



Summary
Online Discussion 14.10.2020

Ethiopia's political transition at a crossroads: How to get out of the current political crisis?

Background: Over the past few years, Ethiopia has seen a number of promising developments. The East-African country, Africa's second most populous nation, seemed to be on a path towards a successful transition to democracy, with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed spectacular opening of the country's political space and him securing a peace deal with bordering Eritrea that earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019.

However, the past months have seen an escalation of different crises, demonstrating the country's fragility: The murder of Oromo musician Hachalu Hundessa in June caused violent protests that led to the death of at least 200 people. The federal government cracked down on leaders of the opposition, including Oromo activist and media mogul Jawar Mohammed who is now facing charges of terrorism. At the same time, conflicts over land, resources, and political representation continue to persist. Recent regional elections in the Tigray region have increased tensions between this region and the Federal Government. Growing nationalism increases the risk of conflict between the various ethnic groups and regions.

Against this background, the **German African Foundation** invited to the online discussion „Ethiopia at a crossroads: How to get out of the current political crisis?“ with **Prof Zemelak Ayele**, **Dr Annette Weber**, **Dr Asfa-Wossen Asserate** and **Dr Abdeta D. Beyene**.

Welcome Remarks and Moderation

David Schwake

Secretary General, *German Africa Foundation*, Berlin

Discussion

Prof Zemelak Ayele

Centre for Federal Studies, Addis Ababa University

Dr Annette Weber

Foundation for Science and Politics, Berlin

Dr Asfa-Wossen Asserate

Chairman of the Board of Trustees, *German Africa Foundation*, Frankfurt

Dr Abdeta D. Beyene

Executive Director, *Center for Dialogue, Research and Cooperation*, Addis Ababa

Highlights:

- **Abiy Ahmed's opening policy was correct, but was not implemented consistently enough; this led to a loss of confidence on the part of the population.**
- **Ethiopia needs democratic federalism; this is the only way to save the multi-ethnic state from more authoritarianism.**

- **International actors should focus on building a national consensus and support local ownership.**
- **Dialogue within the country is central: the population's critical examination of Ethiopia's history and the development of a common national narrative.**

Political developments and the current situation in Ethiopia

In order to understand Ethiopia's current situation, **Prof Ayele** said, one must look at Ethiopia's historical development: Over the past 50 years, several reform opportunities have emerged that show similar patterns: Those who called for reforms, such as greater political participation, usually fought for radical change, leaving little room for compromise or rapprochement between reformers and the respective rulers. This, in turn, led to radical changes to deep social divisions and the current political system of ethnic federalism. Abiy's reform policies also threaten to lead to more division and confrontation.

Dr Annette Weber was ambivalent about whether Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia's prime minister since 2018, had liberalised the country too quickly: On the one hand, Abiy's convincing communication made it clear that the participation and involvement of the entire population in the reform process was explicitly desired. However, this had changed since he met with resistance. Where bridges were built in the past, Abiy Ahmed is now closing the doors, **Weber** said. Ahmed's capacity for integration and openness has been lost. The above-mentioned patterns of behaviour, which started with a reform agenda, could lead to authoritarianism. Therefore, **Dr Weber** concluded that Ahmed had not moved too fast, but that the momentum had waned. While Ahmed's recognition had been steadily increasing in many regions since 2018, the question remained as to how changes would be implemented. It was important to show the population, especially in Tigray, that they can participate in the country's future. Ahmed's decision to open the country's political life was right, but it should have been carried out more consistently. Restoring the public confidence in Ahmed would be difficult. This makes it all the more important to deal appropriately with those affected and with the Tigray government.

For **Dr Beyene**, it was of particular importance that national elections are held within the next year. Then the legitimacy of the government would be restored.

Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia

According to **Dr Beyene**, Tigray's current situation is caused by the fact that Ethiopia is stuck in a development process; the government has been restructured, and federalism has had different effects on the ethnic groups. While, according to **Dr Beyene**, federalism has solved some problems, new ones have been created. The main challenge now is to see how the government will work together with the regional governments, especially with regard to the institutionalisation of federalism. While federalism was viewed positively in Germany, it was strongly criticised in Ethiopia. According to **Dr Asserate**, ethnic federalism is disastrous for the country, as it ethnicises politics - and thus leads to dictatorial rule. Ethiopia would need a "democratic federalism" that changes the population's understanding of a multi-ethnic state. He hopes that Abiy Ahmed will push through such a model; with the founding of the ethnically independent *Prosperity Party* he has already taken a promising direction

Ethiopian identity and the impact of a possible disintegration of the country

Prof Ayele explained that Ethiopia was still in the process of state-building; a national narrative common to all was yet missing. **Dr Asserate**, on the other hand, was convinced that there was an Ethiopian identity. Only those politicians who had no real understanding of Ethiopia's history did not believe in a common identity. However, there was a common and strong bond within the Ethiopian people, based on the common anti-colonial past. Ethiopia must be preserved as a nation state.

Dr Annette Weber pointed out that Ethiopia is the leading nation in the Horn of Africa. If Ethiopia were to withdraw due to internal disintegration, this could lead to destabilisation of the entire region. Ethiopia's future must therefore be viewed primarily in a regional context. Ethiopia's success is crucial for the entire region. The country's infrastructure would also only function if the country was preserved in its present form.

Possible support from external actors - Role of social media

Asked how and whether international actors can and should support Ethiopia on its path to democracy, **Dr Beyene** replied that the Horn of Africa is a very complex region with various external actors. All neighbouring states had to accept Ethiopia's legitimacy and cooperate with the government. The international community should promote the creation of a national consensus and the participation and local ownership of the local population.

The role of social media in ethnicisation was remarkable. Only a few years ago, social media played a positive role, but at the moment they are rather negative for Ethiopia's future, said **Dr Annette Weber**. However, a further blockade of social media by the government is no longer an option; a dialogue is necessary; refusing to engage in a debate will, according to **Dr Annette Weber**, only exacerbate the opposing positions.