

# A Year of Protests in Ethiopia



A burnt-out truck in the compound of a textile factory in the town of Sebeta in Oromiya.

## Key points

- Ethiopia's reputation for predictable internal political order has been ended by a year of widespread grass-roots protests.
- Grievances specific to the Oromo and Amhara people and regions have converged into a youthful protest movement, which has, as yet, no clear political agenda or leadership.
- A State of Emergency has suspended constitutional government for a six-month period with a more pronounced role for security institutions that may be difficult to reverse.
- A reshuffled inclusive and technocratic cabinet has brought some political breathing space for the government but the underlying issues driving protest remain unaddressed.

## Introduction

For more than a year now, two decades of relative social and political order in Ethiopia has been disrupted by unprecedented protest and unrest. Long-standing grievances erupted in November 2015, only six months after the ruling Ethiopia Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) won a total electoral victory earlier in May the same year. The two largest of Ethiopia's internal ethno-national groups—first the Oromo, and then the Amhara—have been in the protest's vanguard. Their respective grievances have converged into heated rhetoric and violent action, not only against their regional governments, but also against the Tigrayan ethno-national group who have dominated the most powerful state offices since 1991.

## Catalyst for unrest

Protests first broke out in opposition to the Addis Ababa Master Plan that saw the fast expanding

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federal capital encroach on lands administered by the Oromiya regional state. Since at least 2014 there had been growing frustration at the federal government's top-down developmentalism that bypassed Oromiya self-government, and at local Oromo Peoples Democratic Organisation (OPDO) party officials benefitting from land deals. The Amhara protests came later, originally in reaction to the transfer of territories from Amhara federal state to Tigray. Local Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) politicians reportedly had sympathy with the initial protests, which they may also have seen as means of leveraging greater influence at the centre.

### Violence escalates

In Amhara, there were instances of communal violence against Tigrayan communities, as well as reports of armed banditry. On 2 October the annual Oromo (*Irreecha*) cultural celebration in Bishoftu, 40 km south of Addis Ababa, descended into chaos, after protest groups took over the customary leaders' dais chanting political slogans. Security responded with live arms fire creating a mass stampede in which there were 50 fatalities according to official statements; opposition groups claimed hundreds died. Following Bishoftu, both Oromo and Amhara regions saw well organized gangs attack and destroy foreign-owned or party-linked farms and factories. Special forces sent to quell protests were also attacked.

### Youth, diaspora and external forces

The protestors are overwhelmingly youthful. Demographically dominant, both in Addis Ababa and the growing provincial centres, they are also better educated and better connected to the outside world than previous generations. Smart phones are ubiquitous, and the government's shutting down of the internet is seen to be deliberately targeting a means of internal mobilization. Despite the accusation that hostile external forces are fuelling opposition from afar including Ethiopian-diaspora based groups using satellite channels, which is at least partly true, the primary drivers remain internal.

### The present situation

A six-month State of Emergency (SoE) declared on 9 October has seen protest subside. Constitutional

government is overridden by rule by a Command Post chaired by Prime Minister Haile-Mariam Desalegn. This was followed by an unusually far reaching cabinet reshuffle on 1 November, changing the government only appointed a year earlier in October 2015. Still more unusual, was the time it took for the government to react decisively to the unrest.

The new cabinet brings high profile ministerial appointments from the ethno-national groups most associated with the protests. Several top positions went to Oromos. Dr Workneh Gebeyehu, who shifted from his very recent appointment as Oromia regional president, was promoted to Minister of Foreign Affairs. An Addis Ababa University lecturer in journalism, Dr Negeri Lencho, who has no experience of government, was appointed minister in charge of the Government Communication Affairs Office. The number of deputy prime ministers was reduced from three to one, the sole survivor an Amhara, Demeke Makonnen. Other key ministries remain with their previous incumbents including Debre-Tsion Gebre-Michael at Communications and Information Technology, Siraj Fegasa at Defence, Kassa Tekle-Birhan at Federal Affairs, and Abraham Tekeste at Finance (promoted from state minister).

The cabinet is pitched as technocratic with a preponderance of ministers with PhDs, and, theoretically, less tainted by the high-level corruption scandals, which even the EPRDF had publicly declared a serious internal problem. Popular opinion is skeptical, however, of how much real change the new cabinet represents. Close attention will be paid to the state minister appointments, perceived to be as, if not more powerful, than the cabinet ministers. The new pool of special advisors is likely to feature familiar names.

### An on-going transition

The government's temporary loss of control that the protests implied, is symptomatic of the ongoing and seemingly unresolved political transition that followed the death of the long-time Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, in August 2012. The smooth assumption of power then by the current Prime Minister, belied a deeper internal struggle over the direction and leadership of the deep state

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over which Meles had consolidated his personal power in the decade before his death.

There are different perspectives on who are the main actors or factions at play in the transition. These revolve around both serving and retired politicians in the EPRDF and their connections with the army, the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF), and the Ethiopian National Intelligence and Security Service (ENISS). The most important factional struggle is reportedly inside the EPRDF's vanguard party, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF); high-ranking ENDF and ENISS officers are also party members.

The other core EPRDF parties—the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organisation (OPDO), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), and the Southern Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Movement (SEPDM)—are, with the exception of certain key individuals in these parties, perceived to be of secondary importance to the TPLF. There is speculation that frustration among the second tier parties with their lack of influence, saw regional party collusion with the local protests in Oromiya and Amhara. At the very least, the fact that regional parties neither preempted nor prevented protests is given as proof of a system in disarray.

## Economy

The protests have also highlighted the flip-side of Ethiopia's recent stellar economic growth. The profile of the protestors reflects joblessness and

low wages. Unrest and the consequent crackdown have caused the economy to falter in the face of a burgeoning debt burden. The economic growth had already put strains on the country's social fabric, which the protests and the subsequent government response have further damaged. The material gap between rich and poor—traditionally narrow in Ethiopia—has widened to an unprecedented degree. The divide is also reflected spatially, as urban development pushes out unplanned housing largely inhabited by the poor in the centre, to new utilitarian condominiums at the city limits. Here solidarity is forming along ethnic lines rather than economic status.

## Prognosis

Order has been restored, with military and security agencies asserting a stronger influence over government than at any time since Meles' consolidation of power in 2001. It is also possible that the collective government that characterized the post-Meles period has been considerably narrowed. This may bring clearer direction to the government's next steps to reassert authority but is unlikely to presage more plural politics, partly because the internal political debate is not resolved. With the economy damaged—to what extent is not yet known—popular grievances will still simmer and the younger generations may feel that Ethiopia's leadership has nothing immediately to offer them, except more sacrifice for less reward.



## Credits

This briefing paper is based on discussion at a Rift Valley Forum roundtable held in November 2016 on the implications of social protest and subsequent state of emergency in Ethiopia. It is available for free download from [www.riftvalley.net](http://www.riftvalley.net).

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