

- English

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## Ethiopia's dangerous crisis of confidence

by Alexander Quint

As part of her tour of Africa, German chancellor Angela Merkel recently (Tuesday, 11 October 2016) visited the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, which is also home to the headquarters of the African Union. During a joint press conference with Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, Merkel urged the Ethiopian government to open up politics and halt violent behaviour by police in response to peaceful demonstrations.

Since early August, [over a hundred civilian protesters](#) have reportedly been killed by security forces in Ethiopia's Amhara and Oromiya regions as well as in Addis Ababa. These crackdowns on generally peaceful demonstrations follow the same pattern as the violently repressed protests that started in October 2015 and which lasted several months. Human Rights Watch estimates that overall, more than 500 people have been killed since then, in addition to tens of thousands of arrests. Last year, the protests took place almost exclusively in Oromiya. Now they have also spread to Amhara. The regions are inhabited mostly by ethnic groups of the same name. Both Amhara and Oromo are citing dissatisfaction with the government's track record of economic, social and security policies, saying that they are discriminated against and left in a general state of disadvantage by Desalegn's predominantly Tigrayan regime.

Tigray is another of the country's eleven regions (including the two separate city administrations of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa) and home to the eponymous ethnic group that has made up the majority of Ethiopian government ministers since Mengistu Hailemariam was in 1991. Meles Zenawi, who ruled Ethiopia from then until his death in 2012, installed a federalist system to overcome ethnic divisions by domination of one single group. It seems the idea has not quite worked out in the eyes of many Ethiopians. While Zenawi and his successor Desalegn have successfully attracted foreign investment, the resulting profits have mostly benefited the already existing economic and political elite. The economic trickle-down effect in this country of some 94 million people has not been large enough to fulfil the everyday needs of significant parts of the population. It seems Desalegn's administration is unable to provide large numbers of its citizens with the economic and social opportunities to profit from the impressive GDP growth (9.6% in 2015).

Just as in 2015, Addis reacts to the current protests mostly with violence, prompting the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to stress the need for investigations of excessive use of violence by security forces. Instead of opening up a dialogue with its populace, the government has now declared a state of emergency and accused Eritrean and Egyptian agents of instigating the protests – not the first time that external powers are blamed for internal problems. Desalegn and his cabinet seem unwilling to change their modus operandi in any way. Not to mention the massive human suffering taking place, the regime simply cannot afford this political stasis and violent repression in the long run.

No matter how much foreign money Desalegn receives for being an ally in the 'War on Terror' – the Ethiopian army has been fighting the violent insurgency of Islamic militants Al-Shabaab in neighbouring Somalia for several years – a government so entrenched in its way of doing business and dealing with dissatisfied citizens in a violent

manner is likely not to last. This could be by way of a coup or a popular uprising, though the latter is likely to inflict massive loss of life even when only parts of the army try to maintain the status quo. Either way, this could also have considerable repercussions for the aforementioned conflict in Somalia. Should the army be occupied with internal strife, large contingents of Ethiopian soldiers, if not all over 4,000 taking part in the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) could be called home. Seeing as Uganda has already threatened more than once to pull out its over 6,000 military personnel, the prospect of such a capacity diminishment of an African Union force with a current total of about 21,000 soldiers is more than worrying: Even with the soldiers it still has and with some US air support, AMISOM has been incapable of defeating Al-Shabaab. Founded in 2006, the Wahhabi terrorist group is loyal to al-Qaeda and regularly commits attacks on AU and government troops as well as civilians. Their most devastating act so far was the killing of 148 people at a university in Garissa, Kenya in April 2015.

An Ethiopian retreat from Somalia would give al-Shabaab even more room to manoeuvre, possibly leading to more disastrous attacks and continued instability in Somalia and neighbouring countries. Even if this scenario does not seem imminent, the international community and especially Ethiopia's close allies should exert considerable pressure on the government to halt its violent campaign against legitimate and peaceful protests and to make sure the gap between rich and poor does not widen even further than it already has. Social and economic opportunities should be equally distributed among all ethnic groups and regions. If the government does not reinstall confidence in their policies, it is questionable if it will last until the next scheduled election in 2020.

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