

Attempted Coup in Ethiopia

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Global Research, June 26, 2019

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Early in the morning of June 22, an orchestrated coup attempt was made against the executive leadership of Amhara Regional Government of Ethiopia, north of Addis Ababa.

A “hit squad” led by Amhara’s security chief **Brig Gen Asaminew Tsige** burst into a meeting in the state offices of Amhara’s capital, Bahir Dar, and shot **Governor Dr. Ambachew Mekonnen** and his adviser **Ezez Wassie**. The men were “gravely injured in the attack and later died of their wounds. **Attorney General Migbaru Kebede** also sustained serious injuries.

Several hours later, in what seemed like a coordinated attack, the Chief of Staff of National Defence Forces **General Seare Mekonnen** was killed in his home by his bodyguard in Addis Ababa as part of a ploy to seize power in the northern region of Amhara. Also shot dead was a visiting retired **General Gezai Abera**. Bodyguard shot himself but is being treated for his injuries.



The coup was masterminded by Brig Gen Asaminew Tsige (image on the right), who was serving as head of government’s Peace & Security Bureau, along with some others. He was given amnesty and released from prison last year after remaining in jail for nine years for allegedly plotting a coup.

It was stated that the coup was meant to create chaos and division in the military, and that the situation was under control and that there were no divisions within the military.

PM Abiy Ahmed urged Ethiopians to unite against “evil” forces set on dividing the country. Flags flew at half-mast after the government declared a day of mourning to mark the deaths of loyalists. Gen Seare and Amhara Governor Ambachew Mekonnen were close allies of the Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. The slain generals were laid to rest with full honors and during the funeral rites, the PM and the people wept bitterly.

Asaminew Tsige was killed on 24 June as he attempted to escape from his hideout in Amhara’s capital. 180 plotters have been arrested and hunt for the rest is going on.

The point to note is that the slain Gen Seare and Gen Gezai Abera hailed from the minority Tigray ethnic group, while Brig Gen Asaminew who hatched the coup plot was part of the second largest ethnic Amhara group. Ethnic rivalry seem to be the driving force behind the coup.

Since coming to power last year in April, Abiy Ahmed lifted martial law, and has initiated sweeping political and economic reforms, the opening of major state-owned sectors to private investment, and reining in the security services. He has released thousands of political prisoners, including opposition figures once sentenced to death, lifted bans on political parties and some outlawed separatist groups. He prosecuted officials accused of gross human rights abuses, but his government is battling mounting violence. He moved the country towards democratization.

His efforts have been directed to open up the once isolated, security-obsessed Horn of Africa country of 100 million people by loosening the iron-fisted grip of his predecessors like Afwerki.

Although Abiy's reforms in Africa's second-most populous country have won him widespread international praise, and are widely popular at home, some members of the previous regime are unhappy with the changes. His shake-up of the military and intelligence services has earned him powerful enemies, while his government is struggling to contain Ethiopia's myriad ethnic groups fighting the federal government and each other for greater influence and resources.

Abiy has survived a number of threats and a grenade attack. Ethnic bloodshed – long held in check by the state's iron grip – has flared up in many areas, including Amhara, where the regional government was led by Ambachew Mekonnen.

In Amhara State, the people have a feeling that they were marginalised, and individuals that were suspected to be behind the coup said that Amhara people have never been subordinated. So besides the ethnic factor, this sense of grievance and victimhood is driving the nationalist movement.

On external front, Abiy mended fences with neighboring Eritrea with which it was at war from 1998 to 2000 by accepting a peace agreement. He made a sincere effort to negotiate a truce between protestors and the military in Sudan but his plan was rejected by transitional military council in Khartoum.

Ethiopia is Africa's oldest independent country and is also the continent's second most populous after Nigeria, with 102.5 million inhabitants from more than 80 different ethnic groups. It has one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, but a vast number of young Ethiopians are without work. Ethiopia is a key regional ally of the U.S. in the restive Horn of Africa region.

Amhara, whose emperors ruled Ethiopia for over a century, struggled to accept the loss of power after the fall of the communist Derg military junta in 1991 which gave way to the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition of four parties that has ruled ever since. One of these is the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP), and with the EPRDF severely weakened after years of turmoil in the country, its members are finding themselves out-muscled by nationalist parties within the region.

Why did the coup take place?

Brig Gen Asaminew hails from Amhara, had a reputation for hardline ethnic nationalism and had previously called for the Amhara people to have greater autonomy. Earlier this month, in a video on social media, he had openly advised the Amhara to arm themselves. He had a bad relationship with the Tigray regional government as well. Since long he had been aspiring to seize power. The bigger motive was not to topple the government, since Asaminew didn't have sufficient means and followers to do so, but his aim was to kill top Generals close to Abiy. And to cause further divisions in the military, which is the main source of power.

Challenges for Abiy

The coup attempt shows the seriousness of the political crisis in Ethiopia, where efforts by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to push through reforms have unleashed a wave of unrest. These tragic incidents demonstrate the depth of Ethiopia's political crisis.

Former army colonel Abiy is faced with a potentially explosive situation that could snowball if not handled correctly. The pernicious political atmosphere is symbolic of Ethiopia's tough changeover from a one-party state to democracy and raises questions whether Abiy [could bring lasting stability](#). Ethiopia has gargantuan societal divisions. Abiy's wide ranging reforms haven't eased the ethnic tension, economic challenges, and institutional corruption that has bedeviled the nation. As of April this year, an estimated 3.2 million people were displaced by conflict and drought.

107 political parties are divided between Ethio-nationalists and Ethno-nationalists. Both blame each other and are ripping apart the social fabric. Partisan media is adding fuel to fire. Due to stunted economy, problem of unemployment has not been overcome due to which the youth is frustrated. People dislike Abiy's soft approach towards wrongdoers.

Abiy is focusing mainly on stabilizing macroeconomic imbalances by re-negotiating loan deals and taking stringent austerity measures. No meaningful headway has been made due to status quo loving non-cooperative bureaucracy, which scoffs at reforms. Politics driven by interests of elites at the cost of neglecting the masses, lack of justice, prevalent endemic of corruption and poverty are major causes of unrest.

Competition is especially heating up with the promise of holding national parliamentary elections in 2020. Several opposition groups have called for the polls to be held on time despite the unrest and displacement. Abiy remains the best hope for Ethiopia's stability and prosperity. He needs to win elections with majority to be able to complete his reforms, unite the country and chart a common future.

Lessons learnt. Snakes will remain snakes; no mercy to snakes which are in the habit of biting the hand feeding them. Like Abiy, we had committed this mistake of freeing Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and later milking the snakes. Some similarities can be seen between challenges faced by Abiy and Imran Khan

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