

AFRICA

Ethiopia, in the Midst of a Political Crisis, Foils Coup Attempt

Attempt comes after months of violence amid reforms by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed



Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is shown on television Sunday in this video grab released by Ethiopian television. PHOTO: ETHIOPIAN TV/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By Joe Parkinson

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Ethiopia’s government foiled a coup attempt that killed several senior government officials, including its military chief, underlining the deep challenges facing Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed as he launches a sweeping, but controversial, reform program.

Mr. Ahmed appeared on state television wearing army fatigues to confirm a coup attempt had been thwarted. The U.S. Embassy said on Saturday night that it was aware of reports of gunfire in Addis Ababa but on Sunday the capital seemed calm. The internet, switched off shortly after the coup began, remained offline.

A Ethiopian government spokesman said rebel gunmen launched a coordinated assault shortly after 9 p.m. local time on Saturday, killing army chief Gen. Seare Mekonnen, who was working to quash the coup from his office in Addis Ababa, and Ambachew Mekonnen, the governor of the regional state of Amhara.

“This illegal attempt should be condemned by all Ethiopians,” Mr. Ahmed said, shown against a plain background that analysts said was chosen to avoid revealing his location. “The federal government has full capacity to overpower this armed group.”

Most of the perpetrators had been arrested by federal forces, including the alleged ringleader, Asaminew Tsige, an Ahmara security chief known as a hard-liner opposed to Mr. Ahmed’s reforms.

The episode shows the seriousness of the political crisis in Ethiopia, a strategically vital nation of 100 million, where efforts by Mr. Ahmed to loosen the iron-fisted grip of his predecessors and push through reforms has unleashed a wave of unrest that has displaced around 2.4 million people, according to the United Nations.

Since rising to power last year after months of political violence, Mr. Ahmed, a former intelligence officer has sought to deliver shock therapy to one of the world’s most entrenched one-party systems. He has released political prisoners, removed bans on political parties, prosecuted officials accused of gross human rights abuses, and re-established relations with neighboring Eritrea. Mr. Ahmed also has pledged to liberalize Ethiopia’s tightly controlled economy and partly privatize state-owned enterprises, including Ethiopian Airlines, one of the world’s fastest-growing carriers.

But the prime minister’s reform agenda has created powerful enemies, including the longtime political and intelligence elite he outflanked to gain power. The premier has delivered many of his speeches behind bulletproof glass after surviving an assassination attempt last year. Last year, Mr. Ahmed said hundreds of soldiers had marched to the office to demand a pay rise had wanted to kill him.

Western diplomats in the capital have voiced support for Mr. Ahmed’s reforms, but cautioned that opening Ethiopia’s system carries danger.

The coup attempt appeared to have its roots in the northern state of Amhara, the second most populous of Ethiopia’s nine semiautonomous regions. Mr. Ahmed is the first Ethiopian leader from the Oromo, Ethiopia’s largest ethnic group. His succession was the first leadership transition in Ethiopian history not precipitated by revolution or an incumbent’s death.

The failed coup attempt comes after months of rising violence ahead of national parliamentary elections due next year. Several opposition groups have called for the polls to be held on time despite the unrest and displacement.

—*Yohannes Anberbir contributed to this article.*

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