



The Fracturing of the Oromo and the Return of the Law and Order State in Ethiopia

By Rashid Abdi



The unrest in Oromia is complex. Long-festering grievances, discontent with Prime Minister Abiy's policies and a deepening fracturing of the Oromo, have combined to create a volatile situation. The escalating divisions, factionalism and contest for supremacy in Oromia packs enough destabilising power to upend PM Abiy's transition.

Urgent steps must be taken to mend the intra-Oromo rift, improve inter-ethnic relations, and put regional and national politics on a less combustible course.

A mystery killing

The killing of the singer and activist Hachalu Hundessa on 29 June triggered a bout of violence and protest, the worst since Abiy came to power in April 2018. A week of communal clashes in Addis Ababa, the capital, and in Oromia, Ethiopia's largest and most populous federal state, left close to 300 people dead. Protests engulfed much of Oromia and spread quickly to several cities with large Ethiopian diaspora communities in North America and Europe.

Businesses owned by non-Oromos were looted and shops torched. The government imposed a curfew, shut down the internet, rounded up dozens of opposition leaders and stepped up the brutal security crackdown in Oromia.

The deaths, mayhem and destruction were not inevitable; in hindsight, it is not too difficult to see how a measured, sensitive and less heavy-handed state response could have produced a different outcome.

By failing to institute an open and credible commission of inquiry into the death of Hachalu, coming out with inconsistent statements barely hours after the killings, and arresting opposition leaders, the government simply reinforced mistrust and inflamed sentiments.

The Ethiopian government has since lifted the internet ban and eased restrictions on movement. A semblance of normality is returning to many parts of Oromia. But tensions still remain high and ethnic relations are increasingly toxic.

Much of the current tense and ominous stand-off can be attributed to the series of missteps and knee-jerk responses by the federal authorities. But these factors, in of themselves, cannot explain the speed at which the situation deteriorated. Even without Hachalu's death and the violent aftermath, a showdown seemed inevitable. To understand why, an analysis of the wider context is necessary.

From accommodation to coercive containment

The crisis in Oromia is emblematic of the inherent tensions, contradictions, and disjuncture between two forms of politics - the "vernacularised" and the national.

Oromia offers a fascinating case study on how Abiy's posture and calculations changed over time; how the evolution from a policy of accommodation to one of coercive co-optation and containment is feeding the current unrest.

Prime Minister Abiy inherited a dysfunctional state that had run out of road and was desperate for a new direction. Years of rolling mass protests in Oromia and Amhara states had brought the nation to a political impasse.

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The EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front), once a strong and progressive party, had run out of steam and ideas; deeply riven by factionalism and power struggles. These divisions mirrored wider cleavages in society and the resurgence of competing ethno-nationalisms.

The economy was on the ropes, done in by a combination of frenetic growth, expensive infrastructure modernisation and unsustainable debt. The treasury barely had enough foreign reserves to cover a month's worth of exports.

The challenges before the new PM were both complex and difficult. Over and above the onerous task of consolidating power, stabilising the economy, reforming politics and putting the transition on a solid footing, Abiy had to grapple with the weight of public expectations.

Abiy's administration in the first few months in office was characterised by a conspicuously Oromo theme. The premier ditched the suit for the flowing white cotton Oromo outfit. He treated visiting dignitaries to lavish banquets at which Oromo chefs laid out the finest of traditional cuisines. He gave away horses to special state guests.

This overt display of Oromo pride was deliberate and went down well in Oromia. Beyond winning the hearts and minds of his people, the strategy had the potential to help him build a solid ethnic, regional support base, which is crucial in an ethnicised political system.

But to establish credibility and earn the trust of his Oromo ethnic group, the PM needed to do more. He released political prisoners, among them prominent Oromo leaders. He appointed a record number of Oromos to key posts in the cabinet, the army and the security services. He unbanned the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), reached out to exiled activists and facilitated their return home.

Consolidating Oromo support proved more complicated for the PM. Despite his popularity, he had to contend with a diverse array of factions and personalities with local and national political ambitions, and, in some instances, with a large following and influence.

Roots of Oromo nationalism and discontent

The Oromo are the single largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, and make up roughly two-fifths (about 40 million) of Ethiopia's total population of more than 100 million. They inhabit a vast geographical territory and are dispersed across much of south, central and western Ethiopia, as well as across the border in Kenya. Sub-families of the Oromo, such as the Boran, Gabra, Burji, Orma, live in the counties of Marsabit, Isiolo and Tana River.

However, this sheer demographic size did not translate into political and economic power. The Oromos' history has been one of marginalisation and exploitation.

The large-scale uprisings in Ethiopia since 2012, largely driven by the Oromo, and which eventually thrust PM Abiy into power, made the Oromo a potent political force that cannot be ignored.

The Oromo are not monolithic. They are the most internally-diverse of Ethiopia's ethnic groups, with sub-groups differentiated by significant linguistic, religious and cultural variations.

These factors in turn inflect political dynamics and ways in which communities respond to political pressures

Dispersal over vast territories, diversity and heterogeneity makes Oromo society uniquely pluralistic and the least insular of all the ethnicities found in Ethiopia. These traits have been a major source of strength but also weakness.

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Religious pluralism, historically manifested in the peaceful cohabitation between different faith systems (Islam, Christianity and the ancestral faith, Waqqeffana), makes Oromo society the least prone to religious bigotry and militancy. It also explains why hard line strains of Salafi Islam have found Oromia uncondusive to put down roots. This culture of tolerance is now under strain from evangelical proselytism and encroachment.

Divisive political co-optation tactics by state and rival political factions feed off these rich diversities within Oromo society and drive much of the tensions and fragmentations we are seeing today in Oromia.

No subject polarises Ethiopia today more than Oromo ethno-nationalism. The bloody violence and protests in the wake of Hachalu's killing have made the debate even more heated, emotive and divisive.

To understand the drivers of Oromo discontent and nationalism, to untangle the underlying trends and dynamics, and to plot the potential future trajectory, it is critical for policy makers to widen their analytical lens and develop deeper contextual insights into its specificity.

Complexity

Oromo nationalism, not unlike other nationalisms, is complex and dynamic. It is fed by multiple streams, taps into a reservoir of potent, accumulated grievances and draws energy and sustenance from a rich repository of cultural memory and aspiration. The latter point is important, not least, because there is a misperception it is primarily/wholly driven by politics.

In fact, the political manifestation of Oromo nationalism is fairly recent and comes off the back of decades of struggle for cultural freedoms. Key demands of the Oromo cultural revivalist movement included the right to accord Afaan Oromo the same official privileges as Amharic and the freedom to openly observe traditional rituals (such as *Irreecha*).

Pride in Oromo identity and the need to affirm it inspired generations of young people. Hachalu was, therefore, the spokesman of this new generation – a proud, unapologetic and self-confident Oromo. His popular song *Jirra* struck a chord because its lyrics encapsulated those aspirations in one simple and powerful line: *We are here!*

It is worth bearing in mind that all ethno-nationalisms are forms of myth-making, constructed around romanticised notions of the past and links with a self-defined ancestral homeland, and impelled by powerful emotions.

Narrative

The current debate about Oromo nationalism comes against the backdrop of an increasingly febrile and polarised political climate. The language of discourse, reflecting these tensions, is emotionally charged and adversarial; much of the discussions, invariably, are as simplistic as they are decontextualised. More disconcerting is the fact that public opinion is increasingly being shaped by misperception – a narrative of mutual “othering” and demonisation.

Current anti-Oromo sentiments are varied and cover a wide spectrum. The most dominant is a generalised fear of Oromo hegemony, sometimes laced with the perception that Oromos are prone to violence. This is especially the case among smaller ethnic groups that have borne the brunt of targeted violence.

The debate about the Oromo has assumed a reductionist dimension and is dominated by essentialism – a tendency to ascribe a category of problematic and negative “essences” to the ethnic group and its politics.

This strain of Oromophobia is now largely driven by an amorphous group of old elites, loosely described as *neftegna*. The term is controversial and contested. The animating force of the *neftegna* ideology is a set of exaggerated “patriotic” ideas that revolve around the imperative to preserve Ethiopia as a single, strong, centralised state. The Christian character of the Ethiopian state, though less accentuated, forms an essential part of the narrative repertoire.

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Oromo discontent in recent months has been inflamed by perception PM Abiy has bought into aspects of the *neftegna* narrative. Even if not true, the PM's rhetorical appropriation of *Ethiopiawinet* (Ethiopianness) and the strident airplay it is getting on state media is polarising. It is a divisive term; [a throwback to the imperial age](#) when it was instrumentalised to subjugate and control Oromos.

There is nothing exotic about Oromo nationalism and protest. The sense of alienation, disillusionment and grievances activists articulate have their roots in real material conditions. The primary engine feeds on long-festered socio-economic and political factors - massive unemployment, wealth and income disparities, elite-driven land grabs, corruption and youth aspiration.

Ethno-nationalism and violence

There is no doubt that violent ethno-nationalism constitutes Ethiopia's gravest threat in the short to medium term.

The last two years saw a resurgence of volatile strains of ethnic identity politics in Ethiopia that ratcheted up inter-communal tensions and stoked violence.

The most serious of these conflicts were in Oromia-Somali Regional State (SRS) borders, Oromia-Afar regional state borders, the Guji Oromo-Gedeo community border areas, the Amhara-Gumuz regional state borders, the Oromo-Benishangul Gumuz regional state borders, and the Oromo special zones in Amhara region. Hundreds were killed and the violence triggered waves of fresh displacements, one of the worst in the country's history, bringing the number of IDPs to over [3 million in early 2019](#).

The upsurge in violence is not surprising. While much of it could be attributed to the disruptive power of Abiy's speedy dismantling and opening up of the old state, subsequent state response played a significant role in compounding the crisis.

State-driven violence is a major contributor to localised violence in Oromia. Aggressive and hostile policing, mass arrest of activists, and indiscriminate and disproportionate use of lethal force to quell protests have all combined to create a combustible environment of siege that stokes counter-violence.

Oromo fracture

Oromia is today more deeply divided and unstable than it has ever been in decades. The region is now both an incubator (generating destabilising currents outward) and a barometre (to gauge the undercurrents of unresolved tensions in PM Abiy's transition).

That the worst fracturing of the Oromo is occurring in a state led by an Oromo prime minister is ironic, and, arguably, an indictment. But before delving into the causes, two general pointers are worth noting.

First, Oromo politics was, and is, never monolithic. The region's politics have always had a distinctly localised flavour, influenced mostly by a whole host of "structural" factors: strong sub-group

loyalties and identities, geography, and an inter-generational divide.

Second, a convergence of two powerful political homogenising trends – one driven by national imperatives, the other by a “vernacularised” politics of resistance – aggravates the situation.

The multiple splits in Oromia partly reflect old regional cleavages. The traditional regional rivalry (*Gaanduumma*) between Bale and Arsi Oromos (the latter predominantly Muslims) now appears more pronounced. The Bale-Arsi rivalry constitutes a potentially dangerous fissure, in large part because it is assuming religious dimensions and is likely to stoke sectarian tensions.

There is also an emerging three-way split, partly animated by traditional regional identity politics but also stoked by intra-elite contestation: the Wollaga (where Lemma Megersa is from); Shewa (the seat of the Oromia regional state), and Jimma (home region of PM Abiy).

Abiy-Jawar rivalry

The power struggle between Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Jawar Mohammed, an Oromo activist and founder of Oromia Media Network, has in the last one year moved to the centre of Oromia’s unsettled politics. The intensifying battle for supremacy between the two men is the single most potent wedge factor currently feeding intra-Oromo fragmentation.

PM Abiy and Jawar were not always adversaries. Jawar’s media outlets and influential social media presence were instrumental in fomenting and directing the popular protests that eventually catapulted Abiy to power. The two men fell out quickly after Jawar returned from exile in the United States, began building his own political base and turned into the premier’s most vocal critic.

Abiy and Jawar share a common interest. They have national leadership ambitions and a desire to consolidate Oromo support ahead of the next elections. A solid ethnic constituency is a great advantage in an ethnicised political system, but even more crucial in competitive politics if it translates into votes.

Abiy and Jawar’s leadership styles are not too dissimilar. Both men are populists, relish playing to the gallery, have a penchant for exaggerated rhetoric, and rely more on the sheer force of charisma to win supporters.

Jawar seems to enjoy significant advantage over Abiy in the contest for Oromo hearts and minds. His popularity has soared since he teamed up with Bekele Gerba, a widely respected Oromo politician, to lead the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC). Unlike the PM, he is on the ground and not distracted by juggling competing priorities. He is more adept at grassroots politics and his “vernacularised” brand of politics has huge traction with a broad cross-section of Oromos disenchanted with state policies. This is especially true of the youth movement, *Qeerroo*.

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More important, Jawar’s initiatives to repair Oromo divisions and to intervene in easing localised tensions and conflicts endeared him to many Oromos. This contrasted with Abiy’s top-down approach and co-optation strategies that catalysed divisions. The PM’s use of mass arrests and draconian security crackdowns to undermine Jawar’s support base have, so far, not only been unsuccessful, but have also generated widespread resentment.

Their differences have progressively widened in recent months, but whether they have solidified into an organic ideological and policy split is debatable.

Federalism

The ethnic federalism model in Ethiopia still remains hugely popular. Bigger ethnicities see it as a system that protects their interests and privileges; the smaller ones see it as the only viable route out of marginalisation.

Much of the disenchantment with the system in recent years is driven by perceptions that it had become hollowed out, conferred no meaningful autonomy, bred its own inequities and stoked inter-ethnic tensions and violence. Yet, the preference, it would seem, of many, is reform, not dismantlement.

PM Abiy's ambivalent and initial mild aversion to ethnic federalism seems to have hardened – rhetorically, at least – in the last one year. The PM is instinctively a centralist and the recent lurch into the traditional default narrative of his predecessors did not come as surprise. There was always an implicit anti-federalism tenor to his rhetoric and a bias for a centralised state.

But what alienates Oromos more than the PM's views on federalism is the strident patriotic messaging that now accompanies it – on the imperative for a united and strong law and order state. This type of discourse tends to be associated, rightly or wrongly, with the [“assimilationist nationalism”](#) of the past.

The prime minister's dissenting views on the issue of ethnic federalism seem not to have evolved much since 2018. In practice, his approach has shifted, somewhat. Whether due to electoral calculations, realism and political opportunism (understandable in an election year), he does appear more accommodating than many had expected.

The creation of Sidama Regional State, Ethiopia's 10th ethnic federal state, in late 2019 may lend credence to this tentative “softening”, even though it is worth pointing out that the process to establish the state has been in train for many years.

Abiy's anxiety about Jawar stems, partly, from awareness of his vulnerability on the ethnic federalism question. By being strong on federalism and making it a central plank of his national campaign, Jawar was in effect signaling intent to leverage his competitive advantage to the maximum.

Arrest

Jawar is loved and loathed in equal measure. Despite his huge popularity in Oromia, he has struggled to develop an appealing national profile and support base. His critics continue to exploit some of his past incendiary rhetoric and links with the *Qeerroo* to paint him as a narrow ethno-nationalist bigot wedded to violence.

His potential to grow into a national leader and his electoral prospects ought not to be discounted. He was beginning to develop links with opposition groups beyond Oromia. Crucially, his strong focus on federalism attracted national attention and galvanised important ethnic constituencies.

The arrest of Jawar on 30 June, and his trial, which is likely to last months (and possibly years if he is convicted), gives the Ethiopian prime minister the space and time, potentially, to reconfigure Oromo politics. This is a prospect almost certain to be complicated, if not likely to fail.

First, Jawar's popularity has not waned; if anything, it has increased. Second, the massive security clampdown and campaign of mass arrests of opposition activists and leaders has dented the PM and tilted Oromia into a less sympathetic political terrain.

OLF splits

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), its ambitions, and, increasingly, radical brand of politics, adds another volatile and complicated layer to the fractured politics and insecurity in Oromia. The ex-insurgency's combatants and commanders returned home in September 2018 under a general amnesty and negotiations facilitated by Eritrea. A botched integration process served as the initial spark that ignited open dissent against the regional and national government. This quickly morphed into a low-grade conflict, pitting regional troops supported by federal troops against armed factions of the OLF in late 2018.

The OLF's swift transition from an ally of the Abiy government to an adversary can be attributed to several factors. The amnesty deal negotiated in Asmara was vague and done in haste. Important issues were either overlooked or not properly addressed. As a result, trust broke down quickly. Disputes over the troop integration process and the latitude of political freedoms allowed to its the leadership soon became problematic wedge issues.

A series of failed talks, peace pacts and mediation led by deeply-riven traditional Abba Gadda councils between November 2018 and April 2019 tipped the stalemate into a full-blown crisis and put the ex-insurgency on a fatal collision course with the federal government.

The decision by the OLF leader, Daud Ibsa, to join other opposition politicians and the youth movement, *Qeerroo*, and coalesce around a common Pan-Oromo platform under the umbrella of the Oromo Federalist Congress (led by Jawar Mohamed and Bekele Gerba) was deemed especially threatening to both regional and national governments.

In response, Addis deployed heavy fire power to subdue the OLF dissidents. This made a bad situation worse, fomented the further breakup of the OLF into small competing splinter factions, made engagement and peaceful settlement difficult and compounded the overall security situation.

Regional spillover

There is a regional dimension to the crisis in Oromia. A protracted and serious conflict in Oromia could spill over into much of northern Kenya because Oromia's politics and conflict dynamics are closely intertwined with those of northern Kenya. The immediate risk is massive displacement and a new humanitarian crisis in the Kenyan districts of Moyale, Marsabit and Isiolo.

It is also likely that conflict fragmentation in Oromia could lead gradually to proliferation of armed criminal syndicates. There are already many armed smuggling syndicates operating on the border between Ethiopia and Kenya.

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Kenya worries in particular about the possibility of Oromia's serious rifts sowing divisions within sub-groups of its own large Boran population.

Recommendations

The crisis in Oromia is complex, serious, and multi-layered, and its causes and drivers are varied. Left to fester, it certainly will become intractable, result in large-scale violence and undo PM Abiy's wobbly transition.

The federal government, the Oromia regional administration, traditional authorities, political parties and civil society need to take concerted urgent action to defuse the crisis.

Below are some of the key areas where sensible and pragmatic policy interventions and change could make a big difference and mitigate risks:

1. **Put ethno-nationalisms on a benign course**

Oromo nationalism is inflamed and risks becoming virulent. It feeds off Oromia's mass disillusionment, acute grievances and multiple fracturing. But the single biggest aggravating factor risking to radicalise it and put it on a violent course is state response (a self-fulfilling prophecy). To mellow Oromo nationalism, the following steps are worth considering:

- A Pan-Oromo conference to de-escalate tensions, repair social cohesion, rebuild trust and address the roots of fragmentation;
- A follow-up inclusive national conference with representatives from all ethnicities to improve relations, foster dialogue, and end mutually hostile narratives, demonisation.

2. **Invest more in conflict resolution and peacebuilding**

Ethiopia's disappointing record in resolving and managing localised conflicts in Oromia highlights a number of crucial lessons. First, the state-driven, top-down conflict-resolution model is ineffective, and often conflict-inducing. It bureaucratises peacebuilding, diminishes local buy-in, sows social divisions, and imposes unsustainable settlements. Second, traditional councils of elders, when given sufficient autonomy and not co-opted by the state, are the most effective agencies with credibility to mediate and resolve conflicts. To improve outcomes, the federal government ought to:

- Reduce its role, allow influential grassroots groups to take lead in local peacebuilding initiatives, allocate resources to sustain them;
- Promote greater inclusivity in peace councils by encouraging credible elders, faith leaders to join;
- Establish a national conflict advisory to monitor local unrest, improve knowledge on conflict drivers and provide early warning to regional and national governments.

3. **End state violence and repression**

Prime Minister Abiy has turned the crisis in Oromia into a law and order problem. His pursuit of lethal force to suppress Oromo dissent, the draconian curbs on media freedom and free expression, internet shutdowns, and mass arrests have put the region and the whole country on a perilous course. Unless there is a fundamental shift in Abiy's current posture and renewed efforts to promote pluralism, inclusivity, civil liberties, and dialogue in Oromia, the situation will worsen. In concrete terms the government must:

- Free all political prisoners arrested recently;
 - Pull out troops from Oromia and end all military operations;
 - Stop aggressive and hostile policing, and invest more in training police on de-escalation techniques.
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