POLICY BRIEF

COVID-19 and political stability in Ethiopia

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The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures used to tackle it could have profound implications for Ethiopia's political stability. While initially the threat appeared to temper political tensions, there are concerns that the state of emergency imposed to contain it may yet spark riots. Looming political differences could also escalate into unrest. Governance options should be politically negotiated and constitutionally mandated to ensure a stable future.

Key findings

▶ Initially the threat of COVID-19 helped calm political rivalries as opposing groups redirected their focus to the pandemic rather than concentrating on contentious political matters.

▶ In time, the pandemic and government measures to contain it could aggravate riots as well as political tensions relating largely to the question of governance once the term of the current ruling party ends.

▶ Whether the tensions will translate into violence depends on the will and capacity of political forces either to incite or to manage conflict. Most importantly, the institutional and ideological capacity and coherence of the state and of opposition parties, and the extent of their willingness to work together, play a huge role.

▶ The state may be more able to enhance its institutional power than its opponents. This doesn't necessarily mean that opposition movements will dwindle because protests are not always tied to organised political parties.

Recommendations

If political stability is to be ensured, all the protagonists must be genuinely prepared to work together to manage political crises.

For both the ruling party and opposition forces:

▶ The controversy over political governance after the end of the current state of emergency should be resolved constructively to safeguard the process of achieving an effective, negotiated and constitutionally mandated mode of governing the country.

For the ruling party:

▶ The government should deal with the pandemic and its socio-economic impacts in a participatory manner that involves non-state actors.

▶ The state of emergency should be implemented in ways that don't stymie the democratic potential of the country. This requires continuous engagement with the opposition to resolve concerns regarding abuse of power by any agent of the state.

For opposition parties:

▶ Opposition parties should play an active role in the battle against COVID-19, while at the same time creating conditions that encourage peaceful resolution of political concerns with the ruling party.

Introduction

The coronavirus has struck Ethiopia at a time when the political and security situations in the country are particularly precarious. Sporadic inter-communal and insurgent violence have rocked the country since the new government took office in April 2018. Competing nationalist forces have created a volatile political situation and debilitating internal divisions in the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (now transformed into the Prosperity Party) have contributed to the conflict.

> ## The political and security implications of COVID-19 will depend on the duration and spread of the virus

The Prosperity Party (PP) was in the process of reorganising itself as a national party (rather than a coalition of ethnic parties) with new ideologies and programmes. State institutions have been fragile for most of the past two years and, in many instances, were unable to contain inter-communal violence immediately and effectively.[1] The COVID-19 pandemic will undoubtedly have unintended consequences for many important security and political developments in the country.

At the time of writing, Ethiopia had 272 reported cases of COVID-19, with five deaths and 108 recoveries. Opinions are divided about just how badly affected the country will be by the pandemic.[2] Some sources project that anywhere between 15 and 30 million of a total of 120 million people could be infected. The Ethiopian Public Health Institute estimates that there could be some 1.94 million cases by the end of May.[3]

A few recent projections, however, have been more optimistic. According to one source,[4] the fact that Ethiopians tend not to congregate outside during the rainy season, and the limited number of hospitals (which are considered to be high zones of virus transmission) may work in the country's favour.

Other possible advantages cited in the same source are that the country plays only a small role in the global

economy. The state's historical capacity to organise resources and people swiftly may also contribute to containing the spread of the virus.[5]

The government has put in place several measures to tackle COVID-19.[6] These include closing borders and shutting down schools and nightclubs, calling in 'retired and in-training medical personnel'[7] and imposing mandatory quarantine on all people entering Ethiopia from abroad. Ethiopian Airlines has suspended flights to 80 destinations.

Moreover, the government has announced a COVID-19 Multi-Sectoral Preparedness and Response Plan that will cost US$1.64 billion. The funding will be spent in the next three months on the provision of emergency food and shelter, the health care system and 'agricultural sector support … the protection of vulnerable groups, additional education outlays, logistics, refugees support and site management support.'[8] The government has also postponed the national elections, which were due to have been held at the end of August, and enacted a five-month state of emergency (SoE).

The political and security implications of the pandemic will depend very much on its duration and reach. Even if the virus is swiftly contained it will affect security and the political transition in some ways and a prolonged and widespread viral attack could have profound and lasting consequences. Whatever the case, it is important to consider both scenarios in order to introduce effective coping mechanisms.

This policy brief examines the implications of COVID-19 and the government's preventative measure for political stability,[9] especially in the short to medium term. It argues that in the short term the disease and the preventative measures could make the country less vulnerable to organised political violence and more vulnerable to riots. In the medium and long term, however, vulnerability to both types of violence could increase, depending on the capacity of political forces to instigate and manage conflict and on their willingness to work together.

The road to instability could be averted by ironing out a politically negotiated and constitutionally mandated way of governing the country effectively when the SoE ends.[10] It is also important that all parties work together both to fight the pandemic and to ameliorate its effects.

Calming of tensions

The immediate effect of the spread of the virus has been to calm political tensions in the country. It can and has, for a while, helped to defuse both horizontal and vertical political conflicts. Since 2018 there have been four major reasons for these conflicts: security,[11] concern for group worth,[12] elite opportunism and state fragility.[13]

Since the advent of COVID-19 some of these factors have undergone a transformation, albeit a short-lived one. The spread of the pandemic might defuse security concerns among ethnic groups as they worry more about saving lives than about threats posed by other groups.

Many political groups have, until recently, devoted most of their political campaigns to setting out ways to battle the pandemic. Media houses, too, have given a considerable amount of airtime to issues related to COVID-19. The spread of the disease does not shift responses to old enemies as much as it alters the structure of the struggle by changing the 'battleground' and the 'enemy'.

It could also trigger a shift in concern from group worth to group existence. Instead of pursuing 'positive' goals such as political and economic upliftment for certain groups, the pandemic has made the priority avoiding the dire prospect of contracting the virus.

> The COVID-19 pandemic may trigger some forms of disorganised unrest in the short term

Further, aspects of elite opportunism may change in light of both the change in the means of exercising influence and power in society and in the context of the sudden reduction in opportunities for confrontational self-advancement. Elites, at least for some time, have been forced to seek fame and respect in their communities by campaigning about COVID-19 rather than about other controversial matters.

Political elites who persistently invoked matters unrelated to the virus were more likely than not being named and shamed for 'inconsiderately' going 'political' in a time of existential crisis.

It is important to note that it has not been necessary to put in place a strong law enforcement regime in order to secure this relative peace. Instead, merely defusing the tensions by redirecting the focus of the actors seems to have been sufficient to placate the opposing forces.

Tensions re-surfacing?

As time goes by, however, COVID-19 may aggravate different forms of conflict. The pandemic and its direct economic consequences may not only lay the seeds of future social disorder, it may trigger some forms of disorganised unrest in the short term. Depending on its duration it may accelerate the depth and spread of abject poverty, deepen economic inequality and generally exacerbate levels of desperation among a large mass of the population, especially urban dwellers.

The National Disaster Risk Management Commission estimates that 30 million people may experience 'consumption gaps', the most likely to be affected being the urban poor, the homeless and those working in the informal sector.[14] Even in rural areas, market-purchase-dependent households will be affected. At the same time, government's preventative measures under the SoE may tamper with the effective movement of commercial and humanitarian goods, which will lead to increased food insecurity 'due to shortages of food items or price increases.'[15]

Whether these factors will translate directly into organised violence depends on certain political circumstances (see below), but there may well be a series of unorganised riots and protests. Although this will largely depend on how well the government responds to the core demands of the people, it will be nearly impossible for it to meet the full expectations of all major groups, not least because of the structural inability of the Ethiopian state to manage rapidly a crisis of huge magnitude.

Political tensions might also accumulate with the lapse of time, particularly in relation to governance when the SoE ends. While most political forces initially sided with the government in its enactment of the SoE to contain the health threat, the ruling party could face a formidable legitimacy challenge when

the five months are over, as that will coincide with the end of its term in office.[16] Elections meant to be held at the end of August have been postponed without any clear alternative plan, adding to the confusion.

Opinions are divided about what course should be taken after that. The government initially set out[17] four options for public discussion – 'strictly' based on the constitution – that it believed could help manage politics until the deferred elections are held.[18]

The options were: extending the SoE, forming a caretaker government by dissolving Parliament, amending the constitution to extend the term in office and soliciting a constitutional interpretation on the matter from the House of Federation (HoF), the upper house of the bicameral Federal Parliamentary Assembly, the Parliament of Ethiopia.

> Elections scheduled for the end of August have been postponed without any clear alternative plan

While public debates were underway, the ruling party officially endorsed the last option and the House of People's Representatives approved it. Preparations for seeking the required constitutional interpretation are now in progress.

Opposition parties have aired diverse opinions, ranging from endorsing one of those four options to advocating their own alternative scenarios. Some influential parties/political elites have pushed strongly for 'political' rather than constitutional solutions – including a transitional government, but the ruling party has vehemently rejected all extra-constitutional options. This debate is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, risking a deadlock.

Thus, whereas the immediate shock of the coronavirus and the SoE – which is largely considered at present to be legitimate – has temporarily halted the political wrangling, debates about governing after September are emerging once again. It is quite likely that elements in the opposition will increasingly turn their attention away from the virus and direct it back to politics if no agreement is reached about how to move forward. This could create

the opportunity for a regime-opposition standoff, whose outcome may degenerate into unrest.

Whether violence will ensue, and on what scale, depends largely on three factors: the state's capacity to contain it, the opposition's capacity to inflame and manage opposition movements, and the willingness of all major parties to work together to manage a crisis.

Capacity and willingness to incite and manage conflicts

The emergence in the near future of a stronger and more influential, but ideologically incoherent, state could be an important outcome of the pandemic. It can reasonably be argued that the crisis and, more importantly, the enforcement of SoE measures, might create some necessary conditions for buttressing the capacity of the state to mobilise and institutionalise without necessarily helping to consolidate programmes and ideologies.

The current crisis could give the state the respite it has needed since the change of government in 2018 to rebrand itself. As the crisis unfolds it could develop its power to repress and control by bolstering the declining morale of elements of the security forces, a legacy of the failure of the pre-2018 repression.[19] As the primary manager of the problem at hand, the state could also extend its reach into society after an interlude (since 2018) of less extensive intervention.

In addition, it might have the opportunity to mobilise people in different parts of the country towards a particular collective goal. According to a senior government official, the state will ensure that it works with non-state actors such as civil society organisations to reach different sections of the society and to mobilise people.[20]

However, given the clear imbalance of power between state and non-state entities, the government will end up playing the leading role in major relevant upcoming activities. In the process, it will build useful networks to be deployed for other purposes at a later date.

The ruling party will also continue to be the most important provider of or conduit for the provision of services and relief for the needy, thereby establishing a new relationship of dependence. Finally, it can capitalise on the SoE to try to ameliorate the institutional incoherence it has suffered since the start of the political

liberalisation: it can now work towards regaining its lost structures[21] and re-establishing command and control where they were broken or weakened.

Some of these objectives may be achieved, either intentionally or inadvertently, while trying to contain the spread and alleviate the effects of the pandemic because under the state of emergency the legal grounds for rejecting a government decree have been scrapped. Full obedience to the orders of the state is required both within the state apparatus and outside it.

However, the effort to achieve ideological and programmatic coherence within the ruling party or the state structure it controls will continue to face challenges during the pandemic. After a long period of enervating internal divisions the party had just started to re-invent itself aggressively ideologically and organisationally when the coronavirus hit the Horn region. It was running large-scale discussion sessions for members all over the country on the visions and policies of the re-invented party. These efforts came to a halt in late March.

Thus, the measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus may enable the ruling party to bring together all the disparate elements in state and party institutions. The ruling party could also centralise the administrative and repressive apparatuses of the government with the stated aim of combating a dangerous invisible enemy.

While it may continue to tap into these achievements to consolidate power in general in the future, such a move may not necessarily be backed up by ideological coherence.

The ban on gatherings means the ruling party, like other political groups, has lost opportunities to focus on internal party matters and define its programmes and ideology. Hence, while institutional state power becomes more formidable, internal ideological party cohesion is likely to remain in limbo for the time being. This problem will make apparent institutional strength precarious at a later date, especially if the regime meets sturdy opposition from below.

The question then is: can the re-invigorated institutional power of the state manage to contain a possibly re-galvanised opposition movement? Timing is critical here. If such a movement builds up

before state institutions are re-invented and state interventions in society are well underway, could it become even more challenging to manage the political crisis?

The re-galvanisation of opposition movements, at least those involving political parties, depends not only on the actions of the state in the coming months, but on certain developments within those parties.

The first issue is their capacity to maintain consistent connections with their social base, which could be affected both by the pandemic and by the containment measures taken by the government. The second is the building of institutional and ideological coherence within the ranks of the opposition.

> The ruling party had just started to re-invent itself ideologically and organisationally when COVID-19 hit

Opposition parties in Ethiopia re-entered the political scene in 2018 with key deficiencies. Many had to rebrand their ideological and programmatic make-up to cope with new developments in the country. They also had to reorganise themselves, partly to redress their past organisational crises and partly to face a new set of challengers who required them to form broad-based coalitions.

With the pandemic spreading and containment measures in place all these processes could be halted or weakened for now. According to some leaders of major opposition parties, almost all work related to mobilisation and internal reorganisation has ceased completely.[22]

These developments will have important implications for opposition politics in the future. In the medium term, parties may have the capacity to oppose state policies and stir people up to that end, but they may lack the capacity to channel movements along clear and coordinated lines and with well-defined goals. With existing institutional and programmatic incoherence, opposition parties may not be up to the task of triggering orderly challenges to state rule. This will not necessarily halt the opposition movement, but it might make it chaotic.

Not all opposition groups will be equally affected, however. Those with a small social base and fragile institutional structures will be more vulnerable. One particular opposition party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), will emerge more powerful because it has similar opportunities – albeit at the regional level – to those of the ruling PP.

The TPLF, as the only semi-independent (of the PP) regional ruling party, is running its own state of emergency in Tigray. By further entrenching its tentacles across that killil (federal unit) and stepping up its capacity to mobilise, it can muster and exercise greater repressive and controlling power in the region. This leads to the conclusion that Tigray, along with other areas harboring parties that have strong connections with their social bases, will continue to remain an epicentre of opposition politics in the future.[23]

> According to some major opposition party leaders, almost all work related to mobilisation and internal reorganisation has ceased completely

In the circumstances, the degree of willingness of the ruling party and the opposition (including the TPLF) to work together will be critically important. Although the PP is now clearly in a position to boost its power in relation to both many opposition parties and its internal structures, it will not be able to pacify the country on its own. This is mainly because popular discontent may be provoked but not always steered by opposition parties; it may go out of their control. A standoff between the government and its opponents could easily translate into chaos.

Conclusion

Although COVID-19 may, in the short term, have calmed the political waters, this could change in the face of an increase in political wrangling. The maintenance of political stability depends on both the institutional and ideological capacity of the ruling party and the opposition groups, along with their ability to mobilise their supporters, and their willingness to work together.

Recommendations

The parties

• The controversy over political governance after the end of the State of Emergency should be resolved in ways that safeguard the creation of an effective, negotiated and constitutionally mandated mode of governing the country.

• Of paramount importance is fighting the pandemic, while at the same time, sorting out ways to reduce political tensions triggered by the question of how the country will be governed after September.

HOW WILL ETHIOPIA BE GOVERNED AFTER THE STATE OF EMERGENCY?

- Any plan for governing the country must take into account the need for the administration to be effective; to have political legitimacy born out of serious political negotiations presided over by an independent body and constitutional legitimacy earned by systematically invoking the spirit and the letter of the constitution.

- The government must seriously consider the importance of political negotiations in a time of major crisis.

- On the other hand, the transitional government proposal propounded by some opposition forces must address the question of government effectiveness at a time when the country needs strong leadership. The proposal and calls by some opposition figures for 'political solutions' must also acknowledge the importance of taking the constitution seriously, not least for the sake of ensuring continuity and predictability in the rules governing political processes.

- Political negotiations and taking the constitution seriously should not be seen as mutually exclusive.[24] The outcomes of negotiations to resolve the deadlock must undergo a constitutionally mandated process before implementation or otherwise must be used to refine legal rulings. For instance, through negotiations, political actors may agree to extend the rule of the incumbent on condition that the government opts for a more 'consultative' approach to ruling the country. That means, as Adem explains, 'the government would continue governing but must formally convene and consult leaders of opposition parties on key policy decisions that may be necessary during the interregnum.'[25] It may also involve joint decision making in some selected areas. The Council of Constitutional Inquiry (CCI) should then look for ways and means of incorporating the terms of the agreements into its submissions to the HoF for approval. Legal scholars have already noted the need for the CCI to go beyond the minimum proposal to end or extend the terms of the government, and include 'advice on how the country should be governed.'[26] Alternatively, whatever the CCI recommends and is approved by the HoF should be enriched by politically negotiated deals among political parties without necessarily negating the rulings of the HoF.

The state

- The government should fight the pandemic and its socio-economic impact in a manner that includes joint decision making with non-state actors. By making the process of managing COVID-19 and its after-effects as participatory as possible, while still under the SoE, it should leave enough space for, and even proactively contribute to, the survival and growth of influential non-state actors. State efforts immediately before the declaration of the SoE to convene discussion platforms with the opposition and get their approval are steps in the right direction and should continue in matters that require national consensus.

- The SoE should be implemented in ways that do not thwart the democratic potential of the country. This requires continuous engagement with the
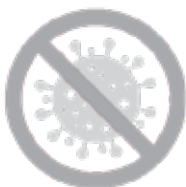
STATE OF EMERGENCY MEASURES MUST ONLY BE USED TO MANAGE THE PANDEMIC

opposition to resolve concerns about abuse of power by any agent of the state.

• The state should further ensure that all measures taken under the SoE are limited to the prevention and management of the pandemic. Care should be taken that such measures do not creep into other realms of life. In terms of the SoE the executive is granted, not necessarily against the constitution, unrestrained power to suspend some rights and freedoms,[27] which has created concerns about the practical protection of human rights. The inquiry board established by Parliament to oversee the implementation process 'cannot question the decision of the Council of Ministers to suspend a particular right or freedom'.[28]

• Any alleged deviation from the objectives of the SoE should be dealt with not just legally but politically as well. The government, opposition parties and local entities working on human rights should consult regularly about major concerns and solve problems jointly.

• The pandemic gives the state an opportunity to reclaim its hijacked structures and centralise its security apparatus, important conditions for successful democratisation. However, serious and consistent efforts to professionalise the security apparatus and render it loyal to the state and the constitution, but independent from party preferences, should be resumed immediately after the pandemic is contained.

The opposition

• Non-state actors (especially opposition parties) should seize the opportunity to put in place a participatory approach, step up their involvement in fighting the virus and support those affected. They should come up with multiple strategies to reduce the burdens imposed on society and embark on helping those in need. This will help them to maintain their connections with their constituencies and stand by them at this difficult time, increasing the opportunity of gaining more acceptance and trust.

Notes

1   S Yusuf, Drivers of Ethnic Conflicts in Contemporary Ethiopia, ISS Monograph 202, https://issafrica. s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/mono-202-2.pdf, December 2019.

2   All the projections are summarised in A Pankhurst Why we can hope that Ethiopia will be spared the worst of the pandemic, *Ethiopia Observer*, www.ethiopiaobserver. com/2020/04/13/why-we-can-hope-that-ethiopia-will-be-spared-the-worst-of-the-pandemic/, April 2020.

3   That is, with aggressive mass testing.

4   Ibid.

5   It should be noted that some of these assertions are questionable, to say the least. For instance, the rainy season may, on the other hand, exacerbate transmission by confining people in often crowded shelters. Moreover, it is not clear to what extent hospitals should be emphasised as major sites of transmission compared to other relevant locations.

6   The UN Capital Development Fund, Ethiopian Government on the forefront of Covid-19, www.uncdf.org/article/5528/ethiopian-government-on-the-forefront-of-covid-19, April 2020.

7   Ibid.

8   Ibid.

9   Such provisions in the SoE as bans on large gatherings, travel restrictions and many others.

10   The italicised words are of critical importance. They are elaborated on in the recommendations.

11   'Security dilemma', in this context, refers to the nationalist competitions that 'are informed by the self-reinforcing logic of power building to preserve one's security. This spurs a spate of power build-up and counter-power build-up between groups, leading to a generally hostile and insecure environment for each, and perhaps to violent conflicts as well' (Yusuf, Drivers of Ethnic Conflicts, 2),

12   Group worth, a concept taken from Donald Horowitz, states that 'the bond that ties the individual's worth to the group's, and the drive to gauge the group's worth in contrast to another's, gives nationalism a strong appeal to the nationalist, making even killing or dying for the cause acceptable' (Yusuf, Drivers of Ethnic Conflicts).

13   Ibid.

14   OCHA, Ethiopia: Covid-19 humanitarian impact situation update No. 2 As of 13 April 2020, www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www. humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/ethiopia_ covid-19_humanitarian_impact_sitrep_02.pdf, April 2020.

15   Ibid.

16   ICG, Managing the politics of Ethiopia's Covid 19 crisis, www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/managing-politics-ethiopias-covid-19-crisis, April 2020.

17   According to party officials, the options were laid out by three independent groups of legal experts.

18   The options were broadcast on multiple local television and radio channels.

19   Yusuf, Drivers of Ethnic Conflicts,

20   Personal discussion, May 2020, Addis Ababa.

21   Ibid.

22   Interview with some party leaders, April and May 2020, Addis Ababa.

23   The TPLF has recently announced its intentions to hold regional elections, adding another layer of complexity to the tensions between the Front and the federal government.

24   See also S Dersso, Constitutional based national dialogue the best way to avert a constitutional crisis triggered by deferred election, Addis Standard, https://addisstandard.com/op-ed-constitutional-based-national-dialogue-the-best-way-to-avert-a-constitutional-crisis-triggered-by-differed-election/, April 2020.

25   A Kassie, Ethiopia's postponed elections: governing in the interregnum, *Addis Standard*, https://addisstandard.com/commentary-ethiopias-postponed-elections-governing-in-the-interregnum/April 2020.

26   Y Fessha et al, Commentary: Making Sense of Ethiopia's Constitutional Moment, Addis Standard, https://addisstandard.com/commentary-making-sense-of-ethiopias-constitutional-moment/, May 2020.

27   The SoE proclamation did not provide "any framework on rights and freedoms [from among those that can be derogated] that the Council of Ministers can justifiably suspend and those whose suspension Parliament deems unnecessary or disproportionate to the problem". Z Aytenaw, Ethiopia's COVID state of emergency: Right move with shades of problematic provisions, *Addis standard*, https://addisstandard.com/op-ed/, April 2020.

28   Ibid.

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