

# Pacified politics or risk of disintegration? A race against time in Ethiopia

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The dramatic changes of the last months have moved Ethiopia away from “ *the gates of hell* ”, but all options are still on the table, from the worst to the best.

April 2, 2018 - House of People's Representatives - Swearing in of the new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Wikicommons/Danielaregay. Some rights reserved.

In February 1974, Addis Ababa's taxis went on strike in protest against the rise in the price of fuel. Not a single observer imagined that this would begin a movement which within a few months would lead to the fall of a centuries-old empire. The imperial regime was not overthrown: it collapsed.

The Derg, the “socialist” military junta which succeeded it, quickly found itself in conflict with an Eritrean secessionist movement and an “ethnic” Tigrayan force in the far north of the country. The Ethiopian army was the second biggest in Africa, massively supported by the USSR. If the rebels had been told in 1987-88 that their forces would enter Addis Ababa in 1991, they would have laughed. They were undoubtedly determined, disciplined and ingenious, but they were finally able to rout the Derg army also because it fell to pieces. They were undoubtedly determined, disciplined and ingenious, but they were finally able to rout the Derg army also because it fell to pieces.

In both cases, the collapse of the regime – Haile Selassie then the Derg – was astonishing because their strength was greatly overrated. In both cases, the new leaders were initially well-received, though nobody knew where they precisely wanted to go. In certain respects, the current transition is similar: a sudden switch in the leadership team, radical and rapid changes, immense popular hope and, once again, an unpredictable future.

## Zenawi's pyramid

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) controlled the military high command, the security services, and the extensive public and para-public business sector, although Tigrayans represent only 6% of Ethiopia's population of 100 million. The other three ethnic parties in the ruling coalition, itself a pure TPLF creation – the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO), the Oromos representing more than a third of the population; the ANDM (Amhara National Democratic Movement), more than a quarter of the population; and the SEPDM (Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement) – remained subordinate to the TPLF.

The Front drew its strength from a clear strategy, iron discipline and the rallying of the Tigrayans behind it. However, it never recovered from the sudden death in 2012 of its all-powerful leader Meles Zenawi. The pyramid of power collapsed because it had been built

by him and for him.

The TPLF was neither able to choose a successor who would be a new strongman – Meles had created a vacuum around himself – nor, alternatively, to return to the collective mode of leadership that had been so successful in its early days. The tour of Tigray by the Front’s “old guard” in the spring of 2014 was a shock. A creeping change had occurred: Tigrayans were turning away from the Front, repelled by the authoritarian and oligarchic excesses of its officials, disappointed by the absence of new leaders, dissatisfied by economic progress that lagged behind that of other regions, infuriated by the “no peace no war” standoff with Eritrea.

Suddenly, TPLF’s dominance over the governing coalition was crumbling. Yet it chose this moment to stir up a hornet’s nest with the Addis Ababa and Oromia Special Zone Integrated Development Master Plan, a move that would have extended the capital’s political authority to large swathes of Oromya around it. Part of the OPDO apparatus rebelled. For young Oromo, especially students, the so-called Querroo, the Plan was a red rag to a bull. Starting in 2014, they launched a wave of protests against a federalism distorted by “Tigrayan domination”. The government abandoned the Plan, the protesters grew bolder. In the summer of 2016, part of the Amhara region entered the fray. Initially wary of this spontaneous and unorganised popular movement, the OPDO and ANDM came to realise how they could exploit it to loosen the dominance of the Front. They let it run, even surreptitiously encouraged it.

The authorities’ only response was force. Some 1000 dead, tens of thousands of arrests, two successive states of emergency. All to no avail, and with reason. Despite a succession of meetings by its leadership structures, all chaotic, interminable and heated, the TPLF proved incapable of developing a political response to this regime crisis. The consensus among observers was that Ethiopia was risking the worst: interethnic civil war culminating in the disintegration of the country or a military coup.

The TPLF caved. It was unable to prevent an OPDO-ANDM alliance from placing an Oromo at the head of the EPRDF for the first time, albeit in a tight squeeze, in March 2018. Forty-one-year-old Premier Ministre Abiy Ahmed launched an avalanche of “liberal” reforms, both political and economic, with an intensity and rapidity unimaginable a few weeks earlier. He seems unstoppable. Quick summary: political liberalisation, i.e. the abolition of “revolutionary democracy”, a cobbled-together doctrine that had been used since 1991 to justify an authoritarian and centralised system; economic liberalisation, including a wave of privatizations; a recasting in the Ethiopian national melting pot of ethnic groups with a hardened and often even conflictual sense of identity; normalisation of relations with Eritrea, frozen in a limbo for 18 years. Nobody expected the winds of change to blow so hard.

## Winds of change

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Most observers believe that the current situation is dominated by the confrontation between the old governing and oligarchic elite, essentially Tigrayan, and the “reformists” headed by Abiy Ahmed. *“The Prime Minister commands but the TPLF controls.”*<sup>[1]</sup> Some go so far as to claim that the country is in fact under a “two-headed” regime. *“The TPLF holds*

a power system unmatched by that of the Prime Minister.”<sup>[2]</sup> In their view, this underground “deep state” or “parallel state” has retained its dominance, in particular over the army and security forces. However, everything suggests that the TPLF is out on its feet.

However, everything suggests that the TPLF is out on its feet. It is still seeking how to reposition itself in the topsy-turvy political game. It is deeply divided. If for no other reason than pragmatism, or to try to save what can be saved, a good section of its members, probably the majority, has accepted the shift in power. Tigrayan opinion has generally welcomed Abiy’s arrival, his “liberalisation” process, and his commitment to normalising relations with Eritrea. Above all, if the TPLF were still a bloc, as unified, organised, and all-pervasive as is claimed, genuinely supported by the mass of Tigrayans, and determined to destroy Abiy, the latter would never have been able to rip up the dogmas that the Front held so dear. He would never have been able to axe so many of its highly placed members in so short a time. He would never have been able to obtain the Front’s agreement – however grudging – on his principal measures and appointments.

Does this mean that Abiy is now seeing the light at the end of the tunnel? Obviously not. Within the TPLF, but also in other parties, in the army and the security services, but also in other institutions, among Tigrayans, but also in the other nations, countless individuals have seen their positions and privileges wiped out or threatened by the changes. They undoubtedly include some who are ready to do their worst to bring down Abiy. Further bloody and desperate acts, such as the grenade attack of June 23 at the Meskel Square mass rally, are always possible. They have multiple ways to fan the flames of the conflicts raging across the country. However, to accuse these “Forces of Darkness”<sup>[3]</sup> of being the main instigators of those conflicts, steered by the hidden hand of TPLF “hardliners”, is to credit them with an objective, an organisation and resources of which there is so far no empirical evidence.

## “Soft” purge

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The EPRDF has often been reproached with having never attempted to bring about national reconciliation after its victory in what was also a civil war. However, although it pretends otherwise with its constant refrain of “unity” and “forgiveness”, the new governing team has come down heavily on the Tigrayan elite and even beyond, and is giving preferential treatment to the Oromo elite. The former developed the economy further than at any time in the history of the country. However defective the implementation, it established a federalism that every significant political force today considers irreversible. Yet it is given little credit for these achievements. Even its role in the defeat of the Derg is underplayed. Not only are the big bosses going down, but simple civil servants are undergoing a sort of “soft” purge, on grounds that can only be ethnic: they are being sidelined, while retaining their position and salary.

When Abiy himself refers to “political traders” behind the “conflicts” proliferating across the country, to “chaos instigators” engaged in “destructive activities”,<sup>[4]</sup> or when he attributes responsibility for the June 23 attack to “forces who do not want to see Ethiopia united”,<sup>[5]</sup> it is interpreted in public opinion as an implicit accusation levelled against this Tigrayan elite. When Abiy or his closest collaborators welcome, with pomp and circumstance, smiles and

embraces, opposition leaders formerly considered as “terrorists”, whose common denominator had been heaping abuse on the TPLF for two decades, they score points in Amhara and Oromo circles, but inflict a snub on the TPLF and ultimately on Tigrayans. For the latter, it is a way “to sling mud at them”.<sup>[6]</sup> By antagonising them, it risks pushing them to the limit. And for the most extreme elements, that limit is secession, a possibility increasingly discussed among Tigrayans, although still within a restricted circle. And for the most extreme elements, that limit is secession, a possibility increasingly discussed among Tigrayans, although still within a restricted circle.

Moreover, this “two-headed” conception of the regime acts as a diversion: it conceals the most essential issues.

## Abiy Ahmed

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Who is Abiy really and where does he want to go? He is a pure product of – and for more than two decades was a significant player in – the governing structure. However, his behaviour, his words and his actions point to a radical departure. Simply put, stone by stone he is dismantling the authoritarian edifice erected since 1991, an edifice largely consistent with the traditional exercise of power in Ethiopia.

This has brought him immense popularity and even the glimmerings of a popular cult of personality. He is not shy to speak, to say the least, but there is something of the sermon in his speeches. Abiy constantly preaches moral values: for example, the word “love” recurred twenty-two times in his 18 minute speech at the massive public meeting on June 23. We can take him to be sincere when he describes the global system he wants to introduce: democracy and a more liberal economy.

But what do these two concepts mean to him? What is not known is the mechanisms through which they would operate. He remains vague, sometimes unclear and contradictory, and largely silent about his practical plans for political and economic reconstruction. In particular, he has set neither a course nor a timetable. Regardless of their subsequent implementation, the Derg had its slogan: Ethiopia Tikdem, Ethiopia first; the TPLF claimed to be committed to a clear goal: to break with dictatorship by establishing democracy. If Abiy has a slogan, it would be *medemer*, derived from a word that means “to add”, which could therefore be translated as “let us unite!”. Fine, but to do what?

Lack of vision, tactical savvy or impotence? Abiy’s authority rests on his position as prime minister – whatever the current limitations on the power that this position confers – but above all on his popularity. The previously repressed or marginalised political forces applaud his dismantlement of the authoritarian system. But would this support continue if he gave more concrete details of his intentions for reconstruction? The radical divisions across the whole political spectrum would emerge clearly, in particular on two essential points.

First, what type of federalism? In two decades it has never been under greater stress. There was a clash between federal army and the military forces of the Somali Region – the Liyu Police – in early August in Jijiga. Abiy had apparently decided to remove the regional President, Abdi Iley, a man notorious for his authoritarianism and corruption, who was

facing growing popular opposition. Abiy's predecessor, and even Meles Zenawi at the end of his life, had the same intention, but were prevented by opposition from some chiefs of the military and security service, which had single-handedly created Abdi and his Liyu Police.

The reactions to this intervention are symptomatic of two opposing conceptions of federalism. The Ministry of Defence justified it on the grounds that "*the region's peace and security has come under threat*".[7] Somali and Tigrayan leaders, on the other hand, as well as commentators close to them, condemned an "*invasion*" that they qualified as "*irresponsible*", "*illegal*", and "*unconstitutional*", "*an attack on the essence of the federation*".[8]

Moreover, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), which had suffered terribly at the hands of the Liyu Police under Abdi's orders and was created to oppose them, called on the army to "*halt immediately any military activities*", as "*the Somali people in Ogaden [will] never allow external forces to decide their fate*".[9] In other words, Addis-Abeba is perceived as a greater enemy than Abdi and his Liyu Police.

On one side, "consociationalism". The internal sovereignty of every federal state is near-absolute. Every significant nation, regardless of population size, is also represented at the centre, which wields only the power that they are willing to grant. Decisions there are taken by consensus, so each nation can exercise a *de facto* right of veto.[10] It is this conception that influential Tigrayan circles have defended in recent years. Having lost the upper hand at the centre, they want to look inwards to Tigray. Under no circumstances should the federal authority be able to stick its nose into their internal affairs. That's the red line which, if crossed, would be a *casus belli*. They are doing everything to ensure that the representatives of the "peripheral" nations (Afar, Somali, South, Gambella, etc .) adhere to it. In addition, however, all the leading parties – TPLF, ANDM, SEPDM and even OPDO – face strong ethno-nationalistic pressures which weaken their current leadership.

On the other side, "Ethiopianism", a regional sovereignty limited to varying degrees, supplanted by the central authority at least in the regal spheres, starting with law and order. In this version, central representation is proportional to population size. This conception was not the traditional position of the Oromo elite while they considered themselves underrepresented at the federal centre. However, it is now the one that Abiy seems to favour. But it attracts strong opposition, including in Oromo circles which condemn Abiy's adherence to an "*imperial 'Ethiopianist' narrative*".[11] On the other hand, it undoubtedly reflects aspirations that have traditionally been dominant among the Amhara.

The second point concerns the liberalisation of the economy and its opening up to international participation. The political class, whether in government or in opposition, is very divided on this issue. The "low-level" oligarchy is probably afraid of being marginalised by foreign investors. There is a risk that the economy could fall within their orbit, whereas many Ethiopians remain viscerally attached to an unyielding defence of national sovereignty. The privatisation of land, long advocated by some of the opposition, has always been ferociously opposed, in particular by the OPDO.

Finally, the popular protests that brought Abiy to power were also motivated by a deep sense of economic injustice, fed by growing oligarchical excesses and by the proliferation of land dispossessions since the early 2000s, whose beneficiaries included foreign investors. The protesters attacked their companies and farms, but also local farmers who had acquired sudden wealth. Could this liberalisation exacerbate the excesses that contributed to the protests? In Oromya, for example, the authorities have taken the opposite tack, increasing public involvement in certain private companies.

## Elite power

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But one key feature that still endures is an elitist conception of power. Whatever their public stance, deep down almost all the political forces believe only in an exclusive democracy. Only those with “knowledge” because of their level of education have the skills and legitimacy required to take informed decisions and impose them on the mass of Ethiopians, perceived as too “backward” to decide for themselves and in their own interests. Reciprocally, however, this is a conviction that is also largely internalised by Ethiopians themselves: society can only work if it is governed by an unshakeable hierarchy, formerly presided over by an emperor by divine right, and now rightfully dominated by “intellectuals”.[\[12\]](#)

Similar situations in other countries have generally led to a remarkable awakening of civil society. The mechanisms through which democracy operates have emerged or been revived, in particular an explosion of debate in different arenas, both informal – forums, clubs, think tanks, etc. – and formal – institutions, political parties, etc.

While there is a newfound freedom of speech, no wave of this kind has occurred in Ethiopia. It would be fruitless to look for informed and well argued discussions on the problems of the country and possible solutions, whether between political actors and intellectuals, or elsewhere in civil society. The only forum of debate in recent years, with decision-making powers, has been the summit of the EPRDF. Paralysed by its divisions, this body seems sidelined and muted. The outcome of the first session of its Politburo since Abiy’s appointment may bring some clarity. The next congress will be postponed once more and nobody knows under what circumstances it might be held. The next congress will be postponed once more and nobody knows under what circumstances it might be held.

One might also have expected an awakening of the country’s institutions, starting with Parliament, “*the highest authority of the Federal Government*”. Yet it remains supine, an assembly seemingly under orders. For example, while Abiy has decided to introduce radical economic change, Parliament unanimously adopted the first budget developed to that end. It showed the same unanimity in granting amnesty to members of organisations whom it had before unanimously characterised as “*terrorists*”.

Never since the death of Meles Zenawi has the verticality of power seemed so great. Abiy Ahmed or his chief of staff announce all the big decisions. These are delivered abruptly, sometimes absent legal procedures. No one knows who developed them, which structures were involved, whether the main stakeholders were consulted. Apart from Lemma Megersa, President of Oromya, and to a lesser extent Workeneh Gebeyehu, Minister of Foreign Affairs, also an Oromo, no political figure, not even party leaders or ministers,



seems to be present on the political stage. Everything appears to emanate from Abiy.

It brings to mind the immemorial figure of the *“Big Man or teleg säw... the authority figure par excellence... accorded universal respect”*.<sup>[13]</sup> And public opinion in general sees nothing wrong in this, quite the contrary: its *“Abiymania”* is symptomatic of a sort of waiver of citizen rights, a handing of the reins of the country to a *“Messiah”* – one of his nicknames – who will take it to the Promised Land. A strange paradox at a time when the incessantly reiterated message is about the march towards democracy and the assertion of inclusiveness ...

## Feet of clay?

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But could it be that the Big Man has feet of clay? Can Abiy count on solid channels of authority needed to govern effectively? It was thought that the end of the big political demonstrations and their cortege of repression would mark a return to law and order. Wrongly. There had to be the capacity to impose them. In fact, not for decades have there been so many people – almost 3 million – internally displaced, essentially for ethnic and religious reasons.

Long stifled, then simultaneously exacerbated and held in check by an ostensible but uneven federalism, ethnic identities have become inflamed, both in the *“big”* and *“little”* ethnic groups. The latter see the new reformism as an opportunity to make their voices heard at last. Interreligious conflicts are proliferating, mainly between Orthodox and Muslims. *“There are growing fundamentalist tendencies to not tolerate the other. Sometimes politics – competition for power and positions – is used to instigate violence. Religious identities are manipulated.”*<sup>[14]</sup> This is happening even in Wollo, which was considered a bastion of tolerance in this respect.<sup>[15]</sup>

Likewise, *“killings, vandalism, riots and lawlessness are being reported literally from all corners of Ethiopia”*, generally motivated by the revival of age-old personal or community interests.<sup>[16]</sup> Jawar Mohammed, the very popular spokesman of the Queerloo, himself one of Abiy’s strongest supporters, has delivered a warning: unless the security situation is seriously addressed, *“it will quickly escalate into full scale crisis”*.<sup>[17]</sup> Many observers speak of the risk of *“chaos”*.

Many too have noted how Abiy has remained remarkably discreet in his speeches and even more sparing in his actions on this issue. The most likely reason is that he lacks the resources to contain a turmoil that he cannot ignore. The centrifugal forces are so powerful that the lines of authority have fractured, both in the federal system and within the ethnic administrations. At local and even sub-regional level, officials and police seem to operate with growing autonomy, following their own priorities and interests, to the point of remaining passive, if not becoming themselves participants or even initiators in the disorder.

To attribute this turmoil primarily to the *“deep state”*, everywhere and always, is to mask the upsurge in these local dynamics, their roots, their implications and their dramatic dangers. To attribute this turmoil primarily to the *“deep state”*, everywhere and always, is to mask the upsurge in these local dynamics.

The intervention of federal troops in the Somali Region will be a test in this respect. Although justified by the necessity of restoring law and order, its real target seems to be Abdi Iley and his accomplices. Its success and the restoration of calm remain more than unsure.

As observed in similar situations, though local for the moment, these conflicts could spread and intensify through the influence of ethnic or religious solidarity, which the most extreme elements will undoubtedly seek to exploit, to the point of degenerating into interregional confrontations and large-scale pogroms. What we are seeing is therefore a race against the clock between the escalation – at present continuous – of all these ethnic, religious or land-related conflicts, or simple settling of individual or communal scores, and Abiy's efforts to assert his power.

The EPRDF managed these lines of authority. But it looks more and more like a hollow shell. The TPLF and half of the Southerners voted against Abiy's election. We have seen where the TPLF is at present. The SEPDM is so profoundly divided that nobody knows if it will be able to hold its next congress. The ANDM has lost momentum through a failure of legitimacy and the emergence of competing parties. While Abiy remains indisputably popular in Oromya, rival Oromo parties and personalities have the wind in their sails.

How much control does the OPDO really have over its cadres? How much authority do the latter have at local level, in particular over the young Queerroo? Jawar Mohammed just declared: *"We have two governments in Ethiopia: Abiy's government and Queerroo government"*.<sup>[18]</sup> In West Wollega, open conflict seems to have broken out with a faction of the OLF, which despite an agreement with the authority to return to peaceful struggle, seems to be refusing to hand over its weapons. All these widespread abuses, though always condemned at the top, prove that Abiy's authority is limited to say the least, even in Oromya: one of his biggest challenge will be to begin asserting it in this region.

The ANDM remains strangely silent. Its main aim in supporting Abiy was to oust the TPLF. This done, what do they have in common? The rise of the OPDO, which could lead to an "oromisation" of federal power in place of the previous "tigrénisation", will sooner or later put their hitherto tactical alliance to a tough test. And what would happen if it snapped?

## Medemer!

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In circumstances like these, attempts are generally made to restructure the political space by reinforcing its institutional mechanisms. Elections are employed as the ultimate arbiter. Political parties reform by reorganising, regrouping, establishing a platform. Voters can then make an informed choice between different political projects. The winning party or coalition acquires a clear mandate and the legitimacy to implement its programme.

In a profoundly unstructured political landscape, be it in the opposition or in the EPRDF, the card that Abiy seems to want – or is forced? – to play is that of individuals and positions among the elite, and hence also implicitly of the resources to which they afford access. He says little about the 2020 elections, and certainly does not present them as a Rubicon point. It is not clear whether his intention is to rebuild an EPRDF in his own image or, if not, to build a new, multi-ethnic force. He purges, appoints or wins over individuals, pursuing the



"Grand Elite Bargain".<sup>[19]</sup> His aim seems to be to form a coalition of personalities, which would bring enough supporters with it for voters to delegate the government of the country to them, rather than a coalition of structured parties based on a common programme that voters would be invited to endorse. "Medemer", "Let us unite!", Abiy repeats, but first behind me personally and the heavyweights I have brought on board.

More than ever, it is impossible to predict the course of events. The dramatic changes of the last months have moved Ethiopia away from "the gates of the hell"<sup>[20]</sup>, but all options are still on the table, from the worst to the best. Will Abiy acquire sufficient authority to counter the forces of disintegration or will they ultimately overwhelm him? One can only hope that it will be the first scenario that is realised.

If so, will he want simply to reshuffle the existing elitist and oligarchical system in order to offer previously disadvantaged ethnic elites – starting with his own – more access to power and wealth, or to build a genuinely democratic order and a liberal economy? The pathway to democracy can be complex, long and tortuous. The emergence of a new Big Man, but in this case in a "softer" and more inclusive mould, would nevertheless be a remarkable step forward.

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He is the author of "[Ethiopia. An heretical revolution?](#)" (1982, Zed books).

#### Subjects

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