

ETHIOPIAN INFIGHTING THREATENS PRIME MINISTER'S REFORM PROCESS

By Donnelly McClelland



Ethiopia marked a national day of mourning on Monday [24 June] after four government officials [and a retired general], including the governor of the Amhara region and the chief of the army, were assassinated over the weekend in dual attacks in Addis Ababa and Amhara's capital city, Bahir Dar. State forces shot and killed Brigadier General Asaminew Tsige, a former political prisoner, who is allegedly responsible for the attacks, in Amhara state on Monday. Asaminew was said to be resentful of perceived maltreatment by the central government, but there remains some confusion about the nature and precise planning of the attacks. (*Foreign Policy*)

What happened?

According to government sources, a “hit squad” entered a meeting of top Amhara officials on Saturday 22 June and opened fire, killing regional president Ambachew Mekonnen, his top adviser and the state's attorney general. A few hours later in Addis Ababa, about 500 kilometres away, army chief Seare Mekonnen was shot dead by his bodyguard. A retired general who was visiting him at the time was also killed. The government said Mekonnen was co-ordinating a response to the “attempted coup” at the time. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's office also said it appeared to be a “co-ordinated attack”, without elaborating further. There does not appear to be a definitive link between the two attacks and their ultimate motives have not been made clear, and there has been widespread speculation over the killings.

General Asaminew Tsige, who was apparently in hiding since the attacks on Saturday, was killed on Monday as he attempted to escape from his hideout in Amhara's capital, Bahir Dar, according to police sources. General Asaminew told the Amhara people to arm themselves and prepare for fighting against other ethnic groups, in a video circulated on Facebook about a week before the attacks. Amhara is home to Ethiopia's second largest ethnic group (after the Oromo, of which the prime minister is a part), and gives its name to the state language, Amharic. Ironically, General Asaminew was released from prison last year after receiving amnesty for a similar coup attempt in 2009. Analysts describe him as a hard-line Amhara nationalist who was likely facing removal from his job over efforts to form a militia and for rhetoric pushing for territory in neighbouring Tigray to be reclaimed.

Ethiopia's ethnic complexities

Ethiopia is the second most populous nation in Africa, with over 108 million people, and has over 80 ethno-linguistic people groups. Ethiopia has an ethnic federalist form of government with nine regional states and two cities that fall under the administrative mandate of the federal government. Each region is administered by an ethnic political party. For almost three decades, Ethiopia's ethnic federal structure – enshrined in the country's 1994 constitution – has been defended by the ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which is comprised predominantly of the four largest ethnic groups and their representative parties. Thus, territorial and demographically larger regions such as Amhara, Oromia, Tigray and the southern region are administered by parties that are members of the ruling coalition. The other five regions are made up mostly of minorities and are economically undeveloped. They are administered by ethnic parties that aren't part of the ruling coalition.

Long-simmering ethnic tensions in Amhara and other areas have surged since Mr Abiy's far-reaching reforms. At least 2.4 million people have fled fighting, according to the United Nations. As of April this year, an estimated 3.2 million people were displaced by conflict and drought in what humanitarian agencies call “a forgotten crisis”.

Balancing reforms and security

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who took over in April 2018 (after three years of often deadly protests forced his predecessor Hailemariam Desalegn to resign), has earned international praise for an ambitious reform agenda that has included freeing thousands of political prisoners, reining in the country's security services, lifting a state of emergency and restrictions on the media, and resolving a long-running border conflict with neighbouring Eritrea.

US assistant secretary of state for Africa (and former US ambassador to Ethiopia) Tibor Nagy said in a recent interview that he believes that the killings in Ethiopia "were likely part of the considerable resistance by members of the old establishment to Mr Abiy's dramatic, incredible domestic reforms".

Mr Abiy's shake-up of the military and intelligence services has taken on powerful groups in the military and the ruling coalition, while his government is struggling to contain powerful figures in Ethiopia's myriad ethnic groups fighting the federal government and each other for greater influence and resources.

Mr Abiy inherited a divided country, but in all his speeches and actions he has made national unity, peaceful co-existence, shared growth and regional integration a central theme of his administration. There are those who believe that he has not done enough to address the deep ethnic issues of society, as evidenced by the rise in inter-ethnic violence. But other commentators believe that the tensions have been there for decades, often suppressed by an authoritarian government, and that the prime minister's efforts to reform the system has simply released the 'pressure valve', which has resulted in the spike in clashes between various groups.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Wikipedia states that Christianity in Ethiopia dates back to the ancient Kingdom of Aksum, when King Ezana first adopted the faith. There are numerous and varied Christian denominations, of which the largest and oldest is the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, an Oriental Orthodox church centred in Ethiopia. The Orthodox Tewahedo Church was part of the Coptic Orthodox Church until 1959, when it was granted its own Patriarch by Coptic Orthodox Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of All Africa Cyril VI.

More than 59% of Ethiopians are professing Christians, while approximately 19% are Evangelical. Evangelicalism is growing at a faster rate than even the general population, in excess of 4.3%. According to the World Christian Database, Ethiopia had about 900,000 self-identifying Evangelicals in 1970, about 3% of its total population. By 2015, that number had swelled to almost 19 million, or 19% of Ethiopians. A June 2019 article in *Christianity Today* asks "Is the world's next missions movement in Ethiopia?" and takes a closer look at the roots and growth of Evangelicalism. They mention the southern region of Sidama where foreign missionaries had planted churches, with a number of them losing their lives in the process. Sidama congregations swore an unconventional oath in response to their deaths: "We must avenge their deaths by sending out our own missionaries." Despite persecution and turmoil, these churches began to do as they had promised. One denomination, the Ethiopian Kale Heywet (Word of Life) Church, now has reportedly more than 1,000 Sidama congregations supporting more than 250 missionaries across Ethiopia and other nations.

According to *Operation World*: "A missions vision was birthed out of suffering during the Marxist regime and the withdrawal of Western agencies during that time. Through the Evangelical Churches Fellowship (ECFE), a long-term strategy for evangelising Ethiopia has emerged, one that includes intercession, focus on unevangelised peoples and church mobilisation. The vision entails planting, cross-culturally, thousands more churches in all regions of Ethiopia and even sending to the Horn of Africa and South Asia."

The incredible Church growth in Ethiopia has clearly happened in the midst of tremendous challenges and persecution, and one can therefore anticipate that the Church will continue to be instrumental in the outworking of Ethiopia's current challenges. Mr Abiy is the son of a Muslim father and an Orthodox mother and is, according to Orthodox sources, a professing Evangelical. One can see a Christlike attitude in his approach to confronting issues, always with the goal of peace and reconciliation. He and his government will need much prayer and tremendous support from Ethiopian believers to overcome the divisive elements in their country. What an incredible testimony it would be if Ethiopian believers of all the various ethnic groups could be "one" as Jesus prayed in John 17:22-23: "I have given them the glory that You gave Me, that they may be one as We are one—I in them and You in Me—so that they may

be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me.”

PRAY

- **For Ethiopia’s leaders to seek godly wisdom in negotiating the many challenges the nation is currently facing**
- **For a peaceful resolution to the current crisis**
- **For Ethiopian believers to be peacemakers and reconcilers across the many ethnic groups**

IMAGE SOURCE:

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