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Prime Minister Abiy: from Nobel to  
Ethiopian and regional peace

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## Prime Minister Abiy: from Nobel to Ethiopian and regional peace

### Summary:

In October, the Norwegian Committee announced the awarding of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize to the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abey Ahmed, in recognition of his reformist efforts to restore civil liberties and especially for the signing of peace with Eritrea after almost two decades of military tension and diplomatic blockade. Since coming to power in April 2018, Abiy has focused all his efforts on moving towards an effective and inclusive democracy, eradicating the violent ethnic rivalry that is spreading throughout the country and promoting regional integrity. To achieve this, it is essential to address the reform of the failed federal regime of 1994, as well as to review the country's economic and industrial programme. Moreover, in a growing climate of social discontent, the Prime Minister must prepare the country for general elections –"peaceful, democratic and pluralistic"– scheduled for May 2020. However, there is still a long and difficult road ahead to consolidate internal peace and regional stability: the polls will determine whether Abey Ahmed is the one chosen to lead this journey. The countdown has begun.

### Keywords:

Ethiopia, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, ethnic rivalry, federal system, economy, general election, Nobel Prize

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## **Introduction: an unexpected and uncertain turn for Ethiopia**

In February 2018, Ethiopia began writing an unexpected chapter in its history. Following the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn –forced by serious social unrest, as well as strong pressure from the international community in the face of bloody government repression– the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as the new leader of the nation's future generated enormous expectation among the majority of the Ethiopian population, frustrated by decades of bad governance, underdevelopment and social injustice. Since coming to power, Prime Minister Abiy decreed sweeping measures to restore public freedoms, released hundreds of imprisoned politicians and journalists, and legalized armed opposition groups exiled outside the country; while launching an ambitious program of political, economic and social reforms to consolidate a pluralistic and inclusive democracy in Ethiopia as a basis for development. In addition, and as the main axis of a renewed foreign policy, it resumed diplomatic relations with Eritrea, which –after the end of the armed conflict in 2000– were blocked by a border dispute and immersed in a fragile situation of "no war, no peace".

However, instead of progressing towards the pacification and stabilization of Ethiopia, the reforms of the Abiy government have exacerbated ethnic clashes throughout the country, as well as the claims of the federal regions, which denounce the enormous social inequality, the poor distribution of wealth and Addis Ababa's interference in peripheral affairs. Although this scenario of growing instability was foreseeable –for internal political and economic reasons, but also due to external factors–, the Prime Minister remains firm in his intention to hold democratic, pluralistic and peaceful elections in May 2020. While preparing the way, and as fundamental aspects of his "road map", he continues with his proposals to, on the one hand, reform the failed federal system established in the 1994 constitution; and, on the other hand, to consolidate sustainable economic growth as a basis for the equitable development of the whole country.

In this scenario of light and shadow, and in the face of the great challenges facing Ethiopia's future, the last support for Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came from abroad on October 11, with the awarding of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize. An acknowledgement –in the words of the Norwegian Nobel Prize Committee– of "his determined initiative to resolve the border conflict with neighbouring Eritrea. The prize is also meant to recognise

all the stakeholders working for peace and reconciliation in Ethiopia and in the East and Northeast African regions”<sup>1</sup>. Undoubtedly, the short and meritorious political career of the reformist Abiy has been a turning point –unprecedented and hopeful– in the recent history of the country and the East African region. However, it is equally true that it has opened up an uncertain process full of risks and obstacles, which is determining the country's present and –much more importantly– whose final outcome will condition its future.

With these parameters, this analysis looks in depth at the achievements of the award-winning Prime Minister, both domestically and beyond national borders; it also assesses the main challenges he must face –in the midst of a spiral of political turbulence and social conflict– to ensure that the 2020 elections become the fundamental link in ensuring Ethiopia's democratization and development. Otherwise, and far from the scenario of peace that everyone hopes for, the defeat of Abiy Ahmed in the forthcoming elections – or even the mismanagement of his victory– could lead to a spiral of instability and chaos with unpredictable consequences for the country and the whole region.

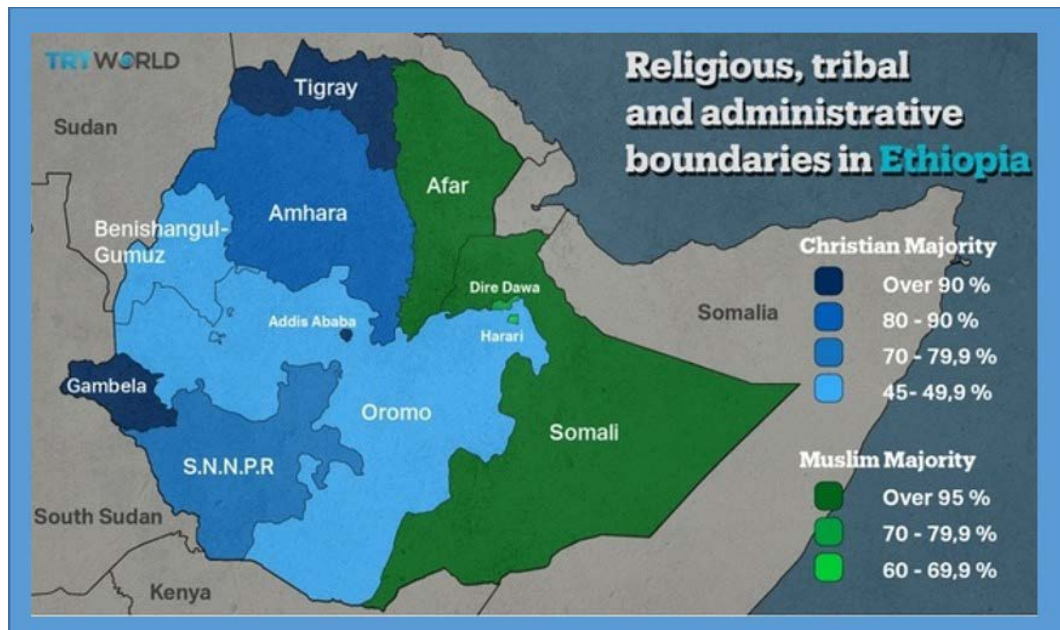
### **Abiy: the surprise leader and his internal fronts**

In mid-February 2018, after almost three years of cruelly suppressed social unrest by the security forces, Hailemariam Desalegn surprisingly resigned as Prime Minister of Ethiopia; and also as leader of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), positions he had held since the death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in 2012. His resignation came when the country was immersed in a repressive state of emergency –the second since 2016– and in the midst of a political crisis within the EPRDF, a coalition of four parties based mostly on ethnic representation: the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP), the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP) and the Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement (SEPDM)<sup>2</sup>, which since 1991 – after the overthrow of the dictator Mengitsu– had led the country's designs and a population of over 105 million.

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<sup>1</sup> *Nobel Peace Prize: Ethiopia PM Abiy Ahmed wins*. BBC, 11/10/19. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50013273>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

<sup>2</sup> All the acronyms of the political parties correspond to their English denomination.



**Figure 1: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.**

Source: TRTWORLD

In 2016, popular demonstrations in Addis Ababa spread throughout Ethiopia, with particular emphasis on the regions of the two majority ethnic groups: the Oromo (35 per cent of the population), who denounced the permanent restrictions on their public freedoms, as well as the paralysis of state urbanization plans that sought to extend the territorial limits of Addis Ababa; and the Amhara (27 per cent), who demanded democratic reforms and more public investment for their neglected region, always subject to the abuses of the omnipresent power of the Tigrinya (6 per cent). This growing and unstoppable social protest, together with the fierce international criticism of the brutal government repression (hundreds killed in just three years, and tens of thousands arrested), exacerbated the internal squabbles within the EPRDF coalition—aggravated by the death of Meles Zenawi—, which called for a profound reform to delimit the Tigrinya domain—all Ethiopian Prime Ministers since 1991 belong to this ethnic group—to end the excessive personalist policies in the management of the country and to redefine the relationship of the central power with the nine Ethiopian regions, which suffer the constant and unbearable interference of Addis Ababa in their autonomous responsibilities.

In this convulsed scenario, and after failing in his numerous attempts to turn the country around, Hailemariam Desalegn –accused by the political elite of a total lack of leadership– decided that it was time to give way to a "new leader" capable of "carrying out reforms that will lead to sustainable peace and democracy"<sup>3</sup>.

Barely a month later, the EPRDF took a radical and unexpected turn, although not without internal criticism, by electing OPD President Abey Ahmed –an unknown figure to most Ethiopian society, but with an intense military and political career behind him<sup>4</sup>– as leader of the coalition and, consequently, prime minister of Ethiopia after the approval of the parliament, which finally arrived on April 2. For the first time, an Oromo politician –with 47 years old, the youngest national leader on the African continent– became responsible for Ethiopia's future. The reaction of the vast majority of Ethiopians was as enthusiastic as it was excessive, and –in this way– Abiy found himself with immense support from the population –especially in the Oromia region– which forced him to react, with total immediacy, to stop the alarming political, economic and social drift that threatened to plunge the country into absolute and violent chaos.

And the new prime minister did not fail to live up to expectations: in his inaugural speech, a committed declaration of good intentions, he stressed that "in a democratic regime, the

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<sup>3</sup> *Ethiopia PM Hailemariam Desalegn in surprise resignation*. BBC, 15/02/18. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43073285>. Date of consultation: 27/09/18.

<sup>4</sup> Abiy Ahmed, at the age of 15, joined the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OOPD). In 1993, he joined the Ethiopian army, and participated in the war with Eritrea (1998-2000) as head of an intelligence unit. Years later, after reaching the position of lieutenant colonel, he completed his bachelor's degree in computer science at Addis Ababa University. In 2008, he founded the Ethiopian Security and Information Agency, of which he was director until 2010, when - in addition to leaving the army - he was elected to parliament for the Oromia region. Between 2015 and 2016, he was Federal Minister of Science and Technology, until he returned to his home region to become, in October 2017, the president of the OOPD, which he later transformed into the Oromia Democratic Party (ODP). On a personal level, being the son of a Muslim Oromo and an Amharic Christian has led him to the conviction that reconciliation among the more than 80 Ethiopian peoples must be the basis for political and social coexistence in Ethiopia. Fisher, J. *A Shining Example for the Horn? Abiy Ahmed's Surprising Leadership in Ethiopia. Leaders for a new Africa*, chapter 2, pp. 26-50. Available at [https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/ispri\\_report\\_africa2019\\_web1.pdf#page=26](https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/ispri_report_africa2019_web1.pdf#page=26). Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

government must allow its citizens to express themselves freely without fear"<sup>5</sup>, a promise addressed to social movements throughout the country and which underlined his intention to end government repression. At the same time, he coined the term *medemer* –addition or synergy in the Amharic language– as a motto that brings together the three pillars of his government: "a vibrant democracy, economic vitality and regional integration and openness to the world"<sup>6</sup> and as a basis for so-called national reconciliation, in a country where diversity –80 nationalities and 80 languages– has always been a factor of discord and confrontation.

Since then, the changes in Ethiopia have been as rapid as they are extraordinary –starting with the immediate lifting of the state of emergency– which has given the Prime Minister enormous international recognition, as well as massive support from his fellow citizens: "Abiy has been magnanimous, releasing thousands of political prisoners and decriminalizing opposition parties and armed groups that were once labeled as terrorists, including a movement, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which has a much more historic record than the OPD and claims to represent Oromo nationalism"<sup>7</sup>. It also strengthened press freedom –although many journalists criticize that censorship is still in place<sup>8</sup>– defended leaders suspected of corruption –an endemic evil in the Ethiopian administration– and increased the role of women in the social and political sphere, especially by supporting the parliamentary election of Sahlework Zewde as president of Ethiopia –the only one in Africa– and by giving half of the ministerial portfolios to recognized professionals and politicians.

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<sup>5</sup> *Full English Transcript of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's Inaugural Speech. All Things Ethiopia*, 05/04/18. Available at <http://www.allthingsethiopia.com/ethiopia-news/2760/>. Date of consultation: 27/09/18.

<sup>6</sup> *Abiy Ahmed makes his case at World Economic Forum, Ethiopia to host 2020 meeting. ESAT News*, 23/01/19. Available at <https://ethsat.com/2019/01/abiy-ahmed-makes-his-case-at-world-economic-forum-ethiopia-to-host-2020-meeting/>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19

<sup>7</sup> *A Shining Example for the Horn? Abiy Ahmed's Surprising Leadership in Ethiopia. Op.cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Mumo, M. *Under Abiy, Ethiopia's media have more freedom but challenges remain. CPJ*, 29/04/19. Available at <https://cpj.org/blog/2019/04/ethiopia-abiy-ahmed-press-freedom-reform.php>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

Despite all these initial successes, his political leadership –now more challenged both politically and at the community level– has had to come to terms with its early failures. Among others, and mainly, its inability to stop the ethnic and religious confrontations<sup>9</sup>, which have caused more than two million internal displacements<sup>10</sup>; besides overcoming an attempted coup d'état in the region of Ahmara last June, which took the life of the regional president and two generals<sup>11</sup>. In this context of lights and shadows, Abiy is today focusing all his efforts on three areas: the revision of the federal state, which will allow the political reconfiguration of the state on the basis of greater integration and representation of the peripheral regions; economic reform and the consolidation of an industrial structure, to achieve sustainable development of the country and greater quotas of social equality; and, finally, the holding of democratic elections planned for 2020, which –among many other derived things– could mean his revalidation as the maximum leader of Ethiopia.

### ***The reconfiguration of the federal system***

For nearly three decades, Ethiopia's federal structure, enshrined in the country's 1994 constitution, has been defended by the governing coalition, the EPFDR, but always under the dominant power of the TPLF's Tigrigna leaders. As a direct consequence, the country was moving from a strongly centralized regime to an ethnically and territorially based federal system, with the aim of alleviating the strong social divisions that –from the establishment of the *Derg* socialist regime in 1974 to the overthrow of the dictator

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<sup>9</sup> "There is growing concern that Ethiopia's prime minister has failed to address rising ethnic tensions and violence": Gedamus, Y. *Abiy's year one: Ethiopia faces the threat of ethnic conflict*. Aljazeera, 02/04/19. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/abiy-year-ethiopia-faces-threat-ethnic-conflict-190401081955303.html>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

<sup>10</sup> Ethiopia, with 2.1 million internally displaced persons, is among the 10 countries with the highest number of internally displaced persons as a result of conflict and violence at the end of 2018. *World Migration Report 2020*. IOM, 2019. Available at <https://www.iom.int/wmr/>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

<sup>11</sup> *Ethiopian army chief killed by bodyguard and regional leader dead in coup attempt*. The Guardian, 23/06/19. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/23/ethiopia-coup-attempt-leaves-army-chief-shot-says-pm>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

Mengistu in 1991<sup>12</sup>– had increased inequality, underdevelopment and injustice throughout the country. But far from resolving the ethnic discrimination, the state administration –made up of nine regions and two cities with special status (Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa), although oppressively dominated by the TPLF– has aggravated the rivalry between the different communities, while mistrust of the central government has grown, especially on the part of the Oromo and Amhara peoples, who together constitute 62% of the Ethiopian population.

Aware of this situation, Prime Minister Abiy has tried to review the federal system since the beginning of his mandate, with the aim of moving towards national reconciliation and, as a preliminary step, consolidating the division of powers between Addis Ababa and the peripheral regions. However, many people are opposed to opening up this far-reaching debate and renegotiating the distribution of political power, because they fear that it could aggravate national instability; nor are there strong, effective institutions –both political and judicial– to ensure the success of such a far-reaching reform. Moreover, the fact that all regions are administered by ethnic parties generates excessive centrifugal forces – stronger if these parties do not belong to the governing coalition– which are hindering intentions to re-fund the federal system, in addition to worsening the precarious security situation and increasing the number of displacements due to ethnic violence.

In this scenario of growing instability, and despite the enormous discrepancies that prevail in the central administration, Abiy must redouble its efforts to promote trust between the various regions and from these to the government –on the basis of comprehensive and inclusive negotiation–; mitigate inter-ethnic rivalry and alleviate their enormous social and economic inequalities, through a more equitable redistribution of power and wealth; and, finally, convince both sides that national unity –out of respect for diversity– is the only way to ensure Ethiopia's viability.

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<sup>12</sup> After the Ethiopian revolution in 1974, the Provisional Military Administrative Council (CAMP), better known as Derg or Dergue (Council in Amharic), was established, led by a communist military junta, which dismissed and imprisoned Emperor Haile Selassie in 1975 (killed a few months later). In 1987, the Ethiopian People's Democratic Republic was formed and remained under the dictatorial rule of Mengistu Haile Mariam until it was overthrown in 1991 by Meles Zenawi's rebel Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front movement.



### ***Economic and industrial reform as a basis for national development***

Over the past 15 years," says Arkebe Oqubay<sup>13</sup>, a minister and special advisor to Prime Minister Abiy, "the economy has grown by 10.5% annually. Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa, and this means that economic growth is key to reducing poverty and generating employment opportunities (...) For the current Government and our Prime Minister, one of the most important challenges is how to ensure rapid but also equitable growth. To this end, the current government aims to transform state-centred economic development into a free market economy, where industrial development is export-oriented, as Abiy Ahmed himself proclaimed at the World Economic Forum in Davos last January: "Ethiopia is undergoing significant institutional reforms to improve the ease of doing business and to increase our global competitiveness. The private sector should be an integral part of our economy. We are committed to opening up the economy"<sup>14</sup>.

Although the Prime Minister has promoted neoliberalism as the key to economic development, Ethiopia had already begun a profound process of structural and economic reform at the beginning of this century. In 2003, it promoted "a comprehensive industrial development strategy that emphasized preferential treatment for export-oriented and labour-intensive sectors, government investment in infrastructure –and industrial parks– to support rapid economic growth and the development of small enterprises to encourage job creation"<sup>15</sup>. A project largely driven by the need to increase foreign direct investment (FDI) –in 2017, Ethiopia led the way in FDI earnings in Africa<sup>16</sup>– but which has also led,

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<sup>13</sup> Sieteiglesias, E. *Arkebe Oqubay: "Si no se invierte en África, la migración será un asunto primordial para Europa y se crearán condiciones fértiles para el terrorismo"*. La Razón, 01/12/19. Available at <https://www.larazon.es/internacional/20191201/vh2cizdq3faqhajpmbfkytj62u.html>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

<sup>14</sup> Abiy Ahmed makes his case at World Economic Forum, Ethiopia to host 2020 meeting. Op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> *Public policies for productive transformation in East Africa. Africa's Development Dynamics 2019* (pp. 177-203). OECD Development Centre, 05/11/19. Available at [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/africa-s-development-dynamics-2019\\_c1cd7de0-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/africa-s-development-dynamics-2019_c1cd7de0-en). Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

<sup>16</sup> Report prepared by the professional services firm Ernst and Young), which determines that the higher figures in FDI were driven by interest in manufacturing, infrastructure and power generation. *Etiopía lidera ganancias por inversión extranjera directa en África*. Wanafrica News, 31/10/18. Available at

since 2008, to a progressive and excessive growth of public debt (in 2018, 61.04% of Ethiopia's Gross Domestic Product<sup>17</sup>).

However, the economic reforms undertaken by the Ethiopian government to establish sustainable development are confronted –according to Abebe Aemro Selassi, Director of the Africa Department of the International Monetary Fund– with "adverse external and internal factors that weigh on growth prospects. Global expansion is losing momentum (...). In some countries, the vulnerability linked to public debt remains high". In Ethiopia, as in other rapidly growing African countries such as Benin and Senegal, "the public sector must hand over the reins of growth to the private sector"<sup>18</sup>, as Prime Minister Abiy has already advocated by opening or privatising strategic sectors hitherto under state control: telecommunications, energy, aviation, railways and industrial parks. However, neither should it forget that a transcendental factor in guaranteeing the success of its economic policy is that it is backed –as the analyst Giovanni Falge concludes– "by a political agreement between the main ethnic groups. In the absence of a political consensus on how wealth will be redistributed (...), political unrest will undermine the government's efforts to reform the economy"<sup>19</sup>.

### ***Elections 2020: plural democracy and the revalidation of Abiy***

Ethiopia is scheduled to hold a general election in May 2020, which –among other things– will be the ultimate test of social support for Prime Minister Abiy, although the government is obsessed with repeating that this is not the main objective of this election: "The most critical thing is the process itself, not the result, stresses Minister Arkebe Oqubay. We must ensure that the elections are fair, very calm, with all parties accepting the result.

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<http://www.wanafrica.com/destacados/etiopia-lidera-ganancias-por-inversion-extranjera-directa-en-africa/>.

Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

<sup>17</sup> *Sube la deuda pública en Etiopía*. Expansion, 2019. Available at <https://datosmacro.expansion.com/deuda/etiopia>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

<sup>18</sup> *El FMI expone políticas para la recuperación económica en un entorno de elevada incertidumbre*. IMF, 12/04/19. Available at <https://www.imf.org/es/News/Articles/2019/04/12/pr19111-ssa-reo-imf-lays-out-policies-for-economic-recovery-amid-elevated-uncertainty>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19

<sup>19</sup> Falge, G. *Resetting Ethiopia*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, October 2019. Available at <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/resetting-ethiopia>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

This will build on the democratic tradition and the parties will then compete in the next elections, which will be held five years later”<sup>20</sup>.

On the other hand, and with the announced intention of breaking with the importance of the ethnic factor in Ethiopian politics, Prime Minister Abiy has de facto dissolved the omnipresent EPRDF with the creation of the Prosperity Party (PP)<sup>21</sup>. Under these acronyms, three of the four political groups that make up the ruling coalition have merged: the Amhara Democratic Party, the Oromo Democratic Party, and the Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement, as well as other minority political groups; while the People's Liberation Movement of Tigray refused to join a political digression that it describes as an "illegal" merger<sup>22</sup>. For their part, ten opposition parties have also agreed on a joint plan –the details of which have not yet been disclosed– to join forces in the run-up to the elections. Among the signatories of this agreement are the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), once considered terrorist groups and which were legalized as political parties by Prime Minister Abiy after his arrival in power<sup>23</sup>.

A few months before the elections, this controversial manoeuvre by Abiy has been well received by a large part of Ethiopian society: that which considers that the Prosperity Party will not defend the interests of any ethnic group but of the entire Ethiopian people, since it represents the full sense of "unity" that the country demands; but it has also been discredited by many, including members of the Prime Minister's party. Among other reasons, the most critical consider that this formation is not based on a common political ideology; that it minimizes –in an extremely complicated moment– the importance of ethnic representation, of political and cultural autonomy of the regions; and that it can

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<sup>20</sup> Sieteiglesias, E. Arkebe Oqubay, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> Yibeltal, K. *Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed gets a new ruling party*. BBC, 22/11/19. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50515636>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

<sup>22</sup> *Due Process Followed to Establish Prosperity Party - PM Abiy Ahmed*. Ezega News, 28/11/19. Available at <https://www.ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/7489/Due-Process-Followed-to-Establish-Prosperity-Party-PM-Abiy-Ahmed>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

<sup>23</sup> Shaban, A. *Ten Ethiopian opposition parties agree to work together in 2020 polls*. African News, 07/12/19. Available at <https://www.africanews.com/2019/12/07/ten-ethiopian-opposition-parties-agree-to-work-together-in-2020-polls/>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

mean the return of centralism in the country<sup>24</sup>. If Abiy wins the election, he will have to take these considerations into account, especially in order to reconcile national interests with respect for ethnic diversity and the political, economic and social rights of the federal regions. Otherwise, this unifying political initiative –but also fraught with risk– may become the greatest obstacle to Ethiopia's democratic transition.

### **Abiy's strategic alliances and external challenges**

In addition to his domestic reforms, Prime Minister Abiy's new foreign policy has become a major focus of his government programme. On the one hand, through new strategic alliances –especially with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates– and a greater opening to the international market, the Ethiopian leader aims to increase external investment to consolidate sustainable economic growth; and, on the other hand, its particular outlook aims to resolve Ethiopia's long-standing border disputes with Eritrea and Somalia to consolidate peace within and beyond the national borders, in addition to making common cause with Sudan, South Sudan, Djibouti or Kenya in the resolution of their crises and conflicts. All this without losing the confidence of his great international ally, the United States, which –despite the tacit and unwavering support it has always given to Meles Zenawi's regime– now considers the changes sought by Prime Minister Abiy to be essential for the future of the country and the region, and also to continue with the American administration's unwavering fight against jihadist terrorism.

In this international context, advancing the negotiations with Eritrea and reaching a fair agreement with Egypt for the management of the Nile water resource are the two most important challenges for the current Ethiopian government.

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<sup>24</sup> Allo, A. *Why Abiy Ahmed's Prosperity Party could be bad news for Ethiopia*. Aljazeera, 05/12/19. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/abiy-ahmed-prosperity-party-bad-news-ethiopia-191204130133790.html>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19

### ***Ethiopia and Eritrea: slow progress on the 2018 peace agreement***

In 1991, and after a long armed rebellion, the Eritrean and Ethiopian liberation movements overthrew the dictator Mengistu. As a result, Eritrea achieved its long-awaited independence two years later, in 1993. However, the failure to delimit an international border between the two sovereign governments led to a bloody war in 1998, which ended with the Algiers Peace Agreement in 2000: both countries accepted international arbitration to demarcate the common border, which would be "final and binding". But the final decision, taken in 2002, was frustrating for Ethiopia: Badme –the small town where the conflict began– was recognized as part of Eritrea. The Ethiopian refusal to accept the international opinion led to the beginning of a tense period of "no war, no peace", which not only led to the blockage of bilateral relations, but became a destabilizing factor for the entire East African region.

Unexpectedly, everything changed a few months after the renewal of the government in Ethiopia. In July 2018, after dizzying and discreet negotiations, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and President Afwerki met in Asmara to initial a Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship<sup>25</sup> that ended nearly two decades of conflict between the two countries. With this agreement, both governments proclaimed the end of the "state of war" and their intention to "forge close political, economic, social, cultural and security cooperation to promote the vital interests of their peoples"; and, most importantly, they pledged that "the border decision between the two countries will be implemented. Since then, gestures of reconciliation have been made by both sides, including the withdrawal of military forces from the border, the exchange of diplomatic delegations and the opening of land and air routes<sup>26</sup>.

On September 17, the two countries renewed their commitment in Saudi Arabia –a prominent supporter of the agreement, along with the United States– in the presence of

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<sup>25</sup> *Eritrea and Ethiopia: A Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship*. Official document. Available at <https://eri-platform.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Eritrea-and-Ethiopia-A-Joint-Declaration-of-Peace-and-Friendship.pdf>. Date of consultation: 27/09/18.

<sup>26</sup> Díez Alcalde, J. *Etiopía-Eritrea: nueva oportunidad para solventar un largo conflicto fronterizo*. Panorama Geopolítico de los Conflictos 2018. IEEE, chapter 4, pp. 83-109. Available at <http://www.ieee.es/publicaciones-new/panorama-geopolitico-de-los-conflictos/2018/PGC2018.html>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and representatives of the African Union and the United Arab Emirates. Furthermore, and as a predictable ripple effect of the agreement in the whole region, only one day later and in the same scenario, the presidents of Eritrea and Djibouti committed themselves to re-establish dialogue to solve the territorial disputes they have been having since 2008<sup>27</sup>; and, in December 2018, the first visit of the Eritrean president to Somalia meant the re-establishment of bilateral relations, which were blocked by the alleged support of the Eritrean Afwerki government<sup>28</sup> to Somali Islamist groups .

However, on the first anniversary of the signing of the historic agreement –which has brought Prime Minister Abiy the greatest international recognition with the award of the Nobel Peace Prize–, its final implementation is still far from meeting the expectations it raised. On the contrary, today the frustration of the population on both sides of the border is growing alarmingly. For a time, many believed the words of Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki during his first visit to Ethiopia following the bilateral agreement: "anyone who thinks that Ethiopians and Eritreans will be separated from each other from now on is naive<sup>29</sup>. The free movement of people and goods between the two countries –by land and air– was undoubtedly the most visible sign of the restoration of bilateral relations until, in July 2019, Eritrea finally closed the land borders, without any official justification and when the joint commission agreed in the agreement had not even been established.

For the Eritrean government, which has shown no sign of political openness during this time, it seems that so much freedom has become a heavy burden that interferes with the iron grip it still has on the population; although no great effort has been made from the Ethiopian side to reverse the paralysis of the agreement, more concerned now with

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<sup>27</sup> *Ethiopia, Eritrea sign peace deal at Saudi Arabia summit*. Al Jazeera, 17/09/18. Disponible en <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/ethiopia-eritrea-sign-peace-deal-saudi-arabia-summit-180917055913813.html> y *UN chief welcomes meeting between leaders of Djibouti and Eritrea*. Naciones Unidas, 18/09/18. Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/09/1019642>. Date of consultation: 27/09/18.

<sup>28</sup> *El presidente de Eritrea llega a Mogadiscio para reunirse con líderes de Somalia y Etiopía*. Reuters/EP, 13/12/19. Available at <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-primer-viaje-oficial-presidente-eritrea-somalia-reunirse-lideres-etiofes-somalies-20181213090909.html> . Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

<sup>29</sup> *Eritrea's Leader Visits Ethiopia for First Time in Over 20 Years*. AP, 14/07/18. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/14/world/africa/eritrea-ethiopia-afwerki-abiy.html>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

resolving its internal problems than with strengthening stronger and closer relations with its northern neighbour<sup>30</sup>, when no progress has been made either on the border demarcation agreed in 2002. To a large extent, as analyst Susan Stigant points out, "peace has been maintained within the political elites and between Presidents Abiy and Isaiiah, but while individual relationships are important, they are insufficient to build peace. Even if they deteriorate, they can pose a risk to maintaining peace and preventing a return to conflict in the medium term"<sup>31</sup>.

Undoubtedly, and although the opening of relations between the two countries has promoted Eritrea's negotiations with Somalia and Djibouti, it will be necessary to strengthen dialogue - agreements on trade, taxes, foreign exchange, security and nationality - and open up new channels of understanding in order to clear up any doubts about the viability and stability of the bilateral agreement, which is essential for strengthening regional stability: "the award of the Nobel Prize –says the director of Vanguard Africa, Jeffrey Smith– should encourage Prime Minister Abiy and the new regime in Ethiopia as much as, if not more than, the progress already achieved"<sup>32</sup>.

### ***Ethiopia's Great Dam of the Renaissance, and the convulsive crisis with Egypt***

Beyond the border disputes with neighbouring countries, the construction of the Great Dam of the Ethiopian Renaissance (GERD) on the Blue Nile has become the major factor in the dispute between the Ethiopian and Egyptian governments –even a latent threat to regional peace– and at the same time, also the most complex test to demonstrate the negotiating and pacifying spirit of Prime Minister Abiy. On the one hand, Egypt stresses that the implementation of the dam is an unbearable threat to the survival of the country

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<sup>30</sup> Kidane, S y Plaut M. *Eritrea and Ethiopia: A year of peace, a year of dashed hopes*. African Arguments, 08/07/19. Available at <https://africanarguments.org/2019/07/08/eritrea-and-ethiopia-a-year-of-peace-a-year-of-dashed-hopes/>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

<sup>31</sup> Stigant, S. y Phelan, M. *A Year After the Ethiopia-Eritrea Peace Deal, What Is the Impact?* United States Institute of Peace, 29/08/19. Available at <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/08/year-after-ethiopia-eritrea-peace-deal-what-impact>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

<sup>32</sup> Taylor, A. *Why Eritrea didn't win a Nobel for its peace accord when Ethiopia did?* The Washington Post, 11/10/19. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/10/11/why-eritrea-didnt-win-nobel-its-peace-accord-when-ethiopia-did/>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

and its population; while Ethiopia does not want to give up a project that is essential for national development. However, as the journalist José Naranjo rightly states, the Ethiopian dam "is one of the most ambitious projects being developed in Africa, but its path is strewn with dangers"<sup>33</sup> because, among other consequences, it will change the agreements on the exploitation of the Nile's water resources –signed by the United Kingdom as a colonial power with Egypt and Sudan– which have prevailed for almost a century, and of which Egypt has been the great beneficiary.

Under the government of Meles Zenawi, in 2011 Ethiopia began construction of this dam, which will provide 6,000 megawatts of electrical power and is scheduled to be fully operational by 2022, after a long and contentious period of filling. Since the beginning of the work, its construction –financed by 30% by China and awarded to an Italian construction company– has become a matter of national pride, and even the officials have accepted the reduction of their salaries to be able to pay for this huge project. Faced with the more than predictable controversy that its implementation was going to generate, the Ethiopian parliament ratified a treaty<sup>34</sup> that contravened the agreements of the colonial era (1929 and 1959): agreements that distributed the waters of the Nile between Egypt and Sudan –more than 90% of the total flow of the river– and, in addition, gave Egypt the right to veto any dam that affected the river's water supply<sup>35</sup>.

In reaction, then Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi –after noting that Ethiopia was diverting the Blue Nile– opposed the Ethiopian parliamentary treaty as well as the

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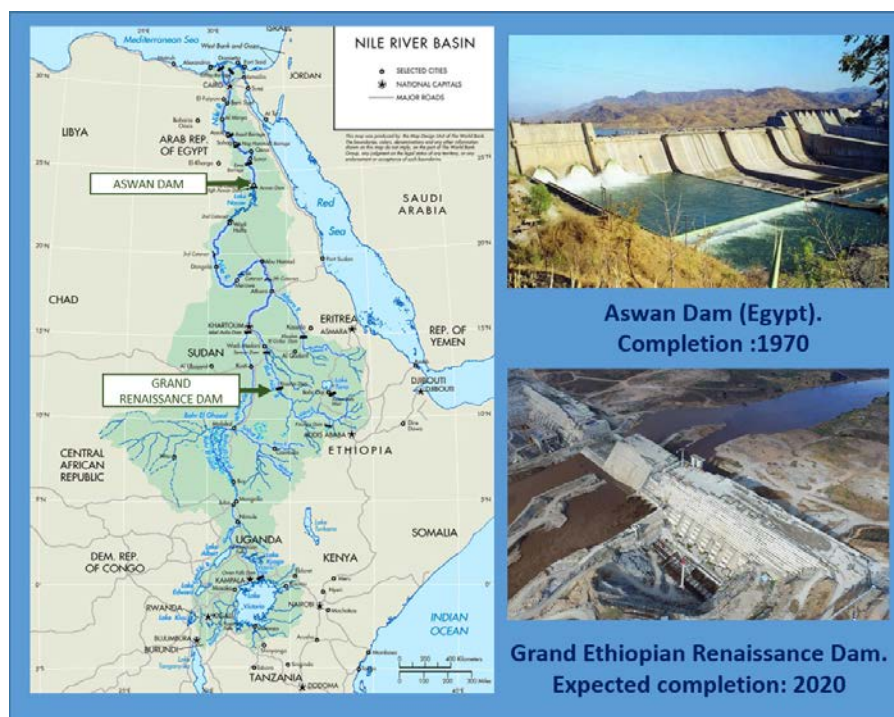
<sup>33</sup> Naranjo, J. *La batalla por la gran presa del Nilo amenaza con desatar una crisis regional*. El País, 06/10/19. Available at [https://elpais.com/internacional/2019/10/04/actualidad/1570187656\\_201122.html](https://elpais.com/internacional/2019/10/04/actualidad/1570187656_201122.html). Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

<sup>34</sup> *Ethiopia ratifies River Nile treaty amid Egypt tension*. BBC News, 13/06/19. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-22894294>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

<sup>35</sup> In 1929, Egypt and the United Kingdom -representing their upstream colonies- signed a pact that granted the Arab country most of the 84 billion cubic meters that reach the lower part of the Nile River annually. Subsequently, in 1959 - three years after Sudan's independence from the British metropolis - the 1929 agreement was amended, with the final allocation of 55.5 billion cubic metres to Egypt and 18.5 billion to Sudan. This colonial agreement has governed the distribution of the Nile's water resources until today and, at the same time, has prevented the rest of the countries that make up the basin of this African river from using the river's resources. Prior to this, in 1902, Ethiopia signed another agreement with the United Kingdom by which it undertook not to carry out work affecting the river watercourse, except if there was a prior agreement between the two nations. Today, Egypt and Sudan claim that the 1929 agreement affects not only the former British colonies, but also Ethiopia under the 1902 pact.



achievement of a mega-project that would have devastating social and economic damage to the country. In fact, according to their own assessment, the dam would mean a 25% reduction in the supply of drinking water in Egypt: a grievance which, as some Egyptian politicians argued, was reason enough to trigger an armed conflict with Ethiopia<sup>36</sup>. Sudan, for its part, has been less combative, as it could benefit from the energy produced by the Ethiopian dam and the effects of the water reduction would be less harmful than for Egypt; while the other countries of the Nile basin (Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo and Southern Sudan) have shown their full support for the Ethiopian project, while supporting the revision of the arbitrary colonial agreements. This poses an extremely threatening scenario for Egypt, which could see its water supply definitively reduced if all the countries bathed by the Nile decide to develop their own irrigation and hydroelectric power generation projects.



**Figure 2: Egypt-Ethiopia: dispute over the water resource of the Nile River.**

Author's elaboration

<sup>36</sup> Mahher, A. *Egyptian politicians caught in on-air Ethiopia dam gaffe*. BBC News, 04/06/13. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-22771563>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

In the Declaration of Principles signed in Khartoum (Sudan) in 2015, the Presidents of the three countries –then Al Sissi, Al Bashir and Hailemariam Desalegn– agreed, on the basis of mutual cooperation and peaceful resolution of disputes, to share the water resources of the Nile in an equitable and reasonable manner, and to implement the results of the Technical Committee according to the considerations of the International Panel of Experts, with special attention to the initial filling of the dam and to the safety of the dam<sup>37</sup>. This Declaration was a major breakthrough after four years of tension between Egypt and Ethiopia; however, for the Egyptian government, the fact that there was no clear reference to its historical rights over the waters of the Nile, nor was there any guarantee that the storage capacity of the Ethiopian large dam would be reduced, was an excessively onerous toll. Therefore, only the translation of the principles of understanding into balanced technical agreements would make it feasible to generate trust among the parties involved, share the benefits of the dam and reduce the negative impact of its implementation. A scenario that, despite the many meetings of the tripartite committee, has never shown clear signs of reality.

In November 2017, the crossover of accusations reached its peak and seriousness, although the government of Egypt continued to rule out any military action to resolve the dispute. At the time, President Al Sissi –after warning that an external and independent analysis of the possible effects of the Ethiopian project on Egypt and Sudan was urgent– pointed out that the activation of the dam "will destroy part of their farmland, and this will affect 96 million Egyptians, who already face severe water shortages (...) Water is a matter of life and death"<sup>38</sup>. For its part, the Ethiopian government also considered –on equal terms– that the operation of the dam was a vital issue for national development, and that "they did not need to obtain permission from anyone to use their own natural

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<sup>37</sup> *Official Text: Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan – Declaration of Principles*, 25/03/19. Available at <http://aigaforum.com/documents/full-text-of-egypt-sudan-ethiopia-agreement-on-nile-use.pdf>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

<sup>38</sup> *Egypt warns Ethiopia Nile dam dispute 'life or death'*. AP, 19/11/17. Available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1371430>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

resources (...) as they did not recognize the 1959 treaty since Ethiopia was not a party to an agreement signed in colonial times"<sup>39</sup>.

After multiple and failed meetings of the Nile Tripartite Committee (Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia) –five times in this 2019, of the nine initially scheduled– the negotiations are still in deadlock today, although it is true that political tension has been reduced in recent months and the "drums of war" –for the moment– remain silent. On the margins of the Africa-Russia summit held in Sochi last October, the leaders of Egypt and Ethiopia showed their willingness to resume meetings between the three countries, as well as to consider international arbitration –Putin offered to mediate in the negotiations– to reach a "fair and balanced" agreement on the initial filling of the dam and the final distribution of the waters of the Nile<sup>40</sup>. Despite this, President Abiy reiterates that under no circumstances can the work of the technical committee be interrupted to assess the impact of the project and that this –despite Egypt's unalterable claims– "will benefit the whole region by providing electricity and regulating the flow of the river to prevent flooding"; while President Al Sisi assured that the Nile, "an artery of cooperation, brotherhood and development", should not become a source of conflict but that he would not give up his historic right to a part of the river<sup>41</sup>.

At present, and while the United States has set itself up as the main mediator of this crisis<sup>42</sup>, dialogue is the only way to definitively resolve this complex regional dispute. At the last meeting in Cairo on 2 December last, the parties renegotiated the main differences: in particular, the amount that the dam should be released annually and the need to extend the filling period, all with the aim of guaranteeing water supplies to Egypt

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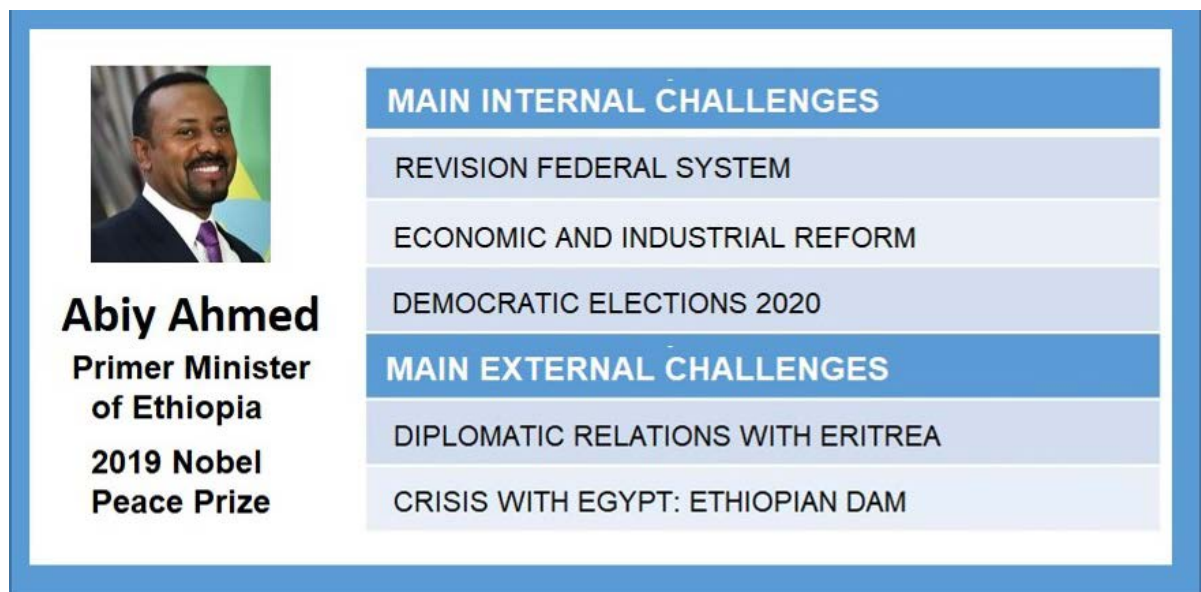
<sup>39</sup> Getachew, A. *Nile dam 'matter of life or death for Ethiopia too'*. Anadolu Agency, 23/11/17. Available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/nile-dam-matter-of-life-or-death-for-ethiopia-too/976799>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19

<sup>40</sup> Sisi, *Ethiopia's PM Discuss Nile Dam on Sidelines of Sochi Summit*. Asharq Al-Awsat, 24/10/19. Available at <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1959711/sisi-ethiopia%E2%80%99s-pm-discuss-nile-dam-sidelines-sochi-summit>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

<sup>41</sup> Gebre, S. y Manek, N. *Ethiopia's Abiy says talks with Egypt can resolve Nile dispute*. Bloomberg, 23/10/19. Available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-10-24/ethiopia-s-abiy-says-talks-with-egypt-can-resolve-nile-dispute>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

<sup>42</sup> *Trump says talks on Nile dam dispute 'went well'*. Aljazeera, 06/11/19. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/trump-meets-african-dignitaries-nile-dam-dispute-191106195315437.html>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.

and Sudan. Most notably, and although they did not reach any final agreement, the three countries agreed on 15 January as the deadline for reaching a final agreement. In this short period of time, it will be necessary to consolidate goodwill as a basis for building trust between the three countries, in particular between Egypt and Ethiopia, to strengthen the diplomatic track and to increase international support, always with the aim of firmly closing this regional dispute on the basis of the Declaration of 2015. It is obvious that the resolution of this crisis will put more pressure on the negotiating capacity of the new Nobel Prize winner Abiy, although –logically– he will not give in to the insurmountable Ethiopian "red line": the completion and implementation –with the start of the filling in 2020– of the pharaonic project that is called to become the support of national development, the Great Dam of the Renaissance.



**Figure 3: Abiy: the surprise leader and his internal fronts**

Author's elaboration

## Conclusion: the countdown to Nobel Prize Abiy Ahmed

There will be people who think," said Reiss-Andersen, president of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, "that this year's prize was awarded too soon, although the committee believes that Abiy Ahmed's efforts now deserve recognition and encouragement<sup>43</sup>. Undoubtedly, the enormous expectation and hope that his arrival in power aroused, as well as the media impact of his early and unprecedented reforms –despite the fact that his political opponents consider them to be as symbolic as they are superficial– have been extraordinary. However, it is also incontestable that the security and stability situation has not improved –quite the contrary– since Abiy took the reins of Ethiopia, as ethnic violence has increased alarmingly and the various peripheral regions have raised the level of their demands for greater autonomy in the face of the planned reform of the federal regime.

From this perspective, the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Ethiopian Prime Minister –as was already the case with President Obama in 2009– could be considered a preventive measure to strengthen his leadership at home and also to boost his peace efforts abroad. Despite this, it is impossible to predict the degree of influence that this – perhaps disproportionate– international recognition will have on Ethiopian voters, who in principle are more concerned with solving their daily problems: security, justice and development, than with celebrating the external support that Abiy Ahmed, now a candidate in the elections planned for May 2020, is attracting. However, it is indisputable that this outstanding award is intended to encourage the wave of democratisation –never without risk and inevitable episodes of instability– that is spreading not only in Ethiopia but in many other countries on the African continent; it also underlines the urgent need to empower civil society through their active participation in the political, economic and social reforms of their respective countries.

However, the countdown has begun, and the Prime Minister has only five months to regain the confidence of the population –at a time when his initial prestige is clearly declining– and to receive the support of a prominent majority of Ethiopians, which will give him sufficient legitimacy to complete the democratization of Ethiopia on the basis of essential national reconciliation, a new federal regime agreed upon with the peripheral

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<sup>43</sup> *Nobel Peace Prize: Ethiopia PM Abiy Ahmed wins*. Op.cit.

powers and the different ethnic groups, and more equitable economic growth. The road to peace and stability in Ethiopia and East Africa will be long and tortuous, but –beyond the outcome of the electoral process– it is unquestionable that Abey Ahmed will go down in history as the architect of having started this journey. For the sake of the Ethiopian and regional population, it would be desirable that their effort obtains the results that their determination deserves.

**Author's note:**

On 10 December, the official ceremony for the awarding and acceptance of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize was held at Oslo City Hall (Norway). The words of Berit Reiss-Andersen - chair of the Norwegian Nobel Committee - and the award-winning Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed deserve to be read and better remembered:

**Berit Reiss-Andersen**<sup>44</sup>: "By recognizing your work and awarding you the Nobel Peace Prize, we are not expressing our opinion on how, or if, you should lead the Ethiopian people in the future (...) You have chosen a path that we believe will consolidate peace and prosperity in your country".

**Abiy Ahmed Ali**<sup>45</sup>: "I accept this award on behalf of Africans and citizens of the world for whom the dream of peace has often become a nightmare of war (...) Peace requires good faith to grow in prosperity, security and opportunity (...) In essence, *medemer* is an act of peace that seeks the unity of our common humanity. It is to seek peace by practicing the values of love, forgiveness, reconciliation and inclusion.

*Jesús Díez Alcalde\**  
Lieutenant Colonel. IEEE Analyst

<sup>44</sup> Award ceremony speech. Presentation Speech by Berit Reiss-Andersen, Chair of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, Oslo, 10 December 2019. The Nobel Prize, 10/12/19. Available at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2019/ceremony-speech/>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19

<sup>45</sup> *Abiy Ahmed Ali - Nobel Lecture. The Nobel Prize*, 10/12/19. Available at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2019/abiy/109716-lecture-english/>. Date of consultation: 10/12/19.