

Addis Ababa on the Brink:

Is Ethiopia's Democratic Transition in Jeopardy?

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Ethiopia's transition that started in April 2018 has been mired by persistent violence and ethnic tensions. The killing of the Oromo musician and activist Hachalu has exacerbated an already tumultuous situation and has put the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in a difficult position. Needless to say, the transition will continue to be a fraught process and a source of tension due to many years of inequality and ethnic tensions. The persistent violence casts doubt on the country's democratic transition and whether the recently-postponed federal elections will be peaceful and credible.

Introduction

Ethiopia has witnessed deadly unrest since the murder of the prominent Oromo musician and activist Hachalu Hundessa at the end of June. The ensuing unrest has so far left more than 230 people dead and displaced at least 10,000 people in the Oromia region of the country. The government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has responded heavily by deploying the military to the capital Addis Ababa and cities across Oromia region as well as arresting leaders of Oromo opposition groups in an attempt to prevent the spread of violence. Those arrested include Jawar Mohamed and Bekele Gerba, two key Oromo opposition figures and leading members of the Oromo Federalist Congress, one of the two main Oromo opposition parties. The country also witnessed a complete two-week internet shutdown following the murder of the singer. The government in Africa’s diplomatic hub had said it is trying to prevent speech that could further incite ethnic violence.

Hachalu Hundessa, the towering figure of contemporary Oromo resistance music (also known as Geerarsa), was fatally shot by unknown assailants outside a home in the capital Addis Ababa on June 29. A former political prisoner who was arrested at the age of seventeen in 2003 for his activism, Hachalu became a prominent figure among the Oromo due to his music that encouraged protesters to stay the course during their campaign for political change. His lyrics served as a rallying anthem during the 2015-2018 Oromo protests that finally forced the former Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Deselgnh out of office. Hachalu’s music encompassed references to Oromo folklore and narratives regarding what the Oromo consider as decades of repression and political marginalisation by previous Ethiopian governments.

Oromos—the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia—denounced the assassination and the government’s subsequent move as an attempt at marginalisation within their own country. In response to the murder of the singer who was regarded as a crucial voice for the Oromo people, demonstrators erupted in several major cities, particularly the in Oromia region that surrounds the capital Addis Ababa. The resulting unrest has left more than 239 people dead and over 5,000 detained by security forces. Oromo diaspora communities have initiated protests in cities across the world.

Transition in Jeopardy

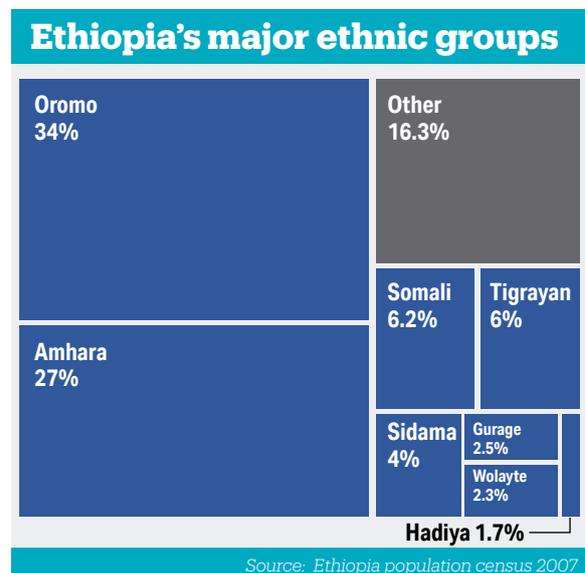
The latest unrest complicates Ethiopia’s prospects for a peaceful democratic transition. Upon assuming office in April 2018 following over two years of anti-government protests, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed initiated dramatic political reforms, which have created moments of euphoria in and outside of the country. Abiy’s unprecedented transformations include lifting the state of emergency that has been in place since October 2016, removing bans on opposition parties, the nomination of women to senior political positions and reconciling with neighbouring Eritrea.

However, more than two years on, Prime Minister Abiy’s ability to address Ethiopia’s most pressing challenges and deliver on much-needed reforms has been called into question. Several reasons stand out as prime factors.

Lack of institutional reform

Ethiopia’s democratic culture and institutions are in their infancy and remain relatively weak. The ethnic Amhara highlanders have traditionally maintained their historically imperial control over other ethnic populations, including the Oromo, Somali and Tigray. For example, all except one of the country’s emperors from 1270 to 1974 were Amhara. The Amhara domination of Ethiopia led to competitive rivalries between the Amhara and other ethnic groups in the country, such as the Oromo and Tigray.

In 1991, the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) toppled the Derg regime that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1987 and formed the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Under the leadership of Meles Zenawi—a veteran Tigray guerrilla fighter—the TPLF introduced a notion of ethnic federalism to Ethiopia’s 1995 [constitution](#), and each ethnic group was guaranteed a right of self-determination, including and up to the right of secession. Once the federal system was established, it became obvious that none of the federal regions actually acquired the rights promised in the constitution. Zenawi’s model revolved around the rhetoric of self-determination, while in practice it allowed an array of regional satellite allies to keep an often kleptocratic authority in power. In 2005, the TPLF held elections, however, once it discovered it was losing, it [clamped down](#) by arresting more than 30,000 people, including all the top opposition leaders, and was able to secure victory. Following the EPRDF election ‘victory’ in May 2005, widespread protests erupted across the country. Security forces shot dead scores of protesters and the number of political prisoners mushroomed.



POLICY OUTLOOK

In December 2019, Abiy dissolved the EPRDF coalition and formed the Prosperity Party (PP)—a pan-Ethiopian national party distanced itself from the EPRDF's nationalist narrative. Throughout its nearly three decades rule, the EPRDF had long depicted Ethiopia's ethnic groups as victims of forced assimilationist policies under a nation-building project that began in the 19th century and ended in 1995 with the introduction of the multinational federal order. Abiy's new PP formulated an alternative history that de-emphasised ethnic domination and marginalisation and instead focused on distancing Ethiopia's politics from ethnic federalism. Particularly important was that the establishment of the PP came at a time ethnic identity and ethnic nationalism were at the forefront of political mobilisation and the demands of country's ethnic groups for political autonomy and cultural justice remained unresolved.

Additionally, Abiy's critics mention that the dismantling of the EPRDF coalition and formation of the PP disregarded proper party procedures, arguing that Abiy alone imposed this change. For example, [Lemma Megersa](#), former president of the Oromia Regional State and the leader of the political process that brought Abiy Ahmed to office in early 2018, has publicly displayed his opposition to the formation of the Prosperity Party. The Oromos, from whom Abiy himself hails and whose protests helped him rise to power, are deeply impacted by fragmentation over the new party. The leadership in Abiy's own Oromo Democratic Party, for instance, is divided between those that back Abiy's pan-Ethiopian discourse and those that seek a continuation of the ethno-nationalist system. The TPLF, EPRDF's most dominant member, has also refused to join the PP and called it as "illegal and reactionary". The problem now relates to the feelings of many Ethiopians that the dissolution of the EPRDF and the creation of the new centralist PP are being imposed by the country's leadership. In this regard, it may become increasingly difficult for Abiy and his new party to maintain law and order and handle the political reform agenda.

Other critics argue that the unitary and centralist nature of Abiy's Prosperity Party is being used as a pretext to to hold on to power and eliminate potential challengers from within. This is a particularly important development given the lack of a constitutional term limits for the prime minister. The current Ethiopian constitution does not limit the number of terms a prime minister can serve and has led to sitting leaders dying in office or resigning solely due to insurmountable pressure.

Spike in violence

Another factor that has complicated Ethiopia's democratic transition has been the increase in political violence and persistent inter-communal conflicts. Since the country's leadership transition began two years ago, Ethiopia has seen a spike in violence, particularly whenever events at the national level lead to disagreements and impact the

political system. In June 2018, for example, Prime Minister Abiy survived an assassination attempt during a rally in Addis Ababa. In October the same year, the Prime Minister again survived an apparent attempt on his life by protesting soldiers who stormed his office. In June of 2019, a series of high-profile assassinations rocked the country. Rogue security officers reportedly gunned down Ambachew Mekonnen, president of the Amhara federal state, and two of his advisers. A few hours later, gunmen in Addis Ababa killed General Seare Mekonnen, Chief of Staff of Ethiopia's military, along with a retired officer. Another round of violence rocked Oromia—Ethiopia's largest region—in November 2019 when the prominent Oromo opposition figure Jawar Mohamed declared that the federal government have withdrawn his security detail in what he said was part of an attempt against his life.

Ethiopia's high-profile political violence: 2018-2020

WHEN	WHAT	CONSEQUENCE(S)
JUNE 22, 2018	A grenade attack at a rally in support of Prime Minister Abiy in Addis Ababa's Meskel Square	Abiy survived the attack. Two people were killed and more than 100 were injured.
26 JULY 2018	Simegnaw Bekele, the project manager of the controversial GERD dam being built by Ethiopia along the Nile river, was found shot dead in his vehicle in Addis Ababa.	Rumours of his assassination quickly circulated throughout the country, even leading to protests. The police later said the dam engineer took his own life.
OCTOBER 10, 2018	Several hundred protesting soldiers, some of them armed, went to see the prime minister - reportedly to demand a pay rise. The situation caused alarm, leading to road closures in the area and the internet to be shut off for hours.	Abiy later said that some of the soldiers had wanted to kill him.
JUNE 22, 2019	Factions of the security forces of Amhara Region, Ethiopia attempted a coup d'état against the regional government.	Amhara Region leader, Ambachew Mekonnen, his bodyguard, General Seare Mekonnen, chief of staff of Ethiopia's military, and several officers were assassinated.
OCTOBER 23, 2019	Jawar Mohammed, a prominent Oromo activist and opposition figure, accused the government of withdrawing his security, in an attempt to have him killed.	Protests erupted and 86 people died during the protests and clashes across Oromia and surrounding areas.
FEBRUARY 23, 2020	A bomb attack targeted a rally supporting Mr Abiy in Ambo in Oromia region.	Abiy did not attend the rally. Close to 30 people were injured.
JUNE 29, 2020	Hachalu Hundessa, an Oromo musician and activist, was gunned down in Addis Ababa	Hachalu's murder sparked nationwide protests that claimed the lives of more 230 people.

A combination of rapid urban expansion, inter-communal conflict over land and resources and violent ethnic nationalism has contributed to the rise of the current wave of instability. [Rising violence and ethnic tensions](#) have taken place against a backdrop of state and party fragility and have so far claimed the lives of thousands and displaced more than three million people in different parts of Ethiopia over the course of the last three years.

Election Delays

The 2020 general elections postponement represents the straw that has broken the camel's back and has contributed significantly to the current political instability. In June 2020, Abiy's government announced that polls due in August 2020 would be postponed for one year due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The decision triggered a looming constitutional crisis and resulted in significant public frustration and rising political temperatures, therefore, posing additional risks to stability.

The opposition subsequently accused Abiy of deliberately stalling elections and complained that it was not given a formal role. Top opposition leaders say that Abiy should have given them more say in deciding how to manage the delay, given the transition's fragility and the broader need for consensus on what are likely to be highly contested polls. When Abiy came to power, the opposition demanded to be politically involved in the transition period leading up to the next elections. The charge that the opposition was not consulted with regards to the postponement decision and its alleged political exclusion is a dangerous development for Ethiopia's transition to democracy and could lead to more protests and violence. For example, the TPLF—the Tigray region's governing party which now sits as the only opposition bloc in the federal parliament—announced that it would go ahead with plans to independently conduct regional elections, potentially in defiance of the federal government, raising fears of a constitutional conflict as the polls will not be held before the federal government's term ends. Additionally, Keria Ibrahim—a top official in the TPLF and speaker of the upper chamber of the parliament—resigned as an apparent protest against the postponement of the planned elections.

Human Rights Issues

Analysts argue that by deploying increasingly repressive tactics in an effort to quell violence in the country, Abiy is demonstrating authoritarian tendencies. The fact that he has also gone after the political opposition has only served to buttress this argument. Since the opening of Ethiopia's political space in 2018, the country has witnessed ethnic flare-ups as well as other grievance flare-ups. With regards to protests and ethnic violence, human rights groups and other observers have warned that Ethiopia's response has seen a return of certain repressive acts used by the previ-

ous government. According to a [recent report](#) by Amnesty International, although Abiy's government took initial first steps "towards improving the human rights environment in the country, a persistence of old-style patterns of violence perpetrated by the security forces threatens to derail sustained long-term gain." The report further noted that following 2019 inter-communal violence in the Amhara and Oromia regions, members of the Ethiopian military, regional police force, local administration officials and allied militia armed youth and vigilante groups carried out serious human rights violations in parts of Oromia and Amhara regions. The violations include "extrajudicial executions, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and other forms of ill-treatment, forced evictions, and destruction of property." Additionally, the government has been accused of silencing opposition figures in the name of preventing ethnic and inter-communal violence. Following the gunning down of the popular outspoken Oromo singer Hachalu Hundesa, the security forces have detained at least [5,000 people](#), "many of whom are in incommunicado detention with their whereabouts unknown," according to Amnesty International. Those detained include prominent opposition figures such as Jawar Mohammed from the Oromo Federalist Congress, leaders of the Oromo Liberation Front, Eskinder Nega of Balderas for True Democracy party, and several journalists.

Furthermore, internet shutdowns have become a regular occurrence in the country, particularly following unrests and anti-government protests. Ethiopians have been without an internet connection for over two weeks, starting from the day after Hachalu's assassination. The government said it is obligated to cut service to prevent potential violence. However, the blackout across the country has made it impossible to access information on those killed and injured in the protests and has amplified concerns that people are being silenced. Since 2016, there have been at least [7 internet shutdowns](#) in the country. In 2019 alone there have been three blackouts. The shutdowns are causing major disruptions by preventing families from communicating, severely [affected humanitarian services](#) in the unrest-affected regions.

In the wake of the latest internet shutdown, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, David Kaye, warned in a series of tweets that shutting down the internet in Ethiopia "is entirely counter-productive and counter to basic human rights standards," while adding that "there is, of course, a serious risk that social media platforms, esp. Facebook, may be used to incite ethnic-based violence & hatred." On July 21, Independent UN human rights experts [called](#) on Abiy's government to allow peaceful protests and refrain from imposing internet disruptions: "Access to the Internet is closely related to the right of peaceful assembly...the Internet blackout has made it extremely difficult to verify the number of people killed and injured in the crackdown on protests Nor has it been possible to determine the exact circumstances sur-

rounding the violence,” said the experts who are appointed by the UN Human Rights Council.

What lies ahead?

Ethiopia's transition that started in April 2018 has been mired by persistent violence and ethnic tensions. The killing of the Oromo musician and activist Hachalu has exacerbated an already tumultuous situation and has put the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in a difficult position. Needless to say, the transition will continue to be a fraught process and a source of tension due to many years of inequality and ethnic tensions. The persistent violence casts doubt on the country's democratic transition and whether the postponed elections will be peaceful and credible.

However, alternative avenues to mitigate risks posed by the current unrest into escalating further remain open. First, authorities should immediately act to diffuse tensions fuelled by the killing of the singer late last month. In this case, the federal government and the opposition leadership should discourage violence and call for nationwide calm. This also requires that politicians on both sides abstain from inflammatory speeches and confrontational posturing. Furthermore, the government of Prime Minister Abiy should conduct credible, independent, and transparent investigations into the political violence and assassinations that have rocked the country in the past two years. As part of this process, the Ethiopian authorities should also investigate instances of inter-communal violence and seek justice for abuses committed by security forces and violent mobs.

Another important mechanism to safeguard the transition and prevent a return to violence is a sustained dialogue with opposition groups. Ethiopia's opposition has complained that they were not given due consideration when the federal government decided to postpone the August general elections due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Moving forward, serious dialogue with the opposition on the election modalities and timing is paramount in order to bridge the divide between opposition parties and the government. Finally, the country requires a genuine inter-communal reconciliation now more than ever. When Abiy Ahmed assumed office in 2018, he came with a promise of reconciliation and healing. That, however, remains an undelivered goal. The government of Abiy Ahmed should empower the [national reconciliation commission](#) established in early 2019 to address and heal the deep social wounds left by years of repression under previous administrations. The government, as well as the commission, should use traditional elders and the religious leadership to reconcile and mediate the current situation. Meaningful steps should be taken to allay the fears of ethnic and religious communities through broad public education campaigns focused on the need to end discrimination and violence. Steps such as

these would help the government and the newly-created reconciliation commission win the critical trust of Ethiopia's diverse social and political groups.

Conclusion

Over 230 people have died in deadly protests sparked by the shooting of the Ethiopian Oromo musician and activist Hachalu Hundessa on June 29. The military was deployed to the capital Addis Ababa and towns across the Oromia region to curb the protests that also raised concerns that they could become conduits for spreading Covid-19. Security forces have detained at least 5,000 people including prominent Oromo opposition leaders. The government also shut down internet service for over 15 days in an apparent attempt to prevent speech that could further inflame ethnic tensions. The police said they have arrested two men who confessed to having killed the singer for the purpose of bringing about the fall of the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

The death of the famed Oromo singer, whose songs were filled with political references that gave voice to the marginalised Oromo ethnic group, has prompted deadly unrest that highlights Ethiopia's simmering ethnic tensions. The increasing violence and the high-profile targeted assassinations have frustrated peace efforts and jeopardised the country's democratic transition. The current Prime Minister, who rode to power two and a half years ago on the promise of reform, has been met with a tide of challenges that have undermined the transition process. Lack of inclusive institutional reforms, a rise in ethnic and political violence, and the Covid-19 pandemic induced election delay have cast doubt on Ethiopia's democratic transition prospects.

Leadership and bold action are required to prevent a further crisis that could give rise to additional risks. Both the government and the opposition parties' leadership should abstain from inflammatory speeches and should appeal for calm. The authorities should also conduct independent and credible investigations into the killings of public figures, inter-communal violence and seek justice for abuses committed by security forces and violent mobs. Sustained dialogue with the opposition over the delayed elections is also critical to avoid further violence. Ultimately, a genuine nationwide reconciliation to heal the deep social wounds left by years of repression under previous administrations is the only way forward.

