

Three for One



The many faces of Abiy Ahmed Prime Minister of Ethiopia and Nobel Peace Laureate

Author Contact information:

Girma Berhanu

Department of Education and Special Education (Professor)

University of Gothenburg

Box 300, SE 405 30

Göteborg, Sweden

E-mail: Girma.Berhanu@ped.gu.se

Introduction

●The nation will find it very hard to look up to the leaders who are keeping their ears to the ground. —Sir Winston Churchill

●All of the great leaders have had one characteristic in common: it was the willingness to confront unequivocally *the major anxiety of their people in their time* [italics mine]. This, and not much else, is the essence of leadership. —John Kenneth Galbraith

In the summer of 2018, only a few months after Abiy Ahmed had been swept into power, I began to have a gut feeling that something was not quite right with a leader widely considered as Africa's brightest hope for the future.

At the time, you had to be mad to doubt Abiy Ahmed. In a nation tired of authoritarian rule, here was a prime minister pushing democratic reforms on a daily basis. He was Africa's youngest leader, no minor detail in a continent mismanaged by aging political dinosaurs like Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Paul Biya of Cameroon or Teodoro Obiang of Equatorial Guinea, to name but a few. To be sure, Ethiopians adored him –or so it seemed. Global media praised him –of course they did.

One word said it all: Abiymania. It was a perfect description for a celebrity African leader who seemed to be making all the right noises. Political prisoners were freed by the thousands and prominent exiles were welcomed back with open arms. Even local media and journalists were told to do as they pleased –the days of harassment were over. Corruption, he promised, would be a thing of the past and those who had benefitted from it would pay for their sins. And then came the cherry on the cake: a sudden peace deal with Eritrea, a country that had been in a state of semi-war with Ethiopia for as long as anyone could remember. For the gesture, Abiy Ahmed was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019.

Who could possibly have second thoughts about such a leader? Well, quite a few Ethiopians, in fact. A first moment of cringe was the publication of his book *Medemer*, loosely translated as 'striving together' and publicised ad nauseam by the government and its loyal media broadcasters. The book is not a masterpiece on power and society, but more of a pseudo-philosophical best-seller along the lines of 'Who Ate My Cheese?' and '7 Morning Routines of Successful People'. Abiy Ahmed claimed it would resolve Ethiopia's political divisions, but to many it read like Gaddafi's bizarre Third Universal Theory and other such megalomaniac amusements: in short, it offers bit of everything and lots of nothing.

While Abiy Ahmed's early accomplishments were undeniable, concerns were voiced about the power behind the scenes: autographs and photo-ops aside, Abiy Ahmed had stamped out a ruling elite that had spent 30 years perfecting their ethnic-based dictatorship –one of Africa's most ruthless and capable. Could they honestly be expected to back down without a last fight? Equally worrying were Abiy Ahmed's impossible promises, which were destined to become broken promises and eventually stir social anger. Sure enough, by the time he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize the country at large was falling apart. It started with the odd massacre here and a spate of killings there, but nothing was done about it, even though it was clear that these were not isolated tragedies but part of a carefully orchestrated campaign of political agitation. The blowback of Abiy Ahmed's broken promises had begun and thousands of Ethiopians were destined to die in gruesome ways for it.

And all along, we got to see Abiy Ahmed non-stop. It is worth stressing this because for Ethiopians it represented a colossal change from the sombre attitude of his predecessors, notably Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. For almost 25 years, citizens never really got to see their leader: they were lucky to get a few moments of him on television, usually with a serious face and an equally serious message –essentially, ‘I know what has to be done so shut up and listen’. Meles Zenawi was praised for his sharp mind, not his kind empathy, and those who disagreed with him paid for it dearly. Abiy Ahmed, in this sense, represented a breath of fresh air. His smiling face was everywhere and he was fluent on social media. Although it seemed Ethiopia’s millions of young citizens could not get enough of him, the shadow to his shining light was impossible to ignore. In less than two years, Ethiopians witnessed his near-perfect political performance –Abiy the Actor– and had been bombarded with his acts of preaching – Abiy the Pastor. But his popularity was eroding, not least of all because of his unwillingness to tackle the weekly mass-killings that were bringing the country to its knees. With the honeymoon period over, the prime minister vowed to defend his power with more than style and good words. The time had come for Ethiopians to meet Abiy the Prince –and he would have made Machiavelli very proud indeed.

For a leader to carry out his good intentions he must first keep himself in power. This is where things get ugly: survival on the throne is littered with moral dilemmas and once an ethical principle is broken for the sake of the ‘greater good’, it can easily run downhill all the way. Abiy Ahmed decided to test this theory with predictable results. Facing stiff opposition from the fallen elites, and having betrayed millions of young Oromos with his impossible promises, it would seem that a dozen murdered civilians could be ignored in order to keep up with the illusion that Ethiopia was thriving under his wise rule. As the mass killings intensified across the country, the thousands of casualties could just as easily be brushed aside. He had enough problems on his table and grieving families were not about to get on his way.

From the very beginning of his time in office, it was clear that Abiy Ahmed was not in full control. Various attempts were made on his life and mutinous soldiers even marched to his palace gates. Regional army commanders tried to overthrow him. Faced with such dangers, he chose to spin publicity stunts to make himself ‘untouchable’ in the eyes of the international community. And it worked: good luck trying to oust a Nobel Peace Prize with a coup d’Etat. Ordinary Ethiopians understood this strategy, but they were at a loss as to why he chose to actively ignore the mass murder of thousands of citizens whose only ‘crime’ was to be born with the ‘wrong’ ethnic label. International observers have been warning that a culture of genocide preparation has taken hold in large parts of the country and Genocide Watch even states, unequivocally, that a genocide is already being undertaken. The prime minister’s answer? Nothing. A deafening silence.

Part of this denial is due to Abiy Ahmed’s awkward friendships. Some of his closest aides, such as his right-hand man Shimelis Abdissa, have indulged in ethnic hate speech with gusto. In the current context, the ‘wrong ethnic label’ means that you live in Oromia but are not Oromo, or that you live in Tigray and are not Tigrayan, or that you live in Benishangul-Gumuz and are not part of an ‘indigenous’ group. In Oromia region, militias have been terrorizing anyone who is not Oromo with the code-word ‘Neftegna’, or settler, and gruesome death awaits those who are singled out. The figures are staggering: hundreds are killed in a sudden raids on villages, stabbed and disembowelled, teased and humiliated by their killers. Their gruesome exploits are captured on film, the benefits of the mobile phone era. The similarities with Rwanda are too glaring to ignore: the language in use, the killing patterns, even the crude weapons.

None of this matters in the mental realm of Abiy Ahmed. In late 2020, as yet another mass-killing was reported in which hundreds of men, women and children were locked in a school hall and machine-gunned to death, Abiy Ahmed decided to dress up as a police officer in the streets of Addis Ababa and surprise unexpected drivers, who were then given his personal well-wishes for the Christmas holiday. It was another cute publicity stunt, made all the more disgusting by the fact that he said not a word about the massacre. As Ethiopia descends into hell, one is forced to wonder whether his political acting is part of a sophisticated strategy of genocide denial or simply the result of inept and weak political leadership. There is no easy answer. It is difficult to imagine that Abiy Ahmed's smile hides an inner monster; it is even more implausible to consider that such an incompetent politician would succeed in getting himself in power in the cut-throat world of Ethiopian politics. Perhaps Abiy Ahmed is a bit of everything, with each side of his multiple personas blissfully unaware of the others.

The Prime Minister appears to possess two or more identities with their own respective moods, behaviours and experiences. Abiy the Actor is kinder than Abiy the Preacher, and neither can match the ruthlessness of Abiy the Prince. No sooner are Ethiopians lectured on the virtues of responsible democratic rule – the Preacher at his finest – than they hear from their own Prime Minister that he was, in fact, ‘chosen’ to lead the country at a young age, when his mother prophesied that he would rise to become the 7th King of Ethiopia – Abiy the Actor. The prisons are full once again of political prisoners, ordinary students who have voiced the wrong thoughts are simply gunned down by government forces – Abiy the Prince.

Ethiopia at a crossroads

The fate of millions of Ethiopians is currently in the hands of ethnic-fascist mobs who have an ambivalent relationship with the government. In this, they resemble Rwanda's Interahamwe militias in the build-up to the final genocide in April 1994, who had close links with government officials but were also vehemently opposed to its supposedly ‘moderate’ policies with regards to the country's Tutsi minority. In the context of Ethiopia, the Qeerroo militias had once sided with Abiy Ahmed in his drive for power, caught in his many promises of an Oromo wonderland in which there were no more ‘settlers’ milking the land. It was a textbook case of genocide propaganda from the very beginning, but Abiy Ahmed was happy to embrace it: these ethnic-fascists were, after all, his core constituency, and in the months of Abiymania he went out of the way to praise them and their leadership. Once these radicals understood that their Prime Minister had no intention on delivering on his promises, they responded by violently denouncing him as a traitor to the Oromo. They would have happily killed him for it, but since this was logistically difficult, they steered their anger towards innocent civilians. Thousands of so-called Neftegnas have been butchered: that is to say, non-Oromo civilians living in Oromia Regional State.

What is now most alarming is not the corruption and misuse of the nation's resources by toxic leaders but the atrocity crimes against civilians. The last major attack occurred last week in the Amhara region, Ataye, Kara Kore Kemissie, and Showa Robit – with large numbers of casualties and displacements. Towns are destroyed. The attacks were conducted by the Oromo Liberation Front and assisted by Oromia state security and paramilitary forces. In this regard, the government has failed in its most fundamental duty to protect the safety of citizens. Ethiopians of Amhara ethnicity residing outside the Amhara region are systematically labelled as outsiders who deserve retribution attacks. The hatred has become so normalized that Amharas are now being attacked in their own region by Oromo militias. The chant of ‘Down with Neftegna’ is not only the buzzword of these radicals, but an unequivocal statement in its objective to target ‘Neftegna’ people living in Oromia and Benishangul regions. Scores of

online videos show protesters and their political organizers going the extra mile and actually chanting violent threats to innocent civilians. Impunity is a great source of encouragement for the perpetrators – and who can blame them? Nobody has been brought to justice over any of these mass killings of Amharas -or ‘Neftegnas’ in the parlance of their killers. In short, the life of an Amhara citizen in Ethiopia is considered worthless in Abiy’s regime¹.

Abiy the Preacher

The Prime Minister belongs to a Protestant church known as the Prosperity Gospel Church or Mulu Wongel (Full Gospel) Believers Movement. Abiy Ahmed loves preaching and enjoys his role as the nation’s new pastor. He certainly knows how to talk the talk, but Ethiopians are yet to see their Prime Minister act on the basic principles of pastoral conduct by comforting the families of those who have been brutally slaughtered by ethnic-fascists. In fact, Abiy Ahmed actively avoids mentioning the massacres and to this end he engages in all sorts of language contortions: when hundreds of innocent civilians are stabbed and clubbed to death because of their ‘Neftegna’ label, these are referred only in passing as inter-communal conflicts.

Amhara citizens are not the only target, but ‘their religion’ too. Abiy Ahmed has a bone to pick with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. In this, he is taking the lead from his predecessors of the TPLF regime that ruled Ethiopia from the early 1990s until Abiy’s rise to power. The Orthodox Church represents everything these politicians despise: the idea of an organized faith that encourages mutual understanding and a sense of Ethiopian commonality. If your power is based on dividing people along ethnic lines, and promoting the interests of some at the expense of others, it follows that such a religious institution is a threat.

René Lefort (2020) wrote that ‘the PM’s faith dictates his political vision and actions. A few among the Ethiopian interviewees believe that he brazenly exploits this faith to reinforce his legitimacy. They agree with a diaspora analyst who argues that “Abiy has deliberately crafted a deceptive ethos as a persuasive tool”². It is probably justified, therefore, to suggest that it is no accident that he chose the name Prosperity Party for the non-ethnic structure he created on the ruins of the former ruling coalition—made up of representatives from the four most powerful regions—which held power for 27 years. The credo of the Prosperity Gospel is that the stronger the belief, the more God will reward the believer with financial blessings. Wealth is a gift from the Almighty to those who deserve it³. According to Lefort (2020), there is

1 The Oromo nationalists came up with fabricating and reducing history by falsifying it and distorting it for propaganda purposes. They claimed they are the first human beings on earth and in Ethiopia, while they were not originally present in the horn of Africa region. They came and occupied Ethiopian provinces through mass genocides in the 16th century following the invasion of Ahmed Gagn. In the OLF rhetoric the Amharas are “culture-destroying race” and should be destroyed ultimately. According to the speeches of fanatic Oromo and Tigrian leaders , such as Ezkiel Gabissa, Jawar Mohammed, Bekele Gerba, Shimelis Abdissa and Meles Zenawi , the Amharas should be eliminated through a war of annihilation in which one side would triumph and the other would be utterly destroyed. According to these Oromo fanatics, Oromos health and prosperity would be restored and become even greater through the victorious struggle against the Amharas. With final victory Oromia as a nation would be powerful, its rule uncontested, its domination feared. As a people, Oromos would be productive and prosperous, with freely flowing water, freshly flowering plants, and smiling people. Everyone would be joined in a racially homogeneous grouping, with healthy members and the elderly well cared for. (<https://www.geeskaafrika.com/ethiopia-amhara-genocide-and-ethnic-cleansing/amp/>)

2 https://www.theafricareport.com/56718/abiy-ahmeds-aim-to-pentecostalize-ethiopian-politics/?fbclid=IwAR2lzZZf0-KDh02g1e-5yFtQ_eYnINoZ54p2-wbfJgekxcqciO9wcijvauc

3 Op.cit.

therefore no contradiction between the strict morality of believers and Abiy's practice of attracting supporters with gifts and positions.

An article titled *Pentecostalism in Ethiopia* (The Economist)⁴ mentions that Abiy Ahmed is a devout Pentecostal, as was his immediate predecessor Hailemariam Desalegn. Abiy Ahmed's closest ally, Lemma Megersa, who is a former president of Oromia Regional State is a board member of the Assemblies of God. Most high-ranking members of Abiy Ahmed's political party are followers of Pastor Gemechis Desta, a Pentecostal preacher. The effects of this are easy to see, as the article in The Economist makes clear: *Abiy's politics are rooted in neither established structures, historical precedent, nor institutions: "Because the truth is with us, no one will stop us... Because we work holding on to the truth, the God of Ethiopia will assist us"*⁵. Abiy Ahmed openly states that he believes himself chosen by God to save Ethiopia, and that provided that his policies are divinely-guided, he will eventually emerge victorious. "Many of his sermon-like speeches about love and forgiveness invoke God. Moreover, many of his followers see him as being on a divine mission. He seems to agree, having said that as a child his mother prophesied his rise".

For the subjugated people of the Amhara ethnicity, on the other hand, the vision of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed can be seen as an attempt to annihilate their ethnic group and create an Oromo dominated nation.

The use of the governance structure to eliminate Amharas was one of the key strategies in the architecture of amhara genocide. The Oromia regional state, Sidamo zone, Benshangul Gumuz regional state are good examples. Especially in Oromia region, the president of the region, Shimelis Abdissa, has clearly stated in many occasions in public and in conferences that the ultimate goal of the Oromos is to cripple amharas and disenfranchise and eliminate them⁶.

The Political faces of Abiy Ahmed

Abiy Ahmed's political ambitions are difficult to understand, not least of all because his rhetoric falls short of practice. In a country in which millions of people live in fear of being butchered in yet another weekly round of mass-killings, he prefers to open new parks and plants trees. None of these are policies, but simple photo-ops of the sort Hollywood celebrities indulge in. The Prime Minister, in this sense, seems to live in parallel world of fiction.

There is also very little accountability in his administration. Accountability is an elusive concept, but understanding where it originates can help citizens find ways to hold governments accountable. In the narrowest sense, accountability refers to the obligation to give an account of one's action to particular individuals, groups, or organizations⁷. This does

4 <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/11/24/god-wants-ethiopians-to-prosper>

5 https://www.theafricareport.com/56718/abiy-ahmeds-aim-to-pentecostalize-ethiopian-politics/?fbclid=IwAR2lzZZf0-KDh02g1e-5yFtQ_eYnINoZ54p2-wbfJgekxcqcIO9wcijvauc

6 <https://www.geeskaafrika.com/ethiopia-amhara-genocide-and-ethnic-cleansing/amp/>

7 Source URL (retrieved on 04/19/2018 - 13:37): <http://blogs.worldbank.org/governance/how-make-sense-government-accountability>. Mukerji

not happen in Abiy Ahmed's regime, where government forces are complicit in mass-killings and nothing is said about it. When asked about these atrocities, he brushes off the question with a chillingly indifferent answer: "I am not a militia or police who has control over the activities of district or village level activities".

Abiy Ahmed's initial popularity can be characterized as a 'Stockholm Syndrome' in which the majority of the Ethiopian population is a 'hostage'. Their irrational attachment to their abuser is perplexing: many do not want to believe that they are being deceived by his political personas. In a recent article, *Ethiopia weeps again*, [James Jeffrey](#) (26 November) 2020 wrote:

Critics have accused his approach to politics as being PR-motivated, superficial and detached from the reality of an Ethiopia that is socially conservative to the core. His style of government has also been accused of lacking transparency, while at the same time repressing media and repeating the authoritarian ways of previous Ethiopian governments. This has included the ongoing implementation of a controversial Anti-Terrorism Proclamation to stifle dissent and gag journalists, including by imprisoning them⁸.

During the Prime minister's visit to the US, right after coming to power, CNN journalist Jenni Marsh (August 29, 2018) reported —*Why Ethiopians believe their new prime minister is a prophet: Young, democratic and preaching peace, he's the leader the country has been waiting for*. But can Abiy Ahmed live up to the hype? Perhaps the biggest concern is that "Abiymania," and the faith it confers, will blind Ethiopians to the potential flaws of their leader, and weaken the democratic process. Natasha Ezrow, a professor in the department of government at Essex University in England, says: "We should be cautious of leaders who emerge and appear to be a messiah for everybody." Ethiopia, she adds, has "no institutions for democracy" and is "used to a strong man." Unless Abiy implements significant checks on his own power, then it will be hard to avoid a dictatorship, she says⁹.

That was almost three years ago. That warning showed that either the actor's side of the Prime Minister or the buzz of "Abiymania" has transformed him. There are some aspects in his personality that can have devastating consequences for the peaceful co-existence of the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural people of Ethiopia.

The Rwandan path to hell

Speaking of ignored warnings, the Rwandan genocide was a well-planned ethnic cleansing and massacre of 800,000 Tutsis and "moderate" Hutus in Rwanda. The genocide, which began on April 6, 1994, was orchestrated by Hutus, who not only attacked the Tutsis, but also any of their fellow Hutu who protected them. The genocide had been in the works since at least 1992, when the Belgian ambassador to Rwanda warned that the Hutus were preparing for an ethnic cleansing. Another Belgian, Professor Filip Reyntjens, also appeared before the Belgian senate and warned that the Hutus were operating death squads. He even mentioned one of their leaders as Rwandan Army Colonel Theoneste Bagasora, who would later command the genocide. In January 1994, the commander of UN troops in Rwanda, General Romeo Dallaire from Belgium, also sent a fax, now known as the "genocide fax," to the UN, warning that the Hutus had plans to wipe out the Tutsis. He requested more troops and permission to attack a Hutu arms cache. The UN turned down his requests and instead told him to inform the Rwandan government, which was filled with the same people planning the genocide. That same month, Dallaire seized an arms cache, which was placed in custody of United

⁸ <https://thecritic.co.uk/ethiopia-weeps-again/>

⁹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/08/26/world/abiymania-ethiopia-prime-minister-abiy-ahmed/index.html>

Nations and Rwandan troops—the same Rwandan troops who were training the rebels who perpetrated the genocide¹⁰.

What is happening now in Ethiopia has exact similarity with the ignored warning of the Rwandan genocide. A genocide is really happening right now in Ethiopia. People are crying out for help. The only thing they want is to live. They are crying out for justice not pretentious and Actorial rhetoric. But the government who is supposed to keep them safe is sponsoring this genocide¹¹. Since PM Abiy Ahmed came to power, there is a widespread genocide and Amharas and other non Oromo groups like Guraghes, Gamos and other peoples have become targets by the Oromo fanatics in the Oromia region.

Borkena (April 17, 2021¹²) reported that radical ethnic Oromo nationalists unleashed an organized attack for four days in a row in North Shoa and Kemissie regions – central Ethiopia. The Federal government has not yet remarked about the alarming situation in central Ethiopia. For Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, it was business as usual. He is just acting as if nothing has happened, Actorial face! He was rather making headlines with the inaugural ceremony of a new building that is said to be designated as the headquarters of the intelligence department¹³.

Conversations on social media tend to link the Organized attack in the name of Oromo Liberation Front (OLF -Shane) as something that is rather orchestrated by anti-Ethiopia forces within the government structure. The areas that came under renewed attack are within the Amahra regions of Ethiopia, and many see the attacks as part of an ongoing Amhara Genocide. There have been a series of massacres in Oromo regions of Ethiopia targeting ethnic Amhara. Amhara genocide does seem to be a reality than ever before but the reaction from the government is almost non-existent¹⁴.

¹⁰ <https://listverse.com/2016/05/12/10-ignored-warnings-that-turned-deadly/>

¹¹ <https://www.stopamharagenocide.com/>

¹² <https://borkena.com/2021/04/17/amhara-genocide-ataye-oromo-radical-forces-launch-attack/>

¹³ <https://borkena.com/2021/04/29/prime-minister-who-makes-a-fetish-of-an-election/>

¹⁴ <https://borkena.com/2021/04/17/amhara-genocide-ataye-oromo-radical-forces-launch-attack/>