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# Abiy Ahmed's Reforms Have Unleashed Forces He Can No Longer Control

Ethiopia's prime minister oversaw the chaotic release of thousands of prisoners, including many ethnonationalist militants. His amnesty may now be coming back to haunt him.

By **Nizar Manek**

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ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia—Former comrades in arms described retired Brig. Gen. Asaminew Tsige, who was shot dead on June 24, as a mediocre soldier and a poor administrator. Asaminew was gunned down by government forces two days after allegedly masterminding the assassination of three senior officials of Ethiopia's Amhara state, including its president—events labeled part of “an orchestrated coup attempt” by the Ethiopian prime minister's office.

Asaminew had a long history in Ethiopian military circles—and in rebel movements. He was an ex-rebel fighter in the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement in the struggle that in 1991 felled the Derg, a Marxist junta that preceded Ethiopia's current ruling system. Asaminew met in 2009 with leaders of the banned opposition movement Ginbot 7 in Dubai, according to members of that movement. On April 24, 2009, the National Intelligence and Security Service and Federal Police Joint Anti-Terrorism Task Force arrested 35 people allegedly involved in plotting a coup against Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's government; most were members of the military or the police. Asaminew was one of them, and he was imprisoned for nearly a decade.

Last February, Asaminew emerged from prison, having allegedly faced solitary confinement and torture, among tens of thousands of prisoners released following a 12-point reform plan handed down by Ethiopia's ruling politburo in December 2017.

## **The effort to release and reintegrate former rebels who had once sought to overthrow the federal government was widely hailed as a bold reform effort. But it has also unleashed forces that Abiy may no longer be able to control.**

Under Abiy Ahmed, who became Ethiopia's new leader in April 2018, Asaminew was honorably retired with full pension rights—and he was appointed by Amhara state later that year to head its administration and security bureau. The effort to release and reintegrate former rebels who had once sought to overthrow the federal government was widely hailed as a bold reform effort. But as the high-profile June 22 killings have shown, that policy has also unleashed forces that Abiy may no longer be able to control.

Tremors have already rippled through the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), the federal army, whose manpower mirrors the ethnic makeup of the country's ruling coalition and has been increasingly involved in internal peacekeeping amid innumerable conflicts that have over the last year turned Ethiopia into the world's largest source for internally displaced persons associated with conflict.

Abiy has brokered an anarchic political opening, leading the four branches of the ethnically based ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)—Tigrayans, Oromos, Amharas, and ethnic groups from the south—to undertake a grandiose personnel restructuring and rebranding. Asaminew's own appointment to the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP) central committee in October 2018 was part of that trend.

According to security insiders, Asaminew relied on hardliners affiliated with the Amhara Democratic Forces Movement, who, after returning from Eritrea amid an historic peace deal between the two countries, agreed last November to merge with the ADP. One of his two deputies in the Amhara security bureau, Alehubel Amare, had fled to Eritrea and formed the ADFM with other military defectors after the alleged coup plot of 2009, and another, the retired Brigadier-General Tefera Mamo, had been imprisoned with Asaminew.

Abiy's intention was, in December 2018, to broker a merger between the ADP (which is part of the EPRDF) and the more radical National Movement of Amhara, or NAMA (which is not). This trend was replicated in Abiy's native region of Oromia with a planned merger between the Oromo Democratic

Front, an opposition movement returning from exile, with Abiy's own Oromo Democratic Party, which is part of the EPRDF.

Just as the communist nomenklatura in the former Soviet republics survived through adopting nationalist rhetoric when the Soviet Union began to face a crisis due to rising regional nationalism, the EPRDF's ADP absorbed existing undercurrents of radical Amhara ethnonationalism in an effort to refurbish its damaged credentials by appeasing hard-liners in advance of competitive elections intended for 2020.

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This ethnonationalist revival in a federal state has unleashed pre-Derg forces seeking to revive a world of feuding dynasties and provincial lords with their own armies competing for dominance based on who has the most weapons while seeking incorporation of so-called ancestral lands into Amhara state, including irredentist claims in other regional states and even in neighboring Sudan.

Prior to his death, Asaminew was overall commander of Amhara state's special police forces, police, and militia, over which he had direct influence; he did not have a command role in the ENDF. Such militias historically played a pivotal role in Ethiopia's internal security during the era of princes, between the 18th and 19th centuries, during which nobles had their own militias from their respective communities to defend their territory and security in the absence of any effective central authority.

They were also present during the Red Terror under the Derg, when so-called people's militias were established largely from the peasantry and empowered to act against so-called anti-revolutionary individuals and groups. In Amhara state, after the Eritrean-Ethiopian War of 1998-2000,

residents of North Gondar and the military and police faced attacks from insurgents linked with Eritrean-supported groups. As a result, militias were increasingly entrusted to operate at the grassroots level as local first responders to lawlessness.

The ADP selected Asaminew to its central committee as part of a pivot toward the incorporation of returning opposition forces. The party's decision to then crown Asaminew as the head of Amhara state's administration and security bureau—a role accountable to the regional president and supervising all regional security organs—was seen as a way of absorbing and neutralizing hard-liners. But it ended up fueling a bitter power struggle at the core of a fragmenting EPRDF and threatening the survival of the federal coalition's constituent branches.

Fractious forms of ethnonationalism are now emerging all across Ethiopia—a country of more than 80 ethnic groups—raising the perilous prospect of a Yugoslav-style breakup. Mutual animosity between regional states is contributing to a national crisis, with a race to strengthen regional security forces amid rising distrust of federal forces—similar to the distrust of the Serb-dominated Yugoslav National Army by Slovenes and Croats in the early 1990s, as they built up their own territorial defense forces.

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As regional nationalism grows, competing irredentist claims are on the rise. One of Amhara state's borders is with Tigray state. Amhara nationalists want to reclaim the districts of Wolkait and Raya, which they say were annexed to Tigray after the Tigrayan-led EPRDF came to power. Amhara nationalists also want part of Oromia, Al-Fashaga in Sudan, and the federal capital, Addis Ababa—and NAMA labels the EPRDF's Tigray People's Liberation Front (which governs Tigray) as a "terrorist group," according to Christian Tadele, a NAMA politburo member—riling neighboring Tigrayan nationalists.

As Asaminew built up Amhara militias and special forces, Tigrayans did the same. A week before June 22, a Tigrayan officer, now a fugitive sought by the federal government, told me there are about 1,000 retired Tigrayan officers looking to form an association. “Our worry is about identity. We don’t want to be cheated as in the 1800s,” he said.

Adding fuel to the fire, there have been ethnically based rounds of military promotions to balance the mid- to upper ranks of the federal military since 2012 and also under Abiy. As a consequence, there have been a corresponding number of ethnically based retirements, leaving many retired officers—some of them disgruntled—who are qualified and capable of training militias.

In the bitter climate of Ethiopia’s political opening, retired officers, including those involved in the alleged conspiracy of 2009, could be used to provide military training to exploitable militias—poor, largely untrained, and vulnerable to political influence, a first-response force meant to supplement, not substitute for, regional police. And unlike regional police, both retired officers and militia members can legally join political parties, including radical ethnonationalist groups.

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Undeterred by Amhara power brokers in the EPRDF, Asaminew sought the independence of regional security organs from the ADP’s party structures, showing the dangers of integrating released prisoners with radical backgrounds into the regional police. He also went after the Qemant, a group with a long-standing desire for self-administration and long punished by Amhara militias and regional security forces for their assertiveness. In April 2018, the Amhara regional administration proposed a Qemant special district. This decision was more generous than expected and met with the sharp displeasure of Amhara nationalists, who wanted to deny any self-administration to the Qemant.

Asaminew was repeatedly accused by the Qemant of masterminding or at least condoning their ethnic cleansing by Amhara irregular forces or local Amhara militias. He also called for Amharas to arm themselves and take their fate into their own hands while pressuring the regional government to occupy Wolkait—a corridor to Eritrea and Sudan that is disputed with Tigray state.

Amhara state's police commissioner reported that 190 new recruits into the regional security forces were suspected as accomplices to the June 22 killings in Bahir Dar, the regional capital. A televised account by survivors of the fatal evening said forces in unfamiliar military attire tried but failed to force a door open and then found another entry point, crossing paths with the three officials, shot as they attempted an escape.

Hours after the Bahir Dar killings, in Addis Ababa, a bodyguard shot the chief of staff of the ENDF, Gen. Seare Mekonnen, and a retired major general, Gezae Abera. Whether the guard, Corporal Mesafint Tigabu, acted on instructions or on his own remains a mystery, as does the extent and coherence of operational planning on the part of Asaminew and his alleged accomplices in the killings earlier in the evening.

Asaminew may have acted without careful planning. Days before June 22, internal evaluation proceedings known as *gimgema* befell Asaminew, insiders reported, with a plan to relieve him as head of Amhara state's administration and security bureau. The ADP has released an alleged June 22 audio recording of Asaminew outlining "measures taken against ADP leaders because they have sabotaged the people's demands."

Weeks prior to June 22, insiders reported Asaminew as having recruited a new batch of retired Amhara military officers into the regional special police—a rapid deployment force used when the regional police are confronted with matters beyond their capacity and called in before the federal forces. A proposal to establish permanent regional branch offices for the federal special police has been held up since February amid problems of conflicting mandates, competition, overlapping jurisdictions, and vexed disputes over the constitutional rights of regional states.

Taking advantage of these bottlenecks, insiders said Asaminew's recruitment drive included Amhara officers demobilized in connection with the alleged coup conspiracy of 2009 as well as some officers forced into retirement due to ethnic restructuring of the national army. With Asaminew in charge, the fox was effectively left to guard the hen house.

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That Asaminew sought to build up the regional special police by relying on ADFM hardliners returning from Eritrea, with recruits ostensibly more loyal to him than the regional government and the constitution, could have offended—and threatened—the regional president, prompting the internal evaluation proceedings that may have spurred Asaminew to action.

In the wake of the assassinations, the ADP may now seek to remove actual or potential allies of Asaminew from its central committee and party-state structures and figure out what weapons he circulated and where, and what training and instructions may have been provided by retired officers to militias. There have been at least 250 arrests without charge—a practice Abiy promised to do away with—including some of Asaminew's alleged co-conspirators of a decade ago, Amhara opposition leaders, and returning rebels from Eritrea absorbed into security structures under Asaminew.

The EPRDF and Abiy will now have to do some soul-searching about the sweeping prisoner releases from which Asaminew emerged. Indeed, Asaminew was released during a state of emergency that professed to protect the constitutional order at a delicate moment when Abiy's predecessor, Hailemariam Desalegn, had already tendered his resignation and before Abiy was designated his successor.

Pardons of former officers such as Asaminew, together with an amnesty law under Abiy that exonerated former defectors from the military and officers charged with breaching military discipline, sent conflicting signals about the rules and regulations of the ENDF concerning noninvolvement in politics. Meanwhile, Abiy convened a meeting of the ENDF top brass, urging officers involved in politics to resign; otherwise, he foresaw possible “chaos” amid states of “friction” that could lead to “proxy war.”

Prior to Abiy's rise to power as EPRDF chairman and prime minister, the EPRDF ostensibly functioned on the basis of consensus, with the 36-member EPRDF politburo—composed equally of its four ethnically based branches—guarding against majority-based decisions.

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But things were already changing under Hailemariam. A 17-day meeting of the politburo, of which Abiy is and was a member, began in December 2017, eventually agreeing to a 12-point reform program that focused on a “democratic opening” and “democratization” of institutions. In that meeting, Hailemariam later told me, he proposed the prisoner releases. He explained that “there are some who have not agreed upon this issue. That doesn't mean that we should follow what they say.”

“The majority has agreed upon it. As a prime minister, it is my responsibility,” Hailemariam added, indicating a significant shift in decision-making procedures. Asaminew, now dead, and another alleged accomplice, Tefera Mamo, now arrested, were released in February 2018 while Hailemariam continued as acting prime minister. Hailemariam's apparent shift signaled a trend toward the disregard of minority views under Abiy.

Inconsistent messages also rippled through the system when Abiy, as part of a push to consolidate control amid power struggles, arrested some ex-officials in key security organs while elevating others to serve as top securocrats and leaving political allies—who formerly served in high security roles meriting scrutiny—unscathed. Abiy, presiding over an absence of consensus in the EPRDF, has become little more than a placeholder transitional leader grasping at rhetoric of unity while relying on pragmatic and shifting alliances to stay in power.

The severe strain that Ethiopia's regional and grassroots security organs are now facing is rooted in myriad power struggles that have rippled out from the core of the ruling coalition during the political opening. Too little attention was paid to characters like Asaminew, who were licensed to act from expanding islands of power amid the breakdown of party structure and control. The violent events in June are a warning that Ethiopia's political opening, with elections and a national census slated for next year, could end in a bloodbath.



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Fortunately, the country hasn't reached that point yet. Asaminew failed despite having built up a certain constituency in Amhara state. If he sought a wider conspiracy to take power in the federal capital, it made little sense, barring delusion or naiveté. A successful regional power grab would have required firm support from at least part of the military in the region, the Western Command, following immediate negotiations with the federal government for recognition. The Western Command has nine divisions, each with a minimum of 4,000 to 5,000 soldiers. The head of the Western Command is not an ethnic Amhara, but from southern Ethiopia; a restructuring under Abiy has reduced six former military commands to four, each led by a general hailing from an ethnic group different from that of the region in which they are stationed.

Although Abiy's actions as Ethiopia's leader have shown some serious strategic errors, this particular measure may help guard against contagion of ethnic conflict into the federal military, preventing a nightmare scenario in which some ENDF Amhara officers would defect and join the sort of ethnonationalist rebellion that Asaminew appeared to be trying to provoke.

For now, the greater peril may lie in politicized elements of Asaminew's former forces fighting with the federal police and military, as the chain of command seeks to guard against fragmentation and a weakened EPRDF remains only nominally in charge of the organs of the state.

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