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Ethiopian Civil War: Latent Causes and Projected Trajectories

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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The Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and its allies continue fighting to repel the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in northern Ethiopia as the latter make inroads towards the capital. The Ethiopian government has already declared a 6-month state of emergency and called for rapid military mobilization following rebel breakthroughs, especially on the Amhara front, which saw many of its cities and towns fall into rebel hands. Meanwhile, efforts to mediate a settlement are making slow progress, amid real fears of a descent into a civil war that threatens to the existence of the Ethiopian state, a prospect with major repercussions for the Horn of Africa and the Nile Valley.

Facts on the Ground

The ongoing war in the northern Tigray region of Ethiopia, which borders Eritrea, broke out in November 2020, after months of tensions escalating between Abiy Ahmed and the TPLF. The Tigray regional government insisted on holding elections in the region, contrary to the federal government's decision to postpone general elections in the country twice due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The federal government considered this approach unconstitutional, and the region responded by withdrawing its recognition of the Addis Ababa government on the grounds that its constitutional mandate had expired. As a result, the Ethiopian forces, backed by neighboring Eritrean forces, invaded the main cities in the region, including the capital, Mekele, and Abiy Ahmed promised at the time that the operation would not last more than a few weeks. Indeed, the government announced its victory in the war and the defeat of the TPLF a month after launching its military campaign.¹

But the Tigrayan fighters who withdrew early in the war regrouped and launched a counterattack last June, during which they regained control of most of the territory,² forcing the withdrawal of the government forces, after capturing tens of thousands of its soldiers. This military retreat of the federal army was accompanied by international accusations of widespread violations committed by the government and Eritrean forces, damaging Nobel Prize winner Abiy Ahmed's reputation.³ The TPLF was not satisfied with recovering its lands alone but pushed the battle to the regions of Afar in the east and Amhara in the south, claiming its aim was to break the siege imposed on the region from all directions, and create an entry point for aid to reach those affected by the conflict.⁴

In a remarkable development, the TPLF announced an alliance with the Oromo Liberation Army,⁵ along with eight other forces, and the formation of a political-military body called the United Front of Ethiopian Federalist and Confederalist Forces (UFEFCF).⁶ The new alliance seeks to topple the

1 "Ethiopian military operation in Tigray is complete, prime minister says", *Reuters*, 26/11/2020. accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://reut.rs/3g2hKHY>.

2 Sohaib Mahmoud, "Ethiopia.. the war in Tigray and the last turn", *The New Arab*, 17/07/2021, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3lY4xTQ>.

3 "Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed: The Nobel Prize winner who went to war", *BBC*, 11/10/2021. accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bbc.in/3DbGCrf>.

4 "Ethiopia: Tigrayan forces 'seize strategic town in Amhara region'" *The Guardian*. 30/10/2021. accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3wM87oW>.

5 Abiy Ahmed himself hails from the Oromo ethnic group.

6 In addition to the TPLF and the Oromo Liberation Army, the new alliance includes: Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front; Agaw Democratic Movement; Benishangul People's Liberation Movement; Gambella Peoples Liberation Army; Global Kimant People Right and Justice Movement/Kimant



government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Indeed, the fighters of the TPLF and its allies managed to seize control of several strategic cities in the Amhara and Afar region before the federal army and its allies were able to repel them. Meanwhile, in a Facebook post, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed urged Ethiopians to use every possible weapon to confront the TPLF and its allies,⁷ echoing the call by the Amhara local government to mobilize the population to defend their lands. Hit-and-run operations are taking place in 8 locations on the borders between the Amhara, Afar and Tigray regions, while communications and internet have been cut off in all areas of confrontation. The pace of fighting to control the strategic roads along the fronts of the Amhara and Afar regions is increasing and extending to the borders of Shawa Governorate, where the government forces repelled the TPLF attempts to control the vital road linking Djibouti and Addis Ababa.

Abiy Ahmed's Failed Strategy

Abi Ahmed came to power in 2018, with a program designed to strengthen the country's increased development and economic prosperity, with a project that sought to bypass the political system based on a kind of ethnic federalism, which was established by former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, given that this system weakens the state and creates divisions. Instead, he focused on the need for national integration, the creation of a centralized state and an all-Ethiopian national party.⁸ However, Abiy Ahmed not only failed to achieve any of these goals, but also plunged the country into a bitter conflict, threatening its territorial integrity.

After securing a new term in the general elections held in late June,⁹ Abiy Ahmed became increasingly prepared to use force to deal with the challenges facing him. He approved a significant increase in the size of the army and boasted of his ability to recruit one million soldiers to repel the massive attack launched by the TPLF to regain control of the territory. Despite his government's assertion that it is fighting a battle against the TPLF, and not against the Tigray people, Abiy Ahmed has imposed a stifling siege policy on the entire region to undermine the rule of the TPLF, preventing humanitarian aid and committing massive violations against civilians.¹⁰ Although the aim of the siege was to push civilians to turn against the front and weaken its popular support, the results were counterproductive, as the population felt that they were being exterminated.

Democratic Party; Sidama National Liberation Front and Somali State Resistance. Ethiopian government spokeswoman Belen Seyoum described the opposition coalition as a "propaganda ploy" and doubted the strength of some of the groups participating in the coalition, "that they really do not have any strength on the ground."

⁷ Dan Milmo "Facebook removes post by Ethiopian PM for 'inciting violence'", *The Guardian*, 4/11/2021, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3nf9DwL>.

⁸ Linda Yohannes "Abiy's homespun balancing act: Medemer reviewed", *Ethiopia Insight*, 26/6/2020, accessed on 13/11/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/32QHRMn>.

⁹ "Ethiopian Legislative Elections: A Reading of the Results and Internal Response", Situation Assessment, ACRPS, Political Studies Unit, 25/8/2020, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/30envOt>.

¹⁰ Tom Dannenbaum "Famine in Tigray, Humanitarian Access, and the War Crime of Starvation", *justice security* 26/07/2021, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3nh10lo>.

With his continued siege of the region and escalating American and Western criticism of the widespread violations committed by government forces, Abiy Ahmed started seeking international and regional support from countries that do not have good relations with the West, attempting to obtain support for developing the military capabilities of the Ethiopian government forces. Last July, Ethiopia signed a military cooperation agreement in Addis Ababa with the Russian government. The Ethiopian government also purchased Turkish military equipment worth nearly \$52 million during Abiy Ahmed's visit to Ankara last August, which includes the Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones.¹¹ The involvement of the air force and drones prompted the TPLF to withdraw quickly from the region in the first round of fighting, according to its leader, Debretsion Gebremichael.¹²

Economically, the war has destroyed infrastructure in regions such as Amhara, Afar and Tigray, and crippled the national economy. After the economic boom witnessed in the few years preceding the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Ethiopia is currently facing a major economic downturn, and a rise in food prices. The value of the Ethiopian currency (the birr) has significantly deteriorated in recent months, due to both the war and the repercussions of the pandemic, as well as the recent drought. The government deficit and administrative failure led to an increase in the economic decline, and the heavy spending that accompanied the last general elections in order to win votes contributed to the aggravation of the economic situation.¹³ But the most prominent challenge created by the war is the sharp rift that has torn at the very fabric of the state, threatening to tear the country apart.¹⁴

The Fate of External Mediation

Mediation efforts to contain the conflict in Tigray began with the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in the region. Last February, the European Union appointed Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto as a special envoy to resolve the conflict. Last April, the US administration appointed Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman as Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa. With the inauguration of the Biden administration to the White House in January 2021, direct American criticism of the role of the federal government in the conflict in the Tigray region increased. Washington condemned the deterioration of the humanitarian situation, exerting pressure on the government to expel the Eritrean forces and Amharic militias from the region, and eventually resorting to sanctions against the Ethiopian government in May. With the confrontations intensifying in recent weeks, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken urged all parties to stop fighting and return to dialogue, and called on the TPLF to stop their advance towards the capital.¹⁵ Jeffrey Feltman held talks in Addis

11 Orhan Coskun and Jonathan Spicer, Ece Toksabay "Turkey expands armed drone sales to Ethiopia and Morocco – sources", *Reuters*, 14/10/2021, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://reut.rs/321riQl>.

12 Declan Walsh, "'I Didn't Expect to Make It Back Alive': An Interview with Tigray's Leader", *The New York Times*, 3/6/2020, accessed on 22/11/2021, at: <https://nyti.ms/30QjI03>.

13 Vivienne Nunis "Ethiopia's economy battered by Tigray war", *BBC*, 30/08/2021, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bbc.in/3CdZvs7>.

14 Sohaib Mahmoud, "Emperors and Fronts: A Brief History of the Ethiopian State," *Jadaliyya*, 10/11/2021. Last seen on 11/14/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2YCzZPQ>.

15 "Blinken 'hopeful' for 'window' to stop Ethiopia war", *Farance24*, 10/11/2021. accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3osrBLF>.

Ababa, conducting mediation efforts with little progress as the Ethiopian Federal Government's felt that the mediation was not neutral.¹⁶

For his part, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, in late August, appointed former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo as the High Representative for the Horn of Africa, with a special focus on the conflict in the Tigray region, after the Western and American mediation failed. Obasanjo visited the affected regions of Amhara and Afar, where he met the rulers of the two regions to discuss his initiative to resolve the conflict. The initiative led by Obasanjo includes mobilizing the support of the international community for African mediation and urging the parties to the conflict to engage in a political dialogue without any preconditions. It also pushes for a comprehensive, immediate and unconditional ceasefire and end to hostilities by all parties. The initiative includes the guarantee of immediate and unhindered humanitarian access to those affected by the conflict in various regions; ensuring respect for and compliance with international humanitarian and human rights laws; and calls for the start of an immediate dialogue and comprehensive national reconciliation.¹⁷ But the African mediation faces major challenges given the insistence of the federal government and the Amhara regional government to recover the lands it lost to the TPLF in the Amhara region.¹⁸ Furthermore, the TPLF and its allies continue to demand the overthrow of Abiy Ahmed.

Possible Trajectories for Ethiopia

In the face of faltering international and regional mediation efforts, several potential conflict scenarios stand out:

- The victory of the TPLF and its allies, after entering the capital and overthrowing the government of Abiy Ahmed. This possibility exists, but it is unlikely. In this scenario the TPLF would be faced with huge challenges given the opposition of other ethnic groups, led by the Amhara. It is also likely that if this scenario materializes, the alliance between the Oromo and the Tigrayans, who were united by the desire to overthrow Abi Ahmed, will end, foreshadowing more instability.
- The peaceful departure of Abiy Ahmed from power: This is the best scenario for the rebel alliance, according to a spokesman for the Oromo Liberation Army, who was quoted as saying, "Of course we prefer if there's a peaceful and orderly transition with Abiy being removed."¹⁹ But this scenario is unlikely in light of Ahmed's determination to cling to power, especially after his party's resounding victory in the recent elections. He himself went to the battle fronts, and appeared in

¹⁶ US Envoy to Visit Ethiopia After Government Declares State of Emergency, *VOA*, 03/11/2021. accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3kEmuXo>.

¹⁷ "African Union Envoy, Tigray Leader Hold Talks on Ethiopia Crisis" *Bloomberg*, 08/11/2021. accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bloom.bg/3DgTc8J>.

¹⁸ "Ethiopia's Tigray conflict explained: How a year of bloodshed has sparked fears of a wider civil war", *CBC*, 09/11/2021. accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3Fe7Y0v>.

¹⁹ "Ethiopia: Tigray and anti-government groups form alliance," *DW*, 5/11/2021, accessed on 2/12/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/31mjTKS>.



military uniform in the Afar region, where the largest air base in Ethiopia is located. Since then, the Ethiopian army has succeeded in regaining control of many towns in this region.

- The military overthrow of Abiy Ahmed: With the recent escalation of the wave of military coups in Africa, the army is likely to lead a coup against Abi Ahmed as he is responsible for embroiling the country in a devastating civil war. Army officers had led several coup attempts against him, the last of which took place in mid-2020, in addition to the coup attempt that occurred in June 2019, and claimed the life of the Ethiopian Army Chief of Staff, General Seri Mekonnen and the governor of Amhara region.²⁰ In this case a coup will not solve the crisis, but only serve to worsen it, given the divisions in the army exacerbated by the recent TPLF defeats.
- The continuation of current battle lines: Considering the inability of the two sides to achieve a decisive victory, and the growing ethnic conflicts in the country, Tigray, in this case, may seek confederation rule or even a unilateral declaration of independence.²¹

Regardless of the possible scenario, Ethiopia has fallen into a state of instability following its years as a model for development and economic prosperity in East Africa. This is due to the complexities of the ethnic situation in the country, and residual political and historical tensions triggered by Abiy Ahmed's attempt to cleanse the state institutions of the Tigrayan ethnic group that ruled Ethiopia for the past three decades, a policy that has come with a high cost.

²⁰ "The story of the mysterious coup attempt in Ethiopia", *Al Jazeera Net*, 25/6/2019, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3DjXnjY>.

²¹ "Ethiopia: Will the TPLF-OLA Alliance Mean Tigray's Secession?", *The Africa Report*, 10/9/2021, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3qARf3h>.