



EUROPEAN
INSTITUTE
OF PEACE

**INTER-COMMUNAL
TENSIONS, VIOLENCE AND
CONFLICTS IN THE TIME
OF A PANDEMIC IN
ETHIOPIA**

By Yihenew Tesfaye,
Fasika Gedif, Kedir Jemal,
and Meseret Asefa

November, 2021



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Yihenew Tesfaye holds PhD in Applied Anthropology, emphasis in biocultural medical anthropology, from Oregon State University, USA, and is currently assistant professor of anthropology at Bahir Dar University and University of Gondar, temporarily position. Yihenew has been engaged in several multidisciplinary research projects including anthropological, ecological, public health, religion, and political studies in Ethiopia and Kenya. Yihenew has co-authored well over twenty journal articles and a few book chapters. Yihenew's research interests include anthropology, public health, implementation science, food and water insecurity, political economy, political ecology, and ethnic studies.

Fasika Gedif is an assistant professor of social-anthropology at Bahir Dar University (BDU), and is currently the chair of the Department of Social-Anthropology at BDU. Prior to joining BDU, Fasika worked in Dilla University as a Lecturer. Fasika has been engaged in several community-based research projects and interventions in the Amhara region including researches on ethnicity, religion and regional politics. Fasika has also been providing capacity building trainings for governmental and non-governmental organizations in Amhara region.

Meseret Asefa is a lecturer in the Department of Social-Anthropology at the University of Gondar (UoG). Meseret holds BA in Social Anthropology and MA in Development Anthropology. Meseret has been teaching several anthropology courses including Political Anthropology, Ethnicity Identity and Nationalism, Ethnography of Ethiopia, and Introduction to Anthropology. He has also been involved in different research projects affiliated with local and international development and research organizations.

Kedir Jemal holds PhD in Agricultural economics from Haramaya University, and currently works as assistant professor of Agricultural Economics at Haramaya University. Prior to joining Haramaya University, Kedir worked as the Head of Department of Economics, Dean of Faculty of Business and Economics, and Student Services Director in Jijiga University, Somali region, Ethiopia. His research areas relate to the links between climate change, poverty, and food security.

Table of Contents

ACRONYMS.....	3
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
1. INTRODUCTION.....	6
2. POLITICAL CONTEXT	8
COVID-19 AND ETHIOPIA’S PANDEMIC RESPONSE.....	10
A NATIONAL STATE OF EMERGENCY	12
3. METEKEL: BANDITRY, LAWLESSNESS, AND ETHNIC VIOLENCE.....	13
PRE-PANDEMIC CONFLICT.....	15
VIOLENCE FOLLOWING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK.....	17
ATTRIBUTING CAUSES	18
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19	20
4. CHILGA: A FLASHPOINT FOR QEMANT-AMHARA CONFLICT	22
COVID-19, ROBBERIES, AND ABUSE OF THE STATE OF EMERGENCY	24
ALLEGATIONS OF EXTERNAL MEDDLING	27
5. EAST HARARGHE: PANDEMIC RESTRICTIONS AND THE JUNE 2021 ELECTION.....	29
TRANQUILITY AND REPRESSION	30
6. CONCLUSION	32
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	33

Acronyms

EHRC	Ethiopian Human Rights Commission
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defense Force
EPHI	Ethiopian Public Health Institute
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
GERD	Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam
IDP	Internally Displaced People
MoH	Ethiopia Federal Ministry of Health
NAMA	National Movement of Amhara
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
PM	Prime Minister
PP	Prosperity Party
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
SoE	State of Emergency
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UoG	University of Gondar

Executive summary

The ongoing conflict in northern Ethiopia—in the Tigray region and adjacent Amhara and Afar zones—has controlled the last twelve months discussions and analyses of Ethiopian politics. The magnitude of the conflict, associated humanitarian crisis, and the news about the crisis (sometimes with deliberate circulations of misinformation) have made this the most significant political challenge of the nation since the 1998 Ethio-Eritrea war. However, recent political developments in Ethiopia feed into each other, and it remains imperative to keep examining continued inter-communal tensions, violence and conflicts in Ethiopia and analysing the ramification of the Covid-19 pandemic on outstanding and novel inter-communal tensions and conflicts in the country. As this report shows, political developments are, directly or indirectly, linked with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has escalated hitherto mostly localised inter-communal tensions and fueled armed conflicts in Ethiopia.

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Ethiopia's political situation and inter-communal tensions, violence, and extremism. By taking cases from the Metekel zone in Benishangul-Gumuz region, from the central and west Gondar zone (largely the Chilga district) in the Amhara region, and the east Hararghe zone in the Oromia region, this report discusses what occurred during incidents since the onset of the pandemic, how sources attribute the causes of these incidents, and how the narratives of sources, directly or indirectly, implicate the pandemic in triggering or aggravating these incidents.

The following are the main findings of the study:

- The first two months after the onset of the pandemic in Ethiopia were characterised by uncertainty and panic, and with religious interpretations of the pandemic dominating both the mainstream and the social media. These months saw broad agreement among government political leaders, opposition politicians, and social media activists on pandemic-related measures taken by the government.
- The postponement of the election due to Covid-19 along with the pandemic state of emergency (SoE) and its enforcement shifted people's perception about the pandemic, leading to accusations of the government and tensions among communities. Discussions on the constitutionality of the postponement of the election and questions about the legitimacy of the government after September 2020

(in the absence of an election) started surfacing on opposition mainstream media and the social media.

- The pandemic SoE first, and then the loosened pandemic restrictions (after the lifting of the SoE), were interpreted by many as a government tactic to strengthen its own hand and weaken the hand of its opponents. The restrictions were associated with allegations of arrests of members and leaders of opposition parties and closure of parties' offices by government forces. Opposition parties claim such crackdowns were not seen when government officials had meetings that breached Covid-19 restrictions. As the election approached, suppression of opposing parties using pandemic restrictions increased. This has generated resistance and grievances against the government, which have led to increased use of force by government forces – a vicious circle of distrust, resistance and government repression.
- The conflicts in Metekel and in central and western Gondar zones, reported since the onset of the pandemic, were marked by an organised attack of civilians by groups of militants. These attacks were reported despite the presence of Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and a SoE declared to ease the conflict in the zones. Sometimes the militants had armed confrontations with government security forces. In Metekel, for instance, the fighting included 'Gumuz militants' with elements of the regional security apparatus siding with the militants against ENDF. Our sources noted that there was a limited counteroffensive, from the government side, against the assaults which became more common since the pandemic.¹
- Citizens trust in regional and zonal administrations and regional security forces has been eroded due to the failure of authorities to protect civilians against attacks. Most of the attacks in Metekel were committed by groups of assailants with the support of the regional and zonal administrative officials and regional security forces. This has eroded citizens' trust in local and regional officials – which has been evident in most of our interviews.

We acknowledge the complexity of the Ethiopia's political situation, and believe that interventions aimed at mitigating inter-communal violence and conflicts, and the impact of the pandemic on these incidents should be executed with the greatest care. Possible measures with tangible impact could include:

¹ A source who, at the time of the interview, was living in Chagni IDP camp.

- Providing medical and psychosocial support to victims of inter-communal violence and armed attacks;
- Initiating independent investigations and human right assessments into the inter-communal violence and armed attacks and bring those responsible to justice;
- Beginning discussions on the (now loosened) Covid-19 restrictions that are limiting citizens to exercise their constitutional rights; and
- Initiating inclusive dialogues among community members, local and regional political stakeholders, informal local actors and other interest groups (such dialogues should focus on reconciliation among community members and restructuring of local and regional government institutions).

1. Introduction

This report aims to offer a broader analysis of inter-communal violence and extremism in Ethiopia in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Reports on the impact of Covid-19 on violent extremism have shown that while the various movement and travel restrictions put in place by different governments, aimed at containing the virus, have contributed to the suppression of violent extremism and terrorism, the lifestyle changes that resulted from the nature of the virus can provide new platforms that facilitate violent conflict.²

An examination of the impact of the pandemic on violent extremism in Ethiopia necessitates a deeper understanding of violence that has surfaced in the country in last three years, such as ethno-religious tensions and inter-communal violence.³ Given the time-specific

² 'Impact of Covid-19 on Violent Extremism and Terrorism.' UNITRA Division for Peace.

<https://unitar.org/sites/default/files/media/file/Factsheet%20CT%20Printed.pdf> (accessed at June 12, 2021); 'Update on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Terrorism, Counter-terrorism and Countering Violent Extremism'. United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Executive director (CETD). 2021. Pages: 6-7; Olawale Ismael. 2021. 'Covid-19 and Violent Extremism in the Lake Chad Basin.' United Nations Development Programme.

³ In the present study, our sources frequently attribute ethnic and religious interest's motivated attacks as a result of being 'extremist'. However, the Amharic word that some of our sources used for ethnic 'extremists' was different from religious 'extremists'. The Amharic word that some used for religious 'extremism' was *Akrarinet*, which primarily 'refers to a rope or string of an instrument being tightly twisted or taut', rather than having an ideology far outside the mainstream attitudes of society. However, the word they used for ethnic 'extremism' was *Tsenfegnenet*, which is somehow closer to the English meaning of extremism, and can mean embracing an ideology that is considered to be far outside the mainstream attitudes of society. In the last decade, especially after the start of the so-called the Muslim Protests movement in Ethiopia in 2011, the word *Tsenfegnenet* has dominated the discourses of ethnic extremism in Ethiopia – typically in government-owned and -controlled mainstream media. It is also important to note that when the word *Akrarinet* is used in religious terms, which is how it is mostly referred, it can have a positive meaning. If someone is *Akrari* of her/his religion, it can mean that she/he strictly obeys what the religion teaches. It is possible, although rarely, that people may use *Akrarinet* and *Tsenfegnenet* interchangeably. Considering this translation difference and the contextual application of the concept of extremism in the study context, we accept the difficulty associated with the application of this complex concept 'within a highly context specific inter-religion and inter-ethnic violence'. Following Ostebo et al., our analysis and application of the concept of extremism avoids categorizing something or someone as extreme but will focus on our sources' narratives of extremism and how they attribute inter-communal violence that surfaced in their community, concentrating on those that took place after

enforcement of Covid-19 restrictions (self-isolation and lockdown) on the general public in Ethiopia, our analysis goes beyond the economic impact of these restrictions – a source of grievances and cause for violence – and conducts a deeper investigation of incidents of violence that took place after the onset of the pandemic.

By taking increases, in frequency and magnitude, of violence and conflicts since the pandemic began into account, we identified three regions for study: the Metekel zone in Benishangul-Gumuz region, central and west Gondar zone (largely the Chilga district) in Amhara region, and east Hararghe zone in Oromia region. We have sought to establish what took place in these localities, how sources attributed the causes of incidents and how the narratives of sources, directly or indirectly, saw an impact of the pandemic in triggering or aggravating these incidents.

The report draws on ethnographic data together with background research collected from May to July 2021. The four-member project-team carried out fieldwork and conducted qualitative interviews, informal discussions and participant observations in various localities in these zones. The report also draws on discourse analyses of regional and national mainstream news sources, social media posts, related articles, reports and other relevant written materials. The timing of the study (which was in the middle of the highly anticipated national election), the sensitivity of the topic under investigation, and the ongoing armed conflict in northern Ethiopia and incidents of violence in Metekel and west Gondar zones made the research challenging. Lack of independently confirmed information, in Metekel and central and west Gondar zones in particular, and explicit biases of sources at times made it difficult to assess sources' details with certainty. Our team members long-term research experience in the regions, and their knowledge of the context and the local language, helped mitigate these problems to some extent.

When we first embarked on this study, we aimed at investigating the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Ethiopia's political situation and inter-communal conflict. Although the pandemic has certainly impacted Ethiopia's political situation, which we will see later in the report, our sources did not always immediately identify the links between the pandemic and violent extremism, possibly because our study was taking place during a time when communities seemed little concerned about the health impact of the pandemic. Inter-communal conflicts were their main concern, and Covid-19 was not near the top of that list. This does not, however, mean that the pandemic had no impact on inter-communal tensions and violence. An attentive view to recounts of our sources and careful investigations into incidents of inter-communal violence that took place after the onset of the pandemic have helped identify both the direct and indirect impact of the pandemic on incidents that took place after its onset in Ethiopia.

the onset of the pandemic. See Østebø, Terje et al. 2021. 'Religion, Ethnicity, and the Charges of Extremism in Ethiopia.' European Institute of Peace. Brussels, Belgium.

The rest of the report is structured as follows. We first provide a background information on political developments seen in Ethiopia since the 2018 reform and on Ethiopia's national pandemic response, then we discuss our case studies in the selected localities in the three regions, and finally, provide conclusions and highlight recommendations specific to our findings.

2. Political context

Between 1991 and 2018, the politics of Ethiopia were actively shaped by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of four ethnolinguistic-based parties. The EPRDF was largely controlled by a single party representing the Tigrayan ethnic minority – the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF).⁴ Inter-communal violence and conflicts in Ethiopia were relatively rare during the first two decades of EPRDF's authoritarian administration. From 2015, however, high levels of unemployment and inequality, and resentment over elites' economic and political control, led to disruption and national protests in the country, starting in Oromia and spreading across the country.⁵

Abiy Ahmed rode the wave of protests to become Ethiopia's first Oromo prime minister in 2018. The new PM promised radical reforms, and in its first 100 days in power, the government increased the role of women in Ethiopian politics, granted amnesty to thousands of political prisoners, and invited diaspora politicians and previously outlawed opposition groups to return to Ethiopia.⁶ Abiy also concluded a peace deal with Eritrean president Isaias Afwerki, which helped him win the 2019 Nobel Peace prize, and dissolved the EPRDF into a new unitary ruling party, the Prosperity Party (PP), which the TPLF refused to join. Some pro-federalist Oromo remained sceptical about the PP too and organized along ethno-federalist lines.

⁴ Bach, Jean-Nicolas. 2011. 'Abyotawi democracy: neither revolutionary nor democratic, a critical review of EPRDF's conception of revolutionary democracy in post-1991 Ethiopia.' *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5 (4): 641-663; Emmenegger, Rony, Sibilo Keno, and Tobias Hagmann. 2011. 'Decentralization to the household: expansion and limits of state power in rural Oromiya.' *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5 (4): 733-754; Feyissa, Dereje. 2011. 'Aid negotiation: the uneasy 'partnership' between EPRDF and the donors.' *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5 (4): 788-817. Also see: Gudina, Merera. 2011. 'Elections and democratization in Ethiopia, 1991_2010. Elections and democratization in Ethiopia, 1991-2010.' *Journal of Eastern African Studies*. 5 (4): 664-680

⁵ 'Violent clashes in Ethiopia over 'master plan' to expand Addis.' The Guardian. 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/11/ethiopia-protests-master-plan-addis-ababa-students> (accessed July 26, 2021); 'Killings and Arrests in Response to Ethiopia's Oromo Protest'. Human Rights Watch. 2016. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/15/such-brutal-crackdown/killings-and-arrests-response-ethiopias-oromo-protests> (accessed July 25, 2021)

⁶ 'Ethiopia swears in first female Supreme Court chief.' CNN new By Bukola Adebayo. 2018. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/11/01/africa/ethiopia-first-woman-supreme-court-head-intl/index.html> (Accessed July 28, 2021); 'Ethiopian's Birtukan Mideksa appointed election boss'. BBC news.2018. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46301112?SThisFB&fbclid=IwAR2VfOngNmIkmdmUnDY0mmBjFipizkVJ3ssm_4KIgEnFZ5GsUkqWu3DL-k4 (accessed July 28, 2021)

Despite a significant decrease of protests against the government compared to the pre-2018 situation, a new wave of inter-communal tensions and conflicts erupted, motivated by political, ethnic and religious differences, starting from four months after the ascent of Abiy to the prime-ministership. There was an escalation of border disputes between the Oromia and Somali regions since August 2018;⁷ minorities were targeted during inter-communal violence in Burayu district of Oromia, near Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa, in September 2018;⁸ the burning of more than thirty Ethiopian Orthodox churches, most of them in Oromia, since July 2018;⁹ the attack of four mosques and multiple Muslim businesses in Motta, in the Amhara region, in December 2019;¹⁰ an ongoing armed conflict in Western Wollega, Oromia;¹¹ the early July 2020 inter-communal violence in Oromia including the city Shashemene;¹² an escalation of the long-standing violence, mostly against Amhara and Agew people, in Metekel zone of Benishangul-Gumuz region;¹³ and an increase of violence between the people of Qemant and Amhara in central and west Gondar zones.¹⁴ The latter two cases, along with recent incidents in east Hararghe, are explored in more depth in this report.

The security situation, and the associated social and humanitarian crisis, have severely intensified due to an armed conflict that erupted on November 4, 2020 between the federal government and TPLF forces. In early November 2020, TPLF forces attacked the northern military base of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) in Tigray.¹⁵ Initiating the war against the ENDF was among the reasons for the TPLF to be designated as a 'terrorist organization' in May 2021, along with Oromo Liberation Front-Shene (OLF-Shene, also known

⁷ 'Change and Continuity in Protests and Political Violence PM Abiy's Ethiopia'. OCHA. 2018. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/change-and-continuity-protests-and-political-violence-pm-abiy-s-ethiopia> accessed July 25, 2021

⁸ 'At least 23 die in weekend of Ethiopia ethnic violence.' Reuters new by Aaron Maasho. 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-violence-idUSKCN1LX0VK> (accessed July 26, 2021)

⁹ 'Why are Ethiopia's churches under attack?'. Newafrica News, James Jeffrey, 2019. <https://newafricanmagazine.com/20840/> (accessed July 28, 2021)

¹⁰ 'News: Attacks on multiple mosques, Muslim-owned business center in Amhara region draws criticism'. Addis Standard news by Bileh Jelani. 2019. <https://addisstandard.com/news-attacks-on-multiple-mosques-muslim-owned-business-center-in-amhara-region-draws-criticism/> accessed July 28, 2021

¹¹ 'Ethiopia: Armed attack in West Wollega Zone kills dozens on November 1.' Gardaworld. 2020. <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/395681/ethiopia-armed-attack-in-west-wollega-zone-kills-dozens-november-1> (accessed July 28, 2021)

¹² 'How a musician's death unleashed violence and death in Ethiopia.' The Guardian report by Tom Gardner. 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/aug/03/how-a-musicians-death-unleashed-violence-and-death-in-ethiopia> (accessed July 28, 2021)

¹³ 'All Is Not Quiet on Ethiopia's Western Front: How Addis Ababa deals with ethnic violence in the region of Benishangul-Gumuz will determine the country's future.' FP report by Tom Gardner. 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/06/ethiopia-benishangul-gumuz-violence-gerd-western-front/> (accessed July 28, 2021)

¹⁴ 'What is driving Ethiopia's ethnic conflicts?'. By Semir Yesuf, Institute for Security Studies. 2019. Page 7. https://media.africportal.org/documents/What_is_driving_Ethiopias_ethnic_conflicts.pdf (accessed July 28, 2021)

¹⁵ 'Vision, the connotations of the victory of the first chapter, November 13, 2020'. 'እይታ፡የመጀመሪያው ምዕራፍ በድል መጠናቀቅ እንደምታ፡ ሀዳር 04/2013 ዓ/ም'. In this televised Demtsi Weyan's, one of the medias owned by TPLF, interview a top political leader and a spokesperson Seko Ture is heard explaining how the TPLF forces started the armed conflict by attacking the nation's northern military base in Tigray. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1yThWjhYYo> (accessed August 12, 2021)

as OLA).¹⁶ The TPLF rejected the unilateral ceasefire declared by the Ethiopian government in the summer of 2021.¹⁷ Fighting moved primarily to border areas between Tigray and Amhara and Tigray and Afar, fought mostly between TPLF forces and regional special forces, as the president of Amhara asked 'all young people in Amhara 'to take up arms' against TPLF's forces.¹⁸ PM Abiy issued a similar call, and later, declared a national emergency in response to TPLF advances.¹⁹ Heavy fighting continues at the time of finalising this report in November 2021, one year after the start of the conflict, and without certainty of how it may end.

The political and security turmoil in Ethiopia was fuelled by, and at times shaped, the government's response to the pandemic from the moment, in March 2020, when the Ethiopia Federal Ministry of Health (MoH) announced the confirmation of the first Covid-19 case, and the federal government and regional states started implementing measures to prevent the spread of the virus.

Covid-19 and Ethiopia's pandemic response

Ethiopia's response to the pandemic can be divided in two stages: the 'early-stage response', from March to September 2020, when the country employed bold pandemic control measures including a Covid-19 state of emergency (hereafter pandemic SoE), and the 'later-stage response', since September 2020, which includes a relaxation of prior Covid-19 bans and restrictions and the lifting of the pandemic SoE.

The 'early-stage response' started within a few days of WHO's declaration of Covid-19 as a public health emergency of international concern. At this time, the MoH activated its Covid-19 specific Public Health Emergency Operation Center. In mid-March, a few days after the first case of Covid-19 was reported in Ethiopia, the PM announced closure of all schools, and the banning of public gatherings.²⁰ In following weeks, additional measures were taken, including a closure of the borders and mandatory quarantine for arriving international passengers.

Around the end of March, the MoH established a National Covid-19 advisory committee. The committee, which consists of experts from the Ethiopian Public Health Institute (EPHI), the

¹⁶ 'Ethiopia to designate TPLF, OLF-Shene as 'terror' groups. Aljazeera. 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/1/ethiopia-to-designate-tplf-olf-shene-as-terror-groups> (accessed August 12, 2021)

¹⁷ 'Tigray fighters in Ethiopia reject cease-fire as 'sick joke''. AP news by Cara Anna. 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/eritrea-ethiopia-africa-9889b4c3692aaeb16b9165763d19303a> (accessed July 28, 2021)

¹⁸ 'Ethiopia's Amhara state rallies youth to fight Tigrayan forces as war widens.' Reuters. 2021 <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethiopias-amhara-state-rallies-youth-fight-tigrayans-war-expands-2021-07-25/> (accessed July 28, 2021)

¹⁹ 'Ethiopia calls on civilians to join army to fight Tigray forces.' Aljazeera .2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/10/ethiopia-calls-on-civilians-to-join-army-to-fight-tigray-rebels> (accessed August 11, 2021)

²⁰ 'Covid-19: Ethiopia closes schools, bans public events.' Anadolu Agency. 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/covid-19-ethiopia-closes-schools-bans-public-events/1767683#> (accessed July 29, 2021)

College of Health Sciences at the Addis Ababa University, and representatives from international non-governmental organizations, has developed 'The National Comprehensive COVID-19 Management Handbook'. This is the most extensive Covid-19 policy document and it was put into practice starting in April 2021. In addition to detailing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) procedures, the Handbook contained protocols for the surveillance of suspected cases and the management of confirmed positive cases.²¹

The first few months following the initial reports of positive cases in Ethiopia were filled with uncertainty and panic among community members, some with religious interpretations of the pandemic that were widely shared in mainstream and social media.²² Conversely, there were many religious solutions crawling the media: prayer and devotion were taken as a remedy. This included a televised prayer session at the presidential palace, conducted by religious leaders representing the main religions in Ethiopia, attended by high-level government officials including the president of Ethiopia, the minister of peace and the minister of health.²³ In addition, the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia declared a month-long national prayer, and several churches organised open air street prayers that were broadcast in different media.²⁴

As we will see below in our case studies, politicians, including opposition leaders, temporarily halted their criticism of the government and showed their support to the different measures that the government took to curb the pandemic. There was also a significant decrease in circulation of extreme ethnic and religious views in social media.

The announcement by the National Election Board of Ethiopia, on 31 March 2020, on the postponement of national election, was, however, a turning point. The election had been highly anticipated, and the apparent truce between the government and opposition political leaders over the pandemic ended. Before long, political interpretations of the pandemic exceeded religious interpretations. The postponement of the election sparked a broader debate on its constitutionality, and discussions on the illegitimacy of a government in the absence of an election stated circulating on opposition media.²⁵ They were also common on social media.

²¹ Marit Tolo Østebø, Terje Østebø and Kjetil Tronvoll. 2021. 'Health and politics in pandemic times: COVID-19 responses in Ethiopia.' *Health Policy and Planning*, 00, 2021, 1–9, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/czab091>

²² Østebø, Terje, Kjetil Tronvoll & Marit Tolo Østebø. 2021. 'Religion and the 'Secular shadow': responses to covid-19 in Ethiopia.' *Religion*, DOI: 10.1080/0048721X.2021.1943769

²³ A YouTube video which shows the televised prayer that took place in the presidential palace. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrT57aQ-7lc> (accessed July 29, 2021)

²⁴ 'Inter-religious Council of Ethiopia Declares Month-long National Prayer to Curb Coronavirus'. United Religious Initiative. 2020. <https://www.uri.org/uri-story/20200420-inter-religious-council-ethiopia-declares-month-long-national-prayer-curb> (accessed July 29, 2021)

²⁵ 'Lidetu Ayalew and Jawar Mohammed's discussion on Ethiopia's politics.' OMN's Amharic YouTube video. 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3HNRi6P8EE> (accessed July 29, 2021). This interview is an example for a few of the televised discussions on the constitutionality of the postponement of the election due to Covid-19.

While a number of opposition parties rejected the postponement of the election, the TPLF went a step further by threatening to hold its own election in Tigray.²⁶ An ‘independent’ regional election was held in Tigray in September 2020, despite a veto from the federal government, during a time when the national pandemic SoE was still in place. The decision to organize elections in Tigray at a time when the federal government had provisionally halted national and regional elections was one of the main reasons the relationship between the TPLF and the federal government worsened. Earlier, the Tigray regional state had introduced its own pandemic SoE before instructions had been received from Addis Ababa, in a move that was meant to show its defiance to rules and regulations set by the federal government. Relations would go further downhill from that point.

A national state of emergency

On 10 April 2020 the federal government announced the declaration of a five-month, April to September 2020, nationwide pandemic SoE. The pandemic SoE was voted into law by the House of Peoples’ Representatives, and shortly after several regulations that further define the measures were issued. The regulations contained a detailed list of prohibitions and restrictions intended to curb the spread of Covid-19 in Ethiopia. In addition to banning public gatherings and in-person meetings of teachers and students, and prohibiting various social activities, the pandemic SoE further introduced ‘Duties Imposed’ on Covid-19 positive and suspected individuals, and on the population at large.

Giving a detailed overview of the pandemic SoE is beyond the scope of this report: we limit our focus on those sub-articles that our sources discussed as politically motivated, used to crack down on opposition, and working in favour of the ruling party, ultimately leading to more grievances and extreme views. Of particular note are elements of Article 3: ‘Prohibited Activities’ and Article 4: ‘Duties Imposed’, which read as follows:

‘It is prohibited to conduct meetings for religious, government, social or political purposes in places of worship, public institutions, hotels, meeting halls or any other place.’ (*State of Emergency Proclamation No. 3/2020 Implementation Regulation Article 3, Sub-article 1.*)

‘It is prohibited to serve alcohol or recreational services at night clubs and bars.’ (*State of Emergency Proclamation No. 3/2020 Implementation Regulation Article 3, Sub-article 10.*)

‘Everyone suspected of being COVID-19 positive and all international passengers shall quarantine at a place designated for this purpose by the government and tested.’ (*State of Emergency Proclamation No. 3/2020 Implementation Regulation Article 4, Sub-article 1.*)

²⁶ ‘Ethiopia: Indefinite postponement of polls raising political tempers.’ The Africa Report. 2020. <https://www.theafricareport.com/28418/ethiopia-indefinite-postponement-of-polls-raising-political-tempers/> (accessed July 29, 2021)

“Any person should inform the police, the Ministry of Health or the nearest health officials of any person he suspects of being infected with Covid-19.” (*State of Emergency Proclamation No. 3/2020 Implementation Regulation Article 4, Sub-article 5.*)

Together with the postponement of the election, these regulations can provide an important contextual understanding of the impact of the pandemic in Ethiopia’s politics and inter-communal violence, especially during the ‘early-stage response’. The regulations in the pandemic SoE recalled the previous reliance on authoritarian forms of governance in Ethiopia, despite the change in administration in 2018. They also helped explain an escalation of a negative public perception towards the government due to ‘increased surveillance and politicisation of the pandemic’, especially during the ‘early-stage response’.²⁷

The pandemic SoE and the prohibitions declared in it were lifted in September 2020. New, much-relaxed provisions have substituted the regulations in the pandemic SoE. As we will see in case studies below, while the political ramifications of the enforcement of the pandemic SoE have continued after it has been lifted (during the ‘later-stage response’), the economic consequences of the pandemic SoE, that can be a potential source of grievance against the government, seemed to ease after ending the restrictions set in it in September 2020.

During the ‘later-stage response’, a loosened version of the ban on meetings (Article 3, Sub-article 1) was declared, allowing meetings of up to fifty people. This new regulation was reported as the main prohibition that, our sources repeatedly noted, was enforced only against opposition forces. This became very serious as the election approached and political meetings, including political parties’ meetings with their constituencies, became a necessity.

To understand how the pandemic and associated measures have impacted Ethiopia’s political situation and inter-communal tensions, we now turn to three case studies: inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts in Metekel zone of Benishangul Gumuz region; conflicts in west and central Gondar zones of Amhara region; and pandemic restrictions and political tensions in East Hararghe zone of Oromia region.

3. Metekel: banditry, lawlessness, and ethnic violence

Benishangul-Gumuz region, one of the ten regional states of Ethiopia, is located in the lowlands of north-western Ethiopia, stretching along the Sudan frontier in the west, the Amhara regional state in the north and northeast, and the Oromia regional state in the south

²⁷ Marit Tolo Østebø, Terje Østebø and Kjetil Tronvoll. 2021. ‘Health and politics in pandemic times: COVID-19 responses in Ethiopia.’ *Health Policy and Planning*, 00, 2021, 1–9, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/czab091>

and southeast.²⁸ The region emerged as a new state through incorporating two areas roughly equally divided by the river Abay (the Blue Nile). Prior to 1995, the vast area of the lowland to the north of Abay, Metekel, was part of Gojjam province, and the lowland to the south of the river was under the administration of Wellega province.²⁹ Following the institutionalisation of ethnic federalism and the establishment of the Beneshangul-Gumuz region, the region arose with three zones – Metekel, Kamashi and Assosa – and twenty districts.

Several ethnic groups inhabit the Benishangul-Gumuz region. According to the 2007 national population and housing census, the ethnic groups Berta, Amhara and Gumuz roughly constitute two-third of the total population of the region.³⁰ The 2002 amended regional constitution of Benishangul-Gumuz designated five ethnic groups – Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao and Kome – as the ‘owners’ of the region. People who live in the region but belong to other ethnic groups – Amhara, Oromo, Agew and Tigrayan – are recorded as ‘other residents’ who are neither the ‘owners’ nor citizens of the region.³¹ These ‘other residents’ are the so-called ‘non-indigenous’ ethnic groups of the region. While each ‘owner’ ethnic group has proportional number of seats assigned for them in the regional parliament, no seat has been assigned for any of the ‘non-indigenous’ ethnic groups, except a few seats put aside for ‘other residents.’³²

In the last two decades, the Metekel zone of Benishangul-Gumuz region has become one of the development frontiers of the country. A significant number of ‘investors’ have shown interest in large-scale agricultural projects.³³ Metekel is also the location where the country’s largest hydropower dam, Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), is located. This has made the zone a centre of interest for both national and international groups. More than a decade of large-scale acquisition of land by national and international ‘investors’ and subsequent migration of large number of laborers to work in these farms from other regions have created a sense of relegation among the ‘indigenous’ community members, leading to more grievance towards the ‘non-indigenous’ communities of the region.

²⁸ Ethiopia’s 1995 constitution has designated Benishangul-Gumuz as one of the nine regional states of the nation. The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Proclamation No. 1/1995, 21 August, 1995, Addis Ababa. Sidama has since become the tenth regional state of Ethiopia.

²⁹ Institute for Peace and Security Studies in collaboration with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, (2013). *Anthology of peace and security studies*, Vol IV; pp: 45-46.

³⁰ Berta (25.4%), Amhara (21.7%), and Gumuz (20.8%). The remaining include Oromo (13.5%), Shenasha (7.7%), Agew (4.2%), Mao (2%), Komo (1%), Tigray (0.7%) and other identities (2.9%). Central Statistical Agency (CSA) [Ethiopia]. 2007. ‘Population and Housing Census, 2007.’ https://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/National_Statistical.pdf . PP: 81

³¹ The Amended Regional Constitution of Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State. November 2002. Assosa. On page 4 and under section two, the constitution designates only five ethnic groups as the ‘owners’ of the region and specifies ‘other residents’ as not the owners of the region.

³² Teklemariam, Dereje, (2016), *The Features of Large-Scale Transnational Land Deals and their Effects on Environment and Livelihood: Evidence from Western Ethiopia*, (Doctoral dissertation), Gent University; PP: 18.

³³ ‘Explaining Metekel Syndrome: Revisiting the Prolonged Ethnic Violence.’ *Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD)*. 2020. <https://www.cardeth.org/explaining-metekel-syndrome-revisiting-the-prolonged-ethnic-violence-2/>

In fact, a sense of marginalisation is not new for Benishangul-Gumuz's 'indigenous' community members. Prior to the region's formal incorporation into the Ethiopia's empire in the late 19th century, the site was considered a frontier area by its more powerful neighbours, including the Sudanese to the west, the highlanders of Ethiopia to the north and northeast, and the Oromos to the south.³⁴ At that time, the 'indigenous' communities of the region, including the Gumuz and Berta, 'were prey to slave-raiding from all three neighbours for centuries and treated as racially inferiors.'³⁵ Gumuz and Berta have been degraded by outsiders through the use of slurs, like *Shanqila* (meaning 'very dark-skinned') and were considered only capable of being slaves.³⁶ The imperial expedition by the highlanders during the late 19th century, along with centuries of slave-raiding, make Benishangul-Gumuz's 'indigenous' communities hostile towards 'non-indigenous' community members and to 'outsiders' in general.

Pre-pandemic conflict

Violence in Benishangul-Gumuz occurs mostly between the indigenous 'owners' of the region and the 'non-indigenous' communities and the *Qey* (*Qey* is an Amharic word which means 'light-skinned'). While all the 'non-indigenous' ethnic groups—Amhara, Oromo, Agew and Tigray—who live in Metekel can be grouped as *Qey*, the 'indigenous' ethnic minorities, the Shinashas, are also considered among the *Qey* people of the region. By and large, the 'Amhara and Agew civilians are those who have borne the brunt' of the attacks.³⁷ Tens of thousands have been displaced from their homes and temporarily live in refugee camps in Chagni town – a town in Awi zone of Amhara regional state bordering Benishangul-Gumuz region, and where we did our fieldwork.

Prior to 2018, violence in Metekel consisted of fragmented incidents, committed by local individuals mostly targeting the 'non-indigenous' and *Qey* people. One source, a farmer who has been displaced from his farming community nearby Gilgel Beles town, the capital of Metekel zone, and now lives in internally displaced people's (IDP) camp in Chagni, said the following:

The existing trend in Metekel for many years was that the Gumuz would wait patiently until the harvest season, and when crops are harvested, they would come to an individual farmer's harvests, take the yields which are not their own, and destroy the

³⁴ 'All Is Not Quiet on Ethiopia's Western Front: How Addis Ababa deals with ethnic violence in the region of Benishangul-Gumuz will determine the country's future.' FP story by Tom Gardner. 2021.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/06/ethiopia-benishangul-gumuz-violence-gerd-western-front/> (accessed July 10, 2021)

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ 'Explaining Metekel Syndrome: Revisiting the Prolonged Ethnic Violence.' [Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy \(CARD\)](https://www.cardeth.org/explaining-metekel-syndrome-revisiting-the-prolonged-ethnic-violence-2/). 2020. <https://www.cardeth.org/explaining-metekel-syndrome-revisiting-the-prolonged-ethnic-violence-2/>

³⁷ 'All Is Not Quiet on Ethiopia's Western Front: How Addis Ababa deals with ethnic violence in the region of Benishangul-Gumuz will determine the country's future.' FP story by Tom Gardner. 2021.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/06/ethiopia-benishangul-gumuz-violence-gerd-western-front/> (accessed July 10, 2021)

remaining deliberately. Sometimes they would attack the owner, who is always not a Gumuz.

Since late 2018, the attacks appeared to be a more organised assault committed by a group of armed Gumuz militants.³⁸ A story on the Amharic online magazine *Addis Zayebe* in July 2021 described the conflict in Metekel zone of Benishangul-Gumuz region, giving an account of the heinous atrocities committed in the zone in the last three years. According to the magazine, the ruthless attacks the region has seen range from:

‘mass [murder and] burials to individual killings; from cutting off the head of a human being to brutally butchering the stomach; from burning people’s houses to the ground to displacing families.’³⁹

In response, the regional administration requested the federal government to intervene. This led to the federal government sending the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) to the region, the announcement of a state of emergency (SoE) in the Metekel zone intended to ease the conflict, and the establishment of a ‘command post’ for a chain of command among security forces in the area. Despite the presence of ENDF and the SoE, however, the attacks against civilians continued. There was fighting between Gumuz militants, sometimes with ‘elements of the local regional security apparatus siding with them against the federal army [ENDF]’⁴⁰. This was supported by a statement made by a regional (Amhara) community activist in an interview:

There is no question that the Benishangul-Gumuz special police force is directly involved in killings, robberies, and supporting the violent groups. Not only the special force but also ordinary regional police members have been involved in [illegal] trafficking guns, and looting and killings. Three months ago, at Gilgel Beles [the capital of Metekel zone] eight bandits were captured while looting properties, among them one is a member of [Benishangul-Gumuz’s regional] special force who was red-handed while wearing his military uniform. We have circulated photographs in social media that showed the special force supporting the looting and destroying of harvests of Amhara and Agew.

³⁸ ‘All Is Not Quiet on Ethiopia’s Western Front: How Addis Ababa deals with ethnic violence in the region of Benishangul-Gumuz will determine the country’s future.’ FP story by Tom Gardner. 2021.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/06/ethiopia-benishangul-gumuz-violence-gerd-western-front/> (accessed July 10, 2021)

³⁹ ‘መቼትም የላገኘው የመቶከል አልቂት’ [The endless atrocities in Metekel.] Afework Solomon, report on Addis Zeyeb. 2021. <https://am.addiszebe.com/featured/benishangul-gumuz/politics-am/societal-issues/economy/peace-and-security/a-never-ending-massacre-of-metekel> (accessed July 27, 2021)

⁴⁰ ‘Ibid.

Violence following the Covid-19 outbreak

At first, the complex peace and security challenges in the zone appeared to be more of ethnically charged inter-communal violence: armed attacks against ethnic groups that were not designated, by the regional constitution, as ‘owners’ of the region. However, the conflict was deeply entangled with the regional and national politics.

After the onset of the pandemic the violence intensified and there were several high-profile assaults by gunmen committed in Metekel. Most notable were the attacks that took place in September and December of 2020. The September 2020 attack targeted civilian Agew and Amhara community members living in Epara, Moji and Koshebonji kebeles (kebele is the lowest governmental administration unit in Ethiopia) in Bulen district of Metekel zone.⁴¹ Bulen district is known to be home to Amhara, Shinasha, Gumuz and Agew ethnic community members. Although there is no clear data (either from the regional administration or the federal government) on the number of casualties and their ethnic background, information circulating on social media and other online sources puts the casualties between 89 to 150. This did not include people who were wounded and went missing.⁴² In his September 15, 2020 tweet, Christian Tadele Tsegaye, a leader of the National Movement of Amhara (NAMA) party, claimed that after the killings, the assailants stopped the bodies from being buried.⁴³ The same was said by one of our sources who is now living in the Chagni IDP camp.

Our sources spoke of other brutal attacks and killings in their area too. These were done with firearms, mostly used by whom they refer to as ‘Gumuz militants and gunmen’, and traditional weapons like knives and bow and arrow, used by ‘Gumuz men’. The attacks are indiscriminate in terms of age and gender: from the killing of pregnant women and infants, to massacres of elder men and women. Our sources believed that the cruelty and the brutal murder is meant to force them to leave their residences and discourage them from coming back.

It was due to these attacks that PM Abiy, together with the military chief of staff and other senior federal officials, visited the region in late December 2020. They met with regional security and administration officials and ‘community representatives.’ The visit came after online criticism and calls for strong military intervention in the region. The late commissioner of the Amhara regional state police, Abere Adamu, asked permission to send regional forces

⁴¹ ‘Explaining Metekel Syndrome: Revisiting the Prolonged Ethnic Violence.’ [Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy \(CARD\)](https://www.cardeth.org/explaining-metekel-syndrome-revisiting-the-prolonged-ethnic-violence-2/). 2020. <https://www.cardeth.org/explaining-metekel-syndrome-revisiting-the-prolonged-ethnic-violence-2/> (accessed August 2, 2021); ANALYSIS: WEEKS LONG ATTACKS ON CIVILIANS LEAVE SEVERAL DEAD, INJURED IN METEKEL ZONE, BENISHANGUL GUMUZ REGION.’ ADDIS STANDARD. 2020. <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-weeks-long-attacks-on-civilians-leave-several-dead-injured-in-metekel-zone-benishangul-gumuz-region/> (accessed July 10, 2021)

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ A tweet by Christian Tadele (a leader of the Amhara nationalist part), National Amhara Movement (NAMA). https://twitter.com/MARHEIR_GEBRYE/status/1305772998117462016?s=20 (accessed July 11, 2021)

in early December.⁴⁴ This followed an October call of the federal deputy prime minister of Ethiopia, Demeke Mekonnen, for 'Amharas in Benishangul-Gumuz to arm themselves'.⁴⁵

The day after the PM's visit, gunmen in Bekuji kebele, located in Bulen district, attacked residents and set their homes on fire, allegedly killing at least 200 people. The victims were ethnic Amhara, Oromo and Shinasha.⁴⁶ A Facebook post by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) indicated that the attack followed the departure of ENDF, which had been sent away to accompany federal and regional officials.⁴⁷ There were suggestions that someone 'on the inside' may have tipped off the attackers about the departure of the ENDF. The incident reflects what Chagni town's police officer told us during an interview:

Zonal administrators [of Benishangul-Gumuz] were involved in the violence. The regional officials were part of the conflict. After the incident, all district officials have been replaced by new officials. Several officials at different level are now detained. The majority of the regional, zonal and district officials have been detained after the incident.

On Dec. 23, 2020 a report from Benishangul Gumuz regional government stated that they have arrested several senior Gumuz officials for alleged complicity in the conflict, including the region's deputy police chief.⁴⁸

Attributing causes

The regional constitution of Benishangul-Gumuz, amended in 2002, was one of the reasons our sources attributed as the cause for violence against the 'non-indigenous' and the Qey people in the region. A police officer whom we interviewed in Chagni town said students' statistics at schools, for example, mention the ethnicity of the so-called the indigenous people - the five ethnic groups who were mentioned in the constitution – but the ethnicity of students who are Amhara, Agew, and Oromo is not mentioned. Instead, they are simply

⁴⁴ 'AMHARA REGION POLICE SAYS IT'S REQUESTING FEDERAL GOV'T TO INTERVENE OR BE GIVEN THE TASK TO SOLVE SECURITY CRISIS IN NEIGHBORING BENISHANGUL REGION. ADDISSTANDARD NEWS.' 2020. <https://addisstandard.com/news-amhara-region-police-says-its-requesting-federal-govt-to-intervene-or-be-given-the-task-to-solve-security-crisis-in-neighboring-benishangul-region/> (accessed July 10, 2021)

⁴⁵ 'All Is Not Quiet on Ethiopia's Western Front: How Addis Ababa deals with ethnic violence in the region of Benishangul-Gumuz will determine the country's future.' FP story by Tom Gardner. 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/06/ethiopia-benishangul-gumuz-violence-gerd-western-front/> (accessed July 10, 2021)

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ December 14, 2020 Facebook post of [Ethiopian Human Rights Commission](#) (EHRC) reads 'BENISHANGUL-GUMUZ: PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS IS THE PRIMARY DUTY OF THE GOVERNMENT'. [Ethiopian Human Rights Commission](https://www.facebook.com/202584253551816/posts/benishangul-gumuz-protection-of-civilians-is-the-primary-duty-of-the-government/1034585193685047/). 2020. [HTTPS://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/202584253551816/POSTS/BENISHANGUL-GUMUZ-PROTECTION-OF-CIVILIANS-IS-THE-PRIMARY-DUTY-OF-THE-GOVERNMENT/1034585193685047/](https://www.facebook.com/202584253551816/posts/benishangul-gumuz-protection-of-civilians-is-the-primary-duty-of-the-government/1034585193685047/) (accessed July 10, 2021)

⁴⁸ 'Ethiopia arrests five officials in Benishangul-Gumuz'. TRTWORLD 2020. <https://www.trtworld.com/africa/ethiopia-arrests-five-officials-in-benishangul-gumuz-42664>; 'Ethiopia arrests officials over ethnic massacres. Anadolu 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/ethiopia-arrests-officials-over-ethnic-massacres/2086868> (accessed September 9, 2021)

referred to as others. Our sources believed that the ‘indigenous’ versus ‘non-indigenous’ dichotomy alienates the ‘non-indigenous’ and makes them vulnerable to attacks.

While the Amharas, Agewes, Oromos and Tigrayans are now among the commonly known ‘non-indigenous’ community members in the zone, the population dynamics of these identities has been shifting from time to time. Amharas, Agewes and Oromos were living in the zone in significant number prior to 1980s; a considerable number of people from Amhara were resettled in the 1980’s resettlement program of the Derg, in response to the 1984-85 drought.⁴⁹ However, in the last two decades, during the TPLF-dominated EPRDF government, Tigrayans became particularly prominent in Metekel, mostly as owners of large-scale agricultural investments. In addition, ‘TPLF-owned or affiliated businesses enjoyed a substantial share of subsidiary contracts in, for instance, the construction sector (as they commonly did elsewhere in Ethiopia)’, and were the one who enjoyed loans and subsidies to ‘invest’ in Metekel.⁵⁰ Our sources believed that these ‘investors’ were not happy by the political change and new administration in Ethiopia since 2018, and that they were instigating and funding most of the conflicts in the zone since then. A female victim of the ethnic violence in Metekel, displaced from her home and temporarily living in the Chagni IDP camp, asserted:

In our zone there is a well-known Gumuz-only meeting platform known as *konch*.⁵¹ In recent days we have witnessed that the Tigrayans are the one who were facilitating these meetings, and Gumuz officials and community members are having these meetings with Tigrayans ‘investors.’ Some of the Gumuz participants who are close with us told us that during the meetings the local officials instructed them how to evict the Amhara and Agew from the zone. In 2011 [Ethiopian calendar, 2019 in Western calendar], for instance, one day immediately after the meeting, a member of the Gumuz community who attended the meeting came to our village and shouted with anger ‘you, the deaf Amhara, why don’t you go out from here. This is the land of the Gumuz and Tigre.’

The Ethiopian federal police, in a documentary, has alleged the same about the involvement of Tigrayan ‘investors’ in Metekel conflict.⁵² The report claimed that individuals, including a Tigrayan businessman, had been paid by Abay Tsehay – one of the founders of TPLF – to organize Gumuz militias and attack Amhara civilians in the region. In September 2021, the regional administration of Benishangul-Gumuz acknowledged the alleged connection of TPLF

⁴⁹ ‘All Is Not Quiet on Ethiopia’s Western Front: How Addis Ababa deals with ethnic violence in the region of Benishangul-Gumuz will determine the country’s future.’ FP story by Tom Gardner. 2021.

⁵⁰ Ibid. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/06/ethiopia-benishangul-gumuz-violence-gerd-western-front/> (accessed July 10, 2021)

⁵¹ A type of meeting platform held by the Gumuz community members and officials, which is mainly focused on political affairs.

⁵² A video which shows the televised documentary made by the federal police of Ethiopia. 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=71shqVHvXSI> (accessed July 12, 2021)

in Metekel ethnic violence by calling the local militants who attack civilians ‘agents of TPLF’ and vowing to take final and decisive measurements against these ‘TPLF agents operating in Metekel and Kamashi zones.’⁵³ The allegations seemed to intensify, both in government and social media, when TPLF’s spokesperson, Getachew Reda, had an interview with TeN Tv Channel, an Egyptian Public Channel, and openly admitted TPLF’s interest to work with regional rebel forces including those who are in armed conflict in Benishangul-Gumuz region.⁵⁴

The extreme messages that were circulating during *konch* meetings included ‘now that there is a new administration, the Amhara and the Oromo’s are coming back to take your land [that TPLF helped you to reclaim]’ and ‘the Amharas will sell you as slave[s] like what they did in earlier time.’⁵⁵ An Amhara community activist agreed with what the other sources said about the Tigrayan ‘investors’; however, he said that Amharas, Oromos and Tigrayans have shown equal interest on Metekel:

There are three interest groups who have political interest in Metekel: the Oromo interest group wants to occupy Metekel in one side, the Amhara interest group wants to grip Metekel on the other side, and this gave a good opportunity for the TPLF to exacerbate the problem by accusing these two groups.

In the eyes of our sources it was not only the Amhara, Oromo and Tigrayans who were identified as the interest groups who have interest in Metekel. Although of lesser importance, Egypt and Sudan were also noted as groups who have interest in the zone and allegedly behind attacks in Metekel.

The impact of Covid-19

Interviewees asserted that Covid-19 has either directly or indirectly impacted the incidents that took place in their area. A source who, at the time of the interview, lived in Chagni IDP camp, stated:

Covid-19 has complicated the problem in our district. After the onset of the pandemic, the violence became more frequent, including group attacks by gunmen. After the pandemic the atrocities seem to take place with limited counteroffensive [by

⁵³ ‘Benishangul gumuz regional state vows to take ‘final measures’ against ‘TPLF agents’’. Addis standard. <https://addisstandard.com/news-benishangul-gumuz-regional-state-vows-to-take-final-measures-against-tplf-agents/> (accessed September 9, 2021)

⁵⁴ This video is an interview that TPLF’s spokesperson, Getachew Reda, gave to TeN Tv Channel, Egyptian Public Channel. While the interview was done in Arabic, Getachew Reda was responding in English and can be heard while responding to the journalist’s questions. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpTJb6laaJU> (accessed September 18, 2021)

⁵⁵ Our interview with a man who was displaced from Metekel and has been living in Chagni refugee camp.

government forces]. 31 people at Dibatie road and then 16 people at Bulen district were killed after Covid-19.

Indicating the indirect role of Covid-19 and its impact on the violence that took place in her kebele, the woman who is a victim of the ethnic violence in Metekel asserted:

People in our community believe that Coronavirus is something that came here to eliminate us [Amharas] from this area. Since schools were closed due to the Coronavirus, our children were forced to come back home from their school, which is far from here and in bigger cities in the zone with no conflict. This made them exposed to the attacks. The virus is here as a tactic to eliminate our children. My youngest sister was killed during the last raid of our village because her school was closed due to coronavirus and she was back to our village to stay with her parents.

We probed our sources to tell us the impact of the pandemic SoE and the postponement of the election due to Covid-19, on national and regional political developments in Ethiopia, and on the incidents that they described earlier. While reciting the impact of the pandemic on Ethiopia's political situation, a health professional and active follower of political developments in Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz, stated:

After the onset of Covid-19, the political situation has changed a lot. Firstly, before the pandemic the political ecology was relaxed, allowing different political parties and individuals to get involved in politics. But, since the onset of the pandemic there were tendencies [by the government] to use Covid-19 as a weapon. For example, the restrictions on assemblies was effectively used in favour of the government. While government-affiliated political leaders were having continuous meetings and election campaigns, oppositions were restricted and cracked in the name of enforcing Covid-19 restrictions.

Describing the economic impact of the pandemic resulting from movement restrictions due to the five-month long pandemic SoE and how this has increased grievances against the government, he added:

Since Covid-19 is a pandemic that affected the global economy, and since our country's economy is based on global aid, it has a direct impact. In addition, since corruption is widespread and since the idea of good governance is not well implemented in our country, the high living cost and inflations that have increased during the restrictions created grievances, especially among those who are in the lowest ladder of the economy. So, as I see it, though there are many additional factors, after Covid-19 the country's political context has changed a lot.

Another source, an Amhara community activist, interviewed in the spring of 2021, talked about the postponement of the election due to Covid-19 and how this 'muddles Ethiopia's politics.' He argued:

People perceived that the postponement of the election was going to work in favour of the government. In addition, it is because of the postponement of the election that the problem in Metekel has continued for this long. One thing, the attention of the government right now is on the election and less emphasis for such problems. The other thing, if the election had taken place as scheduled, the government would have established a stable government earlier and we would not see those atrocities that we saw since September 2020. Much of the displacements in Metekel took place this year [after September 2020].

As we will see in the following case studies, such kind of accounts about the pandemic SoE and the postponement of the election, due to the pandemic, are commonplace assertions made by our sources in central and west Gondar zones about Chilga district, as well as the East Hararghe zone.

4. Chilga: a flashpoint for Qemant-Amhara conflict

Chilga district, a rural area of small-scale farmers located in northwestern Ethiopia in the central Gondar administrative zone of Amhara regional state, is home to 221,362 people, most of whom are Orthodox Christian.⁵⁶ The Qemant are an important ethnic minority in Chilga district, concentrated primarily around the town of Aykel, with a distinct centuries-old religion and language, Qemantegna, a dialect of Agaw. The majority of today's Qemant, however, are followers of Orthodox Christianity and speak Amharic.⁵⁷

The loss of cultural distinctiveness of the Qemant has been cause for concern.⁵⁸ Since 1991, the ideology of ethnic federalism that was espoused by the EPRDF facilitated attempts to maintain the Qemant identity. It also led to the creation of the 'Qemant committee'. From 2015, however, as the TPLF started losing its power within the EPRDF, the conflict between the Qemant and the Amhara in northern Ethiopia, in places like Chilga, has surfaced in a new

⁵⁶ 50.6% were men and only 9.4% were urban residents. 'Summery and Statistical Report of 2007 Population Census.' 2008. Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Population Census Commission. 2008. https://web.archive.org/web/20120214221803/http://www.csa.gov.et/pdf/Cen2007_firstdraft.pdf (accessed June 12, 2021); Central Statistical Agency (CSA) [Ethiopia]. 2007. 'Population and Housing Census, 2007.' https://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/National_Statistical.pdf

⁵⁷ Gamst, F. (1969) cited in 'Sociolinguistic Survey Report of the Kemant (Qimant) Language of Ethiopia'. Leyew, Zelealem .2002. https://www.sil.org/system/files/rapdata/23/15/14/23151488636463151889205993623708894276/SILESR2002_031.pdf (accessed July 4, 2021); 'Inter-ethnic Relations among Amhara and Kemant Ethnic Groups in North-Western Ethiopia.' Birhanu, B. 2019. Int. J. Polit. Sci. Develop. 7(7) 225-236.

⁵⁸ Historically the Qemant, along a few other Agew groups, did not resist the northern Ethiopia's royal incursions in the fourteenth century. Instead, the Qemant tried to maintain their identity through a process of accommodation and withdrawal. One scholar observed: 'beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth, however, their society has experienced strong pressures from the dominant society...leading to the loss of their cultural distinctiveness and their incorporation into the overall class system of the region'. See 'Caste and Class in Historical North- West Ethiopia: The Beta Israel (Falasha) and Kemant, 1300-1900.' Quirin, J. 1998. *The Journal of African History*, 39(2), 195- 220.

form. It coincided with a growth in Amhara ethno-nationalism, especially after the establishment the National Movement of Amhara (NAMA), which the TPLF sought to limit.⁵⁹

Initially, the Amhara regional state had allowed the Qemant to establish their own administration with 69 kebeles around Chilga district. Then the Qemant's committee asked for three more kebeles to form a special district. Amhara nationalists saw the Qemant's committee's demand for more kebeles 'as a plot to divide and weaken Amhara' and 'as a form of proxy war waged by the TPLF'.⁶⁰ The Qemant committee, one author notes 'repeatedly confirmed, at times through protests, that they were not willing to accept anything less.'

One of our sources, a police officer who is also a student at the University of Gondar (UoG), saw the inter-ethnic conflict between Qemant and Amhara as an urgent problem. The officer explained:

There is a serious ethnic violence in western and central Gondar zones. Especially Chilga and Mettema are the two districts where the problem has intensified recently. I think, since 2008 [Ethiopian calendar – 2015/16 on the Western calendar] there were at least eight intense incidents of inter-ethnic violence in our area, and hundreds of people died during these incidents.

The violence increased after the 2018 political change in Ethiopia with Abiy Ahmed becoming prime minister and TPLF losing its power in the federal government.⁶¹ A series of clashes occurred, including between armed Qemant groups and the regional security forces, which 'led to the killing and jailing of hundreds of people and destruction of property, including the burning of houses and the displacement of thousands of people.'⁶²

Some of our sources believed that the conflict between Qemant and Amhara has escalated further after the conflict in Tigray and its expansion to adjacent Amhara districts. A member of the kebele administration of Quskuam-Mariam, in the central Gondar zone, described the recent conflict between the two communities in his kebele, which broke out in May, 2021:

I am one of the victims of the very recent ethnic conflict in our kebele, which took place on May 27, 2021. Much of the conflict between the two communities [Qemant and Amhara] in our kebele took place in 2011 [2018/2019 western calendar], but now it has restarted. The immediate cause of this recent conflict was cattle rustling. However, the issue was immediately changed to an ethnic matter and became the

⁵⁹ 'What is driving Ethiopia's ethnic conflicts?'. By Semir Yesuf, Institute for Security Studies. 2019. Page 7. https://media.africaportal.org/documents/What_is_driving_Ethiopias_ethnic_conflicts.pdf (accessed July 28, 2021)

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

reason for the loss of lives, destruction of properties, robbery of livestock, and displacement of people.

Both Qemant and Amhara community members living in the conflict areas have borne the brunt of the violence. In addition to those who died during the incidents, several people have been displaced from their home and are staying in IDP refugees' camps in the zones. Discussing issues associated with displacement of people due to inter-ethnic violence, another police source states:

There are a lot of reasons that I can cite as the cause for conflicts that took place in our zones [west and central Gondar zones] since 2015 and intensely continuing after the onset of the pandemic. There are now more than four refugees' camps in west and central Gondar zones including Azezo, Woleqa, Sehede and Tekel-Dengay where people displaced due to violence are temporary staying.

Covid-19, robberies, and abuse of the state of emergency

We asked our sources how they relate the reported incidents with the pandemic and how the pandemic might affect these incidents. The first two months after the onset of the pandemic were a state of panic and uncertainty, which – contrary to what may be expected – appeared to ease ethnic tensions in west and central Gondor zones, including Chilga.

It did not last. Quickly, inter-communal tensions escalated. Inter-ethnic conflict in west and central Gondar persisted during the pandemic. Armed robberies, killings, and abduction of people including children and women, and asking for ransom became commonplace incidents in and around Chilga. This was echoed by one police officer interviewed:

After the onset of Covid-19 in Ethiopia, many serious political crises have occurred in the country. In Chilga district, the ethnic conflict between Qemant committee and Amhara, which started in 2008 E.C. (2015/16) appears to have temporarily eased, but a different form of violence has intensified in Chilga district and in other areas named Quskum. Robberies and killings continue increasing. However, the major problem that our people are facing right now is kidnapping community members and asking their families for ransom. Kidnapping for ransom is a serious problem, not only to the victims but to their families who would be asked for ransoms, sometimes more than what they would afford to pay.

Sources repeatedly observed that the robberies, killings, and abduction for ransom have a direct connection with illegal weapon trafficking, which has been increasing since 2018 and intensified throughout the pandemic. Western Gondar zone includes districts and kebeles along the frontiers of Sudan, and these areas are among the locations where illegal firearm trading and smuggling to Ethiopia takes place. Both police officers believe that the increased

crime in the area is associated with illegal weapon trafficking. Discussing this, the police officer who is a UoG student stated:

Since our area is bordering Sudan, illegal weapon trafficking, both small and large weapons, has been taking place for years and has intensified since the pandemic, sometime with officials and police officers involved in trafficking. Weapon trafficking is a very lucrative business and continues to reinforce problems in our area like the robberies, abductions and the ethnic violence.

The economic impact of Covid-19 was reported as a source of grievances against the government and a cause for the involvement of the youth in such criminal activities. The problem appeared to be severe during the 'early-stage response' but has continued, to some extent, since then and was reinforced by the economic burden due to the armed conflict in Tigray and high inflation. A resident of Gondar said:

Inflation, which intensified due to Covid-19, was another cause for the political crisis in the country. The country faced a serious shortage of dollars [foreign exchange] due to Covid-19, which exposed the population to an increased cost of living. Scarcity of dollars impacted the government's ability and exacerbated the problems. On top of that, now there is an ongoing armed conflict in Tigray which has negative implications on our national economy.

Although the inter-ethnic violence between the Qemant and Amhara has intensified following the 2015 internal struggle within EPRDF and the 2018 reform spearheaded by the government of prime minister Abiy, lately abductions for ransom and armed robberies that would take place in the absence of a strong local government security apparatus have increased. Most of our sources agreed that the pandemic stretched the government's ability to control violent incidents, especially during the 'early-stage response'. Explaining the impact of the pandemic on limiting government's effort to control conflict, a police source stated:

Due to the ban on holding public meeting, we couldn't discuss important political and security issues of our zones including target areas during the lockdown [the 'early-stage response']. Major problems which required important political decisions took place at that time.

While the capacity to respond to inter-communal conflict was reduced, the government was able to set restrictions under the Covid-19 SoE in west and central Gondar. Government forces invoked these restrictions to increase their influence and put pressure on opposition groups. This continued after the pandemic SoE was formally lifted and the Covid-19 restrictions were loosened. A member of an opposition party explained the misuse of the SoE:

The [pandemic] SoE was a political decision to help the government. Not a single member of prosperity party has been detained when they breach Covid-19 restrictions. I think the [pandemic] SoE is a miracle sent from God to Dr. Abiy Ahmed [the PM] to save his power. In the name of enforcing the Covid-19 restrictions, the Ethiopian government detained so many opposition party members, including myself. I didn't do anything wrong, but the Gondar city administration arrested me using pandemic restriction regulations as reason. The restrictions were used as an instrument to suppress opposition voices.

This was corroborated by one of our two police sources:

In my opinion, the government's declaration of a [pandemic] SoE is an excuse. According to my friends, since the declaration of the [pandemic] SoE on March 2020, the police have arrested at least twenty *Fanos* [Amhara youth's movement] and activists, including several opposition leaders. While the government prohibited opposition parties from holding political meeting in the name of containing Covid-19, government officials were holding the same meetings without problem.

The unfair enforcement of the pandemic SoE and Covid-19 restrictions was mentioned as a source of grievance against the government, especially among the youth. According to the same police officer:

Covid-19 related lockdowns and limitations of freedoms, which were enforced by local authorities and militias, could lead to further tensions and disenfranchisement of some members of the population. Local militias are using the [pandemic] SoE to attack young men.

Similar to what our Metekel sources noted, our west and central Gondar sources reported that abuses of the Covid-19 restrictions increased as the election approached. While discussing political developments after the onset of the pandemic, a source who works at the Central Gondar High Court claimed that:

Covid-19 has greatly benefited the Ethiopian government. Due to the Covid-19, the government has had the opportunity to extend the general election. If the government had held the election [as primely scheduled], it would have lost because the government was not strong at that time. Extending the general election for a year helped the government to get more power.

Another source who is a resident of Gondar city agreed with this claim, but also highlighted not everyone saw it this way:

Some people believed that the government postponed the election for controlling the power without competition...It is an attempt to hold on power without competition. However, there are also a lot of people who believe that the postponement of the election was the right decision at that time.

Allegations of external meddling

Extreme ethnic and religious views have increased on social media since the onset of the pandemic. Explaining the impact of the pandemic on extreme views, the source who works at Central Gondar High Court said:

The outbreak benefited the Oromo, Tigrayan and Qemant extremists and their politicians because they have been thinking and working how they can instigate ethnic conflicts during the lockdown [the pandemic SoE]. At the same time, during the onset of the pandemic, the Tigray regional government harshly criticized the federal government, which made foreign governments look at the federal government's efforts [of controlling the virus] with scepticism. The TPLF accused the federal government of withholding personal protection equipment [PPE] from the Tigrayan people.

A Tigrayan source, a Muslim activist who used to work in Gondar city but now has moved to Tigray, agreed with the allegation made against the government and said that 'the [alleged] withholding of the PPE by the federal government from Tigray regional government has created more tension between the federal and regional governments, which exacerbated circulation of extreme views'.

Several of our sources, most of whom are Amhara but also a few Qemant sources, alleged that the inter-ethnic violence between Qemant and Amhara was in fact a proxy war, orchestrated by the TPLF from Mekele, the capital of Tigray region. Some accused the Qemant committee of working with the TPLF and inciting violence in Chilga and other areas in Gondar. Others, including some of the sources who asserted that the TPLF worked with the Qemant committee, have also accused the new Amhara nationalist movement and the Amhara nationalist political party NAMA for further escalation of conflicts in Chilga.

In addition to stirring up conflict between the Qemant and Amhara, the TPLF is also seen as responsible, according to residents of Gondar city and other interviewees, for the recent 'lawlessness' in Chilga district. They believe that the robberies, killings, and abductions are associated with the Qemant committee, who are alleged to have been secretly working with TPLF. While explaining the cause of recent incidents in Chilga, our police source stated:

Some people say the bandits are the Qemant committee, who, working along with TPLF soldiers, abducted more than ten children and thirteen youngsters near Gondar

city and in Chilga district last month [April 2021] and demanded that their families each should pay a ransom of 500,000 to 600,000 [Ethiopian birr – approx. 10,000 euro]. Finally, last week, together with other officers I have been in an armed confrontation with the kidnappers. As a result, many of them were arrested and millions of [Ethiopian] birrs were seized.

Furthermore, like in Metekel, the Egyptian and Sudanese governments also stand accused for inciting conflict around Gondar. While explaining intrusions of foreign nations in Ethiopia's politics, a member of the prosperity party (PP) said 'the Egyptians and Sudanese governments are becoming a more serious problem in Ethiopian politics after the new administration led by Abiy came to power'. When people talk about these two nations as sources of conflict in Ethiopia, they tend to associate them with the river *Abay*, or Blue Nile, and the alleged interest of these countries to destabilize Ethiopia in order to halt the development of Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The same source reiterated:

...In addition to these problems, other national problems have also emerged, such as the negative impacts of Egypt and Sudanese government on Ethiopia. In addition to these countries, USA, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries are also working against the Ethiopian people. The statement of the Arab leagues that has backed the call for the United Nations Security Council to intervene in regional dispute over the giant dam which is built by Ethiopians on the Blue Nile is evidence. This reflects the interest of the Arab countries against Ethiopia's interest. Generally, the ethnic conflict and religious conflict in Ethiopia are the result of foreign countries involvement in Ethiopia's internal politics and the conspiracy of Egypt and TPLF.

However, a few of our sources have associated the conflicts that took place in Gondar and other areas in Amhara region with the federal government's interest to put pressure on the Amhara and decrease Amhara influence in national politics. Our sources' accusations of the federal government are mostly made against the Amhara people or the Ethiopian Orthodox church, or both. One of our sources, who has been displaced due to violence in west Gondar zone and lives in an IDP camp, reiterated this:

Much of the Amhara region is under state of emergency due to inter-communal violence and conflicts. Ataye, Chilga and Kemise are all under conflict SoE with military administration. This shows the extent of the conflict in the [Amhara] region and the fact that people are being killed and arrested in the name of conflict SoE. Surprisingly, all attacks on the people of Amhara are carried out by organized groups. The killers are well organized ethnic groups. I think some of them are getting the most modern firearms from Egypt and the TPLF. I [also] think some of the crimes against Amhara are supported by the government because the weapons the perpetrators use seem to be supplied by the government.

Illegal weapon trafficking was also mentioned by our sources as one of the causes for intensifying recent conflicts, including those that took place after the onset of the pandemic. Some of our sources believed that the recent violence, related to armed robberies and abduction for ransom, in west and central Gondar zones has strong link with the practice of illegal firearm trafficking.

5. East Hararghe: pandemic restrictions and the June 2021 election

East Hararghe zone is one of the twenty administrative zones of Oromia regional state. Harar is the economic and administrative centre of the zone; other important areas are Deder district, the largest in size, and the town Aweday, which is the hub for trade in Khat (also spelled chat), a shrub with leaves that stimulates when consumed, which is one of the most important cash crops in Ethiopia. Djibouti, through the border town of Aysha Dewele, and Somaliland, through Togo Wechale (or Togo Wajaale) are close to Eastern Hararge zone.

East Hararghe zone is the most populated zone of Oromia regional state: in the 2007 national census of Ethiopia, the population of the zone was reported to be 2.7 million.⁶³ Most of the inhabitants are Oromo (96.4%) followed by Amharas and Guraghes, an urban minority mostly involved in small business. Most of the Oromos are Muslim while the minority groups are predominantly Orthodox Christian. The geographical proximity, coupled with the profitable Khat business, attracts many migrants from other parts of Ethiopia with different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Aweday is a melting pot of cultures in East Hararghe zone. The increasing population and the changing population dynamics, however, make the zone sensitive to ethnic and religious tensions, which have increased, in frequency and scale, since the political change in 2018.

The most notable display of these tensions was the early July 2020 incident associated with the murder of the famous Oromo singer Hachalu Hundessa, which took place four months into the national Covid-19 state of emergency. While Shashemene, a business city in west Arsi zone, was the epicentre of the July 2020 incident, the two East Hararghe cities of Haramaya and Awaday were other areas where intense inter-communal violence was reported. It was the deadliest inter-communal violence since Abiy's administration had come to power in April 2018.⁶⁴ The attack, targeted against minorities living in different areas in Oromia, was the cause for the death of hundreds of people, the displacement of thousands and the

⁶³ Summary and Statistical Report of 2007 Population Census. 2008. Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Population Census Commission. 2008.
https://web.archive.org/web/20120214221803/http://www.csa.gov.et/pdf/Cen2007_firstdraft.pdf (accessed June 12, 2021)

⁶⁴ 'Ethiopia arrests suspects over Haacaaluu Hundeessaa killing'. Aljazeera news. 2020.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/7/10/ethiopia-arrests-suspects-over-haacaaluu-hundeessaa-killing> (accessed July 19, 2021)

destruction of properties.⁶⁵ A full investigation into these incidents is beyond the scope of this report, and has been conducted elsewhere.⁶⁶ Here we will focus on individual incidents that are related to Covid-19 restrictions and the June 2021 national and regional elections, which our sources asserted as causes of grievances, inter-ethnic tensions, and extremism.

Tranquillity and repression

The Covid-19 SoE and the postponement of the election were perceived positively only during the first two months of the pandemic SoE. Shortly afterwards, reports of abuse of the pandemic SoE by government forces, especially in claims made by Oromo opposition leaders like Jawar Mohammed and others, started surfacing on Oromo Media Network (OMN) – a media network founded by Jawar and other members of the Oromo diaspora – and on social media.

Allegations of these abuses included the arrest of members and leaders of opposition parties and closure of parties' offices by government forces, citing violations of Covid-19 restrictions as a reason. Opposition politicians claimed that such crackdowns were not seen when government officials held meetings that breached Covid-19 restrictions. The claims closely echoed those made by sources in Metekel and west and central Gondar.

While the use of the pandemic restrictions by the government against the opposition started shifting public perception about the purpose of the restrictions, the inter-communal violence in early July 2020 was a game changer. Several prominent Oromo politicians were arrested for their alleged involvement with the incident, which included opposition leaders like Jawar Mohammed and Bekele Garba. In mid-July, protests erupted that were intended to force the government to release those whose arrest was linked with the initial incident. Despite the limited interference of regional and federal forces during the first few days of the early July incident, government forces responded with massive crackdown.⁶⁷

Our sources indicated that, since then, the regional government has suppressed opposition voices. This has intensified as the election day, 21 June 2021, approached. A civil servant in the East Hararghe town of Haramaya stated:

Right now, the government security forces are engaged in a continuous human rights and democratic rights violation. For example, following the death of Hachalu many

⁶⁵ “መንግሥት ያለ አይመስልም ነበር” የአርቲስት ሃጼኤሉ ሁንዴሳ ግድያን ተከትሎ በተከሰተው የፀጥታ መደፍረስ ምክንያት የተፈጸሙ የሰብአዊ መብቶች ጥሰት ምርመራ ሪፖርት (“The government did not seem to exist.” Study report of the Human Rights Violations conducted in the aftermath of the assassination of the artist Hachalu Hundessa), Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. Addis Ababa: EHRC, 2020, 1. <https://addisstandard.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/%E2%80%9C%E1%88%98%E1%8A%95%E1%8C%8D%E1%88%A5%E1%89%B5-%E1%8B%AB%E1%88%88-%E1%8A%A0%E1%8B%AD%E1%88%98%E1%88%B5%E1%88%8D%E1%88%9D-%E1%8A%90%E1%89%A0%E1%88%AD%E2%80%9D-Full-Report-Amharic.pdf> (accessed August 9, 2021)

⁶⁶ Østebø, Terje et al. 2021. Religion, Ethnicity, and the Charges of Extremism in Ethiopia. European Institute of Peace. Brussels, Belgium.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

youths and political leaders were imprisoned and chased out from their town and the rural areas in our district.

At times, government forces used Covid-19 restrictions to justify their actions. The civil servant claimed this new crackdown is leading to a serious grievance against the government and forcing 'the youth to join the bush [those who are in an armed conflict with the government] and fight the government'. He added:

The security forces abuse the Covid-19 restrictions and jail any individual they want to attack for political reasons. In our woreda [district], many opposition leaders are arrested. In rural area people were caught and quarantined due to their political views but using covid-19 restrictions as a cover.

The government crackdown in Oromia since mid-July 2020 was also cited as a cause for extreme views against other ethnic groups, especially the Amhara. Some saw the arrest of Oromo politicians and the subsequent suppression of opposition forces as evidence of the intention of the government to 'suppress Oromo and work for Amhara'. A source from Haramaya said:

For example, when you see the government crackdown after the death of Hachalu, like the arrest of high political figures including Jawar, and when you see the removal of Lema Megersa [from Oromo politics], most people see these as an attack against the Oromo people. This increases the tension between the government and the Oromo people. It increases the hate against other ethnic groups like Amhara, and can even lead to expansion of a new thinking like Abiy himself is Amhara, or he is working for them [Amhara] and against the Oromo people.

People in East Hararghe zone believed, similar to people in Metekel and Chilga, that the postponement of the election and the pandemic SoE were tactics used by the government to buy time and strengthen itself. The absence of any ethno-federalist opposition party representing the Oromo running for the June 2021 election in Oromia seemed to confirm this assertion, even if various Oromo political parties had boycotted the election. The assertion that the government is using Covid-19 to weaken the opposition but to strengthen itself is a commonplace opinion in East Hararghe.

Sources in the zone further noted that the government forces in Oromia became more violent since mid-July 2020, and even more so after the armed conflict in Tigray broke out in November 2020. A few of our sources noted that the presence of the Oromo special police force in the zone has decreased since the Tigray conflict, and the special force has been substituted by local militias. One of our sources, living in Awaday city, observed: 'The local militias are more aggressive and are abusing Covid-19 restrictions to label and attack anyone that they want to attack'. He continued:

Covid-19 is a political instrument that the government uses. In addition, the government became more violent especially after the Tigray incident. They do not have enough military personnel now [special force], so only the local militias are deployed. So, they become harsh on people, they label anyone as '*Shene*' [also known as OLA] and attack. This is not good for them [the government] because it widens the gap between the government and the people. And it pushes people to support and follow extremists' views, people or parties.

In sum, East Hararghe saw no large-scale inter-communal violence since mid-July of 2020, which is an improvement to frequent and intense ethno-religious violence that was reported in the zone after the new administration came to power in 2018. But although the zone seems in a relative peaceful situation, our sources voiced that 'people are resenting in silence due to the recent aggressive government crackdown in the zone'.

6. Conclusion

We investigated the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Ethiopia's political situation and inter-communal tensions, conflicts, and extremism reported in three areas: Metekel zone in Benishangul-Gumuz region, central and west Gondar zones (mainly the Chilga district) in Amhara region, and the east Hararghe zone in Oromia region.

Our findings make it clear that the political developments in Ethiopia since early 2020 are directly or indirectly impacted by the pandemic. There was a brief period of relative calm that lasted about two months, but after that, the pandemic fuelled conflicts and localised inter-communal violence.

In the Metekel zone, an increase in banditry and very violent criminal activity was reported since the onset of the pandemic. There were many organized attacks on civilians, mainly Amhara and Agew, by Gumuz militants. These attacks occurred despite the presence of ENDF and a SoE declared to ease the conflict in the zone, although at times the militants had armed confrontations with government security forces. Citizens' trust in regional and zonal administration and regional security forces has been eroded due to severe failure of authorities to protect citizens against attacks.

Similarly, inter-ethnic conflict between the Qemant and the Amhara communities in west and central Gondar has worsened since the onset of the pandemic. There was a spike in armed robberies, killings, and abduction of people for ransom, as well as an illegal trafficking of weapon has increased since the pandemic. At times, the Qemant 'committee' clashed with regional police forces. Sources noted that the pandemic has limited government's capacity to respond to conflicts by creating further burden on the limited local government's budget for

counteroffensive, and due to movement and assembly restricts that hindered important security activities, mainly during the ‘early-stage response’ of the pandemic. Among many Amhara, there was a strong belief that TPLF or other external actors used the Qemant to stir up conflict in the region.

By comparison, East Hararghe was relatively calm, with the notable exception of violence in July 2020. Since then, however, repressive measures have intensified, as the Covid-19 restrictions have given more power to local militias to crack down on youth. Government pressure on opposition forces increased as the election approached. Many sources saw this as alienating the local and regional government from citizens and forcing the youth to embrace extreme views against the government and other ethnic groups, largely the Amhara.

Across the regions, the postponement of the election due to the pandemic, the pandemic SoE, and enforcements of the pandemic SoE have influenced people’s perception about the pandemic and the government’s pandemic control measures. There has been a crackdown on opposition parties by government forces, referring to pandemic restrictions as reasons. Reports of abuse of the pandemic restriction measures by government forces circulated on opposition mainstream media and the social media. The postponement of the election was interpreted by many as government’s tactic to buy more time and strengthen itself, while the pandemic SoE were interpreted as tactics used to weaken opposition forces, including by arresting opposition party members and closing opposition party offices. Such crackdowns were not seen when government officials and ruling party (PP) leaders and members breached pandemic restrictions. These reportedly increased as the election approached, generating resistance against the government, which has led to increased use of force, leading to more grievances and resentment – a vicious circle between distrust, resistance and government repression.

Recommendations

Considering the complexity of the political situation, armed conflicts and inter-communal violence in Ethiopia and the expanding ethnic polarization, interventions aimed mitigating incidents of inter-communal tensions, violence and armed conflicts, and the negative impact of the pandemic on these incidents, should be designed and implemented with the greatest care. Possible measures with tangible impact could include:

- Provide medical and psychosocial support to victims and their families, including those who are temporarily living in IDP camps, such as in Chagni and central and west Gondor zones of the Amhara region.
- Initiate independent investigations and human right assessments into the armed attacks and the localized inter-communal violence intended to bring those responsible

for these atrocities to justice. Independent investigations, and assurance of justice and security will be advantageous since it increases communities' trust and facilitates efforts towards relocation of displaced people back to their home.

- Begin discussions on the (now loosened) Covid-19 restrictions that are limiting citizens to exercise their constitutional rights including their political rights to involve as members and leaders of opposition parties and to voice their concerns and express their demands to the government.
- Initiate inclusive dialogues among community members, local and regional political stakeholders, informal local actors and other interest groups. Such dialogues should focus on reconciliation among community members. They could also address issues such as restoration and restructuration of local, zonal and regional government institutions. These can help alleviate the grave security concerns in the zones and the regions.

The outcome of the 2021 election is now known: the Prosperity Party has established a new government, and the new parliament has taken its seat in October 2021. In first instance, it should be the responsibility of the new government to initiate these measures. There can be a supporting role, through providing technical and financial assistance, for the international community, in support of the government's efforts to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on Ethiopia's national politics and to government interventions aimed at minimizing the negative impact of the pandemic.



EUROPEAN
INSTITUTE
OF PEACE



European Institute of Peace (EIP)
Rue des Deux Eglises 25
1000 Brussels, Belgium

www.eip.org
info@eip.org

