



# Unrest in Ethiopia: *plus ça change?*

by Erwin van Veen

Popular discontent with the rule of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) became highly visible during protracted, large-scale protests in the country throughout 2016. This matters domestically, as well as internationally because Ethiopia is a major regional power and plays a significant peacekeeping role in the Horn of Africa. It also hosts about 820,000 refugees, mostly from South Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia – of the latter two countries, respectively 59,512 and 19,701 people made their way to Europe in 2015/2016. While the EPRDF's political response to the protests should be cautiously welcomed, so far it represents change *within* – not *of* – the parameters of how the country is run. The centralised and developmental-patrimonial character of rule in Ethiopia suggests that far-reaching political change is unlikely as long as the EPRDF remains united.

## The protests

The protests erupted locally in Oromia state in response to the further official expansion of Addis Ababa city into the land surrounding it, which is farmed by the local Oromo population. The accumulation of grievances centred on past expansions (which did not adequately compensate the Oromo), an absence of consultative procedures and local abuses of power reached a boiling point in November 2015. A vicious cycle of protests and repression subsequently took hold for over a year.

Concentrated in Amhara and Oromia, the protests that rocked the country are estimated to have resulted in about 3,000 deaths and 23,000 arrests (many have

since been released). Despite the fact that initial protests were forcefully repressed, it took the authorities several months to re-establish control, only to see protests and violence flare up several times again. As part of its containment strategy, the government cut off the internet, prohibited the diplomatic corps from travelling outside the Greater Addis Ababa area, stopped the *Addis Standard* (a government-critical newspaper) from publishing and declared a state of emergency that was renewed on 25 March 2017, although some provisions had been relaxed prior to this extension.

At the end of the day, the EPRDF made a number of concessions. First, a number of local leaders throughout the country were replaced to address local perceptions of, and experiences with, corruption and poor administration. Second, Ethiopia's Prime Minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, promised to reform the electoral law to make it easier for legal opposition parties to enter parliament. Third, a new national cabinet was presented in November 2016 that reflected a more balanced composition of the main EPRDF parties and their allies. It also, however, meant that the EPRDF maintained full government control. Finally, the EPRDF promised 'deep reforms', but their scope and content remain unclear. (For now, they seem largely rhetorical).

The EPRDF also engaged in a dialogue with over 20 established opposition parties. While several meetings took place, a lack of clarity – or agreement – about modalities and scope suggests that its meaningfulness is yet to be established. Moreover, the

government has neither committed to addressing Tigrayan dominance of top-level command posts in the security forces, nor to conducting a transparent public inquiry into the operations of Ethiopia's security forces during the protests.

On balance, it is clear that the EPRDF has kept firm control of both the government and its security forces, while proposing several changes that are probably largely symbolic, and others that could acquire more meaning. None of this should come as a surprise. To gauge the significance of the concessions, a closer examination of the protests is needed in the context of general transitions from authoritarian rule.

Arguably, the protests had at least three important characteristics: they were largely spontaneous, spread like wildfire and behaved like a waterbed – press down on one part and another part comes up. The spontaneity of the protests indicates that they were largely uncoordinated. This is hardly surprising: civil society, the media and the legal opposition parties are tightly controlled in Ethiopia and would struggle to organise civic unrest at the best of times, let alone during a security clampdown with the internet disabled. Also, the protests were not significantly connected with either the Oromo Liberation Front or the Ogaden National Liberation Front – both armed opposition groups. Claims by international analysts that peaceful protests were giving way to growing armed insurrection need to be treated with caution. The protests were not necessarily peaceful to start with, and the government rendered both of the aforementioned armed groups ineffective some years ago.

But the protests did prove to be contagious. Instead of indicating co-ordination, however, this illustrated instead the extent of dissatisfaction with EPRDF rule. While such dissatisfaction initially focused on local matters, discourse analysis suggests that it gradually shifted towards critiques of central rule. It is likely that the extent of dissatisfaction, once it became apparent, combined with this shift in focus increased the level of repression. The EPRDF has been there before: expecting an easy electoral victory in 2005, it was thrown by the extent of the votes cast for opposition parties and reacted to the result in a similar manner.

## The concessions

Nevertheless, EPRDF rule was never in danger during the protests. The coalition held, by and large, firm. Literature on transitions from autocracy to democracy suggests that dramatic political change is unlikely when there are no significant dissenting factions within the ruling elite. In short, it could be argued that the pressure on the EPRDF for radical change in

the structure of rule and political competition was, although high, ultimately not significant enough.

If this is taken into account, the concessions that the government made can be viewed in a more positive light. For starters, changes in local leadership suggests that the government is not immune to public pressure. Both the 'People's Forum' that the prime minister has been holding for some time now (senior level consultations between government officials and sector leaders in areas like transport and health) and the new, incipient political dialogue, point in the same direction: cautious conversation with carefully selected audiences, possibly followed by modest changes. These changes do not alter the rules of political competition, but can tweak political direction and leadership. This cautious approach to limited change is also visible in the composition of the new cabinet. Finally, relaxing the electoral law would similarly be a step forward, as it may set small precedents for future change.

What further lessons the EPRDF leadership is drawing from the protests? In the positive case, it might conclude that paying more attention to local interests in its economic development strategy can deliver better results. The economic sphere is a relatively harmless place to experiment with when developing consultation processes. It would echo the model of countries like South Korea and Singapore and is compatible with continued political control in the short to medium term. This would also help to maintain the country's impressive growth rate of 8-10% of the past decade. More broadly, if the EPRDF leadership has accepted that it needs to deal with protests more peacefully, it might prevent a further battering of its international standing. Although Ethiopia's regional mediation and peacekeeping activities endow it with significant credit, as was illustrated by the muted international reaction to the suppression of the protests, a worsening international perception of the country nevertheless carries risks. Ethiopia is, for example, in the top 10 of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) aid recipients (and EU institutions are its fourth largest donor).

In short, the recent protests created modest, much-needed openings for dialogue and perhaps a measure of incremental liberalisation in a country that will likely remain a developmental autocracy for some time. These openings should now be seized and expanded – for the benefit of Ethiopia, regional stability, as well as the international community.

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