

Is There Any Hope Left for the Horn of Africa?

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The high hopes that many had for a radical improvement of the situation in the Horn of Africa just a few short years ago have been shattered by a combination of internal and international conflicts centered on Ethiopia, but it might be premature to predict that the region won't ever recover since Prime Minister Abiy could drastically turn everything around once more should he have the political will to do so.

What Went Wrong?

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's ascent to power in Africa's second most populous country a few years back inspired high hopes for a radical improvement of the situation in the Horn of Africa. His rhetoric was regarded as an almost revolutionary departure from his predecessors' and he quickly set out to patch up his country's years-long conflict with neighboring Eritrea, for which he later was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. This makes it all the more surprising to many observers that the region is once again beset by a slew of internal and international conflicts centered on his country, making them wonder whether something had went wrong or if they hadn't properly assessed the situation to begin with. The answer to this question is complex, but the present analysis will attempt to address it in a relatively simple way for the sake of everyone's understanding.

Background Briefing

To bring unaware readers up to speed, they're encouraged to read the author's prior works on this topic:

- 25 June 2019: "[Ethiopia's Failed Coup Attempt Almost Pushed The Country To The Edge Of Collapse](#)"
- 26 October 2020: "[Ethiopia's Internal Contradictions Might Lead To Its Collapse](#)"
- 24 November 2020: "[The Consequences Of Ethiopia's Civil Conflict Will Be Acute](#)"

The rest of the analysis will reference and build upon the insight above.

Ethiopia's Glasnost & Perestroika Experiment

The problems that have popped up in recent years weren't exactly unexpected. For

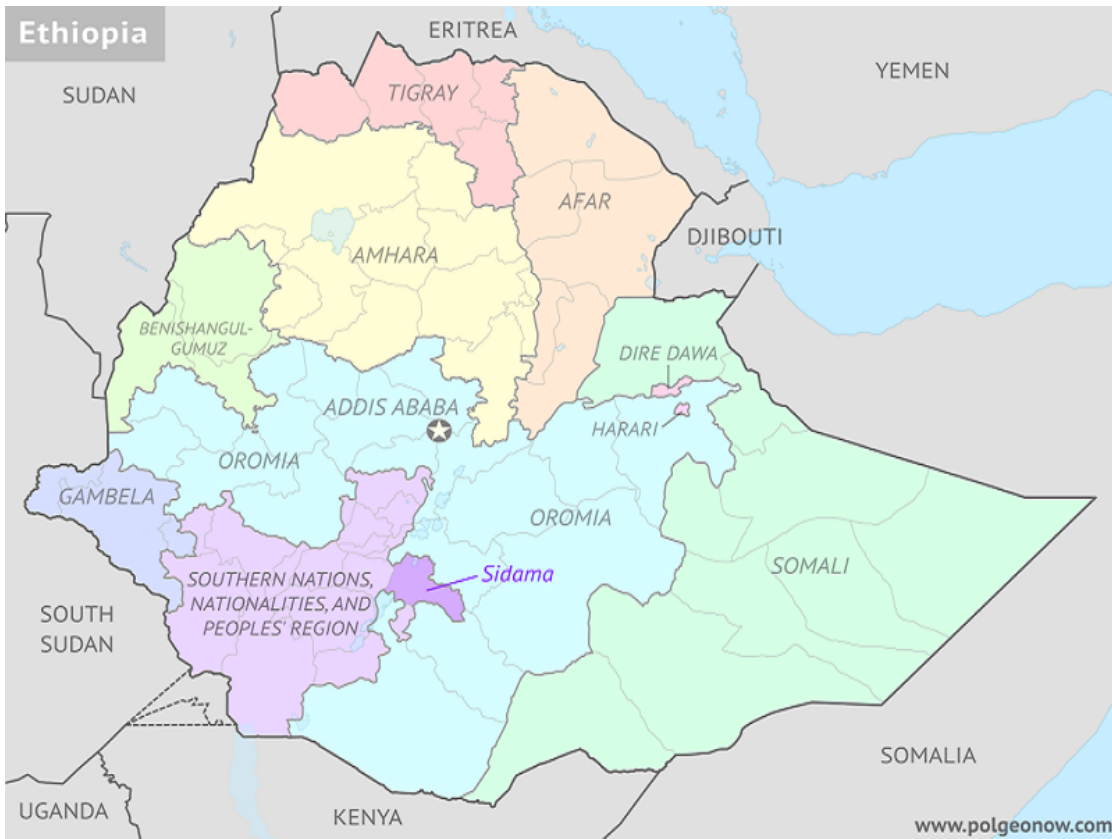
instance, Ethiopia's federal system was always considered to be imperfect though nevertheless manageable under its prior leaders after the end of the civil war. Some internal borders didn't match up with the ethnic demographics on the ground, thereby planting the seeds for future conflict but delaying their growth until a time that the central government became comparatively weaker than it used to be. That moment arrived with Abiy after he preached his political gospel of changing the state of political affairs in his country, particularly by loosening the reins of power that the ruling coalition held over practically all matters. This combination of Ethiopian-style glasnost and perestroika was well-intended but risked spiraling out of control exactly as its Soviet forerunner did.

Trouble With The TPLF

Instead of sitting back and letting centrifugal forces tear his cosmopolitan nation apart as he feared would inevitably happen, Abiy reacted by reversing his liberal vision and reviving some of the centralization tendencies of his predecessors. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), formerly the most powerful member of the ruling coalition, broke with Abiy and threatened an insurgency in their eponymous region that was powerfully crushed by the central government over the past half-year to much international criticism. The ongoing conflict continues to rage at a lower intensity than before and has caused much concern among observers about its humanitarian consequences which currently remain unclear due to a lack of access by independent observers.

"Balkanization" Fears

The alternative to war was always to continue with the track that he'd previously set with his rhetoric of loosening the reins up to the point of redefining the nature of Ethiopia's federal system, but Abiy believed that this might "Balkanize" his country, hence why he reacted the way that he did. There's no turning back the clock and doing things differently so that decision will go down in history as a pivotal moment for better or for worse. Critics claim that he returned Ethiopia to its dictatorial ways while supporters praise him for decisively safeguarding national unity and therefore setting an example to the other separatist groups that are active all across the country. In any case, considering the fact that the conflict remains unresolved and continues to reverberate throughout society, it can be said that the short-term consequences were destabilizing.



Eritrea’s Speculative Influence Over Ethiopia

It’s important to point out that neighboring Eritrea with whom Ethiopia had only recently entered into a rapid rapprochement dispatched troops to the rebellious Tigray region where they reportedly remain despite having promised to officially withdraw. This development internationalized Ethiopia’s internal conflict and therefore raised the stakes of its outcome. It also fueled speculation that long-ruling President Afwerki is secretly pulling Abiy’s strings and might have even succeeded in imposing his desired vision upon the region as expressed by Al Jazeera contributor Goitom Gebreluel in his op-ed about [“The Tripartite Alliance Destabilizing The Horn Of Africa”](#). The expert drew attention to other destabilizing trends such as the de facto changes to some of Ethiopia’s internal borders following the Amhara Region’s military occupation of parts of Tigray.

Geopolitical Competition Between China & The GCC

Gebreluel is also against what he described as the widespread disregard for international humanitarian law and the sharp decline in multilateral diplomacy. These are pertinent points and his concerns should be taken seriously. Missing from his detailed analysis, however, is reference to how the Horn of Africa has recently become an object of competition between rising powers. Chinese investments are now challenged by those from the GCC, particularly Saudi Arabia and especially the UAE. Beijing’s Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) ambitions risk being dealt a massive blow by the latest round of multi-sided destabilization in the region, which can create strategic opportunities for the GCC. It also deserves mention that the US is no longer exerting its post-Old Cold War leadership over the region. It’s unclear what the impact of this is though since it hasn’t been studied much.

The GERD Dispute

The heated dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) continues to afflict the region and provoke fears of a conventional military clash between Ethiopia on one side and GCC-backed Egypt and Sudan on the other. Observers should also remember that Ethiopia and Sudan have recently revived their old territorial dispute, potentially creating the pretext for another conflict that could actually serve as a smokescreen for either of them going to war over the GERD. As for Somalia, which is also mentioned in Gebreluel's piece, its leader finally relented on his prior attempt to postpone elections that was responsible for provoking a brief round of bloodshed. He also repaired his country's relations with Kenya too. Ironically, while Somalia is regarded as the least stable of the region's countries, its recent actions were actually stabilizing.



The Role Of Leadership Over Regional Events

What can be learned from the Somali case is that a lot depends on the political decisions made by the region's leaders. This is evidenced by everything going on in Ethiopia related to its internal and international conflicts. Abiy made the fateful decision to militarily intervene in Tigray, which created a humanitarian crisis that continues to this day even if national unity was preserved, albeit in a more centralized fashion than the decentralized one that his supporters had earlier expected. The GERD dispute is also largely due to the relevant leaders being unable to reach a pragmatic compromise. To be fair, there are serious ecological, economic, geopolitical, and strategic issues at play which take precedence over the personal opinions of any given leader, but these heads of state are ultimately responsible for it remaining unresolved.

Ethiopia's Strategic Centrality

Ethiopia's regional centrality leads one to conclude that "as Ethiopia goes, so goes the region", which is proven by empirical evidence. The country's recent round of multi-sided destabilization (regardless of whomever or whatever one attributes this to) has powerfully reverberated all throughout the Horn of Africa. The centralization trend that Abiy nowadays obviously supports sends the signal that decentralization trends, especially those advanced through the use of arms like Tigray's was, will be militantly opposed by the region's other

leaders. At the same time, however, there's no denying that decentralization is an objectively observable global trend and one that does indeed have some merits in the Horn of Africa. Alas, it won't see any success in the immediate future considering the fear that Abiy has of it inadvertently provoking "Balkanization".

Redrawing Internal Administrative Borders

Going forward, however, responsibly managed decentralization should be seriously considered by him and others as a compromise solution for resolving myriad internal issues, especially those of an ethnic nature. Ethiopia's internal borders remain imperfect, but they shouldn't be de facto redrawn through one region's partial military occupation of another like the Amhara Region is presently doing to Tigray. This leads to the large-scale exodus of local people which can arguably be described as ethnic cleansing even if that wasn't the intent. Replicating this model deeper in the Ethiopian heartland around the Oromo periphery for example could be disastrous for the country and potentially spell its doom in the worst-case scenario. From the opposite view, however, the peaceful resolution of such heated disputes could set an excellent example for the region.

The Most Powerful Man In Africa

What everything ultimately comes down to is the influence of leadership, especially in the Horn of Africa. For better or for worse depending on one's perspective, Abiy is the most powerful man in the region, which thus makes him among Africa's most powerful leaders today. His decisions set the trend that all neighboring countries follow. With this in mind, there's still hope for the Horn of Africa, but it all depends on what Abiy decides to do. As seen from the example set by the neighboring Somali leader, backtracking on a controversial decision might improve the situation in one's country, but Somalia is of course very different than Ethiopia so the comparison is admittedly imperfect. Nevertheless, this still shows that the region's leaders exert powerful influence over national affairs, once again for better or for worse. Abiy could for example eventually take steps to restore the de facto collective leadership model that he inherited from the TPLF, though only if he cares to.

From A Party To A Person Being "The First Among Equals"

To explain, the post-civil war ruling coalition was largely modeled off of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Despite its faults, it succeeded in retaining stability in this very diverse country and controlling its centrifugal tendencies, albeit through heavy handed measures. Abiy retained that strict style of leadership but attempted to reform the dynamics of the ruling coalition, which in turn inadvertently destabilized the country since it was so unprecedented in the post-civil war period. Instead of the TPLF being "the first among equals", it became him personally who fulfilled that role. His outsized influence over all matter of governing affairs has been felt by everyone, again for better or for worse. In a sense, it's a return to history, but his evolving leadership model must continue adjusting to contemporary realities, especially the dynamics that he's responsible for unleashing.

Ethiopia's Most Immediate Priorities

Preserving superficial decentralization while in practice increasing centralization trends risks worsening domestic dissent, especially among the majority-minority Oromo and smaller groups around the country's periphery. Abiy is unlikely to ever follow the Somali model of much broader decentralization for each region but some substantive movement in that

direction with time might help placate some of those who've been provoked by his leadership style. The most immediate priority though is stopping the growing inter-ethnic violence of the past year which is driven to a large extent by various groups trying to redraw internal borders to more closely align with demographic realities on the ground. Only once this is brought under control can the state seriously start discussing the adjustment of those contentious frontiers.

The Tigrayan Tinderbox Risks Spreading Throughout Ethiopia

It mustn't be driven by inertia into letting events unfold "naturally" and creating fait accomplis lest the resultant violence worsen the country's already tragic humanitarian situation. Although Abiy is trying to regain control of these centrifugal dynamics, critics allege that he might secretly be turning a blind eye to some of the violence out of speculative favoritism for one or another group. This risks deepening the country's ethnic divisions as well as the growing gap between the central government and some of the governed. What's happening right now in Tigray might therefore spread throughout the rest of the country as Ethiopia flirts with its own so-called "Great Reset", albeit related to redrawing internal borders and continuing Abiy's centralization trends instead of the socio-economic outcomes generally associated with that concept (i.e. "Fourth Industrial Revolution").

An Outsider's Proposed Solutions

From an outsider's perspective, Ethiopia must immediately regain control over the security situation in all parts of the country without exception, though being careful not to overreact to certain conflicts. Then Abiy must compellingly articulate his envisioned governance model to the masses. Ideally, credible representatives from each region will either support him or offer constructive critiques to whatever he proposes with an aim to improve perceived shortcomings. Only after that happens can the country then consider redrawing some of its internal borders, though that process will of course be controversial and not everyone will be satisfied with the outcome. Amid all of this, Abiy must balance between the competing external forces shaping his decision making, particularly Eritrea and the GCC, while retaining Ethiopia's traditionally excellent relations with China.

Concluding Thoughts

For as dramatic of a comparison as it may be, Abiy's Ethiopia has many parallels with Gorbachev's Soviet Union. Both visionary leaders sought to revolutionize their systems of governance but inadvertently opened up a Pandora's Box of domestic crises. Unlike the USSR, however, Ethiopia still has a chance of surviving as a unified state, though it must eventually make meaningful reforms in the direction of substantive decentralization after stabilizing the security situation throughout the country. Abiy might also do well to consider returning to more of a collective leadership model than the one that he presently rules over where he personally wields the most power as the so-called "first among equals". In any case, it all comes down to leadership, and everyone's hopes are resting on his shoulders to see what he'll do next.

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Andrew Korybko is an American Moscow-based political analyst specializing in the relationship between the US strategy in Afro-Eurasia, China's One Belt One Road global vision of New Silk Road connectivity, and Hybrid Warfare. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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