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***Rise and fall of an African icon. Abiy Ahmed Ali: from Nobel Peace Prize winner to regional security threat?***

**Abstract**

This article seeks to analyse the main events that have occurred in Ethiopia since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in April 2018 until September 2024. During the first months of his mandate, his public persona enjoyed a meteoric rise, culminating in the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019, only to become wildly unpopular in the country, especially among the Oromo and Tigrayan people. Here the successes of his policy will be discussed, condensed in his *Medemer* ideology, as well as its failures, especially those related to the Tigray war, the Oromo Conflict, the Amhara insurgency in Fano and the recent crisis over Ethiopian access to a Red Sea port.

**Keywords:**

Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed, Oromia, Tigray, Conflicts.

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## I Introduction

Ethiopia is a country of extreme contrasts, not only because of its geography and cultural diversity, but also because of its recent political history. With a population of over 110 million inhabitants and an economy that, until 2016, grew at rates close to 10% annually, the country was set to become one of the so-called *African lions*, the continent's emerging powers. However, this economic progress coexisted with the ethno-federal political system, marked by inter-ethnic tensions and an unequal distribution of wealth that kept many in poverty.

In this context of growing unrest, Abiy Ahmed Ali's coming to power in 2018 represented a historic change. As Prime Minister and leader of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), Abiy Ahmed promised to democratise the country, reconcile it with Eritrea after decades of hostility and transform the economy through a series of structural reforms. His rise generated a wave of hope both inside and outside Ethiopia, culminating in him being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019.

However, this initial optimism soon gave way to disillusionment. Abiy's political model, based on the *Medemer* ("synergy" in Amharic) ideology, sought to centralise power and overcome the ethno-federal system in place since 1995. This strategy led to tensions with groups that had traditionally enjoyed relative autonomy, especially in Tigray, Oromia and Amhara, triggering violent armed conflicts such as the Tigray war (2020-2022) and the Oromo and Amhara insurgencies. Moreover, economic reforms, designed to attract foreign investment and modernise key sectors, failed to address structural problems such as inflation and foreign currency shortages, generating discontent among the population with the rising cost of living.

Internationally, Abiy Ahmed tried to position Ethiopia as a key player in the Horn of Africa, but his ambition to secure a Red Sea port strained relations with Somalia and Egypt, further damaging his reputation. This article takes an in-depth look at Ethiopia's political, economic and social evolution from 2018 to 2024, assessing Abiy Ahmed's achievements and failures in a critical period of Ethiopian history. By analysing key events from the recently generated literature, it aims to provide an overview of the challenges this leader and his country are facing.

## 2 The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

### 2.1 *The legacy of Meles Zenawi (1995-2012)*

The Ethiopia born after the bloody civil war (1974-1991), which ended with the fall of the Derg's bloody communist regime, enacted a constitution in 1994 that made it a federal republic. Democratic only in name, as it soon became clear that the war-winning coalition of parties, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic

Front (EPRDF), would not relinquish power. In fact, accusations of fraud, coupled with arrests and harassment of opposition leaders, have been the norm in all electoral processes held in the country (Aimé González, 2022).

The regime of Meles Zenawi, the Prime Minister from 1995 until his death in 2012, was notable for its lack of democracy and the strong economic growth of the country, which thus ceased to be among the ten poorest in the world. Another feature of his rule was the establishment of the ethno-federal system, in which the old provinces inherited from the empire by the *kililoch* (plural of *kilil*, regional state) were abolished. Each of the country's majority ethnic groups was circumscribed within its own *kilil*, with the exception of the southwest, where the Southern Peoples, Nations and Nationalities was formed, a mixed bag of some 45 different ethnicities. Although the ethno-federal system sought to end inter-ethnic tensions, they continued to be present in border areas. However, it was successful in putting an end once and for all to the strong centralism (amharisation) that, coming from the former Ethiopian Empire, was practised by the Derg (Nahum, 1997; Kidane Mengisteab, 1997; Berhanu Abegaz, 2020).

## 2.2 *The origin of the Oromo protests*

Traditionally marginalised by the powers that be, the Oromo account for more than 33% of the country's population, making them the largest ethnic group. Its regional state, Oromia, is also the largest and most populous in the country. During the Meles Zenawi era (1995-2012), the situation of the Oromo did not improve despite the fact that many of the exported products (coffee, pulses, gold, flowers) are produced in Oromia. In fact, the main beneficiaries were Tigrayan members of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), some of whom allegedly enriched themselves through corrupt practices (Tadesse and Young, 2003). Although Tigray is still a relatively poor *kilil*, today Mekelle is one of the cities with the best infrastructure in the country, and the second railway line being built there will link it to Addis Ababa via Awash, although it is currently halted due to the past Tigray war and the country's economic crisis. The developmentalist nature of the Federal Government led it to promote major public works projects such as the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam or the renovation of the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway, aimed at alleviating Ethiopia's lack of infrastructure (Plaut, 2012; Záhorský, 2014).

The side effects of the economic growth projects included numerous abuses against the Ethiopian peasantry, who were poor and lacked the capital to invest in their fields. Meles Zenawi's last years favoured the forced expropriation of private land to hand it over to international investors. The aim was to encourage the export of agricultural products for profit, to secure access to the international food market to avoid famine, and to obtain financial capital for the incipient industrialisation (Lavers, 2012).

Discontent among the population was growing, hidden by good macroeconomic figures. Plans to expand the capital, Addis Ababa, at the expense of the *kilil* of Oromia, which completely surrounds it, were the trigger for protests that erupted

in Ethiopia from 2014 onwards, but they became especially violent from August 2016 onwards. Most of the people affected by the plan were small Oromo farmers whose land was being expropriated for \$0.6 per square metre, usually to build new residential buildings. The impoverished and landless peasants began a wave of protests that resulted in the deaths of 140 people and succeeded in stopping the expansion of the capital (Wayessa, 2020).

These events triggered a true Oromo awakening, especially among their young people, who were burdened by high unemployment and bleak economic prospects. For the first time in their history, many Oromo of rural origin had gained access to higher education, and it was they who took the lead in the protests. These *qeerroo* (“youngster” in Oromo), united by common ideals of social and economic justice, soon began to take to the streets of Oromia’s villages until they reached the capital Addis Ababa itself, which they consider an Oromo city and call Finfinne (Abebe, 2020).

The *qeerroo* managed to keep the protests on the streets from August 2016 until 2018, forcing the Government of Hailemariam Desalegn, Meles Zenawi’s successor, to declare a state of emergency on as many as two occasions. The Government cracked down hard on these protests, while in the *kilil* of Amhara, there were riots in Gondar and other cities demanding investment in the region (Fisher and Gebrewahd, 2019: 7).

### 3 The rise of Abiy Ahmed (2018) and *Abiymania*

Hailemariam Desalegn, Prime Minister from 2012 to 2018, was a technocrat lacking the guerrilla past and charisma of his predecessor. He was chosen to maintain the delicate inter-ethnic balance within the EPRDF: being from the traditionally marginalised south and Pentecostals —Ethiopia’s fastest growing religion— the other three Vice Presidents were from the ANDM (Amhara), the TPLF (Tigray) and the OPDO (Oromia) (Aalen, 2014). The pressure on the Prime Minister became unbearable in early 2018, and he eventually resigned in February in what was an unexpected move. It was clear that the country needed new leadership that could respond to the demands of the growing street protests. Abiy Ahmed’s rise is a result of political manoeuvring by the Oromo sector within the party. The preferred candidate to take over the reins was the President of the *kilil* of Oromia, Lemma Megersa; he could not be elected, however, as he was not an elected member of parliament (Fisher and Gebrewahd, 2019: 8-9). Therefore, a person was chosen who represented the aspirations of the Oromo wing: young, Oromo, son of a Muslim father and an Orthodox Christian mother, Pentecostal and educated in the USA. Abiy Ahmed, a young man who had grown up within the EPRDF, was chosen for the difficult task of leading the country out of a crisis that almost ended in civil war (Lozano Alonso, 2022: 174). His religious beliefs are an important aspect of his personality, as he is a Pentecostal. The various evangelical churches (*P’ent’ay* in Amharic) are the fastest growing in the country, especially in the south, and this is also reflected in national politics, where there have already been two Pentecostal Prime Ministers (Haustein and Feyissa, 2022).

Be that as it may, Ahmed's election came as a surprise to many in the EPRDF, from whose hardliners —the Tigray— he soon began to disassociate himself (Fisher and Gebrewahd, 2019). Thus, Ahmed's reforms were particularly ambitious internally, most notably the early dismissal of the two most important figures of the TPLF, considered custodians of Meles Zenawi's legacy: Samora Yunis, the Chief of Staff, and Getachew Assefa, Head of the Intelligence Services (Maasho, 2018).

Abiy Ahmed's new policy awakened the population's enthusiasm, elevating him to heights of popularity —*Abiymania*— never before seen in an Ethiopian leader after Haile Selassie (Geshaye, 2018). In addition to removing the TPLF from power, he continued Hailemariam Desalegn's measures to release political prisoners and journalists, while encouraging exiles to return to the country (Ylönen, 2018: 2). In April 2018, after four years of staging protests in the streets of Oromia, the *qeerroo* enthusiastically supported the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister, believing that “the Oromo's turn had come” (Østebø, 2020). The streets were filled with portraits of the new Prime Minister, who symbolised the Ethiopians' hopes for change.

On the economic front, he proposed a series of reforms, including the privatisation of some public services, the entry of foreign companies into the telecommunications market (Safaricom) and the creation of industrial parks in the main cities. However, the serious problem of lack of foreign investment and foreign exchange has not been corrected, as the Ethiopian banking system remains poorly connected to the rest of the world (Ylönen, 2019). In 2024, both the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank demanded that the value of the birr be set by the market and not by the Government; in order to grant Ethiopia the 10.7 billion dollars it requested to alleviate the effects of the economic crisis it has been suffering since 2020. Liberalisation caused the value of the birr to plummet, resulting in higher prices for basic necessities, which worsened the situation of the country's impoverished sectors (Kalkidan Yibeltal, 2024).

Compared to his predecessors, Abiy Ahmed has stood out for his commitment to ecology. In 2019, he approved an ambitious plan to reforest the country, which is suffering from severe tree degradation, with the aim of planting twenty billion trees, of which four billion were to be planted by October of that same year (Lambert and Deyganto, 2023). This environmental plan includes providing Addis Ababa with green spaces. The Ethiopian capital has traditionally lacked a sufficient amount of green space or large parks. One of the most prominent was the creation of the Unity Park on the grounds of the imperial palace, opening to the public an area that was hitherto forbidden to the people, which had been also used as a prison and torture centre (Bearak, 2019).

On the infrastructure front, the Abiy Ahmed Administration continued work on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Abbay or Blue Nile, a project conceived during the Meles Zenawi era (1995-2012). With 74km<sup>3</sup> of dammed water, it is the second largest on the African continent, behind only Lake Nasser (132km<sup>3</sup>), although its hydroelectric production capacity of 5.15 gigawatts makes it the largest in Africa. Filling of the reservoir began in 2020 and was completed in September 2023 (Endeshaw,

2023). Its construction has caused a diplomatic crisis in the region, as Sudan and Egypt, countries dependent on the waters of the Nile, have perceived it as a threat to their water security, since 85% of the Nile's water comes from the Ethiopian massif, with the Blue Nile or Abbay providing 60% of the total (Abteu and Dessu, 2019).

An especially important aspect of Abiy Ahmed's first year was his rapid resolution of Ethiopia's conflict with Eritrea since 1998. Between 1998 and 2000, the two countries had fought a bloody war for the control of several border regions that ended in a pyrrhic Ethiopian victory. The UN arbitration to redraw the borders between the two countries was in favour of Eritrea, but Ethiopia did not accept it because of differences in the western zone (Abbink, 2003: 408). This continued to generate friction in the following years, with border closures and frequent skirmishes, as well as regional rivalry that led both nations to support insurgent groups opposed to their rival's interests, including third countries. Eritrean support for the Afar guerrillas of the *Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy* in Djibouti and for various organisations opposed to the Addis Ababa action in Somalia (Abbink, 2003: 413-415) are worth highlighting in this regard.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2018, the EPRDF announced that it had accepted in full the border demarcation established in 2002 by the UN Commission. This was a complete and unexpected reversal of the country's hardline policy towards Eritrea (Woldemariam, 2019). It would be the beginning of an alliance between Abiy Ahmed and Isayas Afwerki against their common enemy, the TPLF, with military cooperation playing a key role in the 2020 Tigray conflict (Afriyie, Ayangbah and Effah, 2023: 145).

Between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of July 2018, an agreement normalising relations between the two countries by ending the border conflict was signed at the Asmara Summit. Thus, a gradual opening of borders and the re-establishment of full diplomatic relations were agreed. The resolution of this conflict was the main reason for awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to the Ethiopian Prime Minister in October 2019. However, the Tigrayan TPLF, disappointed by the new alliance with Eritrea, left the ruling coalition of parties, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (Yihun, 2020).

#### 4 The decline of Abiy Ahmed's popularity

Abiy Ahmed has departed from the precepts inherited from Meles Zenawi by abandoning the concept of ethno-federalism of previous governments for a new ideology. His *Medemer* ("synergy" in Amharic) is based on three main pillars: centralisation of power in the Prime Minister, economic growth through liberalisation of the economy and regional integration. The pan-Ethiopian approach is a key aspect of the *Medemer*, as power is vested in the State vis-à-vis the *kililoch* (Ali, 2019).

Abiy Ahmed's promising first months soon gave way to disappointment. Reforms could not be implemented at the speed that the expectant Ethiopian people had hoped for. Disappointed that they had simply exchanged one dictator for another, the *qeerroo*

revived protests. The disproportionate response by the army and police showed the intransigence of the State and confirmed that reforms would not be implemented quickly, calling into question the country's democratisation process (York, 2020; Aimé González, 2022).

#### 4.1 *The revival of the Oromo protests*

In September 2018, the return of several leaders of the Oromo Liberation Front, one of the main Oromo opposition parties, ended in clashes with police in Burayu, in addition to attacks on people of other ethnicities that resulted in at least 25 dead people (Østebø, 2020). In the south, conflicts over control of land between Oromo and Gedeos resulted in one million displaced people (Ineke Mules, 2018).

Growing tension was also felt in the armed forces. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 2019, in the Amhara capital of Bahir Dar, an Amhara nationalist plot killed General Se'are Mekonnen, Chief of Army Staff and one of the few TPLF Tigrayans that Abiy Ahmed had confirmed in his post. The Government subsequently accused the Amhara nationalists who orchestrated the coup of being backed by foreign powers (*AfricaNews*, 2019a).

In December 2019, Abiy Ahmed took the opportunity to launch the Prosperity Party, which was joined by all ethnic-based parties in the EPRDF except the Tigrayan TPLF (*AfricaNews*, 2019c; Lozano Alonso, 2020: 177). This meant dismantling the old power structure and replacing it with a new one that ran in the 2020 elections, which were postponed the following year due to the coronavirus crisis.

That the TPLF was excluded from the new party that succeeded the EPRDF was a further indication of Abiy Ahmed's hostility towards the former Tigrayan leaders. This political formation continued its estrangement from the Prime Minister, especially after the peace treaty with Eritrea and after some of its members were accused of corrupt practices during the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (Fisher and Gebrewahd, 2019; Abdulkadr and Neszmelyi, 2021). All of this, coupled with the growing disaffection of Tigrayans in the TPLF with Abiy Ahmed's new Ethiopia, led to growing discontent in the region, increasing the risk that the party would opt to pursue Tigrayan independence rather than seek to increase its influence in Addis Ababa (Assefa, 2020).

Despite promises of democratisation, the Prosperity Party won 410 of the 483 seats in the House of Peoples' Representatives, Ethiopia's lower house, in the 2021 elections. The promised transition to democracy is still blocked today by Abiy Ahmed's excessive cult of personality and his refusal to negotiate with the opposition (Aimé González, 2022).

Within the context of the health and economic crisis caused by COVID-19, new protests erupted in Oromia following the murder of Oromo singer Haacaaluu Hundeessaa on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June 2020. Suspicions that the Government might

have been behind the crime led numerous Oromo to take to the streets and protest against what they thought was a political assassination, as the singer was a highly respected figure in the Oromo protest song genre, the *geerarsa* (*Al Jazeera*, 2020).

Abiy Ahmed denied any link between the Government and the crime, but discontent grew among the protesters, who were also influenced by rumours and fake news that sought to only inflame an already explosive situation. During the first week of July, the protests put the Nobel Peace Prize winner against the ropes, and he did not hesitate to use old methods that were thought to have been banished: 166 people died as a result of the crackdown and 2,300 were arrested, including leading Oromo opposition political figures such as Jawar Mohammed of the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) and numerous important journalists. The Government's ploy to cut the internet was also used again (*Deutsche Welle*, 2020).

The protests coincided with the filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The Government used this to fuel its claim that the riots were being financed by foreign powers, without pointing to any specific one, but indicating an unlikely Egyptian or Sudanese involvement, the two actors most interested in stopping the work. However, the Prime Minister asserted that the protests would not delay the filling of the reservoir (*France 24*, 2020).

Inter-ethnic violence became frequent in contact zones of Oromos with Gedeos and Somalis. During the protests in the summer of 2020, *qeerroo*, in some cases no more than children armed with machetes, looted and destroyed homes and businesses belonging to non-Oromos, especially Amhara, in some of Oromia's main towns, such as Shashemene (Getachew, 2020).

While his popularity and democratising promises had earned him great respect inside and outside Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed and his reforms have been tested in an endurance test that they have failed: the moment the situation got out of hand, the Prime Minister and his cabinet did not hesitate to resort to the old authoritarian methods. Dressed in military uniform, he appeared on television to claim that the singer's murder was part of a plot to destabilise the country, forcing the Government to intervene to prevent the outbreak of civil war (Getachew, 2020; *Al Jazeera*, 2020).

But the critical voices against Abiy Ahmed do not come exclusively from the streets of Oromia. His political mentor and then Defence Minister, Lemma Megersa, began to distance himself from Ahmed after the creation of the Prosperity Party, although their differences became irreconcilable during the protests in the summer of 2020. In August of that year, Lemma Megersa was removed from all his posts, proof of his fall from grace in the eyes of the Prime Minister. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of August it was confirmed that he was under house arrest (*Addis Standard*, 2020). A few days later, further violent clashes between protesters and police in Chiro and Aweday resulted in nine dead people and dozens of people shot and wounded (*Al Jazeera*, 2020b).

#### 4.2 *The Sidama and the settlement of the kilil of Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples*

Another pending issue on the Government's agenda was the creation of a separate state-region (*kilil*) for the Sidama, a historical claim of this ethnic group, which, with its more than 4,000,000 people, is the sixth largest in the country and the largest of the more than 45 groups that made up the vast ethnic cauldron that was the *kilil* of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples. The issue was particularly heated in the capital of the *kilil*, Hawassa, which the Sidama claimed as the capital of their own future state-region.

The Government in Addis Ababa, however, refused to apply their constitutional right to constitute a new *kilil* to the Sidama, as they feared that if it was granted, other peoples might demand the same (Abebe, 2019). In May 2019, the Government of the Sidama Zone joined the citizens' protest movement and announced that if the referendum did not take place on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, it would declare the *kilil* unilaterally (Yokamo, 2019).

As the date approached, tensions rose in Sidama. July saw more than 27 people killed in clashes between police and protesters (*BBC News*, 2019). Finally, in October, Abiy Ahmed announced that the referendum would be held the following month (*AfricaNews*, 2019b). In the referendum held on 20 November, the results showed an overwhelming majority (98.5%) in favour of autonomy (*Deutsche Welle*, 2019). Abiy Ahmed did not hesitate to declare that the result showed Ethiopia's commitment to democracy. The new *kilil* was formed on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June 2020 (Borkena, 2020), pending the appointment of a new capital for the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region to replace Hawassa.

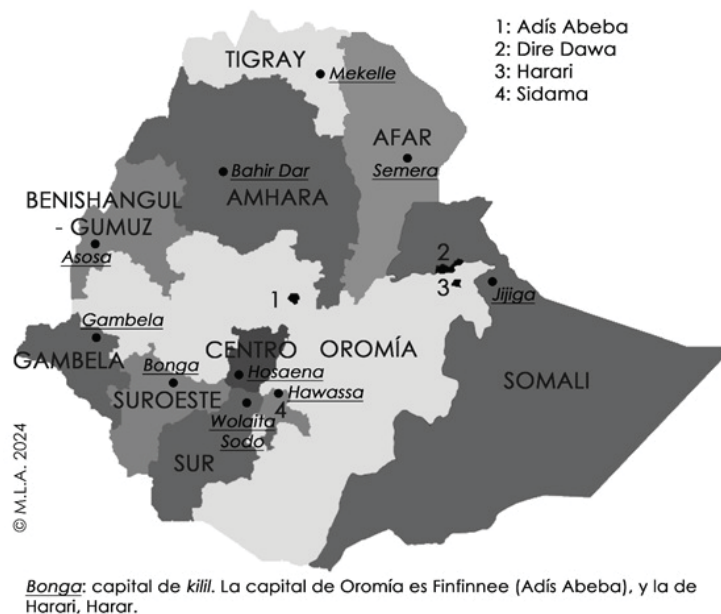


Figure 1. Map of the new Ethiopian kililoch. Author's own based on Lozano Alonso, 2022: 168.

Subsequently, two new referenda further divided the former *kilil* of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (see Figure 1). The first, held on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2021, resulted in a new majority of voters (98%) in favour of unbundling the western territories, forming the *kilil* of Southwest Ethiopia (*Addis Standard*, 2021). The second referendum was held on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 2023, after which it was agreed to separate the majority of the Wolayita, Gedeo, Konso, Gamo and Gofa ethnic areas into the new *kilil* of South Ethiopia (*Addis Standard*, 2023a). Finally, the *kilil* of Central Ethiopia was constituted with the northern areas, inhabited mainly by the Gurage and Hadiya, establishing its capital in Hosaena (*Ethiopian News Agency*, 2023).

## 5 Internal conflicts: the Tigray war and the OLA and Fano insurgencies

### 5.1 The Tigray war (2020-2022)

The most intense internal conflict that Abiy Ahmed faced came from Tigray (see Figure 2). Removed from power, the TPLF's relations with Addis Ababa continued to deteriorate by leaps and bounds. The Prime Minister's decision to postpone parliamentary elections from 2020 to 2021 was not accepted by the Tigrayan party, which accused him of trying to perpetuate himself in power. Thus, the *kilil* of Tigray decided to hold the regional parliamentary elections in open defiance of the central Government, which overruled them. The elections were finally held on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September, with the party led by Debretsion Gebremichael winning with 98.2% of

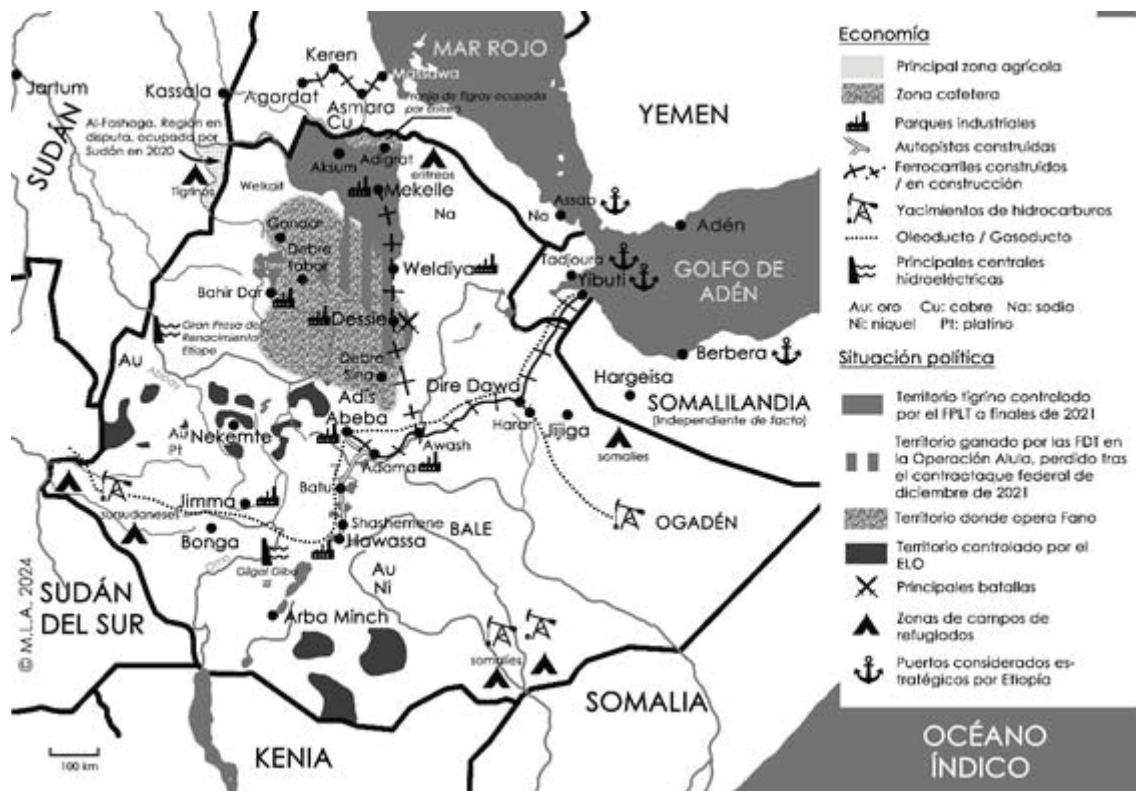


Figure 2. Ethiopia's political situation in 2024. Author's own based on Lozano Alonso, 2022: 179.

the vote, resulting in the TPLF (*Al Jazeera*, 2020c) taking control of the 152 MPs up for election.

After the elections, tensions between the two governments escalated to openly warmongering positions. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2020, TPLF troops attacked one of the federal army bases in the region. The Prime Minister took it as a declaration of war, announcing a military campaign against the rogue region-state. The Ethiopian army's northern command, headquartered in Mekelle, soon defected in favour of the rebels (*BBC News*, 2020).

The Federal Government decreed a six-month state of emergency in Tigray, despite the fact that almost the entire territory was in the hands of the TPLF. However, the State agency *FANA* reported military advances in the west on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November. TPLF sources also reported that fighter jets had bombed several points near the Tigrayan capital on the same day, while internet access and bank accounts were cut off throughout the *kilil* (*Al Jazeera*, 2020d).

Soon the first crimes against civilians began to be uncovered. Between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of December, the village of Mai Kadra, located a short distance from the Sudanese border, was the scene of the massacre of 500-600 Amhara civilians by a local youth militia called the Samri. The bodies of those killed showed signs of having been attacked with knives or machetes in a clear episode of ethnic cleansing (Paravicini, 2020a).

From the outset of the conflict, an important question was what Eritrea's role in the conflict would be, given that much of its southern border is shared with the rebelling *kilil*. While a policy of neutrality could not be ruled out, it was always clear that, in the event of intervention, it would most likely be in favour of the Government in Addis Ababa, given the open hostility that had always been professed by the TPLF against Asmara. These doubts were erased on the 14<sup>th</sup> of November, just ten days after the start of the war, when the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) attacked the Eritrean capital of Asmara with missiles in retaliation for invading Tigray (Paravicini, 2020b).

With the explosion of violence, the first refugee groups appeared. Early in the conflict, some 60,000 Ethiopians fled to Sudan, while the number of internally displaced persons reached 2,000,000. The four existing Eritrean refugee camps in Tigray (May Aini, Adi Harush, Shimelba and Hitsats) were attacked by the Eritrean army, which looted and destroyed Shimelba and Hitsats and executed several hundred political refugees (Pellet, 2021).

The federal army's military operations were successful, focusing on capturing the main population centres. In order to secure the border with Sudan, federal troops seized the airport at Humera, 50 kilometres southwest of the town of the same name. Attacking from the west, troops loyal to Addis Ababa managed to capture Shire, Adwa and Aksum in November. Meanwhile, progress along Highway 2, from Amhara towards Mekelle, was much slower given the proximity of the *kilil's* capital. (Lozano Alonso, 2022: 180; Plaut and Vaughan, 2023). Meanwhile, Eritrean troops occupied

the border strip and the town of Aksum, where they massacred more than 200 people protesting against their presence (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November, Abiy Ahmed issued an ultimatum to TPFL leaders giving them 72 hours to surrender before proceeding to take Mekelle, which was surrounded by federal army troops (*Reuters*, 2020a). On the 28<sup>th</sup> of November, the assault on Mekelle began, which was preceded by a heavy artillery bombardment. In the afternoon of the same day, Abiy Ahmed claimed that federal troops had completely captured the city, ending the conflict (*Reuters*, 2020b).

Predictably, the TPFL engaged in guerrilla warfare, given its knowledge of the rural areas of Tigray, which are endowed with a rugged terrain that facilitates guerrilla action. The Tigray war (2020-2022) focused the Federal Government's attention on the northern region, postponing its response to the country's other crises. Military spending drained the scarce economic resources available to the Government in the context of the economic crisis caused by the Covid pandemic and subsequent inflation. Although Addis Ababa initially managed to control the main Tigrayan cities, the Tigray Defence Force (TDF), the military arm of the TPLF, launched *Operation Alula* in June 2021, a rapid counter-offensive aimed at advancing on the federal capital. To this end, they relied on the alliance of the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), which went from being the TPLF's enemy to its closest ally, along with other guerrillas such as the Gumuz. However, the offensive was halted at Debre Sina, forcing Tigrayan troops to retreat to their region, largely thanks to drones sold by the UAE to Ethiopia and support from Amhara militias in Fano (Plaut and Vaughan, 2023). Finally, the armistice between Tigray and the Federal Government was agreed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 2022, two years into the conflict. The total blockade of the *kilil* caused a severe famine that affected the majority of the population. Exhausted, the TPLF had to sign an armistice with the Federal Government in Pretoria on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 2022, which was brokered by the African Union, whose intervention was key as mediator. Although its ally was defeated, the OLA continued to organise sporadic attacks against the federal army (Lozano Alonso, 2022a: 181). The Amhara militias in Fano played a key role in the defeat of the TPLF and its armed wing, cooperating closely with government troops in order to secure the cession of the western Tigray region of Welkait to Amhara, which was ultimately not granted (John, 2021). Unlike the TDF, the TPLF has not been disbanded, although Debretsion Gebremichael, former leader of the *kilil*, has been replaced by Getachew Reda, acting President of Tigray (*Addis Standard*, 2023b).

The impact of the conflict on civilians in the region has been enormous. The Federal Government cut off humanitarian aid organisations' access to Tigray, which eventually led to a famine that affected 400,000 people as early as 2021 but eventually affected the region's nearly 6 million inhabitants. The total death toll of the conflict is estimated at 600,000 (Nyssen, 2024: 341), according to an estimate by former Nigerian President Obasanjo, who assisted in the African Union mediation mission. This makes it one of the deadliest conflicts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, largely due to famine. To this must be added the cutting off of electricity supplies, the blocking of bank accounts, the impossibility of acquiring medical supplies and the destruction of health and education infrastructures

(Weldemichel, 2022). A worrying aspect has been the brutal episodes of sexual violence suffered by almost half of the women in the region, without any government assistance to date (Fisseha *et al.*, 2023; Gebremichael *et al.*, 2023).

### 5.2 *Benishangul-Gumuz and OLA insurgencies in Oromia*

In the *kilil* of Benishangul-Gumuz in the west, the Gumuz People's Democratic Movement (GPDM) and the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM) began their guerrilla warfare actions in June 2019. Their attacks were mainly directed against the Amhara and Oromo settlers who had settled in the region since the time of the Derg, whom they accused of appropriating the land and driving the native inhabitants off it. This degenerated into ethnic cleansing massacres in Metekel and elsewhere in the *kilil*, while fighting against federal army and OLA troops. An initial agreement for the cessation of hostilities between the two guerrilla organisations and the *kilil Government* was signed at the end of 2022 (*Addis Standard*, 2022). The final peace agreement was signed in June 2024 (*Addis Standard*, 2024a).

Peace in Tigray and Benishangul-Gumuz did not mean the final pacification of the country. In Oromia, OLA guerrillas are still active in many regions of the *kilil*, most notably in Wellega. The OLA has not managed to occupy any major urban centres, but its presence is relatively strong in rural areas. Although negotiations to reach a peace agreement between the Federal Government and OLA began in April 2023, they failed as both sides accused each other of intransigence (*AP News*, 2023). Today, the conflict is still active.

### 5.3 *Fano's rebellion*

Amhara, one of the country's most important *kililoch* (as it boasts the second largest population), soon became a new hotbed of tension. Among the reforms aimed at reinforcing the weight of the Federal Government was the abolition of regional militias, including those such as the Fano of Amhara, which had fought against the TDF in Tigray. This group, heir to the warrior tradition of the Amharas<sup>1</sup>, presents itself as a defender of this ethnicity in the face of growing inter-ethnic violence (Chanie, 2024). But while the TDF or OLA has a cohesive structure with a clear leader, Fano is not a single body, but a group of militant factions operating autonomously and with an unclear hierarchy. The three main factions are the *Amhara Fano Unity in Gondar* (AFUiG), *Fano for Existence, Justice, and Democracy. Movement* (FEJDM) and the *Amhara Fano Unity Council* (AFUC), plus another six factions (see Table I) strongly supported by the Amhara diaspora, and in some cases hostile to each other. They operate mainly in Shewa, Gojjam, Gondar and Wollo (Necho and Debebe, 2024).

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<sup>1</sup> Fano may be translated as "wandering warrior" or "leaderless warrior".

Name	Leader	Region
AFUiG	Mesafint Tesfu and Sefer Melesse	Gondar
FEJDM	Wubante Abate	Gondar
AFUC <sup>2</sup>	Sefer Melesse	Shewa
Amhara Popular Front	Eskinder Nega	Gojjam
Bete Amhara Fano	Unknown	Wollo
Amhara People's Force	Zemene Kassie	Gojjam
East Amhara Fano	Mihret Wedajo	Wollo
Amhara Unit in Shewa	Unknown	Shewa, South Wollo
Amhara Fano Free People's Movement	Asseged Mekonnen	North Shewa

Table I. Fano's main factions, leaders and region of operation. *Source:* Necho and Debebe, 2024.

In April 2023, the Federal Government decreed the abolition of the regional militias. The Fano refused, starting the insurgency in the *kilil* of Amhara. Despite some important initial successes, such as the capture of Bahir Dar or Lalibela in August 2023, the Government in Addis Ababa has taken control of the main towns in Amhara, pushing the Fano into rural areas where they are still engaged in a low-intensity conflict (Necho and Debebe, 2024; Masoliver, 2024).

#### 5.4 *The Berbera port crisis and new changes in foreign policy*

In late 2023, the Ethiopian Head of Government argued that Ethiopia needed to control a Red Sea port, which was key to its own survival. The matter would have gone no further had it not been for the rhetoric employed, stating that “Ethiopia’s natural border was the Red Sea” or that, if the port could not be obtained by peaceful means, it would be done by force. The logical consequence was a diplomatic crisis with its neighbours, since the only viable options for obtaining such a port were, excluding Djibouti, Eritrea or Somalia (Waal, 2023).

The question of access to the sea has been one of the main aspirations of the Ethiopian State since the reign of Menelik II (1889-1913) (Lozano Alonso, 2024). The colonial powers occupied the entire coastline of the region, most notably the establishment of the Eritrean colony, which deprived Ethiopia of access to the port of Massawa, and that of Somaliland, with the port of Zeyla. During the Middle Ages, both were the main trading hubs in the area. The French-controlled port of Djibouti eclipsed that of Zeyla, especially since the 1917 inauguration of the railway linking it to Addis Ababa, transforming it into the country’s main commercial entry and exit point (Fauvelle-Aymar *et al.*, 2011: 29-30). After World War II, Eritrea was ceded by the UN to Ethiopia, allowing it to control the ports of Massawa and Assab, where Haile Selassie’s imperial Government built a refinery. Ethiopia again lost access to the

<sup>2</sup> Disbanded in April 2023 by the Federal Government.

sea with Eritrean independence in 1993, although it was agreed that Ethiopians could access the port of Assab without restrictions (Henze, 2000: 333). Assab remained the main entry and exit point to and from Ethiopia, accounting for up to 75% of transit goods until the border war with the Eritreans (1998-2000) diverted this trade traffic to Djibouti (Takele and Tolcha, 2021: 2).

The need for secure access to maritime trade routes was one of the objectives of Meles Zenawi's Government. The port of Djibouti, the entry point for 90% of the country's imports, was considered a priority, which led to the construction of a new railway line between Djibouti and Addis Ababa, parallel to the old one, completed in 1917 and in poor condition. China, which at the time was engaged in the construction of a military base in Djibouti as part of its *Belt and Road Initiative*, assisted in this endeavour. Interested in strengthening its ties with Ethiopia, China granted both countries a \$4 billion loan, commissioning its construction to two Chinese state-owned companies, the *China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation* (CCECC) and the *China Railway Group* (CREC). It was inaugurated by Hailemariam Desalegn on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1998 (Cabestan, 2021). However, China has significantly reduced investment in the country, although it continues to maintain its interest in the Horn of Africa, albeit now by encouraging Gulf countries' cooperation in the region (Liu, 2023).

Already in 2024, with three recent or ongoing conflicts —against Tigray, the OLA and the Fano— and in dire need of an IMF loan, Abiy Ahmed's military threats are hardly credible (Waal, 2023). This is where we must explain the growing influence of Gulf countries, mainly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which seek to invest in the Horn of Africa region in order to diversify their economies in a framework of energy transition, while funding Islamic schools and mosques, ensuring food security and selling arms. This was especially relevant during the Tigray war, where the UAE provided drones to the Government in Addis Ababa (Meester and Lanfranchi, 2024).

The Saudi presence, which dates back to the time of Haile Selassie (1930-1974), focused on funding Wahhabi mosques in Ethiopian territory (Erich, 2006), although in recent years the country that has gained the most influence is the UAE. Within this context, in 2015, Emirati foreign policy succeeded in getting Eritrea to cede the deep-water port of Assab and the use of a 3,500 m airstrip to the Arab country (*Al Attas*, 2018: 4). In the case of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed has strengthened ties with the UAE, which has allowed him, among other things, to diversify the number of countries interested in investing in the country —apart from China and the US—, to obtain foreign currency and to buy modern weaponry, such as the Emirati drones used in the Tigray war. The inflow of foreign exchange propped up the Ethiopian economy during the conflict, and its diplomatic backing managed to prevent the regime's isolation at a time when the US and the EU were concerned about human rights abuses in Tigray. Emirati support has also been key to mediating Ethiopia's accession to the BRICS group of countries, alongside Egypt, the United Arab Emirates itself and Iran, and in reaching peace with neighbouring Eritrea (Meester and Lanfranchi, 2024).

However, the Emiratis do not appear to be cooperating directly with Abiy Ahmed in his efforts to secure a route to the sea, although an Emirati company, DP World, manages the port of Berbera. A Memorandum of Understanding between the Governments of Ethiopia and Somaliland was signed on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2024, the full content of which has not yet been disclosed. Some aspects revealed by the Somaliland Foreign Minister include the ceding of 20km of coastline near Berbera for the construction of an Ethiopian naval base, in exchange for Ethiopia's recognition of Somaliland as a sovereign state. However, none of this has been confirmed by the Ethiopian Government, and even many aspects of the memorandum, such as which stretch of coastline would be ceded, remain unclear (Yibeltal, 2024).

The memorandum has led to a formal protest by the Somali Government, which continues to claim to be the sole authority authorised to negotiate, even though Somaliland has been operating as a de facto independent country for decades (*AfricaNews*, 2024). A few months later, Somalia and Egypt announced a military alliance that would involve the deployment of 5,000 Egyptian troops on Somali territory to help fight the Islamist insurgency in a new African Union mission, to which further 5,000 would be added separately by Egypt. The latter has taken a stand against Ethiopia since the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which it sees as threatening its water security by regulating the waters of the Abbay (Blue Nile), the main tributary of the Nile. The agreement would help supplant the 10,000 or so Addis Ababa troops operating in Somalia, who would be expelled from there in the event that the agreement to cede the port of Berbera (Wafula, 2024) is formalised. Far from achieving its goal of controlling Berbera, on which there are no new developments, the confrontation with Somalia has served to further drive it apart from Ethiopia and to strengthen the former's ties with Egypt, Ethiopia's traditional rival. To ease the tension and also to prevent the important flow of Ethiopian money from being diverted to other ports, Djibouti has offered to cede the port of Tadjoura to Ethiopia (*Addis Standard*, 2024b). In sum, the new corridor between Ethiopia and Berbera, while it could have been a source of prosperity, now risks becoming a new focus of regional conflict (Stepputat and Norman, 2024).

## 6 Conclusions

Abiy Ahmed Ali's Administration has faced serious problems internally, in many cases inherited from previous cabinets. His rise to power in 2018 aroused enormous expectations, both due to his Oromo origins and his reformist discourse, which promised democratisation, peace and economic prosperity. However, the challenges inherent to governing a country as complex and fragmented as Ethiopia quickly called into question his ability to deliver on these promises.

His major achievements include the signing of a peace treaty with Eritrea, which marked a turning point in regional politics in the Horn of Africa, and the completion of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which can transform Ethiopia into a

power exporter on the continent. Furthermore, its entry into the BRICS represents a significant milestone in Ethiopia's foreign policy, placing the country on a new global economic axis. Abiy Ahmed has also pushed for innovative measures such as his reforestation plan, which seeks to address the country's environmental challenges.

However, these successes are overshadowed by the many internal conflicts that have undermined his leadership. The Tigray war (2020-2022) not only resulted in a devastating humanitarian crisis but also highlighted the Government's inability to reconcile inter-ethnic tensions. This has culminated in the death of 600,000 people, the highest death toll in a military conflict so far this century, as well as provoked a famine that affected the entire population of Tigray. The Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) insurgency in Oromia and Fano militias in Amhara remain sources of instability, which must be seen as a reaction by local elements to the recentralisation implied by the prime minister's *Medemer* policy.

Abiy Ahmed's foreign policy has also suffered setbacks. His handling of the Berbera port crisis, in the context of growing competition for access to the Red Sea, has generated diplomatic tensions with Somalia and Egypt, complicating regional relations. Although he has received support from the United Arab Emirates, this support has not been enough to compensate for the loss of traditional allies and the perception of authoritarianism that is beginning to consolidate on the international scene.

Ultimately, Abiy Ahmed's legacy will be determined by his ability to overcome these challenges. While his Administration has made significant progress, his centralist leadership and conflict management style have exacerbated internal divisions and economic difficulties. Ethiopia faces an uncertain future, in which peace and stability will depend on inclusive reforms that address the demands of different ethnic communities and regions. Without these transformations, the country risks perpetuating a cycle of conflict and inequality, moving away from the promises of change that defined the beginning of his mandate.

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