

The Sidama Region and Ethiopia's "Perfect Storm"

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The last-minute compromise deal by the Sidama Liberation Movement and the Ethiopian government to delay the former's planned declaration of a new regional state until an upcoming referendum in December doesn't solve the deeper problem of the country's contentious internal borders but instead means that this issue will play a leading role in the "perfect storm" that's brewing ahead of next year's general elections.

Ethiopia narrowly averted its second possible collapse in less than as many months after the [last-minute compromise deal](#) between the Sidama Liberation Movement and the federal government, which followed the potentially existential crisis that was barely avoided after last month's failed coup attempt in the Amhara Region.

At that time, a radical nationalist figure tried to violently seize control of the country's historic heartland in a bid to put a stop to PM Abiy's far-reaching reforms, which could have plunged the East African nation of over 100 million people [back into civil war](#) had he succeeded. The root cause of that dramatic event was the rogue security chief's extreme dissatisfaction with the new leader's tacit moves towards transforming the state into the federation that it's constitutionally supposed to have been this entire time, which implies an eventual change of Ethiopia's contentious internal borders beforehand if this outcome is to be sustainable.

It's these interlinked reforms that strike fear in the hearts of the country's myriad ethno-nationalists because of the impossibility of perfectly executing them without one or another group claiming that this was at their expense. Although he didn't mean to, the "Ethiopian Gorbachev" opened up the [Pandora's Box of ethno-regionalist tensions](#) that had previously been held shut by his predecessors' firm hand, and in accordance with the precepts of [Hybrid War](#), it seems as though he's losing control of these pre-existing identity conflicts and has inadvertently sparked a self-sustaining cycle of unrest as a result. It wasn't supposed to be this way, of course, since his [strategic calculation](#) last year to remove the terrorist designation from several armed opposition groups was designed to preclude any real possibility of that scenario transpiring in this ultra-sensitive context, but Ethiopia's administrative-territorial contentions are apparently too serious of a concern to smooth over.

This brings the analysis around to discussing the latest developments in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR). The Sidama people, who constitute an important plurality in this highly diverse part of the country and are based around its capital city, wanted to declare their own separate regional state in accordance with Article 47.3 of the [Ethiopian Constitution](#). That entails holding a referendum within one year of a "two-

thirds majority of the members of the Council of the Nation, Nationality or People concerned” approving this demand and presenting it to the State Council. The Sidama Liberation Movement says that they did this last year but that the government ignored them, hence why they wanted to go ahead with their unilateral declaration on Thursday prior to them agreeing to the National Election Board’s promise to hold their sought-after referendum in December.

That doesn’t solve the larger problem of Ethiopia’s administrative-territorial problems but merely delays the initiation of its settlement until the end of the year, which is nevertheless important because tackling it now so soon after the Amhara coup attempt could have risked exacerbating ethno-regionalist tensions between the Amhara & Tigray, Oromo & Somali, and other much larger nationalities within the country who have already been engaged in so many violent clashes over their titular regions’ borders that the East African state now has the [world’s largest internally displaced population](#). Had the last-minute compromise not been struck, then the much larger ethnic groups could have followed the smaller Sidamas’ footsteps by unilaterally revising the disputed borders with their neighbors and immediately worsening Ethiopia’s many local conflicts to the point of once again threatening to plunge the country into civil war.

Even in the “best-case scenario” that peace prevails until the Sidamas’ December referendum, this worst-case scenario could simply return because the root problem hasn’t been addressed, though the government will probably be forced to finally tackle it next year due to Article 48’s two clauses about the process that must be followed for changing state borders in the event that the vote is a success. That would expectedly set into motion the aforementioned course of events that was only delayed by the last-minute compromise, but it still buys the authorities precious time to finalize their plans for dealing with it. Having said that, it’s very dangerous that this development is occurring in the run-up to next year’s first free and fair elections because it risks making the issue of administrative-territorial reform the cause around which all ethnic parties will rally.

Ethiopia is a cosmopolitan country of over 80 ethnic groups where no single one commands a statistical majority, so it’s entirely possible that the devolution process could quickly spiral out of control and ultimately lead to the state’s dissolution if Hobbesian conflicts break out between its many different people throughout the course of its transformation into an “[Identity Federation](#)”. The Sidama and their struggle for state sovereignty within Ethiopia is but a trigger for forcing the government to implement Article 48 and thus create the precedent for the country’s much larger and more geographically dispersed nationalities to demand the same for resolving their many internal border disputes as well. The “perfect storm” is therefore brewing, one which could throw Ethiopia’s very existence as a unified state into jeopardy and catalyze the geopolitical re-engineering of Africa that might be exploited by foreign actors in the [new “Scramble for Africa”](#).

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