What is driving Ethiopia's ethnic conflicts?

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The rise in violent ethnic conflict in Ethiopia in recent years can largely be linked to the sharp increase in militant ethnic nationalism against a backdrop of state and party fragility. Decades of exclusivist political arrangements have contributed to a steady rise in ethnic consciousness, with the state and ruling party becoming increasingly incoherent. This has increased ethnic disagreement. High-level negotiations aided by nationwide and inclusive dialogue could help stabilise the country.

Key findings

▶ Contending ethnic mobilisation and the incoherence of the state and ruling party have contributed to the rise in ethnic-based violence in Ethiopia, especially since 2018.

▶ Ethnic mobilisation has persisted in the country for at least five decades, either excluded or nurtured by successive political systems. Especially since 1991, the empowering and disempowering effects of, and the simmering tensions within, the centralised ethno federal system continued unabated until unbridled ethnic movements finally engulfed state and party institutions, rendering them weak and incoherent. Fragile institutions facilitated the rise of violent communal contentions.

▶ The state has suffered in three ways as a result of protest movements. Its institutions have been weakened by protesting mobs, fracturing command and control within key sectors. Rules governing the relationship between federal and regional states have become open to renegotiation. Finally, the line between upholding rule of law and order, and sliding back to authoritarianism, has not been clearly defined.

▶ The ruling party in turn became divided along its ethnic components. Ideological and methodological differences, as well as those stemming from contrasting constituencies, have made collaborative efforts to restore peace in the country a formidable challenge.

Recommendations

▶ Internal negotiations within the ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, should aim to bring order into and among each constituent party. Inter-party negotiations should be candid and thorough, and based on the principle of reciprocity. The negotiations must include a concrete plan to secure peace in each region, with cascading positive effects in the country as a whole.

▶ Inclusive national dialogue should take place to find ways to reconstitute the state to meet the reasonable demands of major political groups.

▶ The state should reinvent itself by ensuring its security structures can take action, but with due consideration to professionalism and the basic principles of human rights. Templates for doing so should be developed at different levels.

▶ The government should work on fixing the ailing economy. The focus must be on immediate job creation for the youth.

▶ Civil society organisations need to inject non-ethnic and cross-cutting agendas that bring together diverse groups of people to achieve collective goals. They should also coordinate their activities for maximum effect.

▶ The international community should step up its financial and technical support for the government. Technical support including consultation and training in the areas of establishing law and order, and the prevention and resolution of conflicts, should be escalated and diversified.

Introduction

Ethiopia's political liberalisation, underway since April 2018, gave hope to many that the country was moving towards a better future than its autocratic past.[1] This euphoria was however dimmed with the parallel rise of violent ethnic conflicts across the country.

Although generally subsiding now,[2] these conflicts have rocked different parts of Ethiopia. Well over a thousand people have died,[3] with close to three million displaced. Ethiopia had the highest number of internally displaced people in the world in 2018.[4]

This report tackles the problem of violence in contemporary Ethiopia.[5] It explains it based on insights from the literature on ethnic conflicts and field work carried out for that purpose. It argues that the recent upswing in ethnic violence is mainly due to a sharp rise in contending ethno-nationalisms[6] in the context of perceived party and state fragility, i.e., incoherence and brittleness.

The two factors create a self-reinforcing cycle. With the playing out of more contending nationalisms, institutional fragility worsens. And as institutions become fragile, nationalist mobilisation intensifies and becomes more conflictual.

> Paradoxically, ethnic federalism both empowered and disempowered ethnic groups in Ethiopia

The role of elites is factored in the analysis within the context of institutional/ ideological dynamics.

Ethiopia's economic downturn has also complicated the scene by driving ethnic-based grievances and generating opportunistic conflict.

The analysis provided in this report is confined to the major underlying factors that are common to most conflicts. Institutional, ideological and psychological factors are stressed more than others. It should be noted however, that each conflict case could have its own peculiar qualities not necessarily captured by the model presented here.

This report urges policymakers and social forces to change the institutional and nationalist context that is reinforcing and reproducing this conflict. Among other things, the ruling party needs to renegotiate its plans in ways that make influential members willing to work together towards the goal of transforming the country into a stable democracy. It should reactivate state power and restore law and order in the country.

At the same time, nationalist forces should reorient their priorities and negotiate ways to accommodate all national and ethnic interests. In the process they should help tone down antagonistic nationalist rhetoric.

It is important to note that this analysis should not lead one to assume that Ethiopia has descended or is descending into chaos. Despite widespread violence, many people still lead ordinary lives, not necessarily directly affected by the recent conflicts. The conflict-centred analysis offered here does not imply that the country is heading towards disaster. The report aims to address the root causes of actual and potential conflicts in the country, without assuming that the trend will necessarily continue unabated or that it will engulf the entire country.

Institutional legacy and contending nationalisms

Contending nationalisms are partly byproducts of institutional legacy. Institutional arrangements put in place during the imperial era produced reactive ethno-nationalist movements.[7] Attempts at nation building through educational, religious, political and military institutions were perceived as schemes of 'nation destroying'[8] by some non-Amharic-speaking elites.

These elites, inspired by worldwide decolonisation and Marxist-Leninist movements, drove a strong counter-movement that was ethno-nationalist in form and content.[9] The ethno-nationalist struggles turned into all-out war with the Marxist-Leninist and Ethiopian nationalist regime of the Dergue (1974–1991). The ethno-nationalists won the war, and came into power in 1991.

One of the victors, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), set out to redress the past ethnic subjugation by remapping Ethiopia along ethnic lines. Ethnic federalism was put in place as a remedy to Ethiopia's ethnic problem.

However the federation was beset with ironies. On the one hand it gave legislative, executive and judicial powers

to the regions, and put local elites in place to rule them. This led to a sense of empowerment among some marginalised groups.[10] However that same system was tightly controlled by the ruling party, through its hierarchical party structure.

This institutional arrangement led to two adverse outcomes. First, it created the feeling that Ethiopia's marginalised communities were still under a ruling clique that hailed from one ethnic group.[11] It also created a sharp division between 'natives' (and thus 'owners' of regions) and 'settlers'.[12] Hence, ethnic federalism both empowered and disempowered Ethiopia's ethnic groups.

From 2015, simmering popular grievances scaled up into a series of ethnic-based movements

Such a paradoxically implemented federal system also contributed to the proliferation of nationalisms of various sorts. Ethnic nationalists mobilised their constituencies both within and outside the framework established by the regime. They used the ethnically charged environment and federal structure to nurture ethnic sentiments.

At the same time they capitalised on the centralised and authoritarian tendencies of the regime to inflame ethnic-based anti-regime mobilisation. On their part, Ethiopian nationalists also galvanised their constituencies against the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which they saw as anti-Ethiopian.[13]

Nationalist grievances and mobilisation continued to simmer during the EPRDF's era, resulting in multiple lines of conflict. The first line pitted opposition groups against the regime. Anti-regime struggles included the insurgency waged by rebel groups such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front.

Although they were too weak to directly effect major changes to the order of politics set up by the government, they managed to inflame nationalist sentiments among their respective constituencies.

Second, there persisted violent conflicts between various ethnic groups over a wide range of issues.[14] These included differences over killil (region or federal unit) borders and grazing lands, as well as power struggles among communal groups to control regions. The conflicts were both causes and effects of the escalation of contending ethnic mobilisation.

Finally, debates continued between ethnic and Ethiopian nationalists on such fundamental issues as the history, identity and future destiny of the country.

Above the cacophony of ethnic and anti-regime agitations prevailed a semblance of order and overall stability.[15] Violent inter-ethnic conflicts erupted occasionally over 27 years, but they were usually brought under control and seemed relatively low in intensity. The ideology and policies of the party reigned supreme, and when digressions occurred, coercive tactics kept a facade of stability.

That started changing in 2015. Nationalist mobilisations peaked as anti-regime social movements increased their agitation. Protests rocked Ethiopian cities and towns. Long-simmering popular grievances over administrative, political and economic problems scaled up into a series of ethnic-based movements, especially when organisational challenges were overcome (loosely networked cells mushroomed nationwide) and political opportunities arose.[16]

Growing urbanisation and cyber technology contributed to the organisation of protests. Contradictions in the EPRDF intensified as elements in some of its constituent units challenged the hegemony of the TPLF and set out to decide their fate independently, or with the social movements.

In the process, the TPLF lost its control over the institutional levers of the EPRDF. The process gave a clear victory to the reformists, ushering in a series of political liberalisation measures.

Political liberalisation opened doors for suppressed ethnic-based agitations and contentions. Conflict now raged unbridled in all corners of the country.[17] Thus many of Ethiopia's contemporary conflicts have roots in recent history and involve ethno-nationalist mobilisations. They are escalated by the advent of new actors, intensified use of cyber technology, and quite importantly, the reconfiguration of institutional arrangements in the political system.

Weakening state and party structures

The rising nationalist movements weakened state structures, even triggering a split within the ruling party. They therefore complicated state enforcement of law and order in Ethiopia.[18]

State institutions

State institutions have suffered from four distinct problems. First, they lost autonomy and agility in many areas. Mob networks either engulfed them or put them under heavy influence. Chains of command and control broke down in administrative and security branches in many areas, such as Oromia and Amhara.[19]

Second, the 27-year-old pact between the federal government and the regions that significantly empowered it at the latter's expense is no longer tenable. Regions flexed their muscles, for example flouting federal orders to arrest suspects of criminal acts and building paramilitary forces without official federal consent in some regions, such as Tigray and Amhara.

Third, the image security forces have built over the years as agents of state repression has left many of their personnel demotivated to take action against violations of the law.[20]

Finally, the new government has yet to draw a clear line between enforcing law and order, and sliding back into the authoritarianism of the past. This issue may not, strictly speaking, indicate fragility as it could be an outcome of a deliberate decision by the government not to relapse to the authoritarian method of containing violence used in the past.

> Rising nationalist movements weakened state structures, triggering a split in the ruling party and complicating the enforcement of law and order

The new leadership in Ethiopia, as a senior government advisor told this researcher, wants to radically shift the official thinking around peace enforcement. This entails opting to de-emphasise repressive measures in favour of softer approaches to peacebuilding such as reconciliation and national dialogue.[21] This shift has indeed helped bring about a general climate of freedom from the state, and has also contributed to the diminishing of anti-regime struggles. However, it has also brought about a popular perception of state weakness and/or reluctance to uphold law and order.

These problems have left the state fragile, or perceived as such. The inability of the state to keep the peace adds to the frequency of conflict in the country.

The ruling party

The EPRDF became a divided house at the height of the protests. The alliance between the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) and

AT THE HEIGHT OF THE PROTESTS, EPRDF BECAME A DIVIDED HOUSE

the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO) left the TPLF off-guard.

The appearance of the OPDO as the leading force guiding the political liberalisation further alienated the TPLF. It was practically relegated to merely administering Tigray.

As time went by, the Oromo and Amhara parties also lost the warmth of their relationship. The ANDM (now the Amhara Democratic Party) turned out to be rebranding itself, and flirted with Amhara nationalism more than ever, while the OPDO (now the Oromo Democratic Party, or ODP) vacillated between Oromo nationalism and pan-Ethiopian nationalism. They sometimes entertained conflicting ideas on contentious political issues such as the status of Addis Ababa and the importance of the federal system.[22]

As important, most of the parties making up the EPRDF have suffered from internal incoherence, making inter-party negotiations even harder. The ADP, ODP and Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) do not speak with one voice internally.

The ADP echoes diverse voices and interests on questions of ideology (strong versus moderate Amhara nationalism) and methodology (militancy versus political negotiations).[23] Internally the SEPDM is in even worse condition. Increasing demands for more autonomy among the different constituent units of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region have pulled party members in different directions.[24]

The internal fracture of the EPRDF is a major roadblock to enforcing law and order

Although in better shape, the ODP too is not unified on many critical issues. With divided loyalties (to protest networks or to the regional administration) and contrasting visions (Oromo nationalism versus the pan-Ethiopian rhetoric espoused by the prime minister), members 'do not look like they belong to one party'.[25]

The internal fracture of the EPRDF is a major roadblock to enforcing law and order in the country in at least two ways. First, it has become increasingly difficult for the

Figure 1: Interaction between nationalism and institutions producing ethnic violence in Ethiopia
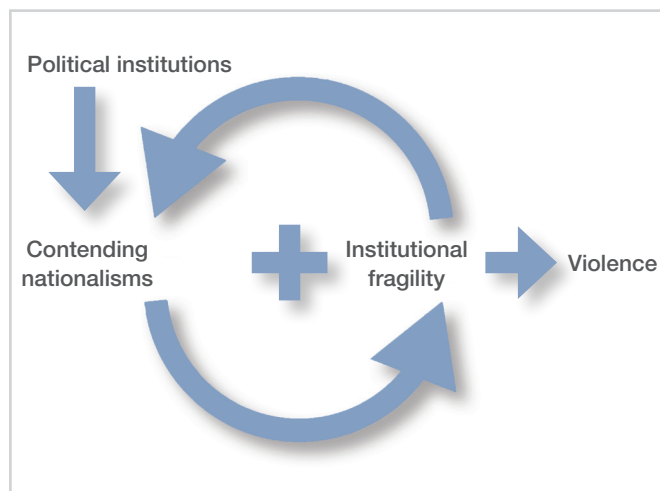
front to chart a general vision, programme and policy for securing peace.

With deep divisions rooted in problem analysis and modality of enforcing law and order, based in turn on ideological divergence and catering for contrasting constituencies, a unified roadmap has remained a chimera. As one senior intelligence officer believes, the problem with the EPRDF is not just that it entertains different views, but that it has not yet agreed on the need and meaning of transition itself.[26]

Elements within the TPLF, for instance, don't want to see a transition that, according to them, begins from the assumption that the recent past was a wasted time in recent Ethiopian history. They also don't have much appetite for the new balance of power between the sister organisations.

Some also don't find it palatable that the transition flourishes at the expense of their stalwart members who now have warrants for their arrest, or are in custody for alleged past crimes.

The second challenge is worse than the first. It is reported that some members of the front have actually turned on the ODP and the federal government that it now leads, in an attempt to destabilise it or the transition it is purportedly managing. In this sense, the problem within the EPRDF is not just disagreement, but active infighting among groups to secure specific interests.[27]

Samples of conflict

In Ethiopia today, contending nationalisms exist in the face of institutional fragility and incoherence. The outcome is the proliferation of violent conflicts, with many examples across the country.

The conflict that involved the Qemant in the Amhara Regional State is a result of the long-running quest for recognition and autonomy in the context of growing Amhara nationalism and a reoriented Amhara regional autonomy. It is compounded by internal divisions within the EPRDF.

The Qemant quest for autonomy has met with hurdles from the regional government since 2007, and the contentions sometimes resulted in violence. With the dawn of a new modus operandi in Ethiopia in 2018, ascendant Amhara nationalism envisioning a more unified Amhara identity saw the Qemant self-assertion as a plot to divide and weaken it.

Both the security branch of the Amhara region and the leaders of the National Movement of Amhara (NAMA), a newly established nationalist organisation, saw increasing Qemant agitation as a form of proxy war waged by the TPLF against the Amhara.[28]

Qemant activists over time escalated their demands for more kebeles to form a special woreda, and repeatedly confirmed, at times through protests, that they were not willing to accept anything less.[29] The stiff confrontation took a violent turn some months after Dr Abiy Ahmed Ali's rise to power.

A series of clashes between Qemant activists and regional security forces led to the killing and jailing of hundreds of people and destruction of property, including the burning of houses. Thousands were displaced.

The conflict in the Oromo Special Zone of the Amhara killil is also an outcome of conflicting Oromo and Amhara nationalisms in changing federal killil (i.e. inter-governmental) dynamics, and the unrestrained autonomisation of the Amhara regional administration.

As a zone that enjoyed self-autonomy for over two decades, its Oromo inhabitants were bent on viewing any attempt at encroaching on that privilege with consternation. As Amhara mobilisation stepped up in the hands of the newly formed NAMA and the chief of the security branch of the regional state, there were rumours of plans to scrap that zonal status.[30] In the meantime, a sense of Oromo victory and a jubilant Oromo crowd following OLF's return to the country as a legal entity spread across the zone.[31] That uplifted citizens' morale.

The scene was already tense by the time the autonomy-seeking chief of the security branch, Brigadier General Asaminew Tsige, dispatched the Liyu Police to Dewe,[32] a small village close to the town of Kemise, in early April on the pretext that the region had become a hub for OLF military activities.[33]

Residents said members of the force started antagonising locals based on their identity and began confiscating their arms.[34] Violence erupted and spread to nearby areas, involving ordinary Amhara and Oromo residents as well. Only the intervention of the National Defense Force pacified the area.

> The problem in the EPRDF is not just disagreement, but infighting to secure specific interests

Gumuz conflicts with the Amhara and the Oromo are not new, but rose sharply with Ethiopia's political liberalisation. The Gumuz had a troubled relationship with the two non-titular groups, the Amhara and Oromo, who were accused of oppressing the Gumuz in the past.[35]

The advent of federalism radically shifted the political balance in favour of the Gumuz. The contention then was geared more to land ownership. The Gumuz contested perceived attempts by others to grab land through land registration. Massive displacement of non-titular groups began earlier in 2013 and peaked after Ethiopia's new administration came to power.

The Gumuz rose up, and calls for taking back 'lost lands' spread wide, resulting in attacks on Amhara and Oromo farmers, and leading to displacement. But this also happened at a time when Oromo nationalism galvanised in the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State and created fear among the Gumuz of attempts by Oromo groups to reclaim land they said was theirs, and even the re-emergence of the discourse of 'black Oromo'.[36]

Amhara nationalism swept across the Metekel zone in Benishangul-Gumuz where many Amhara live. Agitation to secure proportional representation for the Amhara in the regional state, and for getting back Metekel as ceded Amhara land, also spread among the youth.

This combination of factors inflamed local politics in Benishangul-Gumuz. After the displacements, a new round of attacks on the Oromo flared up in September when three officials of the regional state were killed, ostensibly by OLF-affiliated militants.[37] The Amhara and the Gumuz clashed again in April 2019, leading to some Amhara being killed, and a subsequent retaliation by Amhara youth in the Awi Zone of the Amhara region.

> The combination of OLF-led militancy and the complicity of state agents created a breakdown of order and unbridled violence

The Guji-Gedeo conflict resulted from a combination of ethnic competition and a dysfunctional federal and regional state that not only failed to contain violence, but made it worse. Guji-Gedeo relations experienced both warmth and tension before the EPRDF took power, but it steadily worsened after that.

The making of Guji and Gedeo zones created conflict over kebeles during the transition. Various actors rose up to mobilise their respective ethnic groups, widening the gap between the two.[38]

Gedeos, seen as settlers on Oromo lands, were frequently targeted – especially with rising unemployment among the Gujis. Some Gedeos continued calling for the incorporation of the Guji zone into Gedeo in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region as the number of the Gedeo surged over time.[39]

With the weakening of state control in the regions during the protests and then during political liberalisation, corrupt Guji civil servants also fuelled anti-Gedeo rhetoric with the aim of hiding behind Oromo nationalism. The civil servants wished to deflect the attention of the economically aggrieved Guji by amplifying the discourse of the 'enemy Gedeo'.[40]

OLF actors, not necessarily controlled by the OLF leadership,[41] joined the campaign to achieve hegemony in the area, but also to further weaken state structure. The aggregate effect of all these factors was massive displacement of the Gedeo and destruction of their property. In return, Guji Oromos in the Gedeo zone were also displaced due to fear of revenge attacks.

The conflicts in Burayu and Addis Ababa between Oromo nationalists and their detractors were at times a result of a sense of triumphant Oromo nationalism and other elements wanting to curb their influence.

But often non-activist non-Oromos were also targeted to settle old scores, or simply for opportunistic reasons (such as robbery). State institutions failed to

MANY ETHNIC-BASED CONFLICTS ARE DRIVEN BY SECURITY DILEMMAS

contain violence as they were hijacked by mob networks or had fractured and were made dysfunctional.

The conflict that involved the OLF and the Ethiopian government had to do with the breakdown of state structure when the OLF entered the country to stamp its brand of nationalism. The Oromo protests in the lead-up to political liberalisation caused the state in Oromia to fracture.

Chains of command were broken down in the ranks of the security forces, and some members began actively or passively supporting rebel organisations. This became visible as the OLF army entered Wollega and started confronting the state or the ODP. Along with many self-styled OLF supporters from the protest movement, the combination of OLF-led militancy and the complicity of state agents created a complete breakdown of order and unbridled violence.[42]

Other sources indicate that the violence didn't so much reflect state fragility but government conspiracy. According to this version of the story, the government intentionally allowed the OLF army to bloat, act arrogantly and earn the displeasure of the people. When that was gained, security forces fought back and cleared the Oromia house of any major armed opposition.[43] In any case, state fragility – perceived or actual – exacerbated the conflict and chaos in Wollega.

In most of these cases, contending nationalist rhetoric fuelled by nationalist or other elites clashed. The state and party seemed either too weak to take action in time, or some of their functionaries made the conflict environment worse. The two were cyclically related: strong nationalist mobilisation weakened party and state infrastructure, and weak institutions in turn led to the fuelling of nationalism, leading to more conflict.

Security dilemma

A closer look at the micro level would reveal that many ethnic-based conflicts are driven by security dilemmas. Security dilemmas occur when one actor, fearing the potentially hostile behaviour of another, initiates a power build-up to maintain its security.

When this is discovered, however, there is a reactive build-up of (military) power on the part of the other actor, fearing that it could be a target. This kicks off a series of militarisation attempts on both sides, increasing the fear one has for the other, and potentially leading to an arms race. The paradox is that one's attempt to protect its own security ultimately increases its insecurity.[44]

Several ethnic actors in recent conflicts have disclosed a fear of others as a reason to rise up and arm themselves. According to a senior OLF leader, many Oromo elites – including the most moderate ones – have recently advocated, at times against the wishes of OLF leaders, that the OLF keep its arms as long as the Amhara keep theirs.[45]

According to Ethiopian intelligence informants, Tigrayan militia build-up is a reaction to the fiery rhetoric and militarisation agenda of some Amhara Regional State elites.[46] But the Amhara military reaction is also due to the long-accumulated military prowess of the TPLF, whose force is now mostly concentrated within the Tigray boundaries.

> The effort by some ethnic groups to enhance their security creates insecurity in other groups

Addressing a congregation of the Tigrayan diaspora on 6 August 2018 (broadcast on Tigray TV), the chairman of the TPLF said, 'We had not been prepared for defending ourselves from external attack, but when we found out that they [the antagonists in Amhara Region] were working to bring us to our knees, we fast girded ourselves. But when they saw us preparing, they turned the table on us and said, "We didn't see this coming," and got militarised even more.' This captures the Tigrayan-Amhara security dilemma.

The proliferation of the Liyu Police (special forces) in different killils reflects the same logic. The Somali-Oromo conflict and mass displacement that came from it were partly a culmination of the power struggle between the special forces and militias of the two regions. Similarly, gun ownership has escalated in the Kemise woreda of the Amhara killil as a reaction to the threat posed by Amhara militarisation and Liyu Police action.[47]

With increased threats from the security chief after the last round of violent conflict, the increase of arms peaked

in the Oromo Special Zone. In most of these cases, hard-earned properties have been sold by poor families to buy weapons.[48]

Security dilemmas are exacerbated by the (perceived) weakening of state power. Ethnic groups, tribes, clans and groups claiming to represent them immediately assume the central position in the looming political contestation and they compete for security, power and hegemony.

It is not that they don't want order, but they want order under their dominion. The effort by some groups to enhance their security creates insecurity in other groups. Intense competition sometimes results in violent conflicts, and even those resolved peacefully have no guarantee of remaining so.

> An integrated democratic vision for the country is needed, and it should be agreed through inclusive negotiations

Individuals are pulled together by their ethnicity, and consider it important to show solidarity and loyalty to their 'brothers and sisters' in times of uncertainty. The Ethiopian political landscape presently features some of these qualities, as discussed earlier. The major reason for this turn of events is the perceived lack of a strong state able or willing to enforce law and order.

Economic malaise

Not all ethnic mobilisation is due to security concerns; sometimes it is for opportunistic reasons. For example an economic downturn can lead to violence by aggravating personal frustrations, or by lessening the stakes for potential personal harm that comes with engaging in violence.

Since 2015 Ethiopia has been an economic paradox. Despite impressive GDP growth over the past decade and a half, the country has been stuck in widespread poverty.[49] The government's emphasis since 2010 on manufacturing and large-scale government investment didn't lead to the expected outcomes due to a large unskilled labour force and inefficient infrastructure. The constant devaluation of the birr gave rise to high inflation and falling living standards.

Also, unemployment rose as the job creation rate dropped below the population growth rate. Protests since 2015 have also kept the government busy policing the country rather than working to fix growing economic problems.

All these cumulative problems created fertile conditions for youth involvement in inflaming conflict; and it's not always for 'ethnic' reasons. The key factor facilitating even materially driven conflict-mongering is state and party fragility.

Conclusion

In Ethiopia, long-running institutional arrangements meant to regulate ethnic diversity have contributed to the rise of a series of nationalist mobilisations. Feeding on the autocratic nature of the successive regimes, these have finally managed to push Ethiopia's political liberalisation.

However this political liberalisation comes with high-intensity conflicts. Most of these are radical continuations of simmering fault lines from the recent past. In the face of raging nationalist movements, state and party structures have fractured and become too weak to contain the violence. State and party fragility has also expedited opportunistic, not just nationalist, involvement of the youth in these conflicts.

Recommendations

Working towards securing sustainable peace in the country should involve, among other things, calming antagonistic nationalist mobilisation while simultaneously reinventing or reclaiming state structures and party organisation. Specifically, recommendations include:

For the EPRDF parties

- Sister organisations constituting the ruling party should assume a reasonable form of internal cohesion. Through negotiations and multi-level training, ideological and programmatic convergence can be achieved, together with party discipline. The recent attempt by the ODP's leadership towards that end is commendable and should be replicated by others.

- The next step is inter-party negotiations to formulate a minimum plan of convergence to keep the EPRDF as a coherent party or form a new one from it. Although

the latter (forming a new party by merging the constituent parties) seems by now a fait accompli, the progression of the merger should not be rushed. It should involve intensive negotiations that include as many voices as possible, even those who voted against the idea of a merger. The negotiations should be candid and infused with responsibility to manage a stable and successful political transition.

This entails, among other things, trying to make all member organisations comfortable with their involvement in the country's democratic transition. This necessitates complying with the principle of reciprocity, and could at times mean making painful decisions – e.g. letting go of some aspects of justice in favour of reconciliation.

> Protests since 2015 have kept the government focused on policing rather than working to fix growing economic problems

It also involves dodging ethnic-centred condemnation of past political misgivings (i.e. associated with the TPLF), and avoidance of giving priority to territorial claims and counter-claims by sister parties.

- An important outcome of these negotiations should be a clear national plan to calm the country, and specific plans on how to secure stability in each region. Each regional plan should be developed with an eye on its cascading effect on other regions. Each region's plan should complement, not negate, peace efforts in others.

The discussions leading to that plan should include such issues as status and the roles of special forces and other armed groups in the regions, inter-governmental relations, positions on and relations with regional opposition groups and movements, illegal arms movements within and across regional states, and reactivating and professionalising regional and federal security forces.[50]

Most important is a new, integrated, and well-defined democratic vision for the country as a whole. Prime Minister Abiy's new book *Medemer* (meaning 'synergy') can serve as one attempt to forge that kind of vision. The contents of the book, which are reportedly attracting both profuse praise and severe criticism,[51] are undergoing discussions among sister parties and other stakeholders.

The extent to which the book can serve as a source of convergence is yet to be seen. Its success in that regard is largely dependent as much on the level of mutual trust among EPRDF parties as it is on the quality of the book's arguments. It also depends on the extent to which the parties try to reach convergence through negotiations rather than imposition by any single person or party.

SINCE 2015 ETHIOPIA HAS BEEN AN ECONOMIC PARADOX

If divorce within the EPRDF becomes inevitable, it should at least be done amicably. All negotiations, whatever the outcome, should be done with the understanding that the smooth transition of the country into a stable democracy can be made to work for all, not necessarily for just one party or the other. Sliding into chaos, on the other hand, would destabilise the whole region, and undermine the security of all parties.

For state agents

- The state should restructure itself and reclaim its power, autonomy and coherence. This involves, among others, regaining its lost structures, restoring its chains of command and control, and professionalising its security forces. This last endeavour involves developing templates that promote decisiveness in preventing and containing violence; doing so with careful consideration for basic human rights; and maintaining professional neutrality amid contested political terrains.

> ## Civil society organisations should engage with issues that cross ethnic and regional lines

The ongoing efforts by the Ministry of Peace at developing a Police Act and Police Doctrine[52] are steps in the right direction. Security enforcement should be put under strict and tight control by state-sanctioned bodies. Proliferation of informal and unrecognised (by regional or federal administration) armed groups is a recipe for inter-communal violence.

The state should work towards exercising a reasonable monopoly over the means of violence (including a strict rule and practice of gun control) and unleash it in a coherent and organised manner. Success in all these areas would create a positive political environment for the fruitful conduct of inter-party negotiations and national dialogue in general.

- The government should continue working towards reviving the ailing economy for the above efforts to succeed. Attention should be given to immediate job creation for the huge mass of unemployed or underemployed youth in the country. International

support is crucial here, both in terms of financing local initiatives and in transferring skills and best practices.

- Fighting corruption at the local level is also key, not only to prevent resource wastage, but to prevent corrupt elites from using divisive tactics to fuel conflicts.

For other political forces

- As these measures are under way, national dialogue should be kicked off countrywide. This should include all major political streams, and should aim for long-term benefits for all rather than short-term sectarian gains for each. One way to do this is to focus on and discuss concrete policy recommendations on how best to constitute the state so that all national and ethnic interests can be accommodated. Once people see that it is possible to rebuild a state that can accommodate all voices, containing conflict-mongering could be made easier, especially for security forces.

- If demands by organised groups for re-carving boundaries (e.g. those adjoining Amhara and Tigray; Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz; Benishangul-Gumuz and Oromia; Somali and Oromia) or for ensuring the political empowerment of minorities (e.g. the Amhara and Oromo minorities in different regions) can't be toned down for now, then they should be directed to inter-group political negotiations.

This should form part of the national dialogue on reconstituting the state itself (mentioned above). The same applies to demands over the status and 'ownership' of some cities and towns (such as Addis Ababa).

Existing special woredas and zones should remain intact pending discussions during the negotiations, if need be. No party should expect a quick fix of the perceived problems. An important rule governing the national dialogue and also one of its necessary outcomes should be the pursuit of all demands via non-violent routes.

In principle, displaced people should be returned to their homes, but before that, their safety and security concerns should be adequately addressed. This includes for example making sure that state structures, most importantly security forces, function well, and impartially and professionally.

For civil society organisations

Civil society organisations should together engage with issues that cross ethnic and regional lines and mobilise people from diverse backgrounds for their implementation. These organisations should coordinate their activities as a group, as well as with relevant traditional institutions, who should also coordinate their own activities.

For the international community

Help from donor countries and international organisations could take the form of financial and technical support to help diminish the economic burden on ordinary people and enhance government capacity to prevent and resolve conflict. Technical support through consultation and training in the areas of establishing law and order, and preventing and resolving conflicts, should be escalated and diversified.

Contributions by Pact International and the United Nations Development Programme in helping government agencies launch early warning systems and in conflict mapping are especially noteworthy. Knowledge transfer and skills enhancement in relevant areas should encompass all killils, and be stepped up especially before the 2020 general elections and immediately after.

Notes

1   S Yusuf, Ethiopia's power, security and democracy dilemma, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/ethiopias-power-security-and-democracy-dilemma, July 2019.

2   At the time of writing, the security situation in the country appears better overall. The Amhara, Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz, for instance, are less restive now than some months ago. Oromia had been returning back to normalcy until the latest round of unrest in late October. The efforts by the government and other actors such as traditional leaders may have contributed to the calming of the country, as will be indicated below. Whether the relative peace will hold for long is open to question, however, as the volatile situation in Oromia indicates.

3   *Africa News*, Ethiopia govt confirms thousands killed, millions displaced by ethnic clashes, https://www.africanews.com/2019/09/25/ethiopia-govt-confirms-thousands-killed-millions-displaced-by-ethnic-clashes, September 2019.

4   Norwegian Refugee Council, Global Report on Internal Displacement 2019, www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/2019-IDMC-GRID-spotlight-ethiopia.pdf. It should be noted that the Abiy administration inherited around one million internally displaced people when taking office in April 2018, mostly because of the Somali-Oromo conflict that peaked in intensity just before the change of government. Moreover, it should be mentioned that government officials believe three million is a bit inflated number. They put the total number of displaced people after Abiy came to power at 1.1m (a total of 2.3m by 2018). Interview with senior government official, Addis Ababa, October 2019.

5   This report is an abridged edition of a longer ISS monograph: *Drivers of Ethnic Conflict in Contemporary Ethiopia*. For a more detailed analysis of the subject matter, readers are encouraged to refer to that publication.

6   In this report, by ethno-nationalism, ethnic nationalism or sub-nationalism, I refer to nationalism based on an ethnic identity that is subsumed within a specific state (in our case, Ethiopia). For theoretical reflections on the term, see W Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The quest for understanding*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

7   J Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987; J Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, Oxford: James Currey, 2011.

8   W Connor, Nation-Building or Nation-Destroying? *World Politics*, 24:3, 1972.

9   In the case of Eritrean nationalism, Italian colonialism laid the foundations for the emergence of that identity as well. See R Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism, 1941–93*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

10   G Cohen, Language and Ethnic Boundaries: Perceptions of Identity Expressed through Attitudes towards the Use of Language Education in Southern Ethiopia, *Northeast African Studies*, 7:3, 2000. Contentment with the constitutionally guaranteed language rights was especially visible in some parts of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region.

11   L Aalen, *Ethnic federalism in a dominant party state: The Ethiopian experience 1991–2000*, Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, Development Studies and Human Rights, 2002. Many members of the numerically significant ethnic groups (Oromo, Amhara and Somali) have long harboured a strong sense of TPLF domination not only over the federal government but also over their respective regions.

12   A Kefale, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia: A Comparative Regional Study*, London: Routledge, 2013. The 'native vs settler' antagonism was glaring especially in the Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambella regions, and Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region.

13   A Matsuoka and J Sorenson, *Ghosts and Shadows: Construction of Identity and Community in an African Diaspora*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.

14   A Kefale, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia: A Comparative Regional Study*, London: Routledge, 2013.

15   C Clapham, The Ethiopian state's long struggle for reform, in *Ethiopia in the Wake of Political Reforms*, forthcoming.

16   Political opportunities in the form mainly of internal split within the ruling party and the putting of party structures by protest sympathisers within the regime into the service of protest movements.

17   For an in-depth analysis of recent developments about contending ethnic mobilisations, especially among the Amhara, Oromo, and Tigrayans, and the relationship among them, see S Yusuf, *Drivers of ethnic conflict in contemporary Ethiopia*, ISS Monograph, forthcoming.

18   It is important to emphasise that the state has indeed taken some measures to prevent, arrest or manage conflicts. For instance, the prime minister has pursued softer measures such as frequent calls for reconciliation and national harmony as a strategy to prevent violence. Federal and Regional states have also, among others, organised peace conferences and worked with traditional elders to resolve conflicts. It has, at the same time, deployed security forces to arrest violence in some places of unrest as well. Most notably, the intervention of the National Defense Forces in many of the conflict areas discussed earlier has helped prevent the even further intensification of violence in those areas. The fact still remains, however, that the security forces, especially the police, have usually acted too little, too late or at times failed to do even that in the face of ranging violence. Other times, the intervention of state and party agents have even exacerbated the situation on the ground as we will see below. Hence, it is reasonable to argue that the intensification of mostly inter-communal violence (or the failure to diminish it) the past two years has something to do with the changes wrought on the ruling party and state institutions during the protest movements in the lead up to the political liberalisation and once the latter was set in motion.

19   Interview with a major Oromo protest leader, as well as a senior commander in the Amhara Region, June and August 2019, Addis Ababa and Amhara Regional State, respectively.

20   Interview with a senior EPRDF and government official, May 2019, Addis Ababa.

21   Interview, Oct 2019, Addis Ababa.

22 The ODP emphasised that Addis Ababa belongs to the Oromo, and that it won't negotiate over the ethnic federal arrangement, claims that some ADP officials disagreed with. These are just examples of an ongoing set of differences between (officials in) the two parties. The latest round of disagreements centred on Shimelis Abdissa's (Acting President of Oromia) public remark on 'overpowering the neftegna (lit. armed men)'. See Endalk, How Ethiopia's ruling coalition created a playbook for disinformation, https://advox.globalvoices.org/2019/10/18/how-ethiopias-ruling-coalition-created-a-playbook-for-disinformation/, October 2019.

23 Interview with an ADP member and a senior commander in Amhara Regional State, Amhara Regional State, July 2019.

24 W Davison and K Kursha, As Southern Nations break free, pressure mounts on EPRDF, www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/11/28/as-southern-nations-break-free-pressure-mounts-on-eprdf/, November 2018. The party became highly divided since statehood (i.e. regional autonomy) quests went rampant in the SNNPR, most vociferously by Sidama activists. The internal disagreements finally led to the suspension of senior members of the party leadership from the Sidama and Hadiya Zones, and the issuance of warning to others. The imminent danger of 'demise' and 'split' might since have been averted for the time being, but the danger of such divisions recurring cannot be totally ruled out, given the fact that pro-autonomy agitations from below in the region could revive anytime, probably with dire repercussions for the internal unity of the party.

25 Interview with ODP-affiliated activist and intellectual, August 2019, Addis Ababa. Another major Oromo activist with close ties to the ODP leadership stresses, however, that those divisions in the ODP are visible more in the rank and file rather than in the leadership, which is more or less unified in its support for Abiy's reforms.

26 Interview with a senior intelligence officer, August 2019, Addis Ababa.

27 The TPLF is singled out in this respect, and is frequently accused of waging proxy wars across the country. Although many conflicts are quite unscrupulously associated with 'Tigrayan skullduggery', intelligence sources (interview with senior intelligence official, August 2019, Addis Ababa) give more emphasis to some than others. According to the same source, the TPLF as a party may not necessarily be involved in supporting and sponsoring armed conflicts, but some senior officials in it indeed are, and it may thus be difficult to decipher the exact source of the proxy wars. The quotation is from M Labzaé, Benishangul conflict spurred by investment, land titling, rumors, www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/03/08/benishangul-conflict-spurred-by-investment-land-titling-rumors/, March 2019.

28 Interview with a NAMA leader and ADP official, June 2019, Addis Ababa and Amhara Regional State, respectively.

29 Interview with a Qemant movement leader, June 2019, Addis Ababa. According to the leader, the Qemant leadership committee was intent on accepting the recommendation offered by PM Abiy to start up the self-administration with the 69 kebeles already recognised for them by the Amhara Region, with the understanding that the status of the three more contested kebeles would be decided through negotiation. However conflict could not be averted with the fast rise of anti-Qemant agitation among some Amhara activists and regional leaders. Alternatively these leaders saw Qemant militancy as posing an imminent danger to the entire Amhara national interest, and hence wanted to halt its escalation.

30 Interview with local elders in the town of Kemise, June 2019, Amhara Regional State.

31 Ibid.

32 Although popularly dubbed the 'Liyu Police', according to informants in the Oromo Special Zone and in the Amhara Regional Administration (June 2019), the dispatched force is not actually the Special Force of the Amhara Region, but one of the newly established armed groups under Brigadier General Asaminew Tsige.

33 Interview with two zonal administrators and a security official in Kemise, June 2019, Amhara Regional State.

34 Interview with several elders from five woredas of the Oromo Special Zone, June 2019, Amhara Regional State.

35 A Kefale, Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia: A Comparative Regional Study, London: Routledge, 2013.

36 OLF members in the past saw the Gumuz as 'black Oromo' and at times worked to bring them back to their 'true' identity. Ibid.

37 OLF leaders deny responsibility without totally rejecting the possibility of the killing being done by splinter groups that once formed the front. Interview with an OLF leader, July 2019, Addis Ababa.

38 Interview with a Gedeo leader, July 2019, Addis Ababa.

39 Interview with a local activist, July 2019, Addis Ababa.

40 Interview with a Gedeo leader, July 2019, Addis Ababa.

41 Interview with an OLF leader, August 2019, Addis Ababa.

42 Ibid.

43 Interview with a major Oromo activist with close ties to the ODP and OLF, August 2019, Addis Ababa.

44 K Waltz, Theory of International Politics, Reading Mass: Addison-Welsey Publishing Company, 1979.

45 Interview with an OLF leader, July 2019, Addis Ababa; Another major Oromo activist confirms, August 2019, Addis Ababa.

46 Interview with a senior intelligence officer, August 2019, Addis Ababa.

47 Interview with a local elder, June 2019, Kemise, Oromo Zone, Amhara Regional State.

48 Ibid.

49 See International Crisis Group, Managing Ethiopia's Unsettled Transition, https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/269%20Managing%20Ethiopia%20-%20Print.pdf, February 2019.

50 We will come back to some of these issues under state responsibilities. The repetition is unavoidable because of the intractable blending of state and party functionaries in contemporary Ethiopia.

51 Interview with one of the organisers of the discussions, September 2019, Bishoftu.

52 Interview with an expert in the Ministry of Peace, September 2019, Addis Ababa.

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