



PROTESTS IN ETHIOPIA

WHY ARE ETHIOPIANS PROTESTING?

Summer 2016 | The Center on Conflict and Development at Texas A&M University

Student Media Grantee Menychle M. Abebe initially traveled to his homeland of Ethiopia to chronicle the challenges faced by children seeking a quality education in rural parts of the Amhara region. While he was there, protests broke out in the nation's capital. A nimble student photojournalist, Menychle quickly picked up the story and sought to examine some of the driving factors behind the protests.

THE IMAGE OF SUCCESS

Global media coverage of Ethiopia has historically been limited to famine and bleak prospects, with only a few encouraging stories here and there; but in recent years, the media has taken a dramatic shift to focus on positive pieces like the country's economy, its "democratic election" in 2015, and its relative stability amidst an otherwise hostile Horn of Africa region. According to one World Bank report,¹ Ethiopia has registered good progress by reducing poverty by 14% (2000-2011) and decreasing undernourishment by 40% (1990/92-2012/14); it even enjoyed a sustained average economic growth rate of 10.8% between the years 2003/04-2013/14.

Word of Ethiopia's successful economic growth has systematically drowned out that of the country's recovery from the infamous human tragedy of the 1984 famine. Even a brief venture to Ethiopia's capital or other emerging cities could make one believe in the mantra of "Ethiopia rising"—at least with regard to its accelerating construction of skyscrapers, kilometers of smooth roads, and installation of Sub-Saharan Africa's first light railway.²

ALL IS NOT WELL

However, there seems to be a big contradiction between the above encouraging reports and what is actually happening in the country—between what we read in the news and what I call "a bleak prospect".

For instance, there seems to be no convincing explanation for why many Ethiopians are still protesting while the government has declared winning 100% of parliamentary seats in what they called a "democratic election". In that same sense, there is no satisfying justification to explain why millions of Ethiopians are still not food secure while the country has reported double-digit economic growth for nearly a decade. These are, in fact, important issues that require serious discussion.

A YEAR OF PROTESTS

What the global community may not have heard about Ethiopia, in addition to reports of its rapid economic growth, is the country's year-long period of protest and unrest. Thousands of Oromos—the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia—have been protesting nonstop since November 2015. Likewise, in the northern part of the country, the protest of the Amhara people—the second largest ethnic group in-country—came a little later (in July 2016) and soon spread to other parts of the region.

So why are they protesting? Not even Ethiopians can agree on the answer to this question, as polarized politics and a new form of ethnic nationalism are at the forefront, impeding proper communication and understanding among Ethiopians. Meanwhile, the government doesn't seem interested in addressing the real factors of unrest shaking the country. Instead, it pins the blame for the anti-government protests on opposition parties in and outside of the country. According to government reports, these protests are "diaspora organized" movements planned to dismantle state structure.³

However, there are other factors behind the anti-government protests, which have more complex and historical roots than the calls of opposition political parties as claimed by the Ethiopian government.

To resolve this complexity, I have classified the causes of the recent protest in Ethiopia into two factors: triggering and main factors.

TRIGGERING FACTORS

1. OROMO PROTEST: The “Master Plan”

The year-long protest of the Oromos was initially triggered by the government’s intention to expand the capital city’s boundaries to the surrounding provinces of Oromia, as outlined in the “Addis Ababa Master Plan”. This was followed by a brutal crackdown and the killing of more than 400 people,⁴ according to estimates from Human Rights Watch (the report didn’t include 67 other protestors killed in August 2016).⁵ As the number of protestors continued to grow, the government was forced to drop its plans officially and apologize publicly for the death and destruction.⁶

2. AMHARA PROTEST: Attempted Arrest of Disputed Territories’ Representatives

The mass protests of the Amhara people erupted last August over the administration of the disputed Welkait territories. Most Welkaite people identify as ethnic Amharas, and the territories were historically administered by the Amhara region until the new TPLF⁷-led government incorporated Welkaite’s administration into the Tigray region in the early 1990s.

Through chosen committee members, the Welkaite people have since been demanding both federal and regional governments to move the administration of their land back to the Amhara region, which they prefer to be identified with. However, the demands of the Welkaite Identity Committee members were not welcomed, and they became wanted for an arrest by the government. News of the government’s attempt to arrest these individuals triggered the protest of Amharan people in many parts of the region.

Though it was initially peaceful, continued protests were more violent in some locations. The government ordered the national defense for an intervention resulting in the murder of more than 30 protestors in just one weekend, according to Aljazeera news reports.⁸ However, the number of people killed in the Amhara region has clearly increased during subsequent protests. According to an exiled Ethiopian journalist named Muluken Tesfaw, the number of people killed by government forces is estimated to be more than 256.⁹

DEEPER DISCONTENT

Both protests were triggered by land issues, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. While land alone is a serious matter in Ethiopian politics, insufficient attention is given to other core factors driving Ethiopia’s recent unrest—factors that are far more complex.

For instance, one may note that the Oromos are still protesting, long after the government announced dropping its “Master Plan” proposal.

There is a lot of blame game in the Ethiopian political system between the powerful government and significantly weaker political parties. Even though the Ethiopian government blames opposition parties and diaspora activists for orchestrating the

protests,¹⁰ the core factors of unrest are related to the continued grievances of Ethiopians over issues such as the corrupt political culture in-country, weak economy, broken justice system, inequality, and absence of rule of law over the past 25 years.

POLITICIZED DATA

Due to the pervasive culture of politicizing every issue, I have noticed a strong “political force” that expects data on education, health, economy and other sensitive issues to be fancier than the actual situation. For instance, data I personally accessed in one rural elementary school indicated that the school’s number of dropout students was almost equal to the number of dropout students reported in the entire “Wore’da” district, which has more than 100 schools.

There is a tendency to not report actual data on various issues such as education, particularly in times of limited success. As a result, it is reasonable to expect that aggregate data on education and other subjects at the federal level can be misleading. The influence of politics on education, health, agriculture and other sectors is so prevalent in Ethiopia that it sometimes gives a puzzling picture of issues than the reality.



“There is a tendency to not report actual data on various issues such as education, particularly in times of limited success. As a result, it is reasonable to expect that aggregate data on education and other subjects at the federal level can be misleading.”

UNEVEN GROWTH

Ethiopia is commonly represented by multilateral organizations as a good example of recovering from absolute poverty and proceeding towards promising prospects of development. It is undeniable that there are indications of economic growth in the country, and many economic analysts agree that the country is in what people call an “era of construction”. However, quite a number of these projects—including what

was hailed as Sub Saharan Africa's first metro¹¹ in Addis Ababa—gained most of their monetary funds from foreign sources.¹²

Double-digit economic growth reports from the last decade don't seem to reflect the actual situation of millions of Ethiopians on the ground. According to Akindola,¹³ failures to incorporate a concomitant level of social development into economic growth policies can lead to a proportional increase in poverty while registering average economic growth rates. The Ethiopian situation seems to fit this context. Behind years of reports broadcasting the country's success, a huge portion of the Ethiopian population still resides under the poverty line. As the recent Oxford University's Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) report indicates, 33.5% of Ethiopians still live below the extreme poverty line (\$1.90 a day), while 71.3% of the entire population gets only \$3.10 a day.¹⁴ To add to this state of abysmal poverty, more than 10 million Ethiopians are reported to be in need of food as a result of severe drought.¹⁵

ETHIOPIA'S "REVOLUTIONARY DEMOCRACY" IS NOT A DEMOCRACY

Many political commentators have spoken about Ethiopia's good progress to democracy. More recently, US President Barack Obama—during his July 2015 trip to Africa—described Ethiopia as a democratically elected government, despite the fact that the government and its affiliates won 100% of all the 547 parliamentary seats in the recent parliamentary election.¹⁶

Meanwhile, the incident was considered a shame by political analysts because the results can hardly indicate that the election was an exercise of democracy in any way. These analysts see Ethiopia's government as "electorally authoritarian": a generic name that describes regimes that restrict the exercise of democratic freedoms and yet allow periodic multiparty elections in an attempt to bolster their domestic and international legitimacy.¹⁷ In this regard, many reports¹⁸ note Ethiopia's continuing restrictions on opposition political parties, independent media, and civil society organizations. A significant level of intimidation of opposition political parties¹⁹ and attacks on journalists²⁰ are also reported in Ethiopia.

As Abbink writes,²¹ post-1991 Ethiopia saw significant political institution building, yet has a high ingredient of rhetoric not backed by practice. In fact, several other studies also confirm Ethiopia's significant loophole in the practice of democratic values such as freedom of speech and press freedom. According to Committee to Protect Journalists,²² Ethiopia is placed fourth among the top 10 most censored countries in the world. Similarly, Freedom House's 2015 annual report indicated as press and internet are not free in Ethiopia.²³

PERCEPTIONS OF ETHNIC FAVORITISM

Even though the Ethiopian federal system indicates equal exercise of power among different nations, nationalities and peoples, many analysts indicate the dominance of one ethnic group which, some they call it as "Tigrean elite's takeover".²⁴ The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) is still considered by many as a powerful wing of the EPRDF coalition group, and takes a dominating role in the leadership of the country by controlling all strategic positions such as military, foreign affairs, and security that are considered as key sources of power. Back in 2012, Ethiopia promoted 37 senior military officers, 70 percent of whom were from the Tigray region.²⁵ Even though the Ethiopian government called their promotion "merit-based", because of the historically rich experience of many Tigreans in military since times of the armed struggle, it was regarded by observers as Tigrean favoritism at its best.

| Ethiopia's Ethnic Composition | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Ethnic group | % of population |
| Oromo | 34.4% |
| Amhara (Amara) | 27% |
| Somali | 6.2% |
| Tigray | 6.1% |
| Sidama | 4% |
| Gurage | 2.5% |
| Welaita | 2.3% |
| Others | 17.5% |

Source: CIA World Factbook est. 2007²⁶

It is not unusual for an outsider to hear the grievances of Ethiopian people over a system which is criticized by favoring few Tigrean elites in politics and some business areas. The issue was even reflected during the recent Ethiopian protests: Thousands of ethnic Tigreans in the Amhara region moved to the Tigray, region fearing attacks from the protestors.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Ethiopia has a strong military and intelligence which can solve problems during critical times. Ethiopia's geopolitical importance in the fight against terrorism helped to attract western strategic allies and donors; but these entities remain silent,²⁷ even in traumatic situations, valuing political and regime stability over democracy and human rights.²⁸ Political activists in the diaspora have been urging western governments to put pressure on Ethiopia's forceful treatment of protestors instead of issuing the usual 'deeply concerned' statements and travel alerts.

Human rights situations are continuously deteriorating in the country. Meanwhile, the number of people being killed in the ongoing protests are not definitively known or documented. Ethiopia has rejected the United Nations' call²⁹ for an

Menychle M. Abebe, a recipient of ConDev's Student Media Grant, is currently a graduate student pursuing a master's degree in Global Journalism at NLA University College in Norway. Originally from the Amhara region of Ethiopia, Menychle is particularly focused on research related to media and conflict, peace journalism, ethnicity, multiculturalism, and peace and conflict studies. condev.org/ethiopia-childhoods

The Center on Conflict and Development at Texas A&M University seeks to improve the effectiveness of development programs and policies for conflict-affected and fragile countries through multidisciplinary research, education and development extension. ConDev uses science and technology to reduce armed conflict, sustain families and communities during conflict, and assist states to rapidly recover from conflict. ConDev is based in College Station, Texas with projects around the globe. condev.org

investigation by independent bodies concerning the deadly protests.³⁰

The country has been relatively stable, but its present situation is clearly a warning. The country's ever-increasing youth unemployment, together with ethnic-based politics and a weakened economy, may invite another round of unrest and protests if not properly managed. The Ethiopian government has a long way to go to address the real issues behind the protests. If it could establish a democratic system capable of securing justice, social development, equality, and freedom for all Ethiopians, that would be a good start. ∞

Notes

- ¹ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/publication/ethiopia-poverty-assessment>
- ² <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/sep/25/addis-ababa-first-sub-saharan-light-rail-network>
- ³ <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201608091707-0025261>
- ⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/16/such-brutal-crackdown/killings-and-arrests-response-ethiopia-oromo-protests>
- ⁵ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/08/30-killed-ethiopia-protests-opposition-160808105428331.html>
- ⁶ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35773888>
- ⁷ Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF)
- ⁸ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/08/30-killed-ethiopia-protests-opposition-160808105428331.html>
- ⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/muluken.tesfaw>
- ¹⁰ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/08/ethiopia-pledges-probe-killing-protesters-160820150733705.html>
- ¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/sep/25/addis-ababa-first-sub-saharan-light-rail-network>
- ¹² <http://www.economist.com/news/21665199-addis-ababa-has-opened-first-part-new-light-rail-system-sub-saharan-africa-gets-its-first-metro>
- ¹³ <http://jds.sagepub.com/content/25/2/121.short>
- ¹⁴ http://www.dataforall.org/dashboard/ophi/index.php/mpfi/download_brief_files/ETH
- ¹⁵ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35038878>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/22/ethiopia-ruling-party-win-clean-sweep-general-election>
- ¹⁷ <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/200105/summary>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/23/dispatches-alarm-bells-ethiopia-100-election-victory>
- ¹⁹ <http://etd.aau.edu.et/handle/123456789/9211>
- ²⁰ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/01/21/journalism-not-crime/violations-media-freedoms-ethiopia>
- ²¹ http://www.jstor.org/stable/3876785?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents
- ²² <https://cpj.org/2015/04/10-most-censored-countries.php>
- ²³ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ethiopia>
- ²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvIoxaL9k0Y>
- ²⁵ <https://ethiopiaobservatory.com/2012/09/12/ethiopia-promotes-37-senior-officers-to-rank-of-generals-tigreans-collected-most-of-it/>
- ²⁶ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/et.html>
- ²⁷ <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21695402-months-protests-are-rattling-fragile-federation-grumbling-and-rumbling?fsrc=scn/tw/te/pe/ed/grumblinganddrumbling>

28

http://www.jstor.org/stable/3876785?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

²⁹ <http://cctv-africa.com/2016/09/23/ethiopian-government-rejects-calls-for-an-independent-investigation-into-protests/>

³⁰ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/08/ethiopia-observers-needed-protests-rage-160811105846673.html>