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Human Rights Watch Report On Violence In Ethiopia **WorldEthiopiaOromo protestsHailemariam Desalegn**

Ethiopia's prime minister, under pressure following almost a year of deadly protests, appeared to offer an olive branch to disgruntled protesters on November 1.

In a substantial [cabinet reshuffle](#), Hailemariam Desalegn appointed 21 new cabinet ministers. Most notably, Desalegn gave prominent ministerial roles to two members of the Oromo ethnic group, which has been at the forefront of civil unrest against the government since November 2015.

But despite this gesture, there are mixed opinions among analysts as to whether Desalegn's new team will ease tensions in the Horn of Africa country, where the government declared [a restrictive six-month state of emergency](#) on October 9. Oromo protesters seem unlikely to accept the reshuffle in place of a complete change in government.

"Protesters are asking for regime change, not for cabinet reshuffle," says Etana Habte, an Ethiopian PhD candidate at SOAS University in London who comes from Oromia. "This reshuffle has nothing to do with addressing popular grievance in Oromia or Amhara."

Desalegn's reshuffle appears to be in large part motivated by the protests that have [enveloped the regions of Oromia and Amhara](#)—home to the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups, the country's first and second largest ethnicities respectively—over the past year. Initially directed at a later-dropped plan to expand the capital Addis Ababa, Oromos in particular have demonstrated against lack of socioeconomic opportunities and perceived discrimination from the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).



Demonstrators chant slogans while flashing the Oromo protest gesture during Irreecha, the thanksgiving festival of the Oromo people, in Bishoftu town, Oromia region, Ethiopia, October 2. Ethiopia has imposed a state of emergency to deal with waves of protests by members of the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups. Tiksa Negeri/Reuters

In the course of the demonstrations, rights groups estimate that around 500 people have been killed in clashes with security forces. The final straw came on October 2, when more than 50 people were killed in [a stampede at an Oromo religious festival](#). Protesters blamed security forces for firing on the worshippers. A week after the incident, the government imposed the state of emergency, which banned—among other things—diaspora-run television networks, limited the use of social media and prohibited gestures including crossing arms above heads, a sign of solidarity with the Oromo protests popularized by [Ethiopian Olympic silver medallist Feyisa Lilesa](#).

The reshuffle is a sign the government is taking the protests seriously, particularly coming so soon after the 2015 election, in which the EPRDF won 100 percent of the parliamentary seats, according to Ahmed Soliman, Horn of Africa expert at international affairs thinktank Chatham House.

“It signifies clearly that the government feels it has work to do in responding to the protests and unrest that has been happening in the country,” says Soliman. He also points to Desalegn’s recent admission that the country’s electoral system—currently totally dominated by the EPRDF—is [in need of reform](#) as evidence of the government’s attempts to respond to the crisis.

Among the nine ministers appointed from the Oromia region, the two highest-profile beneficiaries of Desalegn’s reshuffle were Workneh Gebeyehu, the new foreign minister, and Negeri Lencho, a journalism professor appointed to the role of communications minister. Gebeyehu formerly served as the transport minister and is affiliated to the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO), one of the four parties that makes up the EPRDF coalition. Many Oromo protesters, however, see the OPDO as a puppet of the broader EPRDF coalition—and in particular the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), which is dominated by the Tigrayan ethnic minority—and Gebeyehu also served as a former federal police commissioner, a sign that he would back a firm stand by the government on dealing with the protests.



Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn addresses a summit at the United Nations headquarters in New York, September 25, 2015. Desalegn appointed nine ministers from the Oromia region in a recent cabinet reshuffle. Andrew Kelly/Reuters

Lencho served as a professor at Addis Ababa University and has previously been critical of the state-controlled media—ranked as [one of the least free in the world](#). Following his appointment, Lencho [told the BBC](#) that he would seek to build a “transparent culture” in Ethiopia’s media.

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Despite appearances, the reshuffle is unlikely to change much, according to Habte. He says that since it seized power in 1991, the EPRDF has remained dominated by the TPLF and has ostracized other ethnic groups, in particular the Oromo. “If this was done 15 years ago, it could have done something,” says Habte. “This is too little and too late.”

Leaving the ethnic element aside, Soliman says that any government would struggle to meet the demands of Ethiopia’s population. The country has an estimated population of 99 million—the second-highest in sub-Saharan Africa—which is currently growing at a rate of 2.5 percent per annum, according to the [World Bank](#). While Ethiopia has been one of Africa’s economic success stories in recent years—it averaged 10.8 percent growth per year between 2003 and 2015, compared to a regional average of 5.4 percent—it has struggled to meet the population’s needs. More than a third of Ethiopians still live below the poverty line, while youth unemployment was estimated at [more than 50 percent](#) in 2013.

Since the imposition of the state of emergency, demonstrations have dwindled in Ethiopia as security forces have cracked down on dissent, [arresting thousands of people](#) suspected of backing civil unrest. But with the anniversary of the outbreak of protests in Oromia coming up in November, Soliman says the reshuffle is unlikely to stem widespread dissatisfaction with the government.

“The state of emergency has taken the sting off some of the recent protests, but it’s beholden on the government to find a more nuanced way of dealing with protests,” he says. “I wouldn’t be surprised to see commemorations of the anniversary and further protests in Ethiopia.

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