



# Discussing the 2018/19 Changes in Ethiopia: Asnake Kefale

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The Nokoko journal is committed to a world where people are free from all forms of oppression and exploitation, where respect for individuals' varied differences is maintained, and where everyone can realise their full potentials. NokokoPod is a companion to the journal, covering current African issues. It aims to bring forth new perspectives that broaden, trouble, complicate and enrich current discourses. Edited and annotated versions of the conversations will be made available on the journal website.

*This is the third, and last, of a series that discusses the changes that have taken place in Ethiopia since 2018. The changes have raised many hopes as well as questions. The podcast for this discussion is available on the Nokoko journal website. This conversation took place on March 9th, with Logan Cochrane in Ottawa and Asnake Kefale in Addis Ababa. This version of the PDF has been reviewed by Logan Cochrane and Asnake Kefale. In addition to the conversation, a set of annotations have been added as footnotes so as to strengthen the value of these publications and enable them to act as a resource for listeners and readers who want to have additional context and/or find additional resources on the topics discussed.*

**Logan:** As Ethiopia has gained international attention over the last year, many people have been interested to learn more about the changes that have occurred and that continue to occur in Ethiopia. In our first episode we heard a historical perspective from Professor Bahru Zewde and in our second episode we heard about youth

perspectives from Hone Mandefro. In this third and final episode on the changes that are occurring in Ethiopia, we speak with Dr. Asnake Kefale from Addis Ababa University, who is a professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations. Amongst his publications include a book on federalism,<sup>1</sup> which was a topic discussed in detail in the second episode. In this talk, we are forward looking, seeking to understand the current changes and the future of the current changes. Thank you kindly for joining us.

**Prof Asnake:** Thank you.

**Logan:** Before we delve into the challenges, could you briefly summarize for us what you see as the most significant changes that have occurred in the last year.

**Prof Asnake:** The most significant change is the relaxation of political climate<sup>2</sup> and the releasing of almost all political prisoners.<sup>3</sup> There are no journalists now imprisoned in Ethiopia<sup>4</sup> There is now a conducive condition for opposition political parties. Even those, which were operating out of the country, were allowed to come back to the country.<sup>5</sup> There is a relaxed atmosphere regarding politics. For scholars and critics who have followed Ethiopia over the last 20 years, one of the key criticisms of the EPRDF was the narrowing of the political space.<sup>6</sup> This was because the gradual narrowing of the

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1 Asnake Kefale (2018) *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia*. Routledge.

2 Opposition parties, some of which were based outside of Ethiopia until they were invited to return, have been actively involved in political processes since the change of government in 2018. This is a significant change. See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics/ethiopia-pm-meets-opposition-parties-promises-fair-elections-idUSKCN1NW0Y1>

3 Amnesty was granted to most political prisoners, see: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-prisoners/ethiopia-offers-amnesty-to-recently-freed-political-prisoners-idUSKBN1KA1U0>

4 For more information related specifically to journalists, see: <https://pen-international.org/fr/nouvelles/ethiopia-journalists-released-from-prison>

5 The most prominent of which is probably a violent segment of the Oromo Liberation Front, OLF, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/01/19/the-olf-is-dead-but-its-oromo-struggle-lives/>

6 See, for example:

Abbink, J. (2017). *A Decade of Ethiopia: Politics, Economy and Society 2004-2016*. Brill: Leiden.

Abbink, J. (2006). Discomfiture of Democracy? The 2005 Election Crisis in Ethiopia and its Aftermath. *African Affairs* 105(419): 173-199.

political space. When it came to power in 1991, the EPRDF allowed multiparty politics. It, however, gradually narrowed down the political space and emerged as almost a single party, particularly since the 2015 elections. As regards to the political space, the changes that have taken place in 2018/19, are dramatic and substantial. As I said above, almost all of the political parties, which used to oppose the government from outside of the country, or those that chose the path armed struggle, are now within the country and participating in the political process. This is a major change in the political history of this country.

**Logan:** Do you view that those changes you just described are the demands that the protesters were calling for?

**Prof Asnake:** Regarding the protesters, I think it would be important to see why the protests happened. The protests were massive, particularly in Oromia and Amhara regions.<sup>7</sup> But, they were not as such led by a political party with a coherent list of demands/questions. Initially, the protests were about issues, events, and things that are limited to some parts of the country. Gradually they became wider, and broader issues about democracy and governance were raised. It is equally important to question why the protests happened. One of the key reasons were the narrowing of the political space, there was no avenue for political parties and others to contest the policies of the government.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the space was left for the young people. The protesters were largely coordinated by diaspora activists, using social media. It is a situation that is still evolving. Even now, amidst the reforms, despite the fact that many

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Lefort, R. (2013). The Theory and Practice of Meles Zenawi: A Response to Alex de Waal. *African Affairs*, 112(448), 460-470.

Sisay A. Y. (2012). CSO Law in Ethiopia: Considering its Constraints and Consequences. *Journal of Civil Society*, 8(4), 369-384.

Tronvoll, K. (2010). The Ethiopian 2010 Federal and Regional Elections: Re-Establishing the One-party State. *African Affairs* 110(438): 121-136.

7 For a sense of the scale of the protests, see: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-37564770>

8 There were divergent movements, occurring in different places and for different reasons. Some coalesced around issues specific to ethno-linguistic groups, other to religious groups, and others were political. The dividing lines between these movements were not strict, but sometimes overlapped. In 2017 and 2018, the growing movements resulted in the Government of Ethiopia declaring a State of Emergency, and eventually to the resignation of the Prime Minister, which led to the changes described in this discussion.

changes have taken place regarding the politics of the country, there is not yet a negotiated road map that could help the transition to democracy. This would enable us to understand what is going to happen, and how. One pending question, for example, is what the pace of the reform will be. From the opposition side, there is not a coherent list of demands and expectations. It is, however, very difficult to say that these changes are aligned with the demands of the protesters because there was never a single movement, nor a set of clear demands. The protesters, largely unemployed youth, had demands that included political and economic. It was not, however, a cohesive movement, with clear objectives and demands.

**Logan:** From our past speakers, we heard about challenges that Abiy and his governments are facing. What do you see as the most critical challenge that is currently being faced?

**Prof Asnake:** The period of transition is a period of fluidity. The old political order has not been completely changed and a new political order is not yet established. There is not even a consultation, a negotiation, about the ideology and structures of the new government. In other words, there is still no what people in the political science profession called political settlement. This is not yet in place.

In many places, as we can see now, the power vacuum that was created because of the political changes is being taken up by groups, different kinds of groups, that are trying to flex their muscles. How to provide cohesive leadership is really one of the key challenges of the government and the Prime Minister. It remains to be seen how it will bring the divergent interests of different groups into public policy, consensus-based public policymaking. There are changes, but there are also different kinds of expectations. Expectations that could lead to tensions and also confrontations. Democratization and political changes might mean different things to different people. As a result, there could be different expectations. The period of transition, and specifically leading up to the upcoming elections—we expect that elections in 2020, there will be contestations over different issues. One thing that the political change has brought is the politics of contestation. But the rules of the game for political contestations are not clearly outlined. I think these are the key challenges.

An additional challenge is the economy. The economy was doing very well in the past decade. There was a high level of economic growth. The problem in the economy was about the

division of the dividends of growth. But after the changes, if the political crisis is not going to be managed well, there could be an economic slowdown. If there is going to be an economic slowdown and inflation, the political problem could be even more magnified. The economy will be a critical challenge as well as how to create a consensus around a transition; how to conduct free and fair elections; how to institutionalize the changes. The changes are important, radical in some respects, but unless they are given institutional manifestation, they could not be sustainable.

**Logan:** In that process, do you see one of the tensions being finding maybe a transition or maybe a balance between ethnic federalism,<sup>9</sup> the developmental state<sup>10</sup> and the transition to a more inclusive democracy?

**Prof Asnake:** These things could be complementary. The developmental state, I think, is important for countries like Ethiopia

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9 For additional readings on ethnic federalism, see:

- Aalen, L. (2006). Ethnic federalism and self-determination for nationalities in a semi-authoritarian state: the case of Ethiopia. *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 13(2-3), 243-261.
- Abbink, J. (2011). Ethnic-based federalism and ethnicity in Ethiopia: reassessing the experiment after 20 years. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5(4), 596-618.
- Cochrane, L. and Yeshtila W. B. (2019). Politics and Power in Southern Ethiopia: Imposing, Opposing and Calling for Linguistic Unity. *Language Matters*.
- Mehretu, A. (2012). Ethnic federalism and its potential to dismember the Ethiopian state. *Progress in Development Studies*, 12(2-3), 113-133.
- Mengisteab, K. (2001). Ethiopia's ethnic-based federalism: 10 years after. *African Issues*, 29(1-2), 20-25.
- Tesfaye, A. (2002). Political power and ethnic federalism: The struggle for democracy in Ethiopia. University Press of America.

10 For additional readings on the Ethiopian developmental state, see:

- Vaughan, S. (2011). Revolutionary democratic state-building: Party, state and people in the EPRDF's Ethiopia. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5(4), 619-640.
- de Waal, A. (2012). The theory and practice of Meles Zenawi. *African Affairs*, 112(446), 148-155.
- Lefort, R. (2013). The theory and practice of Meles Zenawi: A response to Alex de Waal. *African Affairs*, 112(448), 460-470.
- Fantini, E. (2013). Developmental state, economic transformation and social diversification in Ethiopia. ISPI Analysis No. 163. Milan: ISPI.
- Planel, S. (2014). A view of a bureaucratic developmental state: Local governance and agricultural extension in rural Ethiopia. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 8(3), 420-437.
- Clapham, C. (2017). The Ethiopian developmental state. *Third World Quarterly*, 39, 1151-1165 <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1328982>
- Dejene, M. and Cochrane, L. (2019). Ethiopia's Developmental State: A Building Stability Framework Assessment. *Development Policy Review*.

where the private sector has a very limited capacity. One of the good things, if you see the policy-making environment of the EPRDF was its high degree of autonomy in the past 27 years. The new government needs economic reform—it is important to rethink about the role of the state, in which direction the developmental state is going develop. Economic reform might include the liberalization and privatization of some major state-owned enterprises, such as the telecommunications monopoly. It may also be important to adopt policies of liberalization as regards finance. However, if the country is going to privatize major state assets and open its doors for multinational companies without considering the adverse impacts of such moves, such moves would hamper long term economic development and might also bring new tensions. It is important to think about the appropriate role that the state plays in the economy.

To come back to the initial question, in my opinion the developmental state, federalism and democracy could be complementary. If the new government choose a more neoliberal kind of economic policy and push aside the demands of communities for equitable economic development and growth, it could bring another round of tension and crisis. If we choose ethnic-based federalism, as framed in the Constitution, this too would bring tensions. The problem of federalism in Ethiopia so far has been that it has been implemented in a manner that divides communities rather than unites them. If we are going to follow a policy of ethnic federalism without having some reforms, it could undermine the democratic transition. Already there are many problems regarding identity, territory, and a lot of other issues. Those problems could be compounded, could be magnified, but on the other hand there is also a desire from some elements within the political spectrum to move away from the ethnic element of federalism. If this idea is pursued as a policy, it would generate its own problems. The future of the country and its stability depend on how the political leaders, civil society and others are going to behave.

**Logan:** This week there have been protests in Addis Ababa and this somehow relates to this question about land and ethnic

federalism to an extent. Could you tell us a little bit about what is happening?<sup>11</sup>

**Prof Asnake:** This relates to the three things that we discussed earlier—federalism, the developmental state, and democracy—all three were responsible for the protest. The Ethiopian government, in the last two decades, in Addis Ababa and in other major regional centers has been implementing a popular low-cost housing program—commonly known as condominiums. The condominiums are heavily subsidized and are distributed for those who are registered for the scheme and were regularly saving money on the basis of a lottery. This was practiced for many years. The protest that had happened was in relation to the boundary between Addis Ababa, which serves as a seat of the federal government and Oromia regional state. Addis Ababa is located at the center of Oromia region and the region is given by the federal constitution certain rights and privileges. The protest was regarding the location of some of the housing complexes, which according to the protesters were built on the land of Oromia regional state. However, it should be noted that the boundary between Addis Ababa and the neighboring Oromia regional state is not clearly demarcated.

The protest should be seen in the context of the ongoing contestation on a range of issues. One of the issues, after April 2018, or even during the protests, was (and is) the status of Addis Ababa and the expansion of Addis Ababa into the neighboring Oromia regional state towns. The city has been expanding—not in terms of geographic jurisdiction—but with regard to its socio-economic influence. Tens of thousands of people live in towns close to Addis Ababa within Oromia regional state and work in Addis Ababa

The relations between Addis Ababa and the neighboring Oromia towns is one of the key issues behind the protests that started in 2015. It is important to note that there was a joint master plan between Addis Ababa and Oromia. Even after the scrapping of the master plan and the political changes, there are tensions about the future status of Addis Ababa. Some Oromo activists contend that Addis Ababa, which they call Finfinee, should be under the Oromia

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11 For additional background, see: <https://addisstandard.com/news-multiple-protests-across-oromia-region-in-wake-of-condo-houses-distribution-by-addis-abeba-city-admin-%EF%BB%BF/> As well as: <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/protest-hits-oromia-over-condominium-handover>

regional state. This position has been recently adopted by the Oromia regional state. But the issue of ‘ownership’ is not really articulated clearly. What does this mean for a multi-ethnic city of more than 5 million people? Should it be brought under the Oromia regional state or remain a chartered city with self-governing powers? The Constitutional formulation for Addis Ababa is different. It is provided in the constitution that it is the seat of the federal government with self-governing powers.

As part of the contestation over the future of Addis Ababa, some activists rallied the youth regarding the issue of the condominium houses, arguing that they were built on the territory of Oromia regional state by displacing tens of thousands of Oromo farmers. They denounced the decision of the Addis Ababa city administration to distribute the housing units. It is difficult to predict how this problem is going to be resolved. What I said above, however, provides the context for the protest. In sum we see the following things in the protest—a bit of the developmental state, the housing project; a bit of ethnicity and federalism; a bit of democracy too, in the form of expression of opinions.

**Logan:** Do you see this, potentially these three big ideas, also being negotiated or navigated in other tensions around, we could say ethnic tensions,<sup>12</sup> between different border areas which are being claimed or requested to shift,<sup>13</sup> or become newly independent regional states,<sup>14</sup> or different claims that we are seeing on the state.

**Prof Asnake:** The problem is that when we see the federal constitution, one of the key principles is ethnic territoriality. Any ethnic group, in order to have autonomous rights, needs to have its own territory. However, the Constitution is very weak in terms of providing protection, providing mechanisms for the protection, of the rights of minorities. Specifically, people who live outside of their territories. The Constitution somehow promotes, not explicitly but implicitly, ethno-nationalism. As a result, we have seen a lot of confrontations since ethnic federalism was formalized in the 1995

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12 In the south, for example, resulting in mass displacement. See: <https://www.irinnews.org/news-feature/2019/02/28/ethiopia-s-neglected-crisis-no-easy-way-home-doubly-displaced-geedeos>

13 See: Cochrane and Mandefro (2019). Discussing the 2018/19 Changes in Ethiopia: Hone Mandefro. Nokoko.

14 As discussed, Sidama will be the first such case. See: <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/11/03/sidama-take-another-step-towards-statehood/>



constitution. Since the very beginning of the utilization of ethnic federalism in politics, we have witnessed territorial and border conflicts between the Oromia and the Somali regional states. In some places even contestations about the identity of communities: Are they Somalis? Are they Oromos? Also, in the north, between Amhara and Tigray. There are communities with shared identities, and there are people living in certain places that are inter-mixed.

The divisive element of ethnic federalism was tempered by the cohesive, leadership of the EPRDF. This was hugely undermined because of the protests since 2015. One of the major factors for the political changes in the politics of this country were the division that emerged within the EPRDF. In the past, contestations over a range of issues including administrative structures used to be decided by the EPRDF leadership. When demands come from the regions, the EPRDF top leadership was in a position to tell its Sidama members, its Oromo members, its Amhara members: "No, this is not the way to behave, and you need to leave this position. This is not the demand of the people. This is the demand of rent-seekers or something else." In other words, a cohesive decision could be made within the party. Now that the coherence within the EPRDF is lost, in many parts of the country there are demands about regional states and boundaries. In many cases such disputes led to conflicts and displacement of people. The capacity of the government to react to these problems is limited. The sheer size of the problem of displacement—more than two million<sup>15</sup> have been displaced alongside with this there are tensions in several places in the country. These are very difficult challenges for the Prime Minister and for the government to handle. Partly, these issues were generated by the Constitution, which allows two kinds of self-determination. One is to have an autonomous structure to administer oneself, such as linguistic rights. Another is that a given ethnic group could demand a separate region, a federating unit. That ethnic group could put a petition for a referendum, as it is currently being done by Sidama Zone. Another is self-determination up to secession. Contestations over these and other issues in some places are not that violent, in some places they are violent. This is a very critical challenge. The solution? Maybe a re-negotiation of the federal structure? Federalism is important. I do not imagine the future of this country without a

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15 For a detailed geographic breakdown of displacement, see: <https://reliefweb.int/map/ethiopia/ethiopia-internal-displacement-december-2018-dg-echo-daily-map-22012019>

federalist system that recognizes the rights of communities, to use their languages, to administer themselves, and to provide them with autonomy. However, we need to also think about such kinds of conflict. Mass displacement and conflict should not happen. There should be a systemic answer for these conflicts. It is also required in order to ensure the rights of minorities wherever they live. Property rights and other rights.

**Logan:** Some people have been calling for a rethink about the timing of the next election.<sup>16</sup> In some cases because the opposition parties may need more time, in other cases because the reform process itself may need more time. Abiy has said that he will continue the election on time<sup>17</sup> and is now in a bit of a difficult position. What do you think will come out of these demands for a delayed election?

**Prof Asnake:** On the one hand, in order to have a good election we need to complete the reforming of the electoral system. A good start was the appointment of a new head to the electoral board, Ms. Birtukan Mideksa, who used to be in the opposition party.<sup>18</sup> She was a judge. She has the reputation and the creditability of being independent.<sup>19</sup> However, that is not enough. The whole electoral board needs to be reformed. I know that the proclamation on the electoral board is being revised, that has been submitted into Parliament.<sup>20</sup> Other laws, regarding the elections are being revised with the participation of opposition political parties. The problem is: will it be possible to complete the reform process before May 2020? The elections are expected in May 2020. Is it realistic to have the elections in 2020? Are we going to have the postponement of the elections? The postponement of the elections would create its own set of challenges and difficulties because the mandate of the EPRDF is going to be over in June 2020. According to the Constitution,

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16 For context on this discussion, see: <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/02/23/elections-first/>

17 See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics/ethiopias-2020-vote-will-be-free-wont-be-delayed-by-reforms-pm-idUSKCN1LA003>

18 For additional detail, see: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46301112>

19 For context on this comment, see: <http://www.tadias.com/11/09/2018/birtukan-mideksa-the-right-person-to-help-build-democratic-institutions-in-ethiopia/>

20 A summary of the draft is available here: <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/draft-proclamation-liberates-electoral-board>

parliament is going to be reconvened in October 2020. What is going to happen if elections are extended? What kind of arrangement is going to be put in place? A transitional government? What would be the reaction of the different political parties? Some opposition parties floated the idea of a government of national unity. That is not realistic. It does not seem realistic given that we have more than 70 political parties. Which parties are going to participate? Which are going to remain outside? How is power going to be shared? These are some of the many uncertainties. In my personal view, it is very necessary to hold the elections by 2020. If there are postponements, it should be the electoral board that determines postponement by a few months. In my opinion, prolonged postponement of the election is going to bring more problems than solutions.

**Logan:** As you mentioned at the beginning, one of the big challenges that the country faces, and anyone who would run it would face this challenge, is the economic one. Including high levels of unemployment, particularly for the youth.<sup>21</sup> Do you get a sense from your students and your engagements and so on that there is a recognition amongst the youth that this is a difficult challenge that will take change over the long term in order to address, as opposed to a political reform that can be handled relatively quickly in Parliament?

**Prof Asnake:** I do not think so. I think this is a very important challenge. However, politicians have not addressed problem. This was partly because of the fact that many politicians were engaged in mobilizing the youth. They were promising the youth that the changes are going to improve their lives. Realistically speaking, the political reforms—changing the government, putting in new laws, creating new institutions—could be achieved within a short period of period. But providing jobs to the hundreds of thousands of young

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21 For additional reading on youth unemployment (although resources are limited at the national level), see:

Broussard, N. and Tekleselassie, T. G. (2012). Youth unemployment: Ethiopia country study. International Growth Centre. Working Paper, 12, 0592.

Mains, D. (2012). Hope is cut: Youth, unemployment, and the future in urban Ethiopia. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Franklin, S. (2015). Location, search costs and youth unemployment: A randomized trial of transport subsidies in Ethiopia. Centre for the Study of African Economies Working Paper WPS/2015-11.

Nganwa, P., Assefa, D. and Mbaka, P. (2015). The Nature and Determinants of Urban Youth Unemployment in Ethiopia. *Nature*, 5(3).

people who every year graduate from college and high schools is going to take a long period of time. The fresh graduates go to the job market, but there are only limited opportunities.

Furthermore, because of the political uncertainties and political mobilizations, in which the youth are central players, a large number of international companies who have invested in the country were adversely affected. Moreover, if the current trend continues, the investment coming to the country will be declining.<sup>22</sup> And, it is going to decline further if the political crisis is prolonged. This will be a very difficult challenge. Until now the political leadership is more interested in satisfying the demands of the youth who are being mobilized by activists. However, the real challenge is how we are going to respond to the real demands of the youth for jobs and a decent livelihood. That is going to take much more time. Recently, there was a talk about the economy in one of the local FM stations, Ethiopia's famous athlete, and businessman, Haile Gebrselassie,<sup>23</sup> was on the show. He made a very good statement. He said: Politics is simple. People say on Facebook and on the radio that a particular political figure spoke this and that. He said economics is not simple. A popular politician or an activist cannot produce commodities that will be exported. And he said unless we are going to do better economically, the country will have difficulties ahead. I share his sentiment.

**Logan:** I think this relates to some of the youth perspectives that we heard, which were challenging Abiy's popularity. At the root of that, many of the concerns were these economic ones; about jobs, livelihoods and maybe a disconnect between some of the more rapid changes that have taken place that required legal or regulatory or appointment changes whereas this economic question may take a decade to really build a new infrastructure, manufacturing base, an industrial base and those sorts of things.

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22 For additional commentary, see: <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/03/18/lemma-pushing-away-investment-will-not-help/>

23 For some context on Haile, one interview on his reflections about leadership (before the transition of 2018): <https://www.sport24.co.za/OtherSport/Athletics/International/haile-gebrselassie-breaking-records-is-much-easier-than-leadership-20171029-2>

**Prof Asnake:** In some places, we have also seen reversals.<sup>24</sup> Some companies, because of insecurity, are moving out. Some jobs that were created are being wiped out. Why? Because of the protests, the mobilizations, and the ethno-national elements related to conflict. This has affected, and will continue to effect, youth employment. Another problem that politicians, activists and others have created are very unrealistic expectations in the minds of the youth. It was thought that if political changes were going to happen, living conditions would be changed for the better. In reality, even in well-functioning democracies, where the economy is good, one election is not going to bring massive change in the lives of people.

**Logan:** One, maybe last of the challenges, but one that is less political or protest oriented but more recent and I would say a concern for the less politically engaged and more just everybody on the street and so on. That is the almost weekly reports of large caches of weapons that are being confiscated.<sup>25</sup> Could you speak a little bit about what's happening.

**Prof Asnake:** This is really surprising. Almost every week we see this. Just two or three days back, there was a truck coming to Addis Ababa, which held about 100 AK-47s. Those weapons were seized by the police. The widespread smuggling of weapons shows the level of insecurity. People are buying weapons at a hefty price, particularly in the countryside. In some regions, such as Amhara, there is a tradition of carrying rifles. The spike in the illicit trading of small weapons could be attributed to the feeling that the government and its

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24 A notable change is the scaling back of investment in Ethiopia by China. See: <https://www.ft.com/content/06b69c2e-63e9-11e8-90c2-9563a0613e56>

25 Examples of these reports (which have mostly been limited to local media reporting): 1,000 weapons and \$10 million cash seized, 2 June 2018 <https://www.africanews.com/2018/07/22/ethiopia-intercepts-about-10m-in-joint-security-operation/>; 53 handguns, 17 July 2018 <https://ethsat.com/2018/07/ethiopia-authorities-seize-illegal-weapons/>; 50 pistols seized, 20 Sept 2018 <https://allafrica.com/stories/201809200303.html>; hundreds of illegal guns seized, 28 Oct 2018 <https://borkena.com/2018/10/28/hundreds-of-illegal-arms-originating-from-sudan-seized-as-oil-tanker-truck-fell-over/>; 50 Kalashnikovs, 20 November 2018 <https://www.ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/6789/Ethiopian-Police-Seizes-50-Kalashnikov-Rifles-in-Debre-Berhan>; 498 guns seized, 1 Jan 2019 <https://borkena.com/2019/01/01/bahir-dar-498-illegal-guns-seized-in-the-residence-of-a-police-commander/>; 4 machine guns and ammunition, 20 Feb 2019 <https://borkena.com/2019/02/20/ethiopian-police-seized-4-smuggled-machine-guns-over-46000-ammunition/>; These are examples of the reports that have been regular over the past months.

security structures are not strong enough to protect people. The smuggling business is large scale even by the standards of the news media reports. It shows the weakening of the security apparatus of the government. How on Earth, from the border areas where these weapons are reportedly coming from, are reaching the central part of the country? There are so many security checkpoints along the way, and how the smugglers were able to pass through all these checkpoints. Either the police manning the checkpoints are not doing their jobs or are being bribed by the arms traders and dealers. This shows the weakening of security apparatus of the government. It also highlights insecurity. We need to take note that some people are also making a lot of money. Probably there is a network, connected all the way from the Sudanese border to the central parts of the country. It appears that the smuggling of the weapons is a large operation, which cannot happen by single operators.

**Logan:** Looking forward, in the months and years that come, particularly up to the election in 2020, are there any critical moments that you are looking for or you are watching that will signal if the reforms are doing what everyone hopes they are doing, or maybe would signal the alternative that they are not?

**Prof Asnake:** Starting from now, if the reforms are going to be sustainable, the government needs to complete the process as soon as possible. The reforming of the electoral institutions, with the participation of the opposition parties is one of the priority areas. Once we have a credible electoral institution and electoral board—from the local to the national level—that would be a very good signal about the credibility of the elections. The government, with the participation of the opposition parties, needs to devise a way for resolution of electoral disputes. My expectation, whether we are going to have an independent, neutral electoral board or not, the next election is like a transitional election. Almost all the political parties now think that they are going to win the elections. There could be contestations about the results of the elections. People and political parties are going to claim that they won they won the elections, but their votes were stolen by the other party. As a result, it is very important to prepare how such contestations and disputes about the results of the election are going to be handled. It is also important to devise ways that will help to ensure a peaceful atmosphere during the campaign. In the past, the major problem for the opposition parties was limited access to state-controlled media. Now, the media landscape is completely changed. We have several

kinds of media outlets. Social media is there. Some of the media are inflammatory. Unless there is a very good code of conduct,<sup>26</sup> and instruments to control the media, they could play a negative role and this could have negative repercussions on the election and its results.

**Logan:** Are there any things that you are looking for that might signal difficulty in the political realm. You have mentioned the Sidama referendum that is coming in the next couple of months and others.

**Prof Asnake:** Are you sure in the next couple of months?

**Logan:** Constitutionally, they have to have the referendum within twelve months of its approval, which would put it before August, I believe.<sup>27</sup>

**Prof Asnake:** There is no movement in that direction from the national electoral board and from the House of Federation.<sup>28</sup> I do not think it would be possible now to hold the referendum, as there is tension in the south. It may be difficult to organize the referendum within the time limit.

A related matter is the census, and how the census is going to be undertaken. It seems the government has decided that it will be undertaken.<sup>29</sup> There are challenges, but it is very important to respond to the challenges, to organize ways to respond some of the challenges and hold the census. I do not think that the government should postpone deciding on difficult issues indefinitely. Elections, the census, and others, may have controversies, but for the fear of

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26 One development, following the recording of this conversation:  
<https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/political-parties-agree-new-code-conduct>

27 For additional context, see:  
<https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2018/07/20/sidama-expect-referendum-on-statehood-within-a-year-after-zone-backs-autonomy-demand/> Also:  
<https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/11/03/sidama-take-another-step-towards-statehood/> Also: <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/01/12/sidama-referendum-should-proceed-without-further-delay/>

28 For commentary on this inaction, see:  
<https://allafrica.com/stories/201902190557.html>

29 After this conversation, yet another postponement was announced:  
<https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/commission-pushes-census-timetable-once-more>

controversies you cannot indefinitely postpone very crucial political exercises.

**Logan:** Before we close off, is there anything that we have not talked about that you think is important that we should—related to all of the changes that are happening?

**Prof Asnake:** I think we have done well. We have covered quite a bit.

**Logan:** Well thank you very much Professor. This was a very interesting discussion and we appreciate your time.

**Prof Asnake:** Thank you for having me.