

Political Risk Alert (2 July 2019)

Ethiopia: Central government is struggling to contain violence after coup attempt

Event: Details are still emerging about the events on June 22 that left the president of Amhara Regional State and the head of the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) dead.

Significance: The deaths of such senior figures has shaken Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's administration and the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and threatens to derail Abiy's reform agenda. Rumours that the Tigray People's Liberation Front orchestrated the assassinations may lead to more targeted attacks on Tigrayans.

Analysis: On June 22, members of a paramilitary police unit loyal to the Amhara state head of security, General Asaminew Tsige, forced their way into a meeting between President Ambachew Mekonnen and leaders of the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP) in the regional capital, Bahir Dar.

Ambachew and his adviser were killed in the ensuing firefight; the region's attorney-general died later from his wounds. The rogue police unit reportedly also tried to capture the regional police headquarters and media office, leading to violence that left dozens dead. Asaminew fled the city but was killed in a clash with security forces on June 24.

Later on June 22, in Addis Ababa, the ENDF chief of staff, General Se'are Mekonnen, was shot and killed in his home, allegedly by his bodyguard. Retired General Gezai Abera, who was visiting Se'are, was also killed. Statements from Abiy's office have claimed the two incidents were linked, and part of a failed attempt to take control over Amhara state.

Abiy came to power in April 2018, after a period in which the ruling EPRDF coalition has struggled to contain anti-government protests. Although the EPRDF remained in power, the shifts within the coalition that accompanied Abiy's rise have been significant. Moreover, Abiy promised sweeping political and economic reforms. He invited political and armed opposition groups to return from exile, accelerated the releases of political prisoners begun by his predecessor, and started dialogue with opposition parties about reforming the political system.

As part of Abiy's reforms, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia was re-established in November 2018 under a prominent opposition politician and former political prisoner, Birtukan Mideksa. Dozens of political parties have since been registered and electoral coalitions are now emerging ahead of national elections scheduled for 2020.

However, the suddenness of the reforms after years of widespread protests created new space for the airing of old grievances that had previously been largely contained by the EPRDF's authoritarianism and the effective use of its security apparatus.

Violence along the boundaries between the Oromia and Somali states had already killed thousands and left more than one million people internally displaced by the time Abiy took office. Further violence, including attacks on specific ethnicities, has since broken out in many areas and some 2.4 million more people have been displaced by conflict since last year. The return of opposition parties, some of which still have military wings, has fuelled these dynamics.

Many Ethiopians initially greeted Abiy's reform pledges with optimism. However, the government's inability either to restore stability or to acknowledge the scale of the political challenges facing the country is starting to do serious damage to Abiy's image.

Two dimensions of the rising conflict are particularly relevant to the recent assassinations in Bahir Dar and Addis Ababa. First, the shifting balance of power among ethnic-based political groups has emboldened other nationalist political movements across the country, with ethnic Sidama, Wolayta and Gurage demanding regional states of their own. Second, with political liberalisation, the ethnic-based parties that make up the EPRDF coalition now face new challengers claiming to represent those ethnic group's interests.

General Asaminew's appointment to the Amhara regional administration in late 2018 appears to have been part of the ADP's efforts to address the nationalist challenge by empowering nationalists within their own ranks. In his new role, Asaminew used fiery ethno-nationalist rhetoric and began recruiting an enhanced paramilitary police reserve militia, which may have been involved in the June 22 attacks.

All regional states have their own police forces and reserve units. However, as tensions rise within and between ethno-federal units, this now appears to present a growing threat to domestic stability.

The government was quick to characterise the Bahir Dar attack as an attempted regional coup, but it is far from clear how Asaminew expected to hold on to power if this was his intent. Assassinating Se'are may have been an attempt to disrupt federal capacity to intervene in Amhara, but this alone would have been insufficient to deter a response, suggesting Asaminew either had bigger ambitions or that seizing power was never his intent at all.

It is also possible that the ADP was attempting to push Asaminew out itself, and Asaminew simply sought to protect his position. However, the concurrent attack on Se'are fits less clearly into this narrative, unless it was an attempt to fire inter-ethnic and intra-EPRDF tensions through the assassination of a prominent Tigrayan general.

The possibility that a coherent account of the June 22 events may never emerge now that Asaminew is dead is likely to fuel dangerous conspiracy theories. Meanwhile, the federal government may feel greater pressure to bring the security situation under control. The authorities made over 250 arrests in the days following Asaminew's death. This, too, could

heighten tensions if the government is seen as reverting to authoritarianism or failing to be even-handed.

A central problem for the government is that nationalism is playing out very differently against each region's different historical backdrop, while tensions within and between EPRDF parties suggest that the prospects of a nuanced response are limited.

Meanwhile, Abiy, who has been criticised within the EPRDF for allowing security conditions to fester in his attempts radically to open democratic space ahead of 2020 elections, may be forced to reprioritise his goals.

This could see reforms slow as security takes precedence in a shifting agenda that could even see the 2020 election delayed, especially if vested interests see an opportunity to push back against aspects of Abiy's reforms that have undermined their standing.

Looking ahead: The recent violence adds to growing pressure on the cohesion of the EPRDF coalition. It also threatens Abiy's attempts to balance meaningful political reform with a promise to hold elections on time in 2020. Demands for improved security may now take precedence, slowing the reform agenda.

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