

BOOK REVIEW

Tom Gardner. *The Abiy Project: God, Power and War in the New Ethiopia*. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2024. xi + 368 pp. Photographs. Notes. \$37.00. Hardback. ISBN: 978-1911723103.

The Economist's Horn of Africa correspondent, Tom Gardner's, new book, *The Abiy Project: God, Power and War in the New Ethiopia*, tells the story of Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia's prime minister who assumed power in 2018 and provides, moreover, a highly informative account of Ethiopia's political history over the last six years; one of the most tumultuous periods in modern time. The book is meticulously researched, it contains a wealth of important details, and has a clear and concise storyline.


The book is divided in four parts: revolution, reform, crisis, and war. The first part starts with a brief overview of Ethiopia's political history since the early twentieth century before outlining the developments leading up to Abiy Ahmed's arrival. Gardner also tells the early history of Abiy Ahmed, his family background and his political trajectory, and his embrace of Pentecostalism, a religious current that expanded rapidly from the early 1990s. The second part is about Abiy Ahmed's arrival as Ethiopia's new prime minister. It accounts for the early promises of democratic reform and the peace agreement with Eritrea—and how this made him very popular during the first months of his tenure. Gardner subsequently discusses how failure to deliver on his promises, an increasingly complex political landscape, with previously banned parties being invited back to Ethiopia, the premier's seeming lack of any political roadmap, and his inability to deal with increased insecurity, caused his popularity to fade. The third part, crisis, deals with the prime minister's handling of ethnic-based movements, including the Amhara ethno-nationalist movement and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and demonstrates with much detail how Abiy Ahmed maneuvered and manipulated the different ethnic forces. Gardner also discusses the unmaking of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the creation of the new Prosperity Party (PP)—and the subsequent conflict with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The last part is devoted to the war with Tigray. It provides a detailed account of instances and developments that led to the conflict and the war itself. Gardner carefully talks about the atrocities committed by the warring factions, especially those by the Fano movement and Eritrean forces. He also discusses how activists—both in Ethiopia and in the diaspora—engaged each other in massive social media campaigns, and how Abiy Ahmed's government managed to use these campaigns for its own propaganda purposes. It concludes with the story about the negotiations that eventually led to the ceasefire agreement between the federal government and the TPLF in November 2023 and

provides an interesting discussion of how this has complicated Abiy Ahmed's relations with Eritrea and ethno-nationalists.

I often find books written by journalists to be tedious; filled with details without much informed in-depth analyses. Gardner's book is different in this regard. Yes, it contains a lot of details collected from an impressive number of sources, but it carefully discusses these details in a manner that makes the book a coherent narrative. Ethiopia is not easy to understand, but Gardner demonstrates an impressive amount of knowledge of its complexity and discusses the major dynamics in a very careful and nuanced manner.

The book is, as noted, an account of recent Ethiopian political developments, where Abiy Ahmed is the main actor. It demonstrates the continued relevance of the big man in Ethiopian politics—and beyond—and how Abiy Ahmed has managed to cement his power, being a shrewd palace politician, while the country has descended into spirals of violence and unprecedented economic hardship. Abiy Ahmed's faith and religion is central to Gardner's story, where he discussed the prime minister's religious background and conversion to Pentecostalism. Gardner manages, at the same time, to show the idiosyncratic nature of Abiy Ahmed's religious worldview, being a mix of Pentecostalism, Prosperity Gospel, and personal development teachings. He points to Abiy Ahmed's self-image as a leader chosen by God and how he views himself as destined to steer Ethiopia towards a prosperous future, but the book would have benefitted from a more extensive discussion of how his faith has, in practice, affected his political actions. Gardner makes the important point that Abiy Ahmed remains an enigma, one who says things and who makes decisions that do not necessarily follow a clear logic, but this aspect could have received more attention. The increasingly grotesque contradiction between the prime minister's emphasis on aesthetics and large projects—parks, luxury resorts, and a new palace—and the dire security and economic situation (which he seems oblivious to) is quite striking, as is his lack of empathy and shrewdness in dealing with his political opponents. Gardner provides, at the same time, a convincing account of the populist and manipulative nature of Abiy Ahmed's politics—one that “wants to be friends with everyone yet loyal to none” (3)—and how he is driven by the thirst for power.

Ethiopia's current conflicts have impacted interpretations of the country's modern history and contemporary politics, leading to competing narratives and to intense polarization among academics, observers, and analysts. *The Abiy Project* is therefore a book that many will accuse of being unbalanced and biased, favoring this or that side. I believe, however, that the book actually provides a balanced and nuanced account. Arguments made are carefully supported by convincing data and take into account a range of perspectives. It is an invaluable go-to resource for anyone who wants to understand a highly complex chapter in Ethiopian history—a chapter that is yet to end.

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