

A REPORT OF THE CSIS  
AFRICA PROGRAM

# Ethiopia

ASSESSING RISKS TO STABILITY

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Terrence Lyons

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## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

This report is part of a series examining the risks of instability in 10 African countries over the next decade. The 10 papers are designed to be complementary but can also be read individually as self-standing country studies. An overview paper draws on common themes and explains the methodology underpinning the research. The project was commissioned by the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM).

The recent upheavals and revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa reinforce the value of taking a hard look at underlying social, economic, and political conditions that have the potential to trigger major change and instability. Few observers predicted the events that have unfolded with such speed in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya since the turn of 2011. But a close analysis of the underlying fault lines in those countries may have offered some clues, uncovering a range of possibilities that would have given U.S. policymakers a head start in framing responses and devising contingency plans. Similarly, an examination of political crises and conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa, such as postelection violence in Kenya in 2007–2008 and the presidential standoff in Côte d'Ivoire in 2010–2011, uncovers patterns of behavior, common grievances, and social dynamics that can help inform assumptions about other countries on the continent. The purpose of these papers is to delve below the surface of day-to-day events and try to identify the underlying structural vulnerabilities and dynamics that help to drive and explain them.

The papers in this study are not meant to offer hard and fast predictions about the future. While they sketch out some potential scenarios for the next 10 years, these efforts should be treated as thought experiments that look at how different dynamics might converge to create the conditions for instability. The intention is not to single out countries believed to be at risk of impending disaster and make judgments about how they will collapse. Few, if any, of the countries in this series are at imminent risk of breakdown. All of them have coping mechanisms that militate against conflict, and discussions of potential “worst-case scenarios” have to be viewed with this qualification in mind.



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# ETHIOPIA

## Terrence Lyons<sup>1</sup>

### Key Stress Points

- In the short to medium terms, Ethiopia is likely to remain stable but brittle. The authoritarian ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), has consolidated power across all levels of government and society, efficiently suppressing political opposition.
- The choice of a long-term successor to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi is likely to expose tensions within the ruling EPRDF and its ethnically defined subparties, and exacerbate friction between some of Ethiopia's most volatile regions.
- Ethiopia faces multiple security threats, which taken alone can be contained by the military but if combined would threaten to overwhelm the state, triggering serious instability and violence. Constant vigilance is required by Ethiopia to prevent its enemies in Eritrea and Somalia from linking up with internal armed groups such as the Oromo Liberation Front and the Ogaden National Liberation Front.

### Overview

Ethiopia occupies an important position in the volatile and strategically important Horn of Africa. It has used this location to its advantage, offering its assistance as a security partner to the United States and presenting itself as a bulwark against the terrorist threat in the region. As a result, it has enjoyed abundant foreign assistance. In recent years, the importance of these security interests has been increasingly called into question by critical observers of the Ethiopian government, who have tracked the regime's descent into more repressive and authoritarian behavior. The government in Addis Ababa has become adept at neutralizing threats to its rule from both inside and outside the country. Its skill and depth of political experience mean that Ethiopia is most likely to remain stable in the coming decade. Political space will remain firmly closed, and any expression of dissent will be snuffed out. However, in the long term, the narrowly based government in Addis Ababa

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1. Terrence Lyons is codirector of the Center for Global Studies and an associate professor at the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University. This paper draws upon research on conflict and politics in the Horn of Africa undertaken since the late 1980s. This research has included fieldwork in Ethiopia and regular interactions with Ethiopians, American, and other diplomatic officials, activists, and researchers working outside of Ethiopia. The author served as an advisor to the international election observation missions in 1995 and 2005, which provided extensive opportunities to discuss political issues with Ethiopian leaders in Addis Ababa as well as to travel throughout the countryside. In January 2011, additional interviews were conducted in Addis Ababa with representatives from the U.S. Embassy as well as a broad range of Ethiopian observers and analysts.



will find it increasingly difficult to contain the forces of opposition, particularly if they manage to coalesce. The decision as to who should succeed Prime Minister Meles will be a potential lightning rod for opposition and conflict.

Since coming to power in 1991, the ruling EPRDF has consolidated its power through ethnically defined institutions. The party benefits from the resources of the state as well as from an interlinked set of party-affiliated businesses and nongovernmental organizations. It has managed to control the country through a hierarchical system that extends down to the smallest village. This tight control has enabled the party to extract loyalty by threatening to deny state services or public-sector jobs to its opponents.

Beneath this veneer of complete dominance, however, the Ethiopian regime is brittle and has the potential to break down into violence. Significant constituencies that have acquiesced in, but not approved of, the current order may break out into open opposition if the regime appears weak or preoccupied. Shifts in national leadership in the near term are likely to ignite heated competition among the ethnically based subparties of the EPRDF and their affiliated regions for inheritance of the all-powerful party-state. Such jostling could open space for constituencies to voice their grievances against the lack of political freedom, high inflation rates, and food insecurity.

To date, the Ethiopian military has been able to contain the country's multiple security challenges. It has put down public protests, most notably in 2005, when postelection violence was met with uncompromising force. It has largely contained internal challenges from armed insurgencies

in the Ogaden and Oromo regions. In addition, it has managed to prevent a series of external threats from undermining the security of the state. The conflict with Eritrea, which claimed at least 70,000 lives between 1998 and 2000, has resulted in a hostile but fairly stable stalemate. Ethiopia has also managed to extricate itself from a disastrous invasion of Somalia in 2006. However, the root causes of these multiple conflicts and challenges remain

**An intolerance of dissent is deeply rooted in Ethiopia's political history, which has the effect of delegitimizing the types of peaceful opposition found in more inclusive, democratic countries.**

unaddressed. If domestic uprisings were to break out in the cities in combination with a resurgence of regional insecurity, the state would struggle to maintain its grip on power.

## Defining Instability

Ethiopia has the outward appearance of being a stable country, with its disparate ethnic groups tightly bound together by an all-encompassing party structure under the leadership of an experienced and shrewd leader, Meles. However, a glance at Ethiopian history suggests that authoritarian governments ultimately struggle to contain the pressures that inevitably build beneath the surface of Ethiopia's complex society, and which are liable to erupt in unpredictable and dramatic ways. An intolerance of dissent is deeply rooted in Ethiopia's political history, which has the effect of delegitimizing the types of peaceful opposition found in more inclusive, democratic countries. This intolerance pushes political opponents into a corner, making some of them more willing to resort to violence to achieve their objectives. Political transitions have been epitomized by violence and civil conflict. Ethiopia is therefore characterized by long periods of deceptive calm, punctu-

ated by bouts of extreme instability, including civil war, separatist insurgency, and protests against the state, which are inevitably met by brute force. When defining instability in the Ethiopian context, it makes sense to contemplate even the most extreme possibilities, including regime change and threats to the territorial integrity of the state.

## Ethiopia at a Glance

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GDP per capita	\$1,000 (2010 estimate)
Unemployment	Not available
Life expectancy	56.19 years (2011 estimate)
Population	90,873,739 (July 2011 estimate)
Population growth rate	3.194% (2011 estimate)
Median age	16.8 years (2011 estimate)
Urban population	17% of total population (2010)
Urbanization rate	3.8% annually (2010–2015 estimate)
Literacy rate	42.7% (2003 estimate)

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Source: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook 2011* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, 2011).

## Background

### Historical Context

Ethiopia has the second-largest population in Africa, with more than 90 million people, divided among some 60 ethnic groups. The two largest groups are the Oromo and Amhara, followed by the Somali and Tigray. No other ethnic group constitutes more than approximately 4 percent of the population. The exact share of each group (according to the 2007 census) is as follows:

- Oromo, 34.5 percent
- Amhara, 26.9 percent
- Somali, 6.2 percent
- Tigray, 6.1 percent
- Sidama, 4.0 percent
- Others, 22.3 percent.

The country is divided among Christians, who make up approximately 62 percent of the population (43 percent Ethiopian Orthodox, 19 percent other denominations) and Muslims, who make up 34 percent. Ethiopia has a high population growth rate (3.2 percent), and the population is young, with a median age of 17 years.<sup>2</sup>

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2. These figures are from the 2007 census.

Ethiopia is widely considered Africa's oldest nation, with the powerful Kingdom of Axum emerging in the fourth century BC to control at its height an area that covers present-day northern Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Yemen, and stretches into parts of northern Sudan and southern Saudi Arabia. Historians generally trace the origins of the modern Ethiopian state to the mid-1800s, when Emperor Tewodros II wrested power from an array of regional princes, or “*ras*,” who were connected through a very loose federation, and restored the power of the centralized monarchy. Tewodros and his successors Yohannes IV and Menelik II expanded the Ethiopian empire southward from its base in the largely Amhara and Tigray Orthodox highlands into areas inhabited by groups such as the Oromo and Muslim pastoralists from the lowlands who were not previously connected to the imperial regime.

As a result of this history, Ethiopia has had a social cleavage between northerners (largely Amhara and Tigray) and those from the south and borderlands (notably Oromo, but many other groups as well). Emperor Haile Selassie, who was crowned in 1930, further centralized the state apparatus following the Italian occupation from 1931 to 1936. But the legitimacy of the monarchy began to decline in the 1960s and 1970s, as the benefits of economic growth failed to materialize for peasant farmers and the working class, while a new generation of educated students and professionals became increasingly restless. A deadly famine in northeastern Ethiopia and the impact of the global energy crisis of 1973 opened the way for a military coup in 1974 and the accession to power of a Marxist military junta known as the Derg, led by Mengistu Haile Mariam. In 1989, a coalition of opposition groups, led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), came together to form the EPRDF. This coalition worked alongside the Eritrean People's Liberation Movement, mounting a sustained rural insurgency that eventually forced Mengistu into exile and ended the Derg's brutal rule in May 1991. Ethiopia has thus endured a history of violent political transitions and memories of these traumas—particularly the Red Terror of the late 1970s, when hundreds of thousands were tortured and killed in politically motivated attacks—remain very powerful to many who lived through them.

## Ethnic Federalism and Noncompetitive Elections

The EPRDF came to power as an alliance of four ethnically based parties—the TPLF, based in the Tigray Region; the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO), based in the Oromia Region; the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), based in the Amhara Region; and the Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement (SEPDM), based in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region. This broad coalition established the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) in 1991. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which had fought the Derg independently from the EPRDF, briefly joined the TGE but withdrew in 1992, accusing the EPRDF of trying to sideline the Oromo.

On coming to power, the EPRDF, under its Tigrayan leader, Meles Zenawi, began a process of political transition that encompassed two interlinked elements. The first was to organize politics around ethnofederalism and ethnically defined political parties. This transformed historically hierarchical relations among ethnic groups, in which the northern Amhara and Tigray were traditionally superior to Oromo and smaller ethnic groups, into a formal federal system. To many marginalized groups in the south, the imperial expansion initiated by Menelik felt like military occupation; while to many northern elites, the Oromos and others in the south were backward.

The EPRDF codified ethnofederalism in its 1994 Constitution and decentralized state structures based on nine new ethnically defined regions. Each of these regions was given, on paper at least, extensive autonomy, including the right to secede. Regional states are governed by executive councils with legislative and executive power that extends through zone, district (*woreda*), and community (*kebele*) levels.<sup>3</sup> In many cases, regional governments have their own security forces. Although the regions rely upon the center for legitimacy, security, and resources, they also have a degree of political autonomy, and the ethnic parties that make up the EPRDF have local roots.

### The Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The ruling party comprises:

- Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO)
- Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM)
- Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement (SEPDM)
- Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF)

### Parties affiliated with (but not members of) the EPRDF:

- Somali Peoples' Democratic Party (SPDP)
- Afar National Democratic Party (ANDP)
- Benishangul-Gumuz Peoples' Democratic Party (BGPDP)
- Gambela Peoples' Unity Democratic Party (GPUUDM)

The second dimension was the consolidation of EPRDF authority, which it accomplished through a series of largely uncontested elections and the increasing use of repressive, coercive tactics. The EPRDF is very hierarchical and party structures, which are virtually indistinguishable from those of the state, are powerful from the national to regional to *kebele* levels. These two aspects of governance under the EPRDF—ethnically defined structures that are centrifugal, and hierarchical structures that emphasize centralized control—are the source of vulnerability within Ethiopia.

The 2005 elections are considered the country's first genuinely competitive elections, because large segments of the opposition had boycotted previous polls in 1995 and 2000. In 2005, two major coalitions of opposition parties—the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces—competed against the EPRDF across the most populous regions. The EPRDF, perhaps overly confident in its support (particularly in the rural areas) and anticipating an overwhelming victory, had tolerated an unprecedented expansion of political space. Candidates campaigned across the country, and state-owned media broadcast live debates on public policy. The opposition held a rally of 1 million supporters in the main square in Addis

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3. *Kebeles* administer at the community level (3,500 to 4,000 residents), while *woredas* represent larger areas within the regions.

Ababa just before election day. According to official results, the combined opposition increased its number of seats from 12 to 172, winning 31 percent of the total seats in the Parliament. This startling shift represented the potential for an important advance in democratization.

Some key members of the opposition, however, refused to accept the results and claimed that massive fraud had denied them outright victory. Furthermore, the EPRDF altered parliamentary rules to limit the opposition's power, reinforcing the conclusion that the ruling party would never let the opposition operate openly. When the Parliament opened in October 2005, some key CUD leaders boycotted. Demonstrations in October were brutally put down by the Ethiopian military, leaving nearly 200 dead, including 6 police officers. The regime arrested most top CUD leaders, along with an estimated 30,000 students and other opposition supporters.<sup>4</sup> The government formally charged some 131 opposition politicians, journalists, and civil society leaders with crimes, including genocide and treason. Its actions signaled the closing of political space and the criminalization of dissent.

In response to the unanticipated 2005 challenge, the EPRDF put in place a series of new laws that restricted opposition political parties, independent media, and civil society. A new media law passed in July 2008 gave the government broad power to initiate defamation suits, deny licenses and registration, and impose high financial penalties. As a result, virtually every private newspaper has faced lawsuits that risk bankrupting any publisher who challenges the ruling party. In 2009, a civil society law severely restricted the ability of human rights organizations to operate in the country. Nearly all were forced either to change their mandate or to close. A counterterrorism law also passed in 2009 gives the government wide leeway in prosecuting political protesters and nonviolent dissent. At the same time, the ruling party and the government consolidated their links from the national to *kebele* levels, allowing the EPRDF to seal its dominance of government-owned media, tighten its control over development and humanitarian assistance, and increase its ability to restrict professional opportunities to party members. The ruling party effectively used new laws to crush independent political voices and the power of the state to expand its own membership.

Local elections in 2008 and national elections in 2010 represented a return to noncompetitive elections and demonstrated the success of the EPRDF's strategy of closing political space while expanding the party-state apparatus. In 2008, the EPRDF won virtually every one of the 3.6 million seats in local elections. In a country of 80 million (in 2008), that means that one in 22 residents, or 1 in 10 adults, is a member of an EPRDF governing council. The 2010 national election saw the EPRDF win 99.6 percent of the seats in the National Assembly despite opposition participation.<sup>5</sup>

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4. Human Rights Watch, *One Hundred Ways of Putting Pressure: Violations of Freedom of Expression and Association in Ethiopia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2010), 15.

5. The political parties' total numbers of votes and shares of the total vote were as follows: EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front), 22,464,230 votes, 78.97 percent; SPDP (Somali Peoples' Democratic Party), 2,259,885 votes, 7.94 percent; Forum (Ethiopian Federal Democratic Unity Forum), 1,385,430 votes, 4.87 percent; ANDP (Afar National Democratic Party), 980,213 votes, 3.45 percent; AEUP (All-Ethiopian Unity Party), 262,499 votes, 0.92 percent; BGPDP (Benishangul-Gumuz Peoples' Democratic Party), 224,089 votes, 0.79 percent; GPUDM (Gambela Peoples' Unity Democratic Movement), 224,089 votes, 0.79 percent; EDP (Ethiopian Democratic Party), 75,684 votes, 0.27 percent; HNL (Harari National League), 10,839 votes, 0.04 percent; and other parties, 561,316 votes, 1.97 percent. The total number of votes was 28,448,274. Note that the SPDP, ANDP, BGPDP, and GPUDM are not formally members of the EPRDF coalition but are affiliated with the ruling party. Their respective regions are relatively smaller and less developed than the rest of Ethiopia.

The opposition had virtually nothing to show for its decision to participate and engage in electoral competition. Ethiopia has evolved into an increasingly effective authoritarian regime with almost no room for independent political mobilization or debate.

The opposition is divided, weak, often poorly led, and distracted by the agendas of the increasingly disconnected diaspora. The opposition coalitions that dramatically demonstrated the limits to the EPRDF's support in the 2005 elections have been shattered, with CUD and United Ethiopian Democratic Forces leaders either co-opted, forced into exile, withdrawn from political life, or engaged in increasingly marginal campaigns. One strand of the opposition in exile has formed Ginbot 7, a party that asserts that it will use "any means necessary" to remove the EPRDF but has yet to develop significant capacity. The OLF, an Oromo nationalist movement outlawed when it left the transitional government in 1992, has never found a way to return to the influence it had on the ground in Ethiopia in the early 1990s. The Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), a separatist movement fighting for the independence of the Somali region in southeastern Ethiopia led by the Ogaden clan, has been smashed by the EPRDF's brutally effective counterinsurgency campaign.

Ethiopia has evolved into an increasingly effective authoritarian regime with almost no room for independent political mobilization or debate.

The ruling EPRDF therefore has put in place the ethnoregional structures and the restrictions on opposition parties, civil society, and the media that have led Ethiopia to become a highly and increasingly authoritarian country. Freedom House, whose annual survey assesses political rights and civil liberties around the world, downgraded Ethiopia from its "partially free" to its "unfree" category in 2011. The democratic opening in 2005 gave hints of what a process of reform and democratization might have looked like, but the subsequent closure of political space has reinforced the EPRDF's ability to dominate the country.

## The Horn of Africa and the Regional Context

Ethiopia is in one of the world's most conflicted regions, where instability tend to spill across borders. In the recent past, a brutal war with Eritrea, a military intervention in Somalia, and tensions with Sudan have diverted resources away from internal political and economic developments and toward managing crises along the borders.

**Eritrea.** Ethiopia faces insecurity along its northern border, given that its conflict with Eritrea remains deadlocked. The EPRDF and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) cooperated in the struggle against Mengistu's regime, and Eritrea peacefully seceded from Ethiopia in 1993, but relations between Asmara and Addis Ababa had sharply degenerated by 1998. In May 1998, Eritrean armed forces attacked the disputed border town of Badme, an action that quickly escalated into a bitter full-scale war. An estimated 70,000 to 100,000 people were killed, 1 million were displaced, and a generation of development opportunities was squandered.

Following a May 2000 Ethiopian offensive, the parties signed the Algiers Agreement in December 2000 that created a 25-kilometer Temporary Security Zone to be patrolled by the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) and established the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) to delimit and demarcate the border. In April 2002, the EEBC issued its determination and ruled that the symbolically important town of Badme was on the Eritrean side



of the border. Ethiopian leaders strongly objected to the ruling and did everything short of resume hostilities to delay compliance. Eritrea, frustrated both by Ethiopia and by what it considered the international appeasement of Addis Ababa, placed restrictions on UNMEE, eventually leading the UN to withdraw its forces. Though Badme was not the underlying cause of the conflict, both regimes used it as the marker of whether it had “won” or “lost” the war, and hence whether the terrible sacrifices each made in the conflict were justified or in vain. Despite these growing tensions, the underlying stalemate and cease-fire along the border remain stable. Asmara and Addis Ababa both believe that time is on its side and that there is no need to act immediately. These strategic calculations are likely to keep the border frozen and the enduring tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea playing out through proxy relations with insurgent groups in neighboring states. In early 2011, however, Meles escalated his rhetoric and stated that his government would work toward changing Eritrea’s policies or its government, adding that “this could be done diplomatically, politically or through other means.”<sup>6</sup> Similar language has been used in the past and has been driven by

domestic political dynamics, but Addis Ababa seems to be laying out a case for intervention in order to stop Eritrea’s support for Ethiopian opposition.

International advocacy groups have tried to frame the violence in the Ogaden as “genocide” without significant success, in part because the conflict remains largely invisible to the broader international community.

***Somalia and the Ogaden.*** Conflict in Somalia has significant security implications for Addis Ababa. In 1996, Al Itihaad al Islamia, a now defunct Somalia-based Islamist group that established some links with ethnic Somalis in the Ogaden, claimed responsibility for a

series of bombings and attacks in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government responded with a military assault against one of the group’s bases in the Gedo region of Somalia. In December 2006 Ethiopia intervened in Somalia to oust the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) and return the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) to Mogadishu. From the perspective of the Ethiopian authorities, the dangers emanating from Somalia were linked to threats from Eritrea and internal Ethiopian insurgent groups such as the OLF and the ONLF. These regional and domestic adversaries had increased their military presence in areas controlled by the UIC. To Addis Ababa, the potential that the threats from Eritrea, the ONLF, and the OLF, would increase over time—rather than the ideology of the UIC or its ties to al Qaeda—compelled a response. In early 2009, Ethiopian troops withdrew from Mogadishu, having failed to accomplish their aim of reestablishing the TFG.

The Somali inhabited region of eastern Ethiopia erupted into brutal conflict in 2007 as intensified attacks from the ONLF and search-and-destroy missions by the Ethiopian military and allied militias from non-Ogaden clans displaced much of the region’s population. The conflict escalated in part due to Ethiopia’s intervention in Somalia and alleged links between the ONLF and Eritrean agents operating in the areas of Somalia controlled by the UIC. Most dramatically, the ONLF attacked a Chinese oil exploration site at Abole in April 2007, which claimed the lives of 74 civilians (including 9 Chinese workers). The Ethiopian military then launched a brutal strategy of violence, collective punishment, restrictions on food aid and trade, and forced relocation of civilians into protected villages. This heavy-handed military campaign successfully forced the ONLF underground. International advocacy groups have tried to frame the violence in the Ogaden as “genocide” without significant success, in part because the conflict remains largely invisible to the

6. Reuters Africa, “Ethiopia Warns of Action against Eritrea,” March 19, 2011.

broader international community. Access to the region by outsiders is strictly prohibited, making it extremely difficult to assess the humanitarian impact of the conflict.

Alongside and intertwined with Ethiopia's domestic political crisis, therefore, regional pressures are growing and have the potential to explode. Relations between Addis Ababa and Asmara are frozen, the Algiers peace is beyond resuscitation, and the border is tense and highly militarized. Ethiopia's intervention in Somalia in 2006 displaced the UIC, but has not found a way to build a stable ruling coalition in Somalia. Violence in the Ogaden reflects both the domestic political challenges of a historically marginalized region and blowback from strife in neighboring Somalia. Conflicts in the region feed and, in turn, are fed by growing authoritarianism within Ethiopia.

## U.S. Policy toward Ethiopia

Washington has developed close and friendly relations with the EPRDF since the regime overthrew the Derg in 1991. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Herman Cohen played a role in brokering the transition. President Bill Clinton regarded Meles as one of the “new generation” of African leaders, along with Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, Rwanda's Paul Kagame, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Laurent Kabila, all of whom were seen as bringing order and peace to countries that had suffered extended periods of egregious and violent misrule. In Ethiopia, as elsewhere, that initial perception has proved hard to shake, despite an increasingly poor record on governance and human rights. The relationship soured during the Ethiopia-Eritrea war (1998–2000) because Addis Ababa resented Washington for not denouncing what the Ethiopians regarded as an unprovoked invasion by Eritrea and as Washington grew frustrated with the EPRDF's recalcitrance in negotiations.

U.S. officials joined other donors in criticizing the crackdown that followed the 2005 elections. In January 2006, the Department of State released a statement that suggested the EPRDF was taking “steps that appear to criminalize dissent and impede progress on democratization.”<sup>7</sup> Meles, however, remained unmoved, and U.S. policy increasingly engaged Addis Ababa on the security and counterterrorism dimensions of the relationship. Without a willingness to credibly threaten to reduce development assistance or security cooperation, the donors had little leverage to influence the regime's crackdown and closing of political space.

The pattern was repeated in 2010. Washington criticized those elections, saying that a “number of laws, regulations and procedures implemented since the previous parliamentary elections in 2005 created a clear and decisive advantage for the ruling party throughout the electoral process.” By August 2010, however, following a meeting with Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson, Meles reported that a “rather difficult stretch” in U.S.-Ethiopian relations was “by and large behind us.”<sup>8</sup>

Ethiopia has long used its strategic position as the largest state in the troubled Horn of Africa to its advantage. During the 1990s, Addis Ababa cooperated with Washington on containing the threat posed by the National Islamic Front government in Khartoum. The relationship between the two states was close in the 1990s, and these links led the United States to play a major part in the Algiers talks. Addis Ababa was included in Washington's initial conception of a global alliance

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7. Voice of America, “U.S. Gravely Concerned about Dissent Crackdown in Ethiopia,” January 7, 2006.

8. Voice of America, “Ethiopian Leader Says ‘Rough Stretch’ in Ties with U.S. Over,” August 11, 2010



against terrorism in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visited Addis Ababa in December 2002. More recently, Ethiopia has contributed peacekeeping troops to the United Nations operation in Darfur and elsewhere, leading to additional international attention and favor.

Ethiopia's intervention in Somalia in December 2006 demonstrated some of the dynamics within the relationship. In 2006, Washington and Addis Ababa both opposed the UIC in Somalia,

but for different reasons. Washington had concerns regarding links to al Qaeda and other alleged extremist groups and claimed that certain "high-value" targets (notably individuals Washington linked to the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam) were in Mogadishu. Addis Ababa also framed its interests around terrorism and national security, but its focus was as much on Eritrea and Ethiopian insurgent groups operating out of UIC-controlled areas. Although many have

Although many have seen the intervention by Ethiopia into Somalia as an example of the U.S. "subcontracting" the war on terrorism to a regional ally, Addis Ababa likely would have acted with or without Washington's tacit approval.

seen the intervention by Ethiopia into Somalia as an example of the U.S. "subcontracting" the war on terrorism to a regional ally, Addis Ababa likely would have acted with or without Washington's tacit approval. The United States, however, created the impression that it was working hand in hand with Ethiopia when the U.S. military command used its aircraft and high-technology capacities to target what Washington regarded as al Qaeda leaders in Somalia. This perception has made U.S. relations with parties hostile to Ethiopia more difficult.

## Country Assessment

### The Power and Potential Brittleness of the EPRDF Party-State

As noted above, the EPRDF is an extraordinarily powerful, effective political party. In addition to its complete dominance of local and national governmental institutions, a number of large businesses are linked to the ruling party, either directly or through family members. Party-affiliated nongovernmental organizations such as the Relief Society of Tigray, the Amhara Development Association, and the Oromo Development Association are major providers of development assistance; a number of external observers have alleged that access to such assistance has become highly politicized.<sup>9</sup> Membership in the party is essential for obtaining a civil service job, and development assistance and key agricultural inputs are denied to members of the opposition. Mass organizations for women, youth, and unions dominate society and occupy the space filled by independent civil society in other countries. Along with its powerful institutional basis, the Ethiopian government engages in systematic repression against leaders in opposition political parties, independent civil society organizations, and independent journalists. Human Rights Watch, for example, reports: "The government has severely restricted the rights to freedom of expression and association, arbitrarily detained political opponents, intimidated journalists, shuttered media outlets, and made independent human rights and elections monitoring practically impossible.

9. Human Rights Watch, "Development without Freedom: How Aid Underwrites Repression in Ethiopia," October 19, 2010.

Citizens are unable to speak freely, organize political activities, or challenge government policies without fear of reprisal. Key state institutions and representative bodies, such as Parliament and *woreda* and *kebele* councils, have become politicized and fallen under the ruling party's control. State officials face little accountability for the abuses they commit.”<sup>10</sup>

The EPRDF retains control over the large, well-led, and capable armed forces, the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF). While the military is multiethnic, its top officers are overwhelmingly from Tigray. As many as 58 of the top 61 officers are members of the TPLF. The ENDF has demonstrated its capacities in peacekeeping operations (in Darfur, in Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, and Liberia), in its intervention in Somalia in 2006, its massive offensive against Eritrea in 2000, and in its brutally effective counterinsurgency operations against the OLF and ONLF. Although the army is under party control, in the political crisis of 2005 the EPRDF brought in special auxiliary forces to regain control of the streets rather than the ENDF. Insurgent groups continue to operate in peripheral and border regions, in exile from Eritrea, and in the diaspora but pose no threat to the central highlands or main agricultural zones of central Ethiopia.

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Paradoxically, the strength of the EPRDF and the formidable military apparatus on which it relies is simultaneously a source of potential brittleness. The lack of space for dissenting voices, for the development of alternative policies, or for channeling discontent into constructive forms of political dialogue and competition has resulted in a population that has acquiesced to the formidable power of the incumbent or that has accepted the patronage available to those who join the party. This acquiescence, however, may be pragmatic and could evaporate quickly if the regime seems to weaken or lose its control of the patronage system. Those who have challenged the regime have been harassed, beaten, arrested, forced into exile, and had their property seized and jobs taken away. It is not surprising that domestic opposition is virtually nonexistent. If the regime stumbles, however, then the veneer of support may fall away, quickly leaving a vacuum that will encourage a violent scramble to gain the upper hand in the transition. Authoritarian regimes without significant constituencies are not stable in the long run. Longevity should not be mistaken for resilience.

Although organized political opposition has been crushed within Ethiopia, a number of significant constituencies are available for mobilization if the regime appears weak or distracted by intraparty or interregional crises. More than 30 percent of registered voters supported the opposition in 2005, and these constituencies are now without an institutional home or leaders who can voice their dissent peacefully or channel it toward elections. The continued support for the OLF and the insurgent ONLF further indicates that key groups have not consented to the EPRDF's domination. The prospects for incremental reform through a gradual process of political opening are not credible to many in the opposition, who instead have disengaged and wait fatalistically for the current regime to collapse or be removed. Disengagement and cynicism have for now replaced the remarkably energetic participation witnessed in the electoral process of 2005.

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10. Human Rights Watch, “‘One Hundred Ways of Putting Pressure’: Violations of Freedom of Expression and Association in Ethiopia,” 2010.

## Intraparty Sources of Conflict

Comparative cases of single-party regimes suggest that most lose power as a result of internal divisions, often brought into the open during a crisis over leadership succession. The EPRDF is engaged in a process of controlled, internal transition as a number of members of the original group of insurgent leaders are retiring and a new generation of younger leaders is being promoted. The party has stated that it plans to rotate nearly its entire leadership by 2015 and that Prime Minister Meles Zenawi will retire before the next national election. This process of moving out powerful senior members and moving up junior members of the coalition inherently raises questions of relative power and has the potential to generate internal competition and conflict. Whereas the EPRDF has always been more than just an instrument of a one-man regime, Meles has been the leader of the party since it was an insurgent organization in the early 1980s. The ability of the party to cohere without Meles remains untested.

A number of members of the older generation of leaders from the time of the armed struggle (e.g., Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin, Deputy Prime Minister Addisu Legesse, and Trade and Industry Minister Girma Birru) have retired or

been shifted to ambassadorial posts at some distance from the intraparty competition.

Abadula Gemedo, the powerful leader of the OPDO and past minister of defense, has been moved from the head of the Oromo region into the position of speaker of the House. A high-level OPDO member said that while the Oromo were willing to bide their time until 2015, if the OPDO does not get the top position, “there will be trouble.”<sup>11</sup>

While key leaders from the Amhara and Oromo wings of the ruling coalition have been moved out of key power positions, younger members from the south have been

promoted—notably Hailemariam Dessalegn, to deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs; Siraj Fegessa, to minister of defense; and Shiferaw Teklemariam, to minister of federal affairs. Though SEPDM officials have recently moved into leadership positions, the party itself is an amalgamation of a number of smaller ethnic parties, making it an unwieldy base from which to control the EPRDF. Some of those promoted after 2010 lack independent bases of power and are dependent upon top EPRDF leadership for their positions. To date, this process has been well managed. It is possible that an elite pact might be brokered whereby ethnic and regional elites agree to rotate top positions, as in Kenya or Nigeria. But leadership transition is inherently a difficult process in which power and authority are in flux as different individuals and factions of parties rise and fall.<sup>12</sup>

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## Economic Vulnerabilities

Ethiopia’s current stability is based in part on significant levels of economic growth, but this too may be based on shaky foundations. According to the World Bank, Ethiopia has been one of the

11. Interview, Addis Ababa, February 2011.

12. “Ethiopia: A Five Year Exit Plan,” *Africa Confidential*, February 4, 2011, 8–9.

fastest growing economies in Africa, particularly during the 2003 to 2007 period, although inflation has been a concern in recent years.<sup>13</sup> Agriculture-led growth has been impressive, but some have questioned the data upon which these conclusions are based. Some economists note that the country's reported increases in cereal production during the past decade are not plausible unless Ethiopia has seen "the fastest green revolution in history," a conclusion that is not explained by data on intensification of agriculture (e.g., fertilizer use and the expansion of irrigation).<sup>14</sup> Although economic growth in the service sector and in a few export areas such as floriculture is clearly visible, the structural basis for high and continued growth is more difficult to see. Furthermore, Ethiopia remains highly dependent on external humanitarian assistance, with an estimated 2.8 million people in need of food assistance in 2011.<sup>15</sup> Beyond the question of rates of growth in the past, the EPRDF will face increased political tensions if economic stagnation or high levels of inflation constrict the regime's resource base. High inflation in 2011 has been particularly felt by the urban middle classes.

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## Regional and Transnational Sources of Instability

Ethiopia's domestic political dilemmas increasingly adopt transnational characteristics. Tensions along the Ethiopia-Eritrea border, ongoing violent conflict in Somalia and in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, and the potentially volatile aftermath of South Sudan's independence in July 2011 all have an impact on domestic politics in Ethiopia. These threats sometimes become linked to the regime's opponents, as when the OLF and the ONLF operate out of Asmara or when Addis Ababa characterizes its domestic rivals as agents of regional "terrorists." The global war on terrorism often has specifically local dynamics in the Horn of Africa. At present, Ethiopia's borders are mostly stable: the Ethiopia/Eritrea border is frozen and unlikely to erupt into a new round of interstate war in the short term, while Ethiopia successfully managed to withdraw from Mogadishu, and Sudan is relatively peaceful following the January 2011 referendum, despite some armed clashes. In the next five years, however, it is possible that one or more of the conflicts in these neighboring states will escalate and have the potential to both absorb Addis Ababa's attention and resources and to provide a source of cross-border weapons or arenas for war by proxy.

From the Ethiopian government's perspective, security threats from local opposition parties, internal insurgencies, regional rivals, spillover effects from neighboring civil wars, and transnational anti-Ethiopian mobilization are all interlinked. The EPRDF, opposition parties like the CUD, and insurgent groups such as the OLF and ONLF all mobilize communities that are linked to their homeland through networks that are not restricted by geography. All these parties raise funds, broker political alliances, lobby host governments, engage in political debates through the

13. World Bank, "Ethiopia Country Brief," <http://go.worldbank.org/WA1RL12OL0>.

14. Stefan Dercon, Ruth Vargas Hill, and Andrew Zeitin, "In Search of a Strategy: Rethinking Agricultural-Led Growth in Ethiopia," May 2009.

15. Joint Government and Humanitarian Partners Document, "Humanitarian Requirements–2011," February 2011.

Internet, and seek to frame their conflicts in ways that will elicit international support and undermine their opponents. When political space is restricted, those segments of the opposition able to operate outside of authoritarian control become more influential. The diaspora in the United States played a fundamental role in the political opening of 2005 and the subsequent crisis. The Ethiopian government and Ogadeni in the diaspora compete to frame the Ogaden conflict as “terrorism” by the ONLF or “genocide” by the EPRDF.<sup>16</sup> The resentment against Addis Ababa and increased militancy among the Ogadeni will likely fuel conflicts for many years to come. While the war in the Ogaden is insufficient to topple the EPRDF and does not pose a real risk in the short term, if the incumbent regime were to falter, this movement, along with the OLF, could revive and pose new threats to stability. When linked to threats from Mogadishu and Asmara, the smoldering conflict in the Ogaden could escalate rapidly.

## Changing Dynamics in U.S.-Ethiopia Relations

Washington feels it needs a close relationship with Ethiopia to pursue its strategic interests in the Horn of Africa. This relationship, however, comes with costs. As with other pivotal states in difficult regions such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, these “awkward bedfellows” receive U.S. support for security reasons but then pursue their own, sometimes brutal, agendas regardless of pressure

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from Washington. Furthermore, questions about potential regime brittleness and its implications for U.S. foreign policy if a violent and unpredictable transition were to erupt could make Ethiopia a less valuable partner in the region.

Under the George W. Bush administration, counterterrorism strategy dominated

U.S. policy toward Ethiopia. This security imperative remains under President Barack Obama, but there also has been more focus on economic and political development. Assistant Secretary of State Johnnie Carson characterizes the relationship with Addis Ababa as based on three “poles”—democracy and governance, economic development, and security—and has spoken of the need to “rebalance” or “recalibrate” the relationship so that it is not dominated by the security component.

Ethiopian officials have responded by highlighting the growing roles played by China and other investors from Asia and reportedly have indicated an interest in decreasing the U.S. role in military training. The United States, European Union, and the main international financial institutions, however, remain the major source of capital for investments in food security and basic services in health and education. Meles values his role as the African leader who engages global powers on issues of climate change and who gets invited to Group of Twenty meetings and to address the World Economic Forum in Davos. Washington plays an essential role in supporting this diplomatic posture and Ethiopia’s image as a key player in world affairs.

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16. Terrence Lyons, “Conflict-Generated Diasporas and Transnational Politics in Ethiopia,” *Conflict, Security and Development* 7, no. 4, (2007): 529–49.



## Scenarios

The most likely scenario for Ethiopia over the short to medium terms is a continuation of the authoritarian status quo. The EPRDF as a party, as a military, and as a government is strong, while its opponents (both internal, in the region, and in the diaspora) are weak, divided, and unlikely to reemerge in the next two to three years. The World Bank expects the Ethiopian economy to continue to grow at high levels, although not as high as Addis Ababa predicts. Major donors such as the United States and the United Kingdom have increased their assistance, and new donors and private investors from Asia are providing new sources of financial support. Ethiopia benefits from an international perception that it is the bulwark against instability in the volatile Horn of Africa region.

There are alternative scenarios, however, that are conceivable and that have potentially significant implications for stability and U.S. interests. Given the opaqueness of the EPRDF's intraparty dynamics, it is difficult to make precise predictions regarding how such scenarios might unfold. The history of political transition in Ethiopia is extremely violent, and power has been seized through military force in 1974 and 1991. There are multiple potential fracture lines with diverse interaction effects, depending on different scenarios. Structural tensions persist between a political system that is hypercentralized and linked from the smallest village to the central government through a strong single party, on the one hand, and a system that is based on ethnically defined regions and parties that amplify factionalization and movement away from the center, on the other hand. As long as the center is militarily dominant and controls access to significant sources of patronage, the centralizing dynamics manage the centrifugal forces.

If the regime's ability to remain the central organizing authority within Ethiopia is challenged, however, then cascading effects may generate instability and potentially violence as constituencies tied to the EPRDF scramble to protect their interests. In other words, if the EPRDF stumbles and is no longer perceived as a reliable source of patronage or party discipline, then key power brokers with influence in the ethnically defined parties and regions may seek greater autonomy and emphasize how they as ethnic leaders can shore up their bases of support. Although the most likely scenario is stability, there are plausible scenarios that imply significant threats to national unity and have the potential for considerable violence. Two scenarios are worth elaborating on to highlight some of the underlying dynamics of potential instability. First, competition for power within the ruling party could break out and shatter the coalition; and second, a convergence of multiple crises could overwhelm the EPRDF and trigger violent instability.

### Intraparty Splits

The EPRDF is in the process of an internal realignment and a changing of the guard. It is conceivable that during this ongoing process of leadership rotation, fissures could open up within the party. The question of succession, if Meles follows through on his announced plan to retire, highlights the structural challenges of the ethnic-federal system. Promoting another member of the TPLF as the next prime minister will make it very difficult to make the case that the EPRDF is in fact a multiethnic party rather than a tool of the Tigray elite. Selecting an Amhara from the ANDM will generate resistance from those in the historically marginalized south. OPDO leaders insist that it is their turn to lead the country, a role they argue is only fair, given that the Oromo are the country's largest ethnic group. Other smaller ethnic groups, however, fear that an Oromo-led government will impose majority rule at their expense. The SEPDM has had its members

promoted lately within both the government and the EPRDF coalition, but the party is so diverse that it is a difficult base from which to launch a new national leader. The question of succession is therefore likely to generate interethnic rivalries, increase cleavages within the ruling coalition, and potentially create significant conflict and protracted uncertainty.

Although the EPRDF has remained firmly in power for more than 20 years, it sits atop centrifugal forces that may erupt in the event of a leadership crisis. The EPRDF is composed of ethnically defined parties, each ruling its own ethnically defined region and its own ethnically defined institutions, including regional militias and other security forces. If central leadership is uncertain, then many powerful regional interests may seek to shore up local control before engaging in power struggles in the center. There are few incentives for a regional leader to break with the center at the moment, because the center protects the authority of the ethnic parties that make up the EPRDF; the ENDF is always a security force available for intervention if necessary, and resources flow from the center. If there is a crisis, however, there will be incentives for regional power brokers to strengthen their positions in the regions, a dynamic that may unleash centrifugal forces that will put the unity of the Ethiopian state at risk.

## Convergence of Multiple Crises

A second possible scenario plays out if escalation on multiple levels occurs simultaneously, which would tax even a strong organization like the EPRDF. The EPRDF for now appears to have the capability to manage more limited crises. If domestic opposition in urban areas regroups and becomes stronger and perhaps more violent than in 2005, the EPRDF has the political and security tools to suppress it. If the OLF, ONLF, or some new insurgent group escalates its campaign, they would likely be crushed yet again by Ethiopian military forces. Ethiopia has the wherewithal to eliminate an immediate threat from Somalia, to overwhelm Eritrea in a direct confrontation, and to largely manage any spillover from instability in Sudan. But if all these factors coalesce at once, such a combination of threats might be beyond the capacity of the EPRDF to manage. Each of these challenges has a specific history and dynamic. Each, however, also feeds and in turn is fed by the others with the potential to generate an explosive escalation. Even a state with the extraordinary capacities of Ethiopia's would be challenged if a domestic political crisis escalated, if an economic downturn fueled popular frustrations, and if external threats combined with domestic forces.

If either an intraparty struggle or the convergence of regional challenges make the regime less able to use force to preclude dissent, it is possible that opposition could erupt rapidly and with unpredictable consequences. Opposition is most likely to emerge in the cities, where the ruling party has less ability to control the population. In the past, the EPRDF security services have responded with deadly force against civilians, as in Addis Ababa in 2005, in Awassa in 2002, and at Addis Ababa University in 2000. If, however, the ruling party split or there was a confluence of escalating crises both within Ethiopia and in Somalia, Sudan, and along the Eritrean border, then this scenario of instability and violence would be possible. If urban disturbances occurred simultaneously in Addis Ababa and several provincial cities (Dire Dawa, Nazret, Mekele, Gondar, and Awassa are the next largest cities, and Jimma is an important university town), then the ability of the regime to manage the crisis would be in question.

## Conclusion

In Ethiopia today, political space for electoral competition, the free exchange of ideas, and independent civil society organizations is virtually nonexistent. The ruling party responded to the challenge mounted by the opposition in the 2005 elections with a series of repressive measures against independent institutions and by increasing the size of the party and its links to state resources. The party is strong and ubiquitous. It uses government resources and positions to reward supporters, and its local cadres have regularly used intimidation and arrests to prevent an opposition from organizing. Party membership is high and is essential for professional advancement. The party controls access to critical agricultural inputs such as fertilizer and humanitarian relief. Ethiopia is a strong and effective authoritarian state with a ruling party that dominates nearly all aspects of public life.

Despite this extensive capacity, presuming stability in the medium to long runs should be questioned. What appears to be a strong authoritarian regime may in fact be fragile and collapse quickly, with considerable potential for violence and uncertainty. The 2005 election demonstrated significant discontent and this dissent, while lacking an instrument for expression, remains high and potentially explosive if the regime stumbles. Ethnically defined federalism has created potentially powerful interests in the regions with their own institutions, generating the potential for centrifugal forces to undermine national unity in the event of a crisis. At the moment, the power and patronage at the center are sufficient to keep these forces under control, but the regime may face a challenge if it wavers or appears weak.

Although the current regime is likely to remain in power, several factors should be monitored for indications that the ruling party's vulnerability may be growing. The first set of factors is related to intraparty rivalries. If the tensions over leadership positions were to become more apparent, and if the OPDO and ANDM were to begin to publicly voice their frustrations with their position within the ruling coalition, it would suggest that key components of the EPRDF were losing patience with the status quo. If one of these major parties concluded that it was likely to lose even more power in an upcoming rotation of top leaders, the potential for more contentious intraparty struggles could weaken the regime.

Grievances are high among the Ethiopian population, but there are few feasible strategies for challenging the incumbents. If economic hardship, however, were to become intolerable, then food riots or other forms of spontaneous urban resistance might emerge. The highly effective intelligence services and party structures at every level make it extremely difficult to plan demonstrations, but unexpected, impromptu uprisings are possible if grievances mount. High rates of inflation that have made it difficult for the members of the urban middle class to feed their families may provide this kind of spark.

Urban areas have been the center of opposition politics, and the EPRDF has more difficulty in controlling the cities compared with the countryside. Universities are another potential location for spontaneous demonstrations, but the government has made significant progress in forcing students into the party and maintaining close surveillance on the campuses. If a major demonstration takes place and the EPRDF appears weak in the face of this challenge, then other demonstrations and challenges will likely follow and spread across the country. If, as is more likely, the regime responds with lethal force and mass arrests, it may be able to survive in the short run but at the expense of further eroding its domestic and international legitimacy.



What is less likely to lead to regime change is rural insurgency. The EPRDF is strongest in the countryside and when faced with challenges that may be met with military force. The EPRDF nearly destroyed the OLF in 1992 and has kept the rebels to a very low level of insurgency. The ONLF similarly was crushed in 2007. It is possible that Eritrea, al Qaeda, or some other regional and transnational rival will provide support to a proxy force, but this strategy has been tried multiple times in recent years with little impact on the regime's hold on power.

Addis Ababa poses a very difficult set of policy dilemmas for Washington. U.S. interests in regional security, global development, and democracy and human rights are in tension, and it is not possible to advance all three simultaneously. Ethiopia is regarded as an important security partner in relation to threats in the Horn of Africa and an important asset in monitoring Islamist

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movements and terrorism. Washington has also made Addis Ababa a focus for major programs to address global health issues (e.g., HIV/AIDS and malaria) and food security (e.g., the new Feed the Future initiative), and economic assistance is scheduled to increase in the coming years. At the same time, the ruling party is increasingly authoritarian and is hostile to U.S. policy goals with regard to democracy and human rights. Regime stability is essential for Ethiopia to serve as a U.S.

partner in pursuing regional security and global development, but the lack of democracy leaves the regime brittle. If a violent and unpredictable transition erupted in Addis Ababa, Washington's interests in security, development, and democracy would be put at risk.



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