



Commentary

Published 19 July 2019

By International Crisis Group

Preventing Further Conflict and Fragmentation in Ethiopia

High-profile assassinations, intercommunal violence and the question of Sidama statehood have endangered Ethiopia's transition to a multi-party democracy. In this excerpt from its Watch List 2019 – Second Update, Crisis Group urges the European Union and its member states to support a parliamentary vote and assist with economic reforms.

Ethiopia is being buffeted by deadly unrest as it attempts a rapid transition to multi-party democracy under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. His government has chalked up significant achievements during the last eighteen months of political and economic liberalisation. But the challenges it faces were laid bare on 22 June when the president of one of the country's regional states, Amhara, and the Ethiopian military's chief of staff were assassinated in concurrent events in separate cities. The killings came after intercommunal clashes in more than ten areas in 2018 led almost three million Ethiopians to flee their homes, the world's largest conflict-related internal displacement in any one country that year.

Strains within the ruling coalition, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), have contributed to the unrest. The EPRDF is almost inseparable from the Ethiopian state itself, controls all tiers of the federal

“Regional EPRDF parties should avoid appointing hardliners to top slots.”

system and has ruled for 27 years with an iron grip. Tensions among its four member parties have aggravated the country's challenges while at the same time undercutting the government's authority and ability to manage them. Ascendant ethno-nationalist and other opposition movements have exploited the ensuing political opening and further exacerbated instability. Particularly urgent is an evolving crisis in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State, where the Sidama, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia's south, pledge to declare a new regional state on 18 July, potentially setting off unrest and clashes between Sidama activists and other ethnic groups. Political tensions and insecurity have also led officials, opposition actors and diplomats to question whether it will be possible to hold credible parliamentary elections, currently scheduled for May 2020 and which Abiy promises as a milestone toward more open politics, on time.

Calming rising tensions before they derail Ethiopia's transition is becoming critical. Each of the country's major flashpoints likely requires its own set of de-escalatory measures. But Ethiopia's leaders can take some general steps. Abiy and other EPRDF leaders should do everything within their power to rein in intra-EPRDF discord. Abiy himself should avoid fuelling the perception he is favouring his own Oromo political base. In this light, his recent appointment of General Adem Mohammed, an Amhara, as new military chief of staff, instead of the Oromo deputy chief who was next in line, was sensible. Central authorities should rely

on federal security forces to deal with disturbances in regions only as a last resort, instead trusting regional forces where possible, lest federal forces stir up local anger; deploying the army in an attempt to thwart the Sidama's self-declaration of statehood would likely backfire, for example. Regional EPRDF parties should avoid appointing hardliners to top slots. On some intra-EPRDF disputes, the mediation of respected former Ethiopian statesmen or military or religious leaders might help.

The EU and its member states should use the influence their good relations with Abiy's government and their important aid bring by:

- Continuing to engage Prime Minister Abiy and the EPRDF leadership and encourage them to adopt the measures above, notably seeking to dial back dangerous inter-communal tensions.
- Given the urgency of the Sidama crisis, considering increasing European development assistance to accompany the south's likely administrative rearrangement, in the event that the Sidama do unilaterally pursue their own regional state from 18 July. This could help avert protests among activists of other groups in the south by demonstrating that their concerns are also being attended to.
- Aiming to cushion with financial aid and technical support any negative side effects of economic liberalisation, while EU diplomats can advise that economic reform be implemented carefully to avoid shocks, such as a severe reduction in construction jobs due to reduced infrastructure investment, or the rapid removal of subsidies on items like wheat, cooking oil and electricity that could exacerbate political problems.
- Expediting the release of the EU's planned electoral support package, with its first disbursements in September 2019, to help move forward preparations for the parliamentary vote.

Rising Ethno-nationalism and Potential Flashpoints

Ethiopia's ruling coalition is fraying. The EPRDF has controlled all tiers of government from federal to village level since coming to power in 1991, routinely using repressive tactics to sideline challengers. Since taking office in April 2018, Prime Minister Abiy and his government have carried out bold and significant reforms, overhauling the federal security apparatus, making peace with neighbouring Eritrea, releasing more political prisoners and inviting exiles back home. But while these steps were long overdue, they have further weakened the EPRDF's unity and authority, particularly as they came on the back of three years of anti-government protests before Abiy took office.

Disagreements have worsened over power sharing, regional autonomy and territory among the EPRDF's four component parties, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (now the Amhara Democratic Party), the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (now the Oromo Democratic Party), the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). At the same time, ethno-nationalist movements are on the rise in some regions, squeezing EPRDF parties, who have themselves taken harder line positions in response. These dynamics risk contributing to burgeoning inter-ethnic violence, which already over the last few years has reached levels unprecedented in decades. The 22 June assassinations and alleged attempted regional coup came as a stark illustration of the gravity of the crisis affecting both ruling party and country as a whole.

A handful of inter and intra-ethnic flashpoints are particularly worrying. First is friction between the Tigray and the Amhara. The main source is the Amhara's longstanding claim to the Wolkait and Raya territories that are currently part of Tigray regional state and border Amhara. Tigray security forces have repressed protesters in Raya that were seeking to be part of Amhara and, previously, Amhara protesters and militia have killed and evicted Tigrayans from Amhara, particularly the Gondar area in

northern Amhara state. The former Amhara regional security chief, Asaminew Tsige, whom the federal and Amhara governments blamed for the 22 June killings of Amhara's regional president and two colleagues, also promoted the return of parts of Tigray's territory to Amhara.

Second are rising tensions between the Amhara and Oromo, Ethiopia's two largest groups. The EPRDF parties representing them – the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP) and the Oromo Democratic Party – united to propel Abiy to power and reverse the TPLF's longstanding domination of the ruling coalition. But friction between them has mounted since, over matters including high-level appointments and disputes over the capital Addis Ababa. In the case of the capital, which is multi-ethnic but surrounded by Oromia regional state, in February Amhara and other groups opposed the Oromia government's demolition of illegal housing on the capital's outskirts, while in early March Oromo protested the transfer of new government apartments built in Oromia by the city administration to Addis Ababa residents. Addis Ababa, founded in 1887, is an autonomous city accountable to the federal government, but some Oromo factions say it is a colonial settlement on Oromo land and should be administered by Oromia region, or that the city's encroachment into Oromia must be reversed.

Tensions between the Amhara and Oromo have been aggravated by the 22 June assassinations and events leading to them. The appointment of Asaminew, an Amhara nationalist who was jailed in 2009 for his part in a coup attempt and released by the federal government in February 2018, as regional security chief by the Amhara government in November 2018 reflected the ADP's growing ethno-nationalism and its desire to outflank the one-year-old National Movement of Amhara, an opposition party espousing Amhara nationalism. Asaminew fuelled Amhara-Oromo friction by using provocative rhetoric about what he portrayed as impending Oromo domination and involving regional security forces in clashes

with Oromo militia in an Oromo enclave of Amhara in early April 2019 that left dozens dead. Since the 22 June assassinations, doubts over the federal government's account of the killings and a sweep of arrests of Amhara nationalists and others have hardened regional opposition to the Oromo-led federal government. Large crowds of Amhara gathered for Asaminew's funeral, including uniformed security forces.

The third fault line is between the TPLF – which rules Tigray and, until last year, had long dominated the EPRDF and the security apparatus – and the federal government led by Abiy, the head of the Oromo Democratic Party. The TPLF's main sources of grievance are its loss of federal power; what it argues are selective prosecutions of Tigrayan top officials – notably of TPLF Executive Committee member and former national intelligence chief Getachew Assefa – for human-rights abuses and corruption; and opposition to a federal commission that is tasked with assessing interregional boundary disputes, such as the Amhara claims on Wolkait and Raya. The TPLF sees the commission as likely to rule against it and rejects it as unconstitutional because its mandate allegedly clashes with that of the upper house of parliament. The TPLF-run regional authorities apparently refuse to detain Getachew, whose whereabouts are unknown but suspected to be in Tigray, despite the federal authorities issuing his arrest warrant.

Fourth is continuing unrest in Oromia. Three years of anti-government protests since 2015, which largely took place in that state, forced the internal shifts that brought Abiy to power. Violence has continued since. The September 2018 return of leaders of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), a formerly banned

“The Sidama statehood demand could have a domino effect across the southern state, leading to its fracturing and more conflict and displacement.”

armed group campaigning for Oromo rights and autonomy, sparked ethnic skirmishes, as Oromo youth replaced national flags in the capital and surrounding areas with the OLF banner, provoking the anger of, and clashes with, other groups. If the electoral board registers the OLF, which is seen as the standard bearer of the Oromo liberation struggle, as a political party, it could sap votes in 2020 from Abiy's Oromo Democratic Party: while leaders like Abiy are popular with youthful protesters, many Oromo regard the ruling Oromo party as ineffective and for years subservient to the TPLF. Moreover, OLF-linked factions are still fighting the military in western Oromia, with each side accusing the other of being the aggressor.

Lastly, the Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Regional State, home to 45 indigenous groups, is in disarray. In 2018, the south's largest ethnic group, the approximately four million strong Sidama, took advantage of EPRDF incoherence to renew claims to its own regional state. The federal government for months largely neglected the problem, neither preparing to meet its constitutional obligation to hold the referendum (the electoral authority that should administer the vote has also been undergoing reform) on forming a new state that the Sidama had requested nor reaching an agreement with Sidama leaders on rescheduling their statehood bid. Sidama leaders say they will self-declare their own regional state on 18 July, which the authorities are set to reject as an unconstitutional move. This risks triggering violence between Sidama and federal security forces in Hawassa City, currently the administrative seat of the Southern Nations but which the Sidama intend to make the capital of their new regional state. The Sidama statehood demand, and any attendant violence, could have a domino effect across the southern state, leading to its fracturing and more conflict and displacement.

Re-railing the Transition

Prime Minister Abiy's government has rapidly advanced vital reforms, accelerating a transition set in motion under his predecessor,

Hailemariam Desalegn. But the 22 June killings and alleged attempted regional coup throw into sharp relief the enormous challenges remaining. Of these, rising tensions among Ethiopia's regions, and among the EPRDF parties that govern them, pose the most immediate risks. A different set of de-escalatory measures is likely necessary for each flashpoint. Moreover, some grievances date back many years and will take time to resolve: the Amhara and Tigray are unlikely to settle their territorial dispute any time soon, for example, and aimed provocative statements at each other on 10 and 11 July 2019. But Ethiopia's leaders can take some general steps that could help rein in intra-EPRDF tensions, lower the temperature overall and buy time for further reforms that would help build a more democratic system that is able to address such issues.

Abiy himself should avoid any action that might aggravate the perception he favours his own Oromo community, in both his high-level appointments and the government's action against protesters and activists. He made a sound decision when appointing of General Adem Mohammed, an Amhara, to replace the military chief of staff killed on 22 June, instead of the Oromo deputy chief who was next in line. But the mass arrest of National Movement of Amhara activists and other opponents in the wake of the 22 June killings appears to have backfired.

The government should also be cautious about using federal security forces to deal with disturbances in regions. It should do so only as a last resort if there is a grave threat to the country's stability or a risk of bloodshed that regional forces cannot contain. It should be wary about using federal forces to try and obstruct the Sidama's declaration of statehood, for example. Similarly, the deployment of those forces to try and arrest former national intelligence chief Getachew Assefa would be highly likely to stir up local Tigray resistance. Instead the federal government should tackle such issues through concerted dialogue with the relevant regional leaders. For their part, the EPRDF parties should refrain from further

inflammatory rhetoric and avoid appointing hardliners to top slots; finding leaders inclined toward compromise for the Amhara regional president and security chief may well prove a challenge but is critical. Respected former Ethiopian statesmen or military or religious leaders could potentially play a role in mediating among EPRDF leaders to find at least immediate fixes to problems related to existing grievances in order to achieve some short-term stability and set the transition back on track.

The EU and its member states should use whatever influence they have with Prime Minister Abiy's government to encourage such measures, while urging all actors to moderate demands and show patience. They can also take a handful of concrete steps to help minimise risks. First, if the Sidama self-declare their regional state on 18 July, the EU and European governments could offer financial support to accompany the broader administrative rearrangement that a new Sidama state would likely trigger in the south. The promise of additional funds for development projects could help assuage frustration among other groups – some of whom have concerns about the new Sidama state or harbour statehood aspirations of their own – and thus possibly avert protests by their activists that could turn violent. Any plan for increased aid should, however, guard against incentivising future attempts by local leaders to attract extra government resources through agitation, possibly by ensuring that the new arrangements represent a comprehensive settlement backed by all southern groups.

Secondly, increased EU development assistance could prop up government spending if necessary and support the authorities in undertaking economic reform in a manner is carefully sequenced and guards against a slowdown, which could aggravate political instability. European financial aid and technical support could be critical to such reforms.

Lastly, while parliamentary elections are still some way off, preparations are lagging. The new electoral board was formed only last month, for example; electoral laws are not yet finalised, parties may still table potentially far-reaching changes to the electoral system; and some parties are registered while others are not. Furthermore, the mounting tensions, inter-communal bloodshed and general instability since Abiy took office and for three years before could make conditions for the vote fraught. The Ethiopian authorities themselves need to move forward on the basis of consensus among the main political factions, inside and outside the EPRDF. But by expediting the release of its planned electoral support package, with its first disbursements in September 2019, the EU can help advance preparations.

This commentary is part of our Watch List 2019 – Second Update.