

PRIZE FOR PEACE: ON NOBEL FOR ETHIOPIA PM

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The Norwegian Nobel Committee's decision to award this year's Peace Prize to Abiy Ahmed, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, is both a recognition of his efforts for peace in East Africa and a reminder of the challenges ahead for him. Mr. Abiy, who became Prime Minister in April 2018 after his predecessor Hailemariam Desalegn resigned amid a political crisis and social unrest, has taken steps to politically stabilise the country and establish peace on its borders. The committee recognised in particular his "decisive initiative to resolve the border conflict with neighbouring Eritrea". Eritrea, which got independence from Ethiopia in 1991, has fought a disastrous border war during 1998-2000 with its big neighbour. It split thousands of families and killed about 80,000 people. In Eritrea, the dictatorship used the prolonged border conflict as a convenient excuse for conscription and repression of its critics, which led to a mass refugee outflow. Mr. Abiy, immediately after assuming office, took steps to resume the stalled peace process. He led Ethiopia's first state visit to Eritrea and met its President, Isaias Afwerki. Within days both countries declared the end of the border war.

Mr. Abiy, 43, had also initiated reforms at home, such as lifting the ban on opposition political parties, releasing political prisoners and jailed journalists and removing media curbs. Half of his Cabinet members are women and his government has welcomed the dissidents who were living in exile to return. More important, Mr. Abiy, himself hailing from the Oromo ethnic group, persuaded the Oromo Liberation Front to join a wide-ranging peace process with the government. But his biggest challenge is to calm ethnic tensions in his conflict-ridden country. Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic federation ruled by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front with a tight grip. Mr. Abiy has loosened this grip and called for a pan-Ethiopian identity and a freer economy and polity. But his reform agenda was challenged by ethno-nationalists both within and outside his party. His government remained a spectator when ethnic violence was unleashed in several parts of the country over the past year, and sub-nationalisms emerged stronger. The Oromia and Amhara regions remain tense. Ethnic Gedeos and Gujjs are in conflict in the south. Earlier this year, at least 5,22,000 Ethiopians were displaced by ethnic conflicts. With the country set to go to elections next year, many fear that violence could escalate. Mr. Abiy has to arrest this slide of Ethiopia into an inter-ethnic civil war. Being a Nobel peace prize winner, he should come up with a national action plan to end violence, ease ethnic tensions and resettle the thousands displaced by the violence. That should be as important for him as ending the war with Eritrea.

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