

Ethiopia's political crisis at the top

Eight years ago, cadres in Ethiopia's ruling coalition floated an idea of power-sharing — one individual serves as chairperson of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and another as Prime Minister.

Meles Zenawi, the EPRDF's epitome of centralised power and also the chairperson of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), rejected the idea. Getachew Reda, a member of the EPRDF and TPLF politburos, told this reporter that the coalition continues to believe that having two power structures would be "unworkable or unacceptable".

The leadership of the party and that of the government should remain merged, Mr. Reda said. The ruling coalition has had two leaders in its quarter-century history. After Zenawi died in office from an undisclosed illness in 2012, the EPRDF Council, a 180-member body drawn equally from the four constituent parties of the coalition, elected his deputy, Hailemariam Desalegn, as the new leader. Mr. Desalegn, a southerner, resigned last month amid an internal evaluation of his own party, the Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Movement, saying he faced "a very hectic period" in the six years since Zenawi's death.

Mr. Desalegn's Defence Minister, Siraj Fegessa, has now declared a state of emergency, Ethiopia's second in two years. It "forbids promoting political agendas" after Mr. Desalegn decided to release over 7,000 detainees from prison, including a major Opposition politician. Before he resigned, Mr. Desalegn placed three new Deputy Chiefs of Staff — newly created positions — under Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces Gen. Samora Younes, a Tigrayan, which could be interpreted as an effort to tame the Army.

During Mr. Desalegn's six-year rule, security deteriorated amid intensifying anti-government demonstrations and a devastating conflict along Oromia and Ethio-Somali regions' internal boundary, which has displaced over 9,00,000 people. In the run-up to the EPRDF's coming Party Congress, the coalition said a distrust among its four constituent parties has been growing, and blamed the "bloodshed" from the boundary conflict and threats posed by piled up political problems on its leadership.

New leader

Mr. Reda, the TPLF leader who was a special adviser to Mr. Desalegn, says the EPRDF constitution prohibits prior decisions by its four parties even on whether to propose a successor until individuals are proposed within the EPRDF Council, now a 175-member body.

De facto alliances between parties and individual Council members are surely being forged. Little is being openly disclosed but one name has been widely yearned for: Lemma Megersa, President of the Oromia region. Mr. Megerssa is a member of the EPRDF Council and he can be elected as the party's chairperson. But he is not a Member of Parliament and without a special byelection to allow him to wear both hats, he cannot become the Prime Minister. The Oromo People's Democratic Organisation, Mr. Megerssa's party, announced this week a restructuring of its leadership "to meet the fundamental need of the Oromo people". Abiy Ahmed, an MP and EPRDF politburo member, has been made the party's chairperson, switching roles with Mr. Megerssa, now the deputy leader.

Mr. Ahmed's elevation is an indication that he could be proposed for the new chairperson of the ruling coalition. Parliament could then anoint him as Prime Minister. All eyes are now on the EPRDF Council.

After Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn's resignation, the ruling coalition is looking for a successor amid 'growing distrust' between the regional constituents of the coalition

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