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Situation Assessment | 15 November 2020

Ethiopia's Tigray Crisis: Domestic and Regional Implications

Unit for Political Studies

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On 5 November, 2020, armed clashes erupted between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a core component of the former ruling party, the four-party coalition of the Ethiopian People's Revolution Democratic Front (EPRDF), which ruled the country for nearly three decades. The background for the conflict with Abiy Ahmed is long and complex, but many factors have accumulated to spur the outbreak of the conflict. Tensions flared up when Abiy Ahmed's government postponed the presidential elections due to the ongoing pandemic, which sparked widespread objections from various political forces and parties. The government in Addis Ababa also dissolved the EPRDF, establishing the Prosperity Party as an alternative, in addition to targeting party members from the Tigray People's Liberation Front. These actions prompted the TPLF to hold internal regional elections without Addis Ababa's consent and the crisis ensued as a result.

Ethiopia on the Eve of the Crisis

The EPRDF,⁽¹⁾ an alliance of four major parties, most notably the Tigray People's Liberation Front, has dominated the reins of power in Ethiopia for more than three decades (1991-2018), having overthrown Mengistu Haile Mariam with the support of Sudan. In this time, the country has seen huge economic growth rates that have averaged 9.8% in the past decade.⁽²⁾ However, the death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who was also the leader of the Tigray People's Liberation Front, and ruled the country with an iron fist for nearly two decades (1991-2012) instigated rapid political deterioration. The country was thrown into a state of continuous turmoil from 2015, culminating in the Oromia protests of early 2018, on the back of which Abiy Ahmed obtained the premiership (after being director of General Intelligence and the de facto ruler) following his election to the leadership of the EPRDF in April 2018. Following his election, Ahmed purged the existing leadership.

The people welcomed Abiy Ahmed with open arms, especially the youth who had played a prominent role in the 2018 protests. He drew widespread satisfaction after he launched a series of reforms, including the release of political detainees and permitting the establishment of opposition parties, and following his speech calling for national unity in a country in which more than 80 ethnic groups coexist. But these hopes were quickly dispelled as political unrest returned and assassinations became a regular occurrence around the country amid continuous anti-government protests.⁽³⁾ These protests soon came to border on rebellion, especially in the Oromia region, to which Ahmed himself belongs. He faced accusations of showing no interest in the empowerment of his ethnic group, which had high hopes on him, after having been marginalized for a long time, despite constituting one of the largest ethnic groups in the country. The death toll of the Oromia protests that erupted in July 2020 over the killing of a well-known folk singer has reached at least 166.⁽⁴⁾ The authorities have prosecuted more

1 Sarah Vaughan, *Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia*, PhD Thesis, The University of Edinburgh, 2003, accessed on 15/11/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/36BOZgP>.

2 "The World Bank In Ethiopia," *The World Bank*, 12/11/2020, accessed on 13/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2H39IBf>.

3 "Ethiopia Events of 2019," *Human Rights Watch*, 24/10/2019, accessed on 15/11/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2H3Ci5F>

4 "More than 160 killed in Ethiopia protests over singer's murder," *Al Jazeera*, 5/7/2020, accessed on 15/11/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3kvBFPJ>.



than 4,000 people, including senior Oromo leaders and other opposition leaders. In the south of the country, in accordance with the federal constitution, one of the large ethnic groups in the south, the Sidama, submitted a request in July 2018 to the federal government to hold a referendum for their secession from the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR) and the formation of a new region of its own.⁵⁾ This was the first request of its kind in Ethiopia. Despite the success of the referendum in 2019, many problems remained unresolved, such as the city of Awassa, the capital of the region, as well as the borders of the region, which threaten a conflict with the SNNPR region. At the national level, Ethiopia has been affected by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and has suffered from major economic, social and political repercussions.

From Hope to Hostility

As soon as Abiy Ahmed took power, tensions escalated between the capital, Addis Ababa, or the federal government on the one hand, and Mek'ele - the capital of the Tigray region on the other hand, as Ahmed worked to implement a series of measures aimed at purging the federal state institutions of ruling coalition members, most of whom hailed from Tigray. Many leaders, especially the military and security forces, were arrested except for those who managed to flee either outside the country or to the Tigray has a degree of autonomy that allowed it to refuse to hand the fugitives over to the federal government, and that was the beginning of the political rift between the region and the capital, Addis Ababa. These leaders were targeted due to their involvement in an ethnic domination of Ethiopia. The federal government also believes that the EPRDF did not accept the loss of power in 2018, and was therefore behind a number of terrorist operations to sabotage and undermine security, including the many assassinations, as it seeks to weaken the Ahmed administration to force him to make room for a transitional government.

Meanwhile, the Front believes that Ahmed turned against it when he decided to dissolve the coalition, after using it to gain power. The National Elections Council received a memorandum from the EPRDF leader, Ahmed, stating that it no longer exists as a political party and has been replaced by the Prosperity Party, which the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) refused to join. The Tigray People's Liberation Front believes that this decision represents a constitutional breach and comes against the will of the Ethiopian people, who elected members of the parties that formed the coalition. And a large part of the Oromo has come to oppose him as the sole ruler, turning away from democracy under the pretext of preserving the unity and development of Ethiopia, which takes priority over democracy. Many Ethiopian commentators suggest this is a partial adoption of neighboring Eritrean leader Afwerki's ideas.

The tension between the federal government and the Tigray region increased after the Supreme Council in Ethiopia, the Union Council, extended the terms of federal and regional governments for a few months due to the pandemic, a step that the region considered unconstitutional. Therefore, the

5 "The birth of the tenth region .. The Sidama Group Obtains Autonomy," *Al Jazeera*, 24/11/2019, accessed on 15/11/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2ICMPFE>.



region went ahead with holding its regional council elections on 9 September 2020, despite warnings from Addis Ababa that the vote would be considered illegal. The turnout in the district elections was about 98%, with approximately 2.7 million voters, according to the Electoral Commission of Tigray, where the TPLF won a large majority of 152 out of 190 seats.⁽⁶⁾

The main opposition parties in Ethiopia, which number more than a hundred, have rejected the new electoral law, which was approved before the outbreak of the pandemic, believing the law to be tailored to fit the interests of Ahmed's Prosperity Party. The National Elections Council at the time rejected the demands of opposition parties to review the law, and these parties, which enjoy great popular support, include the Oromia Federal Congress, led by well-known opposition member, Merera Gudina.

Among the thorny issues in this crisis is the Tigrayan regional government's rejection of a federal decision by to change the leadership of the army's Northern Command, which is based in Tigray, and includes leaders known for their sympathy with the region's issues in opposition to the federal government and Eritrea due to border disputes and accusations of the federal government's interference in the region. The Northern Command includes more than half of the total personnel in the Ethiopian Armed Forces. These measures strengthened the convictions of the TPLF that Ahmed is working to weaken the region and to monopolize power. Furthermore, a dispute over budget transfers is also an important issue in the conflict between the federal authorities and the Tigrayan government. Because it considered holding elections in the region illegal, the federal government decided to cease funding to the executive authority in Tigray and instead channel it directly to local administrations, which angered the region's leaders.

Possible Repercussions of the Conflict

With the launch of three missiles from the Tigray region, targeting the airport of the Eritrean capital, Asmara, on 14 November 2020, the conflict between the federal government and Tigray threatens to spread not only within Ethiopia, but also to spill out into neighbouring countries. A new alliance between Addis Ababa and Asmara has emerged following the signing of the peace agreement between the two countries in June 2018 and subsequent reciprocal visits between the leaderships of the two countries, the most recent of which was the visit of the Ethiopian President, Isaias Afwerki, to the Renaissance Dam in October 2020 – the first visit by any foreign president. This alliance could translate into a military alliance and joint operations against Tigray, with evidence of that including Addis Ababa hosting a number of Eritrean military advisors.

However, this may exacerbate regional engagement in the conflict, as Egypt may side in favor of Tigray, with the aim of influencing the Ethiopian political decision regarding the Renaissance Dam, which Cairo considers a threat to its national security, as well as to respond to the emerging alliance

6 Medihane Ekubamichael, "News: TPLF Wins Regional Election By Landslide," *Addis Standard*, 11/9/2020, accessed on 15/11/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/38LpYIU>



between Addis Ababa and Asmara. But these possibilities have yet to be realized. Despite calls for international diplomatic intervention to prevent the deterioration of the situation, especially as its continuation threatens the fragile political hold in Ethiopia and puts the federal state at risk of disintegration, international attention has so far been limited to calls by the United Nations and the African Union for restraint.⁽⁷⁾

In light of the unwillingness of some northern leaders of the Ethiopian army to allow federal military intervention in the region, there is a possibility that the situation will deteriorate further. This is especially likely as the Tigray region moves ever more towards secession, since the federal constitution provides for this right, and the regional leaders have made multiple statements on the matter. However, this is not likely to happen unless the conflict escalates and international mediation and interventions fail to suppress the conflict. The inclination towards secession is well accepted by many ethnic groups within Ethiopia but the federal government is unlikely to stand idly by as the country disintegrates. The federal government will consider any attempt to secede unlawful, considering that the current Tigrayan executive authority has been formed illegally. The region's secession and independence would also trigger peripheral conflicts with the Amhara ethnic group (whose leadership is currently allied with Ahmed) due to disputes over lands that Tigray annexed from the Amhara region a few decades ago.

This means that in the absence of a political settlement of the conflict between the federal government and the Tigray authorities, the crisis may escalate, threatening the country's unity and regional stability, especially with the growing difficulty of separating domestic tensions and regional conflicts.

7 "Missiles Fired at the Capital of Eritrea from Ethiopia," *The New Arab*, 14/11/2020, accessed on 15/11/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2UsnsZB>.