

Ethiopia's Capital, Once Promising, Finds Itself in Crisis

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ADDIS ABABA, [Ethiopia](#) - This city fancies itself the capital of Africa, the crossroads of the continent, a refined refuge where African leaders gather to address the crises in unruly places like Sudan, Ivory Coast and Congo.

The city's most powerful resident, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, has been deemed one of Africa's new generation of leaders, a rebel turned democrat and darling of the international donors.

But after a months-long political standoff that has turned increasingly bloody, Ethiopia's capital has joined Africa's more ignominious places, becoming the latest continental crisis point to attract the attention of the African Union, which has its headquarters here. Mr. Meles now finds himself criticized as a dictator, not a democrat.

"If the situation deteriorates here, it's a major symbolic failure for the African Union," said Abdul Mohammed, an analyst with the Inter-African Group who huddled with African Union leaders on Nov. 4 to discuss the Ethiopia crisis. "This is the home of the A.U. This is occurring in the A.U.'s backyard."

Quite literally. The African Union's crisis management team did not have to consult a map to find the latest hot spot on this continent. It could look out the window.

Ethiopian security forces fired on stone-throwing protesters in the streets around the African Union's headquarters in early November. Tires were burned in the street. The lot next door to the organization was turned into a makeshift detention center as thousands of opposition supporters were rounded up by the government.

Many have been released, but treason charges have been filed against some, and others are being held in rugged conditions outside the capital.

The discord stems from a democratic transition that has stumbled and fallen flat. The government called parliamentary elections in May and, unlike in the last two elections in 1995 and 2000, actually allowed opposition candidates a chance to campaign.

The election was considered a test of the fledging democracy in Africa's second most populous country. The results were a shock.

The opposition swept seats in Addis Ababa and finished strongly in other urban areas. Little-known candidates managed to oust several powerful government ministers, a sign that many voters had lost confidence in the governing party.

"The beauty of democracy is people have started to tell even the ruling party they can vote it out if it does not address its concerns," said Bereket Simon, a top aide to Mr. Meles, putting the best possible face on the surprise election results.

After weeks of controversy over those results, the government announced that it had won 296 seats in the 547-member Parliament, with the opposition taking 176 seats, far fewer than the opposition believed it was due.

Unused to sharing power, the ruling party also hastily changed parliamentary rules so that only a party with 51 percent of the seats could raise an issue for discussion, infuriating the opposition.

When opposition supporters took to the streets in June to claim vote-rigging by the government, security forces opened fire, killing about 40 of them.

The African Union stayed silent, drawing the wrath of opposition supporters who accused it of cozying up to the Ethiopian political elite and acting like the old, ineffective Organization of African Unity, which rarely criticized member governments, no matter how repressive.

Ethiopia's political crisis blew up again on Nov. 1 while the African Union held a summit meeting here. Opposition supporters organized a low-key protest to attract the attention of the visiting African leaders: motorists were told to toot their horns from 8 to 8:30 a.m. for three days in a row.

But heavily armed soldiers were on the streets. Tensions were high and clashes broke out. Soon, soldiers were firing on demonstrators, who were heaving rocks, smashing vehicles and burning tires in the road.

The African Union condemned the violence this time and asked Mr. Meles to explain how so many people - 40 or more in the latest bout of violence - died. The chairman, former President Alpha Oumar Konaré of Mali, has met repeatedly with Mr. Meles to discuss the crisis.

Mr. Meles blames the opposition for the violence, accusing it even of hurling grenades at security forces. Infuriated by the protests against his rule, Mr. Meles has accused the opposition of trying to topple the government through demonstrations, which he says he will not allow.

To control the dissent, soldiers and police officers have swept through the city, arresting the top leadership of the main opposition group, the Coalition of Unity and Development.

Similar sweeps have resulted in young men being taken away from neighborhoods where trouble has broken out.

"What we have detained is people who have tried to overthrow the duly constituted government, and that in my view is treason under the laws of the country," Mr. Meles has told the BBC .

Print journalists are also under siege. At least two reporters viewed as sympathetic to the opposition have been detained. Other journalists have gone into hiding, and the authorities took into custody two journalists' mothers as a pressure tactic.

[The Committee to Protect Journalists, a New York group that promotes a free press, has told Mr. Meles in a letter that it is "deeply troubled by your government's harassment and censorship of journalists."]

Alemzurya Teshoe, 25, the daughter of one opposition leader, said that the police raided her home to take away her father and then fatally shot her mother, who was screaming in protest. Ms. Teshoe said the police also shot at one of her brothers, but missed and hit a neighbor instead.

Distraught as she recounted the incident, Ms. Teshoe said neighbors who went to the hospital to recover her mother's body were told that they had to sign a document saying that the opposition party was responsible for the killing. "I was there when they killed my mother," she said, outraged by the request, which was later dropped. "I saw it with my own eyes."

The opposition has said it will not join the Parliament until the government agrees to investigate the killings, release political prisoners and include the opposition on the electoral commission, among other demands. Boycotts of ruling party businesses are also planned. [A strike by shopkeepers and taxi drivers planned for the week of Nov. 7 did not succeed after the government threatened to take away the licenses of those who did not report to work.]

"This was daylight robbery," Hailu Shawel, a prominent businessman who is president of the opposition coalition, said in a recent interview, before his arrest. "The whole machinery of the government went to war to overturn these results."

Despite little tradition of compromise - the word itself does not exist in Amharic, Ethiopians say - negotiation is widely regarded as the only way out of the standoff.

"Africa is littered with the negative consequences of not compromising," said Mr. Mohammed, an Ethiopian political analyst who has been trying to bring the parties together. "The African elite sees compromise as a sign of weakness. It is not. A multiethnic state like this cannot be governed anymore by a one-party state."

What makes Ethiopia's turmoil all the more surprising is that Mr. Meles has been heralded by the West as one of Africa's promising new leaders. He stayed in the good graces of the United States and the European Union, the biggest donors to Ethiopia, even after he and his rival, President Isaias Afewerki of Eritrea, waged a border war from 1998 to 2000 that resulted in a death toll as high as 100,000. Tensions remain high between the countries, with many diplomats fearing that Mr. Isaias may take advantage of Mr. Meles's domestic woes to take aggressive action at the border.

Prime Minister [Tony Blair](#) of Britain picked Mr. Meles, known for his cerebral nature, as a member of his Commission for Africa to help draft a blueprint for building wealth and democracy on the continent. Even after the June killings, Mr. Meles was invited to the Group of 8 meeting in Scotland to advise world leaders.

But with the recent bout of violence, Mr. Meles's image abroad has begun to take a battering.

"Another bloodbath is taking place in Ethiopia," Ana Gomes, the European Union's chief election observer in the May polling, said in a recent letter urging colleagues on the European Parliament to end their chummy approach toward Mr. Meles.