

AFRICA RISK CONSULTING

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The fatal shooting by unidentified assailants of popular singer and Oromo activist Haacaaluu Hundeessaa leads to violent protests in capital Addis Ababa and across the country, and a three-week-long government-sanctioned internet shutdown. African Union-brokered negotiations between Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam end without agreement, with Ethiopia claiming to begin filling the dam this month. The coronavirus pandemic worsens a crisis in Ethiopia's news media sector, with a number of businesses forced into temporary closure.

Violence protests over assassination and long-held grievances

The fatal shooting on 29 June of popular singer **Haacaaluu Hundeessaa** – a prominent voice of the **Oromo**-led anti-government protest movement – by unidentified assailants led to violent protests in capital **Addis Ababa** and in the **Oromia Region** and a three week-long government-sanctioned internet shutdown.¹ The recent protests highlight the deep grievances held by Ethiopia's largest ethnic group over their historical exclusion from political power and the divisions in prime minister **Abiy Ahmed's** (2018-present) political heartland.

Officials reported at least 229 people were killed and 3,500 arrested in more than a week of unrest.² Local media outlets reported incidents of vandalism, arson, robbery and murder. Abiy responded to the violence by deploying police and military forces and blocking internet access. Protests have subsided following the security crackdown and businesses have mostly re-opened, but on 14 July the country entered its third week of internet shutdown.

Although the violent anti-government protests have gained international notoriety, they are not extraordinary in Ethiopia's recent political transition from authoritarianism to democracy. In fact, severe political instability has characterised the country's recent past and protests are growing in regularity, with most of the unrest occurring in the Oromia and **Amhara** regions. Abiy's responses to the most recent protests have enflamed long-simmering political tensions.

Abiy said the assassination represents "*coordinated attempts*" to destabilise Ethiopia and he has retaliated by arresting a number of key opposition leaders without clearly indicating the grounds for their arrest. Police arrested prominent Oromo activist and a possible frontrunner as Abiy's rival in upcoming general election **Jawar Mohammed**, and also shut down his media outlet, **Oromia Media Network**. Jawar's supporters deny his involvement in the murder and claim that the arrest was a political move to neutralise opposition politics – a claim that is supported by growing accusations of intolerance against Abiy by local and international rights organisations (see *ARC Briefing Ethiopia June 2020*). Police also arrested prominent Oromo opposition leader **Bekele Gerba** and prominent journalist and activist **Eskinder Nega**.

It is widely suspected that the assassination came from an anti-government Oromo group. Attorney general **Adanech Abebe** said on 10 July that authorities had arrested two suspects in connection with the shooting.³ The two unnamed suspects have not yet been formally charged. **Qatar**-based media organisation **Al Jazeera** reported that the attackers were acting on orders from anti-government

¹ Borkena, 10 Jul 2020

² AP, 8 Jul 2020

³ Borkena, 10 Jul 2020

group, the **Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)**.⁴ However, **United Kingdom**-based **BBC** reported that the suspects had acted on orders to kill Haacaaluu by a breakaway group from the OLF, called **Shane**, which had held three meetings with the suspects to plan Haacaaluu's assassination.⁵

The government shut down the entire country's Internet on 30 June.⁶ Global digital rights organisation **Access Now** senior policy analyst **Berhan Taye** said:

*"Access to credible information is essential at times of crisis and emergency, and this current internet shutdown is causing further confusion, powerlessness, and anxiety among Ethiopians and the diaspora."*⁷

Authoritarian governments frequently use internet shutdowns to quash activism and silence dissent. The Ethiopian government imposed a total of 274 hours of internet blackouts in 2019⁸ and shut off Internet in the Oromia region for three months between January and March this year. Internet shutdowns have intensified in severity and duration under the leadership of prime minister Abiy Ahmed.⁹ Global advocacy group **Human Rights Watch** warned: "

*"Rather than restoring calm, the authorities' internet shutdown, apparent excessive use of force, and arrest of political opposition figures could make a volatile situation even worse. The government should take prompt steps to reverse these actions or risk sliding deeper into crisis."*¹⁰

Abiy's actions will aggravate an already high level of ethnic nationalism. Oromo politicians argue that the government has arrested and killed Oromo people ever since the dispute over the political control of Addis Ababa, which triggered three years of violent protests that led to the resignation of former prime minister **Hailemariam Desalegn Boshe** (2012-2018) and Abiy's subsequent appointment in 2018. Abiy's decision to postpone a national election scheduled for August for one year in response to the **coronavirus** pandemic has exacerbated these grievances (see *ARC Briefing Ethiopia June 2020*).

GERD negotiations fail again over 'technical issues'

African Union (AU)-brokered negotiations between Ethiopia, **Egypt** and **Sudan** ended on 13 July without agreement on Ethiopia's disputed **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam** project on the **Blue Nile River**.¹¹ Officials present at the negotiations cited 'technical issues' over the unsuccessful talks – a point of contention is the mechanism to resolve further disputes.¹² Ethiopia wants disputes to be sorted out between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan and failing that, within the AU, while Egypt wants the right to appeal to international bodies such as the **United Nations (UN)**.

However, the problem is rooted in national politics in Ethiopia and Egypt and in geopolitics. It is likely that both sides are using the diplomatic dispute to whip up national support. As reputable regional news source **Africa Confidential** notes, there has been significant progress in the negotiations that began almost a decade ago, which may not be apparent given the current rhetoric between the governments.¹³ A cabinet minister in Sudan said 90% of the technical issues over the dam have been resolved.¹⁴ The key technical issue over how and when to fill the dam will not become urgent for at least another two years and an optimistic forecast sees filling of the dam taking longer than five years.

⁴ Al Jazeera, 3 Jul 2020

⁵ BBC, 3 Jul 2020

⁶ Access Now, 30 Jun 2020

⁷ Berhan Taye quoted in Business Insider, 2 Jul 2020

⁸ Top10VPN

⁹ NetBlocks.org, 30 Jun 2020

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, 1 Jul 2020

¹¹ Egypt Independent, 13 Jul 2020 and Bloomberg, 13 Jul 2020

¹² Source quoted by Bloomberg, 13 Jul 2020

¹³ Africa Confidential, 9 Jul 2020

¹⁴ Africa Confidential, 9 Jul 2020

So why are negotiations so tense? Prime minister Abiy has much to gain from the GERD project. Firstly, construction of the 6,000-megawatt hydropower facility, the largest in **Africa**, would be an immense and much-needed contribution to Ethiopia's economic development. Secondly, Abiy appears to be using the \$4 billion project to unite the nation over a common adversary, which will strengthen his hand in politics. An example of Abiy using the GERD project as a populist tool is evident in his initial accusation of Egypt as a suspect in the shooting of popular Omoro singer Haacaaluu Hundeessaa (see above).¹⁵ Abiy hinted that Haacaaluu may have been murdered by Egyptian security agents acting on orders from **Cairo** to stir up trouble. Although there is no evidence that the Egyptian government was involved in the assassination, Abiy said on 3 July:

*"Those external and internal forces who were not successful with the GERD issue have tried their utmost efforts to create chaos at this time."*¹⁶

The Egyptian government fears that the upstream dam will give Ethiopia control of water on which many Egyptians rely. The Egyptian government sees any unilateral filling as a threat to regional peace and security.

The numerous rounds of unsuccessful talks and an increasingly combative rhetoric have widened the diplomatic gulf between Ethiopia and Egypt. In a 19 June letter to the **United Nations Security Council** calling for its involvement in the dispute, the Egyptian government vowed to "*uphold and protect the vital interests of its people*" and said "*survival is not a question of choice, but an imperative of nature*".¹⁷ Egypt's foreign minister, **Sameh Shoukry**, on 19 June accused Ethiopia of "*warmongering*".¹⁸

Egyptian hackers launched a cyber-attack on a number of Ethiopian government websites at the end of June in connection with the GERD dispute.¹⁹ The hackers left messages on the homepage of an Ethiopian regional police force training centre threatening war over the Nile. However, there is no known link between the hackers and the Egyptian government.

The failed AU negotiations are likely to lead to a cooling-down period of several months. The region will be on tenterhooks during that period in the absence of a guarantee from the Ethiopian government that it will not start filling the dam before it reaches an agreement with Egypt and Sudan.

Local news outlets struggle amid coronavirus crisis

Ethiopia Insight journalist **Marew Abebe Salemot** reported on 18 June that the coronavirus pandemic is adding to a crisis in Ethiopia's news media sector, with a number of forced temporary closures and pleas to government for financial support.²⁰ Private news media was in a precarious position before the coronavirus pandemic reached the country, but the virus-induced restrictions have hit advertising revenue, causing businesses to either close or employ less staff. This is a worrying sign for Ethiopia's fragile democracy as fewer news outlets means less news coverage and a weaker check on government power.

Marew reported that local media outlets, such as **Addis Admass**, **The Reporter** and **Fitih** are reducing their printing volumes and circulation numbers, while others such as **Ghion Journal**, **Sheger Times** and **Berera** have had to close temporarily. Marew adds:

"The Reporter claims to have lost half of its advertising income; Nahoo TV similarly reported a loss of 80%... JTV Ethiopia, a private television channel operating since 2016, closed in May of this year citing low advertising revenue and inability to pay salaries. Addis Fortune reported

¹⁵ Al Jazeera, 3 Jul 2020

¹⁶ Prime minister Abiy Ahmed quoted in Africa Confidential, 9 Jul 2020

¹⁷ Securitycouncilreport.org, 19 Jun 2020

¹⁸ Egypt Independent, 19 Jun 2020

¹⁹ Quartz, 27 Jun 2020

²⁰ Ethiopia Insight, 18 Jun 2020

that even ETV, the state broadcaster, faced a precarious financial situation and made a plea for government support, indicating many others must also be struggling.”²¹

Access to reliable and timely information is particularly crucial given that mainstream media has been the main source of information for Ethiopians on the nature of the virus and the measures that limit transmission. Many media outlets are pushing government for financial support so they can maintain this function during the pandemic. Government has not yet responded to the calls.

One strategy is for privately owned outlets to diversify their revenue sources beyond commercial advertising, such as through adapting an online paid subscription model. Marew noted that this has been an effective strategy for many news outlets in other countries, particularly in more developed countries. However, Ethiopia’s low internet penetration rate of lower than 20% makes the in-country market relatively small.

Planner

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

Apr 2021 **(Ethiopia)** Earliest date that Ethiopia’s electoral board expects postponed elections to be held.

Chronology

13 Jul 2020 **(East Africa)** *Bloomberg*. **African Union**-brokered talks end without agreement on Ethiopia’s disputed **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam** project on the **Nile River**’s main tributary;

10 Jul 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *Borkena*. Attorney general **Adanech Abebe** says authorities arrested two suspects, both members of anti-government group **Oromo Liberation Front**, over the shooting of popular political singer **Haacaaluu Hundeessaa**;

9 Jul 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *AA*. Foreign ministry spokesman **Dina Mufti** says authorities have partially restored internet services after a week-long ban in the aftermath of the killing of **Oromo** ethnic group activist **Haacaaluu Hundeessaa**;

6 Jul 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *Borkena*. Authorities arrest five senior members of opposition party **Oromo Liberation Front** in a wave of political arrests following anti-government protests last week which left at least 166 dead and caused a nationwide internet shutdown;

3 Jul 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *Al Jazeera*. Prime minister **Abiy Ahmed** says the killing of popular singer and **Oromo** ethnic group member **Haacaaluu Hundeessaa** and subsequent violence that has left nearly 100 dead represent “*coordinated attempts*” to destabilise **Ethiopia**;

1 Jul 2020 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Egypt Today*. Egypt’s foreign minister, **Sameh Shoukry**, says Egypt has handed a draft resolution on the **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam** to the **United Nations Security Council**;

1 Jul 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *Bloomberg*. Military deploys amid two days of unrest and at least 80 fatalities following the fatal shooting of popular musician and **Oromo** ethnic group activist **Haacaaluu Hundeessaa** by unidentified gunmen in what police say was a targeted killing;

30 Jun 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *CNN*. Protests erupt and internet access is shut off across **Ethiopia** after unidentified gunmen shoot dead prominent musician and **Oromo** ethnic group activist **Haacaaluu Hundeessaa**; police later arrest prominent Oromo activist **Jawar**

²¹ Ethiopia Insight, 18 Jun 2020

Mohammed and authorities shut down his media outlet, **Oromia Media Network**;

29 Jun 2020 **(Africa)** *Reuters*. Draft **European Union (EU)** list shows only citizens from 10 **African** countries – **Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Uganda** and **Zambia** – will be allowed in the EU when it reopens external borders on 1 July;

29 Jun 2020 **(East Africa)** *Al Monitor*. **United Nations Security Council** hears remarks from **Ethiopia, Egypt** and **Sudan** on Ethiopia's **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam** project on the **Nile River**;

27 Jun 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *Al Jazeera*. **Ethiopia's** water minister, **Seleshi Bekele**, says Ethiopia is pushing ahead with construction of the **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam**, and that a deal with **Egypt** and **Sudan** will be reached in two to three weeks;

27 Jun 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *Reuters*. **Sudan** and **Egypt** leaders say **Ethiopia** agreed during mediation by the **African Union** to not start filling its **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam** without reaching an agreement with Egypt within two weeks;

27 Jun 2020 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Quartz*. **Egyptian** hackers launch a cyber-attack on a number of **Ethiopian** government websites over the course of the past week in connection with the **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam** dispute;

24 Jun 2020 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *Borkena*. **National Electoral Board** rejects the **Tigray Region's** request for recognition to conduct a regional election;

23 Jun 2020 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Egypt Independent*. An **Egypt**-prepared resolution by the **Arab League** calls on **Ethiopia** to “refrain” from starting to fill the reservoir of the dam it is building on the **Nile**, before an agreement is reached with Egypt and **Sudan**;

19 Jun 2020 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Egypt Independent*. Foreign minister **Sameh Shoukry** accuses Ethiopia of “warmongering” over the latter’s plan to start filling a huge hydroelectric dam on the **River Nile**;

15 Jun 2020 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Egypt Today*. **Egypt's** foreign minister, **Sameh Shoukry**, says **Ethiopia's** intransigence will push Egypt to seek other options, such as resorting to the **United Nations Security Council** on the **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam** that Ethiopia is building on the **Nile**.

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