

Ethiopia: Abiy the Lucky

by GWYNNE DYER

Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is a very lucky man. He has survived three attempts to kill or overthrow him in the past year.

Last June he escaped unhurt in a grenade attack that killed one and wounded scores at a political rally. In October his office in the capital, Addis Ababa, was surrounded by angry soldiers who threatened to kill him over low pay, but he talked them down. And last Saturday he emerged unscathed from an attempted military coup.

It was a very serious attempt. In the capital, General Se'are Mekonnen was shot dead by his own bodyguard, as was another general who was visiting his home. Abiy had made Se'are the chief of staff of the Ethiopian army, a controversial appointment, only a year ago.

At the same time another of Abiy's appointees, Ambachew Mekonnen, the governor of the key Amhara region, was murdered together with his top adviser in the region's capital, Bahir Dar. It was clearly a quite broad plot, but its coordination must have been off. Police are still rounding up suspected plotters, and Abiy Ahmed was still prime minister on Monday.

That is a very good thing, because Abiy Ahmed is Ethiopia's best chance of breaking the cycle of tyrannies that has blighted its modern history. It is Africa's second-biggest country (102 million people) and one of the world's fastest-growing economies, but its politics has been cursed.

In the past century it has gone from a medieval monarchy to rule by foreign fascists (it was conquered by Mussolini's Italy in the 1930s), and then back to an only slightly less medieval tyranny for another thirty years ? until a Marxist-led military coup in 1974.

The 'Derg' junta murdered the emperor and half a million other Ethiopians ? mostly the better educated ones ? in a 'Red Terror' that fell short of the Khmer Rouge's 'killing fields', but not by much. Then, after almost two decades, the Soviet Union collapsed, the foreign aid to the Communists stopped, and the Reds were overthrown in their turn in 1991.

The victor that time was a coalition of ethnic rebel groups, militarised and brutalised by a long guerilla war against the Derg, who slid quickly into the seats of power and remained there comfortably until last year. The political killings declined, but the tyranny they protected did not ? until suddenly, last year, they handed the whole mess over to Abiy Ahmed.

They did so because the mess was getting out of hand. Ethiopia is a very complicated country: four major ethnic groups, all of which have fought each other in the course of the country's long history, and a litter of smaller ethnic groups as well. The country is also divided between a Christian majority and a big Muslim minority.

To make matters worse, one of the larger et

Abiy is certainly a 'child of the Party', which he joined at 15, but he is a reformer who can be all things to all people. His father was Muslim, his mother was Christian. As an Oromo, he comes from the lowest rungs of the Ethiopian ethnic pecking order. (No Oromo has ever held such high office before.) He is fluent in Afaan Oromo, Amharic, Tigrinya and English. And he is a very modern man.

He knew he had to move fast, so he immediately ended the state of emergency and changed almost all the senior military commanders. He appointed a cabinet that was half-female, plus women as president and as head of the Supreme Court.

He released thousands of political prisoners. He freed the media, made the leader of an opposition party head of the Electoral Board, and put her in charge of organising free elections in 2020.

He made peace and re-opened the border with Eritrea after 20 years of hot and cold war. He has done pretty well everything he could think of, and he did it in little over a year. And yet he is still in a very precarious position

.It could not be otherwise. He is trying to free a big, complex, traumatised country from a century of dreadful history, and the odds, of course, are against him.

But he's not down yet.