

Nota

**Beyond the surface
Historical, political
and socio-economic causes
of the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia**

Melale Hailu

January 2022

Contents

Introduction	p. 3
Evaluation of the Causes of the Ongoing Ethiopian Conflict:	p. 3
1. Historical	p. 3
2. Political, Economic, & Social Causes	P. 4
Conclusions	p. 6
Bibliography	p. 8

This paper is the final research output of the 6-months international internship that ***Melale Hailu***, Bachelor of Science in Global Studies, Double Minor in Economics and Law & Liberal Arts, University of Richmond, VA, spent at CeSPI in 2021, organized by IES Abroad Italy.

The paper traces the historical, political, social, economic causes of the internal conflict that plagues Ethiopia and casts an ominous shadow on its future. For over an year now the country has been torn by a conflict the outcome of which appears far from certain. What in prime minister Abiy's intention should have been a blitzkrieg against the TPLF (the Tigray People's Liberation Front, that has long wielded political and economic power in Ethiopia), risks giving rise to an ethnic conflict that might upset the whole country and destroy the national unity project that Abiy himself has always proclaimed as his goal. Understanding the deep roots of this conflict – potentially able to destabilize the whole region – is both a necessary and a very hard task. This paper provides a few starting points for the analysis.

The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and don't necessarily reflect CeSPI's views.

Introduction

Africa, quite literally the middle continent, is uniquely traversed by the equator as it cuts it into nearly equal halves. Nonetheless, the shackles of ‘underdevelopment’ have plagued the once-prosperous region, pushing the most central of all the continents to the very periphery of world affairs. For many years, the story of Africa has been marked with the paradoxical African economy, one that produces what it does not consume and consumes what it does not produce, ineffective and predatory states, cultures incapable of co-existence, prolonged violent conflicts, and the institutionalized exploitation, inferiorization, and extraction of its people and resources. Ethiopia, in the horn of the African continent, is no stranger to this story. Nothing attests to this more than the present-day condition of the Ethiopian state, one that is at war with itself and potentially on the brinks of collapse. The current Ethiopian crisis, one of the many names used by journalists to describe what is transpiring in the country, is far more complicated than it appears with deep, entangled roots. In short, the crises can be understood as a civil war between regional and federal forces with other internal and external actors on the sidelines. Thus, the goal of this paper is to go beyond the surface and explore the historical (contemporary), economic, social, and political causes of the ongoing conflict and briefly analyze the potential futures that await the Ethiopian nation-state.

Evaluation of the Causes of the Ongoing Ethiopian Conflict:

1. Historical

Ethiopia, widely considered the cradle of mankind, remains to be one of the few regions in the world that encompasses a history that can be traced back to antiquity. The country has deep historical roots, thus understanding its remote past is fundamental to successfully analyze its intricate present as the seeds of the ongoing unrest were planted generations ago. The foundations of the modern Ethiopian state were predominantly established in the mid-nineteenth century by the Kingdom of Abyssinia under three different emperors. While the rest of the continent fell to the European scramble for Africa, Ethiopia, as we know it today, was subject to the empire-expansionist project launched by the Abyssinian emperor Menelik II. During his reign, Menelik II began a perpetual southwards expansion; through this conquest the autonomous states of the south were subdued and incorporated into the Empire giving it the geographical, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic composition we know today. This expansion of territory as reunification of the empire provided the impetus and space for institutionalized exploitation, further conquest of land, and the imposition of the language, culture, and religion of the ruling hegemonic class; the empire-state was entirely dominated by Amhara nobility. Under the empire's feudal system, the northern Tigrayan province was increasingly marginalised by Amhara imperial rule although the ethnic groups were two branches of the same Semitic tree and their languages derivations of the Aksumite tongue Ge'ez (now the language of the Ethiopian/Eritrean Orthodox Church). So perhaps one can argue that the internal conflict today and the looming disintegration it has caused has been brewing for quite some time. In 1991 the tables turned when a coalition of ethnically configured opposition groups who called themselves the Ethiopian People's Democratic Front (EPRDF) captured control of state power. The EPRDF was made up of three

satellite parties that essentially worked to advance the interests of the The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the most consequential of the opposition groups turned political parties. The TPLF were at the forefront of the fundamental transformation Ethiopia underwent post-1991. This fundamental change to the country's long-held political philosophy remains the bedrock of the internal disputes festering in Ethiopia thirty-some years later, the current civil war being the most destabilizing. The tale of two political ideologies and their far-reaching implications in Ethiopia goes as follows.

2. Political, Economic, & Social Causes

Following the fall of the centralized military regime in 1991, the new regime formally reconfigured the Ethiopian state apparatus along ethnic lines under a decentralized, federalist government. This was a drastic change from the unitarist centralized form of governance that had national integration (euphemism for assimilation) at the center of its implementation and which dominated the country's politics for decades. As mentioned above, Ethiopian politics is essentially a battleground between these two opposing political ideologies with political elites on both sides often using them to justify their political biases/moral superiority and consequently ignite conflict. The Tigray war is no exception. After capturing state power, the TPLF formally introduced the ideas of self-determination and pluralism into the Ethiopian constitution (rights of Nations, nationalities, and peoples). Nonetheless, though federalism in Ethiopia gave ethnically-defined regional states significant autonomy it did not fulfill its promise of ending the centre's historical monopoly of ruling power and Ethiopia became a dominant-party state under TPLF rule; the elite in the centre ruled, while the elite in the periphery administered. Their dictatorship was best characterized by astounding state-led economic growth, fraudulent elections, human rights abuses (government killings of civilians, mass arrests, extensive detainment of opposition groups), government land seizures, inequitable distribution of state resources, and the extraction of the country's wealth for the personal enrichment of TPLF elites. After twenty-seven years the Ethiopian people had enough of the political/economic marginalisation of the people at the hands of the powerful and wealthy Tigryan hegemony and widespread discontent dominated nearly every street in the country, with the youth of the Oromo ethnic group leading the way. Then comes now prime minister Abiy Ahmed to rescue Ethiopia from an authoritarian and repressive regime...or not. The dynamics of Abiy Ahmed's rise to power and securance of the most consequential position in the government is important to note; Ahmed was not formally elected by the Ethiopian people, rather he was appointed as PM of a transitional government by the members of the EPRDF after the previous leader stepped down, a government reshuffle of sorts (though his leadership was strongly contested by members of TPLF during parliamentary discussions). Additionally, though much of Abiy Ahmed's initial appeal to ordinary citizens rested on the fact that his approach was that unlike his callous & fear-inducing predecessors, it mustn't be forgotten that Ahmed was essentially an insider, a member of the same ruling coalition as said predecessors. Upon being sworn into office, it appeared as so to both the international community and the local people that PM Ahmed was working to fulfill his promise of political reform, reconciliation, and rebuilding a sense of national unity/identity on the basis of common values, interests, etc rather than on the basis of language and ethnicity (which in a country with a mosaic of more than eighty different ethnic groups and about one-hundred languages will prove to be counter-productive). However what he believed to be political reform, the dissolution of the ruling EPRDF coalition the TPLF had founded and the merging of the

country's parties into one unified pan-Ethiopian party, ended up being the spark that lit the fire. In an effort to stray the country away from ethnic federalism and redeem the fractured reputation of the coalition he once was a part of, Ahmed imprisoned key TPLF government officials on charges of corruption & human rights abuses and more momentously created what he called the 'Prosperity Party' with three of the four parties in agreement. Needless to say, the vanguard TPLF party became incredibly ostracized in the process and the party overwhelmingly was in opposition of the merge and refused to join deeming it illegitimate; thereby marking the start of tensions that soon will boil over into a full-fledged war. Being sidelined after controlling the country's political and economic scene for nearly three-decades with an iron-fist prompted the TPLF to return to their home region of Tigray and continue their leadership there. This division, amongst both the ordinary Ethiopian people and political elites, between Abiy Ahmed and those who support the creation of an all-encompassing national party, and the TPLF and those who are in support of distinct autonomous political entities (important to note that the two are not interchangeable-meaning all those who are in support of distinct autonomous political entities don't support the TPLF) brings us back yet again to the battleground where unitarism and federalism go head to head. Unfortunately in the case of Ethiopia, this battleground did not remain merely metaphorical. The turning point was in the summer of 2020 when the federal government decided to indefinitely postpone elections citing pandemic concerns, and thus began an illegitimate stay in power. This election would have been the first election after 30 years of authoritarianism that would put Ethiopia's democratic transition to the test. A couple months later, the Tigray regional state under the leadership of the TPLF went ahead and held regional elections, defying the central authority in the process, setting off a tit-for-tat chain reaction between the federal government and the Tigray regional government. Abiy Ahmed and his administration reacted to the TPLF defiance by cutting funding to the northern region all together. What transpired after has been a point of contention; Ahmed has claimed he called for a military operation and a state of emergency in Tigray in November of 2020 due to the TPLF's supposed attack and looting of federal military bases (the TPLF have persistently denied these allegations and perceive them as a way for Abiy Ahmed to justify his military offense and further actions against the Tigray region). Nonetheless, the back and forth military exchange between the two has been ongoing for more than a year, claiming the lives of thousands of people, displacing millions more, fueling a deadly famine the likes of which Ethiopia has already seen before, and showing disturbing hallmarks of genocide of the Tegar people (though it is important to note atrocities have been committed on both sides). Additionally, though evidently the key players of the domestic war are political elites and military forces within the country, from the onset of the conflict external actors have continued to play an instrumental role as Ethiopia's regional and international position bears great strategic importance. Though exploring in detail all additional actors is beyond the scope of this paper, it's important to briefly mention some. For instance, multiple sources have confirmed that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed carried out his military offense at the start of the war using federal forces, members of regional militia groups (the most prominent being the Amhara militia), and military troops from neighboring Eritrea. In fact, this involvement of Eritrea in Ethiopia's domestic affairs and the continued presence of Eritrean soldiers in the Tigray region has escalated the conflict and been yet another source of enmity between the federal government and the Tigray regional state. The western community, with the United States at the forefront, have also openly expressed their concerns over the ongoing Ethiopian conflict urging the federal government to halt all military operations, quickly eradicate any foreign military presence within Ethiopian borders, and prioritize

diplomatic discourse, ultimately using sanctions as a tool of persuasion. Internally, recent developments have indicated that an ethnic Oromo rebel group (Oromo Liberation Army), who were once avid fighters of the TPLF, have formed an alliance with their former enemies to together overthrow and fight the federal government- 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' sort of logic.

Conclusion: What Path Will Ethiopia's Future Take?

One of the greatest difficulties with this conflict lies in its uncertain and tumultuous future; everyday the news reports on a new development in the country, each new development drastically changing the course of the war in a different direction and consequently what the future of Ethiopia will look like. The war's volatile and unpredictable nature is best evidenced by the recent developments that have engulfed Ethiopian society as well as nearly every media outlet. Just shy of the war's one year anniversary, it was reported that the TDF (military branch of the TPLF) was advancing on the nation's capital ready to launch an offensive with the intention to oust PM Ahmed from power. This left the federal government anxious, leading Ahmed to declare a state of emergency and more inexplicably urge average Ethiopian citizens to arm themselves and fight off the invading forces (as he puts it "dying for Ethiopia is a duty for all of us"). However, just weeks after, TPLF fighters were forced to retreat back to the mountainous north, never actually capturing the capital of Addis Ababa. Nonetheless, one aspect the differing developments have in common is that they all suggest that the war is reaching a critical juncture, with Ethiopia's future potentially taking two different paths. The first possible path goes as follows: Both TPLF elites and PM Abiy Ahmed agree to a lasting ceasefire and engage in an all-inclusive democratic dialogue to cultivate a political solution to an inherently political problem, most likely backed by efforts by the international community. Dialogue will lay out immediate and long-run de-escalatory steps. Though a possibility, its likelihood of halting the war is low due to the fact that the desires of both sides are mutually exclusive. Its likelihood of yielding relative success is also diminished by the fact that both sides have garnered committed supporters who would not be in line with negotiating with the other side, especially after already this deep into the war. Even if the political elites ended up at the negotiating table, fighting could continue amongst the people that have armed themselves and are determined to fight for their interests. The second direction this war can go in looks as follows: PM Ahmed is run out of Ethiopia, pushed into exile or ousted from power, and the Tigray defense forces and their allies (OLA) successfully capture the city and fulfill their demands. With the power vacuum, they create a transitional government, promote national inclusive dialogue that enables power-sharing amongst regional leaderships to deter yet another conflict (which is sure to come if power-sharing and a fairer distribution of resources is not prioritized especially with their current allies, the OLA). Though it is equally unlikely that if the TDF prevails militarily it will reinstate an authoritarian government with the locus of power in their hands yet again, the chances of a total regime change the likes of which Ethiopia saw in 1991 also are low. In addition, another TPLF-led transitional government will most likely not solve or even begin to solve Ethiopia's deep-rooted issues-thereby not effective in the long-run.

To be completely frank, the future of Ethiopia is unknown and has become exceedingly difficult to discern. What is absolutely certain, however, is that generations of Ethiopians have paid and

continue to pay the heavy price for misgovernment, which at the heart of it is rooted in the monopoly of power held by irresponsible, domineering, and corrupt elites and the disconnect they have instigated amongst society from the state; a disparity breeding political, economic, and social turmoil. It's absolutely integral to the long-term prosperity of the Ethiopian state to engage in an inclusive and transparent national democratic dialogue rather than resorting to fighting one another based on differing interpretations of what the future of Ethiopia should look like. Moreover, there is a serious and potentially dangerous mis-understanding of priorities in Ethiopia; strategies must be articulated to help shift the countries priorities towards reducing poverty, bettering the quality of education and health care, improving internet access, the list goes on. This paper merely scratched the surface of an incredibly complex and multi-layered discourse that is equally, if not more, ubiquitous today as it was fifteen, thirty, fifty years ago.

Bibliography

John Young (1996) Ethnicity and power in Ethiopia, *Review of African Political Economy*, 23:70, 531-542,

Markakis, John. *Ethiopia: the Last Two Frontiers*. James Currey, 2013.

Faleg, Giovanni. *RESETTING ETHIOPIA: Will the State Heal or Fail?* European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2019,

Merera Gudina (2011) Elections and democratization in Ethiopia, 1991–2010, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5:4, 664-680,

Mengisteab, Kidane. “New Approaches to State Building in Africa: The Case of Ethiopia's Ethnic-Based Federalism.” *African Studies Review*, vol. 40, no. 3, 1997, pp. 111–132.

Walsh, Declan, and Abdi Latif Dahir. “Why Is Ethiopia at War with Itself?” *The New York Times*, *The New York Times*, 5 Nov. 2020,

Editors, FP. “How Ethiopia's Conflict Deepened in 2021.” *Foreign Policy*, *Foreign Policy*, 27 Dec. 2021,