

## Introduction to Ethiopia

Archeologists have found the oldest known human ancestors in Ethiopia, including *Ardipithecus kadabba* (c. 5.8–5.2 million years) and *Australopithecus anamensis* (c. 4.2 million years). The most famous fossil is “Lucy,” or “Dinkanesh”, which means “you are wonderful” or “Wonderful Woman” in Amharic-- perhaps the original Wonder Woman! She is *Australopithecus afarensis* (c. 3.2 million years). She is housed in the bone vaults of the National Museum of Ethiopia in Addis and is sometimes actually on display, although the normal exhibition is a cast.

Originally called Abyssinia, Ethiopia is sub-Saharan Africa's oldest state, and its Solomonic dynasty claims descent from King Menelik I, traditionally believed to have been the son of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. Abyssinia extended across the Gulf of Aden into Yemen. The current nation is a consolidation of smaller kingdoms that owed feudal allegiance to the Ethiopian emperor.

Hamitic peoples migrated to Ethiopia from Asia Minor in prehistoric times. Semitic traders from Arabia penetrated the region in the 7th century B.C. Its Red Sea ports were important to the Roman and Byzantine Empires. Coptic Christianity was brought to the region in A.D. 341, and a variant of it became Ethiopia's state religion. Ancient Ethiopia reached its peak in the 5th century, then was isolated by the rise of Islam and weakened by feudal wars.

Modern Ethiopia emerged under Emperor Menelik II, who established its independence by routing an Italian invasion in 1896. His wife Taitu was one of his military advisors and was a powerful figure in overthrowing the Italians. They expanded Ethiopia by conquest. Disorder that followed Menelik's death brought his daughter Zeweditu to the throne in 1917 with his cousin, Tafari Makonnen, as regent and heir apparent. When the empress died in 1930, Tafari was crowned Emperor Haile Selassie I.

Haile Selassie, called the “Lion of Judah,” outlawed slavery and tried to centralize his scattered realm, in which 70 languages were spoken. In 1931, he created a constitution, revised in 1955, that called for a parliament with an appointed senate, an elected chamber of deputies, and a system of courts. But basic power remained with the emperor.

Fascist Italy invaded Ethiopia on Oct. 3, 1935, forcing Haile Selassie into exile in May 1936. Ethiopia was annexed to Eritrea, then an Italian colony, and to Italian Somaliland, forming Italian East Africa. In 1941, British troops routed the Italians, and Haile Selassie returned to Addis Ababa. In 1952, Eritrea was incorporated into Ethiopia.

On Sept. 12, 1974, Haile Selassie was deposed, the constitution suspended, and Ethiopia proclaimed a Socialist state under a collective military dictatorship called the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), also known as the Derg. U.S. aid stopped, and Cuban and Soviet aid began. Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam became head of state in 1977. During this period Ethiopia fought against Eritrean secessionists as well as Somali rebels, and the government fought against its own people in a campaign called the “red terror.” Thousands of political opponents were killed, and in total between 1 and 2 million Ethiopians perished. (A visit to the Red Terror Museum near Meskel Square is an eye-opening experience documenting this period of Ethiopia's history.) Mengistu remained leader until 1991, when his greatest supporter, the Soviet Union, dismantled itself. In May 2008, Ethiopia's Supreme Court sentenced Mengistu to death in absentia. He has lived in Zimbabwe since 1991. It is unclear whether he is currently dead or alive.

Meles Zenawi became Prime Minister in 1991 when a group called the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) seized the capital in 1991, and in May a separatist guerrilla organization, the

Eritrean People's Liberation Front, took control of the province of Eritrea. The two groups agreed that Eritrea would have an internationally supervised referendum on independence. This election took place in April 1993 with almost unanimous support for Eritrean independence. Ethiopia accepted and recognized Eritrea as an independent state within a few days. Sixty-eight leaders of the former military government were put on trial in April 1996 on charges that included genocide and crimes against humanity. Since Eritrea's independence, Eritrea and Ethiopia had disagreed about the exact demarcation of their borders, and in May 1998, Eritrea initiated border clashes that developed into a full-scale war that left more than 80,000 dead and further destroyed both countries' ailing economies. After a costly and bloody two-year war, a formal peace agreement was signed in December 2000. The United Nations provided more than 4,000 peacekeeping forces to patrol the buffer zone between the two nations. An international commission defined a new border between the two countries in April 2002. Ethiopia disputed the new border, escalating tensions between the two countries once again. In December 2005, an international Court of Arbitration ruled that Eritrea had violated international law in attacking Ethiopia in the 1998 war. In 2003, in an effort to solve its chronic shortage of food and to lessen its dependence on international aid, Ethiopia began relocating 2 million farmers from their parched highland homes to areas with more fertile soil in the western part of the country. The largest relocation program in African history, however, has turned into a disaster. The majority of those resettled are still unable to support themselves, and, most alarmingly, much of the fertile regions where the farmers have been resettled are rife with malaria. There have been 3 national elections in the past 13 years; in 2005, 2010, and 2015. The 2005 election was abruptly halted when the EPRDF, led by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, realized that their party was losing control politically. This led to demonstrations and riots which caught the government off guard at first, but soon led to a crackdown on political opposition.

Over the course of the next 5 years, leading up to the next national election in 2010, and subsequent 5 years leading up to the election of 2015, the government analyzed where the voices of dissent came from and embarked on a variety of laws in order to control and weaken any opposition or dissent. These included laws that compromised the media and justice systems as well as the NGO/ CSO community. There were protests both internally and internationally but to no avail.

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) won parliamentary elections by a wide margin in May 2010, and May 2015 with 100% of the seats. Such results lead to questions about the democratic process in Ethiopia.

In August 2012, Prime Minister Zenawi died at age 57 after a short illness. He is credited with lifting the country out of famine to the point that Ethiopia began exporting food, reducing poverty, increasing economic growth, and improving infrastructure. However, some feel that Zenawi was repressive and dictatorial, arresting and imprisoning activists, journalists, and members of the opposition. Relations between the U.S. and Ethiopia improved under Zenawi, with Ethiopia helping the U.S. combat Muslim militants in Africa. Hailemariam Desalegn, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, succeeded Zenawi in the fall of 2012.

In October 2016, a 10-month State of Emergency was declared after heightened political unrest and a fatal stampede at the Ireecha religious festival in the Oromia region killed scores of people. The state of emergency was lifted in August 2017, but not before over 20,000 Ethiopians were arrested (Human Rights Watch).

On 14 February 2018, the Prime Minister, Hailemariam Desalign unexpectedly resigned. A new PM, Dr. Abiy Ahmed Ali, was elected and is currently in power. His own diversity straddles many of the conflicts in the country he leads. He is ethnically Oromo, from a Muslim father and Christian mother, and speaks 5 languages fluently. In October 2019 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for ending the

decades-long Ethiopia/Eritrean conflict. His open and progressive leadership brings promise for a strong future but is also bringing ethnic unrest as long-repressed groups are raising their agendas and seeking retaliation for past wrongs. In 2021 several of these areas of unrest became violent uprisings.