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The Prospects and Significance of the Political Transition in Ethiopia

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Ethiopia, the second most populous African state and one of the world's fastest-growing economies, is facing the prospect of major internal reforms and revision of its foreign policy. Its peace offer to Eritrea after 20 years of conflict is the first signal of these changes. The success or failure of the reforms will determine the regional position of one of Poland's most important African partners.

Internal Context. On 2 April, the Ethiopian parliament approved 41-year-old Abiy Ahmed as prime minister, making him Africa's youngest leader. His nomination was the culmination of the erosion of the authoritarian system established in 1991 in which state institutions were effectively controlled by the Tigrayan minority (6% of the population), which dominated the Amharas (27%) and Oromos (34%). On the central level in that system was maintained the fiction of representation of regions and ethnic groups in the ruling coalition, dominated by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Protests in the regions that began in 2015 allowed the official ethnic parties to free themselves from their created role to became real opposition and promote new, charismatic leaders. In February, the prime minister resigned and more than 6,000 political prisoners were freed. Ahmed took power as the first leader of a party representing the Oromo, a traditionally marginalised people.

Ethiopia's International Position. Ethiopia has an active foreign policy in the region. It hosts the most important African Union institutions, has intervened militarily in Somalia, where it cooperates with the EU and the U.S. to combat terrorism, and supports the Eritrean opposition. It provides the bulk of soldiers for the UN mission on the border between Sudan and South Sudan and mediates peace negotiations in the latter. About 900,000 refugees from the region shelter in Ethiopia. The country also has long been in conflict with Egypt, which is afraid its water security is threatened by the construction of the Grand Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile in Ethiopia. Sudan supports Ethiopia in this undertaking and the two countries have struggled to appease the Egyptians.

China is Ethiopia's largest trade partner, with trade volume of $5.1 billion in 2017 (compared to the EU's $3.8 billion) and largest source of investment ($4 billion in the last 20 years). Ethiopia is one of Africa's biggest recipients of U.S. and European aid. The EU supports its development through food security, health, and transport governance, and supports strengthened border control. Ethiopia is both a source country for migrants to the Gulf and Europe. Poland maintains close political relations with it, strengthened by mutual presidential visits in 2017 and 2018. Both states are members of the United Nations Security Council, where Ethiopia remains neutral towards conflicts in Africa, for example, on 31 May, it abstained from a vote to expand the list of persons under sanction related to the South Sudanese civil war. Polish companies invest in agriculture (Ursus launched an assembly line of tractors in Adama), modernising information systems (Asseco), and other areas.

Revision of the country's foreign policy after the change of power would have wide-ranging consequences for the region. On 5 June, the prime minister declared that Ethiopia would fulfil its obligations from 2002 resolve the disputed border areas with Eritrea. In 1998-2000, the two countries fought a costly and bloody war. Ethiopia never implemented the provisions of the peace treaty, which kept the conflict alive. That resulted in stagnating Eritrea's economy and mass emigration. Ahmed's visit to Somalia, a traditionally hostile neighbour, as the first Ethiopian leader to do so since 2007 was also groundbreaking. It heralded a shift away from relations based on security concerns towards one of economic partnership. Also, Ethiopia won a prestigious competition with Sudan and Kenya to host the first direct talks between Salva Kiir and Riek Machar, the leaders of the warring factions in South Sudan who haven't met since the war re-erupted in 2016. Talks on 20 June reinvigorated regional efforts to find a favourable settlement. Ethiopia's ability to conduct effective regional foreign policy is threatened by the rise of transnational ethnic conflicts like those between the Oromo and Ethiopian Somalis from Ogaden, which has forced a million people to flee, many to neighbouring Kenya. Tensions also are high in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region, close to Eritrea. The destabilisation of Ethiopia could push both Egypt and Eritrea to cut dialogue in key areas.

The change in leadership is important for Ethiopia's relations with the U.S. and China. On 10 April, the U.S. House of Representatives adopted Resolution HR-128, which for the first time put human rights at the centre of Ethiopian-American relations. The U.S. pressure is meant to support Ahmed in building his political force to pursue reform. It helped him to call off on 5 June the state of emergency that had kept power *de facto* in the hands of the army and intelligence elite. Ethiopia's relations with China have been overshadowed by a scandal involving charges of Chinese invigilation of the African Union Commission (AUC), which were made public in January. China built the AUC's new headquarters in Addis Ababa at a cost of $200 million as a "gift" to Africa and to highlight its partner relationship. In the five years since it opened, so since 2012, every night Chinese-installed computers had sent data to servers in Shanghai. The new Ethiopian leadership skipped China in its first foreign policy moves, showing the decrease in trust in and a new focus on its own region.

Perspectives and Conclusions. To keep power, Ahmed must meet the inflated social expectations for liberalisation and deep political transformation. In this regard, he announced the introduction of term limits on the premiership and started talks with opposition movements, both at home and abroad. At the same time, he must keep the country united and contain the most radical, separatist tendencies among the Oromos, Somalis, and Amharas. To do so, he must move the country away from the system based on ethno-regional parties towards all-Ethiopian groupings like in Nigeria. The success or failure of the reform will be indicated by the satisfaction of the political and cultural aspirations of the Oromo, Africa's biggest ethnic group (35 million). The sentiments of this group will affect the structure of Ethiopian migration to Europe. The most difficult task of the new leader will be to reform the security sector, still dominated by the Tigrayan minority. The TPLF will defend its privileged position and influence on Ethiopian political life and the economy. The historic gesture towards Eritrea proves Ahmed's ability to act independently of the police/military complex. In the long run, it could undermine the Eritrean regime in its current form.

The swift transition in Addis Ababa could enable Poland and Ethiopia to implement plans to further bilateral relations, which include opening an Ethiopian embassy in Warsaw, a Polish Investment and Trade Agency office in Addis Ababa and launch a direct flight connection between the two capitals. Maintaining growth in investment and trade volumes will depend on the security situation, mainly the lack of an armed faction fighting the government. Peace inside the country will allow for new investments in the construction, pharmaceutical, and processing industries and provide a market for Polish goods. Although the Chinese economic position in Ethiopia is not seriously challenged, the spying scandal could diminish China's influence on the Ethiopian reforms to the advantage of European states. It is likely that EU development assistance will increase, particularly in engagement in governance and with local governments, where international experts will be needed.