

Riots in Ethiopia over assassination of Oromi singer/activist Hachalu Hundessa

By Jean Shaoul
9 July 2020

At least 239 people have been killed in riots in the capital Addis Ababa and other Ethiopian towns and cities at the hands of the police or in inter-ethnic fighting. The police yesterday broke the death toll down to 215 civilians, nine police officers and five militia members. More than 3,500 arrests were reported.

Days of riots were triggered by the killing on June 29th by unknown assailants of the popular Oromian musician, activist, and former political prisoner, Hachalu Hundessa. One of the deadliest episodes since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in April 2018, promising to end authoritarian rule, highlights the highly unstable situation in a country lauded for the highest economic growth rate in Africa, averaging 10.5 percent a year between 2004 and 2018.

In Addis Ababa, cars and petrol stations were burnt, shops and businesses looted and vandalised and homes and banks robbed. At least 10 people were killed in angry clashes with the police and many more were injured. Similar clashes took place throughout Oromia, the largest of Ethiopia's nine ethnically based regions that has suffered persecution under previous governments drawn from non-Oromo groups.

In Harar, in the east of the country, demonstrators tore down a statue of royal prince Ras Makonnen Wolde Mikael, the father of Haile Selassie—the monarch and US ally who ruled Ethiopia until he was overthrown by a military coup in March 1974.

Abiy responded by deploying troops to put down the riots, shutting down the internet and arresting around 2,000 people. These included journalists accused of inciting violence and a leading opposition politician Jawar Mohammed, also an Oromo and former ally turned opponent of Abiy.

Hundessa has led protests against Abiy, who is also Oromian. Abiy was quick to offer his condolences, saying that the assassins' aim was not just to kill Hachalu, "but through him to kill Ethiopia." But few accepted his pose of sympathy as genuine.

Hachalu's assassination sparked solidarity protests among

Ethiopian diaspora communities in the US and the UK, where 100 demonstrators carrying the Oromo flag smashed the statue of Haile Selassie in a Wimbledon park in London.

Oromia saw a wave of protests from 2014 to 2017 over deteriorating social and economic conditions and anger over land seized from their long-time Oromo owners and handed over to overseas companies—often from the Gulf and China, for infrastructure and export-orientated agribusiness. Land that once produced food in a country synonymous with droughts, famine, and locust swarms, now produces flowers, coffee, palm oil, and other cash crops for European and Asian markets.

Abiy rose to prominence as a leader of the Oromo resistance movement, exploiting popular anger over this land grab and famously making use of Hachalu's political songs to help his campaigns.

On coming to power with the pledge of ending the despotism long associated with Ethiopian governments, he released tens of thousands of political prisoners and ended the internet blackout imposed by the previous government of Hailemariam Desalegn.

He lifted a ban on several political parties, some of which had been designated "terrorist" groups, paving the way for the leaders of the banned groups to return to Ethiopia. He also ended the 20-year long war with neighbouring Eritrea and sacked over 100 generals and other high officers, mostly from the Tigray ethnic group that had dominated the previous regime.

This sparked fierce opposition within the military, both from officers who resented the military's loss of political power and from those who viewed as an attack on the Tigray people, and led to last year's abortive coup. Viewed as collectively responsible for the crimes of the previous regime, hundreds of thousands of Tigray have been driven from their homes and are living in internally displaced people's camps due to racist violence since Abiy became prime minister.

Despite Abiy's promise to end ethnic discrimination,

ethnic violence has increased, with a growing danger of still bloodier ethnic violence. In addition to the attacks on the Tigray, nearly one million ethnic Gedeos have been forced to flee their homes in West Guji. In both cases, the attackers belong to Oromo militias.

The sale of land has also continued, under conditions where 80 percent of Ethiopia's 104 million people are dependent upon the land for their subsistence and at least 25 percent of the population ekes out an existence on less than \$2 a day.

Abiy's liberalisation of Ethiopia's labour laws and plans to sell state assets, including Ethiopian Airlines—Africa's largest and most profitable—telecoms, electricity and transportation, along with manufacturing, hotels and some agricultural sectors, to overseas companies, has secured Washington's approval. It has agreed to invest \$5 billion in Ethiopia through its International Development Finance Corporation, as well as greenlighting a \$2.9 billion International Monetary Fund programme, as part of the Trump administration's efforts to counter Chinese influence in the country.

But within Ethiopia itself, the euphoria that accompanied Abiy's rise to power has long since evaporated as the security forces continue to suppress armed groups and inter-communal violence in parts of the Amhara and Oromia regions with brutal force, including extrajudicial executions and torture.

According to a recent report by Amnesty International, the release of political prisoners and the plans for elections, now postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, has coincided with politicians stirring up ethnic and religious strife in a bid to mobilise support, sparking inter-communal violence and armed attacks in several regional states. The federal government has responded by setting up security command posts to coordinate the operations of the military, police, and local militia.

The report documents a series of alleged abuses in Oromia, where security forces are waging a campaign against the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), the breakaway armed wing of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)—an opposition party that pursued military struggle before its return to Ethiopia to pursue a peaceful agenda in 2018. According to the report, security forces have detained at least 10,000 people suspected of supporting or working for the OLA in rounds of mass detention, starting in January 2019.

As the coronavirus spread internationally, and with just 22 ventilators dedicated to treating severe cases in the entire country, Abiy's government decided it could not afford a lockdown and instead relied on public messaging. It did not immediately stop direct flights from China, but imposed

temperature checks at Addis's international airport. The authorities claim the first case came from Japan, with others coming later, mainly from Europe.

Arkebe Oqubay, a senior minister and Abiy's special adviser, said, "This is not a disease you fight by ventilators or intensive care units," adding, "90 percent of the solution is hand washing and social distancing. The only way we can play and win is if we focus on prevention."

Abiy then declared a state of emergency and suspended the elections that were scheduled for August and part of his pledge to bring democracy to the country. He cited the coronavirus pandemic as the reason without setting a new date for elections. Abiy had been expected to face strong opposition from many ethnically based parties.

While Ethiopia has avoided the worst of the pandemic, having officially recorded around 8,500 cases and, depending on sources, a handful of deaths, the economic consequences have been dire. Its horticulture and agricultural sectors have been decimated, largely because of the precipitous fall in the number of international flights on which its exports depend. Income from tourism and remittances from Ethiopians working in the Middle East have collapsed.

Abiy has sought to deflect tensions outwards, focusing on the dispute with Egypt and Sudan over the \$4.8 billion Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Africa's largest dam on the Blue Nile, GERD provides 80 percent of the waters of the river Nile on which the two downstream countries depend.

Ethiopia has thus far rejected an agreement and concessions to resolve Egypt and Sudan's fears over the adequacy of their water supply. Next month, Ethiopia is to start storing water in the vast reservoir, as the prelude to generating 6,000 megawatts of electricity to supply Ethiopia and the wider region.

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