

German Africa Award 2021 will be awarded to Ethiopian human rights activist Daniel Bekele



Dr. Daniel Bekele is being honored for his lifelong fight for human rights. Daniel Bekele is currently the Chief Commissioner of the *Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC)*.

The German Africa Award of the *German Africa Foundation* has been awarded annually for over 25 years to outstanding personalities from the African continent and is the highest award of its kind in Germany. Traditionally, it is presented in a formal ceremony in the fall by a leading representative of German politics. In 2020, the prize had been awarded to Somali peace activist Ilwad Elman. Daniel Bekele is scheduled to receive the prize in November 2021. An independent 24-member jury of experts from politics, political foundations and the media selected Daniel Bekele from more than 30 nominees.



Daniel Bekele's commitment to human rights began early: at the age of only 23, he started working as a lawyer in Addis Ababa, represented NGOs and quickly became a much sought-after expert on democracy and human rights. He promoted human rights and civil society in Ethiopia including women's rights by working closely with *Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association* and several CSOs. In 2004, Daniel became "Head of Policy Research and Advocacy" at *ActionAid* in Ethiopia. He was one of the leading activists of the *Global Call to Action Against Poverty*. As a representative of civil society, he took a leading role in monitoring Ethiopia's 2005 parliamentary elections. After criticizing the questionable conduct of the elections and its violent aftermath, he was attacked and injured by armed government security operatives in October 2005. In November 2005, he was arrested and subsequently sentenced to prison on trumped up charges of trying to "overthrow the government and the constitution." He remained in prison as an internationally recognized nonviolent political prisoner until March 2008.

Daniel's determination to advocate for the political rights of disadvantaged populations in particular has not been diminished by his imprisonment. Between 2011 and 2019, he held senior leadership positions at *Human Rights Watch* and *Amnesty International* to promote human rights on the African continent and was responsible for hundreds of publications on a wide range of human rights and good governance issues in Africa.

Daniel is convinced that socio-economic development should go hand in hand with respect for human rights and democratic development; and is therefore not afraid to also criticize the donor countries of the North for their unprincipled cooperation with authoritarian regimes as well as their failure on the humanitarian obligations to support the development of poor countries.

In the wake of Ethiopia's democratic opening under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the Ethiopian Federal Parliament appointed Daniel Bekele to lead the *Ethiopian State Human Rights Commission (EHRC)* in July 2019.

Since then, Daniel significantly transformed the commission and successfully advocated for greater independence and expansion of the powers of the Commission: In July 2020, an amendment to the law was passed in parliament to strengthen the Commission's operational and financial autonomy.

The deteriorating political climate in Ethiopia and the civil war over Tigray Province in the north of the country present the Commission with the difficult task of fairly assessing the human rights violations of the parties involved in a politically charged atmosphere. Not surprisingly, the Commission has also been subject to criticism in this context.

Most recently, the commission was praised for its open criticism of the Ethiopian security forces' misconduct in the wake of the unrest following the murder of Oromo activist and singer Hachalu Hundessa in July 2020. The commission also advocated a fair trial for imprisoned opposition politicians such as that of opposition activist Jawar Mohammed and Eskinder Nega. Besides the public advocacy work, the Commission also worked behind the scenes for improving prison conditions, release of detainees and facilitating conditions for political impasse such as hunger strikes by opposition politicians. Bekele's addressing the presence of Eritrean troops on Ethiopian territory at a time when it was still taboo was also met with respect by observers, as was his openness for criticism of his Commission's human rights work.

Testament to the international reputation and credibility of Daniel's Commission is the ongoing joint investigation with the *United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights* on a report on the human rights violations committed by all sides in the course of the Tigray conflict. The investigation was endorsed by several governments including the EU, US, Canada, Australia and the *UN Security Council*.

The President of the *German Africa Foundation*, Dr. Uschi Eid, said on the occasion of the announcement of the award of the German Africa Award to Daniel Bekele: „I am pleased that the independent jury has chosen an outstanding human rights activist. Dr. Daniel Bekele deserves this prize for his lifelong advocacy of human rights. I sincerely hope that the award will encourage Daniel and his colleagues in the *Ethiopian Human Rights Commission* to stand up for human rights in Ethiopia in a fearless and impartial manner.“

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