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Ethiopia 2018: The Transition of Power and its Implications

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The March 2018 Transfer of Power

On 27 March 2018, following the unexpected resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, the executive committee of the Ethiopian governing coalition party, the EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front), convened to vote for a new leader.¹ Since the EPRDF holds 500 seats (out of 547) in the House of People's Representatives (the Ethiopian parliament), election as an EPRDF chairman brings with it election to the post of prime minister of Ethiopia as well. The executive committee of the EPRDF consists of 180 voting members- 45 from each of its four constituent parties: TPLF - the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, ANDM - the Amhara National Democratic Movement, OPDO - the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization, and SEPDM - the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement.²

When the executive committee convened to start the deliberations for the election of the new leader, each of the four constituent parties advanced its own candidate. Debretsion Gebremichael, leader of Tigray's TPLF³ was considered to have been the favorite to win, and his party is not only the dominant one within the coalition but also the party of Meles Zenawi, who served for many years as prime minister of Ethiopia. However, a few hours prior to the opening of polls, Demeke Mekonnen, deputy prime minister since 2011 and the head of the

ANDM, withdrew from the race. He threw his support behind the OPDO candidate, Lt. Col. (ret.) Dr. Abiyot (Abiy) Ahmed Ali.

During the leadership deliberations, Ahmed had been opposed vehemently by TPLF and SEPDM representatives. Therefore, the results of the secret ballot count were perhaps unexpected: Ahmed received 108 votes, surpassing the 58 of the SEPDM leader Shiferaw Shigute (SEPDM leader), and the 2 votes cast for Debretsion Gebremichael. On 2 April, Ahmed was declared chairman of the EPRDF and sworn in as Ethiopia's Prime Minister at the Ethiopian House of People's Representatives.

Who is Ethiopia's New Prime Minister?

At 42 years of age, Abiy Ahmed is not only Africa's newest political leader but also its youngest. He hails from a religiously and ethnically mixed-origin family: his father is Muslim Oromo and his mother comes from a Christian Amhara family. Significantly, Ahmed's nomination challenged 27 years of Tigray preeminence in Ethiopian politics - both his two predecessors Meles Zenawi and Hailemariam Desalegn were supported by TPLF and its coalition partner, SEPDM. This, in and of itself, constitutes a shift in Ethiopia's political center of gravity, from the Amhara-Tigray to the Oromo, which represents the largest ethnic group in the ethnic federation of Ethiopia.⁴

Dr. Abiy Ahmed ascended to power following an intensive, and diverse, career. In 1990, when he was just 14 years old, Ahmed joined the small contingent of Oromo fighters within the TPLF - a group vastly dominated by the Tigrayans - in the battle to topple the Derg government. From 1993-2010, he served in the Ethiopian Armed Forces, primarily within the intelligence and communication branches of the army. In addition, he served as the army representative on the pacification committee formed after the inter-sectarian clashes between Christians and Muslims in Beshasha, and was one of the founders and eventually the acting director of the Ethiopian Information Network Security Agency (INSA).

During his military service he obtained academic degrees in computer engineering, International Leadership, and Cryptography. In later years, he

earned an MBA and a PhD from the Institute for Peace and Security Studies at Addis Ababa University. His PhD research focused on ways to combat extremism through mediation and by developing social capital resources.⁵

After retiring from the army in 2010 as a Lieutenant-Colonel, Ahmed rejoined OPDO, the governing party in Oromia since 1991. In the 2010 elections, he was elected to the Ethiopian Parliament for that party, and was nominated to the executive committees of both the OPDO and the EPRDF. In October 2015, he was nominated as Federal Minister of Science and Technology in Hailemariam Desalegn's Government. The following year, he was elected as vice president of the Oromia province and in 2017 head of the secretariat of the OPDO party, where he dedicated much effort to consolidate political cooperation between the Oromo and the Amhara.

Ethiopia's Internal and Regional New Dynamic

After assuming the reins of power, Ahmed did not delay in taking steps to implement an extensive and ambitious policy of reform. One of the most significant items on his agenda was the signing of the 'Friendship and Cooperation' Agreement with Eritrea. This was a dramatic event that seemed to end the twenty-year conflict between the two rival states, and the effects on the geopolitical climate of the Horn of Africa are too soon to predict.⁷ Other reforms included the release of more than 2000 political prisoners, strengthening cooperation with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, ending the state of emergency in Ethiopia declared by the previous government, amendment of the anti-terror law, replacing senior military commanders, demonstrating willingness to re-establish the currently defunct Ethiopian navy, privatization of the telecommunications sector and more.

What will be the ultimate impact of Dr. Abiy Ahmed's program of reform remains to be seen. Internally, reform efforts must overcome the dual legacy of the EPRDF: impressive infrastructure and anti-poverty programs, juxtaposed against harsh authoritarianism.⁸ The pivotal role of Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa might suggest a much-needed beneficiary effect on the entire region of this new attitude of hope, openness and conflict resolution. Yet, as previous

ambitious reform attempts in the region have shown, a counter reaction could be only a question of time.

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¹ The EPRDF has governed Ethiopia since the successful culmination of its military campaign to topple the Derg rule in 1991 under the leadership of prime ministers Meles Zenawi (1991 - 2002) and Hailemariam Desalegn (2002 - 2018) whose resignation on 15 February 2018 opened the race for the top office.

² In addition, there are five other smaller parties connected to EPRDF without representation on the executive committee of the EPRDF: the ESPDP- The Ethiopian Somali People's Democratic Party, the BGPDU- The Benishangul - Gumuz People's Democratic Unity Front, the HNL- The Hareri National League, the GPDM-The Gambela People's Democratic Movement and the ANDP- The Afar National Democratic Party. All together, they represent every federal state within the Ethiopian ethnic federation construct.

³ Among the different parties, TPLF had the dominant role in toppling the Derg, presented the largest number of fighters and casualties in the war against the Derg's rule (1973-1991). Both the two previous Ethiopian prime ministers were members of the TPLF (Meles Zenawi) or its close ally, the SEPDM (Hailemariam Desalegn).

⁴ Lovise Aalen, "Ethnic Federalism and Self-Determination for Nationalities in a Semi-Authoritarian State: The Case of Ethiopia", *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 13, nos. 2-3 (2006): 243 - 261. See also: Patrick Desplat and Terje Ostrobo, *Muslims in Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics, and Islamic Reformism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1-24.

⁵ Abiy Ahmed, "Countering Violent Extremism through Social Capital: Anecdote from Jimma, Ethiopia", *Horn of Africa Bulletin* 29, no. 4 (2017): 12-17; Janine Nahapiet and Sumantra Ghoshal, "Social Capital, Intellectual Capital and the Organizational advantage", *Academy of Management Review*, 1998, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 242 - 266.

⁷ Abdur Rahman Alfa Shaban, "Ethiopia-Eritrea Peace Deal boost for regional security", *Africa News*, 10 July 2018. Available at: <http://www.africanews.com/2018/07/10/ethiopia-eritrea-peace-deal-boost-for-regional-peace-au-eu/>. Last accessed 5 September 2018.

⁸ Williams Davison, "Ethiopia's new prime minister brings peace with Eritrea and hopes of reform amid fresh challenges", *Independent*, 5 August 2018. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/ethiopia-eritrea-prime-minister-abiy-ahmed-conflict-a8478751.html>. Last accessed 5 September 2018.