Stabilization of Ethiopia: Abiy, State, and Nation Building

Executive Summary

Ethiopia is yet to recover from the instability following unrest of since 2015 caused by Oromo-led protests against land grabbing, corruption, marginalization, unemployment and repression, and long-running ethno-nationalisms. Other factors of tension were the sudden resignation of Prime Minister, Desalegn in early 2018 and the resultant power vacuum that aggravated power struggles within the ruling coalition (EPRDF). The new Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, an ethnic Oromo, is expected to quell Oromo nationalism. This policy brief recommends de-ethnicization of politics, transformation of EPRDF coalition into a political party, institutional reforms, democratization, and de-securitization of politics. It also proposes development of economic and social programs that grow the economy, creation of jobs and remedying of the legacy of marginalization, political inclusion and plurality, capacity building of regional governments and promotion of the rule of law.

Background

The Ethiopia People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) as a coalition of parties replaced the military regime of Mengistu in 1991 through military rebellion (Kumsa, 2014). EPRDF is made up of Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) and Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM). The TPLF-dominated EPRDF then brought 'revolutionary democracy' to Ethiopia under Meles Zenawi since 1991. The coalition then led the country to ethno-federalism under the new constitution of 1995 that brought self-rule to Ethiopia's ethnicities as a way of promoting unity in diversity through shared rule (Kumsa, 2014).

However, the ruling coalition (especially the TPLF faction) gradually centralized power and control over State apparatus. The Tigrayans used this structure of power to control and dominate politics, economy, intelligence, and military apparatus which led to alienation and marginalization of other ethnic groups (van Veen, 2016). This exclusion would lead to internal (EPRDF) power struggles after Zenawi's death in 2012 and ethno-nationalism of alienated groups such as ethnic Oromo and Amhara who jointly account for over half of Ethiopia's over 100 million population (Kumsa, 2014).

The unrest peaked in 2005 following a disputed election. Protests were quashed and opposition politicians arrested. Repression

continued over the years until rising corruption, unemployment, repression, marginalization, and land grabbing (of ethnic Oromo land by government for Addis Ababa Master Plan), led to anti-government protests heightened from 2015 through 2017 (Maasho & Fick, 2018). These protests were led by the Oromo, then Amhara and eventually, countrywide. Counter-measures by government became repressive, fatal, and unavailing leading to the resignation of Prime Minister Desalegn in early 2018. Numbers of protesters, opposition politicians, political activists and journalists were arrested and jailed over the same period. This was the consequence of repressive laws such as the Charities and Societies Proclamation, Access to Information Proclamation, Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, state(s) of emergency and other national security laws (van Veen, 2016). His resignation created a power vacuum and struggle within EPRDF, and also piqued tension in Ethiopia as the country slid into instability amid relentless social unrest. A new Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, was chosen by the ruling coalition's council in March 2018. He comes into office to deal with the culture of ethnic politics, repression, Tigrayan domination, marginalization, corruption, and unemployment, besides the struggle for power within his own coalition.

Key Findings

Ethiopia's stability can be attained by addressing historical grievances, reforming institutions, democratization, economic growth and development, and inclusivity.

Democratization promotes political stability since transitions are stably managed by law and popular approval. Rule of law safeguards justice for all, political competition is fair, free, and open, and civil and political rights are protected. It also improves accountability, integrity, and reduces corruption (Feng, 1997).

Inclusion of marginalized groups politically, socially, and economically is also important to a country's stability. This can be done through promoting broader representation through multi-partyism (opposition politics), inclusive institutions, popular participation, inclusive economic and social programs, and cultural accommodation among other interventions. This is central to democratization as it is to political stability (Correra-Cabrera, 2013; Hanni, 2018; Dryzek, 1996).

Economic growth and development on the other hand also promotes political stability by addressing issues of equity, socio-economic needs, standards and cost of living and empowerment of the people (Paldam, 1998). Such issues may otherwise lead to protest and unrest if unattended to.

Institutional independence, stability and maturity also promotes political stability. It creates balance of power, prevents accumulation of total power, promotes public trust, and confidence in government, and stabilizes democratic transitions among other things (Cosmescu, 2016).

Political parties in a multiparty democracy play a crucial role in polity stability. Most importantly, they ensure accessibility of leadership (and power), champion voter goals and promote popular participation. They also form ideological communities, governance caucus, and social movements that draw cross-cutting following (Pomper, 1992; Joseph, 1984).

Conclusion

Ethiopia's stability hangs in a balance if prevailing circumstances are not managed judiciously. Largely, threats to Ethiopia's stability are ethnic competition, grievances against repression, economic and political exclusion, weak political institutions, and democratic deficit. The new Prime Minister has a unique opportunity of addressing the challenges through his radical progressiveness and political liberalism. Sustainable stability will depend on the impact his promised reforms will have on Ethiopian politics.

Recommendations

To stabilize Ethiopia, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has to address political, socio-economic grievances of the people of Ethiopia. To achieve these goals this, he needs to do the following:

- De-ethnicize Ethiopian politics to nationalistic politics that promote state and nation building by:

   i.   Transforming all political parties from ethnic-based parties to national parties guided by ideologies, values, and principles rather than ethno-nationalistic interests. Such parties will distribute leadership opportunities, representation and power on basis of equality, popular participation/vote, and merit.

   ii   Pass laws through legislation to require all political parties to have national membership, aspirations and goals, and to enforce laws on ethnic hate and fomenting.

   iii. Rationalize public service, social and economic programs, and federal revenue allocation to balance ethnic and regional inequalities (and address marginalization).

- Transform EPRDF from a coalition to a political party for democratic consolidation of party structures, procedures, and agenda. This will limit internal power struggles, guarantee equal rights to all its membership and bolster his policy agenda during legislation and budgetary appropriation.

- Facilitate democratization: open up political space for competitive politics, release political prisoners and compensate them. The freedom of the media should be restored as well as the fundamental rights and freedoms of Chapter 3. Democratization will guarantee constitutionalism, competitive politics, accountability and rule of law (will address corruption and impunity).

- De-securitize politics by repealing the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, Charities and Societies Proclamation, and Access to Information Proclamation and other laws that infringe on political and civil rights.

- Carry out institutional reforms in the judiciary and parliament to restore their independence. The same should be done to the military and police to secure their independence from executive

manipulation, as well as transform their security doctrine to reflect human security aspect. Electoral laws and agencies should also be improved to safeguard transparency, credibility, and fairness.

- Establish favorable economic policies (in keeping with Chapter 10 of the federal constitution) and programs that grow the economy, create jobs, promote economic development, and address historical economic marginalization.

- The capacity of regional governments should be enhanced and facilitated to play their legislative, judicial, security, governance, and developmental roles. More resources and power should be devolved for purposes of Chapter 52 of the federal constitution.

- Engage opposition, rebel groups and the diaspora community through dialogue, accommodation and opening up of mainstream political platforms of competition and participation.

Sources

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