

ETHIOPIA'S BLOODY MAYHEM

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Africa, African Union (AU) and India

Ethiopian Oromo musician and song writer, Haacaaluu Hundeessaa, performs at Millennium Hall in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on July 15, 2018. | Photo Credit: [REUTERS](#)

The gruesome death of at least 80 protesters following the cold-blooded murder of Ethiopian political singer Haacaaluu Hundeessaa shows that tensions in Ethiopia continue to fester. The iconic musician, who belonged to the largest but highly marginalised Oromo ethnic community, was killed on June 29. Haacaaluu, a cultural icon, used to sing about the enduring nature of state-sponsored Oromo marginalisation.

Since 2015, there have been protests in Oromia, sparked by the decision to extend the administration of the capital into Oromia Region, the territory of the Oromos. They subsequently morphed into a broader resistance against the autocratic Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime and left hundreds of people dead.

The expression of dissent has become more normalised from 2018. Months after Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn tendered his resignation in February that year, the government lifted the state of emergency and eased its repressive measures. Thousands of political prisoners were released and bans against prominent government critics in the media and other sectors were lifted. The most significant concession was the EPRDF coalition's decision to appoint the new Prime Minister from the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (later called the Oromo Democratic Party), one of its constituents. The current incumbent, Abiy Ahmed, the 2019 Nobel Laureate for Peace, is the first Oromo to be appointed to the nation's highest office in years.

Comprising a third of the population, the Oromos are challenging the Tigrayans, who make up a mere 6% but continue to wield political power and influence disproportionate to their number. The Amharas, the second largest ethnic community, have rallied behind the Oromos, setting aside mutual differences, to demand greater political representation and better opportunities. The growing assertiveness of the two numerically largest groups has predictably provoked a backlash from the traditional power elites. Mr. Abiy's cabinet overhaul and the removal of the heads of the army and intelligence services soon after he assumed office were criticised as targeting the Tigrayans.

Meanwhile, commentators began to speculate whether the continued eruption of violence was an unfortunate corollary to the new dawn of freedom in 2018. Last November, over 70 people were killed when a prominent media mogul alleged that he was under threat of attack by the security forces. Amid this internecine conflict, Mr. Abiy is keen to promote his version of an inclusive Ethiopian national identity as distinct from the ethnicity-based model of federalism as per the 1995 constitution. To that end, he disbanded the EPRDF, which represented the four major ethnic communities, in November 2019 and launched the Prosperity Party, risking the alienation of not just the Tigrayans but also the Oromos who once backed his ascent. This bold move, and the substitution of the state-driven developmental approach with economic liberalisation, can bear fruit only through a strict enforcement of the rule of law.

Last week's deadly protests following Hundeessaa's murder symbolise the Oromo's fury that one of their own should have been cruelly removed from their midst when the traditional fault-lines in Ethiopian society are being redrawn. Mr. Abiy was awarded the Nobel Prize for brokering the historic 2018 peace agreement with neighbouring Eritrea, ending a two-decade military stand-off. His reputation for promoting reconciliation at home would have been tested next

month, but that general election has been postponed indefinitely in view of the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to reassure the citizens of Ethiopia, Mr. Abiy must shed the General's instincts in him that critics suspect. He must expeditiously bring to justice those behind the tragic shooting of Haacaaluu which has led to a bloody mayhem.

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