

Reform in Ethiopia: Turning Promise into Progress

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Ethiopians wave national flags and celebrate in the streets of Addis Ababa the return of Berhanu Nega, the leader of the former armed movement Ginbot 7, after 11 years in exile, on September 9, 2018. Credit: YONAS TADESSE/AFP/Getty Images.

Key Takeaways

- In January 2018, the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) declared that it would pursue reforms in response to intensifying antigovernment protests that began in November 2015.
- In April, at the age of 42, Abiy Ahmed became one of Africa's youngest leaders when he was selected by the EPRDF as prime minister following the resignation of Hailemariam Desalegn.
- Abiy wasted little time in accelerating the reform agenda, which included lifting the state of emergency, releasing political prisoners, and announcing plans to revise repressive laws.
- Much remains to be done, but a transition to democracy and respect for fundamental rights in Ethiopia would be a substantial victory for democratic governance worldwide, at a time when too many countries are moving in the opposite direction.
- The US government should 1) encourage the Ethiopian government to undertake specific reforms, including revision or repeal of the Charities and Societies Proclamation and measures to ensure the independence of key institutions; 2) increase bilateral assistance and technical support for free, fair, transparent, and inclusive local and national elections in 2019 and 2020;

The recent breakthrough in context

The EPRDF has ruled Ethiopia since 1991. Along with its affiliated ethnic-based parties, the EPRDF currently holds all 547 seats in the parliament. Uncompetitive elections and repressive laws on antiterrorism, civil society, and the media have been used to entrench the EPRDF's authoritarian rule, effectively eliminating opposition parties and independent news outlets and stifling all forms of dissent. Freedom House has rated Ethiopia as Not Free since 2011.

Ethiopia is a country of genuine strategic importance. Home to more than 100 million people and with high population growth rates, it is projected to be among the world's 10 most populous countries by 2050. The economy is a potential juggernaut, posting a 10 percent GDP growth rate in 2017, according to the World Bank. Ethiopian troops play critical roles in UN peacekeeping missions around the world. The country is poised to become an important power in the pivotal Red Sea region.

In the first eight months of 2018, Ethiopia has experienced a head-spinning series of events. In January, the EPRDF declared that it would respond to intensifying antigovernment protests that began in November 2015 by pursuing meaningful reforms, including the revision or repeal of laws that tightly constrained politics, preparations for free and fair elections, and the release of political prisoners. In the ensuing months, thousands of prisoners were freed, and the notorious federal crimes investigations unit in Addis Ababa, commonly known as Maekelawi, was closed.

In April 2018, Abiy Ahmed—a 42-year-old former military officer from Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, the Oromo—was selected by the EPRDF as prime minister following the resignation of his predecessor, Hailemariam Desalegn.

A reform-minded prime minister?

Abiy quickly embarked on a tour of the country, conducting town-hall meetings and listening to constituents whose voices are rarely heard.

He wasted little time in accelerating the reform agenda, releasing several high-profile political prisoners and lifting a draconian state of emergency. He also announced plans to amend the constitution to institute term limits for prime ministers, encouraged exiled opposition politicians to return home and participate in politics, and proposed ending government monopolies in key economic sectors, including telecommunications, energy, and air transport.

Crucially, Abiy moved to end 20 years of hostility with neighboring Eritrea, meeting three times with that country's reclusive leader, Isaias Afwerki. He went further by meeting with leaders of over 50 opposition parties and declaring that a strong multiparty system based on the rule of law and human rights was essential for Ethiopia. On a trip through the United States, with stops in Washington, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles, he engaged with exiled opposition leaders and other members of the diaspora in an effort to show a commitment to reconciliation.

For Ethiopians in the country and abroad who are accustomed to an authoritarian EPRDF that prioritizes economic growth and stability over political and civil rights, the pace and breadth of these changes are exhilarating.

Challenges ahead

Abiy's reforms will not go unchallenged. Power struggles within the EPRDF leadership and its affiliated ethnic-based parties continue to simmer. In particular, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, representing a minority ethnic group that has exercised outsized control over the government for decades, stands to lose influence and could be a spoiler. The government blames disgruntled elements in the party and government structures for recent instances of violence, including a grenade attack at a pro-Abiy rally in Addis Ababa in June. A pivotal EPRDF party congress scheduled for September could ratify Abiy's authority and

the party's new direction. But escalating ethnic-based conflicts throughout the country—especially in the Somali and Oromia regions—also threaten to derail reforms.

American influence on Ethiopia's homegrown reform process will be limited, but there are a number of opportunities for positive engagement.

Recommendations

To encourage democratic progress in Ethiopia and consolidate recent gains, US policymakers should do the following.

1. Press the government of Ethiopia to:

a. Ensure that the process for **revising laws** such as the Charities and Societies, Antiterrorism, and Mass Media Proclamations—which together prohibit civil society work on human rights and democracy issues and restrict the ability of independent media to operate—is transparent, includes all stakeholders, and occurs in a timely fashion. Specific reforms to the Charities and Societies Proclamation may include:

i. Eliminating the 10 percent cap for foreign funding of human rights organizations.

ii. Revising the 70 percent program and 30 percent administration expenses requirement and providing clarification on the definition of program and administrative expenses. The current law considers a number of program-related costs to be administrative.

iii. Limiting the overly broad regulatory powers of the Charities and Societies Agency while introducing a system of self-regulation in the civil society sector.

b. Establish a system of **accountability for serious human rights abuses** over the past 27 years of EPRDF's rule. This does not necessarily mean aggressive prosecutions, but it could entail a truth commission or another form of inquiry that gives Ethiopians the opportunity to air their grievances, question officials, obtain documents, and seek closure. Such an approach can forestall extralegal acts of vengeance against former ruling party officials.

c. Accelerate reform of the **criminal justice system** and the security sector to make them independent of political control and influence. The police and courts have routinely been used to level spurious and politically motivated charges against critics of the ruling party. Revision of restrictive laws such as the Antiterrorism Proclamation will have little impact in the absence of reforms to the criminal justice system itself.

d. Address recurring **ethnic-based clashes** that are causing humanitarian crises in many parts of the country. Abiy's government should establish effective early-warning, prevention, and mitiga-

tion mechanisms for such conflicts, and show a commitment to investigate and punish the perpetrators of related human rights abuses, including members of regional paramilitary forces.

e. Ahead of the 2019 local and 2020 national elections, implement **electoral reforms** that guarantee the independence of key institutions, including the judiciary and the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia.

2. Increase US financial and technical **support for elections** that are free, fair, transparent, and inclusive, including capacity-building programs for institutions such as the National Electoral Board and the judiciary. The 2019 local elections will be a key test of Abiy's ability to advance his reform agenda, and could build positive momentum and experience leading up to the national elections in 2020.

3. Provide robust US support designed to strengthen **civil society and independent media**. Such efforts would both take advantage of the new political space and test its breadth in practice.

4. To the extent allowed by Ethiopian laws, provide capacity-building support for **political parties**. After years of repression, opposition parties are underdeveloped and in need of assistance if they are to offer meaningful competition and address a broad range of interests beyond ethnic bases.

5. Encourage substantive engagement in the reform process by the US-based **Ethiopian diaspora**. This may include supporting exchange programs that help Ethiopian-born experts to return and advise, mentor, and train professionals in key government and nongovernmental sectors associated with reform efforts.

6. If reforms continue to advance, strengthen **economic ties** and expand economic support to assist Abiy and other leaders in providing tangible democratic dividends to a broad swath of the population, enabling political reform to become clearly associated with an improved standard of living in what remains a largely impoverished country where growth has been unevenly distributed.

Ethiopia is currently rated Not Free in [Freedom in the World](#) and Not Free in [Freedom on the Net](#).

Freedom House is an independent watchdog organization dedicated to the expansion of freedom and democracy around the world.

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