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BRIEFING PAPER

BUILDING A NEW ETHIOPIAN POLITICAL SETTLEMENT

CONTEMPORARY REALIGNMENTS AND POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

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Ethiopia's transition under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is the latest attempt to build a stable political settlement – an agreement over how power will be distributed and wielded – between key actors. In its efforts to do this, Abiy's government set out to redefine the state, polity and citizenship, and reorganize state-society relations under the new Prosperity Party (PP) and a loosely defined political and economic approach known as *Medemer* ('coming together').¹

To this end, in its first years Abiy's government sought to do three things: First, mobilize popular support and legitimize its reforms by strengthening an overarching Ethiopian identity, national unity and social cohesion.² Second, improve the inclusion, representation and autonomy of the various national, linguistic and religious groups in political and economic decision making. Third, enhance the legitimacy of the government by democratizing state institutions and processes, liberalizing the political space and respecting human rights and the rule of law.³

However, despite some early progress, Abiy's objectives were hindered by several obstacles – combined with the new government's own failings and abuses – including polarization in different understandings of Ethiopia's history and nationhood; elite fragmentation; and intercommunal violence. The outbreak of the devastating Tigray war in 2020, and the insurgencies in Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz; increased insecurity in Amhara (currently a major preoccupation); and an ongoing border conflict between the Afar and Somali region, reversed many of the transition's early gains. The PP is now ideologically divided and unable to articulate a common position on the constitution and federal system.

1 'Ethiopia's ruling coalition agrees to form single party ahead of 2020 vote', *Reuters*, 21 November 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics/ethiopias-ruling-coalition-agrees-to-form-single-party-ahead-of-2020-vote-idUSKBN1XV24H>.

2 Michelle Gavin, 'Abiy's Agenda and the Future of Ethiopia', Council on Foreign Relations, 10 January 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/abiys-agenda-and-future-ethiopia>.

3 Sara Hasnaa Mokaddem, 'Abiy Ahmed's 'Medemer' reforms: Can it ensure sustainable growth for Ethiopia and what are the challenges facing the new government?', Policy Centre for the New South, 5 March 2019.

Major controversies, including over the future of the Ethiopian Orthodox church; the ownership of Addis Ababa and development of the Shaggar City project; and the continuing insurgency in the Oromia region, are resulting in a volatile political environment and fast changing alliances. Partly to maintain its support base, the PP has become dependent on a transactional political economy characterized by rent-seeking, and fragile elite pacts.

Differences between the PP's regional chapters are undermining the traditional role of the centralized political party in managing relations between federal and regional governments, and between the regional governments themselves. Popular public discontent resulting from a widespread paralysis within local government, poor public services, high inflation, increasing unemployment and widespread corruption is already contributing to social unrest. At this point, the government's support base seems more fragile than it has been since Abiy came to power in 2018.⁴

THE RISE OF THE OROMO

The political settlement that preceded the transition under Abiy was expressed in the form of the multinational federation defined by the 1994 constitution. Its vehicle was the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) – a coalition of regional parties – that was dominated by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF).⁵ Following its effective ejection from power in 2018, and the two-year war with the federal government (2020–22), the TPLF is now a much-diminished force. However, there is a widespread belief that the Oromia-PP is now attempting to reproduce the pre-2018 political, security and economic hierarchies of the EPRDF, replacing the TPLF as the dominant actor.

One reason for this view is that the Oromo region has seen significant benefits since 2018 with respect to regional autonomy, federal representation and the power of its political and security establishment. In the latter, the Oromo now hold several of the most senior positions, including the military Chief of Staff (Field Marshall Birhanu Jula), the head of the Air Force (General Yilma Merdassa), and the General Director of the Federal Police (Demelash Gebremicheal – until 2021 head of the National Intelligence and Security Services). Some traditionally Ethiopianist members of the opposition also highlight that post-2018 promotions, recruitment and assignments in the military and broader security sector favored Oromos.⁶ For example, three of the four recipients of the Black Lion Medal (awarded in January 2021) – the highest military medal of honour – were Oromos.⁷ In addition, half of the generals that were awarded the second highest award, the Adwa Victory Hero Medal, were also Oromos. Senior leaders in the military and PP officials defend the above as a merit-based recognition, and the promotions and wider recruitment of Oromos and others as an attempt to improve the representation and inclusion of groups that were previously under-represented within the state institutions. However, the campaign to modernize and expand the military, which in 2022–23 saw an unprecedented, albeit temporary, 500 per cent increase in its budget,⁸ has been perceived by its critics as a means of disbursing political patronage, or rents.

Outside of the security sector, the rising influence of the Oromia PP is resulting in its increasing leverage over the state. Since 1991, when the EPRDF came into power, Ethiopia has had/been a party state, where the government is subordinate to a dominant political party. However, the weakened role and visibility

4 Patrick Wight, 'Abiy Ahmed's power base is more fragile than ever', Ethiopia Insight, 14 June 2022, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2022/06/14/abiy-ahmeds-power-base-is-more-fragile-than-ever/>.

5 The TPLF led the successful armed struggle against the Derg regime.

6 See: Gobena Jaleta, 'The current burden of Ethiopia: Evolution of the power-seeking Oromo elites', *Borkena*, 22 June 2023, <https://borkena.com/2023/06/22/oromo-elites-the-current-burden-of-ethiopia-evolution-of-the-power-seeking/>.

7 The Oromo recipients were Field Marshall Birhanu Jula, General Bacha Debele and Lieutenant General Alemeshet Degefe.

8 'Ethiopia government to increase military budget by 500%', *Addis Insight*, 28 May 2022, <https://addisinsight.net/ethiopia-government-to-increase-military-budget-by-500/>. The budget increase occurred during the last phase of the Tigray war.

of the PP has resulted in an expansion of power and influence held by Abiy, who is an Oromo. Improved representation of the Oromo at mid and lower-level positions in the federal bureaucracy and the Addis Ababa civil service, as well as the fact that the mayor of the capital is an Oromo, is another reason often presented to support the claim of the political rise of the Oromia region. However, some commentators have pointed to the fact that the region, and Oromos in general, are still significantly underrepresented in federal institutions relative to their population size.

The perception of the growing political power of the Oromo over the state was further consolidated by the new voting and representation scheme adopted by the first PP general assembly held in March 2022. Departing from the previous consociational voting and representation of the EPRDF that gave the four members of the EPRDF an equal number of votes, the PP formula uses population size of regions and membership of PP regional chapters to determine representation in the central committee and the PP's executive council.⁹ The formula has been seen as a mechanism that favours the Oromo and the broader political south.

The voting pattern and alliance formations witnessed at the first congress of the PP held in February 2020 resulted in the election of a deputy president of the PP from the Somali region, Adem Farah. The inclusion of parties from Somali, Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambella, which were allies of the EPRDF, as full members of the PP, saw the new additions aligning themselves with the PM. The disintegration of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) has also ended the existence of Ethiopia's third biggest region and created smaller regions with less interest in challenging the status quo. The Oromia PP rejects the accusation that they are dominating the political sphere, and claims that the Oromo are yet to get the representation they deserve both in the party and the state. According to some sources, the government cited data on the ethnic background of federal civil servants and government employees presented to the PP meeting by the civil service commission in support of its claim that the Amharas are the most represented in the federal bureaucracy and state institutions.

The rift between the two most powerful members of the PP – Oromo and Amhara – is being widened by differences on key issues. These include the constitution; the Oromo claim over Addis Ababa; and how to manage the so-called Western Tigray issue – the dispute between Amhara and Tigray regions over territories that are now mostly under Amhara administration following their takeover by Amhara regional security and administrative institutions during the Tigray war.¹⁰ The Amhara region justifies the annexation by claiming that these lands were previously included in Tigray by force, while the federal government wants to resolve the issue through constitutional procedures. The conflict in the Amhara region beginning in August 2023 is also one factor widening the rift between the two sides. Some even dubbed members of the ENDF that went to fight in the Amhara region as 'OLFite' defence forces, delegitimizing the national institution and implying that the fight is between the Amhara and Oromia forces. Also, the near schism in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOTC) earlier in 2023, which saw several Oromo bishops threaten to form their own synod, had serious political implications. Senior leaders of the EOTC accused the Oromia and federal governments of sponsoring the split, which undermined the legitimacy of the PP in the eyes of many Orthodox followers, particularly in the Amhara region.¹¹

9 Ethiopia's ruling party concludes first congress, vows to address mounting uncertainties <https://english.news.cn/africa/20220314/d0e4a4b6b4804cb1bbo2af6ab43bf6b5/c.html>.

10 'Oromo and Amhara: The quest for transethnic solidarity and its discontents', *Xinhua*, 14 March 2022, <https://addisstandard.com/op-ed-oromo-and-amhara-the-quest-for-transethnic-solidarity-and-its-discontents/>.

11 'As schism deepens, Orthodox Synod slams PM Abiy's remarks on ongoing crisis point by point, threaten to organize worldwide protest', *Addis Standard*, 2 February 2023, <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-orthodox-synod-slams-pm-abiy-remarks-on-ongoing-crisis-point-by-point-threaten-to-organize-worldwide-protest/>; 'A rift in Ethiopia's Orthodox Church has been healed, but tensions remain', *Ethiopia Insight*, 28 February 2023, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2023/02/28/a-rift-in-ethiopia-orthodox-church-has-been-healed-but-tensions-remain/>.

The past few months also saw the resignation of ardent supporters of the Oromia PP – some joining the opposition camp – who had previously given strong support for Abiy’s war efforts and political projects.¹² This includes figures like Neamin Zeleke, Andargachew Tsegie and numerous members of the diaspora media. They were instrumental in galvanizing Ethiopian diaspora support for the government’s war efforts in Tigray, as well as mobilizing and leading attempts to lobby the international community in Addis Ababa’s favour. However, some are now labeling the government as being Oromo-dominated and have initiated a campaign calling for sanctions and for the diaspora to stop sending remittances back home – an important lifeline for the country’s struggling economy.

GROWTH OF OROMO NATIONALISM

For the Oromo political and security establishment, based on its size (geographical and numerical)¹³ and cultural and religious diversity, the Oromo nation has the legitimacy to claim the mantle as the dominant player within the Ethiopian polity. The Oromia regional state occupies much of the central region of the country, but also extends into eastern and western areas. It shares borders with all of Ethiopia’s other regional states, apart from Tigray in the north. This alone could give Oromia an advantage in building an inclusive political alliance across the country. However, contested boundaries, overlapping identities, competition for resources and weak and corrupt local government has tended to undermine Oromia’s aspiration to build alliances with its neighbours. The contested border with the Somali region, where a conflict from 2016-18 displaced more than a million people, is probably the most high-profile example of where cultural and religious alliances or ideological solidarity is being undermined by territorial disputes.¹⁴

The dual identity of the Oromia region in the making of modern Ethiopia allows its elites to entertain diverse views on history, identity and nationhood. However, the same context could exacerbate differences within the Oromo. Oromo elites identify with the political struggles of regions like the Somali, Sidama, Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz, which see themselves as having been marginalized from the state and nation-building process – historically dominated by so-called highlanders. However, alongside this, the Oromo elite increasingly identifies with the history of centralized state-making in Ethiopia, particularly in the nineteenth century. This includes the defeat of the Italian invaders at the battle of Adwa in 1896 – a seminal moment in modern Ethiopian nationalism. For example, in March 2021, the Oromia regional government emphasized the roles of the Oromo generals at Adwa during the annual celebrations at Meskel Square in Addis Ababa. The role of the Emperor Menelik – historically portrayed as the victorious leader of the Ethiopian armies – was conspicuously downplayed.

The Adwa celebrations are just one example of attempts by Oromo elites to promote their region’s legitimacy to shape a new political settlement. Addis Ababa has become the major theatre for the intensifying political, economic and cultural contestation between the two regions and their political elites. Several recent initiatives by the city administration have been seen by members of the pro-Ethiopian nationalist camp, and the Amhara political opposition, as attempts to change the status, identity and demography of

12 Ethiopian organizations demand Abiy Ahmed avoid State Collapse’, *Borkena*, 8 March 2023, <https://borkena.com/2023/03/08/ethiopian-organizations-demand-abiy-ahmed-avoid-state-collapse/>.

13 The 2007 census put the Oromo as 34 per cent of Ethiopia’s population. This was contested by the Amhara region, which was recorded as 27 per cent of the population and seen by many in the region as a deliberate attempt by the TPLF – the then dominant political group in Ethiopia – to down-play the size of the Amhara population. The rejection of the results of the census, which influences federal budgetary allocations, is an important motivator for Amhara nationalism – a relatively recent phenomenon.

14 A 10 March 2023 statement by Congress for Somali Cause accused the Oromia region of ‘illegal expansion and construction in Somali Region’. Congress for Somali Cause, ‘Stop Oromia Land Grab: Congress for Somali Cause Denounces Oromia State Illegal Expansion and Construction in Somali Region’, *Reddit*, 10 March 2023, https://www.reddit.com/r/Ethiopia/comments/110ou4j/for_immediate_release_stop_omoria_land_grab/.

the city in favour of the Oromo. For example, attempts to fly the flag and sing the anthem of the Oromia regional state in public schools was abandoned following opposition and resistance at the start of 2023.¹⁵ In March 2023, the Oromo mayor of Addis Ababa, Adanech Abebie, stated that mass migration from certain regions (implying Amhara) to the city is aimed at overthrowing the federal government. A few hours later, the National Movement of Amhara (NaMA) released a statement accusing the mayor of inciting ethnic division and engaging in genocidal rhetoric.¹⁶ This took place with the backdrop of the increasing frustration of the Amhara regional government on restrictions imposed on people travelling from the region to the capital, which the former president of Amhara, Yilikal Kefale, called unconstitutional and unacceptable.

INTRA-OROMO COMPETITION

As well as building alliances with other regions, the Oromia PP is also faced with the challenge of reconciling intra-Oromo contradictions. For example, Abiy's initial messaging about constitutional reform – indicating a possible departure from the ethno-linguistic foundations of the system – was met with opposition in Oromia while it consolidated his support in Addis Ababa and the Amhara region. Abiy's efforts to strike a delicate balance between Ethiopian nationalism and ethnic nationalism have affected his popularity in the Oromia region, particularly amongst the youth who were at the vanguard of the protest movement that brought the EPRDF down.¹⁷ Other prominent Oromos, including a strong contingent in the diaspora who are vocal on social media, also reject Abiy's understanding of history, identity and citizenship and are suspicious of his commitment to multinational federalism.

Taking a more conciliatory position, Jawar Mohammed, deputy chairperson of the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) and the de facto leader of the Oromo protests of 2014-2018, asserted that the Oromo question can and should be answered within the Ethiopian state.¹⁸ Jawar also emphasized peaceful political struggle as the only way to bring about change and has acknowledged the gains of the federal system and some positive changes since 2018. As is evident, there are serious ideological, organizational, personal, tactical and strategic differences between the Oromo opposition, diaspora and intellectual class. For example, in a speech delivered in late June at the fiftieth anniversary of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the chairperson of the OLF, Dawud Ibsa, asserted that the objective of his party is realizing the self-determination of the Oromo nation.

However, developments in the past year, including the peace process in Tigray, the establishment of Shaggar City encircling Addis Ababa¹⁹ and the alleged role of the government in divisions within the EOTC may be pushing Abiy closer to his Oromo support base – a process accentuated by the widening divisions between Oromo and Amhara PP. A call by Shimelis Abdisa, president of the Oromia region, for a peaceful resolution of the OLA crisis, followed by a week of peace talks in Zanzibar in April, was taken as an

15 Getahun Legesse, 'Unrest, violence in Addis schools ignite blames of "illegally enforcing" Oromia flag, anthem; leads to security crackdown', *Addis Standard*, 13 December 2022, <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-unrest-violence-in-addis-schools-ignite-blames-of-illegally-enforcing-romia-flag-anthem-leads-to-security-crackdown/>.

16 'Mayor's remark on "migration to Addis Ababa" triggers a reaction', *Borkena*, 14 March 2023, <https://borkena.com/2023/03/14/mayors-remark-on-migration-to-addis-ababa-triggers-a-reaction/>.

17 Lucy Fleming, 'Why Ethiopia's 'alphabet generation' feel betrayed by Abiy', BBC, 19 June 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57524513>.

18 Ermias Tasfaye, 'Jawar Mohammed: from 'A luta continua' to peace preacher', *Ethiopia Insight*, 26 June 2022, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2022/06/26/jawar-mohammed-from-la-aluta-continua-to-peace-preacher/>.

19 'Is Sheger City a strategy to swallow Addis Ababa?' *Borkena*, 24 February 2023, <https://borkena.com/2023/02/24/is-sheger-city-a-strategy-to-swallow-addis-ababa/>.

attempt by Abiy and the regional government to capitalize on shifting alliances.²⁰ These developments are substantially pushing the ideology, narrative and language of the Oromia and federal governments closer to the positions of Oromo nationalists and the Oromo opposition.

In an attempt to bring the different political actors in Oromia closer together, an intra-Oromo dialogue started three years ago. The group, which was convened to discuss key political and social issues amongst the Oromo community, included representatives from the government, members of the opposition, former leaders of political parties, intellectuals and members of the civil society and the business community. However, the terrorist designation of the OLA and weakening, polarization and divisions in Oromo political parties resulted in poor attendance and accusations that the forum isn't representative. The absence of key figures from the Oromo political sphere, including Jawar Mohammed, Bekele Gerba, Merera Gudina and Dawud Ibsa has also led to questions on its legitimacy and effectiveness.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE SCENARIOS

Given the central role of the Oromia region in current political dynamics, the continuing schism in the Oromo establishment could have far reaching consequences for Abiy's attempts to form a new political settlement. Fractures and fragmentation in the Oromo opposition could also further undermine the political opposition and weaken the emergence of a strong opposition party to challenge the Oromia PP. The vacuum in competitive politics could further embolden and legitimize the OLA's insurgency as the sole option to challenge the regional and federal governments. Accusations of dominance of the Oromo political and security establishment in the federal government is resulting in declining cohesion of the PP and weakening the image, legitimacy and effectiveness of the state to undertake inclusive, independent and comprehensive peace, political and dialogue processes that may result in a new political settlement.

Possible scenarios

Making predictions in the current political context risks becoming a hostage to fortune. However, here are five possible non-sequential scenarios to consider:

- Divisions between Amhara and Oromia PP continue to widen with the two parties being pushed further towards their nationalist bases. This undermines the capacity of the state to bring consensus and weakens the PP's ability to govern.
- A delegitimized Amhara PP, weakened NaMA and a federal government crackdown on Fanos leads to a low-intensity insurgency in the Amhara region, challenging the hegemonic aspirations of the PP.
- Allegations of an alliance between the Amhara political leadership and Eritrean government undermine Addis-Asmara relations, leading to improved relations between the Oromia PP and the TPLF.
- Renewed peace talks with OLA improve the legitimacy of the Oromia PP in Oromia and consolidate its position as a senior partner in Addis Ababa.
- Rising inflation and unemployment fused with growing nationalist sentiments result in social unrest in Addis Ababa and other major cities.

²⁰ 'Oromia Region President calls for reconciliation with OLA', *Addis Standard*, 17 February 2023, <https://addisstandard.com/breaking-romia-region-president-calls-for-reconciliation-with-ola/>.

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