

In conversation with Paulos Tesfagiorgis

Ethiopia: The Perils of War

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The confrontation between the Tigray People's Liberation Front and the other components of Ethiopia's leadership has erupted into armed conflict. We explore the opportunities for peace, and the risks for the region.

Since 2018, the new Ethiopian Prime Minister (PM), Abiy Ahmed has been presented as a champion of peace and democracy. He released political prisoners and relaxed control over the press. And he signed a peace accord with Eritrea. Under Abiy, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) which had dominated the regime since the overthrow of the dictatorship, was gradually pushed out of one commanding position after another. Abiy's actions resonated with vast numbers of Ethiopians, who seemed to have given him a strong mandate to continue with his reform agenda and consolidate it.

However, it was not too long before conflicts erupted again. The confrontation between the new Ethiopian circle of power, which the PM seems to be beholden to, and the TPLF finally and dramatically exploded in 2020 when the TPLF withdrew, politically and physically from the Ethiopian capital, conducted its own regional elections, and took over Ethiopian military bases in Tigray. Their intention apparently was to pre-empt any attempt by PM Abiy to use the Ethiopian armed forces against the TPLF or the people of Tigray. In any case, the Ethiopian government responded by launching a full-scale invasion of Tigray in November 2019.

Two months later, Ethiopian military forces are occupying the main towns including the Tigrayan capital Mekelle. TPLF battle-hardened troops have gone up into the hills, promising a "battle to the finish, and to make Tigray the "burial ground of the invaders".

This appears to be the beginning of a protracted war. Are there any chances to rebuild peace? What is to expect from other Horn of Africa countries? What about the USA and other powers? We asked these questions to regional expert Paulos Tesfagiorgis.

What is happening on the ground in Tigray?

It is very difficult to know much under the circumstances. Apparently, battles are going on in many regions of Tigray. More than 70 % of the Ethiopian army are now in Tigray. According to Mesfin Hagos, Eritrea's former Chief of Staff and Minister of Defense, the Eritrean President sent 11 mechanized divisions, 4 infantry divisions and 2 commando divisions in addition to providing intelligence, logistics and heavy armaments. This makes one think "who is doing the actually fighting?" Despite this enormous deployment, TPLF seems to be able to inflict heavy losses, including destroying tanks and heavy armaments and taking prisoners of war although we have not seen images of such so far. Nonetheless, human and material costs seem to be quite high on the Ethiopian side. As far as the TPLF is concerned, the extent of their losses is unknown. For sure, there is also a high cost on their side but, one can assume that they were well prepared. They know how to fight, and they know their terrain. They can also count on the support of most of the people in Tigray who might not necessarily like the TPLF, but who will support them in face of an Ethiopian assault which has already affected civilians badly.

Is it heading towards a protracted war?

I see it as a real possibility. Despite their greater number, I do not think the government forces can crush the TPLF easily. There are many questions on the quality of their military leadership, since the Ethiopian army, until 2018, was led by TPLF senior commanders who have defected en masse to join the resistance. Ethiopian soldiers who come from various nationalities do not necessarily have the training and motivation that one will find on the Tigrayan side, united by the call to “defend the nation”. Ethiopia, one should not forget, is still a very poor country, despite their relative economic success of the past decade and half.

Can the involvement of Eritrean forces make a difference?

If the evidence that we have until now is confirmed, Eritrean military could and is, apparently, playing a leading role. Although effective on the military side, that could be dangerous politically. The conflicts between Eritrea and Tigray, more specifically between EPLF and TPLF, are more in-depth, with a long history. Eritrean domination and participation in the war would appear as a foreign invasion. That would make Ethiopians, leave alone Tigrayans, very uncomfortable. All in all, I see the possibility of a protracted war that will sap Ethiopia's energy, distract its attention from resolving the so many problems that it is encountering in different places, discouraging economic activities and development projects.

Was that disaster unavoidable?

It is a complex and multi-dimensional crisis, nothing could have been ‘easily’ resolved. It would have required years, perhaps decades, to build a genuine political space, institute dialogue as a participatory political process and improve the lives of the ordinary people. There were some positive advances in 2018 as Ethiopia was going to a certain extent towards democratization. The sort of ‘ethnic federalism’ that came about in the 1990s, had its limitations, but also advantages. Ethiopia had to find its way outside of the very negative heritage left by the feudal regime of Haile Selassie and barbaric military junta of Mengistu who had cultivated the idea that the country was the property of the Amhara elite, and that everyone else were ignorant peasants. Ethiopian federalism was based on ethnicity, a system that insisted in empowering the historically subjugated and the minority ethnic groups. It was no easy to redesign the constitution, the governance structures of this type of federalism with finances, power sharing, security, etc. working properly. What was also underestimated is the fact minorities also lived within minorities. Would they be asking to assert their identity and claim their right to govern themselves? Would they be treated as equal to the minorities that they live within? One can say, the TPLF that was dominating the government did try, but not really understood the complexity of the situation nor, in the latter years, were it prepared enough. The marginalized are now expected to rally around the newly created Prosperity Party and Prime minister Abiy, that claims to have come with sort of a reform agenda without the required sophisticated, patient dialogue and negotiations.

But then, everything broke down...

I think that Abiy and the new Ethiopia ruling class were unable to evaluate the consequences of the conflict with TPLF, even before the dramatic escalation of the last two months. The thinking was that the new government could force the TPLF to accept the inevitable, i.e., losing their grip on power in Addis and keeping their silence forever.

Abiy miscalculated...

Despite many differences between political and social groups and ethnic identities in Ethiopia, there

was a deep consensual demand that Ethiopia could no longer be ruled by the TPLF. But it seems a strategic mistake to think that they can easily be dislodged in Tigray; a confidence that was hugely mistaken. Abiy could not understand the fact that the TPLF is rooted in the society for historical reasons. Bear also in mind that last summer, the TPLF was elected with a huge majority in the Tigray elections which were, by the way transparent, free and fair. This can also be taken as a new mandate given by the people to the TPLF to govern the region. At the end of the day, going to war against the TPLF was and is a serious failure of leadership, of statecraft, of thinking beyond the present. A credible leader must think carefully before venturing into war especially in the case of Ethiopia. He should think about the people, their lives, their livelihood; the economy of the country, the future that might be compromised because of an avoidable war.

Explain a bit more the role of Eritrea throughout the confrontation...

The Eritrean military presence is probably one of the reasons that Ethiopia can still claim to maintain its occupation of Tigray. It is huge. It seems that Afwerki had conceived this war a long time ago. He had an axe to grind against the TPLF whose forces had effectively defeated him the war of 1998-2000 and which he took as a personal humiliation. Apparently, Abiy looked up to the Eritrean leader when it appeared that the conflict with Tigray was heightening. He accepted, wrongfully the suggestion that the solution was to eliminate or at least degrade strategically the TPLF by a quick surgical military action. What a blunder!

Eritrea at some point will pay the cost...

I am extremely sad that my country is involved. It is not that Eritrea has no issues with TPLF. The non-acceptance of the border decision and refusal to implement an international ruling has left a bad blood between Eritreans and TPLF. The almost two decades of no-war-no-peace that was created by this refusal gave the Eritrean dictator an excuse to suspend all freedoms, democratization, development and the implementation of a constitutions that was made by the people. But if one thinks about peace and reconstruction, going back to war is madness. My country, my people, young and old, will bear the cost of the on-going war. Only candid discussions and a patient dialogue could lead to reconciliation, through truth telling of the damages done to each other and looking for a long-term solution that would promote peace, security and prosperity for the peoples of Eritrea and Tigray and the people of Ethiopia at large.

What about Ethiopia? Who will pay?

Ethiopia was regarded as an anchor of peace and stability in the Horn of Africa region with all its problems. No more! As a matter of fact, it now runs the risk of becoming a source of instability in the region with unimagined consequences. A side but revealing story is that Ethiopia is now pulling out of UN peace keeping operations in Somalia and South Sudan. Abiy, after having won the Nobel Peace Prize for his effort to make peace with Eritrea, seems to have gone to war with his own country, against his own people. Tigrayans are Ethiopians! In the meantime, there is a political squeeze: political party leaders are in prison; some parties are deregistered; others have stated they will not participate in the 2021 elections under the present climate of intimidation. Ethiopia seems to have gone back to the darkness of the 1980s where extrajudicial killings were the order of the day, with slaughter, displacement and with a heavy cloud of silence and fear dominating everyday life. Independent media that flourished in the last few years have resorted to self-censorship.

What about security?

It is evident that security is threatened in many regions of Ogaden, Afar, Beni Shangul and other places. There are unrest in many parts of Ethiopia, including armed resistance, massacres, ethnic

cleansing, etc. Militias are taking the law into their own hands, are ill-disciplined, marauding criminals creating chaos and destruction. They can easily turn into mercenaries, doing the dirty work of whoever pays them more. The recent massacre in Mai Kadra is said to have been committed by militias. Whether they were Amharas or Tigrayans militias, it does not make much difference, although initial investigations seem to indicate that Amhara militias have committed the massacres.

What about the situation in Oromia?

As I said earlier, the regular Ethiopian defense forces are needed in many other places in Ethiopia, but their concentration is in Tigray. The dissatisfaction that expresses itself in violence in Oromia is not addressed yet and might not be if the tactic that is being employed by the government is to instill fear through imprisoning their leaders, accusing them of “terrorism” and shooting them in broad daylight, instead of confronting the huge issue of youth unemployment that manifests itself in sporadic destructive activities, etc.

What about the situation of the Tigrayans outside Tigray?

Ethnic profiling is being practiced against the Tigrayans in the rest of Ethiopia, especially in the capital. Tigrayan businesses are closed; Tigrayans cannot access their bank accounts. Tigrayans are dismissed from government jobs and prevented from travelling. For example, Tigrayans are refused boarding on Ethiopian Airlines. This is not going to disappear especially if the military campaign fails and the invasion of Tigray is not quickly lifted. This might also escalate into massacres that will complicate for generations peace in Ethiopia and confidence of Tigrayans to stay as part of Ethiopia.

Where are the global actors?

The United States that was historically and ally of Ethiopia is expressing its dissent with the ongoing violence and against the involvement of Eritrea. At this point, it is hard to discern a real strategic approach by the international community. The European Union and China who have big economic stakes in Ethiopia, have little political influence and leverage, and additionally, limited capacities to impose on the Ethiopian government to change course.

And the regional powers?

Their main regional governments seem to have a problem with Ethiopia, such as Sudan and Kenya. Egypt and Ethiopia have had, in the past as well as currently, many conflicts with mainly focused on the share of the waters of the Nile river. Sudan on the other had has several land-based conflicts with Ethiopia that are threatening to get out of hand. Eritrea is clearly on the side of Ethiopia and sees chaos suiting its designs. Djibouti is quiet, perhaps wisely. Somalia is in support of Ethiopia but without any meaningful weight one way or the other as the government is unstable and dependent on outside forces for its own security. Because of the many aggravating crises in in these countries, it is unlikely that they can intervene with the necessary means and sufficient credibility to promote some sort of a peace process. What worsens this passivity is the historically fact that the policy of many states in the region have been locked in the false principle that the “enemy of my enemy is my friend”. All these countries have supported their neighbour’s opposition groups. To close this chapter, no one can believe that Saudi Arabia and the Emirates can play any constructive role except dispensing money to different warring factions. What they have done in Yemen, Libya, Syria indicates that no one has confidence they can play and constructive role or bring any positive change.

Can this factor sustain the TPLF hope to find regional allies?

The rumor is in fact that the TPLF is already lobbying Khartoum and Cairo, at least to have open access to these countries and open some passages for supplies, as it was in the case of Eritrean liberation movement and the TPLF until 1991. But in the current confused and dangerous situation, external States will think twice before getting involved with forces, on both sides, who are playing with fire. But the longer this conflict continues the more it risks inviting other interested parties, complicating the situation even more.

In this very dark moment, how can one hope?

I will be surprised if there are no sane voices in Addis Ababa or the rest of Ethiopia for that matter. I am very sure there are many who not only disagree with the war but who are pained by the loss of life, loss of resources and loss of opportunities. Many academic and research institutions have sprouted in Ethiopia. Many professionals and highly skilled and experienced people exist. They have also witnessed the mistakes and blunders of the TPLF and, I very much believe, were ready to participate in correcting them. There is out there a new generation that has somehow to find the will to confront the old dream of bringing Ethiopia back to a unitary state under a restrictive group. Ethiopia has gone through several interesting stages in its history. It had its glorious time, times of defeating outside conquerors and establishing modern institutions. It also had its dark times. In the end it proved it is incredibly resilient.

Can we expect new initiatives from the present rulers both in Ethiopia and Tigray?

I hope this time, some of the leaders would stop the killing and resolve their differences politically through dialogue. Yes, it would be a not so small miracle! On the Ethiopian side, the grave mistakes committed by Abiy must force serious rethinking within the ruling group. Serious people must come upfront and dispense with the dangerous practice of the enemy of my enemy is my friend, or I must eliminate all those that do not think like me. Different countries have supported their neighbour's opposition groups. Serious people must come upfront and challenge the idea that mashing the TPLF or for that matter other regional identities is a sustainable policy. The TPLF has also to do some hard thinking. They cannot risk the side of an endless war that would ruin Tigray for decades. It might be difficult to change their tradition inherited from their dogmatic background, but they have enough young members that can help to shift their politics of force and manipulation to the politics of negotiation, power-sharing and respect of those who do not think like themselves.

Dialogue is not always easy; it can also be time consuming. But, in the end, it can work and the reward benefits everyone – the country and the people – bringing the bright future that Ethiopia and Ethiopians very well deserve.

Paulos Tesfagiorgis

P.S.

Paulos Tesfagiorgis was the head of the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) and one of the senior cadres of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) from the 1970s till the liberation of the country in 1991. While EPLF liberated Eritrea, opposition forces in Ethiopia under the leadership of the Tigray People's Liberation front (TPLF) and its coalition partners, also succeeded in establishing a new government in Addis Ababa. The hope then was that both Ethiopia and Eritrea would be rebuilding in cooperation. But it turned otherwise. Under the leader of the EPLF and new president

Isaias Afwerki, Eritrea escalated a boarder skirmish to an all-out war which caused lots of destruction and animosity for another two decades. Paulos, as many of his former comrades were forced into exile while many senior EPLF and government cadres were detained and disappeared, their whereabouts till unknown.