

# **POLICY ANALYSIS**

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## **THE NEXUS OF GEOPOLITICS, SECURITY, AND LEADERSHIP TRANSITION IN THE HORN OF AFRICA**

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the Cold War, several countries embarked on political transitions from authoritarianism to democracy. In the African continent, the political landscape has been dominated by high profile changes in leadership and governments. Some more peacefully than others. In Gambia, for example, Yahya Jammeh who ruled the country for twenty-two years lost elections and was forced to concede and flee the country in 2016. In Angola, President Eduardo Dos Santos stepped down voluntarily in September 2017. In Zimbabwe, after thirty-seven years, President Mugabe was forced to resign in February 2018. In Sudan, President Omar el Bashir was unseated by a popular uprising in 2019.

According to Sachikonye (2017) and Bratton (1994), from the 1990s a lot of political transitions towards democracy were witnessed on the African continent. The security situation in the Horn of Africa,

which comprises of Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, South Sudan, Sudan, Kenya, and Uganda is complex due to several socio-economic, political, and geopolitical factors (Markaskis, 2003; Gabremicael, 2019). These take the form of armed conflicts, poverty, unprecedented ethnic divisions, drought, and intrastate conflicts. One of the significant causes of civil wars and political turmoil in the region is attributed to the lack of democratic systems. According to Shinn (2019), the various conflicts in the Horn of Africa are exacerbated by external factors, which often lead to widespread human rights violations. One of the longest African intra-state conflicts was fought in Sudan (1983-2005).

In the last two decades, the Horn of Africa has been characterised by many armed conflicts, resulting in the loss of many lives and material possessions, including huge scale displacements (Demeke, 2014).

**The collapse of the state of Somalia, the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and the wars between and within the two Sudan have made the region to be considered as one of the most unstable regions in the world**

(Mengistu, 2015). The recent uptick in engagement by internal and external actors as well as their interests underscore the critical role of geopolitics in shaping the security and economic trajectory of the region (Melvin, 2019). In an increasingly connected global order, the geographical location of the Horn of Africa, its proximity to the oil-rich Middle East and the Gulf States, and its proximity to a vital commercial route make the region a crucial maritime chokepoint. The security of the Horn of Africa can be conceived as a regional security complex so interlinked that the internal problems cannot be resolved apart from one another. Melvin (2019) clearly states that “the complex web of external actors and interests, the potentiality of increased geopolitical competition, regionalization of conflicts and shifting domestic politics intersect at various points in the interregional order with implications for the role and mandate of the regional mechanism, the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGAD) in promoting peace and stability in the region”. The current security complexity of the Horn of Africa can to a larger extent be traced back to the colonial era. The presence of Al-Qaeda affiliated groups such as Al-Shabaab, bad governance and internal conflicts pose additional threats to the security of the Horn. The strategic position of the Horn of Africa - vital for the world economy because of its seaways - is another threat to its security since many countries such as France, America, the Gulf countries, China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran are competing for it (Ferrás, 2013; Cardoso, 2013).

## 2.0 LEADERSHIP TRANSITION IN ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia, like many other African countries, has also seen dramatic political transformations and changes over the past century. Political transition in Ethiopia can be traced back to the early 1960s (Bahru, 2010). The attempted coup d'état against Emperor Haile Selassie marked the beginning of political transitions to democracy (Young, 2012). In 1974, the imperial government was deposed by collective efforts of forces ascending from different political classes. This allowed the Dergue to ascend to power in 1974 (Merera, 2003). Merera (2003) concludes that the coming of the military dictatorship in Ethiopia led by Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam was a failure of the political transition to democracy.

There have been two big leadership changes in Ethiopia, worth noting. The military victory of 1991, which brought to power the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and most recently the accession to power of Dr. Ahmed Abiy as Prime Minister. Since 1991, Ethiopia has been governed by the TPLF-led EPRDF regime which remained one of the most dominant regimes that have ever ruled Ethiopia (Lyons, 2019). From 1991, the EPRDF was led by Meles Zenawi until his demise in 2018. During his era, the

TPLF-led EPRDF regime was supported by the different ethnic and regional groups of the ethnic-based federal system (Andargachew, 1993). Due to the regime's governing style, opposition protests and public unrests broke out in different parts of the country following his death. Political protests intensified mostly in the Amhara and Oromo regions. The death of Meles Zenawi in August 2012 left a huge political void in Ethiopia. With no appointed successor and many rivals, a power struggle arose within the EPRDF. As a compromise, Hailemariam Desalegn was elected as Prime Minister.

**Between 2015 and 2016, several critical crises emerged in the two most populous regions - Amhara and Oromia. The arrest of activists in Amhara about the reallocation of territory from Tigray to Amhara agitated the situation. The protests in Oromia were against a federal master plan to expand Addis Ababa into an Oromia state. As the protests intensified, the government's heavy-handed response, led to the spread of violence, which shifted from concerns with the country's internal state boundaries to widespread opposition calling for political, economic equality, and an end to human rights abuses by the authoritarian TPLF-controlled system.**

It was in this context that Hailemariam resigned in February 2018.

In March 2018, following Hailemariam's resignation, Dr. Ahmed Abiy was elected as the new Chairperson of the ruling Ethiopian Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and consequently as the country's Prime Minister. The election of Dr. Abiy marked the beginning of a major shift in leadership transition in Ethiopia. In his first 100 days in office, Abiy released thousands of political prisoners; liberalized the press, and freedom of speech; legalized opposition groups; committed Ethiopia to a multi-party system; and ended 18 years of conflict with Eritrea (Fisher 2019). Additionally, within weeks of assuming office, Abiy fired the two most fearsome TPLF securocrats in the nation: Samora Unis, the army chief of staff and Mr. Getachew Assefa, national intelligence chief. These were Meles' longstanding and effective enforcers. This placed Abiy as showing less interest in building coalitions and networks with power players inside and outside the EPRDF. Dr. Abiy managed to cultivate genuine affection and support from wider and diverse populations. Despite Abiy's numerous internal and external successes, he must contend with the ongoing ethnic and wider political tensions as well as the Tigray problem. These are the major test of his leadership.

On 4th November 2020, Prime Minister Abiy Ahamed launched a military offensive against the forces of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which is the local government authority of the Ethiopian northern region of Tigray. There were rising tensions between his administration and the TPLF leaders. According to Abiy, the military action was in response to the surprise assault carried out by the TPLF on a Federal Army Base in Tigray, which resulted in the killing of several soldiers and the attempted looting of the government's weaponry depots. The attack on the army base, according to Abiy, was necessary because the TPLF had "crossed the last red line." He maintains that he was forced by the TPLF leadership into ordering the army to attack the region in order "to save the country and the region".

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia is organised along ethnic lines and the Tigray region is one of the 10 semi-autonomous federal states. The Tigray people make up about 6 per cent of Ethiopia's population of more than 110 million. For years, Tigrayans have politically dominated and controlled Ethiopia. In 1975, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) launched a rebellion against the Dergue military government in Addis Ababa and managed to topple it in 1991. This earned them a big political share in Ethiopia. Since then, the TPLF dominated the ruling alliance, composed of four ethnic-regional parties, until Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, a member of the Oromo ethnic group, came to power in 2018. The other parties in the coalition were, the Amhara National Democratic Movement, the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization, and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement.

Between 1998 and 2000, Tigray's powerful military was instrumental in Ethiopia's war against neighbouring Eritrea over disputed border territory. Under the leadership of Mr. Abiy, the Tigrayan leaders accuse the regime of unfairly targeting them in corruption prosecutions, removing them from the top positions they were occupying, and broadly being incriminated for the country's anguishes. The TPLF withdrew from the ruling coalition after Abiy merged it into the nationwide Prosperity Party (BBC, 2020). The disagreement became more intense after Tigray held its elections in September, defying Abiy's government which postponed national polls due to the Covid 19 pandemic. The Tigray government was unlawful, by Abiy's government. The TPLF viewed this as aggression and declared that they no longer recognised Abiy's leadership. The Federal Government cut funding to the region, which the TPLF said was "tantamount to an act of war". When Mr. Abiy ordered the attack on the region, the TPLF accused him of fabricating false stories to justify military action against them. The military action resulted in many casualties on both sides.

**The war in Tigray could be lengthy, bloody, and protracted. There are alarms that a conflict in Ethiopia could impact neighbours such as Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Sudan.**

According to observers, if this war is left to continue its ramifications would be much higher on the Horn of Africa. Egypt, which already has an issue with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam construction could take advantage of Ethiopia's internal rift and work against the Federal Government. If the war spills outside Ethiopia's borders, it may destabilise the Horn of Africa. Should countries like the US and China, who have several strategic military bases in the region, feel that their military bases and facilities were under threat, they may be drawn in. As the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, warned: "the stability of Ethiopia is important for the entire Horn of Africa region". The humanitarian impact could also be huge. Mr. Abiy should find a political compromise to resolve the Tigrayan problem; failing to do so could lead to a delay of leadership transition, war could spill over to reach neighbouring countries, and this could have a negative impact internationally.

### 3.0 LEADERSHIP TRANSITION IN THE SUDAN

Sudan's pathway to democracy has been a rocky one. There are more than a few key players who wish to ensure that Sudan never returns to a monocratic state. Since its independence in January 1956, Sudan like many other states in Africa has been struggling with leadership problems. For the scope of this article, I would limit the Sudanese leadership transition or transition to democracy to the period from 2019 onwards. In 1989, Omar Al Bashir seized power in a military coup and was ousted in 2019 by the military after months of a popular uprising. This change has brought to power Sudan's main opposition coalition and the Military Ruling Council which signed a power-sharing deal, paving the way for a transition to a civilian-led government (Aljazeera, 2019).

Bashir, who was frustrated by the Sudanese leadership at the time, led a successful coup d'état that overthrew the elected government of Sadiq Al Mahdi in 1989. Following the coup, Bashir became the Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council for National Salvation which ruled the country in an autocratic way until he was removed in 2019. After seizing power, Bashir dissolved parliament, banned political parties, controlled the media, and imposed Sharia Law (Ingham, 2021). Bashir is widely believed to have been assisted by the late Hasan at-Turabi, a Muslim extremist and the leader of the National Congress Front (NCF). According to Fox News (2019), Bashir's era will be remembered as one of the most oppressive regimes in the modern history of Sudan. While Bashir ruled Sudan with an iron fist, he met fierce resistance as well. As early as 1990, there was an attempted coup to unseat him. In 2003, a group of rebels from the Darfur region attacked the government in Khartoum and failed to unseat him, too.

To consolidate his hold on power, Bashir formed the Janjaweed Militia (an Arab militia) to terrorise the people of Darfur. The Janjaweed killed and displaced more than 2 million people. In 2010, despite the fact two main opposition groups withdrew from the elections over allegations that the elections were rigged, Bashir was re-elected in the country's first multi-party election in more than 20 years (O'Brien, 2009). After South Sudan got its independence in 2011, Bashir gained another five years in office. From November-December 2016, hundreds of protesters went to the streets against the government's decision to lift fuel subsidies. In January 2018, protests broke out across Sudan against the austerity measures imposed by the government.

**In August 2018, the National Congress Party (NCP) declared that it would back Al-Bashir as its candidate in the 2020 presidential election. This move-in December 2018 by the NCP triggered anti-government demonstrations across Sudan, calling al-Bashir to step down. Despite fierce security crackdown, a state of emergency, and bans on all unauthorised gatherings, al-Bashir clung on to power. He was finally unseated by the Sudanese Military in 2019.**

During Bashir's 30 years rule in Sudan, he was faced with an unprecedented level of popular discontent that started with the failed military coup of 1990 and ended with him being overthrown in 2019. Despite the numerous calls for him to step down during the anti-government demonstrations, Bashir tightened his grip on power and refused to leave power (Ingham, 2021).

During al-Bashir's 30 years of tyranny, he fought the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army and other marginalized freedom fighters. This war ended with the separation of Southern Sudan in 2011. To consolidate his hold on power, Bashir pitted allies and turned former friends against each other (Wasim, 2019). Al Bashir was unpopular in Sudan, the region, and internationally. His relations with the West were not good, though in the years before his exit, Bashir tried to modify his relations with his neighbours. While he supported rebels against the government in South Sudan, he later used his influence to broker a peace deal between the Government of National Unity of South Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Opposition/Army (SPLM-IO/A). Bashir also had mended his relationships with Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam dispute with Ethiopia.

## 4.0 LEADERSHIP TRANSITION IN SOUTH SUDAN

**Signs of power struggle emerged again during the second SPLM national convention in May 2008, when Dr. Riek Machar declared his intention to run for the chairmanship of the party, a position that would later allow him to be the President in 2010. A compromise was reached: to allow Salva Kiir to retain his position as Chairperson of the SPLM and Dr. Riek Machar as the Deputy Chairperson.**

To fairly assess the leadership transition in South Sudan, it is critical to first briefly examine the background of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). The SPLM/A was founded in 1983 under the command of Dr. John Garang de Mabior to fight and bring about freedom and liberty to the marginalised peoples of Sudan. During the struggle, SPLM/A allied itself with different regions of Sudan such as the Nuba Mountains, Southern Blue Nile, and Eastern Sudan which were also seeking similar political transformations in Sudan. The SPLM/A held its first convention in Chukudum in April 1994. This Convention led to the separation of the SPLM and SPLA that was completed in late 1995. While fighting the liberation war, SPLM was faced with massive internal challenges raging from military, leadership legitimacy, and breakaway opposition groups. With the help of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) that mediated one of Africa's longest civil wars, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in 2005 between the SPLM and the National Congress Party (NCP). Dr. John Garang became the Vice President of the Republic of Sudan (Kumsa, 2017).

The first leadership transition in Southern Sudan took place after the death of Dr. John Garang in a plane crash on 30th July 2005. After Garang's death, the leadership of SPLM/A unanimously selected Salva Kiir Mayardit, the current President of the Republic of South Sudan as Garang's successor. Salva Kiir became the Vice President of Sudan, President of the Government of Southern Sudan, Chairman of the SPLM and Commander-in-Chief of the SPLA (Campbell, 2014; Sudd Institute, 2014).

As the President of the Government of Southern Sudan and Chairperson of the SPLM, Kiir contested Sudan's general elections of 2010. He was elected as the President of Southern Sudan. A leadership rift erupted within the SPLM Party during the elections. The selection of Dr. Riek and other candidates within the SPLM Party was viewed as undemocratic. This led to the defection and rebellion of some members of SPLM such as George Athor, Angelina Teny, Gen. Dau Aturjong, and many others. Most of them had contested the election as independent candidates. The leadership crisis within SPLM/A that began in 1983, was at times put on hold when faced with national issues such as the referendum for the independence of South Sudan (Sudd Institute, 2014).

Another power struggle arose within the SPLM Party when Chairman Salva Kiir Mayardit publicly declared his intention to contest once more for the upcoming election. The result was the December 2013 crisis that plunged South Sudan into a deep crisis. According to Koos and Gutschke (2014), the conflict was caused by a power struggle within the ruling SPLM Party fueled by corruption, patronage, and impunity. To some, the



split of Riek Machar in 1991, which created the SPLM-Nasir Faction, may be added to the list. The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) signed on 12th September 2018, between the warring parties provides for the establishment of the Revitalised Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU). The R-TGoNU shall have a transitional period of 36 months which would commence after eight months followed by democratic elections at the end. The R-ACRCS is limping on with so many delays in the implementation.

**With all the past leadership crises, the aftermath of December 2013's crisis, and delays with the implementation of the R-ARCSS, nobody can predicate with accuracy when a smooth leadership transition would take place in South Sudan. No doubt South Sudan's crises have internal, regional, and international implications.**

Internally, South Sudan has been in deep crisis politically, economically, and socially since it was separated from Sudan in 2011. The Congressional Report (2016) puts the number of people killed in South Sudan during the war at least 50,000 people since December 2013; 2.4 million people have been displaced, and 6.1 million people have faced severe food shortages.

Since December 2013, South Sudan has witnessed unprecedented rebellions and tribal conflicts. There are fears that it might spill over into the neighbouring countries. The decline in the global oil price has exacerbated the dire economic situation making it difficult for citizens to meet their daily needs. According to the World Bank (2016), the war is undermining the social fabric and development gains that were achieved since independence, as well as the humanitarian situation. Externally, a London based consultancy group (Frontier Economics, 2015) reported that if the conflict in South Sudan continued for another five years, it would cost Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda and Tanzania, a loss of up to 53 billion US dollars.

Kenya and Uganda trade heavily with South Sudan, and most of the commodities in South Sudan come from these countries. South Sudan uses Sudan's pipelines to transport its oil to the international market and Khartoum heavily relies on the transportation fees paid by South Sudan for using its pipelines. In its communique, IGAD outlined that the conflict in South Sudan is a security threat to the entire region (Communiqué of the 29th Extraordinary Summit of IGAD Heads of States and Government, 2016). The security of South Sudan is intertwined with that of its neighbours and the region (Akuei, 2018).

Internationally, the conflict in South Sudan has drawn international players such as the United States of America, China, and the Troika (US, UK, and Norway). There has been rivalry over South Sudan by external players such as the US and China of who should maintain its influence in South Sudan. The stability of South Sudan is tied to that of the region. The leaders of South Sudan must implement the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ACRCS) and make a smooth transition to democracy to solve all South Sudan's outstanding internal issues.

## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the analysis of the nexus of geopolitics, security, and leadership transition in the Horn of Africa, observed that in the aftermath of the Cold War, several African countries embarked on the political transition from autocratic to democratic regimes. Some transitions were smooth, others were violent. On the one hand, violent transitions were found to have occurred in countries such as Gambia, Zimbabwe, and Sudan. On the other hand, partial or smooth transitions were thought to have taken place in Angola and Ethiopia. However, the security of the Horn of Africa is said to be complex due to several socio-economic, political, and geopolitical factors. The underlying factors are behind the causes of civil wars and political turmoil in the region. In addition, these conflicts are exacerbated by external factors and often led to prevalent human rights violations. The recent uptick in engagement by internal and external actors as well as their interests underline the critical role of geopolitics that shape the security and economic trajectory of the region.

The contemporary security complexity of the Horn of Africa can, to a larger extent, be traced back to the colonial era. Moreover, the location of the Horn of Africa, its proximity to the oil-rich Middle East, its closeness to a vital maritime commercial route, the presence of Al-Qaeda affiliated groups such as Al-Shabab, bad governance, and internal conflicts pose additional threats to the security of the Horn. Like many African countries, leadership transition took place in South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Sudan. In Ethiopia, the political transition can be traced back to the early 1970s, Southern Sudan - currently the Republic of South Sudan to 2005, and Sudan to the 1980s.

It is worth noting that two big leadership changes occurred in Ethiopia, the military victory of 1991, which brought to power the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and most recently the accession to power of Ahmed Abiy as Prime Minister. The current internal war in the Tigrayan region could impact and destabilise not only the neighbouring countries but also the whole region of the Horn of Africa. Another implication of this war is that Egypt which has an issue with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam could take advantage of the internal rift and work negatively against the Federal Government. Also, the US and China which already have their presence in the region could be drawn into the Ethiopian conflict if their interests are affected. The humanitarian impact could also be huge for the region.

As one of the African countries, Sudan has been struggling with the political transition as well. In 1989, Omar Al Bashir grabbed power in a military coup and was ousted in 2019 by the military after months of a popular uprising. The recent change in Sudan has brought the main opposition coalition and the Military Ruling Council which signed a power-sharing deal, paving the way for a transition to a civilian-led government. Notwithstanding, for Sudan to avoid recurrence of the past, the current leadership must allow for a good political environment: modernisation of politics in Sudan; the democratization of Sudan; the military stepping aside and leaving civilians to rule; allowing civil liberties, enhancement of the role civil society; allowing freedom of expression; bringing social justice; upholding the rule of law; and transforming Sudan's relations with its citizens, neighbours, and international players.

The first leadership transition in Southern Sudan, currently the Republic of South Sudan took place after the death of Dr John Garang in a plane crash on 30th July 2005. After Garang's death, the leadership of the SPLM/A unanimously selected Salva Kiir Mayardit, the current President of the Republic of South Sudan as Garang's successor paving the way for him to become the Vice President of Sudan, President of the Government of Southern Sudan, Chairman of the SPLM and Commander-in-Chief of the SPLA.

However, signs of power struggle emerged again in 2013, when Dr Riek Machar and President Salva Kiir Mayardit declared their intentions to run for the position of chairman of the SPLM Party. This led to the aftermath of 2013's events.

No doubt South Sudan's crises have internal, regional, and international implications. Internally, South Sudan has been in deep crisis politically, economically, and socially since it separated from Sudan in 2011. This is in addition to human lives lost during the war. Internationally, the conflict in South Sudan has drawn in external players such as the Troika (US, UK, and Norway) and China. Nevertheless, for the interest and stability of South Sudan, the leaders must implement the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ACRSS) and make a smooth transition to democracy to solve all South Sudan's outstanding internal issues.

To offset the underlying geopolitics, security, and leadership transition in the Horn of Africa and for a better future of the region, the leaderships in the Horn of Africa will have to develop strategies for resolving their internal differences by embarking on smooth political transitions.

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