

Why Ethiopia's Amhara are protesting

By Gonj ze Wadla Assistant professor
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As African heads of state convene in Addis Ababa to attend the 30th ordinary session of AU's summit, their host, the Ethiopian government, is engaged in a violent crackdown of popular protests in the northern part of the country. The latest round of protests erupted after security forces killed dozens of civilians in Woldya, a small town 500 kms north of the capital, while partaking in the annual religious procession of *Timket*. The cause of the killing is anti-government songs heard during the procession. Angered by the rare expression of public dissent, the security forces shot dead more than 20 civilians. Among the dead are Yosef Eshetu, a 12 year old school boy, and Gebremeskel Getachew, a 35 year old respected business man whose body was riddled with five bullets. The protests have since expanded to nearby towns, contributing to the rise of civilian death toll and destruction of properties belonging to supporters of the ruling Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).



Protest in Gondar, Amhara: 2016

The political context

Ethiopia is a country of over 100 million people. It is a culturally and linguistically diverse nation. The incumbent, the EPRDF, came to power in 1991 after deposing the socialist military regime of Mengistu Hailemariam. The EPRDF is credited for building Ethiopia's economy and instituting a semblance of constitutional democracy. However, the EPRDF is dominated by ethnic Tigreans, which account for less than 5 percent of the Ethiopian population.

EPRDF is accused of building a political economy that unfairly benefits ethnic Tigreans. Tigreans today dominate key political and economic institutions. Connected as they are with powerful military and security figures, party-appointed Tigrean operatives function with little regard to the law of the country, which encourages a culture of corruption and impunity at the highest level.

Moreover, through a series of stifling proclamations and extrajudicial measures, the EPRDF has debilitated the multi-party political space. Today, credible opposition political figures are either dead, in jail, or in exile. The EPRDF government performs consistently poorly in international human rights, democracy and transparency rankings.

It is under these circumstances that the widespread protest movements that rocked the Amhara and Oromia regions have erupted two years ago. Realizing the gravity of the situation, EPRDF's executive committee recently sat for an extended meeting. Although it is impossible to know the details of the meeting, party leaders gave a press conference following their meeting, promising a series of reforms aimed at expanding the political space, including the release of political prisoners, freeing media institutions from party interference, and reforms aimed at democratizing the army and security establishment. However, the party has since backtracked on its promises, releasing only a negligible proportion of detained political figures and journalists.

Who are the Amhara?

The Amhara are probably the largest ethnic group in the country. Although the last official census put their number to 19 million, their actual number could exceed that figure. The EPRDF government is accused of deliberately suppressing their number to diminish their political and economic influence at the national level. In the 1998 census, the government has officially admitted to failing to account for over 2 million Amharas who inexplicably vanished from the census report. Despite the significant economic and political implication of this 'error', no attempt was made to rectify it. Disagreements about their size aside, Amharas have historically been a dominant political and cultural force in Ethiopia. Occupying the northern half of Ethiopia, as well as the major cities across the country, the Amhara are the progenitors of the Solomonic dynasty that ruled the country for over 600 years, making it one of the oldest continuous dynasties in history.

The Amhara speak the Amharic language, which served as the official language of the Ethiopian state since at least the 11th century during the reign of Emperor Lalibela, who is credited for constructing the famous rock-hewn churches of Lalibela. Amharic has a rich literary tradition that stretches back to medieval times. Praise songs for the powerful Amhara Emperors of the 14th and 15th centuries have survived in written Amharic.

Their central role notwithstanding, the Amhara administered their empire in close collaboration with other ethnic groups of Ethiopia. For instance, during the reigns of Emperor Menelik II and Haile Sellasie I, ethnic Oromos occupied high-level civilian and military positions. Emperor Menelik II defeated the Italians at the momentous Battle of Adwa by mobilizing forces from all corners of Ethiopia. In fact, the Amhara, until very recently, were hesitant to identify themselves along their ethnic line, instead preferring their pan-Ethiopian, nationalist identity. However, the growing ethnicization of the country's politics has forced them to embrace their ethnic identity and organize their politics around it.

Why are the Amhara protesting?

Although the immediate cause for the latest round of protests is the extrajudicial killing of civilians in Woldya town, the Amhara allege far deeper political and economic grievances. When the EPRDF took power in 1991, it redrew the political map of Ethiopia along ethnic lines, with the resulting polities organized into autonomous regional states. During this process, the EPRDF government chastised the Amhara by giving away their historical territories to other regional states. For instance, the Wolqaita region, a fertile agricultural region in the north of the country whose inhabitants identify as Amharas, was annexed into Tigray regional state. The Metekel in the west, a vast agricultural and mineral rich territory, suffered the same fate having been incorporated into the newly formed Benishangul regional state.

One of the consistent themes that emerged during the ongoing protests in and around Woldya, as well as the geographically much wider protests of 2016, is the call for the restoration of historic Amhara territories.

Apart from these deeply rooted political grievances, the Amhara, not unlike the other people of Ethiopia, have longstanding democratic demands, including the expansion of the political space, respect for human rights and an end to the unfair political economy that unjustly benefits ethnic Tigreans.

Of particular concern is how the Amhara regional state has been deprived of state and private investments, despite the region's natural and cultural riches. In a recent study by the World Bank on the spatial distribution of investments in the country, the Amhara regional state came off worse, having the lowest distribution of newly built

road networks and access to electricity in urban areas. Government neglect has contributed to the strong sense of disfranchisement that permeates the region.

Addressing the crisis

To address the worsening crisis, the government must begin by withdrawing its army from Woldya and other towns. The ongoing extrajudicial killings must be immediately stopped. Security forces who shot dead unarmed civilians must be brought to justice. The Ethiopian security establishment has been operating above the law for far too long. That era of complete impunity must come to an end, and soldiers and officers implicated in the extrajudicial killings of civilians must face the full force of the law. After these face saving steps are taken, the government must turn to addressing the substantive demands of the Amhara people, which include the restoration of historic Amhara territories, putting an end to the economic and political marginalization of the Amhara people and dismantling the current political economy that unfairly advantages Tigrean minorities. The political and economic demands of the Amhara people are both peaceful and constitutional. The government must address them in earnest and wholeheartedly. Anything less than a genuine commitment to address the demand of the people will only lead to more instability and violence.