

Book Review

Tom Gardner. *The Abiy Project: God, Power, and War in the New Ethiopia*. London: Hurst Publishers, 2024. pp.384

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Gardner argues that since coming to power in 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has become one of the most debated political leaders in contemporary Africa. Following years of political unrest his ascent to was initially welcomed. Nonetheless, optimism gave way to growing violence, shrinking democratic space, and most importantly the war in Tigray. While many studies, he added, explain this transition by focusing on ethnic federalism, elite competition, state institutions, or Ethiopia's changing geopolitical factors, Gardner in his book promised to offer a different explanation. He argues that understanding Abiy Ahmed's political vision requires taking religion seriously, for Gardner, the influence of Pentecostal Christianity and prosperity gospel on the prime minister's understanding of leadership, national unity, and state power.

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Gardner places religion at the centre of his analysis of Ethiopia's recent developments. Methodologically, he used investigative journalism, extensive interviews, historical analysis, and first-hand observations collected over many years in Ethiopia. Accordingly, he argues that Abiy's religious view is shaping the broader political project that sought to replace ethnic federalism.

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The book is organised into four broad sections: Revolution, Reform, Crisis, and War to trace Ethiopia's political transition from the final years of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) to the outbreak of the Tigray War.

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In the *Revolution* section, Gardner looks back at the political developments that have shaped modern Ethiopia since the 1974 revolution. He discusses the Derg regime's Marxist dictatorship and argues that many of today's political challenges have their roots in this period. In particular, he explains how the Derg failed to address the political demands of regions such as Tigray and Eritrea, leaving unresolved tensions that continued to influence Ethiopian politics long after the regime collapsed. He also introduces one of the book's main themes: the role of religion in politics. He argues that Abiy Ahmed's Pentecostal faith and his embrace of prosperity theology explain both his political leadership and the vision of national renewal that he (Abiy) promotes.

The Reform section examines Abiy Ahmed's rise to power in 2018, a period that generated both domestic and international optimism. Gardner describes how Abiy's early reforms, including the release of political prisoners, the opening of political space, and the peace agreement with Eritrea, created expectations that Ethiopia was entering a new democratic era. To explain why these reforms attracted so much attention, Gardner first reflects on the political system that Abiy inherited. Between 1991 and 2018, Ethiopia was governed by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which combined ethnic federalism with a developmental state model under an increasingly authoritarian political system. Gardner argues that growing public protests, internal divisions within the ruling coalition, and widespread demands for political change eventually brought this period to an end and created the opportunity for Abiy's leadership.

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The third section (*Crisis*) examines how the early promise of reform gradually turned into political confrontation. Gardner identifies the dissolution of the EPRDF and the creation of the Prosperity Party as a major turning point that fundamentally changed Ethiopia's political landscape. According to Gardner, this decision deepened tensions with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), while Abiy's public admiration for historical figures such as Menelik II and Haile Selassie created additional disagreements with sections of Oromo ethno-nationalists. Gardner also discusses

the role of Brigadier General Asaminew Tsige and the rise of Amhara nationalism. Through this discussion, he shows how competing historical narratives, territorial claims, and ethnic grievances increasingly complicated Ethiopia's political transition and pushed the country towards wider conflict.

He argues that the violence resulted from the actions and decisions of several actors, including the federal government, the TPLF, and regional forces.

The final section, Part IV: *War*, focuses on the northern war, which Gardner refers to as the Tigray War. He documents the human cost of the conflict through the experiences of civilians, health workers, farmers, and others whose lives were deeply affected by the violence. Gardner also examines the involvement of external actors, particularly Eritrean forces, and shows how the conflict extended beyond a confrontation between the federal government and the TPLF.

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One of the book's contributions is that it broadens the discussion of Ethiopian politics beyond familiar focus on ethnicity, notwithstanding the importance of ethnic federalism, historical grievances. Explanations most academic research and media reporting on Ethiopia have, Gardner instead argues, are insufficient as they are not re/considered alongside the religious ideas that shaped Abiy's political identity. In this respect, the book makes an original contribution by inserting political theology into debates on state-building and conflict in contemporary Ethiopia.

Nevertheless, the book could have engaged more explicitly with the extent to which religion outweighs other structural forces (both stated or not). While Gardner acknowledges the importance of institutional weaknesses, competing nationalisms, economic pressures, and other structural issues, the reader is left to consider whether religion is the principal driver of political change or one factor among several. Otherwise, *The Abiy Project* is an ambitious and carefully researched study that offers a fresh perspective on one of Africa's most important political transitions. It helps readers to rethink the relationship among religion, political leadership, and state power in Ethiopia.

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