

A Long War Looming in Ethiopia Should Prompt Urgent U.S. Diplomacy

Joshua Meservey

KEY TAKEAWAYS

A nascent civil war in Ethiopia threatens crisis in the strategically important East Africa region.

The conflict is deepening the ethnic divides and mistrust of the government that cripple the country.

The U.S. must lead concerned partners to press for a negotiated settlement before the fighting settles into a protracted conflict.

A nascent civil war in Ethiopia threatens crisis and instability in the strategically important East Africa region. The fighting broke out after years of escalating tensions between the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that dominated the previous government, and the current government led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

The Abiy government believes it can score a quick and decisive victory, but a prolonged insurgency is likely. The conflict has already exacerbated the ethnic and political tensions in the country that cause division and violence; the U.S. should urgently organize concerned countries to pressure the combatants to negotiate, while also offering assistance and encouragement for a longer-term plan for reconciliation inside the country.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib6029>

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War Breaks Out

On November 4, the Ethiopian military attacked the northern Tigray state, the home region of the TPLF, the political party that dominated the Ethiopian government for nearly 30 years. The TPLF lost its stranglehold on political and economic power in 2018 after popular protests led by the Oromo, Ethiopia's largest but traditionally marginalized tribe, pressured the government to appoint a fellow tribesman, Abiy Ahmed, as prime minister. Abiy quickly purged many senior TPLF members from the government and military, and the TPLF embarked on a campaign of obstruction and resistance to the new government.

The Tigrayans were further aggrieved by the whirlwind reform agenda that Abiy launched to address the economic and political crises he inherited. He made peace with Eritrea, the TPLF's bitter enemy, then dissolved into his new Prosperity Party the four constituent factions of the former ruling coalition party. The Tigrayans, fearing that Abiy was centralizing power, refused to join. This concern bubbled up again when earlier this year Abiy indefinitely postponed national elections because of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Tigray held its own parliamentary elections in September; Addis Ababa dismissed the results and appointed a caretaker government for the state. The TPLF then allegedly attacked a military outpost in Tigray state,² and Abiy launched his offensive soon after.

The crisis is in part the product of decades of corrupt authoritarian rule of a nation riven by ethnic distrust. There are more than 80 ethnic groups in Ethiopia, and for decades Ethiopian rulers have bred animosity by privileging one or another group at the others' expense. The latter-day emperors of the monarchy, and the Marxist dictatorship that succeeded it, privileged the Amhara people;³ the TPLF-dominated former government elevated the minority Tigrayans.⁴

Abiy tried to resolve the animosity by emphasizing a pan-Ethiopian vision,⁵ but some ethnic groups interpreted his agenda as an attempt to undermine the constitutional guarantee of state autonomy.⁶ The mistrust deepened as Abiy, perhaps spurred by the urgency of his inherited crises and the high expectations of the protesters who swept him to power, adopted a peremptory approach to reform.⁷ The Oromo soon renounced support for Abiy, and his security services responded to continuing violence and unrest by imprisoning political opponents and torturing, disappearing, and summarily executing protesters and others.

An Emerging Disaster

The quick conventional victory that Abiy seeks might be possible, but a decisive one is unlikely. The TPLF is isolated and has Eritrea looming to its north, which the TPLF claims has already joined the offensive. Money will be tight, and it will be difficult for the TPLF to access food and supplies from outside.

However, the fighting will strain Ethiopia's already distressed economy, and unrest in regions such as Oromia could grow. Abiy's maximalist demands—the disarmament and arrest of the TPLF leadership—has likely hardened Tigrayan resolve. Tigray may also hold the majority of Ethiopia's military weaponry,⁸ a legacy of TPLF dominance of the military and Tigray's status as a frontline state with Eritrea. The TPLF boasts as many as 250,000 fighters⁹ with an experienced cadre of officers and troops, while the Ethiopian military could fracture along ethnic lines.¹⁰ The TPLF, which was born as an insurgent movement, is fighting on home ground with the likely support of most Tigrayans.

Sudan to the west is Tigray's only possible outlet, and therefore key to the fighting, but it is unclear how Khartoum will play its hand. It has already closed border posts, but has also joined international calls for negotiations that Abiy rejected. Sudan opposes Ethiopia's unilateral filling of its giant dam upstream on the Nile River, and its new prime minister, Abdallah Hamdok, likely has at least a cordial relationship with some TPLF figures as he lived in Addis Ababa in exile for years. The two countries also have a long-running border dispute on which Khartoum is reportedly seeking concessions in exchange for keeping the TPLF contained, yet the contested territory is part of the compensation that Amhara state, which borders the disputed territory, seeks from Abiy for joining the offensive against Tigray.¹¹

The ethnic undertones to the fighting are likely also deepening distrust within Ethiopia. Many Ethiopians hate the TPLF for its abusive rule, but Addis Ababa sending troops and ethnic militia against a state will almost certainly spark fear among other ethnic groups that they could suffer the same fate. And, despite Abiy's call to avoid scapegoating Tigrayans, some have been abused by the security services and fellow Ethiopians. The TPLF, meanwhile, allegedly slaughtered hundreds of non-Tigrayan civilians residing in Tigray.¹²

U.S. Interests

The conflict endangers the huge investments that Washington has made in Ethiopia. Over the past two decades, the U.S. has delivered more than \$13 billion in aid to the country.¹³ Washington welcomed Abiy's ascension

as an unexpected opportunity to help to build democracy in a traditionally authoritarian country. The unrest is also eroding Ethiopia's contribution to the U.S.-supported international force battling Islamist terrorism in Somalia.¹⁴

The fighting is already destabilizing the strategic but fragile East Africa region that hosts the U.S.'s only permanent African military base, dominates the international shipping chokepoint at the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and contains some of sub-Saharan Africa's largest economies and most-populous countries. It is unclear how long or how effectively Sudan, itself experiencing a delicate political transition, can or will keep its Tigray border closed—particularly as the costs exacerbate its existing economic crisis—across which refugees are already pouring. The conflict also likely signals, for now, the death of what little hope there was for a settlement of the Egypt–Sudan–Ethiopia Nile dam dispute that the U.S. previously tried to mediate. There is a danger that the conflict is already spreading: In response to Eritrea's alleged incursion into Tigray, the TPLF rocketed the Eritrean capital of Asmara on November 14.

What Now?

Both sides may see this conflict as existential, leaving little opportunity for the U.S. and others to persuade them to de-escalate. Nonetheless, Washington should:

- **Urgently lead a diplomatic effort by concerned countries to persuade the warring sides to negotiate.** The coalition will have to be diverse and include countries with influence in Ethiopia, such as Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. Given his links to both sides, Sudanese Prime Minister Hamdok could be an important mediator.
- **Notify both sides that the U.S. will consider sanctions and other measures against perpetrators of human rights violations.** Making clear to the combatants that the U.S. is considering the option under authorities such as the Global Magnitsky Act could have a deterrent effect against the worst forms of violence.
- **Encourage and facilitate reconciliation.** Without reconciliation of the many hoary grievances Ethiopia's ethnic groups nurse, violent instability that harms the country, the region, and U.S. interests will continue.

The fighting in Tigray, whether conventional or as an insurgency, is likely to be prolonged. It is deepening divisions that have already caused much trouble, and could plunge the entire region into crisis as refugees flee, weapons and fighters flow across borders, and coronavirus-devastated economies tumble further. The U.S. must lead concerned partners to press for a negotiated settlement before the fighting settles into a protracted conflict with all the damage that would entail.

Joshua Meservey is Senior Policy Analyst for Africa and the Middle East in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.

Endnotes

1. The postponement extended the Abiy government's term past its constitutionally mandated expiration date of October 5.
2. The TPLF denies this, and several independent analysts have cast doubt on Abiy's allegation. See Rashid Abdi and Tobias Hagmann, "Ethiopia Is about to Cross the Point of No Return," *Mail & Guardian*, November 10, 2020, <https://mg.co.za/africa/2020-11-10-ethiopia-is-about-to-cross-the-point-of-no-return/> (accessed November 19, 2020).
3. Aleksandra W. Gadzala, "Ethiopia Opens a Pandora's Box of Ethnic Tensions," *National Interest*, October 12, 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/ethiopia-opens-pandoras-box-ethnic-tensions-18025> (accessed November 19, 2020).
4. Tigrayans only constitute about 6 percent of the Ethiopian population.
5. Abiy's philosophy, *Medemer*, has been variously translated from the Amharic as "addition," "synergy," or "synergic unity."
6. As the borders of six of Ethiopia's states roughly correlate with the homelands of the country's most prominent ethnic groups, state autonomy is viewed as synonymous with ethnic security and self-determination.
7. This is part of the critique of some of Abiy's once staunchest allies, such as Lemma Megerssa, former minister of defense. See Ephream Sileshi, "Updated: Lemma Megerssa Dismisses Medemer, Prosperity Party (Translation of the Full Interview)," *Addis Standard*, November 29, 2019, <https://addisstandard.com/news-alert-lemma-megerssa-dismisses-medemer-prosperity-party/> (accessed November 19, 2020).
8. Abdi and Hagmann, "Ethiopia Is about to Cross the Point of No Return."
9. International Crisis Group, "Clashes over Ethiopia's Tigray Region: Getting to a Ceasefire and National Dialogue," November 5, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/ethiopias-clash-tigray-getting-ceasefire-and-national-dialogue> (accessed November 29, 2020).
10. Tigrayans once made up about 99 percent of the officer corps of the Ethiopian military. Oromo officers are reportedly sympathetic to the TPLF in the current fight. See Gadzala, "Ethiopia Opens a Pandora's Box of Ethnic Tensions," and Abdi and Hagmann, "Ethiopia Is about to Cross the Point of No Return."
11. Even if those mutually exclusive claims could be reconciled, a deal could easily fall apart if local Sudanese and Ethiopians who are passionately committed to their claims of the contested territory continue to clash. For reporting on the potential Sudan–Ethiopia quid pro quo, see Nizar Manek and Mohamed Kheir Omer, "Sudan Will Decide the Outcome of the Ethiopian Civil War," *Foreign Policy*, November 14, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/14/sudan-will-decide-outcome-ethiopian-civil-war-abiy-tigray/> (accessed November 19, 2020).
12. Amnesty International, "Ethiopia: Investigation Reveals Evidence that Scores of Civilians Were Killed in Massacre in Tigray State," November 12, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/ethiopia-investigation-reveals-evidence-that-scores-of-civilians-were-killed-in-massacre-in-tigray-state/> (accessed November 19, 2020).
13. News release, "U.S. Renews its Commitment to Ethiopia with \$230 Million Development Partnership Agreement," U.S. Embassy in Ethiopia, May 14, 2020, <https://et.usembassy.gov/u-s-renews-its-commitment-to-ethiopia-with-230-million-development-partnership-agreement/#:~:text=Over%20the%20past%2020%20years,long%2Dstanding%20partnership%20with%20Ethiopia> (accessed November 19, 2020).
14. Ethiopia has reportedly withdrawn about 3,000 of its troops from Somalia since the fighting in Tigray began. Simon Marks, "Ethiopia Withdraws Thousands of Troops From Neighboring Somalia," *Bloomberg*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-13/ethiopia-withdraws-thousands-of-troops-from-neighboring-somalia> (accessed November 19, 2020).