

Research article

The Current Political Situation in Ethiopia is Transformation or Change?

Gadisa Mitiku Amosa

Mettu University, Bedele College of Agriculture and Forestry, Department of Civic and Ethical Studies

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This paper presents primarily the current political situation of Ethiopia whether it is transformation or change. The objective of the study is to differentiate the current political situation of Ethiopia whether it is political transformation or change. To this end exploratory research design was used, and the study used secondary data from published journal, article and report papers. Then the researcher quantified the general activities carried out by the reformist leaders Dr. Abiy Ahmed Ali. The results show that the current reform in Ethiopia mainly transformation rather than change.

Keywords: change, ethnic federalism, transformation, reform, protest

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1991, Ethiopia has been governed by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of four political organizations joined together during the liberation struggle against the defunct regime of Mengistu Haile Meriam. The constituent members of the EPRDF coalition are Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDEM now Amhara Democratic Party, ADP), Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO, now Oromo Democratic Party (ODO), Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) and Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The 1995 Constitution which shaped the machinery of government (executive, judiciary and legislative) and a myriad of laws and proclamations informing state-society relations in Ethiopia, was promulgated during the EPRDF reign. (Mohamed Salih, et al 2018).

Three distinct strategic doctrines define the edifice of EPRDF political and economic orientation are worthy of a brief mention because of their centrality in the ongoing political reform process: First, "Ethnic Federalism",

whereby Ethiopian Constitution provides for the creation of nine ethnic-federal governments to accommodate ethnic groups' cultural, linguistic, and political claims. Second, "Revolutionary Democracy" which has thus far enabled the EPRDF to play a leading role in the process of popular mobilization of the entire people to realize its Revolutionary Democratic Program, it is imperative to have a lasting unity of ideas and practice between EPRDF and its member organizations from top to bottom. The current debate in Ethiopia in general and within the EPRDF coalition members is centered on the need or otherwise for a political reform aiming to establish a liberal democratic orientation. The opponents of revolutionary democracy argue that it has for 27 years united the party and the state and therefore left meager if any democratic space for opposition political parties to part-take. Questions have also been raised about the tolerance of revolutionary democracy towards critical media, civil society, and primacy of the rule of law and election integrity because of proximity to the revolutionary Democratic Party to the state.

Third, EPRDF adopted a "developmental state"

doctrine within a market economy model in which the state is the driving force of the economy supported in some sectors by national and foreign private sector (Mohamed Salih, et al 2018).

The present political reforms in Ethiopia can be distinguished from political transition in that; they do not aim at dismantling the state institutions created by the EPRDF, but rather to reform these institutions within the confines of the current political developments. Moreover, what is taking place is not a political transition because it does not satisfy the full thrust of a full-fledged process. For example, political transition could mean political transformation, commencing from a given political regime that for many reasons became inadequate or unable to live up to its institutional tasks and culminates in another constituting a break from the past political life of a country. As the EPRDF ruling coalition is still in power, Ethiopia is at an early stage of apolitical reform process that would undoubtedly reform and retain most of the positive characteristics of the current regime rather than sweeping it away in the manner the EPRDF swept away the Derg regime in 1991.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Beneath the surface, however, the country was headed toward a crisis. The contradictions between the political settlement of 1991, which instituted a form of ethnic federalism, and late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's drive to centralize a developmental state were becoming increasingly unmanageable. The informal networks Meles had created to control the regional governments and the ethnic parties were weakening. Economic challenges, including chronic foreign currency shortages, stuttering growth, inflation and pervasive corruption, exacerbated the political problems. Social discontent mounted in parallel to political tensions, especially among youth – people aged 15-25 years – in large provincial towns. With a weak and fragmented opposition, mostly confined to the diaspora, as well as restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, the restless population increasingly channeled its grievances and calls for change within regional states and the ethnic parties in the ruling coalition. Frequently, these grievances focused on ethnic imbalances in the system. Ethnic undertones to the discontent sometimes surfaced, triggering communal violence. (author, 2019).

Since the end of 2015, tens of thousands have been protesting against the compulsory purchase of land set aside for expanding the capital, Addis Ababa. More than 700 people were killed in the subsequent crackdown and 23,000 arrested. The state of emergency imposed at the time shattered the relationship between the government and the people. A movement called Qeerroo Bilisummaa Oromo (Oromo Youth Movement) became a symbol of

protests. Strikes were sometimes controlled via social media, including through bloggers in the diaspora (Annette, 2018).

In January 2018, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) announced that in order to respond to intensifying antigovernment protests, it would take comprehensive reform measures, including revising and repealing laws that narrowed the political space, facilitating free and fair elections, releasing political prisoners and promoting national reconciliation. In the months that followed, thousands of prisoners were freed and the notorious federal crimes investigations unit in Addis Ababa, commonly known as Maekelawi, was closed.

The resignation of Hailemariam Desalegn as prime minister in February 2018 was one of the most consequential political developments that revealed that differences among supporters of profound changes and those fighting to ensure the continuation of the status quo with minimal overtures to change and reform have reached a tipping point. While the resignation of Hailemariam was greeted with joy by the public and considered a key step that help push reforms forward, the declaration of a state of emergency the next day was a reminder that the power struggle within the EPRDF was far from over. However, the selection of Abiy Ahmed by the EPRDF to become the new prime minister in April after six weeks of painstaking deliberation within the leadership of the ruling party ushered in a new chapter in Ethiopia's political history, one that seems to put the country on an unprecedented trajectory of political change and opening (Yoseph, 2018).

METHODOLOGY OF THE PAPER

The study was employed qualitative research method. The study was employed exploratory research design. In order to organize the paper, the researchers have been used secondary data. Secondary data was from published articles, reports, ideas and suggestion from politician, activists, journalists, known individuals and different peoples through goggling, and by using digital library am try to find the sources from the internet and finally am being to organize the paper entitled the is the current political situation of Ethiopia and EPRDF transformation or change?

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The swearing in of Abiy Ahmed as Ethiopia's Prime Minister on April 2, 2018 has been regarded as a watershed moment in the country's political development; Abiy took power after his predecessor, Hailemariam Desalegn who had been in office since 2012–

unexpectedly left office. Hailemariam's time in office was marked by states of emergency and widespread protests. PM Abiy's brief tenure thus far has been marked by a dramatic shift in the country's rhetoric, an increased tolerance for political dissidents, and a thawing of tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea over a long-standing border dispute (the Guardian, 8 July 2018). However, the change in leadership has not put a halt to political violence in the country. There may have recently been a greater tolerance for protests and a decline in the number of demonstrations in Oromia, but in the same time period, long-standing conflicts have flared and intercommunal violence in the country has been on the rise. These are potentially encouraged by regional and local power-brokers who are eager to advance their own interests in this period of political flux. From the above discussion what we understand that the current political situation of Ethiopia is the matter of change in leadership and some reforms within the existing parties. This indicates the time of transformation rather than change.

The political transition that made Abiy Prime Minister is in many ways ongoing; the constituent parties of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) held their party congresses in early October and implemented a number of rhetorical and leadership changes (Borkena, 2 October 2018). During the party congress for the EPRDF, the party approved plans to professionalize and depoliticize the state's security sector, a process which entails removing the current heads of national security agencies, who are members of the party's Central committee (Africa Intelligence, 12 October 2018). The ethno regional parties that constitute the EPRDF are still attempting to position themselves favorably in the new era of Ethiopian politics and the members of those parties are also competing for influence (Hilary, 2018). From this what we clearly know that still there is change in leadership not the party.

Prime Minister Abiy has overseen a period of rapid political reform in Ethiopia; the pattern of violence in the country suggests that leadership changes in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) have resulted in, for now, a more placid Oromia and a less lethal response to peaceful protest. The durability of this arrangement remains to be seen. Furthermore, since Abiy took office, there has also been a surge in violent activities in the country's south, suggesting that a change in EPRDF leadership is insufficient to ensure an end to violence throughout the country. The insecurity and political instability of this transition period has catalyzed competitions for power and influence that often manifest in violence. Regional power-brokers and politicians have leveraged ethnic identities and sub-national armed groups to advance their position during this period of political flux. (Hilary, 2018).

Immediately after his nomination Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the incoming administration had signaled a

reformist policy. This was followed by the release of political prisoners, the closing of the Maekelawi prison, officially known as the Federal Police Crime Investigation and Forensic Sector, and the removal of three opposition groups from the national list of terrorist organizations. The new administration also decided to unblock a number of websites, blogs and radio and TV stations including two diaspora TV stations which were previously unavailable to the population. These decisions had widened the political space in Ethiopia and could lead to an improvement in the human rights situation, including for members of the opposition. This development had inspired a cautious optimism among observers of the political situation in Ethiopia as the new administration had announced that it will take human rights more seriously. However, at the same time violence, ethnic clashes and abuses may continue at local level. The overall situation for opposition parties has improved following the nomination of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. This relative improvement also included the youth branches of those opposition parties. The opposition groups OLF, ONLF and Ginbot 7 had been removed from the national list of terrorist organisations and their leadership had been invited to return to participate in political discussions. OLF and Ginbot 7 leaders had accepted the invitation and returned to Ethiopia. Both the OLF and the ONLF had been weakened over the past three years and lost political and military influence. Since January 2018 the number of mass demonstrations in which students had been shot at and detained by the authorities had decreased and the overall situation for students who were active in student organizations had improved. The Ethiopian diaspora's activities are monitored by the authorities. This includes their activities on Facebook, YouTube and personal blogs. Ethiopian citizen who participate in anti-government demonstrations in Europe or in the US were likely to be video-taped and thereby having their participation in such events documented; this surveillance would also extend to Ethiopians who had obtained a new nationality. After the nomination of the new Prime Minister, the situation for the diaspora is less threatening. Members of the diaspora who decide to return to Ethiopia are allowed to reintegrate into society as citizens, and open private businesses (Ministry of Immigration and, 2018). In many ways, Abiy's election signaled a dramatic shift in EPRDF's style of governance. While structural changes to the institutions and the legal framework that served as an instrument of repression have yet to be made, the new prime minister and his team have so far taken several bold measures that earned them strong popular support.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's articulated his programme for political reform in his Inaugural Address April 3, 2018, in which he declared the democracy, freedom and the rule of law should apply the tenets of the relationship between state and society, including the

peaceful and armed opposition. Amhara Democratic Forces Movement (ADFM), Arbegnoch Ginbot 7 Movement, Ogaden National Liberation Movement (ONLF) and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) are among the armed opposition parties whose forces will benefit from government-funded reintegration program. Leaders of these armed-movements reached an agreement with the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to end their armed struggle, return to Ethiopia and embark on a peaceful effort to achieve their political goals.

Abiy's new government released thousands of political prisoners, including some high profile figures, lifted the draconian state of emergency in June, publicly announced plans to amend the constitution to institute term limits on the tenure of the prime minister, invited exiled opposition politicians to return home and participate in politics and moved to lift the terrorist designation of three major opposition political parties. As a result, many opposition parties including those engaged in armed struggle, have returned home pledging to participate in peaceful political activities. Expanding the democratic space for political participation is one of the fundamental choices informing the political reforms currently underway. The justification of this choice emanating from the objectives that motivated the government to embark in the political reform process and what energized the Ethiopia people protests which covered most of the last three years. Citizens, opposition parties and armed movements regardless of ideological orientation or ethnic belonging, have based their struggle on the aspiration to create a freer and more democratic Ethiopia. No wonder that for all democratic forces, expanding the democratic space for civic engagement is inviolable and the cardinal of their political and armed struggle, regardless of social, ethnic, religious and ideological cleavages. Enhancing the civic engagement as a means of expanding authentic participation in the political reforms. In a sense, there is no choice between expanding the democratic space for political participation and enhancing civic engagement for expanding the political space or vice versa. They are two faces of the same coin. Furthermore, the engagement of reform committees, subject experts and party officials cannot compensate for the need for direct involvement of civic association representatives in the ensuing debate on the political reforms. A large part of this Report explains the mismatch between constitutional, legal and policy frameworks and practice in respect to civic engagement (particularly the role of media reforms, NGOs and civil society, gender equality, judicial system reform and electoral system reforms) in a democratic society. Although some of the committees and experts entrusted with the political and legal reforms are at different stages in the process, it is too late for institutionalizing the stakeholders' role in the reform process. Fostering peaceful co-existence between Ethiopia people, nations

and nationalities and equal treatment of citizens regardless of race, religion, region or creed: Ethiopia would have never been able to realize the levels of economic growth improvements in health, education, and drinking water supply, physical infrastructure, without political stability, peace and security. It is only by recognizing that conflict is the antithesis of development that the Ethiopian people be able to continue to improve and consolidate the current levels of socio-economic development towards achieving the cherished goal of poverty eradication (Mohamed Salih, et al,2018).

In the economic sphere, the government is taking steps to end the government monopoly on key economic sectors including telecom, energy and air transport. While the practical implementation of this is going to be complex and is likely to face strong opposition from different sectors of the public. Abiy seems intent on moving forward. In addition to appointing reform-minded executives to key economic positions, including the governor of the National Bank, the Chief Executive of Ethio Telecom and the Head of National Planning Commission, Abiy set up an advisory council on the privatization of state-owned enterprises in August.

In another dramatic move with potential implications for the wider Horn of Africa region, Abiy took the initiative to end 20 years of hostility with Eritrea by declaring EPRDF's unconditional acceptance of the 2000 Algiers Agreement and the 2002 decision of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission (EEBC). In the weeks that followed, leaders of the two countries met several times in Addis Ababa and Asmara. They restored diplomatic relations, re-opened their embassies and signed a number of trade and investment agreements. Last week's symbolic anchoring of one of Ethiopia's commercial vessels at the port of Massawa for the first time in 20 years indicated the consolidation of the rapprochement between the two countries. This peace dividend seems to be expanding to the region, as Djibouti and Somalia have also engaged in peace talks with Eritrea (Yoseph, 2018).

In June, the government set up a law and justice Advisory Council under the auspices of the office of the Attorney General. The Council, composed of 13 independent legal professionals, is entrusted with examining restrictive laws, including the Charities and Societies Proclamation and the Antiterrorism Proclamation, and flaws in the justice system, and developing recommendations for comprehensive revisions including amendments to the laws and restructuring of institutions. The Advisory Council and the different working groups within it have so far done a remarkable job of holding several public forums to solicit feedback from stakeholders on proposed changes to these laws (Yoseph, 2018). The above discussion indicate that there is change in leadership and a lot of activities accomplished by the new prime minister. Since the new prime ministers nominated from one of the EPDRF

parties and there is the time of reform not revolutionary, therefore it is transformation rather than change. But if there is change in party, political system, ideology, and totally collapse of the former system like that of the beginning of the 1991 it will be transition not transformation.

CONCLUSION

The 1995 Constitution which shaped the machinery of government (executive, judiciary and legislative) and a myriad of laws and proclamations informing state-society relations in Ethiopia, was promulgated during the EPRDF reign. (Mohamed Salih, Andreas Eshete and Samuel Assefa, 2018). Three distinct strategic doctrines define the edifice of EPRDF political and economic orientation are worthy of a brief mention because of their centrality in the ongoing political reform process were: Ethnic Federalism, Revolutionary Democracy and “developmental state but, un able change into practice. Beneath the surface, however, the country was headed toward a crisis. The contradictions between the political settlement of 1991, which instituted a form of ethnic federalism, and late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi’s drive to centralize a developmental state were becoming increasingly unmanageable. Since the end of 2015, tens of thousands have been protesting against the compulsory purchase of land set aside for expanding the capital, Addis Ababa. More than 700 people were killed in the subsequent crackdown and 23,000 arrested.

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ABBREVIATION

ADP	Amhara Democratic Party
ANDM	Amhara National Democratic movement
EEBC	Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission
EPRDF	Ethiopia People’s Revolutionary Democratic front
ODP	Oromo Democratic Party
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
ONLF	Ogaden National Liberation Front
SEPDM	South Ethiopia Peoples Democratic Movement
TPLF	Tigray Peoples Liberation Front

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