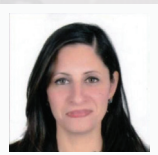# Government Failure and Civil War: The Conflict in Ethiopia's Amhara Region

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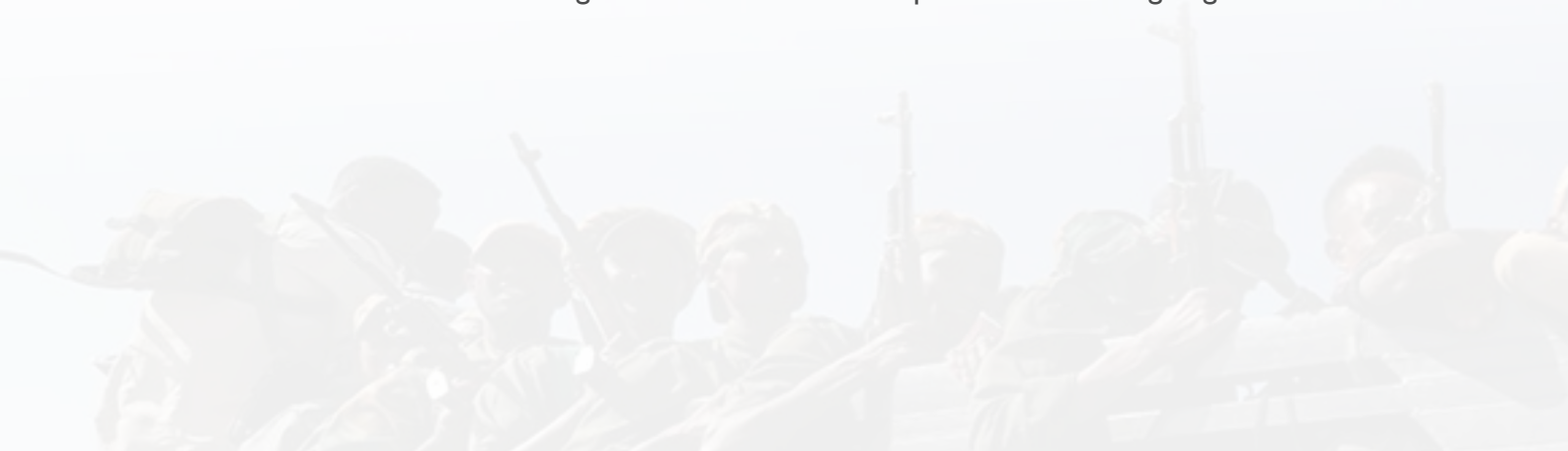African Narratives

Abstract:

This study provides an analytical insight into how Abiy Ahmed's policies have impacted Ethiopia's security, stability, unity, and overall political, economic, and social conditions, as well as its foreign relations and regional role. Ethiopia has been facing successive internal crises that have deepened in recent years, primarily revolving around issues of ethnic diversity management. These internal challenges are exacerbated by Ethiopia's external disputes with neighboring countries due to the ruling regime in Addis Ababa's pursuit of strengthening its influence and dominance in the region. This has raised concerns among various parties that now view Addis Ababa's policies as aggressive towards its neighbors and a threat to regional security and stability.

Undoubtedly, the conflict in the Amhara region between the Fano militia and the government is no less dangerous than the Tigray conflict. It is a direct result of Addis Ababa's approach to governing the country, which has intensified Ethiopia's internal crises and worsened both domestic and external conflicts. This means that the government's failure to find a fundamental resolution to this crisis could endanger national unity and potentially lead to the country's fragmentation in the future. Consequently, Ethiopia stands at a critical crossroads, where its future depends on the ability of different factions to overcome their disputes and reach solutions that ensure national unity and stability. Achieving this requires wise policies that take into account historical factors and the deep sensitivities associated with Ethiopia's immense ethnic diversity. However, the current situation suggests that achieving this remains difficult given the complexities of the ongoing crisis.

Keywords:

Conflict in Amhara Region, Abiy Ahmed's Policies, Ethnic Diversity, Internal Conflicts in Ethiopia.

Key Points :

1. Despite Abiy Ahmed's efforts to establish a centralized governance system to address the imbalances of federal rule, he has failed disastrously in managing the country. Instead, he has been besieged by crises once again, plunging Ethiopia into both domestic and external conflicts, potentially leading it into unprecedented turmoil and a return to war.

2. The ruling regime in Addis Ababa seeks to strengthen its influence and dominance in the region, raising concerns among many parties that now perceive its policies as aggressive towards its neighbors, threatening regional security and stability. This could create devastating internal fractures and escalate serious conflicts within the region, while also causing major issues for Ethiopia on the international stage.

3. In recent years, under the leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia has experienced significant political and security instability. This has resulted in an increasingly complex situation, with escalating armed conflicts between the federal government and various armed groups across the country—most notably, the ongoing conflict in the Amhara region.

4. Analyzing the repercussions of the Ethiopian regime's current policies both internally and externally reveals severe consequences. If these policies persist, they will lead to continued crises and wars, potentially resulting in the country's fragmentation and division in the future—unless the government abandons its provocative and aggressive approach.

Introduction

In recent years, Ethiopia has experienced significant political and security instability under the rule of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. This has resulted in a highly complex and volatile situation, with escalating armed conflicts between the federal government and various militant groups across the country.

In this context, the ongoing conflict in the Amhara region between the Amhara-based Fano militia and the government adds another layer to Ethiopia's internal crisis, which is already complicated by its socially diverse and fragmented structure. Until recently, Fano militias fought alongside the federal army in Tigray against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). They were also involved in armed clashes with the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and played a role in Ethiopia's conflict with Sudan over the disputed Al-Fashaqa region. However, Fano has now turned against the state, posing a significant challenge to national stability. This shift comes amid Abiy Ahmed's governance strategies, which have deepened Ethiopia's internal crises, exacerbated conflicts both domestically and internationally, and further destabilized an already fragile security landscape. The situation also carries broader implications for regional stability in the Horn of Africa.

Based on this premise, this study examines the underlying causes and dynamics of the Amhara conflict, its potential repercussions on the region, and the role of Abiy Ahmed's policies in intensifying Ethiopia's internal and external crises. Furthermore, the study presents a forward-looking analysis of the ongoing conflict through three potential future scenarios.

First: The Motives Behind the Conflict Between the Fano Militia and the Ethiopian Government

The ongoing rebellion in the Amhara region reflects the complex relationship between this influential ethnic group—Ethiopia's second-largest population—and successive ruling authorities since 1991. The Fano militia re-emerged as a powerful force after the Tigray War, having strengthened its military capabilities and manpower through its participation alongside the central government. A key factor in its growing strength was its absorption of the Amhara Special Forces, which rejected integration into the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF). As a result, Fano became a major security threat after turning against the federal army.

Despite previously being a crucial ally of Abiy Ahmed's government in its war against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), tensions escalated between the government and Fano in April 2023, prompting a state of emergency. By early October 2024, the Ethiopian army launched a military operation against Fano in the Amhara region, accusing the group of rejecting peace initiatives proposed by the federal government. Several direct and indirect factors can explain this armed conflict, as outlined below.

1. Direct Motives

• Disarmament of the Amhara Special Forces

In April 2023, the Ethiopian federal government decided to dissolve the Amhara Special Forces and integrate them into the federal army, aiming to centralize the military and security apparatus. However, this move was met with strong resistance from the Fano militia, which saw it as an attempt by Abiy Ahmed to weaken the Amhara people. The resulting unrest allowed Fano to gain territorial control while hindering federal army movements, further intensifying the conflict[1].

Although the Amhara forces had supported the federal government during the Tigray War, the government's refusal to compromise left them feeling betrayed. Abiy Ahmed's insistence that regional forces threaten national unity and must be dismantled only exacerbated tensions. [2]In response to escalating clashes, the Ethiopian government declared a six-month state of emergency in August 2023, later extending it in February 2024 before lifting it in June. The government used this period to carry out mass arrests and targeted assassinations of key Fano supporters, including prominent Amhara parliament members[3].

• Lack of Trust Between Fano and the Federal Government

Despite Fano's alliance with the federal government in the Tigray War, the sudden withdrawal of federal troops—without consulting regional leaders—left Amhara forces vulnerable to counterattacks by the TPLF. This deepened distrust between Amhara forces, Abiy Ahmed's government, and the Ethiopian military.

Amhara groups feared that the government might force them to return strategic territories such as Welkait and Raya, which they had gained during the war against Tigray. With the TPLF weakened, some Amhara factions saw an opportunity to reclaim political dominance, further fueling tensions with the federal government.

• Exclusion from the Pretoria Peace Negotiations

Abiy Ahmed signed the Pretoria peace agreement with the TPLF in November 2022 without any Amhara representation, despite their role in the war.

1   د. حمدي عبد الرحمن، الحرب الزاحفة...أسباب وتداعيات الصراع في إقليم الأمهرة الإثيوبيا، قراءات أفريقية، 8 أغسطس 2023. متاح:
https://qiraatafrican.com/11861/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%AD%D9%81%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D9%81/

2   Ethiopia's Amhara Conflict Could Spark Civil War, Foreign policy, 6 March 2024.
https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/06/ethiopia-amhara-conflict-civil-war/

3   د. حمدي عبد الرحمن، الحرب الزاحفة، مرجع سبق ذكره

Their exclusion, reportedly at Abiy's insistence, was a turning point in their relationship, shifting Fano from a key ally to a direct adversary. Many Amhara groups viewed the agreement as a betrayal, suspecting a renewed alliance between Abiy Ahmed and the TPLF at their expense. This perception, combined with government efforts to disarm Fano and crack down on Amhara activists and journalists, further widened the divide between the two sides.

2. Indirect Motives

• Fano as a Threat to Centralized Governance

Fano poses a direct challenge to Abiy Ahmed's centralization agenda. The militia sees itself as a defender of Amhara rights and interests, and its influence has grown significantly since the Tigray War. However, Abiy Ahmed, who seeks to replace Ethiopia's ethnic-based federalism with a more centralized system, views Fano's increasing power as a threat. Although Fano lacks a centralized command structure, its armed rebellion has become one of the biggest challenges to Abiy Ahmed's government.

• Rising Violence Against Amhara Communities

Despite lifting the state of emergency in June 2024, the Ethiopian government continued military operations in Amhara. Reports from international and local sources indicate widespread human rights violations, including targeted attacks on schools, healthcare centers, and civilian homes. Airstrikes have killed civilians, millions of children have been displaced from schools, and large-scale arrests of Fano members occurred during the federal government's ceasefire with the TPLF in 2021. Furthermore, government inaction during the June 2021 Tigray offensive allowed TPLF forces to seize several Amhara towns. The June 2019 assassinations of Amhara regional president Ambachew Mekonnen and other officials also fueled suspicions that Abiy Ahmed's government was colluding with Oromo elites to weaken the Amhara. [4] This perception of government bias has intensified Amhara grievances and fueled the ongoing conflict.

• Political Marginalization

Initially, Amhara groups supported Abiy Ahmed in exchange for promises of democratic reform, political representation, constitutional review, and resolution of historical territorial disputes. However, the government's National Dialogue Commission failed to address these issues, leaving them unresolved despite escalating unrest. This political marginalization further alienated the Amhara and contributed to the ongoing conflict.

4   Centre for International Policy Studies (CIPS), Understanding the Conflict in Ethiopia's Amhara Region, January 16, 2025. Available:
https://www.cips-cepi.ca/2025/01/16/understanding-the-conflict-in-ethiopias-amhara-region/

Second: Abiy Ahmed's Policies and the Deepening of Ethiopia's Crises

Since assuming office in April 2018, Abiy Ahmed has positioned himself as a key player in regional and international politics. Initially regarded as a reformist and modernizing leader, he was credited with ushering in significant political and economic transformations in Ethiopia. However, in recent years, his reputation—both among neighboring countries and global powers—has undergone a drastic shift. Instead of being seen as a committed reformer, he is increasingly perceived as an unreliable leader who frequently reneges on international commitments, particularly regarding water disputes and border conflicts. Abiy Ahmed's policies have thus exacerbated Ethiopia's internal and external crises, which can be outlined as follows:

1. Internal Crises

• Political Turmoil

At the beginning of his tenure, Abiy Ahmed appeared to champion democratic reforms, responding to widespread demands for political change. He expanded political freedoms, released political prisoners, invited exiled opposition groups back to Ethiopia, and initiated several economic and developmental projects. Additionally, he played a role in easing tensions with Eritrea and supporting Sudan's political transition. These moves temporarily stabilized Ethiopia and earned him the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, [5]leading many to believe that Ethiopia was on the brink of a new era of political and economic reform.

However, these expectations quickly unraveled as widespread unrest erupted, beginning with Oromo protests, followed by the devastating Tigray War, and most recently, the ongoing conflict in the Amhara region. This instability has triggered widespread political and economic turmoil. Ethiopia's deep-seated ethnic divisions resurfaced, fueling armed conflicts and exacerbating security challenges. The country now faces renewed fears of civil war, further compounded by economic difficulties that have severely impacted the Ethiopian population.

In response to these crises, Abiy Ahmed has sought to rally national unity around the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), portraying it as a national project capable of solving Ethiopia's economic challenges. His defiant stance on GERD, despite opposition from African nations and international agreements on Nile water distribution, reflects his attempt to consolidate political support amid mounting domestic pressures.

• Rising Ethnic Conflicts

Despite Abiy Ahmed's early attempts to mitigate ethnic tensions, Ethiopia's ethnic conflicts have only worsened under his leadership. The country's diverse ethnic makeup—primarily consisting of the Oromo, Amhara, and Tigray—has posed ongoing governance challenges. Upon taking office in 2018, Abiy Ahmed introduced political reforms aimed at transitioning Ethiopia from ethnic federalism to a more centralized system. He dismantled the dominance of the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) in state institutions and sought to integrate regional security forces into the national framework.

However, the central government's weakness in managing regional autonomy led to the failure of these efforts, culminating in the 2020 Tigray War. After Abiy Ahmed's government removed Tigrayan leaders from power, the conflict escalated into a full-scale war, resulting in mass killings, war crimes, and the displacement of thousands.

Even after the Tigray War officially ended in 2022, Abiy Ahmed faced another major internal crisis. The Amhara, who had fought alongside the federal government against the TPLF, turned against the government in 2023 following its decision to dismantle the Amhara Special Forces and integrate them into national security institutions. [6] This led to intense clashes between the Fano militia and the Ethiopian military, marking yet another chapter of instability in the country.

• Economic Decline

Ethiopia's continuous conflicts under Abiy Ahmed's rule have drained national resources, causing severe economic strain. The wars in Tigray and Amhara have inflicted massive damage on infrastructure, resulted in thousands of casualties, and forced millions into displacement. These conflicts have also fueled ethnic violence, further fracturing the country's social fabric[7].

The Ethiopian economy has suffered significant setbacks due to the Tigray War, which led to substantial financial losses. The ongoing Amhara conflict continues to hinder economic recovery, pushing Ethiopia into a debt crisis. The country has defaulted on its debt payments, prompting Fitch Ratings to downgrade Ethiopia's credit rating to a high-risk category.

• Regional Implications

Ethiopia's instability threatens to spill over into neighboring regions, particularly as tensions between the central government and various ethnic groups persist. If the Amhara conflict escalates further, it could draw in external factors such as Eritrean forces. With ongoing conflicts in Sudan and instability in Somalia, Ethiopia's crisis risks destabilizing the entire Horn of Africa.

2. External Crises

Abiy Ahmed's governance challenges extend beyond Ethiopia's borders, straining relations with neighboring countries and international powers. Key external disputes include:

• The GERD Dispute

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam remains the most contentious issue between Ethiopia and Egypt. Cairo accuses Abiy Ahmed of employing deceptive negotiation tactics, prolonging talks while unilaterally completing the dam's construction and filling process. Despite numerous rounds of negotiations with Egypt and Sudan, Ethiopia has persisted in imposing a fait accompli, disregarding potential harm to Sudanese dams and the catastrophic impact on Egypt's water security.

Egypt has consistently advocated for a legally binding agreement on GERD's operation and water allocation, but talks have repeatedly stalled. Ethiopia's unilateral actions continue to heighten tensions, with Egypt asserting its commitment to defending its national water security. Meanwhile, ongoing military conflicts in Ethiopia and Sudan complicate diplomatic efforts, further intensifying regional tensions.

6   Ethiopia's Amhara crisis: Abiy's political failures threaten a return to war, August 24, 2024.
https://theconversation.com/ethiopias-amhara-crisis-abiys-political-failures-threaten-a-return-to-war-211754

7   Ethiopia's Debt Crisis: What Next?, 14 August 2024.
https://afrodad.org/news-events/articles/ethiopias-debt-crisis-what-next

• The Al-Fashqa Border Dispute with Sudan

Ethiopia's border dispute with Sudan over the fertile Al-Fashqa region remains a major point of contention. Despite preliminary cooperation agreements, Abiy Ahmed's government has failed to provide clear commitments, fueling suspicions that Ethiopia is using the border issue as leverage in GERD negotiations with Sudan. Instead of seeking a decisive resolution, Ethiopia has repeatedly postponed talks, leading to military skirmishes between the two nations.

• The Somaliland Port Agreement

In 2024, Ethiopia sparked regional controversy by signing a deal with Somaliland, granting Ethiopia access to a 20-kilometer stretch of the Red Sea coast for port and military use. This move triggered strong opposition from Somalia and other regional actors, who viewed it as a direct violation of Somali sovereignty. The agreement heightened geopolitical tensions in the Horn of Africa and drew international criticism.

3. Regional and International Reactions to Abiy Ahmed's Policies
• Regional Relations

Ethiopia's relations with Horn of Africa nations and the Middle East have become increasingly strained. While Abiy Ahmed has sought closer ties with Gulf states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, he has struggled to maintain balanced relations with Egypt and Sudan. Additionally, his regional ambitions and military interventions have contributed to rising tensions with neighboring states.

• Global Perception

International attitudes toward Abiy Ahmed have shifted dramatically. Once hailed as a reformist leader, he is now seen as an unstable figure whose policies pose risks both domestically and globally. His military interventions in Tigray and Amhara, which have led to mass displacement and human rights abuses, have drawn widespread condemnation.

Western powers, particularly the United States and the European Union, have become increasingly cautious in their engagement with Abiy Ahmed's government. While these nations initially supported his administration, his authoritarian tendencies and human rights violations have led to growing concerns about his leadership.

Third: Future Outlook and Potential Scenarios

Ethiopia faces an uncertain future marked by significant challenges and various possible scenarios that could shape the next phase of its political and security landscape.

1. Military Option

The Ethiopian government may attempt to achieve a decisive military victory over the Fano militia, given the strategic importance of the Amhara region to Addis Ababa. However, this approach could escalate armed confrontations, increase public opposition, and further destabilize the country.

Achieving a military resolution will not be easy for Ethiopian forces, especially considering Fano's guerrilla warfare tactics and potential ethnic support from within Amhara. Additionally, the possibility of Fano receiving external support cannot be ruled out, which would complicate any government attempt to eliminate the militia entirely.

2. Negotiation Scenario

Abiy Ahmed's government could seek a peace agreement with the Fano militia, similar to the Pretoria Agreement with the TPLF, to avoid another prolonged internal war and reduce tensions. Whil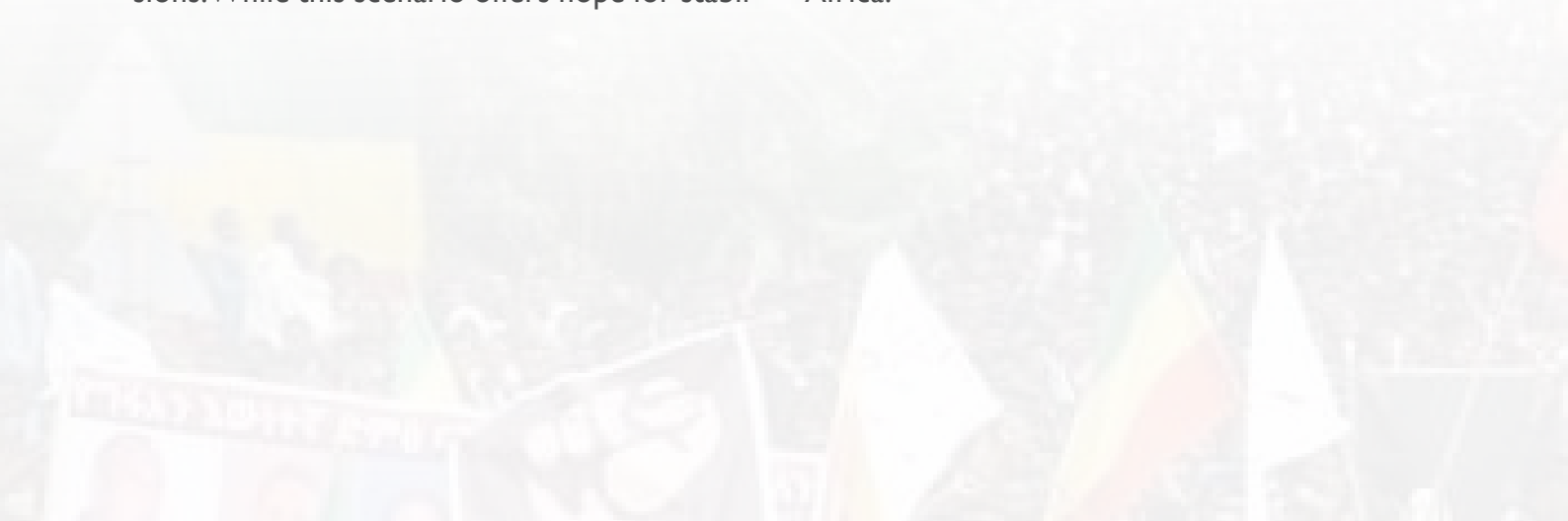e this scenario offers hope for stability, it faces significant challenges due to Ethiopia's complex ethnic and political landscape.

Hardline factions within both the government and Fano may resist negotiations, making the success of such talks uncertain in the short term. Furthermore, unresolved historical grievances and a deep mistrust between the parties could hinder the implementation of any peace deal.

3. Fano's Victory and the Overthrow of the Regime

There is a possibility that Fano could gain significant ground, potentially aligning with elements of Ethiopia's so-called "deep state" to overthrow the current regime. While this scenario reflects the strength of the armed opposition, it also carries significant risks, including the potential fragmentation of Ethiopia into smaller, warring entities.

If Abiy Ahmed's government collapses, the country could descend into deeper chaos, with escalating violence, increased regional and international interventions, and the challenge of rebuilding a new political order. The instability would likely extend beyond Ethiopia's borders, further destabilizing the already fragile Horn of Africa.

Conclusion

The continuation of Abiy Ahmed's current policies—both domestically and internationally—could have severe consequences. Unless the government abandons its confrontational approach and acknowledges Ethiopia's internal complexities, the country will remain trapped in cycles of conflict and instability.

In just five years, Abiy Ahmed's administration has engaged in three internal wars, surviving largely due to international and regional backing. The Ethiopian regime has often sought to divert internal divisions by rallying public sentiment around external conflicts, such as the GERD dispute. However, short-term power consolidation efforts and ambitions for regional dominance risk creating deeper internal fractures, increasing the likelihood of violent conflict within Ethiopia and beyond.