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DOI:

[10.1093/afraf/ady056](https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/ady056)

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Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Fisher, J & Tsehaye Gebrewahd, M 2018, 'Game over'? Abiy Ahmed, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front and Ethiopia's political crisis', *African Affairs*, pp. 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/ady056>

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|------------------|---|
| Journal: | <i>African Affairs</i> |
| Manuscript ID | AfricAff-2018-198.R2 |
| Manuscript Type: | Briefing |
| Keywords: | Ethiopia, Ethnic federalism, Ethiopian politics |
| | |

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BRIEFING

‘GAME OVER’? ABIY AHMED, THE TIGRAYAN PEOPLE’S LIBERATION FRONT AND ETHIOPIA’S POLITICAL CRISIS

JONATHAN FISHER AND MERESSA TSEHAYE GEBREWAHD*

ON 15 FEBRUARY 2018, HAILEMARIAM DESALEGN, Ethiopia’s beleaguered prime minister, resigned. Bowing to pressure from within his own party¹, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), Hailemariam declared that he hoped to facilitate an end to ‘unrest and political crisis’ in the country by leaving the national stage.² If Hailemariam’s departure had taken observers by surprise, however, what was to follow would defy all predictions. His successor, Abiy Ahmed – whose elevation was unanticipated even by many within the EPRDF Politburo itself³ – has, since his April 2018 inauguration, presided over a dramatic set of iconoclastic policy shifts. Perhaps most high profile amongst these has been the securing of a *rapprochement* with Eritrea, Ethiopia’s most bitter regional nemesis since the outbreak of a border war in May 1998.

It is in the domestic sphere, however, where Abiy’s reform agenda – or, at least, its stated ambitions – has been most radical. In particular, Abiy has sought to distance

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¹ Interview, EPRDF Politburo member, Mekelle, 20 July 2018.

² Al-Jazeera, ‘Ethiopia prime minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigns’, 15 February 2018, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/ethiopia-prime-minister-hailemariam-desalegn-resigns-180215115215988.html>> (5 October 2018).

³ Interview, EPRDF Politburo member, Mekelle, 20 July 2018.

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3 himself from the past 27 years of EPRDF rule (or, at least, core dimensions of it),
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6 condemning his immediate predecessors within weeks of coming to office as
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8 overseers of ‘terrorist acts...and using force just to stay in power’ and announcing a
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10 range of plans to overturn longstanding EPRDF positions on, for example, the role of
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12 the state in the economy and multi-party politics.⁴ Leader of the recently-renamed
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14 Oromo Democratic Party (ODP – formerly the Oromo People’s Democratic
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16 Organisation (OPDO)) within the four-member EPRDF coalition, Abiy has also
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18 looked to underline the ‘new broom’ character of his movement by rebuking the
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20 Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), the onetime senior partner within the
21
22 EPRDF, and rolling back their influence and place within the Ethiopian polity.⁵
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27 More concretely, in June 2018 Abiy unexpectedly replaced perhaps the two most
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29 powerful TPLF figures in Ethiopia since the death of long-serving TPLF chair and
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31 prime minister Meles Zenawi (president and later premier from 1991 onwards) in
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33 August 2012: Samora Yunis, army chief of staff, and Getachew Assefa, intelligence
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35 chief.⁶ Indeed, it is the departure of Samora and Getachew – the latter removed in a
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37 much more unceremonious manner than the former – that reportedly persuaded
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39 Eritrean president Isaias Afwerki that the TPLF elite, Asmara’s enemy for two
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41 decades, was being increasingly side-lined.⁷ In a speech twelve days later, Isaias
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44 announced that he would respond to Abiy’s peace overtures by sending a delegation
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48 ⁴Al-Jazeera, ‘Ethiopia PM: Security agencies committed “terrorist acts”’, 19 June 2018, <
49 [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/ethiopia-pm-security-agencies-committed-terrorist-acts-
50 180619051321984.html](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/ethiopia-pm-security-agencies-committed-terrorist-acts-180619051321984.html) > (5 October 2018); Maggie Fick, ‘Ethiopia prime minister calls for multiparty
51 democracy – chief of staff’, Reuters, 22 July 2018, < [https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-
52 politics/ethiopia-prime-minister-calls-for-multiparty-democracy-chief-of-staff-idUKKBN1KC0MX](https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-politics/ethiopia-prime-minister-calls-for-multiparty-democracy-chief-of-staff-idUKKBN1KC0MX) >
53 (5 October 2018). It is worth noting that some of these issues had also been raised under the
54 premiership of Hailemariam although Hailemariam lacked the mandate to move further forward with
55 such discussions.

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57 ⁵ Argaw Ashine, ‘Cracks emerge in Ethiopian ruling coalition’, The East African, 14 June 2018, <
58 [http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/africa/Cracks-in-Ethiopian-ruling-coalition/4552902-4611768-
59 x71xd9z/index.html](http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/africa/Cracks-in-Ethiopian-ruling-coalition/4552902-4611768-x71xd9z/index.html) > (5 October 2018).

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61 ⁶ Aaron Masho, ‘Ethiopia’s prime minister replaces security chiefs as part of reforms’, Reuters, 8 June
2018, < [https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-military/ethiopias-prime-minister-replaces-
commanders-in-security-reshuffle-idUSKCN1J40PU](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-military/ethiopias-prime-minister-replaces-commanders-in-security-reshuffle-idUSKCN1J40PU) > (5 October 2018).

⁷ Interview, Senior Eritrean policy official, Asmara, 20 June 2018.

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3 to Ethiopia, noting gleefully that ‘the people [of Ethiopia] said “enough is enough”’.⁸
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5 This in turn precipitated the end of the TPLF’s shenanigans; which was aptly
6
7 described as “Game Over”.⁹
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10 This Briefing takes a step back to place current, fast-moving political developments
11
12 in Ethiopia within a broader context. For while the pace and imagery of ‘Ethiopia’s
13
14 quiet revolution’ owes much to Abiy Ahmed’s personality and approach to politics,
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16 its wider trajectory was set in motion long before his premiership. Abiy was not the
17
18 architect of the situation that led to his ascendancy. We argue that Ethiopia’s current
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20 political dynamics derive from two longer-term phenomena. The first is the maturing
21
22 and solidification of the EPRDF’s ethnic federalism project, and the federal
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24 government’s blunt engagement with this process. The second is the disintegration of
25
26 the TPLF into factionalism and self-criticism since the death of Meles. Both processes
27
28 have been brokered by political elites within the ODP/OPDO – and another EPRDF
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30 coalition member, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM)¹⁰ – to
31
32 rebalance relationships within the EPRDF, and between federal and regional
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34 governments.
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42 *Ethnic federalism and Ethiopia’s ‘prison of nationalities’*

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44 Ethiopia’s ruling EPRDF regime, in power since May 1991, emerged out of the
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46 TPLF, a Marxist-Leninist ethno-nationalist liberation movement founded in Tigray
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48 during 1974-1975. Established during the dying months of emperor Haile Selassie’s
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50 reign, the TPLF attacked the historical Ethiopian state as a ‘prison of nationalities’
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56 ⁸ Ministry of Information, Eritrea, ‘President Isaias’ speech on Martyrs’ Day’, 20 June 2018, <
57 <http://www.shabait.com/news/local-news/26520-president-isaias-speech-on-martyrs-day> > (5 October
58 2018).

59 ⁹ *Ibid.*

60 ¹⁰ As discussed below, the ANDM, like the OPDO, changed the name of their party in September 2018 – to Amhara Democratic Party (ADP).

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3 whereby the country's diverse ethnic communities had long been subjugated and
4 exploited by just one – the Amhara group of the imperial family and its military *junta*
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8 successor, the *Derg* (in power 1974-1991). After a brief flirtation with the idea of an
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10 independent Tigray, the TPLF soon committed itself to fighting for 'self-
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12 determination' for all of Ethiopia's different nationalities *within* a united Ethiopia.
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14 Having defeated a range of competitor rebel organizations by 1979, TPLF fighters
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17 turned their full force onto the *Derg* army, securing full control of Tigray by 1988.¹¹
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20 Tigray, however, was home to only 7 percent of the then Ethiopian population and
21
22 the province covered only one-seventeenth of the country's land mass.¹² The TPLF
23
24 had limited reach beyond Tigray and little profile or legitimacy among Ethiopia's two
25
26 largest ethnic groups – the Oromo and Amhara – which together represented (and
27
28 continue to represent) over half of the Ethiopian populace. For both normative and
29
30 pragmatic reasons, therefore, the TPLF set about constructing a coalition of similarly-
31
32 minded ethno-nationalist movements from across the country's disparate nationalities,
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34 inaugurated as the EPRDF in 1989.
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38 Where such ethno-nationalist movements did not exist (as was largely the case) or
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40 where bilateral relations were already rocky (as with the Oromo Liberation Front), the
41
42 TPLF instead brought them into existence. The ANDM was formed from the
43
44 remnants of a splinter group of a rival rebel movement neutralized by the TPLF in
45
46 1978, while the OPDO was built around Oromo prisoners-of-war captured by the
47
48 TPLF from the *Derg* army.¹³ The fourth and final member of the EPRDF coalition –
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56 ¹¹ Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian revolution: War in the Horn of Africa* (Yale University Press, New
57 Haven, CT, 2009), pp. 76-110.

58 ¹² John Young, *Peasant revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975-1991*
59 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997), p. 67.

60 ¹³ John Markakis, *Ethiopia: The last two frontiers* (James Currey, Oxford, 2011), pp. 243-244; Young,
Peasant revolution, pp. 166-167; Interview, former senior OPDO official, Addis Ababa, 17 July 2018.

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3 the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM)¹⁴ – was also
4 'recruited from the prisoner-of-war camps' and, like the OPDO, 'received political
5 training' from TPLF cadres.¹⁵ The artificiality of these early political movements is
6 attested to by one former OPDO leader who recalls visiting an EPRDF camp soon
7 after the fall of the *Derg* and 'seeing only Tigrayans wall-to-wall; the fighters were all
8 Tigrayan, they all spoke Tigrinya'.¹⁶

9
10 The four EPRDF members, and the coalition's associate ethno-nationalist parties,
11 nonetheless became the governing parties of the nine regional states established in
12 Ethiopia by the EPRDF between 1991 and 1995, the building blocks of the country's
13 new ethnic federal system. This system was designed to limit and curtail the power of
14 the centre and provide relative autonomy and self-government to the regions. In
15 Ethiopia, however, these states corresponded not only, or primarily, to regional
16 identity but, rather, to ethnic identity. This was undertaken, notionally, to ensure that
17 all the country's major nationalities could exercise 'self-determination'¹⁷ at the
18 regional political level, and avoid subjugation by whichever groups dominated at the
19 centre. This resulted in a very diverse range of regional states – from the
20 comparatively tiny Gambella in the west (population less than half a million) to the
21 sprawling Oromia, a vast region nearly ten times the size of Gambella in terms of
22 area, and over sixty times the size in terms of population.

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24 Moreover, while ethnic federalism aimed at weakening central control over the
25 regions in theory, in reality the federal government's influence remained very strong
26 throughout the 1990s and 2000s. During the 1990s, this was partly because regional

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¹⁴ The SEPDM was formally founded in 1992, a year after the EPRDF had captured power.

¹⁵ Interview, former TPLF political education coordinator, Addis Ababa, 4 May 2016; Interview, former senior OPDO official, Addis Ababa, 17 July 2018.

¹⁶ Interview, former senior OPDO official, Addis Ababa, 17 July 2018.

¹⁷ Semahagn Gashu Abebe, *The last post-Cold War socialist federation: Ethnicity, ideology and democracy in Ethiopia* (Ashgate Publishing, Farnham, 2014), pp. 167-173.

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3 governance structures were so nascent beyond Tigray, having been gutted during the
4
5 Ethiopian civil war in many places, and recalibrated by the EPRDF in the aftermath of
6
7 victory. As one former senior OPDO official recalls, ‘when the regions were being
8
9 established, mass recruitment took place for the OPDO but...we didn’t have enough
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11 intellectuals for the bureaucracy of Oromia...TPLF had enough manpower to place
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13 bureaucrats in [the Tigray state] administration...the others did not’.¹⁸
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17 The new regime was also reluctant to permit the emergence of genuine autonomy in
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19 regions where its own writ had barely been established, intervening at will to replace
20
21 troublesome regional administrations on a number of occasions. Moreover, in the
22
23 aftermath of a 2001 split within the TPLF which nearly saw his removal, Meles
24
25 launched a comprehensive *tehadso*, or renewal, of the EPRDF machinery throughout
26
27 the country, simultaneously building the capacity of regional bureaucracies while
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29 strengthening their dependence upon the centre.¹⁹ Indeed Jon Abbink suggested in
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31 2011 that, ‘the actual power and interference of the federal government in regional
32
33 and local affairs has become stronger than under any previous regime’.²⁰
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38 The situation today, however, is rather different – at least in the most populous and
39
40 ethnically coherent regions: Amhara, Oromia, Somali and Tigray. As Sarah Vaughan
41
42 notes, following an unexpectedly poor showing in the 2005 Ethiopian general
43
44 election, the EPRDF sought to ‘win back the population’ who, they feared, viewed
45
46 ethnic federalism as little more than a smokescreen for EPRDF – or TPLF – national
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48 domination. This was undertaken through building formerly shunned community
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50 leaders into local governance mechanisms, pressuring local EPRDF leaders to extend
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55 ¹⁸ Interview, former senior OPDO official, Addis Ababa, 17 July 2018.

56 ¹⁹ Jon Abbink ‘Ethnic-based federalism and ethnicity in Ethiopia: Reassessing the experiment after 20
57 years’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, 4 (2011), pp. 596-618, p. 604; Sarah Vaughan,
58 ‘Revolutionary democratic state-building: Party, state and people in the EPRDF’s Ethiopia’, *Journal of*
59 *Eastern African Studies* 5, 4 (2011), pp. 619-640, pp. 629-631.

60 ²⁰ Jon Abbink ‘Ethnic-based federalism and ethnicity in Ethiopia: Reassessing the experiment after 20
years’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, 4 (2011), p. 604.

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3 their mobilization networks and strengthening the voice of regional representatives in
4 a range of fora, including those of Oromia in Addis Ababa (constitutionally, a
5 chartered city surrounded by Oromia Regional State).²¹
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10 This process continued and took on a dynamic of its own after Meles' death in
11 August 2012, the 'strongman' leader of Ethiopia for 21 years being succeeded by a
12 man with limited clout even within his own party. Viewed by many EPRDF cadres as
13 a 'legacy maintainer' and by his own admission 'considered a neutral person',
14 Hailemariam Desalegn assumed the premiership as a compromise candidate and
15 sought to govern more collectively than Meles, in part because he had little
16 alternative.²² Coupled with the outbreak of renewed factionalism and introspection
17 within the formerly dominant TPLF, this relative power vacuum at the federal level
18 accelerated processes of regional-level regime-building already underway.
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30 With Meles gone, however, there existed no clear presence at the centre to tether
31 regional proxy leaders such as Abdi Mohamoud Omar ('Abdi Iley'), president of
32 Somali Regional State (SRS) between 2010 and 2018, to a broader federal state-
33 building project – no presence, that is, beyond the Ethiopian National Defence Force
34 (ENDF). Indeed, SRS's recent political history is revealing of the shifting power
35 balance occurring more broadly between Ethiopia's federal and regional levels over
36 the last decade. In 2004, for example, the Region's ruling party – and EPRDF satellite
37 – the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP) could dismiss its leader, regional
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55 ²¹ Vaughan, 'Revolutionary democratic state-building'. pp. 632-634.

56 ²² Meressa Tsehaye Gebrewahd, 'Assessments of the political and security dynamics in Ethiopia since
57 2015 and emerging windows of opportunity', paper presented at 'Ethiopian Defence Day', organized in
58 collaboration with Mekelle City Council, Mekelle, 13 February 2018; Greg Mills, 'Ethiopia's need
59 for "deep renewal"', *Daily Maverick*, 14 August 2018, <
60 <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-08-14-ethiopias-need-for-deep-renewal> > (5 October
2018).

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3 president Abdirashid Dulane, only after securing permission from Addis Ababa.²³ By
4
5 2012, however, Abdi Iley, who had been head of security in SRS during the two years
6
7 prior to becoming president, was able to outmanoeuvre federal attempts to remove
8
9 him by aligning with ENDF officers.²⁴
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12 By August 2018, Iley's hold on power within SRS had become so comprehensive
13
14 that the federal government opted for brute force to remove him – sending in heavy
15
16 artillery to apprehend and arrest him after Iley's paramilitary (*liyu*) forces disrupted a
17
18 meeting being held in Dire Dawa.²⁵ Dire Dawa, like Addis Ababa, is a chartered city
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20 and, therefore, under federal authority. Tweeting in the midst of the crisis, Somali
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22 Affairs analyst and *Voice of America* journalist Harun Maruf noted that 'relations
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24 between the federal Government of Ethiopia and leaders of the Somali Region are
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26 said to be at "breaking point" and mused at 'the likelihood of the region cutting ties
27
28 with the Federal Government'.²⁶
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36 *Protest and emergency in Oromia and Amhara*

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38 Somali Region has not, however, been the primary flashpoint in Ethiopian federal-
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40 regional relations in recent years. The country's two largest states – Oromia and
41
42 Amhara – erupted in protest during 2015 and 2016 with thousands demonstrating
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44 against, *inter alia*, perceived political and economic marginalization, human rights
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46 abuses by the federal military and police, federal encroachment into regional affairs
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51 ²³ Tobias Hagmann, 'Beyond clannishness and colonialism: Understanding political disorder in
52 Ethiopia's Somali region, 1991-2004', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 43, 4 (2005), pp. 509-536, p.
53 522.

54 ²⁴ Tobias Hagmann, *Talking peace in the Ogaden: The search for an end to conflict in the Somali*
55 *Regional State in Ethiopia* (Rift Valley Institute, Nairobi, 2014), p. 35.

56 ²⁵ Addis Standard, 'Talks between federal and Somali Region authorities underway after weekend
57 violence leaves trail of casualties, destruction', 6 August 2018, < <https://addisstandard.com/news-talks-between-federal-and-somali-region-authorities-underway-after-weekend-violence-leaves-trail-of-causalities-destruction> > (5 October 2018).

58 ²⁶Harun Maruf Twitter page, see < <https://twitter.com/HarunMaruf/status/1025543749932396544> > (9
59 August 2018) and < <https://twitter.com/HarunMaruf/status/1025661142595719169> > (5 October 2018).
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3 and the perceived seizure of Amhara or Oromo territories by another state, or the
4 federal government itself. The government's heavy-handed response, which included
5 police shooting protestors dead and arresting thousands as well as the declaration of
6 two states of emergency, not only failed to quell the unrest, but vindicated the
7 arguments of those protesting.²⁷

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9
10 While these and later protests across the two regions have come to encompass
11 broader political and economic concerns, their origins are firmly located within
12 identity politics and ethno-nationalist territorial grievances against Addis Ababa.²⁸
13 The Oromia protests began initially in response to the so-called 'Addis Ababa master
14 plan', a federal developmental initiative announced in 2014 which aimed to expand
15 the Ethiopian capital into Oromia territory.²⁹ Protests in Amhara were based in similar
16 ethno-territorial sentiments: they followed the July 2016 arrest of Demeke Zewdu, a
17 leading member of the Welkait Identity and Self-Determination Committee (WISC),
18 an Amhara organization opposed to the 1995 allocation of the Welkait Tegede region
19 to Tigray Region. The arrest of Demeke and, soon after, of activist Nigist Yirga
20 precipitated large-scale protests from Amhara communities who resented the federal
21 government's reluctance to engage in the Welkait Tegede issue.

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23
24 The Addis Ababa master plan was abandoned in January 2016, while Nigist and
25 Demeke were released in February 2018. The damage had, however, already been
26 done. The two issues – and the federal government's violent reaction to both – had
27 acted as catalysts in the two regions, mobilizing Oromo and Amhara communities in

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²⁷ Organizers of the Grand Oromia Rally, 'The Grand Oromia Rally for freedom, justice, voice and peace', 5 August 2016, < https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B_2O980GNog5dkRWbGNtVIFpQkU/view > (5 October 2018).

²⁸ Tom Lavers, 'Responding to land-based conflict in Ethiopia: The land rights of ethnic minorities under federalism', *African Affairs* 117, 468 (2018), pp. 462-484, p. 464.

²⁹ Endalk Chala, 'Violent clashes in Ethiopia over "master plan" to expand Addis', *Guardian*, 11 December 2015, < <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/11/ethiopia-protests-master-plan-addis-ababa-students> > (5 October 2018) and 'Ethiopia scraps "master plan" after protests kill 140', *Guardian*, 14 January 2016, < <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/14/ethiopia-addis-master-plan-abandoned> > (1 August 2018).

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3 defence of an ethno-territorial identity which has become an increasingly potent and
4 central driver of state-society relations in contemporary Ethiopia.³⁰ As Yonatan
5 Tesfaye Fessha notes, ‘the decision that each major ethnic group [in Ethiopia] should
6 be dominant in one and only subnational unit has elevated ethnic identity to a primary
7 political identity...doing so can radicalise ethnic allegiance, cause continuous tension
8 and puts [sic] a strain on inter-ethnic relations’.³¹ The state’s brutal crackdowns also,
9 however, led protest movements in Amhara and Oromo to increasingly associate their
10 struggles with each other’s. In Amhara region, for example, slogans such as ‘we are
11 all Oromos’ and ‘the blood flowing in Oromia is our blood too’ became progressively
12 more commonplace in rallies and demonstrations, particularly in the aftermath of the
13 regime’s bloody response to a major protest in Gonder in July 2016.³²

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In Oromia and Amhara – as in the rest of Ethiopia – these processes of political mobilization have, since 1991, evolved in parallel with processes of subnational state-building by the OPDO and ANDM. However basic regional administrative structures may have been during the 1990s, the last two decades has seen, as discussed above, a comprehensive expansion and strengthening of regional political networks and administrative structures, placing OPDO and ANDM regional leaders between the federal level and ordinary citizens as the *de facto* defenders of Oromo and Amhara interests. This is not, of course, how the two parties have historically been viewed by their notional constituents; both have often been dismissed by commentators and citizens as puppets or proxies of the TPLF, their effective creator.³³

³⁰ Lavers, ‘Responding to land-based conflict’, pp. 482-483.

³¹ Yonatan Tesfaye Fessha, ‘The original sin of Ethiopian federalism’, *Ethnopolitics* 16, 3 (June 2017), pp. 232-245, pp. 232 and 243.

³² Awol Allo, ‘“The blood flowing in Oromia is our blood too”: Why Oromo-Amhara solidarity is the greatest threat to the Ethiopian government’, *African Arguments*, 27 September 2018, <<https://africanarguments.org/2016/09/27/the-blood-flowing-in-oromia-is-our-blood-too-why-oromo-amhara-solidarity-is-the-greatest-threat-to-the-ethiopian-government/>> (5 October 2018).

³³ Abebe, *The last post-Cold War socialist federation*, p. 168; Interview, former senior OPDO official, Addis Ababa, 17 July 2018, Addis Ababa.

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3 The 2015-2016 protests, however, presented the two parties with a dilemma
4 regarding how to proceed: continue to defend and implement the policies of the
5 federal government (of which they were core members), or present themselves as
6 more sympathetic to the protestors' grievances, even if this meant opening themselves
7 up to charges of hypocrisy. Both chose the latter route, with the OPDO in particular
8 dramatically re-framing itself as an internal critic of the federal government on issues
9 as diverse as federal working languages, distribution of wealth and federal
10 encroachment upon Oromo interests in Addis Ababa.³⁴

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21 Instrumental in this realignment of the OPDO with Oromo protest movements has
22 been Lemma Megersa, former speaker of Oromia's state assembly, who became an
23 early and outspoken opponent of the Addis Ababa master plan and federal military
24 involvement – and killing of civilians – within Oromia. Elected president of the
25 Oromia region by the OPDO in this context in October 2016, Lemma became a
26 leading contender for the premiership following Hailemariam's 2018 resignation.
27 Lacking a seat in parliament, however, Lemma was technically disqualified from
28 being nominated for this post. Consequently, a week after Hailemariam's
29 announcement, the OPDO's Central Committee voted for Lemma to take the post of
30 deputy chair and to elevate the head of the OPDO Secretariat to the chair, to ensure
31 that there was a viable OPDO candidate for prime minister. The OPDO Secretariat
32 chief, an enthusiastic member of what had become known in the Ethiopian press by
33 that point as 'Team Lemma', was Abiy Ahmed.

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51 The ANDM leadership has been less forthright – at least until recently³⁵, and
52 indeed has historically been viewed as a more reliable TPLF ally, siding with Meles

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³⁴ Tsegaye R Arrarssa, 'The Lemma Mergessa moment and the Oromo dilemma: Between resistance and governing', Addis Standard, 10 January 2018, < <http://addisstandard.com/opinion-the-lemma-megerssa-moment-and-the-oromo-dilemma-between-resistance-and-governing> > (5 October 2018).

³⁵ *Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 'Purge underway among the Amhara', Issue 1480, 31 August 2018.

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3 after members of his own party turned against him in 2001 (see below).³⁶ A critical
4 development since the start of the protests has nonetheless been the emergence of a *de*
5 *facto* alliance between ANDM and OPDO ruling elite.³⁷ This has been demonstrated
6 in a range of symbolic moves including both parties' MPs boycotting parliament –
7 robbing it of a *quorum* – in December 2017.³⁸ Both also renamed their organisations
8 simultaneously in September 2018, adopting names clearly intended to suggest
9 mutual sympathies and shared visions, with the OPDO becoming the Oromo
10 Democratic Party and the ANDM becoming the Amhara Democratic Party.

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12 It is in the March 2018 election of Abiy Ahmed to the EPRDF chairmanship (and
13 thus the Ethiopian premiership) where the alliance has proven to be most significant
14 and most indicative of a more profound realignment in Ethiopian politics. At the start
15 of the March EPRDF Executive Committee meeting, TPLF cadres had hoped for an
16 ANDM-OPDO-SEPDM contest for the leadership in which the more reliable ANDM
17 would triumph; only three of the four coalition party chairs can go forward to the final
18 ballot to prevent a deadlock. The TPLF therefore nominated ANDM chairman, and
19 EPRDF deputy, Demeke Mekonnen for the chairmanship. Demeke, however,
20 unexpectedly declined the nomination, saying that he preferred to retain the deputy
21 position. The ANDM then nominated TPLF chair Debretsion Gebremichael, ensuring
22 that the selection would be between the OPDO, TPLF and SEPDM leaders. Abiy's
23 victory – secured with 108 votes (compared with Debretsion's two and SEPDM chair
24 Shiferaw Shigute's 58) – was not in doubt once it became clear that the ANDM would

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³⁶ Medhane Tedasse and John Young, 'TPLF: Reform or decline?', *Review of African Political Economy* 30, 97 (2003), pp. 389-403, pp. 390 and 402.

³⁷ Recent criticisms of ANDM leaders by Abiy – including in a September 2018 EPRDF Executive meeting – would suggest that this alliance has not been further consolidated since Abiy's election as EPRDF chair. Personal interview, EPRDF Politburo member, Mekelle, 16 September 2018.

³⁸ Mary Harper, 'Ethiopian MPs' boycott over ethnic unrest', BBC World Service Africa, 21 December 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-africa-42420474?ns_mchannel=social&ns_source=twitter&ns_campaign=bbc_live&ns_linkname=5a3bae44e4b0e9a433c1edab%26Ethiopian%20MPs%27%20boycott%20over%20ethnic%20unrest%26&ns_fee=0#post_5a3bae44e4b0e9a433c1edab > (5 October 2018).

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3 not be fielding a candidate.³⁹ TPLF members of the Executive Committee reportedly
4 understood Demeke's decision to be a calculated result of 'conspiring' between the
5
6 OPDO and ANDM.⁴⁰
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12 *Whither the TPLF? Crisis and critique in a post-liberation movement*
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15 Ultimately, however, the TPLF's position going into the Executive Committee was
16 far from coherent – an indication of the wider factionalism that has overtaken the
17 movement since Meles' death. Together with a prolonged period of self-critique and
18 growing concerns regarding its unpopularity in its Tigray heartland, these divisions
19 have significantly reduced the movement's influence within the ruling coalition and
20 allowed other member parties, notably the OPDO, to seize the wider initiative and to
21 paint the Tigrayan Front as the authors of Ethiopia's political crisis.
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31 This characterization of the TPLF as the long-time dominant power within the
32 Ethiopian government is certainly not without accuracy, particularly with regard to
33 the management of the country's vast economic parastatals and military-security
34 complex.⁴¹ It is important, however, to recognize the extent to which EPRDF
35 structures themselves – which assign a 25 percent voting share to each of the four
36 member parties – have served to curtail the influence of divided constituent
37 movements.
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47 A 2001 split within the TPLF, for example, imperilled Meles' hold on power and
48 the then prime minister survived only by negotiating – and, to some extent,
49 compelling – support from the ANDM, SEPDM and eventually the OPDO.⁴² Having
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56 ³⁹ Interview, EPRDF Politburo member, Mekelle, 20 July 2018.

57 ⁴⁰ Interview, EPRDF Politburo member, Mekelle, 20 July 2018.

58 ⁴¹ TPLF cadres argue this to be an external perception and prefer the language of 'contribution'
59 (Interviews with two former senior TPLF official, Mekelle, 19 July 2018 and Addis Ababa, 21 July
60 2018).

⁴² Medhane and Young, 'TPLF'.

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3 purged many TPLF cadres who opposed him, Meles held the movement together
4 during the next decade through a range of authoritarian and top-down ‘renewal’
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6 processes (see above). Following his death, however, the party quickly splintered
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8 between Meles loyalists (including many ‘old guard’ cadres notionally retired several
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10 years previously), a younger generation of technocrats based in Addis Ababa and
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12 party apparatchiks based in Mekelle, Tigray. As René Lefort has noted, these factions
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14 have since taken different positions on a range of core issues, including how best to
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16 respond to the protests, paralysing the TPLF.⁴³
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22 This points to a broader structural challenge the TPLF has long faced and which
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24 Meles largely kept in check between 2001 and 2012: its commitment to *gim gima*, a
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26 practice of collective, critical evaluation of individual and group practices developed
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28 during the liberation struggle and aimed at debating policies at length and holding
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30 cadres to account.⁴⁴ This attribute derives from the Front’s Marxist-Leninist origins
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32 and traditions of democratic centralism, and while many senior TPLF officials feel
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34 that periodic self-evaluations of movement progress ‘creates more strengths than
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36 not’⁴⁵, in reality such processes tend to solidify divisions within the Front and weaken
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38 its ability to act strategically. This is particularly the case within the EPRDF coalition,
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40 where the three other member parties are much less inclined to excoriate their records
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42 in semi-public fora in such a manner.
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47 During the EPRDF self-evaluation process that preceded Abiy’s election, for
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49 example, senior TPLF members reportedly assigned blame for many of Ethiopia’s
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51 core challenges to their own organization, while OPDO members conducted a much
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55 ⁴³ René Lefort, ‘Ethiopia’s crisis’, openDemocracy, 19 November 2016, <
56 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ren-lefort/ethiopia-s-crisis> > (1 August 2018).

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58 ⁴⁴ Young, *Peasant revolution in Ethiopia*, pp. 143-144. In the post-1991 era, *gim gima* has increasingly
59 been criticized for its use within the civil service to humiliate ‘those who promote [d] alternative
60 viewpoints’ to senior officials (Vaughan, ‘Revolutionary, democratic state-building’, p. 628).

⁴⁵ Interview with former senior TPLF official, Addis Ababa, 21 July 2018.

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3 less comprehensive review, focusing instead on consolidating their own position.⁴⁶
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5 Indeed some of Abiy's most pointed recent public criticisms of the EPRDF and
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7 TPLF's records were arguably made more forcefully first by TPLF cadres themselves.
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10 In a June 18, 2018 address to parliament, for example, Abiy implored spectators to
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12 'not say TPLF and the people of Tigray are one and the same, the people of Tigray
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14 still face a lack of good governance – there are many poor people there'.⁴⁷ Four years
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16 previously a number of TPLF elders had toured Tigray to assess local views of the
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18 Front's record in the state. Their respondents heavily criticized the Front's
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20 performance and the delegation's report back to the TPLF (much of which was made
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22 public) pulled far fewer punches than Abiy's words in parliament.⁴⁸
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27 Indeed, in explaining the TPLF's decline in influence in Addis Ababa in recent
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29 years one should not focus solely upon 'push factors'. The movement's declining
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31 reputation among Tigrayans themselves has perturbed many current and former party
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33 officials and led, particularly since Abiy's election, to a re-prioritization of Tigray by
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35 the Front. Indications of the latter include the April 2018 appointment of Getachew
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37 Reda, an influential minister under Hailemariam, to the post of deputy head of the
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39 TPLF Secretariat in Mekelle. TPLF chair Debretsion Gebremichael has also come to
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41 rhetorically position the party anew as the defender of Tigrayan identity, promoting a
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43 range of slogans aimed at the federal government in July 2018 rallies included 'stop
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45 targeting Tigrayans' and 'justice for Tigrayans'.⁴⁹
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52 *Abiy Ahmed: Painkiller, placebo or cure?*
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55 ⁴⁶ Interview, EPRDF Politburo member, Mekelle, 20 July 2018.

56 ⁴⁷ Abiy Ahmed speech to the Ethiopian Parliament, 18 June 2018, <
57 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJnC2aX4jP8&t=6119s>> (1 August 2018).

58 ⁴⁸ Personal interview, aide to senior TPLF cadre, Addis Ababa, 27 April 2015.

59 ⁴⁹ Dr. Debretsion Gebremicheal speech on Tigray People's Rally in Mekelle, 28 July 2018, <
60 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9iKRXw6UT0>> (1 August 2018). Author's own translations from Tigrinya.

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3 In a July 2018 interview, while reflecting on Ethiopia's political crisis, TPLF co-
4 founder Sebhat Nega argued that 'the national question is already solved in practice:
5 the Oromo and Amhara, you do not have one dominating over the other'.⁵⁰ From one
6 perspective this is true: the maturing of ethnic federalism has provided unprecedented
7 degrees of recognition and self-governance to many of Ethiopia's once-ignored
8 nationalities. Recent events nonetheless raise the question of the place of the 'federal'
9 within Ethiopian ethnic federalism. The medium- and longer-term dynamics
10 described in this Briefing have created a situation where political actors are best
11 served by mobilizing along ethno-territorial lines *against* federal structures and,
12 indeed, against other states.
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16 To date, Abiy Ahmed and his advisers have sought to walk this tightrope by
17 publicly defending the Ethiopian project, while also distancing themselves from the
18 TPLF and, to some extent, the wider EPRDF; 'we live as Ethiopia and as Ethiopians,
19 as we die', declared Abiy at his inauguration.⁵¹ His first few months in office have
20 also focused around conciliatory and much publicized visits to communities across
21 the country, where an Ethiopia of self-governing nationalities has been played-down
22 in favour of the more pan-Ethiopian and vague vision of *medemer* (Amharic for
23 summation, or addition), which Abiy defines as 'tender love instead of abject cruelty,
24 peace instead of conflict, love over hate, forgiveness over holding a grudge, pulling
25 instead of pushing'.⁵²
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29 It remains to be seen, however, how durable this approach will be, and how far it
30 embeds itself within Ethiopia's political fabric once Abiy's honeymoon has ended.
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32 The August 2018 crisis in Somali Regional State indicates perhaps the limited
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⁵⁰ Interview, Sebhat Nega, Mekelle, 19 July 2018.

⁵¹ Abiy Ahmed speech to the Ethiopian Parliament 2 April 2018, <
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ulc17714uh4>> (5 October 2018).

⁵² Abiy Ahmed speech to the Ethiopian Parliament, 18 June 2018, <
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJnC2aX4jP8&t=6119s>> (5 October 2018).

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3 practical purchase of *medemer* for resolving the more intractable governance
4 challenges that Ethiopia faces and provides support to the claims of some
5 commentators that Abiy represents only a ‘painkiller, not a cure’.⁵³ Moreover, Abiy
6 came to power by virtue of his role within the EPRDF and, particularly, the OPDO;
7 he remains vulnerable to changing dynamics within his party and the wider coalition,
8 which controls every seat in the Ethiopian parliament. A renewed TPLF or
9 recalibrated ‘Team Lemma’ could plausibly challenge his position through the party’s
10 internal structures in the coming months and years.
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21 Moreover, Abiy’s July 2018 call for multi-party democracy, which has been
22 accompanied by the release of political prisoners and legalization of long criminalized
23 opposition movements, holds its own challenges. For some, including Abiy’s
24 supporters, it represents an opportunity to free the premier’s emerging movement
25 from the organizational constraints of the OPDO/ODP and EPRDF, though even in
26 Oromia itself an independent Abiy movement would face serious competition from
27 the now decriminalized Oromo Liberation Front.⁵⁴ For others, particularly within the
28 TPLF, Abiy’s presidential, populist style is ‘at best, naïve’.⁵⁵ The wider concern,
29 though, relates to the growing gap between aspirational discourses at the top and
30 unresolved ethno-nationalist conflicts on the ground. As Wolde Tadesse, Jason
31 Mosley and Angela Raven-Roberts have noted in relation to continuing violence
32 around Oromia’s southern border with the Southern Nations, Nationalities and
33 Peoples’ Region (SNNPR), ‘[Abiy]’s and his party’s positioning as reformers have
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57 ⁵³ Hamza Mohamed, ‘Abiy Ahmed a “painkiller, not a cure” for Ethiopia’s problems’, Al-Jazeera, 5
58 July 2018, < <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/abiy-ahmed-pain-killer-cure-ethiopia-problems-180705073956209.html> > (5 October 2018).

59 ⁵⁴ Fick, ‘Ethiopia prime minister calls for multiparty democracy’.

60 ⁵⁵ Interview, EPRDF Politburo member, Mekelle, 20 July 2018.

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3 raised expectations...across the country'.⁵⁶ These expectations may well be difficult
4
5 for Ethiopian policy-makers to meet, particularly since core EPRDF coalition partners
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7 and associates, including SNNPR's SEPDM, are now struggling to redefine
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9 themselves and their relationships with the centre and the populace within a rapidly
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11 evolving and unpredictable political climate.
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56 Wolde Tadesse, Jason Mosley and Angela Raven-Roberts, 'Strains down south: Ethiopia's national reforms rouse local tensions', *African Arguments*, 19 June 2018, <
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58 [https://africanarguments.org/2018/06/19/strains-south-ethiopia-national-reforms-rouse-local-tensions-](https://africanarguments.org/2018/06/19/strains-south-ethiopia-national-reforms-rouse-local-tensions-snnpr/)
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60 [snnpr/](https://africanarguments.org/2018/06/19/strains-south-ethiopia-national-reforms-rouse-local-tensions-snnpr/) > (5 October 2018).