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Ethiopia's House of Federation (upper chamber) votes in favour of a one-year extension to the mandate of incumbent national and regional governments past the five-year term limit, with elections to be held once "international health institutions have deemed the threat from coronavirus to be over". Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan resume protracted and bitter talks to resolve a dispute over the \$5 billion Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Ethiopia's foreign ministry says it is dismayed at recent cross border incursions along its common border with Sudan and calls for Sudanese authorities to allow for diplomacy to lead the search for an amicable solution.

Government rule extended past constitutional limit

Ethiopia's House of Federation (upper chamber) on 10 June voted in favour of a one-year extension to the mandate of incumbent national and regional governments past the five-year term limit, with elections to be held once "international health institutions have deemed the threat from **coronavirus to be over**".¹ The extension of prime minister **Abiy Ahmed Ali** (2018-present) and the ruling **Prosperity Party's (PP)** term beyond September is likely to widen ethnic-political division in the country and herald the end of the country's transition to democracy.

The **National Electoral Board of Ethiopia** declared in late March that it would not be able to conduct the country's sixth general election as scheduled in August, due to the coronavirus outbreak. The matter was referred to the House of Federation for legal interpretation, which, in turn, referred the matter to the **Council of Constitutional Inquiry**. The upper house based its decision to temporarily extend the parliamentary terms on the commission's recommendation.

As expected, opposition parties oppose the decision to extend the current government's time in power. They claim that it is a power-grab rather than a constitutional necessity for the betterment of the country's democracy. The Council of Constitutional Inquiry is not an independent constitutional court, but merely an advisory body to the upper house of parliament, which is controlled by the ruling party. This means that the decision was not void of political interest and Ethiopia's opposition parties have not validated the decision. Opposition **Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC)** key figure **Jawar Mohammed** – the face of anti-government protests – responded to the house of federation's decision by saying he was not surprised at the move and that the constitutional consultation panel was a "sham show".²

*"So they exploited this divine intervention to do what they always wanted, stay in power as long as possible. Because they know, if election is held, even if they try to rig it, they will be done."*³

Opposition **Oromo Liberation Front** chairman **Dawud Ibsa** has said that the house of federation vote "does not have any constitutional basis" and that his party would meet soon to figure out how to respond.⁴

Parliament's approval came two days after house of federation speaker **Keria Ibrahim**, a leading member of the opposition **Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)**, resigned on 9 June over the

¹ Ethiopian News Agency, 10 Jun 2020

² Africanews, 11 Jun 2020

³ Africanews, 11 Jun 2020

⁴ AFP, 10 Jun 2020

deferred general elections, saying “*the constitution is being violated and an authoritarian government is being formed.*”⁵ **Somali Regional State** vice president **Aden Farah** was elected in Ibrahim’s place. Ibrahim’s resignation is a sign of the growing split between the PP and the TPLF over the handling of the constitutional crisis.

The rift between the PP and the TPLF is likely to widen considerably. The TPLF has declared the government’s actions invalid and authoritarian, and has threatened to hold its own elections in the **Tigray** region, which it still controls (see *ARC Briefing Ethiopia May 2020*). **United States (US)**-based think tank **International Crisis Group**’s senior Ethiopia analyst **William Davison** has concerns that the increasing division could lead to election boycotts, protests and more political instability.

*“If [the TPLF] reject this plan ... protests or election boycotts could become a reality, reducing the chances of successful competitive polls in 2021 ... That would mean more political instability and undermine the planned democratic transition.”*⁶

Some opposition parties have called for a transitional government once the incumbent government’s mandate ends in October. Abiy has ruled this out, claiming that it is unworkable. In a speech to the nation on 8 June, Abiy called on opposition members to be patient amid concerns that the postponement of elections will create a constitutional crisis and stoke political tension. He said:

*“If the election is extended, it is only by months, so the opposition parties need to have patience for a few months, prepare and within the time-frame given by the electoral board, carry out a democratic election that is acceptable by all.”*⁷

Abiy in his message said that the process has addressed the current challenges while “*helping the country to experience democracy*” and that “*the decision is a decision for the people, not for the government or parties.*”⁸ Abiy also said that the ruling PP opposed the postponement of the election and that his party is eager to go to the polls.

Failing negotiations over Nile dam raise security risks ...

Ethiopia, **Egypt** and **Sudan** resumed protracted and bitter talks this month to resolve their dispute over the \$5 billion **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)** that Ethiopia is building on the **Blue Nile**.⁹ While any negotiation is better than none, the latest talks have already been tarnished by accusations made by **Cairo** and **Addis Ababa** against one another, illustrating just how far off an agreement is, and how fractured relations are. The dam has been a source of rising tension in the region amid fears over water security. With Ethiopia planning to start filling the dam next month, at the start of the rainy season, time to find a resolution is running out.

The latest round of negotiations has been largely unsuccessful and has led Egypt to accuse Ethiopia of rejecting “*fundamental issues*” at the heart of the negotiations. Egypt’s irrigation ministry said in a statement on 14 June that Ethiopia was looking to renegotiate a number of points of contention, which “*demonstrated that there are many fundamental issues that Ethiopia continues to reject.*”¹⁰ Irrigation ministry spokesman **Mohammed el-Sebaei** accused Ethiopia of bogging down the talks with a new proposal to start from a blank slate, which he called “*concerning*”.¹¹

Ethiopia’s water and energy ministry the same day said el-Sebaei’s comments were “*regrettable*” and that if the ongoing negotiations failed, it would be because of Egypt’s preference for a colonial-based agreement,

⁵ Tigray TV, 9 Jun 2020

⁶ New York Times, 10 Jun 2020

⁷ Borkena, 12 Jun 2020

⁸ Borkena, 12 Jun 2020

⁹ Al Jazeera, 14 Jun 2020

¹⁰ Egypt Today, 15 Jun 2020

¹¹ Egypt Today, 15 Jun 2020

“Egypt’s obstinacy to maintain a colonial-based water allocation agreement that denies Ethiopia and all the upstream countries their natural and legitimate rights”.¹²

The failed talks have led to an escalation of security concerns. Ethiopia’s dam project is Egypt’s most pressing national security threat due to its reliance on the river – both economic and the survival of millions of Egyptians. Egypt’s highest security body, the **National Security Council**, has accused Ethiopia of “*buying time*” and seeking to begin filling the dam’s reservoir in July without reaching a deal with Egypt and Sudan. Egypt’s foreign minister, **Sameh Shoukry**, said on 15 June that “*Ethiopia’s intransigence would push Egypt to seek other options, such as resorting to the **United Nations Security Council [UNSC]** to prevent any harm to international peace and security.*”¹³ Military action is a preferred strategy over diplomacy by some in Egypt’s government-affiliated media.¹⁴ Abiy has acknowledged this possibility and said on 22 October that his country is ready to field millions of troops to protect the dam should a war erupt over it.¹⁵ Ethiopia’s deputy army chief, **Birhanu Jula**, said his country will strongly defend itself and will not negotiate its sovereignty.

The Sudanese government has also looked to the intergovernmental security body. Sudan issued a letter to the UNSC on 2 June aligning itself with Egypt’s demand to stall the filling of the GERD until a comprehensive agreement is signed. Shoukry’s comments and Sudan’s letter cast serious doubts on the prospect of an agreement being found before the filling of the GERD reservoir commences.

The dispute between two of Africa’s most populous and powerful countries is the most serious threat to stability in the **Horn of Africa** region – which is why the international community is stepping in to mediate an equitable settlement. Previous negotiations came to an acrimonious halt in February after Ethiopia rejected a US-crafted deal and accused the US administration of siding with Egypt. The US’ dominance in the UNSC means an involvement by the international security body is likely to have an equally unconstructive outcome.

The GERD project was announced in 2011 and is the centrepiece of Ethiopia’s bid to become Africa’s biggest power exporter, generating more than 6,000 megawatts. Ethiopia’s minister of water, irrigation and electricity, **Seleshi Bekele**, expects the dam to start production by the end of 2020 and be fully operational by 2022.

... amid escalating border tensions with Sudan

Ethiopia’s foreign ministry on 31 May said it is dismayed at recent cross border incursions along its common border with Sudan and called for Sudanese authorities to allow for diplomacy to lead the search for an amicable solution.¹⁶ Diplomatic efforts to diffuse a security crisis on the border between Ethiopia and Sudan have been ongoing, but the situation on the ground has escalated over the past couple of weeks, with Ethiopian militias and Sudanese troops assembling forces in the area. Sudanese army spokesperson **Amer Mohamed Al Hassan** said on 28 May that Ethiopian militias backed by the Ethiopian army have attacked territories in **Gadaref State** in eastern Sudan since 26 May.¹⁷ According to Sudan’s military, recent cross-border attacks left at least one Sudanese soldier and a child dead. The cross-border skirmishes have harmed previously amicable relations between the neighbours and may impact tripartite negotiations over Ethiopia’s Nile dam project (see above).

The cause of the heightened border tension is not clear. **Bjorknes University College (Norway)** peace and conflict studies professor **Kjetil Tronvoll** has said, “*the interesting aspect is why there is new violence now and possibly also at a higher level than before.*”¹⁸ International Crisis Group senior Ethiopia analyst William Davison said:

¹² Al Jazeera, 14 Jun 2020

¹³ Egypt Today, 15 Jun 2020

¹⁴ Foreign Policy, 15 Nov 2019

¹⁵ Foreign Policy, 15 Nov 2019

¹⁶ Borkena, 31 May 2020

¹⁷ AA, 28 May 2020

¹⁸ DW, 4 Jun 2020

*"It is not clear exactly what triggered a flare-up of this long-standing border dispute. Sources suggest that Sudanese security forces may have responded to incursions by Ethiopian farmers, which in turn brought in Ethiopian security forces."*¹⁹

Tronvoll noted: *"If these allegations are true, then it is an escalation."*²⁰

Ethiopia has urged the two countries to pursue diplomacy as a means of resolving the border dispute. Last month, prime minister Abiy sent military chief **Adam Mohamed Mahmoud** to Sudanese capital **Khartoum** to ease the tensions. A solution is yet to be found.

The border dispute could complicate Ethiopia's plan to construct the GERD, but it does not appear that the heightened tensions are a cause of the dispute over the dam. The border tensions flared up around the same time as the dam negotiations restarted. However, Sudan, which initially backed the mega-dam project but later refused to sign on an initial agreement for Ethiopia to begin filling the dam, wrote to the UNSC on 2 June calling on it to urge Ethiopia and Egypt not to take unilateral action on the dam. This will damage relations with Addis Ababa, which could spill over to the dam negotiations.

Planner

1 Jul 2020 **(Africa) African Continental Free Trade Area** deadline for 90% tariff liberalisation;

10 Oct 2020 **(Ethiopia)** Mandate of the current administration expires;

Apr 2021 **(Ethiopia)** Earliest day Ethiopia's electoral board expects postponed elections to be held.

Chronology

14 Jun 2020 **(Egypt) Al Jazeera.** **Egypt** and **Sudan** say talks over **Ethiopia's** controversial dam project on the **Nile River** will resume on 15 June, amid Egyptian accusations that Ethiopia has sought to scrap "all agreements and deals" they had previously reached, and that Ethiopia continues to reject "many fundamental issues";

10 Jun 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) Ethiopian News Agency.** **House of Federation** (upper chamber) approves an extension to the mandate of the current parliament as well as regional parliaments and councils "until international health institutions have deemed the threat from **coronavirus** to be over";

10 Jun 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) AA.** **House of Federation** (upper chamber) elects **Somali Regional State** vice president **Aden Farah** as its new speaker after former speaker **Keria Ibrahim** quit on 9 June over the deferred general elections and the ensuing constitutional crisis;

9 Jun 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) CNBC Africa.** **African Development Bank** board of directors approves a \$1.2m grant to **Ethiopia's** government to finance a feasibility study for construction of a standard-gauge railway (SGR) link between Ethiopia and neighbouring **Sudan**;

9 Jun 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) Tigray TV.** **House of Federation** (upper chamber) speaker **Keria Ibrahim** quits over deferred general elections, saying "the constitution is being violated and an authoritarian government is being formed";

9 Jun 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) EMPEA.** **Ethos Private Equity** and **Proparco** invest \$22m in **54 Capital PE Advisors**-managed holding company **Turaco**, which holds a portfolio of fast-moving consumer goods assets in **Ethiopia**;

9 Jun 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) AA.** **United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance** says **Ethiopia's** humanitarian requirements for this year have more

¹⁹ DW, 4 Jun 2020

²⁰ DW, 4 Jun 2020

than doubled, as 16.5 million people are now in need of emergency food and non-food assistance, mainly due to **covid-19**-related multi-sector impacts;

8 Jun 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) AFP**. Prime minister **Abiy Ahmed** rules out forming a transitional government once his mandate expires in early October and calls on opposition parties to be patient amid concerns that the postponement of elections will stoke political tension;

8 Jun 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) AA**. Prime minister **Abiy Ahmed** vows to parliament that government will complete the construction of its \$5 billion **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam** project, with stalled negotiations with **Egypt** and **Sudan** set to resume on 9 June;

4 Jun 2020 **(East Africa) MEMO**. **South Sudan** foreign affairs ministry says information circulating social media about South Sudan's approval of **Egypt's** request to establish a military base near the **Ethiopian** border is unfounded;

3 Jun 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) AA**. Water minister **Seleshi Bekele** holds a virtual meeting with his **Sudanese** counterpart, **Yassir Abbas Mohammed**, over the resumption of the trilateral talks with **Egypt** on the **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam** project;

2 Jun 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) FANA**. Government reportedly launches an investigation into human rights violations allegedly committed by its security force between December 2018 and December 2019 in **Oromia** and **Amhara** regions;

2 Jun 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) Ethiopia Insights**. **Ethiopian Central Statistics Agency** says year-on-year inflation hit 22.9% in April 2020, the highest since 2012;

31 May 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) Borkena**. Foreign ministry says it is dismayed at recent cross border incursions along its common border with **Sudan** and calls for Sudanese authorities to allow for diplomacy to lead the search for an amicable solution;

30 May 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) AA**. Government rejects as being "one-sided" a recent human rights report by **United Kingdom**-based **Amnesty International** accusing security forces of committing "grave violations" in **Amhara** and **Oromo** states between December 2018 and December 2019;

28 May 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) AA**. **Sudanese** army spokesperson **Amer Mohamed Al Hassan** says **Ethiopian** militias backed by the Ethiopian army have attacked territories in **Gadaref State** in eastern Sudan since 26 May;

27 May 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) AA**. Party leaders, government officials and members of the **National Committee for Coordination of Public Participation** on the **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam** project meet and unite around the dam project;

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