

Africa's new giant emerges from the shadows

When Feyisa Lilesa claimed the silver medal in the men's marathon at the 2016 Summer Olympics, he crossed both arms above his head in a political gesture that was seen across the planet. **Legalbrief** reports that the mega sporting event coincided with a wave of violent state repression. Fast forward two years, and the world is saluting the east African country which has embarked on a series of pro-democracy reforms, including ending the long-standing practice of jailing political dissidents. The reform agenda under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, which has received nods and political acclaim globally, **has radically broken the mould not only in the Ethiopian context but also in the African and global political spheres**. For example, the UN Security Council on Friday said it was preparing to lift sanctions on neighbouring Eritrea after the US dropped its insistence on prolonging the measures despite a peace deal with Ethiopia. A report on the **News24** site notes that the UK circulated a draft resolution to the council on Thursday that called for lifting the arms embargo and all travel bans, asset freezes and targeted sanctions on Eritrea. The council is to vote on the proposed resolution on 14 November. Diplomats said they expected the measure to be adopted. The council slapped sanctions on Eritrea in 2009 for its alleged support to Al-Shabaab jihadists in Somalia but the draft resolution acknowledged that UN monitors had 'not found conclusive evidence that Eritrea supports Al-Shabaab.'

The Daily Maverick notes that Ethiopia's dramatic shift began with the lifting of the state of emergency that had been imposed in February. This was followed by the release of more than 2000 political prisoners who had been detained in a government crackdown of protesters and the adoption of a law that ensures amnesty for former detainees. At the same time, government lifted the 'terrorist designation' of three groups while promising engagement on reform of the legislative framework, including the anti-terrorism laws and an overhaul of the justice system. In addition, Ahmed's pursuit of Pax Ethiopia culminated in the Eritrean-Ethiopian rapprochement, bringing to an end the two decades-long animosity between the two countries. In July, Ahmed and Eritrean President, Isaias Afwerki, signed a full peace agreement which realised the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two states, the opening of embassies, resumption of flight services, connection of ports and re-institution of telecommunication services. **The deal has serious implications for the geopolitics of the Horn of Africa** as Ethiopia moves to reinforce its status as a regional hub in light of growing strategic interests of key powers for Red Sea ports and the competition for influence among the Middle Eastern axes.

Analyst David Monyae believes there is nothing that will stop Ethiopia achieving its dream of reaching the lower-middle-income status by 2025 as its economy has registered an impressive growth rate of 10.3% since 2005. In a column in **The Mercury**, he points out that Ethiopian Airlines remains Africa's most profitable airline reaching more global destinations than SAA and Kenyan Airlines (the airline is in the early phases of building yet another airport in the Bishoftu area, 48km from Addis Ababa, with a projected annual capacity of 80m passengers). Monyae describes Abiy Ahmed as a peacemaker with a developmental agenda for the wider region. 'He has wasted no time to end the senseless war with neighbouring Eritrea. The peace with Eritrea is part of Ahmed's broad strategy of reforms in Ethiopia. Ahmed has vowed to continue with his predecessors' economic agenda, the second phase of its Growth and Transformation Plan. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is halfway complete. It is expected to supply Ethiopia and its neighbours with much-needed energy to power economic development in the region. The new Chinese-built 750km Ethiopia-Djibouti railway has shortened the time in getting goods from port. Ethiopia is attracting more investment from China. It is becoming an alternative destination for Chinese companies. The country has already earmarked itself to be Africa's manufacturing hub. The world's attention remains fixed on SA and Nigeria as the most vibrant African economies, but it seems Ethiopia will soon have a seat at the table with the giants.'

Just days after appointing the first female President, Ethiopia has followed that up with the unanimous endorsement by Parliament of prominent women rights defender Meaza Ashenafi as the first woman Federal Supreme Court president. 'Ethiopia's march towards gender parity in key leadership positions continues unabatedly,' noted chief of staff Fitsum Arega. A report on the **allAfrica** site notes that Ashenafi (54), a prominent women rights defender, served as a High Court judge between 1989 and 1992. In 1993 she was appointed by the Ethiopian Constitution Commission as a legal adviser. In 1995, Ashenafi founded the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association, and became its executive director. Through her legal contacts, she has been instrumental in campaigning for women's rights in

Ethiopia. Ashenafi told the [BBC's](#) Focus on Africa programme that she wants to ensure that the country has an independent judiciary. 'This is an honour and a distinct privilege. This kind of offer does not come every day and this is a new chapter in our country as we go through a transformation,' she said. **'I am so happy that the glass ceiling is shattered and my daughters can dream of becoming anyone they want to be in Ethiopia.'** The report notes that Ethiopia's legal system has in the past been criticised as being a tool of government power.

As previously reported in [Legalbrief Today](#), the government last month appointed a woman to the largely ceremonial position of President for the first time, further increasing female representation in the government of Africa's second-most populous nation. In a unanimous vote, Ethiopian lawmakers picked career diplomat Sahle-Work Zewde (68) to replace Mulatu Teshome who had resigned. A [TimesLIVE](#) report notes that Ahmed last week appointed a slimline 20-person cabinet in which half the posts are held by women. They include Defence Minister Aisha Mohammed and Muferiat Kamil who leads the newly-created Ministry of Peace, responsible for police and domestic intelligence agencies. [The Washington Post](#) reports that this could be one of the most important ministries in the government, though its name has garnered a degree of criticism on social media for its Orwellian sound. It oversees the federal police, the intelligence services and the information security agency, and it will take the lead in tackling much of the ethnic unrest that has swept the countryside since Abiy's reforms. **'If the current change in Ethiopia is headed equally by both men and women, it can sustain its momentum and realise a prosperous Ethiopia free of religious, ethnic and gender discrimination,'** Sahle-Work said on Thursday.

And, for the record, [Lilesa has returned to his homeland](#) from exile in the US after sports officials assured him he would not face prosecution. [Legalbrief](#) reports that Lilesa was quoted as saying **the new government was 'a result of the struggle by the people'** and he hoped it would address concerns after years of repression in Africa's second most populous nation.