

The Flag War: Ethiopia's Competing Nationalisms

Addis Ababa's "Flag War" Is Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's Biggest Challenge Thus Far

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The Ethiopian capital is on edge as Oromo from the surrounding region flock to Addis Ababa ahead of tomorrow's open-air concert organized by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), a group that was previously designated as "terrorists" by the government up until recently, with the cause of tension being that youth are provocatively hoisting and even painting the OLF flag all over the city in what some non-Oromo locals feel is an act of hyper-aggressive political signaling that's bound to instigate violence.

Contextual Backgrounder

Ethiopia has been undergoing a transformation since its new [Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed](#) entered into office a little over half a year ago, and [one of the most profound](#) domestic changes was that several high-profile groups that were previously designated as "terrorists" by the government have been delisted and encouraged to enter into a national dialogue with the authorities. All of this has been celebrated by most of the country apart from those intimately tied to the former Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) ruling faction of the governing Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition, but no one was under any illusions that the path ahead would be easy after decades of conflict and ethno-regional "political engineering" led to the de-facto destruction of Ethiopia's once-unified national identity.

Competing Nationalisms

The now-acting President of the Somali Regional State Mustafa Omer wrote a very frank but nonetheless objective article last summer about the two main trends of nationalism in Ethiopia that he provocatively titled "[Can contradictory Oromo and Amhara political aspirations be reconciled?](#)", which is a must-read for anyone who isn't already familiar with these ideas. To concisely summarize his points as best as possible but understanding that they nevertheless need to be read in full in order to be fully grasped, Omer basically puts forth each of the country's two main ethnic groups' perspectives on their shared history, concluding that the Oromo's ethno-driven decentralization is incompatible with the Amharas' desire to (re)craft a unified trans-ethnic identity and that compromises are urgently indeed otherwise the country is bound to descend further into bloodshed with time.

The "Flag War"

Bearing in mind this prevailing concept, the ongoing "[Flag War](#)" in Addis Ababa is extremely

disturbing and suggests that Ethiopia's two competing nationalisms are on the brink of physically clashing over their ideals. To bring the reader up to speed, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), one of the presently rehabilitated groups that were previously designed as "terrorists", is organizing a massive open-air concert tomorrow in the capital, and countless Oromo from the surrounding region are thronging into the city ahead of the event. Some of these over-ebullient youth are hoisting and even painting the OLF flag all throughout Addis, which has provoked non-Oromo locals into confronting them. The Prime Minister and police chief seemed to sympathize with the new arrivals and urged the native inhabitants to remain calm and not overreact to what's happening.

That might be a lot easier said than done, however, because flags are in and of themselves some of the most symbolic and emotional objects in history, and it's understandable why they elicit strong reactions one way or the other. This is especially true in the case of the OLF's flag, which had for decades represented an ethno-separatist cause that, if successful, would have literally destroy the geographic core of the country and put an end to Ethiopia. Although the Oromo are the country's largest plurality (~34%), the Amharas (~27%) had historically been its vanguard people up until the Tigrayans were able to masterfully manipulate the post-civil war system in order to emerge as the most influential ethnic group despite constituting roughly 6% of the population. The informal post-TPLF transition has now thrust these ethno-power disparities and aforementioned competing nationalisms to the forefront of the national conversation.

An Impossible "Balancing" Act?

PM Abiy has tried to "balance" the Oromo and Amhara nationalisms by emphasizing the country's identity diversity and retaining the TPLF-drawn ethno-"federal" boundaries (many of which have been criticized for "dividing and ruling" local populations to the ruling Tigrayan faction's political benefit) while preaching the need to develop an inclusive national identity that remains united despite its many differences. This is practically as impossible of a task as "balancing" communism and capitalism, with the "hybrid solution" of "state capitalism" being equally unacceptable to both parties' leading ideologues the same as PM Abiy's ultimate vision might be for Oromo and Amhara nationalists. Moreover, if the state apparatus that he's now responsible for is perceived to be biased in one way or another (whether that's actually the case, is fake news, or is a weaponized exaggeration), then it could contribute to radicalizing the other side.

The challenge that Ethiopia is facing is that its many diverse people were so desperate for a change that they placed all of their hopes into PM Abiy, making him out to be whatever they wanted him to be just like many Americans did with former President Obama, but some of their expectations are now being exposed as unrealistic. On the one hand, ultra-nationalist Oromo might not be pleased with their Prime Minister's support of Ethiopian unity, while their counterparts in the Amhara camp might fear the consequences of his plans to incorporate Oromo nationalism into the state framework. Again, Omer's article about the competing nationalisms of both ethnic groups comes to mind in illustrating the almost existential challenge facing Ethiopia today, one which is dangerously coming to a point during Addis' "Flag War".

The Danger Of A "Civilizational Balkanization"

It's important to mention at this juncture that Omer's provisional leadership has actually

overseen [two very symbolic changes](#) in his region, which saw it drop the “Ethiopian” pretext from the Somali Regional State’s prior official name and also replace the flag that this predecessor modified by returning the white Somali star on the blue background that internationally symbolizes Somali nationalism. This might have emboldened OLF’s supporters to more prominently display their organization’s flag in Addis, which they claim as part of their historic Oromo territory despite the Amharas contending that it was originally theirs before the southern people’s northern migration centuries ago. The dispute over Addis’ ownership between the Amhara and Oromo also explains why the “Flag War” has led to such high tensions in the capital city.

The first-mentioned group perceives the sudden hoisting and painting of OLF flags in their city by youth from the surrounding region to be an aggressive reaffirmation of the Oromo’s historical claims, which makes the Amharas feel doubly disrespected because they were already made to feel like “second-class citizens” under the TPLF despite their legacy of leadership in the country and might now think that nothing really changed under PM Abiy. As for the Oromo, they understandably feel emboldened after “one of their own” became Prime Minister and their OLF opposition “heroes” are now legally recognized as a legitimate political force, hence their ecstatic expression of nationalism by hoisting and painting the group’s flags all over the capital city ahead of tomorrow’s OLF-organized open-air concert.

As a result of the incompatibility between these two national visions, tensions are rapidly reaching a crisis level in the city and could see the explosion of violence if all sides – including the state – don’t responsibly manage these fast-moving dynamics. Worse still, any high-profile violence in the capital could catalyze simmering and long-suppressed nationalist sentiments elsewhere in the country such as the ones [between the Oromo and Somali people](#) that began to heat up last year over the arbitrarily drawn border between their two “federal” states, to say nothing of a “Clash of Civilizations” template unfolding between the country’s majority-Muslim and majority-Orthodox peoples as well as within each of “their own” against minority confessions. For example, the majority-Muslim Oromo might be pushed into conflict with their minority Orthodox brethren, the same as could happen in the reverse when it comes to the Amhara.

The eventual outcome of these Hobbesian conflicts could be the “Civilizational Balkanization” of Ethiopia, a very real danger that mustn’t be discounted.

Concluding Thoughts

The “[Ethiopian Renaissance](#)” that PM Abiy is trying his best to herald in has suddenly but not unexpectedly been thrown into jeopardy by the long-running nationalist contradictions between his country’s two largest ethnic groups, coming to a head in the capital city of all places and right before an open-air concert there organized by the OLF. The sudden influx of Oromo youth from the surrounding region and their spree of OLF flag hoisting and painting have alarmed some of the non-Oromo locals of this multiethnic city who interpret their actions as hyper-aggressive political signaling being committed with impunity and predicated on expressing the superiority of their nationalist vision. This has in turn elicited an increasingly physical reaction from some of the Amharas in Addis who feel like their sensitivities are being trampled upon, thus instantaneously resurrecting one of the country’s oldest and deepest fault lines and throwing Ethiopia on the course of “Civilizational Balkanization” if it’s not properly addressed.

PM Abiy is in a bind because he can't order serious state action against the flag-hoisting and -painting Oromo youth ahead of what basically amounts to their celebration of his premiership and the positive changes that they expect it will produce for their people without risking a very negative reaction from them that could in turn undermine the OLF's ongoing reconciliation talks with the government. Similarly, refusing to decisively respond to what the Amhara locals view as ethno-political provocations risks making him appear biased in support of the Oromo and therefore undercutting his support among the country's other constituent people, especially those like the Amharas and Somalis who are engaged in preexisting territorial tensions with the country's largest plurality as it is. The "Flag War" therefore represents the most sensitive challenge that PM Abiy is forced to face in the de-facto post-TPLF transitional period thus far, and his handling of it will determine whether the "Ethiopian Renaissance" rolls on or burns out.

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