

RESURGENT CLASHES IN ETHIOPIA

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It is ironic how the government led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed who won the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize is witnessing unprecedented occurrence of violent clashes on multiple fronts within the country. Perhaps like how Gorbachev's policies of perestroika and glasnost partly paved the way for the collapse of the USSR, the series of reforms introduced by the Ethiopian Prosperity Party-led government since 2018 that led to political and economic liberalization blew the lid off decades of largely suppressed dissatisfactions and grievances in Ethiopia. This essay attempts to analyse the resurgent clashes in Ethiopia by examining their root causes from the historical context.

Origin of the Multi-ethnic Nature of Ethiopia and Seeds of Inter-Group Friction

John Young delves into the origin of the multi-ethnic nature of Ethiopia and how the sparks which would later ignite the current flames were kindled. Following its decline, the legacy of the Axumite civilization of the first millennium BC – centered in the present-day Tigray – continued through the ruling Abyssinian family whose two branches, the Tigrayans and the Amharas. By the medieval ages, the social structure of the Tigrayans and the Amharas resembled that of the three Estates of France – the clergy, the nobility, and the peasantry. This feudal system continued till Derg introduced land reforms in 1975. Gradually, the increase in population of the Amharas marginalized the Tigrayans, a majority of whom were becoming increasingly destitute peasants.

In the late nineteenth century and early eighteenth century, Emperor Menelik II of the Shoan branch expanded his empire southwards, eastwards, and westwards to include regions of Oromia and Ogaden. Court and church officials, nobility especially those of the Shoan branch, soldiers, and migrants from the north were the main beneficiaries of the new lands and resources at the expense of the indigenous population there. The Tigrayans and the other provinces of the north made little gains from this expansion.

Ethiopia under Emperor Haile Selassie

The aspirations for centralization and modernization of the empire could be seen among rulers even before Menelik. This took the form of imposition of Amharigna as the official

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state language, import of technologies, state oppression, and the traditional regional rulers losing their authority. Haile Selassie's explicit attempts to establish Amhara hegemony and impose taxation was the final blow. In the early twentieth century, rebellions led by different groups broke out in different parts of the country, the most notable of which was the Woyane rebellion of 1941. Though they were quickly suppressed with British military aid, Young opines that this incident was a wake-up call for the minorities to mobilize along ethnic lines and to organise their leadership.¹

Following the independence of Ethiopia from Italian rule in 1941, the restored imperial government of Haile Selassie pursued a rigorous policy of centralization, bureaucratization, and modernization which solidified the dominance of Amhara culture and society. This coincided with the rise of the multi-ethnic and politically ambitious petty bourgeoisie who became increasingly conscious of their powerlessness. The social and economic polarization and contradiction between Shoan Amhara aristocrats and the politically marginalized population, between the landowning minority and the peasantry who were the majority, and between groups supporting centralization and those against eventually precipitated in the coup attempt of Emperor Haile Selassie by the Council of the Revolution in 1960. In addition, there were incidents of rebellion among the Somali and Oromo groups in the southeast and the south respectively. Soon, the side-effects of racism and skewed policymaking, an eroding popular base, strengthening opposition, and old age caught up with the emperor whose reign succumbed to the Soviet-backed Derg, the military junta which administered Ethiopia on Marxist-Leninist lines, in 1974.²

Ethiopia under the Derg

Under the Derg, which was established as a provisional government, Ethiopia's feudal system was abolished, development was accelerated, sweeping land reforms – including the nationalisation of land – were introduced, literacy rate was improved, and promises were made to end ethnic oppression and equality of all cultures was promoted. However, the Derg too inherited some of the traits of its predecessors. To consolidate its power, it vigorously centralized the state and ruled arbitrarily. It retained the predominantly Amhara character of the State, refused to share power, and stood up to the rebellious Tigray, Somali, Oromo, Afar, and other ethnic groups. In addition to the poor performance on the economic front owing to poor policies, droughts, famines, and dependence on foreign aid, the military regime had to deal with the challenges of resurgence of inter-group clashes, armed resistance of ethnicity-based opposition groups with varying ideological affiliations leading to civil war, and

¹Young, John. 1996. "Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia." *Review of African Political Economy* (Taylor & Francis, Ltd.) 23 (70): 532.

²Young, John. 1996. "Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia." *Review of African Political Economy* (Taylor & Francis, Ltd.) 23 (70): 532 - 533.

Eritrean war of independence. In 1987, the military regime transitioned into the civilian-led communist state People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE).³

Rise of Ethnicity-based Rebel Groups

The students began organizing themselves in the mid-1960s. Initially, they focused primarily on class contradictions and was pan-Ethiopian in character. However, under the Derg, realizing that merely attempting to resolve class contradictions have not reduced ethnicity-based suppression, they regrouped along ethnic lines calling for the rights of national self-determination and secession.⁴

The first such group to be formed was the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) by militant Tigray students. It quickly established itself as a formidable opposition to the government in the Tigray region. In its struggle in Tigray, the TPLF defeated the former nobility who sought to restore the former status quo as well as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) whose aim was to mobilize the peasantry. Fearing another round of Amhara dominance and the brutality of the Derg regime, the TPLF rallied the Tigrayan peasants against the junta and began to call for their right to self-determination to form an independent Republic of Tigray. TPLF's success is a testimony to the fact that an appeal to one's nationality was the best way to mobilize and unify the oppressed. Other ethnicity-based groups also began to emerge.⁵

Ethiopia Under the EPRDF Regime

As the civil war intensified, the Derg regime disintegrated in 1991. The United States proposed a transitional government led by the EPRDF, now a coalition of four political parties - the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) - much to the annoyance of the opponents of the EPRDF. In a conference convened in Addis Ababa in 1991, whose participants were largely ethnic groups, the transitional government was established. Also, all the major political forces agreed upon the independence of Eritrea. By a proclamation, the EPRDF upheld the rights to national self-determination and secession and organized the administration based on ethnic federalism. The cabinet and the Council of Representatives had members representing the different ethnic groups but was still dominated by the TPLF and the EPRDF.⁶

³ Young, John. 1996. "Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia." *Review of African Political Economy* (Taylor & Francis, Ltd.) 23 (70): 534.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. 535.

⁶ Ibid. 535-356.

As a result of the absence of any major opposition, the EPRDF easily swept the 1994 elections to the Constituent Assembly as well as the national elections of 1995 and 2000. The EPDRF-led government gained legitimacy through devolution of decision-making to ethnic groups, establishment of peace to a large extent, and peasant-friendly policies. State and party control of media, absence of free press, and absence of effective opposition bolstered its position. Gradually, the situation began to muddle. Ethnic groups were not proportionately represented in government ranks. The EPRDF opposed multinational movements and promoted ethnic-based parties. They projected the struggle against the Amhara-dominated state as the source of liberation of all ethnic nationalities. Even though TPLF could not garner an urban support base, no other regional party could emulate the success of TPLF at the regional level. The ANDM failed to face the opposition in the Amhara region. The Oromo region was paralysed due to differences of opinion between multiple organizations - the ODPO (criticized for its subservience to the EPRDF government), the Oromo National Congress, and the OLF – regarding the representation of the true interests of the Oromo people. Similarly, chaos ensued in the regions of Somali, Afar, and Beni Shangul, among others. Gradually, frictions began to arise within the ruling coalition primarily because its internal balance was skewed in favour of the TPLF.

The army and offices of the government comprised of members mainly from the TPLF and the EPRDF. Following its successful stint in the Ethiopian civil war, the TPLF confidently believed in its superiority. Consequently, its relations between the OLF and the EPRDF broke down quickly, after which OLF indulged in armed insurrection and later, banned. OLF considered the latest government to be just like its predecessors, except that this time, it was the hegemony of the Tigrayans. Many of the opposition parties feared that the government's ethnic policy would make Ethiopia a failed state. New opposition parties representing various ethnic groups were formed to compete with the ruling party. At the bureaucratic level, frictions developed between the Amhara and the Oromos against the Tigrayans due to disproportionate opportunities and representations.⁷

Tensions with Eritrea erupted into a major war between the two states resulting in the Ethiopia's loss of access to the port in Assab. State control of economy and peasant-friendly policies like low levels of taxation resulted in little resources to spare for administration purposes, unemployment, displacement, inflation, and dissatisfaction, especially among the youth and businessmen, inviting mass demonstrations. Following TPLF's split in 2001, policies of the TPLF began to show signs of centralization. By 2005, the state had tightened its control over the economy and had begun to actively suppress any dissent.

The strong performance by the opposition parties in the national elections of 2005 came as a surprise to the ruling coalition. The electoral violence that followed at Addis Ababa was violently suppressed by the government resulting in a death toll of 193 and injury of 763 protestors.⁸ After this incident, the EPRDF suppressed any dissent and criticism by media.

⁷ Ibid. 536 - 541.

⁸ 2006. *Ethiopian protesters 'massacred'*. October 19. Accessed September 21, 2021. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6064638.stm>.

Despite rapid GDP growth and reduction in headline rate of poverty, increased investment in infrastructure and economic opportunities, the government could not keep pace with the growing aspirations of the youth.

What marked the beginning of the end of the EPRDF was wave of protests between November 2015 and October 2016, following which a state of emergency was imposed until August 2017. While centralized urban planning that sought to expand the boundaries of Addis Ababa acted as the catalyst, feeling of domination of the Tigrayans spanning decades, ethnic tensions arising from the humanitarian and economic shocks brought by the floods and droughts of 2014, and imbalanced focus on industrialization at the expense of development of the agriculture sector provided the fertile ground. Starting from Oromia, the protests spread into its neighbouring regions of Amhara, and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR). The boundary between Oromia and Somali regions became a violent hotspot again. These tensions reflected within the ruling coalition which by 2017 began the process of rebalancing among its constituent parties. Ultimately, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigned in February 2018 and was succeeded by Abiy Ahmed, leader of the OPDO, in April 2018 thereby setting the direction of Ethiopia's latest political reforms.⁹

The political redirection under Abiy Ahmed

Abiy Ahmed's succession tilted the balance away from the TPLF within the coalition. In November 2019, the process of merging the four members of the EPRDF coalition with the five ruling parties of the Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Harari, and Somali regions began, thereby transforming itself into a single national party, the Ethiopian Prosperity Party. Tensions inevitably arose as what was once a coalition representing different ethnic groups is striving to attain a pan-Ethiopian character. The transformation also saw some of the important leaders resigning due to their lack of confidence in a single pan-Ethiopian party. The TPLF exited during the merger process and shifted its focus away from the national matters to the Tigrayans and their region. Besides, Abiy has attempted to unilaterally make policies by overriding the constitutionally laid mechanisms, such as giving permission for politicians to return from exile, releasing political prisoners, intervention in Sudan in 2019, and so on. The government has unleashed not only a new wave of political and economic reforms but also fresh and revived conflicts and displacements.¹⁰

Resurgent clashes since Abiy

⁹ Mosley, Jason. 2020. "Ethiopia's Transition: Implications for the Horn of Africa and Red Sea Region." *SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security* 2-3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 3-6.

The TPLF suspects the EPP government as attempting to destroy the federal nature of Ethiopia by centralizing power. To make matters worse, the ruling party, in its decision to establish peace with Eritrea, did not consider the concerns of the TPLF. Tensions reached a peak and simmered into a war when the government announced the postponement of national elections of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and when Tigray went ahead to hold the regional elections which the government later termed as illegal. The TPLF seized federal military bases. In retaliation, the government authorized an invasion into Tigray. As war and starvation hit the region, the locals fled their homes. Ultimately, the TPLF was designated a terrorist organization and was banned.¹¹

Amhara regional state expressing growing nationalism and quest for autonomy has put the Qemant at unease. They responded through agitation and its own calls for autonomy as well as other demands. The National Movement of Amhara (NAMA) and the regional security branch view this as a conspiracy to weaken the Amhara national identity. Violence erupted after Abiy Ahmed took office as the Prime Minister. Here too, thousands were imprisoned, injured, killed, or displaced.

Another consequence of the Amhara's renewed thrust for nationalism is conflict between the locals of the Oromo Special Zone of the Amhara region. With rumours of plans to withdraw the special status to the zone and newfound sense of pride and security as Abiy Ahmed, himself an Oromo, became the Prime Minister, stress between the two groups was on the rise. The act of the Amhara regional security branch to dispatch its forces to Dewe, a small village in the special zone, resulted in a series of clashes which spread to the nearby areas.¹²

September 2018 witnessed the Burayu massacre between the Oromos and the Dorze groups on one side and the Amaharas from Addis Ababa on the other hand in the town of Burayu in the Oromia state and in Addis Ababa. This is another case of clash due to the increased morale of the Oromos to exploit the political situation and settle old scores. Failure of state institutions also played a major role.

Despite the triumphant sense of victory among the Oromos, conflicts arose between the OLF and the government to guard themselves against the perceived attempts at centralization. The militancy of the OLF, support to rebel groups and the failure of the state machinery resulted in complete breakdown of law and order in Wollega zone in Oromia state.¹³

In the Benishangul-Gumuz region, the Gumuz already had frictions with the Amhara and the Oromos. The land reforms initiated under the EPRDF government raised issues of land

¹¹2021. *Ethiopia's Tigray war: The short, medium and long story*. June 29. Accessed September 23, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54964378>.

¹²Yusuf, Semir. 2019. *What is driving Ethiopia's ethnic conflicts?* East Africa report, Institute for Security Studies,

¹³2018. *Ethiopia: Thousands protest after deadly ethnic violence*. September 17. Accessed September 23, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/9/17/ethiopia-thousands-protest-after-deadly-ethnic-violence>.

ownership and massive displacement of non-titular groups beginning in 2013. The political reforms under the Abiy administration and the strengthening of the Oromo and the Amhara nationalism further intensified the conflicts as the Oromos as the Gumuz brought up the issues of previously being oppressed by them. The Gumuz set out to regain their lost lands and the Amharas are set on securing proportional representation. In the process, rounds of attacks and counterattacks happened.¹⁴

The secession of Sidama zone from the SNNPR in November 2019 kindled secessionist demands among other ethnic groups in SNNPR disrupting the local balance. The Guji-Gedeo conflict is an instance of border conflict between the Guji zone in the Oromo region and the Gedeo zone in the SNNPR over kebeles. The Gedeos are seen as encroachers on Oromo lands and are frequently blamed for the rising unemployment of the Gujis. Since the EPP came to power, there was an increase in anti-Gedeo activities, whereas the Gedeos have moved to merge both the zones in the SNNPR to accommodate their increased population. Gedeos were displaced due to attacks on the property by the OLF actors and the Gujis were displaced due to fear of retaliatory attacks.¹⁵

Conflict over access to natural resources and land caused a series of border clashes in the Oromia-Somali, Somali-Afar, and Amhara-Tigray borders.

Conclusion

Three decades of absence of effective opposition and suppressed civil rights like free press only resulted in sporadic violence and few major protests. Yet, a year of political liberalization and attempts at ensuring civil rights caused the spill over and violent manifestation of suppressed grievances. It all began with the redefinition of EPRDF, an ethnicity-based coalition, into a pan-Ethiopian party, the EPP. The wind of attempts at centralization by the EPP ignited the fear of losing regional autonomy and threat to existence. Subsequently, the major ethnicity-based parties operating at the national level began to refocus their attention to the regional level resulting in multiple calls for regional autonomy which oftentimes were incompatible with each other. As a side effect, the Ethiopian government also witnessed the emergence of strong and influential opposition in the form of regional parties like the TPLF on the one hand, and increased in-fighting among the groups over claims of true representation and accurate delineation of their aspirations and goals. There is also an increase in political activity among more ethnic groups. Since 2018, Ethiopia is also witnessing fights for territorial possession and border disputes renewed afresh and with more vigor than ever before.

¹⁴Yusuf, Semir. 2019.

¹⁵Ibid.

The perception of or preponderant influence of a particular ethnic group within the regional governmental apparatus and instances of misuse of this influence to intimidate the minorities for the dominant group to get their bidding has increased insecurity among the minorities in that region. Besides, the federal government lost their direct control over the regional security branches forcing them to use the federal army against its own people for the maintenance of law and order. Nothing screams authoritarianism and centralization more than this. State fragility, failure of state institutions, disproportionate use of force by security forces, and the fear of domination by other ethnic groups and of erosion of one's identity and culture have provoked defensive attacks.

The newfound and strengthened morale of the Oromos from having an Oromo as the Prime Minister of Ethiopia resulted in attacks to show off their political strength as well as attacks by other elements on the Oromos to bring down their influence. This can be seen as stemming from decades of being subordinated by numerically smaller ethnic groups such as the Tigrayans and the Amharas, despite being one of the most populous groups themselves.

However well-intentioned Abiy Ahmed and his vision may be from the perspective of democratization and modernization, he has definitely radiated some bad signals of tendencies of authoritarianism. At the same time, increased awareness of civil and political rights has encouraged the people to redress their grievances. Clearly, the sight today has been decades in the making.