Introduction:

From November 2015, Ethiopia has experienced an unprecedented wave of popular mobilisation. The government responded to the protests with a heavy hand, resulting in thousands of casualties and tens of thousands of people arrested, and charged with terrorism offenses. A state of emergency has been extended into July 2017. Further, militant activity has risen in tandem with popular unrest, stemming from both the distraction that civil unrest posed for the Ethiopian military, and also shared grievances. Available data collected from international and local media since November 2015 points to more than 1,200 people reported killed during protests. Approximately 660 fatalities are due to state violence against peaceful protesters, 250 fatalities from state engagement against rioters, and more than 380 people killed by security forces following the declaration of the state of emergency in October 2016.¹

The protests in the Oromia region from November 2015 are generally seen as part of a movement that began in April-May 2014, when students across several locations in the region protested a plan to expand the capital, Addis Ababa (hereafter, the Addis Ababa Master Plan). The 2014 protests, led by university students, were comparatively small and situated in the Western part of Oromia (see Figure 1).² The demonstrations were repressed by the security services (Amnesty, 10 October 2014).

Protests resumed in November 2015; they were mainly led by students from secondary schools and universities. The demonstrations quickly gained momentum and the students were soon joined by farmers, workers and other citizens (EHRP, March 2016). An average of 26 protests occurred per week between November 2015 - February 2016. The sharp drop to seven protests per week between March - April 2016 was due to the onset of the sowing season, rather than the Ethiopian government’s suspension of the Master Plan. Large-scale demonstrations resumed in May 2016 and continued over the summer, while fresh protests also occurred in the Amhara region from the end of July 2016 (see Figure 2).³ The continuation of the protests beyond the suspension of the Master Plan revealed enduring grievances against the Ethiopian regime among different ethnic groups.

Government violence at the Irecha religious festival in Oromia in early October 2016 sparked outrage among the opposition and catalysed a rapid escalation of the protest movement. Oromo activists called this escalation the “week of rage”. The government ultimately declared an unprecedented state of emergency on 8 October 2016, imposing tight restrictions that have since successfully curbed the protests. The number of reported riots and protests dropped from 56 in October 2016 to 7, 4 and 2 in November 2016, December 2016 and January 2017 respectively. The significant reduction in riots and protests accompanied an
increase in political and ethnic militia activity, and in battles involving security forces and foreign-based rebel groups, especially in Oromia, Amhara and Tigray (see Figure 3; ACLED, February 2017). Though the link between the protesters and the various armed groups remains unclear, these trends point to an escalation from peaceful unrest to an armed struggle taken up by local armed militias and rebel movements united in their aim to remove the government. The government prolonged the state of emergency until the end of July 2017, aiming to control the remaining pockets of instability in the country.

Why did protests erupt?

Background on Ethiopia

Lack of economic opportunities and resource ownership

Since the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in 1991, it has governed by the principle that national security will best be served by an intrinsic combination of rapid economic growth and democratic advancement. The establishment and consolidation of an effective development state, combined with a form of democratic federalism ensuring peoples’ participation in administering their own affairs, have been seen as the two key pillars driving Ethiopia’s “renaissance” from 1991 (Government, 13 December 2010; Chatham House, 23 October 2015).

Through the promotion of a development-statist vision, and the state controlling many sources of rent and owning around two-thirds of businesses in the country, Ethiopia registers an annual economic growth rates close to 10% (World Bank, 2017; Dittgen and Demissie, January 2017). At the national level, the EPRDF regime is focused on improving agricultural inputs, building roads, promoting large-scale land deals and investing in education and health in rural areas – which hold close to 80% of the overall country’s population. Regionally and internationally, it has also invested in key transport links to improve commercial corridors with countries such as Sudan, South Sudan, Djibouti and Kenya; asserted its role as a leading regional electric power and water provider; and opened some sectors to foreign investments to boost economic activities. As part of the five year Growth and Transformation Plans, which have run since 2010, the EPRDF has envisaged for Ethiopia to become a food-secure and middle-income country by 2025 (Government, 2010; Government, 2016; Dittgen and Demissie, January 2017). The most tangible results have been a reduction in the number of people living below the

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1ACLED recorded more than 3,400 fatalities from overall conflict activity and riots and protests from November 2015-May 2017. This includes deaths from combat with armed non-state groups, and other forms of violence against civilians.

2Figure 1 shows the localisation of conflict and riot and protest events in Ethiopia over January 2014-May 2017. The colours represent the various event types recorded in each location. The size of the circles varies depending on the number of events recorded per event type in each location.
national poverty line from 45.5% in 1995 to 29.6% in 2010, and significant improvements to the country’s Human Development Index and life expectancies (see Figure 4).

Strong economic growth, however, is accompanied by growing inequalities. With the second largest population on the continent nearing 100 million, the annual per capita Gross National Income is still very low at $590 in 2015. The economic gap between rich and poor appears to be widening (World Bank, 2016; Dittgen and Demissie, January 2017). In parallel, unemployment and underemployment have risen, particularly among educated youth in urban areas, and allegations of public corruption have spread (Broussar and Tekleselassie, August 2012; Transparency International, 2016). Considering the centralised-driven economic growth strategy, populations have suspected the Tigrayan elite – which has dominated the government since the EPRDF came to power – of being the main beneficiary of the economic boom. This has fuelled sentiments of economic marginalisation, particularly among non-Tigrayan people, and fed social tensions (Africa Research Bulletin, 31 October 2016).

The protests that have rocked Oromia since 2014 have highlighted the fundamental tension between the state’s centralised development strategy and non-Tigrayan ethnic groups’ desire for more public consultation and localised decision-making in the face of marginalisation and dispossession.

The initial protests erupted in Oromia due to the controversy around the proposed expansion of the capital Addis Ababa’s boundary by up to 1.1 million hectares, an approximate 20-fold increase into Oromia territories. This expansion aimed to accommodate the demands for residential, commercial and industrial properties (see Figure 5) by a growing middle class in the capital as a result of the economic boom. Exploiting the lack of clearly defined boundaries between the capital and the Oromia region, authorities published plans for the proposed expansion (the Addis Ababa Master Plan) without meaningful consultations with the impacted communities. This raised concerns among many Oromos about whether farmers and households facing eviction to make way for land sales would be offered adequate compensation and protections. The plan was also perceived as violating constitutionally-enshrined territorial rights attributed to the region, as the land would be removed from Oromia’s jurisdiction and thus significantly alter the region’s territory (HRW, June 2016; Amnesty, 13 May 2014; National Poverty Line from 45.5% in 1995 to 29.6% in 2010, and significant improvements to the country’s Human Development Index and life expectancies (see Figure 4). Strong economic growth, however, is accompanied by growing inequalities. With the second largest population on the continent nearing 100 million, the annual per capita Gross National Income is still very low at $590 in 2015. The economic gap between rich and poor appears to be widening (World Bank, 2016; Dittgen and Demissie, January 2017). In parallel, unemployment and underemployment have risen, particularly among educated youth in urban areas, and allegations of public corruption have spread (Broussar and Tekleselassie, August 2012; Transparency International, 2016). Considering the centralised-driven economic growth strategy, populations have suspected the Tigrayan elite – which has dominated the government since the EPRDF came to power – of being the main beneficiary of the economic boom. This has fuelled sentiments of economic marginalisation, particularly among non-Tigrayan people, and fed social tensions (Africa Research Bulletin, 31 October 2016).

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The government’s promotion of private sector agricultural investment since 2005, through the leasing of land to domestic and foreign investors, has also created resentment. As of 2011, up to 1.4 million hectares of land in Oromia (4% of lands) had been allocated to investors (more conservative estimates put the number at around 21,000 hectares, but these estimates only include land deals over 1,000 hectares). Furthermore, an alleged 15,000 Oromo farmers from suburban towns surrounding Addis Ababa, and many more in other areas of Oromia, have been forcefully evicted from their lands without appropriate support or compensation in order to promote these in-

*Mesfin, 2013; Addis Standard, 20 August 2015.*

The controversial plan came against the backdrop of previous tensions between the government and the Oromo population, and fed the perception that the Tigrayan-led regime aimed to plunder the region’s resources. The government’s temporary transfer of the regional capital from Addis Ababa to Adama in 2004, for instance, was perceived as detrimental to Oromos, as it would strip them of their most valuable economic and political asset. This triggered months of protests by students across Oromia and Addis Ababa (*Amnesty, 13 May 2014*).
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The demonstrators have also expressed grievances over regional administration. Ethiopia transitioned in 1991 from a centralist to an ethno-federal state, following revolts by various guerrilla movements formed in the 1970s to seek better political representation and independence from the Amhara-dominated regime. The Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), whose forces were the main military structure in the country at the time, de facto replaced the state army and appointed a ‘Representatives Council’ led by the EPRDF. This began as an umbrella of ethno-national fronts (the Oromo Peoples’ Democratic Organization (OPDO), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the South Ethiopian Peoples’ Democratic Front (SEPDF) and the TPLF. A new Constitution was prepared and passed in 1995, establishing nine regional states drawn along ethnic and linguistic lines. Each state was delegated powers and rights of self-determination, including secession. At the national level, the Constitution also ensured the separation of executive, legislative and judicial powers, vesting executive powers in the hands of the Prime Minister and of the Council of Ministers (Government, 8 December 1994; Mesfin, May 2015). The adoption of this new, seemingly decentralised form of government raised hopes for appreciable change, after decades of political and economic centralisation, oppression, poverty and hunger under the previous regime. However, political evolutions since the transition suggest a continuation of the policy of hegemonic central control: first, in the way ethno-federalist principles have been practically implemented; second, in the way political opposition to the ruling party has been controlled.
Limits of the federal system

While the federal system is meant to reduce conflict by delegating power to ethnic groups locally and guaranteeing their representation at the centre, ethno-federalism also has the potential to sow divisions between communities and extend the influence of the centre to the periphery ([Mesfin, May 2015]). In Ethiopia, the limited applicability of federalist principles transpires in the lack of central representation for ethnic groups and the continued centralisation of political and economic powers.

Despite the government’s multi-ethnic composition, and the ruling coalition’s gathering of four ethnic parties, politics in Ethiopia have long been dominated by the TPLF. The TPLF represents the Tigrayan ethnic group, which comprises 6% of Ethiopia’s 100 million population. The TPLF played a major role in removing the military junta (“Derg”) under Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991, and in subsequently gathering the various ethno-regional rebel organisations into the EPRDF coalition, which has been leading the country ever since. Several evolutions illustrate how the TPLF has, from the onset, sought to play a leading role in defining the country’s political trajectory. The TPLF Chairman, Meles Zenawi, for instance, occupied the key posts of EPRDF leader and president of the Transitional Government in 1991, before moving on to become Prime Minister in 1995 – a role that he held for 17 years until his death in 2012. Zenawi’s control of government representatives tightened after the war with Eritrea (1998 - 2000), as internal disagreements led to a streamlining of both the EPRDF and the TPLF. This led to political power becoming concentrated in an increasingly smaller number of politicians close to Zenawi ([ICG, 4 September 2009; African Arguments, 7 October 2016]). Instead of being disbanded after 1991, the TPLF’s military structure also replaced the former army junta to form the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF). In early 2007 Tigrayans constituted between 60-70% of the officer corps in the Ethiopian armed forces, partly as a result of Zenawi’s purges within the government ([Global Security, 2015]). Other examples include the exclusion of the main Oromo opposition party, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), from the transitional government in 1992, following disagreements with the TPLF; and the lack of consultation of pan-Ethiopian opposition parties, with differing views on ethically-defined citizenship, in preparations of the new Constitution ([Van Veen, September 2016; Mesfin, May 2015; ICG, 4 September 2009]).

When Hailemariam Desalegn replaced Zenawi as Prime Minister in 2012, there was hope that a more pluralistic ethnic mix up could emerge within the government due to his regional affiliation to the SNNPR ([Handino, Lind and Mesfin, October 2012]). However, the TPLF elite considered this transition a conspiracy to push them aside, and adopted measures to cripple the new Prime Minister’s power. The TPLF elite reduced Desalegn’s control over ministries; appointed several, often Tigrayan, senior advisors to work at his side; promoted some 37 – often Tigrayan – officers to the rank of generals; and retained control of key defense, intelligence and foreign affairs posts. They also purged dissenters within the government ([African Arguments, 18 September 2016]). The dominance of the TPLF within the EPRDF means that other involved parties lost their status as legitimate representatives of the ethnic groups they nominally represent. Oromo dissenters, for instance, widely perceive their OPDO (EDPRF) representatives as “government puppets”, handpicked by the TPLF. They accuse the TPLF of having masterminded the very creation of the party to pit them against the OLF, a more potent symbol of nationalism. This is significant, as the OPDO has had a near-total monopoly on political power in Oromia since 1992 ([African Arguments, 7 October 2016; Mesfin, May 2015]).

The ruling EPRDF seeks to retain power by maintaining tight legislative control over the regions and the localities. This control eliminates the possibility of regional representatives enacting their constitutional rights of autonomy or secession. In fact, the very formulation of vague and overarching provisions on shared and delegated federal and regional powers in the Constitution has offered the federal government scope for extensive policy leverage over regions ([SIDA, March 2003]). The EPRDF retains power through a number of key methods: by controlling the establishment and evaluation of regional parties and their leaders; by deploying state advisors to ensure that the central government’s position on important political matters is followed; and by electing local officials controlling the distribution of a wide array of government services for communities through the kebele structure ([ICG, 4 September 2009; Bach, 2016]). The government also seeks to maintain loyalty to the ruling party by controlling access to resources. Historically, more than 80% of government revenue has been collected centrally, while the government has controlled around 60% of total spending. However, trends in regional spending show significant variations: as of 2011, for instance, the Tigray region was by far the most decentralised, with 56% of expenditure happening at the district level, compared to 48% in Oromia, 38% in Afar and 17% in Harari regions ([World Bank, April 2016]).

Regions and districts therefore depend heavily on federal
budget transfers, leaving regional representatives with little opportunity for political autonomy. In rural areas, in Amhara, Tigray, Oromia and southern regions, the absence of private landholdings and land tenure security also means that people are strongly dependent on access to government land, and can therefore rarely challenge government rulings. At the most local level, the *kebelle* structure makes the welfare of local communities’ dependent on their relations with local officials – and therefore on their compliance to the will of the EPDRF – as the local officials control access to resources, including seeds, fertilizers and agricultural inputs, as well as the benefits of development and foreign aid (ICG, 4 September 2009; HRW, June 2016). Lastly, while the Constitution guarantees the regions’ right to organise police forces at the regional and district level, the central government has the right to send in the federal police and armed forces whenever it deems a crisis to be exceeding a region’s capacities. Since the EPRDF controls every level of government, in practice it does not have to wait for a request by the regional government, and can deploy central forces at will (Arriola, January 2013).

Many Ethiopians – particularly the Oromo and Amhara communities – resent Tigrayan domination in the government. The Oromo community in particular generally support ethnic federalism, but aspire to greater autonomy, and resent government intrusion in regional affairs. They believe that they are controlled and denied a voice in issues that impact them. These perceptions have led to protests several times in the past. For instance, protests over freedom of expression and the economic plight of the region in 2004. The Oromo community has raised these grievances against the regime throughout 2016, despite the suspension of the Addis Ababa Master Plan (VOA, 11 December 2015; Africa Confidential, 18 March 2016). For the mainly nationalist Amhara urban educated middle class, EPRDF uses the ethno-federal system to privilege its Tigrayan base and plant divisions among other ethnic groups that vie for resources (ICG, 4 September 2009). The Amhara community have long opposed the government over the Wolkayt district, for instance. Wolkayt is one of several areas between the Tigray and Amhara regions that Amhara activists say the TPLF took out of their region’s control when drawing the ethnic boundaries in the 1990s. They accuse the TPLF of moving Tigrayans into the district during the civil war, resulting in a predominantly Tigrayan-speaking population, in spite of the Amhara’s historical ownership of the district. For many, this is testament to the Amhara community’s frustration over the loss of their pre-1991 stature as the most powerful ethnic group in a centralised system (Africa Confidential, 26 August 2016; The Guardian, 22 December 2016). It was a clash over this issue that provoked the wave of demonstrations in Amhara from August 2016 in support of Oromos.

**No space for political opposition**

The government’s rhetorical line is that development without democracy is not sustainable in the long run, and that democratisation in Ethiopia is still lacking.
The elections in 2005 were a turning point, as the EPRDF was confronted for the first time with a real opposition.\footnote{Mesfin, January 2008; ICG, 4 September 2009.} The government blamed the revolt in 2005 on having been too liberal. As a result, the following decade saw no new democratic reforms, an expansion of surveillance, and an expansion of the localisation of government decisions through the kebelle system\footnote{Dittgen and Demissie, January 2017.}. There were regular reports of threats to, and detention and prosecution of, opposition party members, activists, bloggers, journalists and academics, often without charge\footnote{HRW, 22 January 2016; VOA, 11 December 2015; Freedom House, 2016.}. From 2005 - 2015, widespread use of torture by government officials and security operatives quashed opposition to the ruling party\footnote{MFP, 18 June 2012.}. Repression was particularly fierce in regions with active insurgency movements, including Oromia. The government used anti-terrorism laws, passed to assist the Western based ‘fight against terror’ to criminalise and prosecute any expression of dissent in Oromia\footnote{African Arguments, 6 August 2016.}. Between 2011 and 2014, at least 5,000 Oromos were arrested as a result of their actual or alleged peaceful opposition to the government, with authorities going as far as interpreting expressions of Oromo culture and heritage as signs of dissent. Authorities regularly accused detained Oromos of supporting the OLF insurgency. The government was also particularly watchful for signs of dissent among students in Oromia, and accused the OLF of fuelling student protests in the region. Given this context, the first Oromo protests against the proposed Addis Ababa Master Plan in April - May 2014 were heavily repressed, resulting in an alleged 30 people dead and dozens in detention\footnote{Amnesty, 10 October 2014.}.

Opposition parties were frequently undermined in order to prevent them from mounting a real challenge to the EPRDF. Examples include the Oromo People’s Congress (OPC) and the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM), which both gained seats in Parliament in 2005 through the UEDF\footnote{African Arguments, 7 October 2016.}. But new alliances emerged from the implosion of the main opposition parties after the 2005 elections: in 2007, former CUD members created the Union for Democracy and Justice (UDJ), while in 2008, some UEDF founders created the Forum for Democratic Dialogue in Ethiopia (Medrek). The two parties joined forces in the 2010 elections, but only managed to win one seat in Parliament. The alliance between the UEDF and Medrek dissolved, enabling the EPRDF and its allies to win 100% of the seats in Parliament in 2015\footnote{Figure 6; Bach, 2016.}.

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Yet, the dominance of the ruling party within the security sector, local government and legislative politics means that avenues for political opposition or dissent are practi-
Today, the group is mostly made up of Oromo youth—predominantly students from elementary school to university—organising collective action through social media (The Conversation, 14 August 2016). Many Ethiopians confirm that a number of collective actions during the most recent wave of protests are organised on social media (The New York Times, 12 August 2016).

Protesters in Oromia have been largely peaceful gatherings of collective marches, boycotts and strikes (see Figure 8). One of the protesters’ major campaigns was the organisation of a Grand Protest against the government agenda. On 6 August 2016, peaceful demonstrators gathered across 200 cities in Oromia. Political prisoners at the Maekelawi and Qilinto prisons in Addis Ababa also launched several hunger strikes, demanding the respect of their basic rights by the administration, including an end to degrading and inhuman treatment, as well as access to medication and family visits.

The apparent absence of an established civil society organisation or local representative in leading the movement has been a key feature of the Oromo protests since April 2014. Some Oromo demonstrators are said to have been mobilised through an underground network of nationalist activists known as the Qeerroo (or Qubee generation). The Qeerroo gained increasing support after the OLF was pushed out of the transitional government in 1992, developing traction as a modality of Oromo nationalism.

Riots often occurred in reaction to prior state violence against protesters in the same areas (see Figure 8). In December 2015, crowds of protesters in Gindo (South West Shewa) burned down Dutch-owned flower farms; students in Waliso (also in South West Shewa) clashed with state forces and set fire to administration offices. Students also clashed with state forces in Shashamane over the heavy deployment of security personnel at schools and universities. Other forms of rioting in the months that followed include setting up roadblocks to prevent state forces from entering towns and villages; overrunning po-
lice stations and prisons to free political prisoners; and
destroying local business and development projects. Riots
in Oromia particularly escalated following government
violence at the Irecha festival in Bishoftu (West Shewa) on
2 October 2016. Oromo activists called the escalation the
“week of rage”, as protesters in different parts of Oromia
blocked roads and attacked local administration buildings,
police stations, and businesses built on lands allegedly
confiscated from local Oromo control (Amnesty, 18 Octo-
ber 2016).

The protests in Oromia accompanied rising militia activity,
especially by Oromo ethnic militias and unidentified
armed groups (UAGs) (see Figure 9 7). UAGs clash with
state forces, but also target civilians, including govern-
ment representatives and protesters. In some previous
instances, UAGs hurled grenades at students during rallies
and in state properties; in others, UAGs killed and abduct-
ced civilians, including known government supporters. Oro-
mo ethnic militias, on the other hand, exclusively engaged
in battles with state forces. During the wave of protests,
reports indicate that Oromo farmers and residents defend
their lands and communities from state forces. Since the
beginning of 2017, larger numbers of the Oromo commu-
nity have risen up against a marked increase in attacks
and human rights violations by state and paramilitary forc-
es, such as the Liyu police. The Oromo community identi-
fies the increased activity by the Liyu police as a way for
the government to usurp Oromo lands and further quash
dissent (Opride, 5 March 2017).

7 Figure 9 shows the level of conflict activity by the two main political and ethnic militias in Ethiopia’s Oromia region (namely the Oromo ethnic militia and UAGs) and the interactions in these events, each month between November 2015 and May 2017.
Amhara people

Amhara people represent around 20% of the Ethiopian population (approximately 20 million); all but one Emperor in Ethiopia’s history were from the Amhara community. Amharic has long acted as Ethiopia’s official language, and remains one of the most common languages spoken in Ethiopia as of today. In July 2016, the fatal clash between security forces and Amhara residents following the arrest of three Wolkayt leaders in Gonder ignited regionalist grievances. This resulted in a surge in unrest from August 2016 (see Figure 10). Demonstrators resent TPLF’s domination within the government, and denounced the government’s violent repression of the Oromo protests (see Figure 11). Amhara protesters displayed an unprecedented level of solidarity with the Oromos, organising joint marches (for instance during the Grand Oromo protests in August 2016), sit-ins, boycotts, and stay-at-home protests, as well as using other non-violent tactics, such as head shaving and crossing arms above the head. Long-standing historical tensions, as well as differing political agendas, had previously prevented similar forms of union between the two groups (African Arguments, 27 September 2016).

The protests in Amhara also took a more violent turn than in Oromia, with regular episodes of riots and increasing activity by militias (see Figure 12). From July 2016, Amhara residents and activists frequently clashed with state forces, leading to the formation of a new militia (Amhara Tegadlo) in September 2016. Amhara farmers also fought state forces on several occasions over July - November 2016. In parallel, UAGs have become increasingly active in Amhara, engaging in various clashes with state forces,
Other ethnic groups

The government’s violent response to the Oromo protests has prompted populations in other regions to demonstrate their solidarity with the Oromo demonstrators (see Figure 13). Students in regions outside Oromia held various protests and sit-ins in solidarity. Key flashpoints were the universities of Dila and Hawasa (SNNPR region) and the various schools in Dire Dawa, where many Oromo students resided. The inhabitants of Jijiga, in the Somali region, as well as members of the Muslim community in Addis Ababa, also demonstrated in support of the Oromo protests. Lastly, hundreds of people in Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa responded to the Oromos’ Grand Protest call on 6 August 2016, organising large demonstrations in their respective areas.

The Oromo protests also encouraged other groups to be more vocal about their own grievances. Members of the Konso community protested in the SNNPR in March 2016 to demand autonomous administration and the right to self-determination. The demonstration resulted in a violent government response that triggered further protests attacking a main prison in Gonder, and executing no less than 13 bomb and grenades attacks, mainly targeting state officials, between January - April 2017.

The apparent solidarity displayed between the Oromo and Amhara groups represents a significant threat to the government, as together these two groups represent more than half of the country’s population. Yet, it remains unclear to what extent the two groups will overcome their historical contentions and form a credible alternative coalition to the ruling party. Discussions between both groups’ elites over the last two decades have failed to support the building of trust between the two communities, partly because of different political agendas (African Arguments, 27 September 2016). Tensions notably rose in April 2014 following an unveiling of a monument in Oromia’s Arsi zone to commemorate Menelik II’s Oromo victims. This prompted members of the Amhara to defend the Emperor’s memory (Bach, 2016). More recently, in December 2015, Oromo and Amhara militias clashed in Oromia’s Amaya district, resulting in five fatalities and destroyed property.

Figure 12: Main Ethnic and Political Militia Activity in Amhara by Interaction, from November 2015 - May 2017.

Figure 13 compares the localisation of conflicts, riots and protests events in regions outside Oromia every three months in 2016. The colours represent the various event types recorded in each location. The size of the circles varies depending on the number of events recorded per event type in each location.
Figure 13: Number of Conflict and Protest Events in Regions outside Oromia by Quarter in Ethiopia, 2016.
Residents of several districts in Addis Ababa and in Dire Dawa also marched, in June 2016 and July 2016 respectively, to protest the future eviction from their homes planned by the government. Other expressions of group grievances were more violent: the Quemant farmers (of the Agaw ethnic group) clashed with security forces in November 2015 (ESAT, 9 November 2015). The Quemant officially numbering around 172,000, and live along an axis stretching to the north of Gonder. They have sought self-rule – as opposed to Amhara assimilation – as permitted under Ethiopia’s Constitution (Tigray online, 12 July 2013). Members of the Surma ethnic group also clashed with state forces in the Omo valley in March and in Mizan Teferi in SNNPR in July 2016 over dispossession of their lands without compensation. Surma militants also attacked a group of European tourists in November 2016. Finally, farmers of Addis Ababa clashed with state forces in May 2016 as they were being evicted from their properties by security forces.

The Ethiopian Government

Since the beginning of the protests, the government has accused the OLF and the Patriotic Ginbot 7 for Unity and Democratic Movement (AGUDM) rebel groups of infiltrating the movement. The government considers these groups to be terrorist organisations supported by external forces including Eritrea and Egypt. The label has been used to discredit the organisations, opposition parties, or diaspora activists on social networks – and analysed by ACLED since November 2015 points to more than 1,200 people reported killed during protests. Approximately 660 fatalities are due to state violence against peaceful protesters, 250 fatalities from state engagement against rioters, and more than 380 people killed by security forces following the declaration of the state of emergency in October 2016.”

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A first investigation by the government-appointed Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in June 2016 revealed that 173 people had been killed in Oromia since November 2015, including 28 security force members (US State Department, 2016). A second EHRC investigation into unrest in some parts of Oromia, Amhara and SNNPR over June - October 2016, acknowledged that an additional 669 people had been killed, including 63 among security forces. It also stated that, in a few instances, security forces had responded to the protests using inappropriate force (Government, 18 April 2017). EHRC investigations have been criticised for their lack of a transparent methodology, so international bodies continue to call for an UN-led independent investigation into the protests (HRW, 18 May 2017).

Available data collected in local and international media – including information published by non-governmental human rights organisations, opposition parties, or diaspora activists on social networks – and analysed by ACLED since November 2015 points to more than 1,200 people killed in the context of the protests. This includes around 660 fatalities from state violence against protesters, 250
fatalities from riots, and more than 380 people killed following the declaration of the state of emergency in October 2016 (see Figure 1412). Tens of thousands of people have been arrested and charged with terrorism offenses, including 20,000 in the months that followed the declaration of the state of emergency, but also thousands of others arrested earlier in the year (HRW, 9 March 2017). Among those charged are teachers, activists, bloggers, journalists and prominent opposition members. OfC president Dr. Merera Gudina for instance, a key leader of the Oromo movement, was detained and charged on terrorism offenses and other counts after denouncing human rights violations at a European Parliament conference in Brussels at the end of 2016. Members of the opposition Semayawi youth party were also arrested for criticising the government’s response to the protests.

On the political stage, the government’s limited response to calls for deep structural reforms by protesters show its lack of interest in solving protesters’ grievances or addressing the democratic deficit in the county (Africa Confidential, 20 January 2017). For instance, despite a departure from tradition in the appointment of technocrats rather than political loyalists to senior positions, changes introduced to the Prime Minister’s Cabinet in the course of 2016 suggested only minimal ideological repositioning. In particular, no change was made to the Tigrayan-dominated leadership of the security forces (Africa Confidential, 2 December 2016). Moreover, despite the Prime Minister’s declaration that the government is trying to reform the electoral system to include the opposition’s demands for better representation, the ability of the opposition to make any gains in the next local and national elections seems limited (Africa News, 11 October 2016).

The same goes for the likelihood that any major figures within the regime will be affected by the ramping-up of corruption prosecutions in the next few months (Africa Confidential, 20 January 2017). Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the government has failed to engage in a dialogue with the protesters to address their grievances. The Oromo community’s main representative within the ruling coalition - the OPDO - has failed to condemn the excessive use of force towards the protesters. OPDO representatives reformed the party’s leadership in a bid to address the causes of unrest. However, the move led to the appointment of former regional and federal security...
The Ethiopian diaspora is estimated at two million, a significant number of whom remain actively engaged in domestic politics and critical of the ruling government (Dittgen and Demissie, January 2017). Diaspora activists, writers, bloggers and journalists play a key role in providing coverage of the recent protests, particularly on social media websites like Facebook and Twitter, using the handle #OromoProtests. This was particularly important considering the limited press freedom and the increasingly severe government restrictions on communication and information-sharing platforms inside the country (Amnesty/OONI, 2016; Quartz Africa, 25 October 2016). For example, criticism on social media following violence at the Ireecha festival in Bishoftu on 2 October 2016, was possible by activists based outside Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, the entire Internet was shut down in most parts of the country after the events (EISF, 31 October 2016). The diaspora’s ability to coordinate and lead the protest movement in Ethiopia, however, is stymied by the lack of internet access in rural areas of the country, and by the government’s increasing restrictions (The Washington Post, 14 October 2016).

Beyond social media, international sporting events have also been used to raise awareness and support for the issues faced by Ethiopian ethnic groups in their country. Crossing wrists above one’s head became a gesture of solidarity with protesters in Ethiopia after silver medallist Feyisa Lilesa made the sign while crossing the finish line at the 2016 Rio Olympics. The move gained sufficient traction amongst Ethiopians to be banned under the state of emergency, as well as other similar solidarity gestures (African Arguments, 6 March 2017). During the state of emergency, international sporting events have become one of the only ways for Ethiopians to continue to register their discontent towards the EPRDF rule. Several Ethiopian athletes, for instance, refused to wave the current starred Ethiopian flag to celebrate their victories at various events in early 2017, thereby protesting EPRDF’s inability to embrace ethnic and religious diversity (African Arguments, 6 March 2017).

The International Community

The recent crisis is the first time that ethnic issues in Ethiopia have attracted such global attention, due in part to the diaspora’s ability to relay information that was blocked inside the country. However, public criticism by donor governments and allies has been minimal. The European Parliament and the United States (US) Senate have produced the strongest statements, condemning the Ethiopian government’s violent crackdown, and calling for their own governments to take a stronger stance against the EPRDF regime. Various international and regional bodies, as well as a number of human rights organisations, called for an independent, credible investigation into the crisis (HRW, June 2016). As of May 2017, these statements have not translated into any substantial policy shift on the part of the Ethiopian government, nor in the implementation of conditions for donor funding of political, economic and humanitarian projects in Ethiopia. Failure to express its disapproval has underlined the international community’s prioritisation of Ethiopia’s track record on development and economic progress, and of its strategic role in issues such as the fight against terrorism, regional instability and migration (NYT, 12 August 2016; HRW, June 2016). The public statement made by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini, during her visit to Ethiopia early 2017, is seen as a missed opportunity to denounce the government’s crackdown. She instead focused on partnerships related to humanitarian assistance, migration, refugees and economic growth (EEAS, 17 March 2017; HRW, 24 March 2017).

Rebel Groups

The link between rebel groups and protesters remains largely unclear. However, the ACLED dataset shows that rebel activity in 2016 was at its third highest since 1997, which suggests that the protests have encouraged rebel groups to intensify their operations (see Figure 1513). Rebellion reached unprecedented levels in Oromia and Tigray, led by the OLF and the AGUDM forces respectively; and in Amhara, rebellion led by the AGUDM forces surged after two years of inactivity (see Figure 1614).

In Oromia, neither the Oromo protesters nor the OLF confirm any organisational link with each other. OLF’s Executive Committee, however, encourages its armed wing to intensify efforts to defend the oppressed Oromos (OLF, 4 December 2015). The Qeerroo group also recognises the OLF as the origin of Oromo nationalism and articulates that OLF should replace the Tigrayan-dominated regime

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13 Figure 15 shows the regions where insurrections in Ethiopia have mainly concentrated, every year between January 1997 and May 2017.
14 Figure 16 shows the regions where the main rebel groups in Ethiopia have been active, every year between January 1997 and May 2017.
manner reminiscent of the overthrow of previous Ethiopian regimes. The Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) represents the most sustained rebellion movement against the new Ethiopian regime and is concentrated mainly in the Somali Ogaden region, condemns the government’s violence towards Oromo protesters in December 2015. It called on all oppressed people to fight in unison against the regime (ONLF, December 2015; UNPO, 7 November 2016). In August 2016, as protests spread from Oromia to Amhara, Ginbot 7 signed a memorandum of understanding with the recently-formed Oromo Democratic Front (ODF), an independent political party run by former OLF leaders and supporters. Through the agreement, the two groups called for a coalition of all democratic and militant groups to remove the current TPLF-dominated regime and transition to a genuine federal and democratic state (Tesfa News, 12 August 2016).

Conclusion and Outlook

This piece has underlined several trends that might influence the evolution of the political situation in Ethiopia over the next few months. The ongoing unrest indicates a need for deep systemic reform in how federalism is implemented, and in how power and resources are shared in Ethiopia. Grievances that motivated the protests of the past two years have not been addressed, and discussions...
stand together and resolve their historical differences (African Arguments, 3 May 2017).

Yet, the increased tendency among some activists and ethno-political groups to take up arms against state forces in protest regions, combined with the intensification of rebel activity, could lead to a further escalation of the violence in Ethiopia. Rebel groups such as the OLF in Oromia or the AGUDM in Amhara might gain increasing support; and may gradually seek to form a stronger and more unified rebel coalition movement against the EPRDF regime.

Figure 16: Geography of Main Rebel Group’s Activity in Ethiopia, from January 1997 - May 2017.

Grievances that motivated the protests of the past two years have not been addressed, and discussions have yet to take place between the government and the protesters. This suggests that there is a strong possibility of demonstrations resuming once the state of emergency is lifted at the end of July 2017. If the protests resume, it is unclear whether the Oromo community will retain support from the Amhara community and other ethnic groups, and whether these groups can form a more unified peaceful opposition to the government. Deeper solidarity between groups of young grassroots demonstrators is possible if ethno-nationalist leaders find a way to
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COUNTRY REPORT: Popular Mobilisation in Ethiopia: An Investigation of Activity from November 2015 to May 2017


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