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## Abiy Ahmed's law and order operation is stoking Ethiopia's crisis of legitimacy

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Abiy Ahmed's political agenda of strength via unity calls for an expansion of federal authority over regionalisation, which has antagonised Ethiopia's struggles over national identity. The war in Tigray further inflames these debates alongside the country's ethnic tensions, writes Nima Khorrami, and does nothing to weaken the TPLF's support in the region. What does this mean for Ethiopia as a state and how the current crisis might be resolved?

Ethiopia's Prime Minister and former darling of the international community, Abiy Ahmed, ascended to power on the back of rising tensions between regional authorities and the Federal government. As a sign of his political ambitions, Ahmed moved quickly in 2018 to stamp his authority and diminish the power network in Addis Ababa centred around the mighty military-political faction representing the Tigrayan minority: the Tigrayan People Liberation Front (TPLF).

Ahmed's new Prosperity Party (PP) promised sociopolitical reforms and a genuine push towards democratisation. He ordered the release of political prisoners, welcomed back exiled opposition figures and introduced plans to reform the economy, whereby he alleged to limit the role of the state, and managed to built a reputation for himself as a peacemaker. Such conditions make his declaration of war – officially a *law and order* operation – on the TPLF both surprising and contradictory. The Ethiopian leader seems to be undoing much of his own efforts over the past two years by insisting on increasing the authority of the federal government.

Ahmed's entire political agenda of strength via unity, which calls for an expansion of federal authority over regional affairs, seems to squarely defy the very basic and fundamental demands of protestors whose desire for greater regionalisation and expanded authority led to his rise to power. To be sure, **Ethiopia's modern history** has always been marked by a struggle over national identity-building and the subsequent question of the centre-periphery. In other words, the most constant and enduring aspect of sociopolitical life in Ethiopia has always revolved around what some scholars call a **war of vision** between two sides: those who call for more regionalisation versus those who favour a more centralised system whereby federal governments make all the major decisions independent of regional authorities.

This is why Ahmed's breaking up of the ruling EPRDF political coalition that preceded him, and its replacement with his own political party, is now being **seen by some activists and commentators** as a cunning move to simply replace the TPLF and not its modus operandi – that is, to keep the same system in place with himself at the helm. In the same vein, his privatisation plans as well as cosmetic societal reforms are, so the argument goes, to primarily serve his own political ambitions.

Expectedly, Ahmed and his supporters categorically reject such claims as lies and fabrications, which they may well be. However, his military campaign in Tigray does nil to calm nerves and reduce ethnic tensions. In fact, there has been an uptick in **ethnically charged clashes** since the start of the Tigray campaign, and the **start of Ahmed's premiership** more broadly, with activists in Amhara and Oromo fearing that the events in Tigray could set a dangerous precedent for the

federal government's treatment of regional movements in the long-term, if not the immediate future.

## Prospects for the TPLF

The military campaign likewise does not help the federal authorities in achieving their goal of weakening the TPLF in Tigray and reducing its appeal and influence amongst the locals. Not only are the emotional and cultural **bonds between the TPLF and the locals** decades old, but the PP itself has no organic presence in the region. Furthermore, the government's approval of **Eritrean forces** and **Amhara militias** in the region is nothing short of poisonous for its image and soft powers. Add to these his refusal to grant aid agencies access to the region – a policy stance that has led some to accuse him of using **starvation as a tactic** – and it then becomes reasonable to assert that the operation is undermining both his campaign to gain the good will of the locals and, more broadly, his claims to be wanting to be a leader for all Ethiopians. No wonder the TPLF's top leadership is still at large and a guerrilla style conflict seems to have already started. There have been **reports** of increased attacks on government's positions in the north, where Eritrean forces are stationed, and alongside the transit corridor between Tigray and the Sudanese border.

Given this situation, the prospect for resuming some degree of normalcy, let alone peace, is at best distant, especially if the international community continues its current and indeed unfortunate path of inaction, and to a degree indifference, towards the conflict. Beside the grim humanitarian situation, which has been **widely reported on**, Ethiopia is **scheduled to hold an election** in June 2021. As of now, it is unclear whether Tigrayans will be given the chance to cast their ballot. Given the ongoing conflict, there are **reports** that there will be no election held there. On the other hand, it is unclear whether the results would be accepted in the region even if there were to be elections in Tigray, because the TPLF, as main political party, has been banned from standing. With regard to other regions, there are already reports of unfair practices by the ruling PP, which is **accused** of using state resources, including media, to run its campaign, thereby putting itself at a clear advantage compared to its resource deprived opponents.

Needless to say, it is premature to claim that the June votes will be fraudulent in advance. However, given the current climate of mistrust and ethnic tensions, it is safe to assume that many will question the results even if votes are casted freely and counted fairly. This in turn would undermine government legitimacy in the eyes of segments of the public and could compel it to use force against its opponents by accusing them of siding with the TPLF or undermining national unity.

## Effects on the economy

The ensuing instability and uncertainty, most importantly, would diminish investor confidence in the country at a time when the Ethiopian economy is already bleeding from a **lack of foreign investment** and the negative effects of COVID-19. Similar to its counterparts around the world, for instance, Ethiopian Airlines is struggling and the tourism industry is drying up. At the same time, some major businesses are **reported** to have either been forced to stop operations due to increased levels of violence or are actively planning their relocation strategies should the conflict in Tigray drag on or spread to other regions. Lastly, there are speculations over whether the government will go ahead with its privatisation plan for Ethio Telecom given its recently developed habit of shutting down communication links between the country and outside world as part of its crisis management strategy.

## Regional dimensions of the conflict

Equally worrisome is the evolving regional dimension of the conflict. Relations between **Sudan and Ethiopia**, in particular, have been on a downward trajectory ever since Khartoum sent troops to Fashaga. Although Ahmed played a constructive role in the immediate aftermath of Sudan's long-time leader Omar Al Bashir's downfall, and notwithstanding Khartoum's earlier **proposal** for the establishment of a joint border patrol force, Sudan has made an opportunistic move to take advantage of Ethiopian forces' preoccupation with the conflict in Tigray and take de facto control of a region that has been traditionally home to Ethiopian farmers since 1995.

In response, Ethiopia has **warned of retaliation** and refused to participate in any talks until Sudanese forces have departed from the region; a demand that is highly

unlikely to be met by Sudan. For its part, Khartoum has now **changed its stance** on the Nile dam issue, essentially causing the failure of the last round of talks by refusing, in spite of its initial agreement, to agree to the presence of the African Union's technical experts at the negotiations.

As such, there is now a real fear of a joint Egyptian Sudanese cooperation to assist the TPLF by providing a safe haven for its leadership and resources for its fighters to prolong the conflict. Cairo and Khartoum now share a common desire to increase their bargaining power vis-a-vis Addis Ababa, albeit for different reasons: while Cairo is keen on extracting favourable concessions from Ethiopia with regard to the dam and its filling, Sudan sees a once in a life-time opportunity in the current conflict to settle the border question once and for all.

The mere possibility of a military confrontation benefits the Sudanese armed forces in its current tussle with the civilian government over political influence. Further, the fact that the TPLF leadership already has a network of friends in Khartoum in conjuncture with the recent increase in the frequency of TPLF attacks on government positions along the transit corridor between Sudan and Tigray could indicate that this cooperation may already be taking place. Add to this the reduced international and regional commitment to Somalia's security and the resulting **surge in Al Shabab activities** in the run up to what is promising to be a highly contested election, combined with uncertainty over the intentions of Eritrean forces inside Ethiopia, and it becomes clear why the Tigray conflict could become the catalyst for further instability in the Horn.

## Routes to resolve the crisis

Looking ahead, there is a strong possibility that Ethiopia could undergo the types of events and infighting that erupted, and in a sense characterised, the sociopolitical life of the country between the 1970s and early 1990s, which led to the separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia. As the election month approaches, the economy further stagnates and trust between and within ethnic and communal groups and federal authorities erodes, it is not unreasonable to expect both the emergence and radicalisation of student and youth led movements across the country. Indeed there is a strong tendency for populist politics centred around ethnicity, nationalism and national security.

To avert the worse, the international community needs urgently to bring the warring sides to the negotiating table. Given that both the US and China have vested interests in the stability of Ethiopia and the wider Horn, Ethiopia represents a case where they can cooperate in pursuit of a common cause. In fact, the conflict in Ethiopia can be used to test the viability of President Biden's China strategy and whether Beijing and Washington can cooperate with each other when their interests merge.

Prime Minister Ahmed needs to realise that the more he rejects international mediation and blocks access to the region out of a desire to not internationalise the conflict, the more, rather paradoxically, internationalised the conflict will become. Yes the TPLF must not be allowed to take the country's territorial integrity hostage by threatening secession if its maximalist demands for near total autonomy are not met. However, its total elimination is also not a realistic objective; it is deep rooted in Tigray's sociopolitical fabric and still enjoys a relatively high degree of popularity amongst Tigrayans.

As a result, a creative combination of the South African and Emirati models could provide a viable way forward. They both recognise the importance of local/tribal identity and the right to its preservation. Yet, they also prioritise national allegiance over and above ethnic or tribal royalties, and thus they allow for the construction and strengthening of both national and local identities in tandem with each other and not in opposition.

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*Photo: Prime Minister Dr Abiy Ahmed welcomes President Kagame in Ethiopia for a State Visit. Credit: Paul Kagame. Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.*

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