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Time for Ethiopia to Bargain with Sidama over Statehood

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What's new? Officials representing the Sidama, southern Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, are threatening to unilaterally declare the formation of a new regional state within Ethiopia's federation on 18 July, unless the government meets a constitutionally mandated deadline to organise a referendum on the issue before that date.

Why does it matter? Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's planned transition toward multi-party democracy has already been marred by violence. If the federal government accedes to the Sidama's constitutional demands without proper preparation, it could aggravate deadly unrest. But seeking to frustrate the demands is equally perilous.

What should be done? Abiy should offer Sidama leaders a referendum date that is the earliest operationally feasible. If the Sidama still declare their state unilaterally on 18 July, they should delay its formation until sensitive issues, particularly relating to multi-ethnic Hawassa city, are resolved.

I. Overview

Leaders of the Sidama people in southern Ethiopia have threatened to unilaterally declare their own regional state within Ethiopia's federation on 18 July 2019. Each of the country's ethnic groups is constitutionally entitled to a vote on forming a new state if its governing council requests one. The poll is supposed to take place within a year of the request, which in the Sidama's case came on 18 July 2018. Yet with the deadline for the vote only two weeks away, the Ethiopian authorities have neither set a date nor started preparations. If poorly managed, Sidama statehood aspirations could fuel violence and deepen an ongoing crisis within Ethiopia's ruling coalition. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and other coalition leaders should seek agreement with Sidama leaders, ideally on a later referendum date. If that proves impossible, and the Sidama declare a new state unilaterally, then their leaders should delay the state's implementation while the parties resolve contentious issues. Deploying the army to stop the Sidama from declaring statehood, as Abiy seems ready to do, risks provoking greater bloodshed.

With little time remaining, the government has no good option. Granting the Sidama their state could trigger unrest in the restive Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Regional State that is home to around one fifth of Ethiopia's more than 100 million people. A particular flashpoint is Hawassa city, now the Southern Nations

regional capital, which the Sidama intend to designate as their own capital, potentially provoking opposition and triggering a fraught contest for what are currently Southern Nations' assets. Minorities in the city and elsewhere could resist the new Sidama state. Moreover, its formation would intensify other statehood demands, particularly those of the Wolayta, the second largest ethnic group in the south. It could catalyse a violent unravelling of the Southern Nations.

Conversely, seeking to block Sidama statehood would likely lead to mass protests by Sidama that could also turn lethal. The Sidama are in no mood to accept further delays to forming a state for which they have long campaigned. Their quest has gathered momentum that will be hard to stop. Sidama activists from the Ejjetto ("hero", in the Sidama language) movement that has spearheaded the campaign say failing to hold the vote on time would breach their constitutional rights and justify self-declaration. The Ethiopian constitution and electoral laws make no provision for what happens if a statehood referendum does not take place within a year of its request, beyond that the upper house of parliament should resolve any dispute.

The Southern Nations upheaval comes at a difficult time for the country. Since assuming office, Prime Minister Abiy has embarked upon important reforms but contended with burgeoning inter-ethnic violence, which has killed thousands and displaced millions in the past two years. The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the ruling coalition which comprises four regional parties, is fraying. The EPRDF party that governs Southern Nations has lost most of its authority. The EPRDF parties representing Ethiopia's two large ethnic groups, the Amhara and Oromia, are squeezed by ascendant ethno-nationalist movements within their own regions and, in response, have adopted harder-line positions in power sharing and territorial disputes. The killings of five top officials, including the military chief of staff, on 22 June, both reflected the EPRDF's internal crisis and threaten to aggravate it. The EPRDF has proved incapable of responding effectively to the brewing crisis in Southern Nations, while national security concerns have hardened the mood in the capital Addis Ababa.

It is imperative that Prime Minister Abiy and federal authorities hold immediate talks with Sidama leaders. Deploying the security forces in a bid to prevent the Sidama from self-declaring may prove costly. It could leave Ethiopian troops policing mass Sidama protests that turn violent, pitting protesters against security forces and Sidama against other ethnicities. Instead, Prime Minister Abiy should seek an agreement with Sidama leaders that ideally entails a date for a referendum as early as operationally feasible, and, assuming that voters in that plebiscite endorse the proposal, a timeline for that state's formation. For their part, Sidama leaders should accept such a compromise, which would hew closely to the constitution and would carry the smallest risk of conflict.

If it proves impossible to reach such an agreement and Sidama leaders move toward declaring their own state on 18 July, they should at a minimum agree to delay its formation to give themselves time to resolve contentious issues related to the new state. Particularly important is to soon reach agreement among federal and regional authorities, Sidama leaders and other Southern Nations ethnic groups' leaders on plans for Hawassa, a fair division of regional assets and the relocation of the Southern Nations capital. The government also must manage other statehood aspirations that the Sidama's new state will likely fuel. Prime Minister Abiy and other senior

officials should build on a regional government study to negotiate with other groups on arrangements for a possible new configuration of multi-ethnic southern states formed from the rump Southern Nations. International partners and the federal government could offer increased budgetary support to help fund the new states and offset losses from the inclusion of relatively prosperous Hawassa within the new Sidama state.

II. A Long Campaign

Sidama demands are rooted in Ethiopia's imperial history and the construction of the multinational federation in the mid-1990s. Conquerors primarily from the Abyssinian highlands incorporated Sidama territory into Ethiopia in the early 1890s. For decades it existed as part of a multi-ethnic province named Sidamo. Like other provinces, it chafed under a succession of emperors in Addis Ababa and rebelled under the Marxist Derg, which ruled from 1974 to 1991 and also ran a unitary nation state, albeit with an initial attempt at promoting regional autonomy in 1987.¹

The Tigrayan-led EPRDF rebels who came to power in 1991 vowed to devolve power to regions. The new constitution introduced what is commonly called ethnic federalism, a system that aims to protect the rights of Ethiopia's ethnic groups and prevent the return of the abusive rule from the centre they had endured for centuries.² The charter allowed for self-rule in nine regional states, plus the federal capital, Addis Ababa. It went a step further, including provisions that are relatively easy to meet for further self-determination for "nations, nationalities and peoples" that share a "large measure" of language, culture or other traits and inhabit the same territory – even up to and including secession by regions as independent nation-states.³

In practice, the tight grip on power exerted for decades by the EPRDF did much to contain the constitution's potentially centrifugal force. The ruling coalition discouraged autonomy demands that were viewed as destabilising. It kept regional state governments on a short leash through its four regional component parties, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (now the Amhara Democratic Party), the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (now the Oromo Democratic Party), the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), as well as other closely affiliated parties that run the five other regions.⁴

In the south, the EPRDF's decisions on federalism fuelled discontent, primarily among the Sidama. The ruling coalition initially created five multi-ethnic southern states in 1992 for a transitional period.⁵ Ultimately, however, it bundled them into

¹ "Proclamation of the Constitution of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia", Proclamation No. 1/1987, 12 September 1987.

² Crisis Group Africa Report N°153, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, 4 September 2009.

³ "Proclamation of the Constitution of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia", Proclamation No. 1/1985, 21 August 1995.

⁴ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°269, *Managing Ethiopia's Unsettled Transition*, 21 February 2019.

⁵ "A Proclamation to Provide for the Establishment of National/Regional Self-Governments", Proclamation No. 7/1992, 14 January 1992.

one, the Southern Nations, partly to act as a counterweight to the populous Amhara and Oromia regions. At the same time, Ethiopia's constitution granted six ethnic communities regional states that they overwhelmingly dominate, which brought advantages to those groups, or at least their elites, in allowing them to choose a working language, levy some taxes and legislate in areas such as education, health and land administration. In this sense, the amalgamation of the southern nations was something of an outlier and caused resentment among the Sidama, who were the south's largest ethnic group and far more numerous than the population of some entire regional states.⁶

Violence associated with the Sidama's statehood struggle has periodically erupted in Hawassa, a diverse city with a population of almost 400,000 that is growing at around 4.8 per cent a year.⁷ It is both the capital of Southern Nations regional state and the administrative centre of Sidama Zone (zones are administrative sub-units within regions and in the highly diverse Southern Nations mostly have a single ethnic character), which sits on the eastern edge of Southern Nations and probably has slightly more than four million residents.⁸ In 2002, police allegedly killed dozens of protesters on Hawassa's outskirts during demonstrations against measures removing the city from Sidama Zone and making it directly accountable to the regional government.⁹ Four years later, then-Prime Minister Meles Zenawi persuaded Sidama leaders to suspend their pursuit of a regional state after the Sidama zonal council voted for a referendum on statehood.

After that, the Sidama's campaign largely lay dormant until 2018, when it resurfaced as the EPRDF weakened, due to more than three years of anti-government protests and the ruling coalition's own reforms, which were championed by the new premier, Abiy.¹⁰ Over the course of the first half of the year, the Sidama held a series of grassroots consultations and petitions and 21 Sidama district assemblies voted in favour of a statehood referendum.¹¹ The assemblies' action led to an affirmative 18 July 2018 vote at the zonal council, which mustered the support of more than the constitutionally required two thirds of Sidama Zone legislators.¹²

That vote meant, in turn, that the Ethiopian authorities had to organise a referendum within a year of the regional council receiving the zonal request – so by 18 July 2019 – and create a new regional state if a majority backs that option. The Ethiopian electoral board is responsible for organising referenda, though it has never held a vote on regional statehood before.¹³ Prime Minister Abiy told parliament on

⁶ According to the 2007 census, for example, Sidama Zone (zones are administrative units in regions) had three million inhabitants, 93 per cent of whom were Sidama, while only 183,000 people lived in Harari region. Ethiopia Population and Housing Census, 2007.

⁷ "Socio-Economic and Geo-Spatial Data Analysis and Dissemination Core Work Process: 2009 E.C Socio-Economic Profile", Hawassa City Administration, Finance and Economic Development Department, 2009.

⁸ The creation of Sidama state would cut off Gedeo Zone from the rest of Southern Nations. The UN says attacks by Guji Oromo displaced more than 500,000 ethnic Gedeo last year.

⁹ "Report 2003 – Ethiopia", Amnesty International, 28 May 2003.

¹⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Managing Ethiopia's Unsettled Transition*, op. cit.

¹¹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Sidama activists, May 2019.

¹² "Sidama's quest for statehood", *The Reporter*, 10 November 2018.

¹³ An electoral official told Crisis Group in late May that the board needs time to develop procedures to conduct a regional statehood referendum. For example, the constitution does not stipulate clearly

1 July that Southern Nations statehood demands are constitutional but can only be satisfactorily addressed through the correct procedure when the new board is fully up and running. He said failure to follow correct procedure for declaring statehood could result in federal intervention. “There is no government that can compromise Ethiopian unity”.¹⁴ A federal official said the Abiy administration is amenable to Sidama statehood but wants to consider the question as part of a constitutional reform process. He added that the government’s senior ranks are worried they will not be able to handle the situation. “They fear it could open a Pandora’s box”.¹⁵

Sidama activists portray their quest as part of the democratisation that Prime Minister Abiy has promised since coming to power and say greater autonomy will improve local people’s lives. They argue that statehood will end 130 years of oppression, adopting the mantra that theirs is the last generation that will struggle for autonomy. “This is our final sacrifice”, one said.¹⁶ Ejjetto members say a task force of around 40 people, primarily Sidama academics, has made the necessary preparations for a new state.¹⁷ According to task force member Filate Gigiso Boroje, who is also head of Hawassa University’s law school, public consultations on the new state’s constitution began on 11 June. The task force has prepared strategies for economic development, an “exit plan” from Southern Nations region that is being kept under wraps, and a blueprint for the putative new state’s administrative structure. “Sidama will proceed to declare a fully functioning state on 18 July”, Filate said.¹⁸

III. A Fraught Statehood Quest

Risks of violence related to the Sidama demands are high. According to a former senior federal official:

The situation is very volatile and carries considerable risk of serious deadly violence in Hawassa and elsewhere in the south. It is likely to further complicate the country’s difficult political situation.¹⁹

who participates in a statehood referendum. It implies that only the concerned group should participate in a self-determination vote, meaning that non-ethnic Sidama residents of the zone would be ineligible. A senior federal official confirmed this in a telephone interview. Anti-ethnic federalists view this as disenfranchisement. Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2019.

¹⁴ Prime Minister Abiy said on 1 July 2019: “If you want an answer to a legal question through anarchy, you will not get a permanent solution”. A Sidama activist told Crisis Group the intervention threat was “dangerous” as it increases instability and there would be no change to the 18 July self-declaration plan. “I don’t know how in a very limited time Dr Abiy turns to be undemocratic and make such a kind of authoritarian speech. We are educating people to follow the law and not [his] speech”. Another activist said it was the government that was in breach of the law. Self-declaration, he continued, would go ahead on 18 July. Crisis Group telephone interviews, July 2019.

¹⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, July 2019.

¹⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2019.

¹⁷ Crisis Group telephone interviews, May 2019.

¹⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, June 2019. A 12 June letter sent by “Sidama Community Members” to international organisations and embassies affirmed this position: “Sidama Administrative Council will declare the Sidama Regional State of Ethiopia on 18 July 2019”.

¹⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2019.

The primary hotspot is Hawassa itself, whose outskirts were the scene of the worst violence in 2002 when the Sidama protested against their zone losing administrative control of the city. Emperor Haile Selassie I founded Hawassa in the early 1950s on land inhabited mainly by Sidama. It has been a major commercial centre in Southern Nations since then, but it has also benefited from being the regional capital; for instance, it has been home to Ethiopia's flagship industrial park since 2015. The city's ethnic Sidama population has grown dramatically. It comprised 10 per cent of Hawassa's population in 1994 but almost half in 2007, when the last census took place, and the same a decade later, according to estimates.²⁰

Sidama leaders say Hawassa will be their new state capital and the Southern Nations government must relocate, likely meaning a decline in its revenue. If the Sidama unilaterally declare statehood and assert exclusive rights to govern Hawassa, violence could also break out between the Sidama and the city's minorities, who may suffer reduced access to government jobs, contracts and services.²¹ Some Sidama activists exhibit disdain for other Hawassa residents' concerns. "Hawassa is Sidama-land", one said.²²

The campaign for statehood has already cost lives. Dozens of people died last June in Hawassa during the main Sidama cultural festival and campaigning for a regional state. According to media reports, security forces killed protesting Sidama students.²³ Mob attacks by Sidama on ethnic Wolayta, the second-largest Southern Nations group, left perhaps ten Wolayta dead and thousands displaced.²⁴ The Sidama suffered deadly retaliatory violence in Sodo, the capital of neighbouring Wolayta Zone.²⁵ Sidama and Wolayta leaders, who have long competed for regional leadership, blamed each other for the violence.²⁶

Getahun Garedew, the Southern Nations deputy chief administrator and a former top Wolayta Zone official, told Crisis Group that academics commissioned by the regional state's government will present the conclusions of a seven-month study on a

²⁰ "Socio-Economic and Geo-Spatial Data Analysis and Dissemination Core Work Process: 2009 E.C Socio-Economic Profile", Hawassa City Administration, Finance and Economic Development Department, 2009. A new census has been delayed since 2017, due primarily to insecurity. The high population density of surrounding areas has contributed to the Sidama influx into Hawassa and pressures on the city. The mainly rural districts of Sidama Zone such as Aleta Wendo, Dara and Shebedino have more than 500 people per square kilometre, at least five times the national average. Ethiopia Population and Housing Census, 1994 and 2007.

²¹ Some people already report government bias toward Sidama residents and aggression by Sidama toward other groups. Crisis Group telephone interview, resident, May 2019. Also see "Hawassa – a city in a state of disorder", *Ethiopia Observer*, 18 June 2019; "Is the Sidama Ejeetto Peaceful?", ECAD Forum, 1 March 2019.

²² Crisis Group telephone interview, Sidama activist, May 2019.

²³ An activist told Crisis Group that security forces killed 32 Sidama. Crisis Group telephone interview, June 2019.

²⁴ "Deadly violence hits Hawassa as protesters call for Sidama state", *Ethiopia Observer*, 14 June 2018.

²⁵ "Ethiopian police arrest 257 individuals for involvement in deadly riots", Xinhua, 22 June 2018. The heads of Sidama and Wolayta zones resigned in June 2018 after Abiy visited the affected areas and requested that local leaders take responsibility for the violence. See "Sidama Zone head, Hawassa mayor resign", *The Reporter*, 5 July 2018.

²⁶ "The Vilification of Sidama Nation by TPLF, Its Deheden and Wolayta agents is Categorically Deplorable!!", press statement, Sidama National Liberation Front, 24 June 2018.

new configuration of southern states to top SEPDM and EPRDF committees in early July. Once the party leaders have agreed upon the way forward, he said, they will consult the Southern Nations public, though he did not specify how.

The electoral board has been held up setting the date for the Sidama referendum due to the same upheaval and insecurity that have led to delays in the census and local elections. “Forming a new regional government requires the country to be strong and stable”, Getahun said. He opposes Sidama self-declaration, as in his view forming a new state must be done according to constitutional procedure – through a referendum, in other words – and a unilateral approach will not benefit the Sidama people.²⁷

Yet as the 18 July deadline approaches, Sidama anger is growing. Inaction from EPRDF leaders, the electoral board and the regional government has created mistrust among many Sidama, who accuse the authorities of passing the buck.²⁸ All activists said they would not accept a referendum scheduled after the deadline.²⁹ According to one:

We are not ready to listen to their talk. What we’re waiting for is to see whether they respect the constitution or not. The people of Sidama nation are sovereign, as stated in our constitution, and have the right of self-declaration and self-administration.³⁰

A national group of five ethno-national organisations, known as the Peoples’ Alliance for Freedom and Democracy and comprising both Sidama and other groups, including the Oromo nationalist and until recently exiled guerrilla movement, the Oromo Liberation Front, said in a 9 May statement that failing to meet the Sidama demands would be “costly” for the federal and regional governments, apparently implicitly threatening upheaval if the Sidama do not get their way.³¹ One activist cited the group’s statement as representing the statehood movement’s views.³²

²⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, Getahun Garedew, Southern Nations deputy chief administrator, 3 July 2019.

²⁸ For example, Tesema Elias, a task force team member and assistant law professor at Hawassa University, says that there has been a “conspiracy” by Abiy, the SEPDM and the electoral board. “The old region did not officially refuse to undertake the referendum, but it claims that the board is the only accountable authority”, he said. Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2019.

²⁹ Crisis Group telephone and email interviews, May 2019.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Mathe Mengesha, paediatric doctor in Hawassa and Ejjetto member, May 2019.

³¹ “Shrugging off the Sidama’s quest by the Ethiopian government must come to an end by urgently fixing the date for referendum”, press statement, Peoples’ Alliance for Freedom and Democracy, 9 May 2019. The People’s Alliance includes the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and the lesser-known Sidama National Liberation Front (SNLF), which was formerly an insurgent movement known as the Sidama Liberation Front and campaigns for statehood. In March, the SNLF urged Ejjetto to work together with their Oromo counterparts, the Qeerroo, to foil enemy “plots”. Activists claim Sidama have lost out as Hawassa has grown in recent years and also present their demands as part of an anti-colonial struggle. See “Sidama’s quest for statehood and the question of Hawassa”, *Addis Standard*, 18 June 2019. Some Oromo express similar complaints about Addis Ababa’s expansion into Oromia. See “Ethiopia scraps Addis Ababa ‘master plan’ after protests kill 140”, *The Guardian*, 14 January 2016.

³² Crisis Group telephone interview, Mathe Mengesha, pediatric doctor and Ejjetto member, May 2019.

Mass mobilisation has also been growing. Sidama women supporting a regional state attended a large rally on 9 April in Hawassa and the Ejjetto called a three-day strike in March to press its demands.³³ Current Southern Nations President Million Mathewos, a former Sidama Zone chief administrator, has publicly expressed support for statehood. Meanwhile, the top former federal official told Crisis Group statehood is a “fait accompli” because of its legal basis and the Sidama people’s successful mobilisation.³⁴

At least ten other ethnic groups in Southern Nations have requested regional statehood demands, according to deputy president Getahun. Sidama statehood would likely fuel agitation by the Dawro, Gamo, Gofa, Gurage, Hadiya, Kafficho, Kambatta, Wolayta and other groups for their own regional states.³⁵ The Wolayta’s claim is particularly advanced. In May 2019, the group held a well-attended rally in Sodo to lobby for statehood, and their zonal council requested a referendum on 3 December, meaning the constitutional deadline for that vote is 3 December 2019.³⁶ One activist from the Wolayta National Movement, a new party formed to campaign for statehood, told Crisis Group the movement was not planning unilateral declaration but expected the government to adhere to the constitution in organising the referendum.³⁷

Meeting the Sidama and Wolayta statehood demands – and others that could then intensify – would mean the wholesale breakup of Southern Nations. No compelling legal argument exists against such a breakup, as the constitution expressly allows ethnic groups to seek their own state, a fact an activist said Abiy acknowledged in June 2019 during town hall discussions with Sidama people.³⁸ But the region’s fracturing would risk provoking fighting, with indigenes potentially uprooting minorities from their homes, as has occurred recently on a large scale in several locations across Ethiopia.³⁹ In the south, past mobilisation around autonomy demands and local power-sharing arrangements has involved bloodshed.⁴⁰ The Wolayta’s suc-

³³ “Sidama women stage rally to ask for regional statehood status”, Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 9 April 2019; “Hawassa on a second day strike after Ejeto call for protest”, *Addis Insight*, 14 March 2019.

³⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2019.

³⁵ “Demands for regional status rock Ethiopia’s south region”, 7D News, 2 December 2018.

³⁶ “A rally in Wolaita-Sodo called for Wolaita statehood”, *Addis Insight*, 17 May 2019; “As Southern Nations break free, pressure mounts on EPRDF”, *Ethiopia Insight*, 28 November 2018; Crisis Group telephone interview, Wolayta National Movement activist, June 2018.

³⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2019.

³⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, July 2019.

³⁹ “Ethnic unrest tarnishes new Ethiopian leader’s reforms”, Reuters, 24 August 2018.

⁴⁰ Examples include the Konso people’s autonomy struggle, which involved deadly unrest in 2016 and 2017; fatal violence since 2017 in Tepi in a power struggle between Kafficho and Sheka people; and last year’s conflict between factions of Gurage and Kebena over Wolkite city in June 2018. See “Fugitive mediator clubbed by activists then charged with sedition as protests cleaved Konso”, *Ethiopia Insight*, 18 July 2018; “Renewed violence in Tepi, South Ethiopia, casualties reported”, *Borkena.com*, 31 January 2019; “Week-long riots in southern Ethiopia leave 15 dead: media”, *Xinhua*, 17 June 2018. In 2002, attacks by thousands of the ethnic Sheka and Majengir, frustrated that they were not able to run the local district after claiming an election win, left dozens of ethnic Tepi dead. Hundreds of Sheka were reportedly killed in retaliations. See David Turton (ed.), *Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective* (Athens, Ohio, 2006), p.196.

successful campaign two decades ago for their own zone – their own administrative sub-unit in Southern Nations regional state – also saw deadly violence.⁴¹

IV. A Crisis within a Crisis

Sidama statehood demands come at a bad time for the federal government. Since taking office in April 2018, Prime Minister Abiy has carried out significant reforms: overhauling the federal security apparatus, making peace with Eritrea, releasing more political prisoners and inviting exiles to return home. These steps, while long overdue, have weakened the EPRDF's unity, particularly coming after more than three years of anti-government protests that started in 2015, and have stirred old disputes about power sharing, internal borders and the degree of autonomy enjoyed by regions.⁴² Some of the ruling coalition's parties, notably the Amhara Democratic Party and the Oromo Democratic Party, face pressure from ethno-nationalist movements within their own regions, which they now feel compelled to outflank by toeing a harder line.⁴³

The 22 June assassinations and alleged regional coup attempt in Amhara state both reflect the gravity of the crisis within the ruling coalition and risk aggravating it. The federal government blamed the attacks on Amhara regional state's late fire-brand security chief, Asaminew Tsige, who had pressed territorial claims against Tigray since being appointed in November. Asaminew reportedly died in a firefight with police one or two days after the assassinations. Popular support for Asaminew, as shown by large crowds at his funeral, doubts over the government's account of the killings and arrests of Amhara nationalists have hardened regional opposition to Abiy's government, and could push the Oromo and Amhara ruling parties further apart.⁴⁴ A new Sidama state and the breakup of the Southern Nations region would further stress a ruling coalition that for years has run a de facto one-party state, formally controls all tiers of government and is still critical to the country's stability.

The question of political representation for any new southern state is fraught.⁴⁵ The EPRDF's four regional parties have equal representation in the coalition's decision-making bodies.⁴⁶ It is unclear whether parties emerging from new southern

⁴¹ In 1998-2000, security forces killed at least five people when the Wolayta successfully campaigned for their own zone and rejected the attempted imposition of a new composite language. See Data Dea, "Enduring Issues in State-Society Relations in Ethiopia: A Case Study of the WoGaGoDa: Conflict in Wolaita, Southern Ethiopia", *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. 2, nos. 1/2 (Summer/Fall 2005-2006).

⁴² Crisis Group Report, *Managing Ethiopia's Unsettled Transition*, op. cit.

⁴³ Crisis Group Statement, "Restoring Calm in Ethiopia after High-profile Assassinations", 25 June 2019; Crisis Group Report, *Managing Ethiopia's Unsettled Transition*, op. cit.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group Statement, "Restoring Calm in Ethiopia after High-profile Assassinations", op. cit.

⁴⁵ See Crisis Group Report, *Managing Ethiopia's Unsettled Transition*, op. cit.

⁴⁶ Each EPRDF party has a members' congress, central committee and executive committee. A 36-member EPRDF Executive Committee comprises 9 members from each party's top committee, while the EPRDF Council, the front's second highest decision-making body, has 45 representatives from each party, and the EPRDF Congress is composed of equal members from each movement. Factions from the two largest groups, the 35 million-strong Oromo and the Amhara, whose region has around 30 million people, object to the equal vote of Tigray, which has a population of six million.

states would become EPRDF member parties, affiliates or independents – or, alternatively, remain represented by the SEPDM, the EPRDF's southern wing. Ejjetto activists reject this latter option, citing what they describe as SEPDM's neglect of Sidama interests. They say the new state could remain without political representation at national level, while following SEPDM policies, until the election scheduled for 2020.⁴⁷ If new parties become EPRDF members they would alter the balance of power within it, given that the ruling coalition takes decisions by majority, and so that carries huge sensitivities.

This potential impact, combined with existing fissures, could make the EPRDF more likely to fracture. Prime Minister Abiy has suggested unifying the EPRDF's four parties and the other parties affiliated with the coalition that run five other states into a single ruling party.⁴⁸ The Tigray People's Liberation Front, which was the dominant coalition member under Abiy's predecessors, rejects the idea, largely due to its fear Abiy is trying to weaken regional autonomy. This raises the destabilising prospect of the coalition splitting, with the possibility of a new ethno-federalist grouping emerging that includes the TPLF, the Oromo Liberation Front and others – and which the new southern parties, if they opt out of trying to join the ruling coalition, might enter. Overall, increased EPRDF turmoil could further undercut the government's ability to manage inter- and intra-regional tensions.⁴⁹

Over the past year, the ruling coalition has not taken a clear public stance on the Sidama demands, though the SEPDM criticised the moves to form new regional states in November.⁵⁰ According to one former senior EPRDF figure, its last Congress, which was held in Hawassa in October 2018 and is the coalition's ultimate decision-making body that meets at least every 36 months, was a missed opportunity to discuss the potential for Southern Nations fragmentation.⁵¹ A senior official argued that Prime Minister Abiy was not attuned to the risks and party meetings had given the issue short shrift; EPRDF leaders reportedly planned to discuss the Sidama issue in mid-June but did not do so due to Abiy's father's death.⁵² The 22 June assassinations almost certainly will require more of Abiy's and other top leaders' attention, and imminent EPRDF discussion of the academic commission's findings is arguably too little, too late. With the country's political powerhouse troubled and distracted,

⁴⁷ Crisis Group telephone interviews, May and June 2019. One said the party was a TPLF tool to control southern groups and was no longer recognised by the people.

⁴⁸ "Displacement crisis not a precursor for a very bad future but residue of a very bad past: Mustefa Omer", *Addis Standard*, 15 May 2019.

⁴⁹ The EPRDF designed and governed the federation single-handedly, brooking no dissent and crushing opponents. That is now set to change if Abiy's government sticks to its commitments, raising the question of what will replace the EPRDF in the interim to coordinate and control autonomous regions.

⁵⁰ "Even though decisions made by zones are constitutional, it is against directions of the council – SEPDM", Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 26 November 2018. In a recent meeting the EPRDF Executive Committee described "extreme ethnic nationalism" as a challenge – but that phrase could apply to any one of many parts of the country. "EPRDF Executive Committee concludes meeting", Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 19 May 2019.

⁵¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2019.

⁵² A leading opposition activist argued that Abiy should have pleaded with the Sidama leaders for more time to manage the democratic transition without the complication introduced by the southern demands. Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2019.

an unmanaged Southern Nations break-up starting with the Sidama's self-declaration looks like a real possibility.

V. Pulling Back from the Brink

The Sidama regional statehood campaign is not Ethiopia's gravest challenge, particularly after the 22 June assassinations and the attendant risk of further violence. But it is the most urgent one, given the looming referendum deadline and the fact that, if mismanaged, it could aggravate other problems, particularly the EPRDF's internal crisis and burgeoning intercommunal tensions. Last year, violence, much of it directed at local minorities, forced 2.9 million people to flee their homes, making Ethiopia the country with the highest number of conflict-related displaced in the world that year.⁵³ According to collated media reports, more than 1,500 people are estimated to have died in such violence since Prime Minister Abiy took office.⁵⁴ While Abiy has laid out ambitious measures for opening up politics, from unshackling the opposition, media and civil society to holding free elections and building an independent judiciary, his immediate priority must be restoring security.⁵⁵ That will become all the harder if the Southern Nations fractures violently.

No option is particularly good. The Sidama will accept nothing less than statehood, a goal for which they have long campaigned. Attempting to thwart that aspiration with the government in breach of the constitution is likely to lead to mass protests that would risk turning violent. But granting it risks clashes between Sidama and minorities in Hawassa and elsewhere, as well as a chaotic unravelling of the Southern Nations region amid other statehood claims, notably by the Wolayta.⁵⁶ Even if the government subsequently concedes to Wolayta statehood, agitation among other groups is likely, and the authorities would have to draw a line somewhere.

⁵³ The 2.9 million number comes from "Ethiopia: Figure Analysis – Displacement Related to Conflict and Violence", Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2019. More than two million of the displaced have since returned home, an official from the disaster relief agency said on 31 May. "Over 2 mln IDPs repatriated to original villages, says an official", Ethiopian News Agency, 1 June 2019.

⁵⁴ ACLED data accessed 1 July 2019. The actual figure is likely to be higher as media coverage of Ethiopia is relatively weak.

⁵⁵ Although he defended the federal system in his 1 July comments, the prime minister has previously said that constitutional change may be discussed after the election, an option new opposition party The Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice Party backs. It wants changes to ethnic federalism, which critics say hardens subnational identities, causes intercommunal conflict and weakens Ethiopian citizenship. Tigrayan leaders say the country must remain a multinational federation to protect hard-won rights to self-rule. Strong ethno-nationalist movements also exist in the Amhara, Oromia and Somali regions.

⁵⁶ In its search for solutions, the Southern Nations government commissioned a group of academics last September to study a new configuration of states. They reportedly favour a return to five multi-ethnic regional states, as in 1992. Sidama activists, however, reject this option outright, as do Wolayta, as the latest attempt to frustrate their right to self-rule. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Southern Nations zonal officials, Sidama activists, Wolayta National Movement activist, June 2019. The latter said the only scenario under which they would consider the recommendation is if all other Ethiopian ethnic groups that dominate regions, such as the Amhara, Oromo and Tigray, shared power in their states with others.

Some senior officials argue that the break-up of Southern Nations is too risky and that the government must step in to frustrate the Sidama's aspirations and those of other southern groups seeking statehood.⁵⁷ It could, they argue, deploy the army to prevent the Sidama from self-declaring, potentially by blocking a planned zonal council self-declaration resolution. After the 22 June assassinations, increased national security concerns mean that the mood in Addis is particularly uncompromising.⁵⁸ Indeed, an August 2018 federal military intervention to remove an abusive regional leader in Somali state, though in a very different context, was largely applauded in Addis Ababa.⁵⁹

But any federal military intervention would likely prove counterproductive. The Sidama would most likely eventually self-declare in any case, while organising mass protests in Hawassa. The army and police would then face the formidable challenge of having to control those demonstrations without eliciting a violent backlash. Clashes would also likely erupt between Sidama, on the one hand, and Wolayta and local minorities, on the other. Prolonged turmoil would be a real risk.⁶⁰ Any heavy-handed crackdown would recall the authorities' failed tactics during more than three years' protests that led to the transition that brought Abiy to power.

Negotiating with the Sidama would be a wiser course. Prime Minister Abiy's support cuts across ethnic divides and he is the transition's pivotal figure. He should seek talks with Sidama Zone leaders. At the same time, the EPRDF and federal and regional authorities should make contingency plans for the likely break-up of Southern Nations and discuss possible new arrangements with all groups in the south, particularly those agitating for statehood.

Ideally, Prime Minister Abiy would persuade Sidama leaders not to self-declare. The two sides would agree on a new timeline for the Sidama referendum and, assuming that vote endorses a new Sidama state, for its formation. Federal and regional authorities would expedite the electoral board's preparations and offer Sidama leaders a referendum date that is the earliest logistically feasible. For their part, Sidama leaders would accept this date and avoid a unilateral declaration of statehood, instead opting for a vote which, though late, would hew close to Ethiopia's constitutional requirement and avert the need for an inflammatory self-declaration.

Such an agreement may prove hard to reach, however. Little time remains before 18 July, and Abiy and other EPRDF leaders are dealing with the fallout from the 22 June killings. For their part, Sidama leaders distrust the authorities, whose inaction in response to the referendum demand they view as a ploy to buy time and frustrate their campaign – which is also how they see the plan that deputy administrator

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview and telephone interviews, former federal official, Ethiopian diplomat and prominent Ethiopian political commentator, May 2019.

⁵⁸ In addition to Prime Minister Abiy's 1 July comments, Defence Minister Lemma Megersa said in a 23 June speech that national integrity is paramount. "There's no right that can be demanded where there is no country".

⁵⁹ Crisis Group Report, *Managing Ethiopia's Unsettled Transition*, op. cit.

⁶⁰ A senior foreign researcher on the Southern Nations described that option as a "recipe for disaster" that would lead to a "bloodbath", as the Sidama are united, well-organised and determined to exploit their long-frustrated constitutional rights to a region. Crisis Group telephone interview, June 2019.

Getahun outlined.⁶¹ Sidama activists repeatedly state their unwillingness to relinquish the option of self-declaring a state.⁶² Nor have the 22 June killings or the crisis engulfing the EPRDF changed their calculations. According to one Ejjetto activist: “The recent assassinations do not change our plans to declare a state. The assassinations are heartbreaking. We felt deep sorrow. But we are making ourselves ready for 18 July”.⁶³

If it proves impossible to persuade Sidama leaders not to declare their own state on that date, Abiy should aim to strike an agreement with them that the new region will not be established until the main points of contention are resolved. This would mean reaching consensus on new administrative arrangements for Hawassa and on a fair division of the regional government’s assets, as well as of federal transfers (more than three quarters of Southern Nations spending comes from Addis). There appears to be space for such talks: Sidama activists state that the statehood movement’s position is the existing regional government would not need to be moved until the matter is settled.⁶⁴ The federal government could even consider tacitly blessing the Sidama self-declaration if in return the Sidama delay forming their state and enter talks to resolve these issues.⁶⁵ While not ideal, this course of action could fulfil the Sidama’s aspirations while averting a chaotic and potentially violent process of regional state formation.

At the same time, the government must accelerate its plans for dealing with other newly energised statehood aspirations. While the Wolayta’s population and history mean that their campaign will likely gather momentum, granting them their own state would supercharge other demands. Prime Minister Abiy and the federal authorities should negotiate with all the other campaigning groups – Dawro, Gamo, Gofa, Gurage, Hadiya, Kafficho, Kambatta, Wolayta and other groups – on arrangements for new multi-ethnic southern regional states, formed from the rump Southern Nations. Splitting what is left of the Southern Nations could go some way toward assuaging the bigger groups by offering them a degree of pre-eminence in new regional states, even if they do not get states of their own. To encourage these groups to put aside demands for their own states, the government and outside partners could offer increased funding to help build infrastructure and perform other tasks necessary for the new regional states and offset any revenue losses from Hawassa’s integration into a new Sidama state.

⁶¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, July 2019.

⁶² Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2019.

⁶³ Crisis Group telephone interview, June 2019. Another Sidama activist said: “The recent turmoil associated with assassinations has no direct relation with the Sidama case. But given a complex nature of the country’s political climate, the coup might have provided an opportunity for the government ... to obstruct the Sidama from proceeding to self-declaration. [There are] hints that the government wants to follow a ‘let’s save the country first’ approach. But the Sidama people are already back at their task”. Crisis Group telephone interview, June 2019.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, June 2019.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2019.

VI. Conclusion

While Ethiopia's transition remains an inspiration across Africa and beyond, the challenges confronting Prime Minister Abiy are mounting. The EPRDF is under serious strain, as power shifts before and since Abiy assumed power have heightened grievances among its members. The ruling coalition is struggling to contain burgeoning intercommunal violence. Indeed, the growing ethno-nationalist sentiment some of its member parties espouse risks fuelling bloodshed. The 22 June assassinations and alleged regional coup attempt throw a sharp light on the gravity of the country's political crisis.

Brewing troubles in the Southern Nations make things all the harder. Ultimately, all options for managing the Sidama's statehood demands come with risks. But the government's neglect of the problem and lack of a strategy to manage it have allowed it to fester, while the dearth of communication from Addis has sowed mistrust among the Sidama that will make it all the harder to resolve. Prime Minister Abiy already has a lot on his plate. But if mishandled, a Sidama self-declaration on 18 July could throw the Southern Nations into turmoil, which will complicate the prime minister's ambitious agenda and efforts to address the country's many challenges. The sooner Ethiopia's premier acts, the better chance he will have of averting such a scenario.

Nairobi/Brussels, 4 July 2019

Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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