



Statement

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By International Crisis Group

Restoring Calm in Ethiopia after High-profile Assassinations

The shocking murders of five high-ranking officials have exposed the gravity of Ethiopia's crisis. To mitigate risks, politicians should refrain from doing or saying anything provocative, while the federal government and ruling elites take urgent steps to heal deep and dangerous internal rifts.

A series of assassinations on 22 June has jolted Ethiopia. That evening, in Amhara state, the country's second-largest federal region, gunmen killed regional leader Ambachew Mekonnen and two of his advisers. A few hours later, a bodyguard reportedly shot dead General Seare Mekonnen, chief of staff of Ethiopia's military, along with a retired officer, at the general's home in the capital, Addis Ababa. The Prime Minister's Office linked the killings and cited a coup attempt in Amhara, the federal government imposed an internet blackout across the country – still in effect – and the military launched a manhunt for the alleged mastermind, the hardline Amhara security chief named Asaminew Tsige. State media announced that Asaminew was killed by the military in a firefight on 24 June.

For now, order appears to have returned, in both Addis and Bahir Dar, seat of the Amhara

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regional government. Still, the events laid bare the extent of the country's political crisis. To prevent an escalation, politicians from all camps should avoid inflammatory speech or actions. The authorities should take urgent steps to convene discussions – including considering mediation by respected Ethiopians – to calm the wrangling within the governing Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) on issues including power sharing, territorial disputes and demands in certain regions for greater autonomy. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed should consult broadly on General Seare's replacement to minimise suspicions of ethnic favouritism.

Ethiopia's political crisis is, in a sense, an extension of the crisis within the EPRDF. Since taking office in April 2018, Prime Minister Abiy has carried out significant reforms at breakneck speed, overhauling the federal security apparatus, making peace with neighbouring Eritrea, releasing political prisoners and inviting exiles back home. These steps, while long overdue, have come at a cost: they weakened the unity of the EPRDF, an alliance of four regional parties that has controlled all tiers of government from the federal to the village level since 1991 and routinely used repressive tactics to sideline challengers. Security reform in particular altered the balance of power in the central government by reducing the number of top officials from the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), one of the EPRDF's four component parties, representing the Tigray minority that

had long dominated the ruling coalition and security apparatus.

One upshot is that ethno-nationalist parties are presently on the rise in Ethiopia's regional states, pushing strident agendas and presenting themselves as true defenders of communal interests. The EPRDF parties – themselves created to govern autonomous federal states and represent regional demands in the capital, as per Ethiopia's ethnic federalist system – now feel compelled to outflank them. The heightened ethno-nationalist rhetoric contributes to intercommunal violence, which over the past eighteen months has reached levels unprecedented in many decades in Ethiopia.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the two most populous regional states, Amhara and Oromia. In the former, the one-year-old National Movement of Amhara challenges the EPRDF's Amhara Democratic Party (ADP) by presenting itself as the standard bearer of Amhara interests. It is pressing territorial claims on neighbouring Tigray region and asserting that it would stop the "persecution" of Amharas living outside Amhara state. In the case of Oromia region, leaders of a formerly exiled insurgency, the Oromo Liberation Front, returned in September 2018 amid joyous demonstrations, and on the understanding they would continue its struggle for Oromo rights and autonomy through peaceful and democratic means. Yet since the movement's return, the military has confronted armed groups associated with it in western Oromia.

Against this backdrop, the 22 June assassinations are ominous signals. The Prime Minister's Office claims that Asaminew orchestrated the Amhara chief administrator's killing to oust the regional government. It also has alleged that the two sets of murders – in Addis and in Bahir Dar – were connected, and part of the same plot. Whether or not these claims are correct, the killings highlight the volatility at the heart of the country's political system despite the enormous promise of the 2018 transition.

Conflicting accounts of the killings' aftermath have added fuel to the fire. The Prime

Minister's Office said on 23 June that authorities had detained Seare's assassin. The following day, the Federal Police said he committed suicide just after the killing, but then amended their position to say he was in hospital injured. The confused messaging has led to theories that contest the official account. One such theory is that an Oromo-led federal government used the crisis to assert control over Amhara region, which is indicative of a brewing power struggle between Oromia and Amhara. A tactical alliance against the TPLF between parts of the Amhara and Oromia EPRDF parties was critical to bringing Abiy to office last year, but is now under strain.

Asaminew has long been a controversial figure. He was jailed along with other ex-military colleagues in 2009, allegedly for being part of the Ginbot 7 opposition group, then banned, and plotting a coup against then Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's government. He was released in February 2018 as part of an EPRDF amnesty before Abiy became prime minister; nine months later, the ADP and the regional government appointed him security chief. His appointment was an indicator of the Amhara ruling party's increased chauvinism and appeared to be an attempt to claw back popular support from the Amhara ethno-nationalists: Asaminew championed many of the same issues as the National Movement of Amhara and backed efforts to reclaim land that Amhara state leaders say they lost to Tigray in the early 1990s. But his appointment drove the EPRDF parties further apart, worsening the Amhara-Tigrayan territorial dispute and fuelling Amhara-Oromo tensions. Oromo leaders suspected Asaminew of ordering violence against Oromo in an

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administrative enclave of Amhara region in April and training local Amhara militias across the state.

As a result, federal and regional leaders increasingly considered Asaminew a liability. Ambachew, appointed in March by the regional parliament as Amhara chief, was reportedly about to fire him before being murdered. Asaminew's death at the military's hands, and conflicting accounts of the other assassin's death, could further polarise the situation, particularly by sharpening discord between Amhara and Oromo. The 22 June killings confirm the dangers in handing security portfolios to hardliners like Asaminew who are ready to pander to extreme ethno-nationalists, from whichever of Ethiopia's ethnicities.

Addressing Ethiopia's many economic, political and security challenges will require time. For now, however, the most pressing threat is that the 22 June killings could trigger intensified power struggles and violent reactions in politically sensitive locations across the country. The EPRDF and government should take urgent steps to restore calm, including:

- A clear commitment by Prime Minister Abiy to try to rein in intra-EPRDF dissension, in recognition of the gravity of the country's political crisis. The EPRDF parties will have to resolve differences over sharing federal power, internal borders and regional autonomy. For now, however, they need to put those differences aside in order to help the government maintain order. That may be difficult, given the pressure they face from within their own ethnic constituencies, but it is necessary. All party leaders should be open to mediation by respected Ethiopians if they cannot ease problems in EPRDF forums and should publicly commit to work with the Reconciliation Commission, established by parliament in December 2018, to investigate the causes of past conflicts in order to prevent future violence.
- A concerted effort to counter damaging rumours. The federal and Amhara governments should, as best they can, keep the public informed about what they know and do not know as the situation unfolds. The Prime Minister's Office statement issued on 23 June went some way toward that goal, though it should release any evidence it has linking the Ambachew and Seare assassinations in order to quell speculation.
- A push to keep the military united and prevent its politicisation. Seare's assassination raised troubling questions about divisions within the military, though government sources stress that it was an isolated incident. For the most part, the military has remained cohesive and effective during the transition, even as Abiy has taken steps to reform it, notably by seeking to rebalance its upper echelons away from Tigrayan predominance. An initial challenge lies in the appointment of a new chief of staff. The next in line, Deputy Chief of Staff and Head of Military Operations Berhanu Jula, is an Oromo, and his appointment could fuel tensions with Amhara nationalists and other opponents stemming from allegations that Abiy favours his own Oromo ethnicity. The prime minister should consult across the political spectrum and take a consensual decision on Seare's replacement.

In tandem with these official steps, all politicians – inside and outside the EPRDF, and representing all the country's regions and peoples – ought to refrain from exploiting the situation through provocative rhetoric or hate speech, whether out of anger or as part of calculations of self-interest.

Ethiopia's transition has been an inspiration across Africa and beyond. The 22 June assassinations have shaken that transition but, if prudence and precaution prevail, they need not derail it.