

AFRICA RISK CONSULTING

Country briefing – Ethiopia

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Summary

Military and political defections hit the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front. Four pilots defect to the Eritrean-backed opposition group Ginbot 7, and former Addis Ababa mayor Arkebe Equbay defects to the United States. The defection of the air force pilots highlights corruption in the Ethiopian National Defence Force but does not raise the threat posed by Ginbot 7 to the government. Federal Ethics and Anti-Corruption prosecutors file charges against 44 people. The government cracks down on the Party Semayawi in a strategy which will boost influence of the security services.

1.1 Defections highlight limited room for political opposition

Four senior pilots of the **Ethiopian Air Force** defected and joined the opposition **Ginbot 7 Movement** in September.¹ In a separate development in the same month, former **Addis Ababa** mayor and senior **Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF)** official, **Arkebe Equbay**, defected to the **United States**.² The defections serve as a reminder that the lack of any significant electoral challenge to the ruling **Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)** will perpetuate opposition outside formal politics.

The Ethiopian government has yet to comment on the air force defections reported on the opposition **Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT)** which is known for its close ties with, and sympathies for, Ginbot 7. While there is no independent verification of the story, ESAT provided names and ranks of the soldiers, as well as details of their military service in **Somalia** and **Darfur**.

¹ ESAT, 18 Sept 2013

² www.EthiopianNewsForum.com

Politically motivated defections are a fairly common phenomenon in Ethiopia. Most disaffected soldiers head to **Eritrea**, but in this case the defectors have joined Eritrean backed opposition.³ In 2005, eight air force pilots undergoing training in **Israel** claimed asylum at the Eritrean embassy in **Tel Aviv**. In 2006, over 300 Ethiopian troops including Brigadier General **Kemal Gelchu** - associated with the rebel **Ogaden National Liberation Front** - along with his trusted colonels also defected to Eritrea.⁴ In 2005, four pilots fled to **Djibouti** citing a lack of political freedom in Ethiopia. Djibouti returned the pilots, and a military tribunal later sentenced them to death.⁵ Senior government officials also defect. While Equbay was once considered apparent heir to former prime minister **Meles Zenawi (1995-2012)**, he was victim of prime minister **Hailemariam Desalegn's** policy of introducing fresh blood into the EPRDF and stepped down following the TPLF congress in March 2013.⁶ Hailemariam faces a fine balancing act: reforming the EPRDF [See *ARC August briefing*] while keeping the party's officials on side.

The pilots' defection may have some strategic benefits for Ginbot 7 which seeks to depose the EPRDF. The Ethiopian government stands to lose the intelligence and technical expertise that the pilots hold to both Ginbot 7 and, by extension, Eritrea.⁷ This is the main reason behind the government's tough stance on defectors. However, the pilots may be of little use to Ginbot 7 as the group has little meaningful structure or resources, either inside or outside Ethiopia, to pose a significant challenge to the Ethiopian government.⁸ Ginbot 7 has no armed wing, but is a diaspora group that draws its support from the educated elite of the **Amhara** and **Gurage** ethnic groups. Its leader **Berhanu Nega** is a **United States (US)** trained economist who was elected mayor of Addis Ababa In 2005. He refused to take his position in parliament, accusing the EPRDF of massive electoral fraud and the killing of civilian protesters. Following arrest and imprisonment, he moved to the US from where he called for a coup d'état to overthrow Meles. Military officials of Amharic descent have previously been linked with Ginbot 7.⁹ In December 2009, an Ethiopian court found 33 people, mostly former military officers, guilty of collaborating with Ginbot 7 in "mutinous acts" to overthrow the government by assassinating ministers and bombing key infrastructure.

³ Source, East Africa analyst

⁴ Source, East Africa analyst

⁵ Ethiopian Review, 19 May 2008

⁶ Source, East Africa analyst

⁷ Source, East Africa analyst

⁸ Source, East Africa analyst

⁹ Source, East Africa analyst

The ESAT report claimed the pilots had become disillusioned by epidemic corruption in the military. Corruption in the **Ethiopian National Defence Force** is notable in what is otherwise a well-disciplined military. **Transparency International (TI)** ranks Ethiopia in Band D- in its **Government Defence Anti-Corruption Index 2013**, concluding there is a high risk of military related corruption.¹⁰ Of particular concern to TI are the military budget and the secrecy around auditing of military spending. Although there is acquisition and procurement planning, it is shrouded in secrecy. Ethnicity and political affiliation continue to influence military selection processes; **Tigrayan** officers associated with the taking of Addis Ababa in 1991 continue to dominate the upper echelons of the military.¹¹

1.2 Corruption cases continue

Federal Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission prosecutors have filed charges against 44 people.¹² The charges relate to the arrests in May of senior officials at the **Ethiopian Revenue and Customs Authority (ERCA)** and prominent businessmen. Those charged at the Federal High Court include former ERCA director general **Melaku Fenta** and **Semachew Kebede**, owner of Addis Ababa's **Intercontinental Hotel**. The exact charges remain opaque and further hearings are scheduled for October. The individuals have been denied bail. Ethiopian authorities requested 14 days extra to continue investigations into businessman **Mehereteab Abraha**, brother of TPLF stalwart **Seye Abraha**, and **Begziabhere Alebel**, a major shareholder of **Ultimate Plan**, a construction consulting company. The prosecutors dropped charges against three people. It would not have been a surprise had all the charges been dropped. Hailemariam meant for the arrests to be a warning to EPRDF officials that he was no more permissive than his predecessor and their initial detention should have been sufficient to demonstrate this.¹³ One of the most notable features of the original case was the involvement of the **National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS)** in gathering evidence in the case.¹⁴ The government had previously insisted that the mandate of the NISS limited it to anti-terrorism. The Ethiopian judicial system is often guided by the political interests of the EPRDF, suggesting that further information about the role of the NISS in monitoring those conducting business in Ethiopia is unlikely.

1.3 Blue Party protests to continue despite crackdown...

¹⁰ Transparency International, "Government Defence Anti-Corruption Index 2013"

¹¹ Bloomberg, 14 Feb 2013

¹² Addis Fortune, 1 Sept 2013

¹³ Source, Ethiopian analyst, Addis Ababa

¹⁴ Source, Ethiopian analyst, Addis Ababa

The opposition **Semayawi Party (Blue Party)** continues to test the Hailemariam administration's recent, and relative, tolerance for public demonstrations. In September, the group vowed to continue holding demonstrations, despite Ethiopian authorities detaining 100 members.¹⁵ Should the security services take the lead in cracking down on opposition movements, it will increase their political influence. The Semayawi Party had planned to protest on 1 September, but police raided their offices in Addis Ababa the previous day. The party accused the police of using violence in detaining their members and confiscating equipment. Semayawi Party chairman **Yilkal Getnet** said that all members were subsequently released but that the party would seek compensation through legal redress. The Ethiopian government organised a self-styled "anti-extremism" rally in **Meskel Square** for the same time as the Semayawi Party had been planning to protest. While more than 40,000 demonstrators attended, some complained that local authorities had forced them to.¹⁶ Following their initial protest in Addis Ababa in June that attracted thousands of protesters, the Semayawi Party said it would organise another demonstration within three months if the government did not listen to their demands.

2 Implications

The defections of the air force pilots are a major statement to the EPRDF which has invested a lot of resources in minimising Ginbot 7 activities. The government is likely to respond by tightening its control of telecommunications systems, especially the Internet and radio broadcasts which are Ginbot 7's main tool for propaganda communication. Arrests of ESAT journalists are probable. As embarrassing as the defections are, they will not increase the strategic threat that Ginbot 7 poses to the government. Berhanu's backing of Eritrea's totalitarian president **Isaias Afewerki** (1991-present) and the support he offers Ethiopian rebel groups have isolated Ginbot 7 from other opposition groups and damaged Berhanu's credibility. Most Ethiopians view Eritrea's government as worse than their own. Any attempt to form a coalition between Ginbot 7 and separatist rebel groups including the ONLF are unlikely as Ginbot 7 advocates a strong federalist system. The defections will not affect the possibility of negotiations between Ethiopia and Eritrea over the contested border regions as these remain a distant possibility amid tense relations between the two states.

A coup against Hailemariam - the first Ethiopian leader without a military background - remains highly unlikely in the medium term. Senior posts are occupied by ethnic Tigrayan officers loyal to the EPRDF, while ethnic **Oromo** and Amhara officers are regularly purged on suspicion of disloyalty. The

¹⁵ VOA, 2 Sept 2013

¹⁶ Sudan Tribune, 5 Sept 2013



risk of a coup will increase should Hailemariam's reforms accelerate and the military see their influence threatened.

The anti-corruption charges will not change the business culture whereby close contact with government officials is necessary for big businesses to operate successfully in the country.

There was surprise in political and diplomatic circles when the Ethiopian government allowed the Semayawi Party's protest to go ahead in June. The recent arrests do not necessarily mean that authorities will ban further protests. However, the government certainly intended them to be a shot across the bows, and let the Semayawi Party know that future demonstrations will be at their discretion. The heavy handed approach of authorities increases the risk that future protests will result in sporadic localised violence.