethiopian context

The Ethiopian diaspora, estimated to be anywhere between one to three million worldwide, is an important political and economic player. Its role has been amplified by digital

technologies and Ethiopia's political fragility. The diaspora has historically been a hotbed of opposition. Diaspora-based media and activists played an active role in the 2018 political transition that brought Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power. However, initial hopes for democratic change were dashed by the 2020-2022 Tigray war and ongoing insurgencies in the Amhara and Oromia regions.

This context of internal conflict and shrinking civic space has resulted in a legitimacy crisis for the government. As a result, it seeks to mobilise the diaspora as a strategic asset for regime survival. Its objectives include promoting its narratives globally, undermining critics abroad, and secure foreign exchange through remittances. Europe is a key arena

Key Messages

- The Ethiopian government views the diaspora as both a major asset and a threat
- The state actively engages, co-opts, and suppresses critical diaspora voices
- The government mobilised diaspora for pro-state digital campaigns and diplomacy during the Tigray war
- These efforts are an extension of the government's regime survival strategy
- The government's ability to influence the diaspora is contingent upon alignment of political outlook
- Mobilisation during Tigray war deepened distrust in Western media and institutions among the diaspora



for these efforts. It is the third important destination for the Ethiopian diaspora, following the U.S. and Middle East, as well as a key source of remittance. It is also one key source of political pressure concerning human rights.

Overview of the Ethiopian Diaspora

The Ethiopian diaspora has been growing steadily and is estimated to be between 1 and 3 million worldwide.¹ Europe is an important destination, home to 13% of Ethiopians living abroad, making it third after the US (27%) and Saudi Arabia (18%).² The EU is also an important source of remittances. In 2020, remittances from Europe totalled \$592.9 million, making it the third largest regional source after Asia/Middle East and North America. The UK, Germany, and Italy were among the top ten sources of remittances to Ethiopia.³

The diaspora is very diverse in terms of ethnic origins, political affiliations, education and social backgrounds. Divisions are particularly visible along ethnic lines, as well as reflecting ideological divisions back home. There was a moment of unity following Abiy Ahmed's rise to power in 2018, but this was short lived.

The Ethiopian Diaspora is a key political actor

In the face of authoritarian rule and repression at home, the Ethiopian diaspora has historically played an outsized role of opposition and advocacy. It pushed for change, promoting human rights, press freedom, and free elections, while also providing political leadership inside and outside of government. Through its satellite media, blogs, and social media activism, the diaspora has amplified protest movements and shaped international narratives.

It has also complicated conflict resolution, with financial support for insurgent groups and hardline positions contributing to polarisation in Ethiopia. The diaspora engages in lobbying in host countries, mostly acting against the Ethiopian government.

With the expansion of digital media, the diaspora's political influence has expanded, enabling it to contribute to facilitating and coordinating the protests which brought about a change of government in Ethiopia in 2018.⁴ Diaspora lobbying and mobilization in support of the Ethiopian government has also had real political impacts on host countries. For example, dissatisfaction with the Biden Administration's response to Ethiopian conflict during the Tigray war prompted

Information suppression has a transnational character, whereby authoritarian states attempt to control the flow of information beyond their borders to shape international public opinion and mute dissenting voices with the goal of strengthening their grip on power. Diaspora communities constitute one important target of such transnational information suppression.

¹ Thubauville, Sophia, and Kim Glück. (2025) 'Home- and Future- Making in the Ethiopian Diaspora'. Addis Ababa: Centre français des études éthiopiennes

² RemitScope Africa, *Ethiopia: Country Diagnostic 2022* (RemitScope Africa, 2023), accessed 9 January 2026, remitscope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Ethiopia_Diagnostics_Remitscope_AFRICA_EN.pdf

³ USD UK (86.2 million USD), Germany (61.5 million USD), and Italy (40.6 million USD). remitscope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Ethiopia_Diagnostics_Remitscope_AFRICA_EN.pdf

⁴ For instance, the activist turned politician, Jawar Mohammed, based in the US during the 2015-2015 period, were influential in mobilizing youth, through his media Oromo Media Networks (OMN) and as a central hub on social media, particularly face book.

lobbying in Virginia, contributing to the victory of a Trump-endorsed republican candidate in a gubernatorial race.⁵

The Ethiopian state actively engages the diaspora

The state views the diaspora as an economic and political asset, but also as a threat that beyond state control. Ethiopia has a dedicated agency, Ethiopia Diaspora Service (EDS), to facilitate engagement and mobilise the diaspora for development, cultivating political support, and image building.

Historically, the state has attempted to reduce opposition and information coming from the diaspora through the jamming of satellite media and blocking of dissident websites. It has also labelled critics in the diaspora as terrorists and threats to the constitutional order, as well as occasionally attempting to get them extradited.⁶ The state has co-opted members of the diaspora by providing incentives like opportunities for investment and land, housing, and privileged banking opportunities. For example, during the Tigray war diasporic members who were active in supporting the Ethiopian government's information operations were allegedly rewarded with material benefits.⁷

Embassies have been used to try and infiltrate diasporic communities, as well as link pro-government efforts across borders. It attempts to use the diaspora to shape perceptions and extend its strategic narratives on key issues. Recently, the state has also focused on second generation diaspora, through initiatives such as Second-Generation Homecoming, considering first generation Ethiopian diaspora members to be too politically inclined.⁸ Seeking identity and belonging, second and third generation are seen as more likely to buy into the narratives of transformation, delivered through visual media.

The Ethiopian diaspora in Europe is a key target

The political changes in 2018 temporarily realigned relations between the Ethiopian diaspora and the government. Generally seen as a hotbed of political opposition, the diaspora embraced Abiy Ahmed and supported his newly formed government. Ethiopian embassies mobilised the Ethiopian community to travel to Frankfurt to meet with Abiy Ahmed for his first official visit to Europe,⁹ where he was welcomed with great fanfare.¹⁰ There he urged Ethiopians abroad to help build a new Ethiopia instead of 'pointing the finger and criticising' from a distance.¹¹

During the Tigray war, the diaspora in Europe mobilised in support of the government through coordinated digital campaigns and public demonstrations, amid increasing pressure on the

⁵ Kuradusenge-McLeod, Claudine. "Democracy by the "Other": How Ethiopian Diaspora Communities in Virginia Engage in Political Participation." *Diaspora aop* (2024): e25120241115.

⁶ A high-profile case involves the kidnapping of Andargachew Tsige, a high-profile opposition leader, who was kidnapped and handed over to authorities while transiting through Yemen in 2014.

⁷ EU02 – Interview, member of Defend Ethiopia Task Force Steering Committee, Europe, June 18, 2025.

⁸ E05 – Interview, Researcher, studying Ethiopian conflicts and foreign policy, Jan 25, 2025, Addis Ababa.

⁹ DW (Oct 31, 2018). Calling all Ethiopians to return home www.dw.com/en/prime-minister-abi-ahmed-on-tour-to-mobilize-ethiopians-abroad/a-46107833

¹⁰ The weight of the visit to the diaspora in Europe is evidenced by the entourage that accompanied him from Addis, including Daniel Kibret, Workneh Gebeyehu, Shimelis Abdissa, and Ahmed Shide Shide. MoFA www.facebook.com/MFAEthiopia/posts/247504965252263/ (DW live video)

¹¹ DW (Oct 31, 2018). Calling all Ethiopians to return home www.dw.com/en/prime-minister-abi-ahmed-on-tour-to-mobilize-ethiopians-abroad/a-46107833

Ethiopian government to resolve the conflict peacefully. This mobilisation, coordinated by embassies, eventually coalesced under the Defend Ethiopia Task Force in Europe. Defend Ethiopia EU's declared objectives included 'confronting the disinformation and misinformation launched against our country' and 'challenging the policies and actions of European Governments, the European Union (EU), the European Parliament (EP) and UN entities that might negatively influence Ethiopia's interests'.¹²

The group took the narratives of the Ethiopian government global, through social media campaigns and letter and email writing targeting European policymakers. It was also an active participant of what became the #NoMore movement, coordinating closely with pro-government diaspora networks in North America to organise protests criticising 'Western intervention' in the Ethiopian conflict and condemning 'Western media bias'. The diaspora thus acted as intermediaries – transmitting (and translating) the narratives of the Ethiopian government regarding the war to a European audience.

Following the end of the Tigray war relations between the government and the diaspora in Europe has deteriorated. Tensions emerged after the release of politicians like Sebat Nega and Jawar Mohammed from prison and deteriorated further with the signing of the Pretoria Peace Agreement. The start of insurgency in Amhara in 2023 only worsened the relationship. Government-led diaspora mobilisation during the war has had lasting effects within diaspora communities. Narratives portraying Western countries and Western media as biased and supportive of Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) against the Ethiopian state were widely internalised, contributing to declining trust in Western media and institutions among diaspora activists.¹³

Regime survival as a key goal

The Ethiopian government's mobilisation of its diaspora is an extension of its regime survival strategy. Facing an international legitimacy crisis during the Tigray war, it actively mobilised the diaspora into an advocacy network to counter condemnation and pressure for peaceful negotiations. The shift in the relationship, particularly the change of the diaspora's outlook towards the government following the signing of Pretoria agreement, shows that the ability of the government to influence diasporic networks is limited and contingent upon alignment of political outlook.

¹² "About Us," Defend Ethiopia, n.d., accessed 9 January 2026, <https://defendethiopia.eu/about-us/>

¹³ Multiple interviews.



Policy recommendations

To prevent diasporas from being co-opted as agents or becoming victims of information suppression in Europe, initiatives should acknowledge the fears that tie diaspora to authoritarian states.

- **Recognising that the diaspora is neither monolithic nor readily influenced.** Its vulnerability emerges when political outlooks align.
- **EU policy makers should invest in understanding country contexts** (Ethiopia) so that EU/European countries do not take positions that are seen as paternalistic, undermining these countries.
- **Build Ethiopia/Africa expertise:** There is a need for more Ethiopia, and broadly, Africa expertise in Europe, to continually assess and understand their foreign policies and engagement with their large diaspora.
- **Diversify sources of information:** Conflicts in fragile contexts are complex, polarised, and highly contested. There is a need to diversify sources of information consult diverse constituencies before taking a position on such conflicts.
- **Consult the diaspora:** The EU can consult diaspora communities more closely, and take their inputs, in its decision making regarding countries like Ethiopia, so as to have a more nuanced perspective and avoid taking positions that sideline and alienate the diaspora.

Disclaimer

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About the ARM Project

Coordinated by the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), the ARM project delves into authoritarian strategies for information control beyond borders. While foreign disinformation receives ample scrutiny, other forms of foreign information manipulation and intervention (FIMI) remain overlooked.

Analysing Russia, China, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, ARM conceptualises and addresses different forms of FIMI. The project will explore the extent that major global players like China and Russia, alongside Ethiopia and Rwanda, engage in transnational information suppression, particularly targeting European diaspora communities.

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