

Ethiopia's Slide Into Ethnic Politics Shows the National Fragility | Ethiopian Crown in Exile Calls for Calm

February 27, 2018

Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis

Founded in 1972. Formerly *Defense & Foreign Affairs Daily*
Volume XXXVI, No. 15 Monday, February 26, 2018

© 2018 Global Information System/ISSA.

Ethiopia's Slide Into Ethnic Politics Shows the National Fragility
Ethiopian Crown in Exile Calls for Calm

Ethiopia's Slide Into Ethnic Politics Shows the National Fragility

Analysis. From GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs Staff in Addis Ababa. It was widely acknowledged that the election of Hailemariam Desalegn to the Premiership of Ethiopia on the death of Meles Zenawi in 2012 was seen as tokenism: the real power would remain in the hands of the leadership clique of Meles' Tigré Popular Liberation Front (TPLF), which controlled the coalition EPRDF (the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) Government.

Why, then, does it matter who replaced Hailemariam as Prime Minister of Ethiopia following his resignation of February 15, 2018?

Basically, the context has changed since Meles died. The TPLF increasingly saw Ethiopia faced with internal and external

challenges, and a significant resumption of foreign-sponsored support for domestic secessionist movements and other regional threats. Within the party, particularly from around mid-2017, factional wars had resulted in what could be termed the “security and defense wing” assuming dominance, and the remnants of those who were close to Meles were being removed.

The “anti-corruption” campaign which began its rise in 2017 paralleled the use of “anti-corruption” campaigns in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) by Pres. Xi Jinping, and the similar cover campaign by Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

By early 2018, Ethiopia faced significant challenges due to ethnic divisions to an extent not imagined in 2012 when Desalegn took office (and ethnic distrust was already high then). It is true that Hailemariam Desalegn Boshe, now 52, was supported to the national leadership in many ways because he was *not* Tigrean. He was from a minority ethnic group, the Wolayta, in Southern Ethiopia, and he was a Protestant, from the Apostolic Church of Ethiopia, a Oneness Pentecostal denomination, not from the main stream of Ethiopian Christianity, the Orthodox Church (or even from the mainstream of Protestantism). And, because he was from a minority, he would not be seen as a threat to the other two major ethnic groups, the Oromo and the Amhara, let alone the Tigreans.

It was the EPRDF’s attempts to re-define federalism along mainly ethnic lines (and the Ethiopian Empire of old brought together some 60 main ethnic groups) which caused a significant rise in inter-ethnic tensions, largely because it was perceived – rightly or wrongly – as a mechanism by which TPLF could “divide and rule”. Imperial Ethiopia had, until the 1974 coup, been divided into a series of provinces (14 by the time of the coup), under governors appointed by the Emperor in ways which were historically understood. And while the Emperor reduced the power of the feudal aristocracy, the historical hierarchies in the subdivisions of the provinces remained

important and respected. Old royal houses, and particularly those of Solomonic descent, remained respected, and ethnic or tribal distrust was able to be managed.

By 2017, however, the older, smaller communal groups were being “bundled” into the larger, overarching or umbrella ethnic/linguistic designations, such as Oromo, Amhara, Tigrean, and the like. And the TPLF, which had essentially been handed power with the collapse in 1990-91 of the *Dergue* (and endorsed then by the US Government, which wanted to focus on the collapse of the USSR), found itself in control of the capital, Addis Ababa, and therefore in control of Ethiopia.

The TPLF had been fighting for Tigrean secession, and did not represent all Tigreans; and the Tigrean population represents only some six percent of the overall Ethiopian population. Little wonder, then, that the TPLF preferred to retain its control of Ethiopia from within a coalition which appeared to represent the broad spectrum of Ethiopian society.

This did not, however, allow the TPLF to avoid blame by non-Tigreans (also transliterated as Tigrayans) for the policy of federalizing (or re-federalizing) Ethiopia, this time along perceived ethnic lines, rather than on the lines of the old hierarchies.

But with Hailemariam’s resignation, the contest for leadership of the Government is very much seen as being between three member organizations of the EPRDF: the Amhara Nations Democratic Movement (ANDM); the Oromo Peoples’ Democratic Organization (OPDO); and Southern Ethiopia Peoples’ Democratic Movement (SEPDM) from which Hailemariam Desalegn resigned, on February 15, 2018, when he resigned as Chairman of the EPRDF.

There was widespread belief that the only way for the Interim Government to avoid an escalation of the unrest would be to appoint an Oromo as the Prime Minister, at least up to the 2019 elections. And the Chairman of the OPDO, Lemma Megerssa,

who was also head of the Oromia region, was expected to be the candidate for the premiership. But then, on February 22, 2018, the OPDO Central Committee voted to remove Lemma as party Chairman (making him Deputy Chair, but still President of Oromia state), and made the Deputy Chair, Dr Abiy Ahmed Ali, a Muslim, the new Chair. Ostensibly that would put Dr Abiy in contention for the post of Prime Minister.

With this, convoluted Ethiopian political maneuvering became even more complex. It was perceived that running for the premiership posed dangers for the OPDO leadership. If Lemma was put forward and rejected, it could hurt his chances to lead the OPDO to dominance in the 2019 poll. Thus, the strategy reportedly was to put Dr Abiy, rather than Lemma, into contention for the premiership until the 2019 elections. But Dr Abiy's status as a Muslim would break new ground in Ethiopia (he had a Muslim father and Christian mother), and evokes memories of the accession (never crowned) to the Imperial Throne by *Lij* (noble) Iyasu (1913-16), who was believed to have converted to Islam, and was deposed as a result. Dr Abiy (a respected scientist and former Army lieutenant-colonel) and the OPDO, then, are well aware that by having him replace Lemma Megerssa they run the risk of being thwarted in the short-term bid for the premiership. And yet the failure to place an Oromo in the post of Prime Ministerial office now could see Oromo unrest escalate seriously.

The question facing the EPRDF coalition leaders, then, is whether the denial of the pent-up Oromo demand for recognition is the major threat, or whether it is the approach to federalizing the nation-state along deliberately ethnic lines (as opposed to historical or secular geopolitical lines) which has exacerbated the ethnic focus thereby triggering ethnic politics. Who, then, is appealing to Ethiopian interests?

At the same time, the Ethiopian Crown Council, which represents the Solomonic Crown in exile, issued a statement – in English and Amharic – on February 22, 2018, from

Washington, DC, calling for calm and unit. Full English-language text follows:

Statement on the Current Situation in Our Country

By His Imperial Highness Prince Ermias Sahle-Selassie Haile-Selassie,

President of the Crown Council of Ethiopia

Our beloved Ethiopia is currently beset by challenges and difficulties. It is an historically important time for all Ethiopians.

It is a time when we must realize that we can choose a path of unity, hope, and leadership, or we can allow ourselves to fall into mutual antagonisms and thereby choose a path which leads to the break-up of the great experiment which began more than three millennia ago.

We can recommit ourselves to being the great, noble, and gracious collection known as Ethiopia, or we can succumb to becoming a mere collection of small, petty, and struggling societies.

We are at a point where we can choose our future, and whether or not we choose to overcome our difficulties and challenges to become again a unified, prosperous example to Africa and the world.

Our forefathers maintained our sovereignty, moving the Solomonic Crown – the historical identity of the peoples of our great collection of societies – to the position where its primary function was to represent and inspire the unity and nobility of our nation and peoples. We reiterate those respective positions of the Crown and the age-old traditions of Ethiopia.

The Crown takes no political rôle when it calls on all of us to ensure that we do not harm our great country. We understand

that there are differences between individuals and between communities, but equally we understand that this is a time when these issues must be approached carefully, judiciously, and not in haste or in anger.

There are many external forces at work on our country, anxious to inflame mutual distrust within Ethiopia, and to promote the forces of secession or irredentism. It is easy to fall into the trap of reaction and indignation, a process which, while addressing short-term challenges and emotions, has long-term consequences. Above all, we must remember the special relationship which our great Ethiopia – and its peoples of several different Abrahamic paths – has with God.

Political frustrations do occur in multi-cultural societies like Ethiopia, but they are best channeled by building and strengthening democratic institutions. But in the meantime, we must remain cognizant of our shared identity, our unity as a gathering of many peoples, and our great and noble purpose as a special society which is destined once again to set an example of tolerance, hospitality, generosity, and learning.

The only beneficiaries of a disunited or dismembered Ethiopia are those who wish to see our great history rendered meaningless and our potential as a society destroyed, and those beneficiaries are not Ethiopians. We have all learned the dangers of times of inflamed emotions, and we trust in our civil society and our institutions of state to act with restraint and kindness.

My fellow Ethiopians: please pause; please offer compassion when provoked to reaction. Let us start to rebuild the greatness of Ethiopia which began with our origins three millennia ago.

We pray that calm heads and tolerant hearts prevail, and that together we emphasize and build upon our shared identities and values.

What differences exist between our communities must be seen as the shades which exist within a family. Nothing can be as devastating as the destruction of family; but nothing is as worthwhile or productive as the shared pride in the special differences which exist within it.

May God Keep Ethiopia Forever