



Presidents Isaias Aferworki of Eritrea, Mohamed Farmaajo of Somalia and Ethiopia's PM Abiy Ahmed. Two months after he came to power, Dr Abiy signed a peace deal with Eritrea, a country they had been at war with for the past 30 years. FILE PHOTO | NMG

ETHNIC MILITARISM AND DEMOCRATIC RETREAT IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

LEWIS NDICHU & SHADRACK KUYOH

The new wave of ethnic tensions and anti-government unrests are rolling back the gains of democratic uprising in the Horn of Africa. In Ethiopia, ethnic extremism and violence has displaced 1.4 million in Oromia region, the largest number of new displacements of any country in the world according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Fresh clashes between the Oromo and Gedeo in Oromia's West Guji zone at the end of 2018, displaced an estimated 2.4-3 million people. Ethiopia has increasingly become a hanging state as armed groups resort to violence to take over local governments, asserting exclusive ethnic citizenship and intimidating or forcibly expelling other ethnicities settled in their ethnic territory. Further, Somalia faces the unique problem of hewing a state for diverse and antagonistic clans, challenging effective cooperation between the Central Government and key Federal Member States.

As Ethiopia heads to the May 2020 election, democratic revolution is giving way to a new wave of militarism in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia is charting its own hegemonic agenda with the unfolding geopolitical power theatrics in the region, expanding and modernizing its military to assert its hegemony and access to ports in Somalia's Indian Ocean seaboard.

Democratic reforms that seek to change Ethiopia's old model are proving mission impossible, after Abiy's new reforms to dismantle the old order weakened the Ethiopian state, giving new energy and impetus to ethno-nationalism, secessionism and soared up inter-ethnic animosity and clashes.

Ethiopia is reverting to one party state following the merger of three of the four ethnically-based parties in the governing coalition. According to Prime Minister Abiy, the new Prosperity Party (PP) would help break down ethnic divisions, unite the country and become the national driving force replacing the three-decade old ethnically based coalition. But democracy in Ethiopia remains under threat. The chair of the opposition National Movement of Amhara (NaMA), Dessalegn Channie, has remained critical of Abiy's reforms. In October, 2019, he was quoted saying that Abiy's reform focuses on acts that have a public relationship impact. In September 2019, a coalition of Ethiopian opposition parties threatened to boycott the August vote if no changes are made to the electoral law in parliament, where the ruling party holds all the seats. In the light of this, the chances of the Prosperity Party winning a free and democratic election in the near future hangs in the balance, raising the stakes for the August democratic transition.

Ethiopia has also increasingly become a hanging state as armed groups resort to violence to take over local governments, asserting exclusive ethnic citizenship and intimidating or forcibly expelling other ethnicities settled in their ethnic territory. Spells of ethno-extremism and ethno-nationalism have led to the killing of hundreds and triggered

the displacement of 3.5 million in 2019 alone.

In the Oromo region, intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic violence led to 86 deaths in October 2019. Fresh clashes between the Oromo and Gedeo in Oromia's West Guji zone at the end of 2018, displaced an estimated 2.4 -3 million people. This has also been followed by secession quests in the Tigray region where the Tigrayan Liberation Front is toying with breaking away from the Ethiopian state. In July 2019, anti-Abiy sentiment in Tigray increased in the wake of the killings of five high-ranking government and military officials in Amhara state and Addis Ababa, triggering the re-emergence of Tigrayan secessionism. In the Amhara, one section supports a Pan-Ethiopian nationalism, feeling strong enough about maintaining Ethiopia's integrity to be willing to defend it with force while the other embraces a more potent form of Amharic nationalism. On June 22, 2019, this ideological tension within the Amhara group exploded. The Amhara region's Governor, Ambachew Mekonnen, a close confidant of Abiy's, and his top adviser were killed in an attempted coup, which the Government blamed on the Amhara state security head, General Asamnew Tsige. In a separate attack on the same night, Ethiopia's army chief of staff, General Seare Mekonnen, and another retired general, were shot dead in Addis Ababa by his bodyguard. In November 2019, the Sidama people, voted by a huge margin of 98.5% in favor of a new autonomous federal region hoping to regain control of land resources, political representation and to reaffirm their cultural identity.

Be as it may, for long Ethiopia has become concerned with the militarization of the "very volatile" Red Sea area. This explains the shift of its focus from the Port of Djibouti to Somalia's Indian Ocean ports in Kismayo, Balawe, Basasso, Barbera, Hobyo north of Mogadishu and the Juba Valley corridor. In June 2018, Ethiopia agreed on a joint investment in Somali ports in what appeared as Abiy's move to legitimize logistical deals initially questioned by Mogadishu.

Further, Ethiopia and the Federal Government of Somalia are pushing for the implementation of the Juba Valley Corridor Operational Plan as two-pronged strategy to effect regime change against Madobe with Non-AMISOM troops from Ethiopia spearheading this offensive. In a similar fashion, Villa Somalia provided \$1.8 million in an effort to taking over Gedo region of Somalia's Jubaland State bordering Kenya.

In November, Ethiopian troops arrested and forcibly took away officials and military officials in the Gedo region for "refusing to work with the Somali government". Among those arrested and given conditions to denounce Jubaland Government were the commissioners from Beled-Hawo, Luq and Dolow districts of Gedo region and the Jubaland army general commanding the troops in Gedo.

Militarism in the Horn is soaring on a Cushitic consciousness (Oromo and Somalis), an existential ideological challenge to IGAD and the regional outfit it represents. Coalescing around the idea of the New Horn Axis and counting on the support of rival factions in the Gulf allied to Turkey and Qatar, Mogadishu is reportedly negotiating with partners in the 'New Horn' to replace Kenyan, Ugandan and Burundian troops with the Cushite Alliance.

Presently, the battle lines are clearly marked. Ethiopia has openly sided with Farmajo's government, although its AMISOM contingents insist they are independent of Addis Ababa. On August 13, 2019 an Ethiopian delegation dispatched to Kismayo led by two military intelligence generals at the behest of President Farmaajo held a three-hour meeting kowtowing with a demand to interfere with the electoral commission.

Additionally, Ethiopia and Eritrea—with its large fighting force remnants from its war with Ethiopia—are seeking a new role as a military ally to Farmajo. This raises serious questions regarding the future of AMISOM, especially its contingents from Kenya, Uganda, Djibouti and Burundi and

the very war against Al-Shabaab.

At the regional level, the euphoria and momentum around the Eritrea-Ethiopia peace deal has evaporated. An intensely militaristic Eritrea has shut down all border crossings with Ethiopia previously opened after the deal. The no-peace no war stalemate between the two neighbors has returned.

Ethiopia's ethnic militarism is rippling through the Horn of Africa. Here, militarism is taking the form of a peculiar supra-ethnic nationalism based on a "Cushitic" identity and consciousness around Abiy's Oromo elite and President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo's Somali elite who came to power in Villa Somalia in 2018.

This has weakened the existing regional security consensus that has rested on strategic partnership between Kenya and Ethiopia and IGAD'S mutual security. Action is needed on several fronts to roll back militarism and secure democracy.

First, Ethiopia should prioritize holding a National Convention of all its ethnic nationalities for a broad-based national dialogue to guarantee unity and national cohesion to counter spiraling Ethno-extremism and ethno-nationalism. Second, cease interventions and military incursions into Somalia's Jubaland and Southwest states, withdraw its non-AMISOM troops inside Somalia; and respect the sovereign will of federal states.

Lastly, Strengthen IGAD's capacity as a regional mechanism and mutual strategic partnership to counter violent extremism, steer peace processes and development priorities in the region.

Lewis Ndichu is Policy Analyst at the International Policy Group and Shadrack Kuyoh – Policy Advisor at Williams Hill (SRC) Inc.; this article is an abridged version of Africa Policy Institute's Policy Brief on 'Ethnic Militarism and Democratic Retreat in the Horn of Africa.'on China Daily Global 2020-04-01 at 09:06 <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202004/01/WS5e83e915a3101282172837cf.html>

API Africa Research Notes Series publishes scientifically valid research outputs that cannot be considered as full research or methodology articles. Its aim is to provide a forum for sharing data, useful information and perspectives on topical issues of concern to the policy and research communities. Articles published under this series cut across disciplines, and include some short articles or opinion pieces that have already been published by the experts of the Africa Policy Institute. Some are brief publications, updates to previous work, abridged versions of research agendas or concept notes or brief reports of policy forums.



*<https://www.africapi.org/africa-research-notes/>
NHIF Parking Tower 5th Floor, Ragati Road
P. O. Box 34791 - 00100, Nairobi, Kenya*