

**ETHIOPIA:  
RECENT TURMOIL IN THE SOMALI STATE REGION RISKS TO  
JEOPARDIZE THE SECURITY AND POLITICAL SITUATION AS  
ETHNIC TENSIONS SPREAD ACROSS THE COUNTRY**

*By Mattia Caniglia*

Ethiopia, Africa's second-most-populous country, has suffered military rule, civil war, and catastrophic famine over the past half century. Yet, in recent years it has emerged as a beacon of stability in the Horn of Africa enjoying one of the world's fastest economic growth and an increasing strategic importance in the region. However, starting from 2015, a surge in political turmoil rooted in an increasingly repressive ruling party and in the disenfranchisement of various ethnic groups threatened the country's progress.

**The swearing in of Abiy Ahmed as Ethiopia's Prime Minister on April 2, 2018, has been regarded as a watershed moment in the country's political development.** Abiy took power after his predecessor, Hailemariam Desalegn— who had been in office since 2012— unexpectedly left office. Hailemariam's time in office was marked by states of emergency and widespread protests.

**PM Abiy's brief tenure thus far has been marked by a dramatic shift in the country's rhetoric,** promises of unprecedented political and economic reforms, an increased tolerance for political dissidents and an historic peace deal with neighbouring Eritrea which has brought to an end a 2-decade-long conflict.

However, the change in leadership has not put a halt to political and ethnic violence in the country. Turmoil continued to agitate Ethiopia in the last 3 months with long-standing conflicts flaring and intercommunal violence on the rise especially in the Somali State region, where last August tensions exploded in a large-scale crisis that spilled over neighbouring Oromia.

While the situation in the region has recently improved, **intercommunal and political violence incidents now being reported between the Oromia and Somali regions but also from other areas of the country, suggests that security and political circumstances in Ethiopia might deteriorate** over deep-rooted historical and ethnic issues.

In order to analyse the current security and political situation, one need to understand/examine/trace back the recent turmoil that has agitated the country in the past months.

**THE CRISIS IN THE SOMALI STATE REGION**

**On August 4, the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) entered in the town of Jijjiga - the capital of the Somali State** – seizing key positions including the regional parliament, government offices and courts, and clashed with the local Liyu police. The intervention of the federal forces triggered reactions in the local population causing civil unrest and violent clashes between the population and the federal security forces. While the unrest appeared to be centred around Jijjiga, the violence spread in Dire Dawa and other areas of the Somali region, taking the connotations of an ethnic confrontation between the Oromo and Somali people.

In the following hours, reports gave accounts of violence spreading in the region with mobs attacking civilians and looting property, Ethiopian Orthodox churches being burned down and heavy fighting leaving an unknown number of civilian deaths and thousands displaced. In an attempt to contain the crisis, Ethiopian authorities decided to cut off the internet in the area.

The reports on the situation were and still are contradictory, however, according to some local source, the Liyu police - a regional paramilitary force – would have been involved in violent confrontations with the federal army and would have allegedly perpetrated abuses on the civilian population.

**On August 6, after talks between federal and Somali regional state authorities on the security situation in the wake of these events failed to produce results, the region's president Abdi Mohamoud Omar, commonly known as Abdi Illey, was forced to resign and was replaced by his finance minister Mr Ahmed Abdi Mohammed.** In the meantime, the US Embassy in Ethiopia released a travel alert reporting sporadic on-going unrest in various parts of Ethiopia's Somali region, therefore, confirming the deteriorating environment.

Following the nomination of the new region's president, federal forces arrested Abdi Illey and some top Somali State's military officials and transferred them to Addis Ababa. At this point, the Ethiopian federal Army was officially authorised to enter the Somali Regional State to restore order in cooperation with the Liyu police.

Again, on **August 8, local and international media reported that authorities had cut off the internet access in the eastern cities of Jijiga, Dire Dawa, and Harar following violence and simmering political tensions.** In doing so, Addis authorities adopted a strategy similar to the one put in place during the states of emergency in 2016 and 2017. Respectively, in 2016, the government had made posting updates about the then on-going protests on Facebook a crime, while in 2017 officials had blocked the internet ahead of scheduled national examinations fearing activists would leak the tests.

On August 11, adding to the already confused situation, the Ethiopian newspaper *The Reporter* published an article in which - citing unconfirmed sources - it claimed that oil companies engaged in oil exploration projects in the Somali State region have evacuated their staff to Addis Ababa. According to the article, alarmed by the political and security turmoil that occurred in the Somali Regional State, Poly GCL Petroleum Investments, a Chinese company engaged in oil and gas exploration and development projects in the Ogaden basin, and BGP Geoservices, another Chinese company, evacuated their key personnel from the area.

*The Reporter* was the only media to report about the alleged evacuation of oil companies' personnel and the news was denied by both the companies involved and the government.

**On August 12, in a surprising move, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) - a separatist rebel group fighting for self-determination for the Somali region - declared a unilateral ceasefire, officially ending its 27-years armed struggle for independence against the Ethiopian government.** ONLF said that the move was in consideration of "the call for peace by the current Ethiopian government leader PM Abiy Ahmed" and of the "positive steps" taken by Addis Ababa's new leadership.

On the same day, the central committee of the Ethiopian Somali People's Democratic Party – the governing party in the Somali State region - elected Ahmed Shide as its new leader to replace Abdi Illey, earlier forced to resign. Ahmed Shide previously served as Ethiopian Federal Government Communication Affairs Minister; a post for which he was directly chosen by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

Regardless of the developments towards a political stabilization of the situation, on August 13 international media continued to report ethnic violence with 40 Oromo people reportedly killed by security forces on the border between Oromia and the Somali State region. According to some sources, members of the Liyu paramilitary police would have carried out cross-border attacks in Oromia's East Hararghe district on August 12.

## HOW THE CRISIS STARTED

Different accounts have been given about the reasons which triggered the intervention of the federal military forces in the region and consequentially ignited the crisis.

According to some sources, **the initial intervention of the ENDF might have been related to the rumours that members of the Somali State regional parliament were planning to invoke article 39 of the Ethiopian Constitution, which allows self-determination including secession.** The alleged secessionist bid would have followed the breakdown of relations between the Federal Government of Ethiopia and the Somali regional President Abdi Illey caused by the news announced by the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed earlier on June. In fact, on June 28, the Ethiopian PM declared in a statement that the Somali regional authority would have been allocated only 5% of the revenues generated from oil and gas reserves recently discovered in the region. The Somali State

regional government opposed the decision and urged residents to take the streets to protest invoking secession.

However, other sources reported that **the crisis would have begun unfolding when, on August 1, armed members of the Liyu Police, operating under the auspices of the region's president Abdi Illey, tried to disrupt a meeting by some members of the regional state parliament, Somali elders and others, which was taking place in Dire Dawa**, a chartered city in eastern Ethiopia. Participants of the meeting were denouncing human rights abuses in the region and had called for the federal government to hold Abdi Illey to account for gross human rights abuses. The attempted attack by the Liyu Police, along with growing signs of anarchy from organized youth groups, would have forced the Dire Dawa city council to establish a military command post involving the city's and federal police as well as federal defence forces to safeguard the city and its environs. After talks between federal and Somali regional state authorities to discuss the security situation in the region in the wake of the events in Dire Dawa failed to produce results, on August 4, armed members of the federal defence forces began entering Jigjiga city.

## THE ROOTS OF THE CRISIS

Although reports of the early stages of the crisis are still contradictory, the 2 possible explanations reported above refer to **2 historical issues that could be considered among the main drivers behind this crisis: the ethnic tensions between Somali and Oromo people and bad governance in the Somali State and neighbouring Oromia region.**

To recall, the Somali State region, also known as Ogaden, is the second largest state by land mass in Ethiopia and it is rich in natural resources, especially natural gas. It is the least developed and most unstable region in Ethiopia and is home to the second largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, the Somalis, which have often come to a confrontation with the Oromo, a minority ethnic group within the Somali State (Ogaden).

Furthermore, the Somali State region borders on the west with the Oromo-ethnic-dominated Oromia region. Border areas between the 2 regions have often been a theatre for ethnic confrontations and disorders. **Ethnic tensions in the Somali State originally started with a reclamation of the region as part of 'Greater Somalia' done by the Somali government in the seventies. The claim triggered a bloody war fought between Somalia and Ethiopia between 1977 and 1978.**

The separatist Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) - a group fighting for self-determination for the Somali region - emerged from this conflict. When in 1991 the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) led by the Tigrean People's Liberation Army took power and created a new government in Addis Ababa, the fight between state forces and ONLF began, producing political and security turmoil for over 15 years and setting the roots for the current crisis.

**Ethnic issues are also entrenched into a difficult political history.** Since 1992, the government dominated by the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) ran the region as an occupied territory. In fact, the military and intelligence services controlled all aspects of the internal political dynamics of the Somali region. The TPLF military and intelligence services set up the Liyu police, a para-military force funded by western donors, as a proxy counter-insurgency force against the ONLF. The Liyu police - under the guise of fighting ONLF for terrorism - reportedly committed abuses against both the Somali and Oromo communities, fuelling ethnic tensions and social resentment. According to the various reports from Human Rights Watch, the federal forces would have also been responsible for various crimes against humanity and collaborated in shaping this second drive of the present impasse.

Adding to these elements, the violent outbreak appears to also be related to the long-standing administrative dispute on the contested border between Oromia and Somali State region. **This conflict, particularly vivid since 2017, would be a result of political dynamics, competition for power and control over contested border areas.** Several referenda have been held to determine which region border communities belong to, however, formal demarcation has never occurred, and the border remains an important regional symbol that has been used to mobilize violence in several occasions.

As a result of these tensions, a state of emergency and blockade have been imposed on the Ogaden region since 2007, with areas surrounding oil exploration sites conveniently among those most impacted. Citizens living in remote villages have been entirely displaced under the guise of fighting the ONLF. The area of Shilaabo where the Calub reserves are located remains one of the regions most severely impacted by mass displacement.

In recent years, also due to the decision of the Addis Ababa government to start oil and gas exploitation in the region, the situation further escalated with clashes along the Somalia State's border with the Oromia region, displacing tens of thousands of people and causing frequent violent outbreaks.

**The exploitation of the oil and gas reserves is another relevant drive behind this crisis as it has been an important element also in the conflict between the ONLF and the federal state.** The ONLF - which instigated ambushes and guerrilla-style raids against Ethiopian troops since its inception and has kidnapped foreign workers presumed to be agents or supporters of Ethiopia's government - had a particularly fierce dispute with the government over the presence of energy companies in the region. The position of the ONLF has always been to oppose the exploration of oil and gas in the area until and unless the region would become independent. Tensions over the issue reached a new high on April 24, 2007, when ONLF gunmen killed at least 74 people, including 65 Ethiopians and 9 Chinese oil workers, and kidnapped 7, on an oil field in Abole.

However, this is the only historical precedent of an attack on oil and gas facilities in Ogaden; although Somali people living in the region have consistently demonstrated their opposition to the extraction of natural resources deeming these resources to be the very cause behind their continued oppression and marginalization. The only actor in the region capable of representing a consistent threat to the sector was ONLF. However, after months of talks with the government and efforts to move the group struggle into the political domain, **on August 12 the ONLF has declared a unilateral ceasefire stopping all military and security operations in the Somali State region.**

Therefore, no indication of an imminent attack against oil and gas facilities in the region exists, but the latest developments appear to be related to the above-mentioned unsettled political issues and to unresolved ethnic tensions. In fact, **the majority of the violent episodes reported were actually related to clashes between the Oromo and the Somali population or about abuses committed by the Liyu police or the federal forces on Ethiopian civilians.**

#### CHANGES IN POLITICAL AND ETHNIC VIOLENCE

The recent escalation in violent events and the incidents in the Somali State seem to confirm that the rise to power of **Prime Minister Abiy may have helped to quell the crisis in Oromia and contributed to a more restrained security sector, but that Ethiopian politics remain contentious while violence has not disappeared but only changed its geography.**

Since PM Abiy has been sworn in, violent events appear to have moved away from the capital and western Oromia. One reason for Abiy's rise was the persistence of protests in the Oromia region, which had been severe enough to trigger the declaration of a state of emergency on a number of occasions (last time on February 18, 2018). Since Abiy has been in office, the protests in that region have petered out. According to The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), between October 2017 and April 2018, there were 264 violent events in Oromia, comprising 68% of all violent events in the country. Since April, there have been 199 events in Oromia, constituting 47% of events in the country - a decline of over 24%.

As incidents in western Oromia have lessened, activities increased dramatically in the Somali region. This build up is especially apparent near the border with Oromia. **Between October 2017 and April 2018, there were 5 events in Somali region; since Abiy has taken office, that number has risen to 70.** According to ACLED's data, much of this increase is driven by protests, which constitute 57% of events in the post-Abiy period in the Somali region. The most frequent type of incident in the Somali region since Abiy's nomination are confrontations between state forces and civilians (with 11 cases of this kind reported).

Furthermore, what is important to underline is that the instability related to the Liyu Police – increasingly associated with violent incidents taking place in bordering areas between the Somali State and Oromia region- alludes to the existence of **sub-regional power-brokers in Ethiopia that are seeking to consolidate their power and advance their own interests in this period of political flux.**

However, **discontent with the status quo appears to extend beyond regional security forces; on October 10, hundreds of (uniformed, but unarmed) Ethiopian soldiers marched to the Prime Minister's office to demand higher pay.** Though details about the event are sparse, it is clear that the march took PM Abiy's administration by surprise and that the government was threatened enough to shut down the internet for several hours.

In a similar way, in the last month, protests and political violence seem to have spread in other part of the countries including back in the capital city. Local media reported, on September 24, that at least 58 people were killed during an upsurge of ethnically-motivated violence, when Oromo people targeted ethnic minorities. Later on, between September 29 and 30, at least 44 people were killed during fighting between rival ethnic groups on the border between the central Oromia and western Benishangul-Gumuz regions. Meanwhile, clashes between the state forces and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) – a separatist organization that fought the central government to promote self-determination for the Oromo people - resumed in the Oromia and Southern regions as fissures appeared over disarmament issues in the recently-signed peace agreement.

#### A POLITICAL PROBLEM?

The current political scenario contributes in adding elements of concerns as the political transition that made Abiy Prime Minister is in many ways still ongoing. **The constituent parties of the ruling EPRDF appeared far from being united at their party congress in early October 2018.** Contrasts among member parties are growing especially between the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP), the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM), and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) as these ethno-regional parties are still attempting to position themselves favourably in the new era of Ethiopian politics – amid members of those parties competing for influence.

In addition to the geographic shift in violence and the intra-party, political competition, there has also been a shift in the type of groups fighting one another, towards increasingly inter-communal conflicts. According to ACLED's data, **there has been a marked rise in inter-communal violence since April 2018, concentrated largely in Oromia, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' (SNNP) Region, and Amhara.** Between April and October 2018, there were 43 violent interactions between communal militias (an increase of over 168%); over that time period, such intercommunal violence accounted for 10% of the overall number of violent events. Violent events between communal militias and civilians have also been on the rise since Abiy took office.

**The prevalence of this violence suggests that local flashpoints over access to resources and mobilization around ethnic lines are on the rise since Abiy's swearing in. Mobilization along ethnic lines during this period of political change may be a result of the Ethiopian government's system of ethno-federal regionalism; emphasizing ethnic identity may be a way for ethnic groups and ethno-regional politicians to signal their strength and jockey for influence.** Not only is this type of violence becoming more common, it is becoming more lethal. As per the statistics provided by ACLED, between October 2017 and April 2018, the average intercommunal battles resulted in 5 reported fatalities per event; while, since Abiy was sworn in, that average has risen to more than 8 reported fatalities per event.

#### A DIFFICULT PATH AHEAD

In conclusion, with regards to the Somali State region, Prime Minister Abiy's predecessors generated the current situation by relying on the regional president to pacify it and keep Islamist Al-Shabaab terrorists in neighbouring Somalia from entering Ethiopia. But since taking office, Abiy has put in place major reforms that have disrupted the power of the old Somali regional authorities. Now, with Abdi Illey gone and the ONLF neutralised, the new Ethiopian PM might have a chance to deliver these reforms and bring peace in the region if he manages to keep his party united and the central government authority strong. **Abiy – also thanks to the positive political momentum following the peace agreement with Eritrea - could be able to guide the new regional leadership through a path of ethnic reconciliation,** stopping a debilitating dynamic of abuses and violence. In this case – over the long-term – the risk of violent ethnic escalations in the region could diminish.

**However, at the regional level, rebuilding trust and addressing issues affecting Somalis will be a critical task for the Prime Minister particularly since he has not yet resolved the displacement happening in the region and since a possible vacuum of power in the Somali State could give more room for manoeuvre to Al Shabaab.**

Whether or not the Prime Minister succeed in such endeavour, the Somali region issue will in any case represent an important test for the political stability of the current government and for the security of the entire Ethiopian state.

Abiy has indeed overseen a period of rapid political reform in Ethiopia, however, as observed in this paper, **a widening disconnection is growing between the reform agenda promoted by the PM and developments at the regional level.**

As the data presented shown, since Abiy came to power there has been a surge in violent activities in the country that, although originally concentrated in the Somali State region, is now spreading to other areas.

Adding up to the historical/ethnic issues, the reason for this surge in violence lies also in the political situation. The EPRDF has grown increasingly divided since the 2012 death of Meles Zenawi, a powerful Prime Minister, known for forging consensus among the 4 parties that make up the governing coalition, with the alliance now showing alarming signs of weakness.

**The insecurity and political instability of the current transition period within the EPRDF has weakened the central government, catalysing competitions for power and influence that often manifested in violence. This power vacuum is the reason why regional power-brokers and politicians have seized the opportunity to leverage ethnic identities and sub-national armed groups to advance their position during this period of political flux, and in doing so further contributing to the deteriorating situation.**

Moreover, although Abiy has adopted a more democratic approach since his nomination, the pattern of violence observed suggests that leadership changes in the EPRDF have been insufficient to ensure an end to tensions throughout the country. This is why ethnic and political issues, if not addressed promptly, risk tipping Abiy's administration back to authoritarianism.

Finally, **Abiy's mandate will be made even more difficult in the years to come by the country's economic development trajectory. Ethiopia has a median age of 18 and an estimated 2 million people entering the work force each year and a growing large-scale job crisis, especially among its youth population.** Should the government fail in putting in place measures and policies that could guarantee a consistent economic growth and therefore prosperity, unemployment might become a trigger for unrest, inter-communal violence and, ethnic tensions.

The road ahead for Ethiopia is not an easy one, its security and political destiny appears to be deeply interlaced not only with ethnic-related issues but also with the economy, as ethnicity - over the short and medium terms - is likely to remain pronounced despite the country's surging GDP.