

Five government officials killed in alleged coup attempt as Ethiopia's "democratic" facade cracks

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Gunmen killed five high ranking government officials, including Army Chief of Staff General Seare Mekonnen, in two separate attacks in Ethiopia's Amhara region on Saturday.

Very few details about Saturday's attack have been released, but Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed appeared on state television that evening, dressed in military fatigues, to condemn what he called an attempted coup against the Amhara regional government.

His office released a statement the next day, self-contradictorily declaring that "the situation in Amhara region is currently under full control by the Federal Government in collaboration with the Regional Government," while maintaining that operations to secure the region would continue and for "citizens to also be guardians of peace and support all efforts to hold suspected individuals accountable."

According to spokesmen for Ahmed, the assault began when Brig. Gen. Asamnew Tsige and soldiers loyal to him stormed a meeting of the Amhara government, wounding a number of individuals and killing Ambachew Mekonnen, the president of the Amhara region, his adviser, Ezez Wassie, and Migbaru Kebede, Amhara's attorney general. Later that day, Seare Mekonnen and retired Major-General Gezae Abera were killed in Seare Mekonnen's home by one of his bodyguards.

The federal government responded by initiating a nationwide manhunt for people it says are suspected of taking part in the coup attempt, during which much of Amhara was on lockdown. The operation has so far resulted in 180 people being rounded up, including four high ranking Amhara regional officials.

Tsige, who was pardoned by Ahmed last year after having been imprisoned by the previous government for allegedly orchestrating a similar coup attempt in 2009, was killed in a gunfight in Bahir Dar, in northern Amhara, on Monday. Nevertheless, the military is continuing its crackdown.

Ahmed's claims that the attack was aimed at the Amhara regional government have been viewed with much skepticism, and for good reason. Ahmed's tenure as Prime Minister, which began in April 2018, has been dominated by tension between his government and the military. He came to power promising to bring an end to the despotism that has historically characterized Ethiopian governments.

Among Ahmed's promised reforms were expanded freedom of speech and expression, opening up the internet, and limiting the military's role in the government. As a gesture of goodwill upon taking office, he released tens of thousands of political prisoners, ended the internet blackout imposed by the previous government of Hailemariam Desalegn, and sacked over 100 generals and other high officers, mostly from the Tigray ethnic group that had dominated the previous regime.

This created a large constituency for his removal within the military, both from officers who resent the military's loss of political power, and from those who see the sackings as a racist attack on the Tigray people. The Tigray are often seen to be collectively responsible for the crimes of the previous regime, and hundreds of thousands of Tigray have been driven from their homes due to racist violence since Ahmed's rise to power.

However, Ahmed has also endeared himself to Western politicians and business interests by opening up the Ethiopian economy to foreign exploitation, namely through the liberalization of labor laws and the privatization of state assets. Ahmed plans to sell the government's shares in Ethiopian Airlines, Africa's largest and most profitable airline, and open up numerous sectors currently monopolized by the state, including telecommunications, aviation, electricity, and transportation. Manufacturing, hotels, and certain agricultural sectors are expected to be fully privatized.

Thus, it is no surprise that world leaders and the international press have hailed his rise to power, declaring

his political reforms to be the dawn of a new era of freedom and prosperity for Ethiopia, while ignoring the fact that ethnic violence has actually increased since his inauguration. In addition to the attacks on the Tigray, nearly 1 million ethnic Gedeos have been forced to flee their homes in West Guji. In both cases, the attackers belong to militias affiliated with the Oromo ethnic group, of which Ahmed is also a member.

Nevertheless, only two months after assuming office, in an editorial titled “Abiy Ahmed pulls off an astonishing turnaround for Ethiopia,” the *Washington Post* declared that he had ended the country’s “cycle of unrest, repression, and more unrest.”

At the same time, the paper acknowledged that the real interest of the American bourgeoisie for whom it speaks is ensuring the undisrupted flow of capital from Ethiopia to American investors: “It remains to be seen whether Mr. Abiy can sustain his reform drive, which is sure to draw opposition from regime hard-liners. A key question will be whether economic reforms, including the sale of shares to foreign investors in large state companies and the privatization of others, will bring in enough hard currency to allow payments on foreign debts and ease import bottlenecks.”

His imperialist backers are surely also aware that the limited reforms they have tried to pass off as a democratic revolution are not sustainable. Ethiopia is a highly unequal society in which over half of the population lives on less than \$2 per day, while the ten richest individuals possess \$25 billion.

Furthermore, Ethiopia’s economic strategy is based on seizing land from poor farmers for little or no compensation, and then selling that land to investors, largely in China and the Arabian peninsula. In this way, millions of acres of land that once produced food in a country notorious for its vulnerability to famine have been converted into condominiums and cash crop farms for producing coffee, flowers, and palm oil.

This policy has come to be symbolized in popular consciousness by an operation known as “The Master Plan.” Initiated in 2014, it involved seizing farmland from Oromo farmers and conveying it to the city of Addis Ababa for its own expansion, usually to build condos for wealthy investors. The Master Plan met with immediate and fierce resistance from the Oromo population, which organized massive demonstrations that were brutally repressed by the government. Over a three-year period, hundreds of Oromo were killed in protests, and 5,000 were put in prison.

Although the government officially terminated the Master Plan in late 2016, the policy of seizing land for sale to investors has continued under other names. Ahmed exploited

popular revulsion at this policy and rose to prominence as a leader of the Oromo resistance movement. However, he has largely turned his back on the farmers who propelled him to power. Land seizures have continued, and in March, the Oromo resumed their protests.

Then, in early June, Ethiopia’s internet was shut down for reasons that have still not been explained. Neither the Ethiopian telecom company nor the Prime Minister’s office have responded to media requests for comment, except to say that customers will receive credits on their accounts for the time they were denied access. The internet had been restored for merely four days when Saturday’s attack occurred, at which point the government shut down the internet once again.

Regardless of Ahmed’s specific motivation for these shutdowns, one cannot ignore their significance given the degree to which his international backers, and Ahmed himself, touted his initial restoration of the internet as proof of his commitment to democratic rights when he assumed office.

The situation in Ethiopia is extremely unstable. This is the second violent attack against the Ahmed regime by disgruntled elements in the armed forces, and Ahmed is finding his limited democratic reforms to be wholly incompatible with an economy that relies on stealing land and cannibalizing state resources.

Given the historically tight relationship between the Ethiopian and US militaries, and the US’s dependence on the Ethiopian military for subduing the Horn of Africa, it cannot be ruled out that elements in the Ethiopian Army believed they would have American support for an operation to restore their power.

The illusion of solving the problems which confront the working class and poor farmers in Ethiopia through idealistic appeals to concepts like freedom and democracy is being rapidly exposed. Instead, the problems confronting Ethiopian society can only be resolved through the rational and planned use of resources to meet human needs instead of profit, and this can only be achieved by the revolutionary restructuring of society on a socialist basis led by the working class.



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