



Ethiopian President Sahle-Work Zewde (left) and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. EPA-EFE/STR

Since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took over from Hailemariam Desalegn in April 2018, Ethiopia has experienced a [rapid pace of political reforms](#). So far, save for the unfortunate [incidents of ethnic violence](#) across the country, the changes made by the new administration have been nothing short of breathtaking.

Under Abiy's leadership, [a historic peace deal](#) was reached with neighbouring Eritrea. At home, his administration has freed all political prisoners while also promising to reform some of the country's harsh laws.

In addition, the new premier has also vowed to transform the country's state-led economy by outlining a proposal for the [partial privatisation](#) of Ethiopia's state enterprises. Privatisation would open up opportunities for competition, and raise funds for the country's major development programs.

Most recently Abiy's ongoing political reforms have included the recognition of Ethiopia's female leaders. He has taken great strides to ensure that women are represented in Ethiopia's political landscape. The last four weeks, in particular, have seen spectacular breakthroughs. These ranged from cabinet appointments to women being chosen as president, chief justice and press secretary to the prime minister. All unprecedented - in Ethiopia as well as the continent more broadly.

## Women in the cabinet

On October 18th, 2018, Abiy [appointed a gender-balanced cabinet](#). The cabinet now has 10 female ministers out of a total of 20. This recognition of women in Ethiopian politics has been touted as a groundbreaking move that challenges the country's [patriarchal political culture](#).

In comparison, Abiy's predecessor Desalegn's last cabinet included only [four women ministers out of 34](#).

With his new appointments, Abiy has not only achieved an enviable gender balance, but he has also succeeded in downsizing Ethiopia's cabinet.

By appointing an unprecedented number of women to his cabinet Ahmed has remained true to his word that he would place women front and centre in his reform agenda.

In his [April 2018 acceptance speech](#), he encouraged women to take up positions of leadership saying:

Our national identity is meaningless without the participation of Ethiopian women. By denying due recognition to women who built our country, served our country, and helped it to stand on its feet, it is impossible to establish a successful national renaissance.

## A woman president

Just one week after Ahmed appointed his cabinet Sahle-Work Zewde was [unanimously confirmed as the president of Ethiopia](#) by a joint session of the House of Representatives and the House of Federation.

Zewde is Ethiopia's fourth president since the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front [came to power](#) in 1991, and the first woman to hold the post.

She was a senior foreign service officer who later served in the United Nations. In her last role, she was the [UN's representative to the African Union](#) in the rank of Under Secretary-General, the first woman to have held that position in the organisation.

Although the role of Ethiopia's president is ceremonial Zewde is widely expected to emerge as a strong player in Ahmed's push for reforms. Her appointment comes at a time when the country needs a strong and unifying influence to [manage the ethnic tensions](#) that have dogged Abiy's fledgeling administration. Because the president is expected to be non-partisan, Zewde is in the best position to mediate between opposing groups. Her work as UN representative and mediator in the Central African Republic conflict also stands her in good stead.

## A woman chief justice

Another major development has been the appointment of former women's rights activist and lawyer, Meaza Ashenafi, as [Ethiopia's new chief justice](#). Ashenafi is expected to put the country's strained legal system back on track.

Before her appointment, she founded Ethiopia's Women Lawyers Association, where she advocated and fought for women's rights. She has also been a high court judge and an adviser to a commission writing up Ethiopia's constitution. Ashenafi also founded the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association and [helped start the country's first women's bank](#), Enat.

She is well known for ruling on a landmark [child-bride abduction case](#). Her ruling outlawed the kidnapping of girls and forcing them into marriage.

Thanks to these accomplishments Ashenafi has been praised for bringing a track record of [competence and relevant experience](#) to the role.

Until recently, Ethiopia's justice system was one of the most repressive in the world. The authoritarian ruling coalition had complete [control](#). And there have been reports of torture and cruelty about Ethiopia's prison system for years.

From the [notorious Jail Ogaden](#) in Ethiopia's Somali region to the famous prison zones of [Maqgelawi, Qaliti and Qilinto](#), horror stories have been common.

Thanks to the reform measures taken by Abiy and his new administration, a [commission that studies laws](#) have been constituted to look into Ethiopia's legal framework.

This commission is expected to support Ashenafi and her brand of judicial activism in a country that has historically been known for its legal conservatism.

## **The future is hopeful**

Abiy's push to level the gender playing field has also extended to the office of the Prime Minister with the recently announced appointment of Billene Seyoum, a young woman known for her work in women's empowerment, as the premier's spokeswoman in the [newly minted press office](#). As the press secretary, Seyoum will keep domestic and foreign press periodically apprised of Ahmed's projects.

All in all, the last four weeks have shown quite a meteoric rise for Ethiopian women. Despite the meagre resources at their disposal, and the challenges of succeeding in a field historically dominated by men, Ethiopians expect that the women will deliver.

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