

10 Political Breakthrough in Ethiopia? Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's Reformist Agenda

In April 2018, unexpected political events occurred in Ethiopia: the rise to power of Dr. Abiy Ahmed, a reformist Prime Minister with an entirely new political voice and a team of staunch supporters within the ruling party EPRDF. As a member of the ODP faction of the party (previously called the OPDO), he was chosen after an internal election and with an eye to addressing major problems in the country. The ruling party chose a new course and elected Abiy Ahmed Ali as leader following three years of violent protests and contestation challenging the incumbent EPRDF regime, which was marked by authoritarian rule and saw thousands of people killed and arrested as well as massive destruction of business and other property. His election indicated a major power shift within the ruling party. In the past year, he has shown himself to be an energetic and charismatic PM. His acceptance speech was seen as unprecedented in its responsiveness to the concerns of Ethiopians, as a move towards openness in political and economic affairs, and as reconnecting to key Ethiopian religious-cultural values. It is no exaggeration to say that his first public appearance evoked joy and positive emotion not only among MPs, but also among the wider public. Subsequent appearances and actions created similar hopes and expectations. In his first year as PM Abiy Ahmed Ali has: overseen the release of all political prisoners, journalists, and activists imprisoned in previous years (among them Prof. Merera Gudina, who was a visiting fellow at ASCL); invited Ethiopian diaspora communities and previously outlawed opposition groups based abroad to return and reconnect; eased restrictions on civil society, rights groups, and the media; and begun a process of revision of repressive laws. As a result, the political space in the country



PM Abiy Ahmed giving his inaugural speech at the Federal Parliament, April 2, 2018

has shown significant broadening. In the domain of foreign relations, PM Abiy also struck the new tone: he has opened up to Eritrea, accepting the contested 2002 border decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration; reset relations with Somalia and Djibouti; and visited Saudi Arabia, Kenya, Sudan, the UAE, and many other countries. Relations with donor countries and the World Bank have also been reconsidered and the PM has received a lot of support from these circles. His leadership has clearly increased the stature of Ethiopia in the sub-region and in Africa.

Nevertheless, as much as the new changes created a sense of hope and confidence in the country, Ethiopia – the second-most populated country in Africa with over 105 million people – has deep underlying problems and is not easy to govern; there are persistent economic concerns (e.g. youth unemployment), ethnic tensions, and worries about the nature of the future political process, with elections expected in 2020. There are also serious concerns about internal displacements as a result of massive intercommunal conflicts over the past three years. There is internal division in the ruling EPRDF coalition that remains unsolved. The political landscape is also beset by ‘extreme ethno-nationalists’ on various sides, who fail to see the positive historical opportunity that has presented itself, pose maximalist demands, and operate in irresponsible ways, locked in perceptions of the past and increasing the volatility of the political transition. Amidst all this, the economy is a crucial dynamic and there is urgent need to reinvigorate economic growth, address socio-economic inequality and social injustice, and to meet the concerns of marginal groups as well as of efficient political and administrative representation.

These challenges are addressed as part of our research on political history and change in Ethiopia and Northeast Africa. Questions considered include how the ‘reform package’ of PM Abiy and his team will unfold, what its implementation strategies are, and how the Ethiopian people will engage with this agenda, both on the local and regional levels. The conceptualization and sustainability of the enthusiastically received reform agenda requires ongoing investigations. Such research might also contribute to the positive changes in what is one of the largest and most important countries in Africa.

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The Researchers’ Assembly (RA) continues to be an important forum for exchange of ideas and project proposal drafts among ASCL researchers. The RA facilitates free discussion on issues of content, practical matters, and institutional and financial regulations. It was chaired by Prof. Jon Abbink. In 2018, the RA decided to install an ASCL Ethics Review Board, which assesses new research projects and proposals on ethical issues in the context of the new European privacy law (impacting if not complicating research practice).

While many researchers at the ASCL continued writing chapters for the annual publication *Africa Yearbook*, a decision was taken to terminate the Centre’s organizational and editorial role in this publication as of 2019. Jon Abbink, co-editor of the last three volumes (12-14), will continue as author of two chapters.

A further substantial development was the emerging research and exchange partnership with the Centre for African Studies of The University of Edinburgh, UK. Two organizational meetings were held in Leiden and Edinburgh, and four Leiden-Edinburgh Research Groups (LERGs) were formed. This venture was gaining momentum towards

