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AfricarEUnaissance: The great European strategy for Africa can start in Ethiopia

After just coming back from a demanding mission in Ethiopia, with a high-level EESC delegation, the images and contents overlap in a whirlwind of emotions and convictions, which I could sum up in this way: in a world where autocrats seem to be gaining ground, here is a country that is going in the opposite direction and could claim the title of good news of the year and, perhaps, lion of the African Renaissance.

Populated by one hundred million people and located in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia has a population 70% of whom are less than 30 years old, and is destined to double by 2050. Among the last 20 countries according the UN Human Development Index, representing 5% of the world population in a state of absolute poverty, the second country in the world for the number of refugees accepted (920,000), over 3.2 million internal refugees (the highest in the world) reflecting clashes between different ethnic groups, over 300,000 forced repatriations in the last year of Ethiopians who had emigrated illegally mostly to Saudi Arabia, via Yemen.

And yet a country with impressive economic growth, over 10% a year, a process of democratisation without equal on the continent in such a short period. The new Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, 42, elected in April 2018, started by releasing hundreds of political prisoners and detained journalists, and for the first time in the past 15 years there is no longer even one in prison. One swallow does not a summer make, certainly, but it is still a good indicator of the state of freedom in a country. This was followed by an important reform for media freedom, by laws on civil society, and by the establishment of a new National Electoral Commission, entrusted to a former leader of an opposition party, who had been repeatedly imprisoned in the past and is today responsible for preparing for the 2020 elections.

At the beginning of 2018 Ethiopia seemed to have to sunk into a generalised civil war. In the end Abiy Ahmed prevailed, by choosing to focus on young people and on Ethiopian women, establishing equality in the government and assigning to women many key portfolios, such as the Ministry of Peace (which monitors refugees, internal refugees, police and security services), the Presidency of the Republic, the Electoral Commission, the Ministry of Commerce, the CEO of the company that promotes industrial parks and so on. And finally he signed a peace agreement with Eritrea, after thirty years of war and devastating hostilities. Today he is providing part of the African military mission in Somalia and is seeking to promote a peaceful solution for South Sudan.

By opening up a society that had long remained closed in the feudal scheme of the imperial regime of Hailé Selassie, later modified into one of the most closed and orthodox military Marxist regimes, this government has inevitably made many enemies, especially within the old guard of power and in many regional and provincial structures.

However, Abiy Ahmed seems to be managing to stay on course, promising to dismantle state control of the Ethiopian economy so as to develop entrepreneurship and attract foreign investment, willing to join the WTO within the next year, as well as aiming to build a real regional market and encourage a true African internal market, while at the same time initiating significant social and labour reform, which includes setting a minimum wage, and while being among the first to implement the Global Compact on immigration, with the new law on refugees, which allows them to enter social and economic life and the labour market, like any Ethiopian citizen.

The ultimate goal is the creation of jobs in a country that has demand for at least 10 million jobs per year, wages even in the new industrial parks ranging between 30 and 50 dollars a month, among the lowest in the world but still three times higher than the salaries paid in the local business system.

The prime minister, a former military man who studied computer science and philosophy, has a Muslim father and a Christian mother. He has energy to sell, and attracts much attention, first and foremost in the European Union, which is making an enormous political and even economic investment in this country, for geostrategic and regional stabilisation reasons. But he also has the economic attention of the new Chinese, South Korean, Indian, Pakistani and Taiwanese investors, who see the country as a low-price hub to produce goods for rich countries. And finally also a fair amount of credit from private investors, international and national NGOs, as well as all the main multilateral agencies, such as the UN, World Bank, African Union, UNHCR, IOM, ILO, etc.

Despite its limitations and the risk of regression, Ethiopia is today a country that defines refugees as "welcome guests", which seeks allies and friends, especially in Europe, a country which does not renounce its legitimate pride as a great nation and which wants a future of peace and progress for its people and for Africa.

It is a big bet, complex but possible, that deserves to be followed, encouraged and supported. Also for all the living forces of the economy, of business, of work, of agriculture, of humanitarian NGOs and of civil society and also of culture.

It can be done. Ethiopia, with its vital energy, can become the real pivot of the already proposed European strategy for a new Alliance for specific progress. EurAfrica or AfricarEUnaissance are possible today. Let us not miss this great opportunity, for everyone.