



Failed Coup Attempt Leaves PM Abiy's Reforms at Risk in Ethiopia

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The coup attempt on June 22, 2019, spreads the air of uncertainty in Ethiopia after the killing of five senior officials of the country. The Ethiopian Army Chief of Staff and Amhara state president were murdered in cold blood in the attempted coup. The Army Chief of Staff was killed by his bodyguard. The coup attempt in Ethiopia can be seen as the product of ultranationalist elements and politico-economic transformations by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

Recent Changes in Ethiopia

Since April 2, 2018, Ethiopia has seen fundamental reforms under PM Abiy. After taking charge, Ethiopia's youngest country head tried to end political repression by removing bans on political parties, releasing political prisoners, and taking legal actions on those officials accused of human rights abuses. Taking a progressive policy, Abiy persuaded Ethiopian Parliament to elect its first woman President, reserved 50 per cent seats for women in the Parliament,¹ and signed a peace agreement with

Eritrea, marking an end to the 20-year-long state of war.² On the economic front, he took measures to liberalise the economy, privatise parts of Ethiopian Electric Power, Ethiopian Airlines, and Ethio Telecom. His political-economic reforms surprised not only the Ethiopian people but also the African continent and the world at large.

Reason for Coup Attempt

The winds of change by Abiy started taking the form of a dangerous cyclone. He earned powerful enemies with his reforms. Unemployed Ethiopians started losing hope with the deteriorating economy. One of the fast-growing economies has crossed loan of over \$20 billion from China alone. Crony capitalism increased the country's dependency on foreign investors. Ethnic tensions also increased since Abiy released the political prisoners. Another issue which led to the coup attempt is unrest within the military since April 2018. PM Abiy's Chief of Army Staff Seare Mekonnen made sweeping changes in the security apparatus and annoyed

military commanders. In October 2018, hundreds of soldiers marched to PM office and demanded pay rise to improve their living standards and review the structure and operations of the military.³

Consequently, a number of soldiers were involved in the coup attempt. With the help of General Asaminew Tsige (a high ranking military officer released from prison by the previous PM Hailemariam Desalegn), rogue state militia – which was a recently formed unit of the region's security services and has been claiming stakes in the government – was responsible for the coup attempt. General Asaminew was a member of the country's second largest Amhara ethnic group and was seen on popular social media videos openly advising the Amhara people to arm themselves.⁴ Tension increased, and massive firing was exchanged between the rebel and Ethiopian forces. Five senior officials, including the Ethiopian Chief of Army Staff, were killed in action to foil the coup attempt in Amhara region. The coup bid clearly brought out that there is significant opposition within the military against its leadership. Amhara being the second populous region is very important to control, and the assassination of its president in the coup attempt is a setback to PM Abiy. However, Gen Asaminew Tsige was killed later during the escape attempt from his hideout; the situation remained the same in the country. There is a different opinion on socio-political issues in Ethiopia.

Loss in Abiy's Charm

However, progress has been made on some fronts, and Abiy's reforms made many Ethiopians believe that the country is finally departing from the age-old politics of authoritarianism, the deep-rooted challenge of ethnic conflicts and land disputes due to Internally Displaced People (IDP) that had remained unresolved. The ground situation is entirely different, however, as unemployment has increased, and the ongoing violence has displaced more than two million people. The Ethiopian prime minister has failed to live up to the people's expectations. His pro-democratic reforms to calm inter-community movements have upset many leaders. He became the victim of a grenade attack by the Oromo people (the largest ethnic group of the country) at Meskel Square rally due to ethnic issues. A few months later, five people were arrested for the attack. Assailants were not satisfied with the pro-democratic and development work taken by Abiy for his ethnic community to secure their interests.⁵ The concept of Ethiopian nationalism for pan-Ethiopian unity remained ineffective for the masses. And failure to mobilise for pan-nationalism led to violence between Gumuz and Amhara. More than a thousand people died from both communities due to ethnic violence.⁶

Future Trajectory

Abiy came to power after Hailemariam Desalegn resigned as PM and left his post as chair of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary

Democratic Front (EPRDF). He brought hope for the country, but many in civilian, political and military leadership were not prepared for revolutionary changes under his leadership. If the situation remains unresolved in Ethiopia, it would impact the political, economic and social development of the Horn region. The whole Horn of Africa is volatile due to political rivalry, the Civil War in Somalia, border disputes, terrorism, clan war, insecurity due to foreign military mobilisation and health issues. Being the fastest growing economy, Ethiopia can contribute to the overall development of the region by assisting the United Nations and African Union peace missions in the region, resolving disputes and strengthening the economies of neighbouring countries.

The coup attempt in Ethiopia is a shocking development; it shows how fragile the transition has been. Abiy needs to address the issues by taking people into confidence by reaching out to ethnic group leaders and responsible government officials personally or by his trusted representatives; maintaining Gross Domestic Production (GDP) growth; addressing the issue of unemployment, and overcoming the challenge of the debt trap. Abiy needs to work on the transformation of rural Ethiopia by linking it to the urban economy. It will help to generate employment, and uplift the industrial, agricultural and social structures of the country. The Ethiopian prime minister can also look for the development options through the United

Nations (UN), African Union (AU), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), and IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa). Lastly, if PM Abiy wants to be a people's leader, he must reconsider his objectives and engage with the people to resolve ethnic conflicts.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Abdi Latif Dahir, "Ethiopia's new 50% women cabinet isn't just bold-it's smart", *Quartz Africa*, October 16, 2018, <https://qz.com/africa/1426110/ethiopias-new-cabinet-is-50-women/>, Accessed on June 23, 2019.

² Aljazeera, "Ethiopia, Eritrea sign peace deal at Saudi Arabia summit" *Aljazeera and News Agencies*, September 17, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/ethiopia-eritrea-sign-peace-deal-saudi-arabia-summit-180917055913813.html>, Accessed on June 23, 2019.

³ Maggie Fick, "Ethiopian PM meets with soldiers demanding pay rise: TV", *Reuters*, October 10, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-military/ethiopian-pm-reaches-agreement-with-soldiers-demanding-pay-rises-tv-idUSKCN1MK220>, Accessed on June 24, 2019.

⁴ Staff and agencies, "Ethiopian army chief killed by bodyguard and regional leader dead in coup attempt", *The Guardian*, June 23, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/23/ethiopia-coup-attempt-leaves-army-chief-shot-says-pm>, Accessed on June 24, 2019.

⁵ BBC, "Ethiopia attack: Five charged for trying to kill PM Abiy Ahmed", *British Broadcasting Corporation*, September 28, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45678760>, Accessed on June 25, 2019.

⁶ AFP, "Dozens Killed in ethnic clashes in Ethiopia, regional official says", *The Times of Israel*, May 03, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/dozens-killed-in-ethnic-clashes-in-ethiopia-regional-official-says/>, Accessed on June 25, 2019.