

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

by GRAHAM PEEBLES

28.07.2020

The Volatile Path to Democracy in Ethiopia

Ancient ethnic divisions and long held grievances die hard. Ethiopia is made up of dozens of tribal/ethnic groups, divided into nine regional states. Oromia is the largest region (it includes the capital, Addis Ababa) and, with 34% of the population (c.40 million), the Oromo people make up the biggest single group.

On 29th June the popular Oromo singer/political activist Hachalu Hundesa was murdered in Addis Ababa, triggering protests, killings and violence. The UN Human Rights agency report that protests were ethnically driven, roads in parts of Oromia were blocked, “buildings vandalized and burnt.... gunfire and bomb explosions in Addis Ababa.” Official estimates say that 239 people died in the unrest.

The government’s heavy-handed reaction was to arrest almost 5,000 people including political activists, journalists and a leading critic of the government, Jawar Mohammed, and shut down the Internet (30th June). Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said that Hundessa had been killed by groups working to inflame ethnic tensions and trigger civil war, but gave no details; the Minister in Charge of Democratization, Zadig Abraha, accused “external forces opposed to democratic change of involvement in the violence,” again without details. In an interview with France24 he also denied widespread claims that the government was using the unrest as an excuse to crack down on the opposition and stifle dissent. It has nevertheless arrested key members of opposition parties, who they claim are linked to the violence.

At demonstrations in Paris by the Oromo diaspora on 11th July organizers claimed that Hundessa was murdered “on government orders”, because “he was Oromo.” The

government has since announced that they have arrested suspects in the murder of Hundessa.

Abiy is the first Oromo PM, and when he took office in 2018 the Oromo people rejoiced. Initial jubilation was short lived though; some within the community remain loyal, others are disappointed in his tenure – “we thought that Abiy Ahmed supported our cause because he is Oromo, but over the past year Ethiopia has become a dangerous country for us,” while some, including Jawar Mohammed, have gone further and are actively working to undermine his leadership and destabilize the government.

Stepping backwards?

For decades Ethiopia was ruled by a brutal regime that terrorized and suppressed large sections of the population. The ruling party outlawed political opposition, trampled on human rights, tortured, raped and murdered. Despised and widely feared, after four years of protests in which Hachalu Hundesa and his music played an important role, the EPRDF government (made up of parties from four regions but dominated by a group of Tigray men within the TPLF) collapsed in April 2018.

No elections were held and the EPRDF coalition stayed in office; Abiy Ahmed (a member of the previous administration) became Prime Minister and a fresh, gender-balanced cabinet was installed.

Acknowledging the atrocities of the previous regime and the deep-seated ethnic divisions in the country, in his inaugural speech Abiy pleaded: “I call on us all to forgive each other from our hearts. To close the chapters from yesterday, and to forge ahead to the next bright future through national consensus.” Restrictions on independent media were lifted, websites unblocked, political prisoners released, repressive laws repealed and the border conflict with Eritrea resolved. Many Ethiopians living abroad returned home amid an atmosphere of expectation and hope.

But as the political space opened, suppressed feelings and historic grievances related to land, and issues of identity and governance surfaced among various ethnic groups. Military insurgencies and inter-communal violence erupted in a number of regions (Amhara, Oromia, Harar, Dire Dawa, Benishangul, and the SNNP) leading to the internal displacement of (currently) 1.5 million (down from 2.9 million in 2018); people whom the government has failed to support. And, consistent with the policy of Ethnic Federalism (used by the previous regime a tool to ‘divide and rule’) enshrined in the 1994

constitution, there have been calls for autonomy from groups in Oromia, the northern Amhara region and by Sidama in the Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP).

The atmosphere is volatile, and while under Abiy much that is positive has taken place, “local governance and security have sharply deteriorated in many locations,” and the lack of law and order, HRW report. “Means there are few constraints on how grievances are expressed.”

The government’s response to inter-communal conflict has fluctuated between inadequate and inflammatory, and disturbingly, there have been a series of violations by security forces. Killings, torture, and arbitrary arrests have been documented by HRW, in addition to “shutdowns of phone and internet services in Oromia, and the arrests of journalists and opposition leaders and their supporters.” Amnesty International, in their detailed report, relate that between December 2018 and December 2019, “at least 10,000 people were arbitrarily arrested and detainedas part of the government’s crackdown on armed attacks and violence in Oromia Region.” They claim that, reminiscent of the previous regime, security forces “burned homes to the ground, committed rape and extrajudicial execution in response to inter-communal violence.”

And while old laws of control have been repealed, controversial new ones have been enacted. On 23rd March 2020 the Government introduced The Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation, in order they state, to curb, inflammatory language on social media. Human rights groups say it contains a vague definition of disinformation, and HRW describe it as “an ill-construed law that opens the door for law enforcement officials to violate rights to free expression.”

“A 5-month State of Emergency (SOE), beginning in April,” has also been imposed. To limit “the spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19).” This seems unjustified – when it was brought in only three deaths and 82 cases of the virus had been reported in Ethiopia, and to date, according to Worldmeter, the numbers remain low – 128 deaths and fewer than 8,000 reported cases. The SOE essentially bans protests and has been used HRW says “as a pretext to restrict free speech.”

General elections, due to take place in August this year have also been cancelled due to the pandemic. However, in order for parliamentary elections to go ahead at all, a national census (postponed once in 2017 and again this year) is badly needed.

The need for unity

Moving from an authoritarian government to democracy, which has never existed in Ethiopia, was never going to be easy or take place overnight. Many challenges are involved in such a transition and mistakes are inevitable. It is crucial, though, that the Government does not dilute reforms and revert to suppressive methods. For change to be lasting, developments need to be gradual and have broad consensus: this requires that everyone who wishes to contribute to the debate, is able to do so.

There have been changes within civil society including the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), the media and the judiciary but they are still not seen to be free of government influence. Fully independent transparent institutions (particularly the EHRC) that are trusted should be quickly established; institutions that are capable of dealing with community grievances impartially and effectively, and thereby reducing the risk of escalation. The government needs to reinstate law and order where it has broken down, this is crucial, and, as HRW say, “perpetrators of violence need to be charged in accordance with Ethiopian law.” Importantly this must include members of the security forces, who have acted with impunity for far too long; anyone breaking the law must face justice.

Ethnically based identity is currently a powerful divisive force in the country; this need not be the case. Ethnic diversity should be seen as a positive factor, with each group being respected and encouraged to add their distinct tone and color to the overall life of the nation, thereby enriching the culture for all. Diversity in unity should be the aim. Historical injustices and grievances need to be acknowledged, and, in an atmosphere of forgiveness and tolerance, community healing allowed to take place.

Political parties aligned along ethnic lines, intensifies existing divisions; political groups need to evolve that are free from any specific ethnic association. This would negate the suspicion of community bias and build trust. Despite the recent upheavals, the opportunity for lasting change persists in this wonderful country. Unwavering commitment to human rights, social justice and national unity, should be the government’s driving goals; the Ethiopian people deserve no less.

CounterPunch 27.07.2020