

Conflict dynamics in Ethiopia: 2019–2020

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Ethiopia's 2018 political reforms were widely hailed for liberalising the country's restricted political landscape. However, it did not take long for the transition to become mired in inter-ethnic and communal clashes. This report examines the drivers of the violence that ravaged Ethiopia between October 2019 and the end of 2020. It points to ethnic tensions, militant national identities, rival political elites and their mobilisation of the masses, along with state fragility and complicity.

Key findings

- ▶ Opening up the political space at a time when militant ethno-national sentiments were on the rise and political divisions were deepening contributed to the proliferation of violence in many parts of the country from late 2018.
- ▶ The fragility of the state and discord within its institutions and structures played a significant role in the escalating conflict.
- ▶ At the heart of most violent clashes between October 2019 and the end of 2020 were inter-group tensions and perceived security threats related to these tensions.
- ▶ Calls by various parties for autonomy, resources and control of sections of the economy aggravated tensions. So too did religious and racial sensibilities and secessionist aspirations.
- ▶ The indifference of state institutions to episodes of violence, and their failure to stop them, contributed to the rise in clashes. The situation was exacerbated by the complicity of some officials in creating conflict.
- ▶ Repressive state tactics aimed at stemming the violence in some regions resulted in an increase in clashes, deaths and loss of property.
- ▶ Until a comprehensive political settlement is negotiated to bridge the seemingly irreconcilable ideological divide among political elites, stability in Ethiopia will remain elusive.

Recommendations

- ▶ While the government's commitment to national dialogue is commendable, the process must be inclusive in order to bring peace.
- ▶ Mediation is needed between those with opposing ideological views with the aim of achieving a negotiated political settlement.
- ▶ The state should actively work to restrain the violence and enable a negotiated settlement between opposing forces.
- ▶ The state should create a professional, disciplined, impartial and accountable police and security force that can intervene to stop violent clashes and maintain security.
- ▶ Since much of the conflict is the result of increasingly militancy, the security apparatus should break the cycle by dismantling the illicit arms network that fuels the clashes.
- ▶ Civil society and professional associations should work together to strengthen local conflict resolution mechanisms. While existing institutions are losing their power to resolve macro level political conflicts, they still enjoy a great deal of credibility and legitimacy at grassroots level. These bodies should design a sustainable capacity building scheme in both traditional and modern conflict resolution and revitalise their role in mediating and containing inter-communal clashes.

Introduction

In 2018 Ethiopia experienced a unique political event. For the first time in the country's history, a national protest movement, which began in the country's two most populous regions – Oromia and Amhara – succeeded in putting a relatively popular civilian government in power.

The administration, headed by Abiy Ahmed, swiftly introduced bold political and legislative reforms that earned it popular support and raised expectations of a new era.¹ Exiled opposition political parties were decriminalised and political prisoners released, signalling an intention to decouple politics from the barrel of the gun.

The government's commitment to opening up the political space and the legislative reforms it introduced were regarded by many commentators as a radical departure from the country's authoritarian past. The goodwill engendered by the moves prevented the outbreak of the violent inter-communal clashes that so often characterise the early days of transitions from authoritarian regimes to democratic dispensations.

It did not take long, however, for the transition process to become mired in ethnic and communal conflicts in much of the country. In a monograph published in 2019, Semir Yusuf documented the conflicts, identifying what caused them.² Among the driving factors were competing ideologies and national identities.

Abiy's political reforms and style of leadership could not contain the violent inter-ethnic and communal conflicts that mushroomed in the country. They were a relic of the post-1991 federal dispensation, which, although designed to accommodate such differences, turned out to be merely a façade. After 2015, the heavy-handed centralised rule of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) heightened ethnic tensions and triggered widespread opposition and mass protests that provoked the resignation of prime minister Haylemariam and Abiy's installation.

Several factors contributed to the increase in violent clashes after 2018. One was the perceived fragility of the state and party apparatus, partly as a result of years of unrest. The liberalisation of the political space enabled the growth of assertive and militant nationalist identities

that challenged the status quo both within the ruling party and state institutions.

Another factor was the growing involvement of informal and sometimes clandestine ethno-cultural youth groups in the competing movements.³ The state's response was to give the politics of appeasement a chance with regard to previously exiled political parties as well as the many youth groups. It did so either to show restraint in the face of looming clashes or because it didn't want to antagonise these groups.

The combined effect of these factors ignited the ethnic conflicts. The rise in competing national identities not only fuelled animosity among rival elites, but also triggered the mobilisation of the masses, changing the source and nature of the violent clashes.

Abiy's political reforms and style of leadership could not contain the violent inter-ethnic and communal conflicts

A major event since 2019 has been the formation of the Prosperity Party (PP), headed by Abiy. It arose from a merger of the three former EPRDF member parties – the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (which became the Oromo Democratic Party), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (the Amhara Democratic Party), and the Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement and former EPRDF affiliates the Afar National Democratic Party, Harari National League, Gambela People's Democratic Movement, Somali People's Democratic Party and Benishangul Gumuz People's Democratic Party.

The formation of the PP reverberated across the Ethiopian body politic, giving rise to considerable antagonism. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which opposed the merger, withdrew from the PP and became the only opposition party with state resources at its disposal. Several other political groups also opposed the merger, portraying it as a colossal misstep, while others lauded the move. The unification of the front would prove to be an earthquake that would determine the realignment of the country's political forces and play a significant role in igniting the violence.

A fundamental question is whether the time was ripe for such a merger considering that it led to the TPLF's withdrawal and subsequent abysmal relations with the PP. The merger also resulted in the expulsion of prominent political figures from the party, largely due to contradictory views on ideology and party structuring.⁴

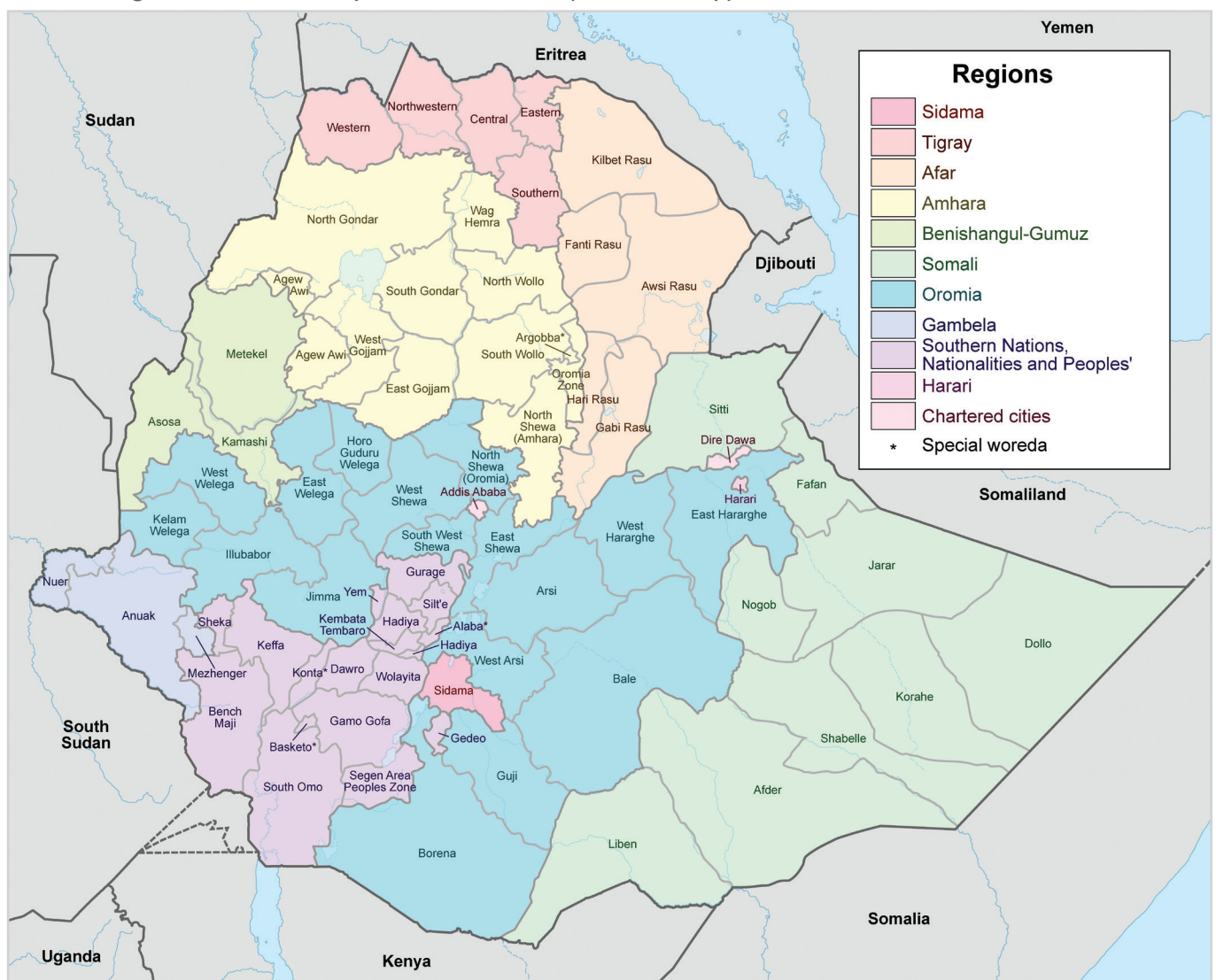
From October 2019 and throughout 2020 the country was rocked by waves of violence that ranged from ethnically driven communal clashes to insurgency. This report examines the major drivers and factors exacerbating this violence in the Oromia, Amhara, Benishangul and Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples's (SNNP) regions (Chart 1).

It argues that heightened ethnic sentiments and militant nationalisms, spurred on by animosity among the political elites and their mobilisation of the masses along seemingly irreconcilable lines, threaten the country's stability. State fragility, along with the incompetence, indifference and incoherence of state institutions impedes efforts to halt the violence and pave the way for a negotiated, inclusive and democratic state.

Methodology

The report is based on research that involved extensive fieldwork in the regions mentioned above between October 2019 and the end of 2020. In areas where the security situation was fluid, experts who hail from or

Chart 1: Regions/states in Ethiopia and their zones (unofficial map)



Source: Wikipedia

are affiliated with the areas, were deployed to carry out the research.

Structured in-depth interviews were conducted with multiple interviewees, including local officials, ruling and opposition party officials and members, elders and religious leaders, members of youth groups and victims of violence.

Since the information was gathered in 2019 and 2020, it does not directly address ongoing cases of conflict in the country. However, the findings indicate that the conflict structures and political and institutional dynamics have remained largely unaltered throughout 2021, so the findings in this report remain relevant. The most important exception in this regard is the year-old war in the northern part of the country, which requires a separate study.

Tensions and violent clashes

Inter-ethnic and communal violence has been the Achilles' heel of Ethiopia's post-2018 transition. There have been confrontations between armed (insurgent) groups and the state in Benishangul Gumuz and Oromia and ethnic violence and alleged state repression in Amhara (the Qimant group) and SNNPR (the Wolayta group).

In Oromia, waves of bloody violence were triggered by the alleged 'attempted arrest' of the prominent Oromo politician, Jawar Mohammed, and the murder of popular musician Hachalu Hundessa. In SNNPR there were inter-ethnic clashes between the Konso and Ale over contested territory and there was religiously motivated violence in Amhara (in the town of Mota in the Misraq Gojjam zone). These are just a few of the violent episodes that shook the country – evidence of the multiple fault lines that characterise a deeply divided society.

The parties involved are as varied as their motives and endgames. While some portray themselves as determined to achieve autonomy, economic wellbeing and cultural emancipation, others struggle for cultural purity, territorial integrity, national revival and peace and security. What they have in common is the politics of 'group worth', predicated on an 'in-group-out-group' discourse.

The state's attempts to defuse heightened ethnic sentiments with a narrative of the 'civic state' and

politics of convergence have failed to stem the trend. Instead, it has provoked opposition and cemented ethnic differences. The political elites, in turn, have used ethnicity and identity politics to mobilise the masses against their political targets.

These problems are compounded by yet another variable – institutional dynamics that have impacted the intensity and trajectory of the conflicts. When the new administration came in, both the party and the state apparatus were in disarray. Unlike its predecessor – known for ideological consistency and commitment to revolutionary democracy, developmentalism and strong party discipline – the ruling party was plagued by ideological incoherence and tactical inconsistency. One example was its public rejection of revolutionary democracy without replacing it with a new ideology. At the same time, the government embraced economic policies with liberal and capitalist overtones through its 'home-grown economic reform' schemes.

The parties involved in the violent clashes are as varied as their motives and endgames

On the one hand, the PP stated that it endorsed the federal arrangement and ascribed to a 'multinational' mode of nation building. For instance, it made five languages – Amharic, Tigrinya, Afaan Oromo, Afar and Somali – its working languages. On the other, it characterised the federal arrangement as being designed to divide rather than unite, in a prelude to the mushrooming 'tribalism' that would destroy the country.

Contradictions in party documents on issues like federalism and self-determination and in public statements of the party's senior members reveal ideological conflict and incoherence. So too did its response, for instance, to demands for autonomy (internal self-determination in the form of regional statehood).

These factors gave party officials the opportunity to generate conflict and profit from it. Many interviewees in the three regions alleged that some government officials impeded mediation between conflicting parties, because they believed their job security depended on

prolonging the conflicts. Other officials are said to have incited conflict, aligning themselves ideologically with parties opposed to the government. The state security apparatus, too, was unsettled and fragile. This effected the chain of command, manifesting in unpreparedness, indifference and the complicity of the security forces in the violence.

The violence in all the regions covered in this report bears the hallmark of these complex dynamics.

Competing ideologies

Since the rise of the Ethiopian student movement and the incorporation of Marxism into the political scene, the country has been caught between two competing ideological orientations – ethnonationalism and pan-Ethiopianism. The 1995 constitution essentially championed the former and institutionalised ethnicity. Over the years, the two political camps refined their narratives and their rhetoric has become more nuanced,⁵ although the fundamentals remain.

The ethnonationalist camp interprets the political history of the state as one of domination – both culturally and politically – of one group over many oppressed nationalities. They argue that decades, if not centuries, of political domination led to economic subjugation, making comprehensive freedom a cause worth fighting for. For them, the constitution and the federal dispensation are the culmination of the struggle and the start of an era of ‘unity in diversity’.

The pan-Ethiopianist camp on the other hand, is vehemently opposed to what it sees as the ethnonationalists’ revisionist concept of history. It accuses them of rejecting the country’s past glories and history in the name of achieving ethno-cultural justice. They regard the institutionalisation of ethnicity as a political ploy to subordinate the idea of a united Ethiopia to the politics of difference. Despite refining their political tactics to the point of endorsing federalism, they still contest the validity and viability of the existing Ethiopian brand of federalism.

The political liberalisation of 2018 took place against the backdrop of this polarised political landscape.⁶ The divisions contributed to and shaped the realignment of forces in the waves of violence that began in October 2019 and continued throughout 2020.

The formation of the PP and its endorsement of ‘*Medemer*’⁷ as the (quasi-)ideological basis of its programmes – together with Abiy’s insistence on the need for a politics of convergence – raised suspicions in both the PP and the opposition that the administration is innately unitarist. An analysis of the waves of violence in several parts of the country strongly suggests that these divergent ideologies influenced many involved in the conflicts.

Oromia is one of the regions severely affected by a series of ideologically based violent clashes. After the protests against the alleged attempt to detain Jawar in October 2019 and the murder of Hachalu in July 2020, many lives were lost and public and private property destroyed.

Many of those involved in the conflict in Oromia blame the violence on conflicts over ideological purity

Emerging cities like Shashemene (West Arsi zone) and Robe (Bale zone) and rural municipalities like Kofele (West Arsi), Agarfa, Gasera (Bale) and Awoday (East Hararge zone) were heavily affected. Wollega and West Guji zones have also endured sporadic violence and recurring government counter-insurgency offensives. According to an official in Wollega, ‘there has not been a single day that has gone by without someone being killed or abducted.’ Though the violence is diminishing, this has also been the case in areas controlled by the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) in West Guji.

Many of those who were involved in the conflict in Oromia, among them government officials, community leaders, youth groups and insurgents, blame the violence on conflicts over ideological purity.

Government officials, religious leaders, elders and members of the informal youth group known locally as *Qeerroo*, allege that the ‘attempted arrest’ of Jawar and the murder of Hachalu are ‘a neo-*neftenga* ploy to subdue *Oromumma* and the Oromo cause.’ Many also accuse the PP of ‘succumbing to the neo-*neftenga* narrative’, casting the regime as ‘a continuation of the old Abyssinian empire by other means.’

Tensions and violent confrontations in the Amhara, Benishangul Gumuz and SNNP regions were also symptoms of the deep ideological divides within and between the ruling and opposition forces. Some members of the Amhara PP, for instance, describe *Medemer* as empty sloganeering, with few practical implications for political stability. They likely believe *Medemer* is a 'unionist' ploy to promote the interests of a certain ethnic group, usually the Oromo. Others, however, say it's a unionist ideology and a prelude to dismantling ethnic self-governance in the federation.

This ideological divide was also behind the political stand-off between the Wolayta zone in the SNNPR and the federal government prior to the deadly August 2020 violence in Sodo and nearby towns in the zone. Abiy's insistence on delaying their quest for autonomous regional statehood and his alleged proposal for them to form a larger and more economically viable regional state along with neighbouring zones was dubbed 'paternalistic' and 'a mere delay and deny tactic'.¹⁸ After moving to finalise the procedural requirements for a self-declared referendum, the result was violent clashes between protesters and government forces after the government detained the zone administrator, Dagato Kumbe, and his colleagues.

The Gumuz worry that the old Dergue mode of rule is imminent and self-administration will be scrapped

According to activists,⁹ government forces killed between 34 and 36 protesters and injured 170 more. Activists, pro-autonomy government officials and PP members in SNNPR believe the federal government's reluctance to entertain their demands indicates a lack of commitment to the fundamentals of self-governance enshrined in the constitution.

It is not uncommon to hear the PP portrayed as unitarist by the Yolaga (informal youth group), pro-autonomy PP members and the opposition in Wolayta. The government rejects the accusation, pointing to the referendum it 'oversaw' for Sidama statehood as a manifestation of its commitment to self-rule.

Similarly, the inter-ethnic clashes in Benishangul Gumuz appear to have been exacerbated by contrasting

ideologies. Triggered by a dispute over taxi fares in Metekel zone (Dangul district) in 2019, the violence spread to several municipalities, culminating in a killing spree targeting the Amhara and Agew. Victims were randomly attacked, mostly with arrows but also with bullets. After July 2020, the attackers became more organised. According to a local official,¹⁰ forces such as the Gumuz People's Democratic Movement, the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement and the Boro-Shinasha People's Democratic Party were behind the attacks.

In addition to the racial¹¹ and economic factors driving the most recent conflicts, accusations that the government is trying to undo the federal arrangement have caused the Gumuz to fear a loss of their self-determination. There is also a growing concern that 'the old Dergue and imperial mode of rule are imminent and self-administration is going to be scrapped'.¹² According to a Gumuz activist, this sentiment gained credence as 'the Amhara claim land and kept scaring out the people'.¹³

Inter-elite rivalry

The return of the opposition in the heyday of political reform calmed the polarised political landscape. It helped Abiy garner support across the divides despite not spelling out a programme to remedy the conflicts.

While reluctantly endorsing his ascent to power, some continued to voice concerns. It did not take long before detractors accused the administration of inclining to the right of the ideological continuum. The lack of ideological coherence resulted in a flood of competing narratives among the ethno-regional parties that constituted the EPRDF and, later, the PP. The rivalries within the party were revealed when the Sidama region pushed its demand for autonomy (regional statehood) despite resistance from both the federal and the SNNPR government.

This dispute inspired ethnonationalist elites from Oromia and Tigray, among others, to coalesce behind the Sidama's cause. The region achieved statehood on 20 November 2019 after a referendum. This fuelled the rivalry between the Wolayta-Sidama and the SNNPR, prompting the ethnonationalist elites to join forces in support of the Wolayta.

The government's failure to accede to the Wolayta's demand for statehood – in contrast to its response to the Sidama – increased the former's sense of marginalisation and deepened rivalries between the elites. The federal government has accused forces such as the Wolayta elite of working with the TPLF and OLA,¹⁴ which the federal Parliament has declared 'terrorist groups'. The realignment of forces among the elites, which is as much about ideology as power politics, fuelled tensions and violent confrontations between ethnic groups.

These rivalries are not confined to confrontations with the 'other' or the 'out-group'. There are conflicts within the 'in-group' as well. Following the 2020 violence in Oromia, for instance, many pointed to elite rivalry based on competing ideologies as the major cause.

Activists claim the more assertive and largely Arsi and/or Muslim Qeerroo are being sidelined in Oromia

According to an elder in Robe (Bale zone), the uncertainty and volatility in Oromia, which has revived historical social cleavages, has been attributed to 'Abiy's confidence in his soldiers (and state resources), Lemma's silence and Jawar's overconfidence in Qeerroo power.'¹⁵ A senior lecturer at Mede Wolabu University adds that conditions in the region deteriorated 'when Abiy decided to form a national party and sidelined' certain prominent political figures.¹⁶

Oromia's response to the violence has deepened the intra-ethnic cleavages. Hundreds of local administrators and mid-level political appointees were expelled from their posts, allegedly for incompetence and negligence.¹⁷ Several interviewees accused the government of using the clashes as a pretext for replacing the Arsi/Muslim Oromo with the Shoa/Tulama/Christian, thereby ensuring the latter's dominance in the region.

The cooption strategy, effectively implemented by the Oromia PP, relates largely to the Qeerroo group. The regional government is often accused of trying to win the Qeerroo's loyalty by offering inducements such as jobs, financial credit and land.

According to a senior government official in Robe, the government created jobs for 3 305 Qeerroo in the

2019 fiscal year and planned to create 5 057 more in 2020. Activists claim that the more assertive Qeerroo, who, they say, are largely Arsi and/or Muslim, are being sidelined.¹⁸ The cooption strategy appears to have increased the rift between the two factions, and alienated the broader community.

The same strategy has been used with local elders, resulting in deep fissures. These cleavages are so marked that interviewees openly refer to the pro-government Qeerroo and elders as '*Qeerroo Fayyadame*' (with/of government resources) and '*Jaarsa fayyadame*' (elders with/of government resources). Tellingly, detractors of the government refer to the more assertive Qeerroo and elders as '*Qeerroo umaata*' (the peoples' Qeerroo) and '*Jaarsa umaata*' (the peoples' elders).

In Amhara, the June 2019 assassination of Ambachew Mekonnen, the president of the region at the time, and his colleagues, was the cruellest manifestation of the intra-elite rivalry. It triggered age-old regionalism pitting the *Gondarite* against the *Gojjame* identity.

In 2020, the region was also engulfed in rivalry between supporters of Amhara nationalism and those who supported Ethiopian nationalism. There was fierce rivalry between the National Movement of Amhara (NAMA) – the most important opposition party in the region – and the Amhara PP. Organisations such as the newly formed Amhara Scholars Consultative Assembly acted as mediators.

Another factor contributing to the violence was the feud between the more assertive ethnonationalist elites in the region and the Gumuz in the neighbouring Benishangul Gumuz region. Many Amhara and Agew lost their lives and livelihoods in the violence.

All these elements cemented the pattern of in-group factionalism and inter-group animosity. They also determined the trajectory of violent confrontations in the regions.

'Group worth' and mass mobilisation

Donald Horowitz, in his seminal work, *Ethnic groups in conflict*,¹⁹ explains concepts that help in understanding Ethiopia's conflict dynamics. His concept of ranked vs. unranked groups and group worth elucidates the role played by elites in the country's conflict.

The tensions and violent confrontations between the Amhara and Gumuz elites revolve around the latter's suspicions that the nationalist Amhara aspire to revive 'superordinate-subordinate' group relations. In response, the Gumuz invoke the *key-tikur* ('red-black' colour/skin-tone) divisions and direct their violence at the Amhara and the Agew. Others play the 'group-worth' card. As Horowitz puts it:

... the bond that ties the individual's worth to the group's, and the drive to gauge the group's worth in contrast to another's, gives nationalism a strong appeal to the nationalist, making even killing or dying for the cause acceptable.²⁰

The elites used this strategy to mobilise the masses in Oromia, Amhara, Benishangul Gumuz and SNNPR, heightening the severity of the inter-ethnic/communal clashes.

The religiously motivated attack on mosque businesses in Mota, East Gojjam zone in Amhara, shows how effective the 'group-worth' notion has been to mobilise people. Ethnonationalist sentiments galvanised the ethnic and religion-based conflicts. The attack was triggered by rumours of an assault in an Orthodox church that prompted a group of youths to set Muslim businesses on fire. According to a church leader,²¹ some Christians who opposed the violence were beaten by the mob. In the previous two years, there had been attacks on Muslims in different places in Amhara, according to the region's Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs.

Party and state officials who should have helped to prevent or stop conflicts failed to do so

One of the underlying reasons for these attacks is longstanding and growing Islamophobia in some Christian circles. Other reasons are that Christians, aggrieved by religiously motivated attacks on fellow Christians in Oromia, retaliate against Muslims in their own region.²² Ethnonationalist elites have played a significant role in these violent confrontations.

Those in Gumuz and Shinasha (Metekel zone) exploited the racial divide and grievances about economic

deprivation and an imminent loss of regional pre-eminence. In Amhara, nationalists exploited competition over land, existing racial fault lines and claims of territoriality by other regions.

The Konso-Ale conflict is partly rooted in competition for land, while the 'Qimant committee'²³ and the Amhara regional administrators clashed over questions of autonomy. Militant groups in both camps have exacerbated the stand-off, leading to violence including against civilians. Wolayta activists also galvanised followers around the need for regional autonomy, which resulted in a heavy-handed response from the government.

The Oromia conflicts, fuelled by armed and rival political elites, were informed by ethno-religious and secessionist sentiments. Several of the conflicts in Amhara were also religiously motivated and had some connection with those in Oromia.

Institutional fragility and complicity

In all instances, party and state institutions and officials who should have helped to prevent or stop conflicts failed to do so. In some cases, they were actually complicit in causing the clashes.

As mob violence was unleashed against civilians in many parts of Oromia in October 2019, police failed to respond to repeated and widespread calls to intervene. Victims in Benishangul also complained about the inertia of the police in the face of impending violence. Some police said their superiors instructed them not to intervene, but in other cases they appeared to be actually involved in stoking violence. In West Arsi (Oromia), officials blamed their colleagues for orchestrating attacks against civilians.

Institutional fragility and complicity were also apparent in the attempts by the security forces to end violent confrontations. In some areas they were accused of indifference and incompetence while in others they allegedly used excessive force and repressive tactics.

State repression was another manifestation of the conflict, with the state ranged against civil society. In Wolayta, for instance, the government's heavy-handed response to calls by the youth for autonomy led to mass arrests and deaths.

Conclusion

Since 2019, ethnic conflicts have diminished in some parts of the country, while others have been ravaged by further cycles of violence. The examples cited in this report make it clear that government and other stakeholders have a major task ahead if they are to contain communal and inter-ethnic violence.

At the heart of most of the violent clashes is group fear of a perceived threat. This is fuelled by elite rivalry and mass mobilisation around claims of autonomy and a desire for status, resources (land and access to or control of the local economy), religious and racial sensibilities and secessionist aspirations.

Competing ideologies and power politics are also underlying causes. And institutions and agencies of the state and the opposition political camp contribute by either triggering or exacerbating the conflicts.

The proliferation of violent inter-ethnic and communal clashes has put Ethiopia's political transition and the entire body politic in a precarious position. Resolving this predicament is no easy task. Nonetheless, all participants should revisit their strategic and tactical vantage points and factor in dialogue, compromise and reciprocity as major instruments in their political toolkit.

Recommendations

The Prosperity Party

The PP should have a clear vision in relation to fundamental issues. These include the federal dispensation, the political history of the state and how to redress grievances through ethno-cultural justice and the politics of recognition and representation. The party should free itself of the constraints of ideology and return to the foundational principles that unite and guide it. In this way it would avoid the mistrust that is often at the heart of the violent clashes.

The PP should also demonstrate clearly that it is true to its stated commitment to intra-party democracy. This will minimise the danger of its members sabotaging the party from within. The free flow of ideas and deliberations on ideological, strategic and policy matters will advance party cohesion and nurture democracy. Without this, members of the party will continue to involve themselves in conflict and obstruct efforts to alleviate the violence.

The PP and the opposition

Unless a comprehensive political settlement is negotiated to bridge the ideological divide among the political elites, political stability in Ethiopia will remain elusive. While the government's commitment to national dialogue is commendable, the process must be structured and inclusive. This will not only signal good faith but also give credibility to the idea of 'national dialogue'.

The state and the opposition must redefine the way they conduct politics and iron out their differences so that citizens can accept a negotiated political settlement. A 'community dialogue' process such as that recently undertaken by the Ministry of Peace should continue, and be led by an inclusive or independent body. Both the ruling and opposition parties should support the process and encourage their supporters to do so.

A clear commitment to intra-party democracy will minimise the danger of PP members sabotaging the party

The war in the northern part of the country looms over efforts to institute such a process. A peaceful resolution to this conflict is essential to any move towards an inclusive national dialogue. All parties to the conflict should commit to a cessation of hostilities and resolve their political differences peacefully.

State agents and government

Public perception of government indifference, incompetence, partisanship and complicity is likely to harden societal fault lines, intensify tensions and trigger violence. A commitment by the government to avoid heavy-handed tactics and excessive use of force will not undermine its ability to provide security. The state should create a professional, disciplined, impartial and accountable police and security force that can stop violent clashes and ensure peace and security.

The security apparatus should dismantle the illicit arms network that provides the weapons used in violent clashes. It should strive to achieve a negotiated settlement that addresses the root causes of the conflicts, and demonstrate the political will to resolve differences between the political elites.

Civil society bodies and professional associations

One of the elements of ethnic conflict in Ethiopia is the resurgence of militant and opposing national identities. Civil society organisations and professional associations could mediate and facilitate dialogue among the parties to these conflicts.

To do so they should upgrade the capacity of local conflict resolution mechanisms and institutions. A consortium across ethnic lines could be established to contain inter-ethnic fear, hatred and animosity in a neutral atmosphere. Efforts by local CSOs such as the Multi-Sectoral Initiative for National Dialogue should be strengthened.

International community

The government's development partners and the international community should direct financial and technical support to conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

The newly established Ethiopian Reconciliation Commission should be revamped and supported.²⁴ The international community should also invest in ongoing efforts to kickstart national dialogue by sharing its experience and expertise and providing financial support.

Because many of those who participate in the violence are unemployed, sectors that have the potential to create jobs should be supported. The 'youth voluntary community service program', an exemplary body created by the Ministry of Peace, also needs to be bolstered.

Notes

- 1 M Ademo, PM Abiy Ahmed faces many challenges, but he has achieved much and can do even more, if given popular mandate, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/4/2/abiys-year-one-ethiopias-best-hope-for-stability>.
- 2 S Yusuf, Drivers of Ethnic Conflicts in Contemporary Ethiopia, ISS Monograph 202, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/mono-202-2.pdf>.
- 3 The advent of informal youth groups first became a feature of the protest movements in Oromia and spread to other regions. The Qeerroo of Oromo, the Fano of Amhara, the Ejetto of Sidama, the Yolaga of Wolayta, the Zerma of Gurage and the Jano of Qimant are some of these ethno-culturally informed organisations.
- 4 See <https://addisstandard.com/news-alert-lemma-megerssa-dismisses-medemer-prosperity-party/>.
- 5 S Yusuf, Constitutional Design Options for Ethiopia: Managing Ethnic Divisions, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/monograph204.pdf>.
- 6 While this characterisation suggests that these ideological divides animate macro-level political conflict, several micro-conflicts such as the Somali-Oromo, Oromo-Gumuz, Guji-Gedeo and Afar-Somali have followed the path of inter-ethnic rivalry, regardless of their ideological positions.
- 7 The concept of 'Medemer' (loosely translated as synergy) came into use after Abiy came to power. Abiy was often heard stating that the country needs 'Medemer' to free it from the quagmire it is in. What was considered to be an optimistic political dictum calling for 'politics of convergence' across the country turned out to be the quasi-ideological outlook of the ruling Prosperity Party after Abiy wrote a book titled *Medemer* and the party endorsed it as 'a homegrown notion/'philosophy' (as described in the Amharic version of the book) and 'the way to ensure prosperity'.
- 8 Interview, member of the Prosperity Party, Sodo, October 2020.
- 9 Interview, activists, Sodo, October 2020.
- 10 Interview, government officials, Assossa, October 2020.
- 11 The race factor in Benishangul Gumuz and more generally in the country should be understood in its own unique context. Inter-ethnic tensions in Gambella and Benishangul are often caused by skin tone with violent clashes between the indigenes in the areas (with darker skin tone, locally referred to as tikur) and the non-indigenes (with a lighter skin tone, referred to as key).
- 12 Interview, government official, Assossa, October 2020.
- 13 Interview, Gumuz activist, Assossa, October 2020.
- 14 Interview, government official, Sodo, October 2020.
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