

Ethiopia's new civil war may trigger demands for new Constitution

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It is no longer a case of questioning the potential for Ethiopia to descend into a state of civil war – Ethiopia is now in a state of civil conflict. This past week, allegations of atrocities on both sides and a Tigrayan rocket attack on neighbouring Eritrea drew further attention on the escalating situation. The conflict may ultimately lead to demands for a new non-ethnic based Constitution.

On 04 November, the Ethiopian government under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed launched security operations against Ethiopia's northern Tigray region. The robust action came following accusations of attacks on Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) bases in the region by forces loyal to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The escalation came against a backdrop of significant tension. Prior to the violence, Prime Minister Abiy postponed August's elections over Covid-19 concerns. Subsequently, Tigray's president, Debretsion Gebremichael, held a regional election anyway in September, with the federal government branding the move illegal. However, conflict between Addis Ababa and Tigray region has been a long time coming.

Since coming to power in April 2018 Abiy has sought to challenge Ethiopia's system of ethnic federalism by restoring power to the centre at the expense of regional governments. The main losers from Abiy's reforms have been the Tigrayans who previously enjoyed disproportionate representation and power within Ethiopia's state and security apparatus. The blowback from such purges, cessations of power, as well as Tigrayan opposition to peace with Eritrea, had been reaching a tipping point.

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Source: AP / DaMina Advisors

Managing conflict

For Abiy's federal government, containment remains a key objective. While the conflict is confined to Tigray, the potential for further political fissiparity to Ethiopia's federal system is mitigated. The main concern here is that if other regions move for greater self-autonomy then it has the potential to bring about the balkanisation of Ethiopia. If Ethiopia does split then it would most likely be on a scale beyond recent fissiparous conflicts in Sudan, South Sudan or Somalia. This remains the worst case scenario. Ensuring the support from other potential problem regions is fundamental to preventing such a breakdown, with Prime Minister Abiy's actions highly likely to be aimed at controlling this complex dynamic.

There are clear divisions within some of Ethiopia's other ethno-political groups. Abiy is from the Oromo group but there is division within the Oromos over support for the prime minister. During the summer, Oromo youths led anti-Abiy demonstrations but the political elite of the Oromia region remain pro-Abiy. Similarly, Abiy crucially retains the support of the political elite from Ethiopia's other largest ethnic group, the Amhara people.

Recent military changes have favoured the Amhara, with the president of Amhara region taking up a senior intelligence services role at the outset of this month's conflict. Amhara regional troops are also reportedly fighting alongside the ENDF in Tigray. Such support is conceivably inappropriate given the history of intercommunal fighting between Tigray and Amhara. Further intercommunal violence remains highly likely, even beyond the borders of Tigray. The potential widespread violence is highly likely to rise if the conflict increasingly takes on a more ethnic rather than political dynamic.

In the short term, Abiy's aim in Tigray is to reassert federal dominance. As the situation on the ground escalates a negotiated cessation in hostilities remains unlikely. Abiy has shown himself to take authoritarian or robust measures to division before. Convuluted negotiations or concessions to re-integrate Tigray's ruling political elite into the national fold are not necessarily in the prime minister's interests. Such a resolution would set a precedent that if other regions revolt in the future then favourable concessions can be attained by different regional leaders. Abiy wants a decisive victory to mitigate this risk.

However, despite talk in Addis Ababa this week of a 'final' offensive, a decisive military victory remains unlikely in the short term. Tigray is a highly militarised and mountainous region home to seven million people. Given the historic conflict front with neighbouring Eritrea there is a significant volume of materiel in the region. Similarly, prior to Abiy coming to power, around three quarters of the ENDF's senior military leadership were Tigrayan. From a military standpoint, conflict in Tigray favours the defender. Therefore, talk of any final or decisive victory remains delinked from reality and there is a very real risk of a long protracted civil conflict with Tigray region.

TPLF difficulties

It is highly unlikely that Debretsion Gebremichael projected this outcome when he opted to hold elections in Tigray. Since then the TPLF have been unable to control the narrative. Addis Ababa remains in control of the rhetoric with the Tigrayans seen as disruptors, while the TPLF are widely perceived to have been the aggressors, despite no clear evidence of which side began the conflict. The majority of allegations of atrocities have been attributed to Tigrayan fighters, while the decision to conduct a rocket attack on Eritrea's capital, Asmara, has drawn criticism over the TPLF's attempt to internationalise the conflict. As perceptions go, Tigray has not been able to generate the wider sympathy seen in similar conflicts, such as in Sudan's Darfur region in 2003.

Beyond the narrative issue, the TPLF remain in a challenging situation. It is increasingly difficult for the TPLF to push for constitutional change or change in the centre given the escalations, with a push for separation highly likely to become more prevalent. Despite relative strengths, there are also still doubts over the TPLF's ability to conduct military operations and retain control without external support, while support from Eritrea to Ethiopia would sandwich Tigray between two capable military powers. As a result, there is significant concern over the impact of regional and international geo-politics pervading the conflict with Tigray region.

Internationalising the conflict

The Tigray crisis is already an international conflict. The international community has sought to push for peace, condemning the actions of both sides, while Eritrea is already reportedly involved.

The potential for regional or international meddling in Ethiopia is dependent on both interests and appetite. Unlike DRC in 1998 or, more recently, conflicts in Sudan, South Sudan or Libya, the potential for regional meddling remains more abstract in Ethiopia. Major concern rests on the potential for further political division in Ethiopia and the potential for overspill into a regional or proxy conflict.

Old tensions

When the ENDF began military operations in Tigray, the attention immediately turned to Tigray's northern border and historic conflict front with Eritrea. Eritrea are now involved in the conflict. On 14 November TPLF

forces reportedly conducted a rocket attack on Eritrea's capital, Asmara. The TPLF subsequently justified Eritrea as a legitimate target, citing that Eritrea was being used as a base for Ethiopian attacks. Eritrea has also been accused by the TPLF of providing security forces to support the ENDF.

Asmara has almost certainly already backed and will continue to back Addis Ababa. Although Eritrean and Tigrayan rebels had historical cooperation, this was undone by Eritrea's prevention of famine relief reaching Tigray and the Eritrean-Ethiopian border conflict (1998-2000). The previous divisions between Addis Ababa and Asmara were with a Tigrayan-led regime which remains the main target of Eritrea's grievances with Ethiopia rather than Abiy's government.

Eritrea have yet to wade into the rhetoric and have observed significant restraint in doing so. Despite peace between Abiy and Eritrea's President Isaias Afwerki, very little active rapprochement has taken place since the deal in July 2018. With evidence to suggest Eritrean support to the ENDF, this will highly likely continue as it offers two fronts to pressure Tigray region. With a shared opposition to the TPLF between Abiy and Afwerki, further cooperation is likely to improve relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

New tensions

Under Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia has sought to be a peacemaker in the region, notably the rapprochement with Eritrea and mediation in Sudan's transitional power sharing arrangement. However, in contrast, Ethiopia's firm position on its Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project on the Blue Nile has created conflict with Sudan and Egypt over its impact on water availability on the Nile, as well as drawing criticism from the international community. In essence, the GERD disagreement is over the rate at which the dam is filled and its potential for creating water shortages for agriculture in Egypt and Sudan.

Based on the recent tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt over the GERD, it is conceivable that Egypt may wish to support the TPLF in a protracted conflict enough for them to be a nuisance to Abiy's regime. The question remains over whether Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime is willing to actively be an unsettling force in Ethiopia as a route to pressing the dam issue, especially when this threat could be mitigated by meeting Egyptian demands over the filling rate of the dam. As such, despite speculation that Egypt could use the TPLF to further its GERD demands, it remains a significant leap to suggest that this is likely at this time.

In other developments, Egypt and Sudan reportedly conducted joint security operations at the weekend. This has been widely viewed as a show of force in the context of the Tigray crisis. However, this was reportedly planned prior to the outbreak of the Tigray conflict and is likely a case of timing rather than intent.

Sudan is in a more difficult position compared to Egypt, especially as the only other international border with Tigray other than Eritrea. Sudan largely sides with Egypt on the dam issue but the Tigrayan crisis is already prompting an influx of displaced peoples from Ethiopia. A protracted conflict would place greater strain on Sudan's humanitarian capacity. Sudan also lacks significant economic capital to support groups in Ethiopia while any explicit military support (as Sudan is reportedly conducting in Libya) would come at the expense of its significant efforts to improve western relations and access critical international debt relief. It would be a radical change for Sudan to deviate from this approach – even with Sudan's military acting as the senior partner in its transitional process – over the GERD, especially given the risks to Sudan of a protracted conflict in Tigray region

Existing international dynamics and concerns

The Horn of Africa remains a playground for Gulf politics with the UAE, Qatar and Turkey all using port access to assert dominance in the region. However, landlocked Ethiopia and its population of 110 million remains a consumer rather than a player in this conflict. It is highly unlikely that the Gulf conflict dynamic would play out in Ethiopia at this time, although reports have emerged over the UAE reportedly providing drones in support of ENDF operations in Tigray this week.

Ethiopia's other neighbours are all likely to push for peace. Instability in a neighbour not only hinders inter-African trade and prompts displacement but can be an unsettling force for communal ties transcending national borders. This week, both Kenya and Uganda pressed for peace, with this approach likely to be the main narrative going forward for the majority of regional actors.

However, there are concerns over how the Tigray situation could impact Ethiopia's commitment to the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) against al Shabaab. Ethiopia currently deploys troops in Somalia both as part of its AMISOM fulfilment and of its own accord. Several hundred Ethiopian troops were reportedly redeployed from Somalia to Ethiopia this week as a result of the Tigray crisis. There is a fear that Ethiopia could withdraw from peacekeeping duties in a protracted conflict. This would potentially place greater pressure on other AMISOM-contributing countries to fill the gap or raise questions over whether the international community would remain happy funding ENDF activity. However, this remains unlikely. The ENDF withdrew troops from Somalia previously during the 2016 tensions in Ethiopia, while AMISOM participation is a significant financial benefit to its contributing forces. The risk here remains unlikely, but it is likely to be a key point of discussion in the region over existing security cooperation.

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