

## **Ethiopia Insight - Analytical Reporting to Improve the Federation project ('ARIF')**

### **I. Project summary**

In light of the worsening violence in Ethiopia that is largely driven by disputes related to identity, resources, and power, *Ethiopia Insight* aims to produce a series of in-depth analytical reported publications relating to the federal system that explain the drivers of the deadly instability and offer constructive suggestions on addressing related issues.

As a journalistic-academic collaboration, the two-year ARIF (*'arif'* means 'good' in the Amharic language) project will boost the free exchange of ideas in Ethiopia. It will also do this by providing an inclusive platform for a cross-section of Ethiopians to contribute to public discussions relating to these critical issues and any upcoming constitutional reform program.

ARIF will produce online text articles and audio-visual materials to be published on the *Ethiopia Insight* website. The ARIF project will include an advisory panel of Ethiopian and foreign experts specializing in federalism and other relevant academic disciplines.

### **II. Project Background**

The shift of national power dynamics in 2018 came with the promise of democratic reforms. But, the three years since have been marked by serious instability across the country, the major one being the civil war in Tigray region that began in November 2020 and spread into neighboring regions in July 2021. Furthermore, deadly armed conflicts have been prevalent within the Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Southern Nations regions, as well as between the Afar and Somali states.

Given the worsening situation, improved coverage of Ethiopian affairs is more pressing than ever. The issues driving political violence across the country are complex and multifaceted, the depth of which cannot easily be captured in straightforward, news wire-style reporting of events. *Ethiopia Insight* aims to fill this gap by producing a series of in-depth analytical reported articles.

Many of the conflicts in Ethiopia, such as between the Tigray and federal governments, are rooted in disputes related to the multinational federal structure of the country, which was prescribed by the 1995 constitution. According to its defenders, the adoption of multinational federalism was a legitimate attempt to rectify historical injustices experienced by many marginalized groups. To this end, ethno-linguistic communities were given the right to govern themselves, vote for statehood within the federation, as exercised in Sidama, and even ultimately to secede from the federation solely via self-determination processes.

Critics argue that the federal structure and the focus given to group rights has weakened the country's unity. Defenders accuse Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of working to dismantle the ethnic-based federation as part of efforts to centralize power. To many of them, the war with the Tigray government and other ethnic-based

insurgents such as the Oromo Liberation Army result in part from the federal leadership's alleged desire to do away with key pillars of the ethnic-based federal structure.

The country's 11 semi-autonomous regions and two chartered cities, as well as many lower tier administrative areas, have problems caused by contestation over issues such as power sharing, language rights, territorial boundaries, degrees of autonomy, and resource distribution.

Nationally, there are also ongoing debates on those issues as well as over, for example, official demographics, federal languages, federal subsidies, and clauses in the constitution such as on land ownership and ethno-linguistic groups' secession right. The articles to be published under ARIF will examine how federalism-related issues impact Ethiopian people and their livelihoods, while also offering suggestions on how to create a more robust and harmonious federation.

Resolving disagreements over the federal dispensation is central to any political negotiations intended to get Ethiopia's transition back on track and also to any constitutional reform process. A failure to do so may contribute to a disastrous and accelerated fragmentation of a federation that is home to more than 110 million people. On top of the unprecedented humanitarian crisis that the collapse of the federation will result in, it will also lead to the further destabilization of the Horn of Africa.

### **III. Overall Objective**

The two-year ARIF project will investigate the causes and nature of political violence in Ethiopia, particularly with a view to highlighting potential improvements to the make-up and functioning of the federal system. The project aims to positively impact political negotiations and constitutional reform programs.

A broader objective of ARIF is to strengthen *Ethiopia Insight's* role as an inclusive voice in Ethiopia's media landscape by striving for maximum objectivity in our coverage.

### **IV. Specific Objectives**

The **first** objective is to improve inclusivity by reaching a wider audience of Ethiopians on issues that could feed into a constitutional reform debate. Given how polarized public discourse in Ethiopia has become, there is value in providing a platform for Ethiopians from all communities and of all political persuasions to be heard. These voices will be supplemented by insights from Ethiopian and foreign academics and practitioners.

The **second** objective is to increase our journalistic capabilities in Ethiopia, which will contribute to increased public scrutiny of decision-makers during the transition.

The **third** objective is to unpack the complex questions relating to constitutional reform in Ethiopia from an analytical and academic perspective that is informed by our in-depth reporting of relevant events and issues.

## **V. Activities**

We seek to build a more comprehensive investigative reporting element to *Ethiopia Insight* through pre-reporting training and mentored reporting. We will improve coverage by providing impartial, inclusive, and analytical journalism.

Two virtual workshop-based approaches will be taken to increase the reporting capacities at *Ethiopia Insight*:

First, to link reporting on the constitutional reform theme with analysis on how disputes related to federalism fuel chronic violence through expert discussions.

Second, an investigative reporting element is included with the wider aim of upholding transparency during the country's transition to democracy and greater market liberalization. Doing so will include training on the use of open source materials to boost information-gathering.

## **VI. Impact**

The ARIF project will strengthen independent media in Ethiopia, which will then positively influence political developments, particularly around any upcoming reforms impacting the functioning of the federal system and the constitution.

It will also ensure that journalists are well-positioned to keep the transition in line with democratic values, and, along with better informed readers, hold authorities accountable.