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Ethiopia politics is at a turning point

The first months of 2018 have been a critical juncture for Ethiopia. In February, the peak of the social and political upheaval affecting the country since 2015, plunged the government into a severe crisis: the prime minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, unexpectedly resigned and a six-month state of emergency was declared right after by the ruling coalition, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Yet, just when it seemed that the country's national unity was on the verge of being disrupted, the prompt nomination of a new prime minister at the end of March came along with a promising prospect of respite and change.

By electing Abiy Ahmed as its new chairperson and premier of the country, the Ethiopian ruling coalition has shown a clear signal of openness and understanding towards the masses' complaints and demands: Ahmed is the first ethnic Oromo chosen to lead the government and he comes from the most populous Ethiopian region where the demonstrations first spread – Oromiya.

Despite being the largest ethnonational group in Ethiopia (accounting for 34% of the population), Oromos have long been emarginated at both social and political level. Their historical demands concern a greater autonomy in regional self-rule and a more equal distribution of power among the government parties, but their discontent was ultimately exacerbated in 2015 by a national master plan, which allowed the capital, Addis Ababa, to expand its boundaries and confiscate their lands. Consequently, between 2016 and 2018 thousand of Oromos took the streets, soon joined by members of the Ethiopian second largest ethnic group, the Amharas, all protesting against the authoritarian and elitist vanguard party, the Tygrayan People's Liberation Front, that represents only 6% of the population and repeatedly repressed violently its opponents.

The appointment of an Oromo prime minister could represent a real transformational event. Of course, since Ahmed took office while the country was on the edge of breakdown and the challenges to be faced are deep-rooted, an improvement of the situation is not to be taken for granted. However, it must also be said that Ethiopia has a great potential in terms of economic growth and regional influence.

One of the first acts by the PM was to cancel a contract won by the Metals & Engineering Corp. (METEC), a military-industrial conglomerate, to build a sugar plant for the local state-owned Ethiopia Sugar Co [*Ethiopia Courts Foreigners for Sugar Plant as Army Sidelined*, Bloomberg, April 18, 2018]. The tender has been re-opened also to foreign participation and the silence from both METEC and the Defence ministry indicated a clear displeasure. The PM told clearly that he did not want favouritism vis-à-vis armed and security services (some of the largest in Africa) and that they had to revert to their constitutional duties, implying that their omnipresence in the economy was unwelcome.

According to the IMF, the country is predicted to be the fastest-growing economy of Sub-Saharan Africa in 2018, boosting its numbers with an 8,5% increase by the end of this year. In addition, Ethiopia should soon become the African biggest producer and exporter of electricity thanks to the imminent completion of the \$4 billion Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, the future largest hydroelectric power plant in the continent. The same dam has also been the source of recurring tensions between Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan regarding the use of the Nile's water supplies, but it has been among the new premier's priorities to reassure his neighbours over the major benefits that all three countries will receive.

Even considering the long-term turmoil agitating the borders shared with Eritrea and Somalia, Ahmed's path towards the restoration of internal and regional peace and stability is going to be harsh, and yet, at the same time, his election is expected to ease the tensions and stabilize the country, leading Ethiopia towards a more inclusive and democratic system.

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