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## **A GLIMMER OF HOPE IN ETHIOPIA?**

News from Africa are often similar-sounding: dictators abusing power, manipulating the constitution to stretch the duration of their regimes, tribal conflicts, Islamic terror, the systematic violation of human rights, poverty and social abuse. This explains in part the fact that, when we receive different, more positive kinds of news, they are not given due prominence.

Ethiopia is one of the greatest African countries with its own specific ethnicity and with a Christian majority, something very peculiar in the African continent.

On May 27, Abiy Ahmed Ali, a member of the Oromo ethnic group, was elected President of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In April, he became Prime Minister, the highest office in the Ethiopian institutional system. Abiy Ahmed Ali was previously the head of a sub-party within the EPRDF called Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO). The fact that he now became Prime Minister is in itself a striking event because no Oromo had ever made it that high, seen that the Party that governs Ethiopia since 1991 has been traditionally controlled by the Tigrins, another ethnic group.

### **The history of the Oromo**

The Oromo are the most populous ethnic group in Ethiopia. They represent 35% of Ethiopia's 100-million strong population. They have their own language, their traditions and their social system based on clans.

The Oromo inhabit Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya and have always had separatist aspirations, which made them the target of manipulations in the territorial feud between Ethiopia and Somalia. As a consequence, they have been opposing the central authority in Addis Ababa as well.

They fought in a long war under the insignia of the Oromo Liberation Army, the armed wing of the Oromo Liberation Front, supported in part by Eritrea. But neither the military defeat nor the will to abandon the armed fight (bar the 2015 attack against an Ethiopian police station) have lessened the hostility of the Oromo against the Ethiopian regime. After all – and this is perhaps the most significant element – the Oromo have been discriminated politically, economically and culturally this far.

### **An attempt to move past old conflicts**

The move by the EPRDF to elect an Oromo can be considered a move towards reconciliation and towards a greater “democratization” in the division of power. It is an attempt to widen the social support base of the most important ethnic group in the country – numerically speaking, at least. The results of Abiy’s election, with 108 votes out of 169, demonstrates it.

The election of Abiy wasn’t a wholly spontaneous decision, it was determined by the social situation which was becoming explosive: the Oromo had accused the regime of repeated violations of human rights and police brutality amid the state of emergency (indiscriminate arrests, torture, disappearance of individuals, etc.). The accusations were followed by a wave of demonstrations and clashes with authorities. To top it all, the Oromo, who were discriminated socially and politically, had called for an agrarian reform.

All of this was causing the exodus of thousands of Oromos towards Kenya to escape persecution. Initially, the regime used the iron fist, trying to crush disorders with the army and the police as internet and mass media were being blocked to prevent them from spreading the news. Inevitably, despite media barricades, the price of the blood paid to these demonstrations became public, causing continuous unrest and roughly 1000 dead from November 2015 to this day.

### **The moderate solution**

Prime Minister Abiy represents a moderate solution to all this: he is an Oromo, a link between the demonstrators and the national security agencies; he speaks all of the country’s most important tongues (Oromo, Aramaic, Tigrin) and has the advantage – in a country where over 60% of the population is Christian and 34% Muslim – to have a Christian mother (a member of the Amara ethnic group) and a Muslim father. Because of his credentials, Abiy has the potential to bring social peace in the country.

And he is also an astute politician, well-liked by both sides; he is a diplomatic man, who has a very good reputation despite his young age: 42 years. His curriculum includes a stint in the army with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, the creation and management of a facility for Cybersecurity and a stretch as Minister of Science and Technology.

All of these elements have turned his designation into a ray of hope for a more democratic Ethiopia, or at least for a more inclusive social system, where select ethnic groups are not marginalized.

### **The economic challenge**

Currently, Ethiopia is one of the countries with the highest economic growth rate in Africa. During the past 10 years, it has grown an average of 10% annually. The challenge at hand is to let the Oromo reap the fruits of this growth together with other ethnic groups. The Oromo must be drawn to the regime through the bettering of their life conditions and by putting an end to their social and economic marginalization.

Who better than an Oromo Prime Minister could possibly bring this change about? On the national level, youth unemployment is over 17%, which in itself is yet another social scourge.

### **The conflictual ethnic situation**

Until today, power in Ethiopia was managed by the Tigrins, which account for roughly 6% of the total population. This power was won in the fight against Menghistu's regime in 1991.

In order to soften this hegemonic ethnic stance, the EPRDF is based on a coalition of 4 ethnic formations, including the OPDO of the Oromo, the ANDM (Amhara National Democratic Movement) of the Amhara (the second most populous group in the country: 30% c.ca), the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) of the Tigrins and the Southern Ethiopian People Democratic Movement of the southern ethnic groups.

Abiy inherits an unstable social situation plagued by feuds and social juxtapositions. The current parliament has its 547 seats occupied mostly by Tigrins from the EPRDF, a circumstance that will have to change, possibly with a widening of the political dialog.

Abiy's predecessor, Hailemariam Desalegn, had already enacted measures for a social pacification of sorts by releasing members of the opposition and journalists who were incarcerated without a trial or specific accusations. But soon after his resignation, many of these individuals were re-arrested.

### **The expectations arising from the designation of Abiy**

The first expectation, shared by a majority of Ethiopians, is that the country start a democratization of its social and political systems. This change is strongly supported by the younger generations who put a lot of trust in their new Prime Minister.

Deep social reforms could only occur through a number of changes in the institutional system. In this respect, the most relevant problem is the willingness – or lack thereof – of the military and intelligence apparatuses (most of them headed by Tigrins of the TPLF) that have governed the country until today.

A part of the population also sees Abiy as an individual who is colluded with power and who lacks the characteristics of a true reformer of the very same system that made his fortune. After all, Abiy is a member of the OPDO since the late 80's. His past experience as the head of the Information Network Security Agency, a structure officially dedicated to Cybersecurity – but which also carried out monitoring of the opposition at home and abroad – is a clear indicator that Abiy is highly compromised with the current system of power.

The first step needed to achieve social peace should be to put an end to the state of emergency, which represents the main instrument used by the regime to inflict abuses and limit individual freedom. The state of emergency was originally proclaimed shortly after the

resignation of Desalegn, perhaps in an attempt to fill a void of power that was liable to cause further social tensions.

Desalegn himself had relinquished the helm – or rather, he was forced to let go – on February 15 because he was deemed too weak in managing public order. We must therefore expect the state of emergency to remain in effect so long as Abiy fails to demonstrate that it is no longer needed. It is no bargaining chip, but a mere protective measure for the regime, which would be willing to yield only if faced with clear guarantees about their future.

### **An uncertain future**

The Ethiopian political crisis can have strong repercussions in the wider African context and especially in the horn of Africa. Ethiopia is the second most populous country in the continent and houses all of the major inter-continental agencies. It is a major economic and military power in the region, also thanks to the coexistence of Muslims and Christians on its vast territory.

An unstable Ethiopia can have repercussions on the Somali crisis, on the relationship with Eritrea, with Egypt and on the controversy over the dam on the Nile between north and south Sudan.

The path that Abiy must take to bring social peace and democracy is a long and difficult one. He will have to find a way to merge the man of the regime with the man for change. Two roles that could easily collide. The positive aspect of this, which sparks new hopes and expectations, is that the regime has realized that the balance of powers within the nation must change.

The inclusion of the Oromo is a part of this project and represents but the first step in the right direction. There is much to be done for the Amhara, for the Welayta of Somali origin and for all of the other marginalized ethnic groups in Ethiopia. But something is moving: recently a team of the Oromo Democratic Front, an exiled fraction of the Oromo Liberation Front, has been allowed to travel to Addis Abeba to negotiate their return home and their registration as a proper political party. But perhaps it isn't enough to fuel grand hopes for change.

## GADDAFI'S DOWNFALL

August 2003. The Libyan envoy to the United Nations, Ahmed Own, delivers the following letter to then President of the UN Security Council, Syrian Ambassador Mikhail Wehbe:

“1. I am pleased to inform you that the remaining issues relating to fulfillment of all Security Council resolutions resulting from the Lockerbie incident have been resolved. (...)

2. The Libyan Arab Jamahiriya has sought to cooperate in good faith throughout the past years to bring about a solution to this matter.

3. In this context, and out of respect for international law and pursuant to the Security Council resolutions, Libya as a sovereign state:

- has facilitated the bringing to justice of the two suspects charged with the bombing of Pan Am 103, and accepts responsibility for the actions of its officials;

- has cooperated with the Scottish investigating authorities before and during the trial (...);

- has arranged for the payment of appropriate compensation. (...)

4. The Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, which during the last two decades did, on numerous occasions, condemn all acts of terrorism in its correspondence to the General Assembly and to the Security Council, reaffirms its commitment to this policy.(...)”

By accepting its responsibility for the Pan Am bombing, Colonel Gaddafi paved the way for a new start in his relationship with both the United States and the United Kingdom. By condemning all acts of terrorism, at least officially, Libya asked to cease being a Rogue State. And agreed, on paper, to pursue any official involved in terrorist acts.

The deal included a relief from UN sanctions in exchange for 2.16 billion dollars for the families of the victims on the Pan Am flight. A huge sum of money that was supposed to erase Libya's shameful past.

### **Libyan terrorism**

The Pan Am flight moving from London to New York exploded while in mid-air on December 28, 1988 over Scotland. An explosive device had been concealed inside a suitcase and 270 people died. The investigations led to two Libyan citizens: Abdelbaset al Megrahi, in charge of security for Libyan Airlines and an intelligence agent, and his colleague, Lamin Khalifa Fhimah, who was later acquitted.

In 2001 Megrahi was convicted to life in prison by a special tribunal set up in the Netherlands and then extradited to Scotland to serve his sentence. During the trial, he never confessed, nor admitted of having acted on behalf of the Libyan regime. After a series of appeals, Abdelbaset al Megrahi was released on medical grounds, he had a prostate cancer that according to doctors left him 3 months to live, in 2009. His homecoming was a national holiday. Gaddafi's son, Seif al Islam, welcomed him as he

descended the steps from the presidential plane. Abdelbaset al Megrahi died in his home in Tripoli in 2012.

As facts have later shown, Megrahi was not released on mere compassionate grounds, but with the aim of improving the relationship between the UK and Libya. But Lockerbie was not the last terrorist attack against the West.

On September 19, 1989 a French commercial flight exploded over Niger because of another bomb. The UTA airplane was flying from N'Djamena to Paris and carried 170 passengers. None of them survived. A French Court has established Libya's responsibility in the incident, including the role played by Abdullah Senussi, Gaddafi's brother-in-law, and of Libyan Security Services. They have all been convicted in absentia.

Libya's terrorist attacks were acts of revenge against the West. The Pan Am flight was targeted after the US bombed Tripoli in 1986. The UTA plane was a revenge attack for the French military intervention in Chad that forced the Libyans on the retreat with heavy casualties.

### **Gaddafi's rehabilitation**

By accepting his part of the blame over Lockerbie, Gaddafi wanted to offer the world a new face, less controversial and more reliable than in the past. He let go of his man over the Scottish incident rather than the French one because he could sacrifice Megrahi, but not his brother-in-law. At the same time he preferred the US and the UK to the French.

The Libyan leader was always careful over who to befriend. He was always prudent and definitely wary. Gaddafi realized that the good old days of when he killed opponents home and abroad, supported militant groups from Ireland to Palestine and carried out his own terrorist attacks were over. He now had to be on the right side of history. He now had to fight terrorism.

Muammar Gaddafi had consolidated his personal power after having been a revolutionary, a Panarabist, a Nasserian, a defender of Islam, a terrorist, anti-Israeli, anti-American and anti-Italian. He now had to come to moderate terms. And the fight against terrorism was just the perfect excuse.

This change of attitude was not dictated by his heart. Terrorism was close to home. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) was in Algeria and Islamic extremism was spreading throughout North Africa and in the Sahel. Furthermore, his know how of terrorism could be a valuable asset for future partners in the West.

### **The cooperation in the fight against terrorism**

Following the deal over Lockerbie, CIA and MI6 representatives landed in Tripoli and started cooperating with the regime. The French DGSE also sent an envoy to Libya to work on anti-terrorism. In 2003 the Libyan External Security Service was still under the guidance of one of the most controversial and ruthless personalities of the regime, Musa Kusa, but Western powers didn't seem to care.

The cooperation became extremely close. This is proven by the Extraordinary Rendition to Libya of LIFG's leader, Abdelhakim Belhaj, in 2004. The US caught him in Kuala Lumpur, had him briefly jailed in Bangkok before extraditing him to Libya.

### **Before the Arab Spring**

Muammar Gaddafi's new moderate dress fitted a world fighting against the Islamic terrorist plague. But he was still Gaddafi nonetheless. Even when he asked fellow African presidents to elect him to the presidency of the African Union or, by a bunch of local rulers from across the continent, demanded to be acclaimed as the "King of Kings" of Africa.

By 2009, after the celebrations for his 40 years in power were over – the military parade on the Green Square featured unarmed soldiers who were checked at the metal detector before marching in front of their leader – Gaddafi's main concern became his handover of power. He did not have any official roles anymore, or at least he claimed, and acted solely as the "Guide".

The person chosen to replace him was the first son from his second wife, Seif al Islam. Gaddafi first convinced the other fellow members of the Revolutionary Command Council that their powers would not be affected. They were worried about Seif al Islam's continuous talks of democracy, human rights and power to the people. Muammar then had to convince his own family, and especially Mutassim, who was next in line after Seif and who did not go well with his father's pick. When this was done, Seif al Islam benefited from a series of changes to the Libyan Constitution, prestigious and internationally recognizable appointments that built around him an aura of both moderation and respectability.

Even the External Security Service changed when its control was handed over from Musa Kusa to Abu Zied Durda, whose past in civilian postings was not paved with the cadavers of the regime's enemies. The only individual staging a comeback was Gaddafi's brother-in-law, Abdullah Senussi. After having been put in the sidelines following his conviction in France, he was put in charge of a Committee tasked with fighting human trafficking. This new position allowed him to directly control Libya's security apparatus.

### **The Arab Spring**

In 2011, when the so called Arab Spring erupted, Libya was a stable country. The dictator had a solid control over his people, with the exception of recurrent protests in Cyrenaica by the families of the detainees of the Abu Salim prison that had been massacred in 1996 under the guidance of Abdullah Senussi. 1200 inmates were slaughtered by the security forces.

After over 40 years at the helm, Gaddafi knew how to deal with the local tribes and, through them, make sure the people were with him. Even the LIFG was not a threat anymore, while the Muslim Brotherhood had accepted a truce and mosques were put under direct government control.

The protests in Tunisia and Ben Ali's overthrow and Hosni Mubarak's defenestration in Egypt suddenly put Libya in the crossfire. But when rallies began, and a civil war was in

the making, the Libyan regime was still in a position to quash the rebellion and maintain stability. There was only one way of overthrowing Muammar Gaddafi.

In March 2011, NATO forces struck Libya and declared their support for the rebellion. The French were the ones to insist and pressure their allies to intervene. Libyan airspace was first banned to Libyan government planes. Then the air strikes began. The French attacked around Benghazi, while US and UK ships launched their Tomahawks on other military targets. NATO's "Unified Protector" op eventually led to the downfall of the regime.

On October 20, 2011 Muammar Gaddafi was captured and killed by rebels close to Sirte.

### **Why Libya?**

What followed the regime's fall was chaos. External military interventions alter the balance of power on the ground. They support one side against another and lead it to victory. But whoever is the chosen one doesn't necessarily have enough influence or power to actually rule. And Libya's ongoing civil war is there to prove it. Democracy cannot be imposed. And a dictator ends up being replaced by another dictator. Human rights were violated during the Gaddafi regime and continue to be violated today.

NATO's military intervention might have been the occasion to rid the globe of a brutal autocrat as Gaddafi definitely was. But it was at least 20 years too late. By 2011 Gaddafi was a moderate Head of State that was useful to a number of Western countries, especially Italy for the role he played in blocking the influx of migrants landing on its shores. But probably he wasn't useful enough to France or to the other countries that contributed to his fall.

There must probably be some logic to this. There are a series of hypothesis as to why an armed intervention was planned against Libya. Some claim that then French President Nicolas Sarkozy, one of Gaddafi's staunchest opponents and promoters of the attack, wanted to put his hands on Libyan oil. Others say, and recent judiciary developments provide some indirect evidence to this, that Sarkozy wanted to make sure there were no witnesses or traces of the money Gaddafi provided to his presidential campaign. An embarrassment worth a conflict? Nonetheless, for whatever reason Sarkozy decided to act, the US had sanctioned the operation as is reported in the leaked emails from then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

The most reasonable explanation is that Gaddafi, despite his political turnarounds, was not as appreciated and loved as he thought he was. And he was taken out when the chance came about. At that time, several countries in the West wrongfully interpreted the Arab Spring and its protests as the precondition for the spread of democracy in the Middle East. Even the United States believed the Muslim Brotherhood could become a beacon of liberty in Egypt, only to reverse their decision when al Sisi stepped in. Getting rid of a dictator fitted the picture, just the consequences for the Libyan people were not calculated properly.

## **THE US CHOICES THAT INFLAME THE MIDDLE EAST**

The US Administration's fresh approach to the Middle East, as directed by President Donald Trump, is already producing its first effects, albeit negative ones. As the killings in Gaza testify, the United States have abandoned a traditional policy of equilibrium, moderation and of balancing the different and often conflicting aspirations of regional actors in favor of an unbalanced support to Israel.

Moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, the cancellation of the Iran nuclear deal, the unquestioning support to the Israeli army's "right" to shoot on protesters in Gaza or of attacking targets in Lebanon or Syria, so much as Tel Aviv's "right" to claim that Iran should not obtain a nuclear weapon, when Israel has built over a hundred bombs without any international oversight or the signing of any international deal, is definitely a break with the past.

And so are the results. A fresh Palestinian revolt. And, at the same time, the new sanctions against Iran that have pushed the regime towards a radical stance on its nuclear projects. And to break the encirclement, the Iranians will continue to support all those forces that fight Israel (Hezbollah and Hamas), or any other US ally in the region, such as Saudi foes in Yemen (the Houthis), the Shia dissidents in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and to strongly back the Shia government in Iraq.

Following the Arab Spring and the conflict in Syria, the Middle East is still looking for a new balance of power. The civil war in Damascus is still ongoing, ISIS has not been totally defeated, the Hezbollah still dictate their agenda in Lebanon, while the Iraqis are still struggling to find peace among Shia, Sunni and Kurds. What the region badly needs is stability, not fresh hotbeds of conflict.

### **A traditional broker**

By choosing to side with Israel, and only Israel, the United States have lost the traditional role of power brokers they played in the past. Despite the meagre results, the US played the referee in the Middle East. Even the huge sale of weapons, worth some 300 billion dollars, to Saudi Arabia goes in the direction of antagonizing Iran.

The one true winner of this new scenario is Russia. When it intervened in Syria, Moscow showed that it could be a reliable international partner. Vladimir Putin stuck to his promises with an historical ally in Damascus, but also showed a good dose of ductility with other actors in the region. Putin speaks with Israel (and that is why Benjamin Netanyahu attended the May 9 parade on the Red Square to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory over the Nazis), talks with Saudi Arabia (and that is why King Salman paid a historical visit to Moscow in October 2017), and is in good terms with both Iran and Turkey.

Russia has become the new go-to-guy in the region replacing the United States. The talks in Astana over Syria prove that peace will have to go through Moscow. And the more the US choose to side with just one actor, the more Russia will be the region's new peace broker.

### **Trump's policy**

Unilateral decisions, continuous provocations, a bullyplomacy based on threats rather than negotiations, the lack of respect for the opinions of traditional allies. This is Donald Trump and his foreign policy. After over a year in office, there is a wide range of examples. Take trade (duties and tariffs even against Europe), or neighboring countries (the wall with Mexico and the tirade against Canada) and, of course, the Middle East. The latter is one of the globe's most unstable regions where being prudent makes more sense than playing with fire. But Donald Trump loves fire.

Not only that. He wants to establish a personal legacy. And, as is the case in the Middle East, wants to undo everything his predecessor Barack Obama, and Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State, did during their mandate. If Obama gave Netanyahu the cold shoulder, Trump has become his best friend. If Obama signed a deal with Iran, this has to be cancelled. One could define this as infantile diplomacy, only to find that it's the world's biggest super power acting like a child.

But there are also other, impersonal, reasons to act as Trump does. One of them is the arms lobby. One of the largest contributors to his presidential campaign, they want a "warrior" president that will boost military expenditure, arms sales to friendly States and support targeted operations against foes that are worth millions of dollars of missiles at every strike.

Trump's voters are, after all, deeply rooted in the alt-right. His main advisors are always characterized for their extremist views. A naturally conflictual personality as is Trump would have needed a bunch of moderates by his side. Trump is nonetheless extremely coherent. He is coherently enacting what he promised during his campaign.

### **A very tough future**

Trump's moves in the Middle East risk fueling more tensions in the region. The US President believes he can unilaterally dictate the unfolding of events in the area. But reality is often different from wishful thinking and for two basic reasons.

Firstly, the region is so contort, articulated and ever evolving that there is never a clear cause and effect. An initiative hardly ever delivers the expected result, unless the wished outcome is chaos. Furthermore, when navigating the Middle East with Donald Trump's relational bullying, he underestimates the Arab pride that wakes up when provoked.

Secondly, there are other actors playing in the same playground. And when they go by the name of Russia, China and Turkey they should be accounted for. Shared solutions to complex problems should be they way forward. Unilateralism as now practiced by the US has isolated the United States, not the contrary. If and when Israel decides to attack Iran with the United States' tacit or open participation (a very realistic hypothesis as things stand), they could have to deal with a reaction from Russia, China and Turkey.