

# Deepening divisions

Countrywide ethnic tensions and severe ongoing violence will underpin Ethiopia's upcoming election.

**Jordan Anderson** and **Nizar Manek** consider the historical backdrop and the likely outcomes.

## Key points

- Incumbent Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's Prosperity Party is likely to win the election in June, although the ongoing conflict in the Tigray region and continuing Amhara-Oromo ethnic frictions will produce potential flashpoints.
- Localised surges in violence – such as in western and southern Oromia, between the Afar and Issa-Somali communities, and between Amhara and Oromo in the southern Amhara region – will likely disrupt voting.
- If Abiy wins the election and secures politically pliant regional administrations, he will be free to pursue a more ambitious agenda of changing Ethiopia's governance, including through constitutional reform.

Ethiopia's general election, originally scheduled for August 2020 but delayed amid the Covid-19 pandemic, is set for 5 June. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is looking to secure a mandate for his Prosperity Party (PP), formed in November 2019 out of the parties in Ethiopia's former ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), with the exception of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), with which he went to war in November 2020.

The conditions for holding the polls are worse than in 2020. Despite limited testing, by 20 April the Ministry of Health had recorded a cumulative total of almost 250,000 Covid-19 cases in a country with a population of more than 100 million. Separately, on 23 March Abiy told parliament that the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) was "in a major fight on

eight fronts" against armed groups in north and west Ethiopia.

These fronts include the conflict in the Tigray region, where forces working with the ENDF – Amhara special forces and militia, and Eritrean troops – are fighting forces aligned with the TPLF, the region's former ruling party that Abiy replaced at the end of November 2020 with PP affiliates as the transitional administration. The ENDF is also combating an insurgency by the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) in western and southern Oromia.

A former official with ties to the Prime Minister's Office told *Janes* in April that several

**Ethiopian army units patrol Mekelle in the Tigray region on 7 March 2021, after the city was captured in an operation against the Tigray People's Liberation Front.**

Eduardo Soteras/AFP via Getty Images: 1788955





of Abiy's aides had privately expressed regret about not having held an election and secured a mandate in 2020, saying that Abiy wanted to hold an election at all costs. Major international donors from the Development Assistance Group (DAG), comprising 30 bilateral and multilateral development agencies, reported to *Janes* in April that Abiy had indicated to the DAG a willingness to negotiate, including on holding a national dialogue and releasing political prisoners, but that he had made this conditional on first holding an election. According to those same sources, Abiy wanted to buy time and secure a five-year mandate.

### Amhara-Oromo divisions

Although the conflict in Tigray receives greater international media and diplomatic attention, the widening political gulf between Oromia and Amhara – visible within the PP – risks being potentially more destabilising for Ethiopia's power structures. From 2016 to 2018, both regions suffered widespread protests against the then TPLF-dominated government, and an alliance of ethnic Oromo and Amhara cadres within the then-ruling EPRDF helped to elevate Abiy to the premiership. However, this was due to the TPLF being a common enemy of both, although it has subsequently been relegated to a regional security threat.

Without the uniting foe of the TPLF, Oromo-Amhara rivalry for control of the federal government has returned. Oromos – concentrated in Oromia region, Ethiopia's most populous – constitute more than one-third of Ethiopia's population, whereas Amharas are a significant urban population throughout Ethiopia, including in Addis Ababa, and the majority in Amhara region. They dominated the national government for most of the 20th century.

Ethiopia's former Shewa and Wollo provinces are the focus of the most recent rupture between the Amhara and Oromia PP branches. They were divided between multiple regions, including Oromia and Amhara, after 1995 under the TPLF-led EPRDF, but with mixed populations and a zone within Amhara region with Oromo administrative autonomy. In March, Amhara security forces allegedly attacked ethnic Oromos, and more widely the OLA has been accused of repeatedly targeting ethnic Amharas living in Oromia.

The Oromia PP has accused the Amhara PP of 'war crimes', and a senior Amhara region security official claimed to *Janes* in April that some Oromia PP officials were supplying the OLA with ENDF weaponry. This claim, the veracity of which cannot be established,



Ethiopians protest in Washington DC on 6 April 2021 against the alleged genocide of ethnic Amharas in Ethiopia. Amhara and Oromo ethnic tensions threaten Ethiopia's fragile political and social stability.

demonstrates the distrust between factions within Abiy's own ostensibly centralised and 'unified' party. Speaking to *Janes* in April, the same official also accused the OLA of working with both ethnic Gumuz in fighting Amhara in the Metekel zone of Benishangul-Gumuz region and with the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF). The PP does not control areas of Oromia bordering Benishangul-Gumuz and a coalition between the OLA, Benishangul-Gumuz groups, and the SAF is possible.

During a PP central committee meeting in late December 2020, the Amhara members Yohannes Buayalew and Minister of Revenue Lake Ayalew accused Abiy of a failure of leadership. Also in the PP meeting, Oromo officials led an anti-Amhara charge after the Amhara de facto annexation of western Tigray and conflict with Benishangul-Gumuz over Metekel.

The Amhara and Oromia branches of the PP are escalating their differences amid appeals to local power bases, partly seeking to absorb would-be voters of ethno-nationalist opposition parties – the National Movement of Amhara (NAMA) in Amhara, and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) in Oromia. To date, Abiy – who heads the Oromia PP – has failed to arbitrate the intra-party conflict. Notably, the consolidation of Ethiopia's former governing coalition into a single PP entity has increased Abiy's power to change regional politics, as regional PP branches depend on Abiy's appointments.

A former confidant of Abiy suggested to *Janes*

that this enabled him to project overall power and work towards a post-election power structure to 'dilute' unruly aspects of the PP, portraying himself as above the fray. There is therefore a useful but unstable symbiosis between Abiy and the Amhara political establishment.

### Power balance

The TPLF's forced removal from Ethiopian politics has also emboldened Amhara's authorities, with Amhara regional security forces and militias playing a key role in military operations in Tigray. This has enabled Amhara forces to enact the de facto annexation of large areas of Tigray west and south of the Tekezé River, claimed by the Amhara regional government on historical and demographic grounds.

Amhara forces have also engaged in what US Secretary of State Antony Blinken described in March as "ethnic cleansing" to force out ethnic Tigrayans from these areas. Such gains have been made at the expense of the once-dominant TPLF, encouraging Amhara to pursue other irredentist territorial claims – in particular to Benishangul-Gumuz region's Metekel zone and Oromia's North Shewa zone – and even to seek Amhara control of Abiy's administration.

Conversely, the Oromia PP's political influence has been weakened by Abiy's means of controlling it. Numerous senior and influential Oromia figures whom Abiy previously worked with have been sidelined, most prominently former minister of defence and Oromia regional president Lemma Megersa, who was placed

under house arrest in August 2020. Replacements have been close to Abiy and without their own strong political followings.

A PP-linked political observer in Oromia told *Janes* in April that new recruits had not taken the place of casualties among the Oromia regional forces that had taken part in the early phase of the Tigray conflict, weakening the region's security influence compared with Amhara. However, Oromos dominate the top military ranks under commander-in-chief Abiy (see box). The power imbalance between the Amhara and Oromia regional administrations, and in particular the Oromo regional leadership as a proxy for Abiy, is likely acting as an obstacle to dispute resolution between the respective PP branches. However, Oromia's authorities have limited ability to oppose Amharas in the absence of an intervention by Abiy on their behalf, and in March Abiy responded unfavourably to remarks by an Oromo legislator accusing Amhara forces of attacks against Oromos.

With the Amhara PP radicalising in the face of a significant electoral challenge from the ethno-nationalist opposition, Abiy is unlikely to rein in Amhara's authorities before the polls. Oromia's regional president Shimelis Abdisa and others have attempted to rally Oromo nationalist support by suggesting that unnamed forces – implicitly Amhara – have conspired to take away ostensible and hard-fought Oromo freedoms.

### Election outcomes

The very likely outcome of the election is a PP majority, supported by some opposition parties allowed by Abiy to flourish as part of an ostensible political opening since 2018. Moreover, Abiy will almost certainly remain at the head of government and the PP. His popularity in his home state of Oromia has nevertheless been



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**Merera Gudina, the leader of Ethiopian opposition party the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), on 23 January 2018. Gudina told *Janes* in April that the OFC had complained about the credibility and independence of election personnel.**

severely dented by the imprisonment of leading opposition figures and activists with potential for pan-Oromo appeal and mobilisation, most prominently influential opposition figure and former media mogul Jawar Mohammed.

The core Oromo opposition parties – the OLF and OFC – are boycotting the election, leaving the PP largely unopposed on the ballot. Criticisms of Abiy across a spectrum of Oromo activists and opposition parties – whose following has been repeatedly demonstrated by large turnouts at rallies and demonstrations – show that there is a widespread grassroots perception that Abiy is pursuing a centralised form of governance at the expense of Oromia's autonomy

and interests. This centralisation is perceived to be weakening the heavily subservient Oromia PP and neutralising influential Oromo cadres and potential challengers.

The PP-linked political observer in Oromia told *Janes* in April about calls to disrupt the election, already manifested through boycotts of election registration, likely polling station arson, and killings of NEBE personnel. Facing conflict around Ethiopia, security forces will be challenged if there are sustained protests in Oromia around the election. OFC chair Merera Gudina told *Janes* in April that his party had complained to the NEBE about the credibility and independence of NEBE election personnel.

In Ethiopia's second most populous region, Amhara, the PP will face its sternest opposition challenge, particularly from the NAMA and Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA), both of which will also likely be strong competitors in Addis Ababa. In mid-April, the regional government supported protests that erupted in Amhara opposed to perceived neglect by Abiy to an unfolding 'Amhara genocide'. In Ethiopia's other regions (including the third most populous, the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region: SNNPR), the weakness of the opposition parties and the PP's strength will likely produce large PP majorities.

The Tigray region, where the September 2020 unilateral polls were won by the ruling TPLF, will not take part in the June election amid the conflict. PP-aligned transitional legislators will likely simply be appointed to represent this region in the federal parliament as an extension of Abiy's current approach. Similarly, surges in violence in particular trouble spots – such as in western and southern Oromia, between the Afar and Issa-Somali communities, and between Amhara and Oromo in southern Amhara region – could disrupt voting and lead to direct appointments of PP representatives. This risks further violence, depending on the ethnicities of those appointed. On 19 April, the Ministry of Defence established a Command Post of federal and regional security agencies in areas of Oromo-Amhara violence – North Shewa, South Wollo, and Oromia special zone – potentially stressing a largely Oromo and Amhara ENDF.

The June election will likely also lead to a weakening of the Amhara PP branch in terms of its share of the PP's overall parliamentary representation. With the PP likely to win large majorities of the seats elected by regions, the Amhara PP's likely loss of seats to the NAMA and EZEMA opposition parties will shrink the Amhara region's influence comparatively within the ruling party and parliament.

### National security forces

Oromo dominance of the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) leadership includes Chief of Staff Lt Gen Birhanu Jula Gelalcha, Air Force Commander Maj Gen Yilma Merdassa, Head of Special Forces Maj Gen Shuma Abdeta, and Head of the Republican Guard Brig Gen Birhanu Bekele. Other key Oromo national security appointees include Sisay Tola, a deputy director of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), and the Federal Police Commissioner-General Demelash Gebremichael.

Abiy formed the Republican Guard in 2018 after a grenade attack on a rally he attended and it is an increasingly prominent force within Ethiopia's military.

According to a *Janes* source, the primarily Oromo Republican Guard is rapidly becoming Ethiopia's most powerful military force, planning to expand its strength to 60,000 (compared with the Ethiopian military's approximately 140,000 active personnel, according to *Janes* data in November 2020). Some Amhara special forces may also be folded into the ENDF.

With the isolation and encampment of Tigrayan soldiers, Amhara nevertheless make up the ENDF's majority fighting force. Abiy has publicly complained that only limited numbers of Oromo youth have registered to join the military.



From the government's perspective, disruptive localised insecurity will not affect the holding of the election, even though the OLA and other non-participating armed groups are likely to attack polling stations and electoral commission staff. A PP-linked political observer in Oromia described to *Janes* in April the resulting "paradoxical situation", with threats to the electoral process needing security force intervention, but the presence of these forces likely to be perceived locally as undermining the election's validity.

### Post-election consolidation

The pre-election strength and autonomy of the Amhara region's authorities and security forces nevertheless suggest that Abiy may seek to establish his control over them after the election, in keeping with his consolidation of power since taking office in 2018, having marginalised some former allies from within the ruling system. However, the large numbers and senior positions of ethnic Amharas (below the very top ranks) in the Ethiopian state apparatus – including the security services – make it unfeasible for Abiy to seek their general exclusion from key positions. This is similar to how ethnic Tigrayans have been excluded, and perceptions of sidelining could embolden Amhara protests.

Consequently, Abiy will more likely seek to dilute the power of the Amhara political establishment, given varying power bases within it, including among Amhara opposition parties and EZEMA. A senior Ethiopian diplomat told *Janes* in April that Abiy wanted to establish Temesgen Tiruneh – president of the Amhara region until his appointment as Director of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) in November 2020 – as the leader and face of Amhara.

Meanwhile, Abiy's relationship with his Amhara deputy prime minister Demeke Mekonnen is strained. However, neither Abiy nor Demeke have popular local constituencies, and therefore their uncomfortable relationship is likely to continue at least until the election, even if Abiy plans ultimately to dismiss Demeke. Indeed, Abiy and Demeke have presented a cohesive front.

The Oromo senior military circle around Abiy could prove to be key to ensuring that he can rein in targeted Amhara leaders in the post-election period without facing an attempt to oust him by military officers sympathetic to the Amhara. A subsequent display of reconciliation between Abiy and Oromia – such as granting Afaan Oromoo status as a national working language alongside Amharic – would be likely, even as Abiy is alienated from his Oromo base.



People over 55 years of age receive Covid-19 vaccinations at the Kazanches Health Center in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on 14 April 2021. The pandemic will be a further strain on the holding of the election in June.

### Outlook

If Abiy wins the election and secures politically pliant regional administrations, he will be free to pursue a more ambitious agenda of changing Ethiopia's governance, likely beginning with a tightly controlled national dialogue or reconciliation process involving limited opposition groups in the name of national unity. Frictions will continue to undermine the relationship between the Oromia and Amhara factions of the PP.

Although the Amhara PP will likely be weakened in terms of parliamentary and cabinet representation, it will likely ally with NAMA to serve wider Amhara interests and counter perceived threats.

To increase his power, Abiy may seek constitutional changes, shifting Ethiopia away from the system of ethnic federalism enshrined in the 1995 constitution that enables ethnic self-administration in certain regions, towards a more geographically based federation with a stronger central government. Such changes would be more popular in Amhara region, Addis Ababa, and large multi-ethnic cities, but opposed elsewhere, including in Oromia and Tigray.

If he seeks such changes, Abiy is likely to need to provide incentives to the political elites of the SNNPR. A PP cadre who worked on a confidential government study seeking to gauge the validity of a multitude of claims to ethnically based statehood told *Janes* that such statehood claims were likely to resurface after the election,

indicating how constitutional amendments could further drive insurgencies and discontent with Abiy's government in Oromia and Tigray, perpetuating long-term regional instability.

Meanwhile, the Amhara and Oromia PP branches' antagonism and use of ethnically charged rhetoric during the election campaign – combined with the likelihood of some ethno-nationalist opposition parties entering parliament – will likely serve to reinforce armed activism beyond the election in a context of Amhara-Oromo tension, even if Abiy bears down on political leaders. Future Amhara or Oromo deaths, even if not perpetrated by the other group, will almost certainly continue to fuel widely believed narratives of ethnic hatred that will be perpetuated by political leaders for their own gain. ■

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