

OPINION

# The Armed Conflict in Ethiopia may have severe security complications to the region

---

*by Abdiqadar Abdigani Mohamed*



East Africa  
Association  
for Research  
& Development

---

Ethiopia is on the brink of a civil war following an order from Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed on Wednesday that allowed Ethiopian army to take countermeasures to a violent attack by the armed forces in the country's northern region of Tigray as the federal government claims. As a result of the ongoing armed conflict, a large number of refugees fleeing from the affected region already started pouring into Sudan. On the other hand, the TPLF forces in Northern Tigray region launched multiple artillery strikes to Asmara, the capital of Eritria on 15 November, 2020.

Ethiopia's domestic conflict comes after several minor conflicts that have been deteriorating the overall situation for months and that may spiral upwards and affect the whole region. The armed conflict between the federal army and Tigrayan regional forces had started in eight localities. It is difficult to know what is really going on since the federal government had shutdown the internet in the region, a humanitarian source told Reuters on Sunday. But reports say that both sides suffered casualties.

### ***Causes of the Soured Tension***

In 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power with the agenda of reforming and transiting the country from an authoritarian rule to almost an inclusive democracy. Also, the Prime Minister managed to solve the long stood problem which Ethiopia had with the neighboring Eritrea. All these helped win him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. But his actions have faced critical resistance and the Tigray region in the northern Ethiopia held parliamentary elections. Though, the Prime Minister described it as illegal and unconstitutional move.

Due to the corona virus pandemic, this year the government of Abiy Ahmed postponed the national elections of the country which was supposed to be held in August. But groups opposing to Mr. Abiy's rule, had been furious about that decision. The northern region of Tigray became agitated by the decision of the central government as well. Both the authorities in Tigray region and other opposition groups think that the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is merely trying to extend its term in office by about one year and planning to hold national elections sometime in future. The tension between

the prime minister and the Tigray regional administrations soured after the region decided to hold their regional elections. Authorities in the Northern region of Tigray and members of opposition groups believed they were not consulted, and blamed Mr. Abiy of a power grab attempts.

The standoff in the Tigray region has intensified the already bubbling political turmoil in Ethiopia, the second most-populous country in Africa. The country was already experiencing rising insecurity, internal displacement and public violence which all have threatened to tear at the multiethnic fabric that is characterized by the societies living in Ethiopia.

The ongoing problem comes about two months after deadly protests wrapped up in the country following the killing of a well-known singer named Hachalu Hundessa, a champion of the Oromo ethnic group, the country's largest, that has been complaining of political and economic marginalization for a long period of time. Hundreds of people were killed in the capital, Addis Ababa, and the neighboring Oromia region, as some businesses, schools and factories were burned. The government shut down the internet in several times and arrested about 10,000 people. Many of those detained were arrested without any charges. Among the detainees were journalists, activists and opposition figures, including Jawar Mohammed, a media tycoon who is from the Oromo ethnic group and who has turned into one of the prime minister's major critics.

The population of Ethiopia is almost 110 million and Tigrayans comprise only six percent of that population. But Tigrayans have had huge influence in the country's politics as they were the leading force that resisted and overthrew the Marxist rule in 1991. But, Abiy Ahmed has been changing the course in the political sphere of the country since he came to power and started distributing the power more equally. As a result, the political leverage and economic clout of the tigrayans have rapidly diminished. As there were also some arrests faced by some officials from that northern region due to corruption and security related allegations. All these are some of the major factors which caused the standoff and made Tigrayans angry about the policies of Prime

Minister Abiy Ahmed and decide to hold their own elections despite the heated arguments between the region and the prime minister.

### ***The Notion of Secession***

Some active Tigrayan politicians have been entertaining the notion of being independent nation from Ethiopia. While others took the different approach but seeking more freedom for Tigray to uphold their own regional language and culture. Most amazingly, The Tigray Independence Party, a newly established political party which calls for secession, took an active role in the last controversial regional election in Tigray and that may escalate the problem further.

After the contentious election in the region, the Federal Authorities took decisive actions towards the media trying to cover the election process to counter the move by the region. Authorities barred some local and foreign reporters from traveling to the region, confiscating their documents before their go to the region.

Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a weightier political party from Tigray region, played a central role in ousting the communist regime in 1991, and drafting the constitution that gives ethnic groups the right to determine their-own state affairs. Also, the new opposition party, the Tigray Independence Party (TIP), has come out to contest the Tigray regional election. This party portrays Ethiopia as an "empire", and describes that their main duty is to secure the region's independence.

Academics from the region also started supporting the idea and the notion of secession. So for the first time since 1991, the topic is on the agenda of mainstream politics in Tigray. Two other Tigray nationalist parties competed in the poll and claim that they aim the region to have more autonomy to protect its territorial integrity, promote its language, and safeguard its heritage.

The TPLF currently controls all the seats in the regional parliament after they won the elections, and the situation will be carefully followed to see if the nationalist and pro-secession groups continue to pursue their agenda further. As for Mr. Abiy, he has

repeatedly said that Ethiopia will "never" disintegrate, indicating that he is confident that he can hold the nation together, despite the ethnic, religious and political violence that have hit different parts of the country, leaving about two million people homeless since he took office. The TPLF argues the displaced include about 120,000 Tigrayans.

### ***Potential Regional Implication***

If the conflict between the federal government of Ethiopia and Tigray region deteriorates, it will, certainly, spill over to neighboring countries in the Horn of Africa region. Eritrea can be the hardest hit, since it is the nearest to Tigray. As stated by the New York Times, "many veterans from the TPLF who participated in the Ethiopian-Eritrean war between 1998 and 2000 are now part of the Tigray region's paramilitary forces" and there is a persistent hatred between those veterans and the neighboring Eritrea as we have already witnessed that Asmara was hit by a couple of missiles launched from Tigray region.

Ethiopia has also been involved in a persistent conflict with Egypt regarding the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam over the Blue Nile. Also, Sudan got involved in the conflict over the dam over the Blue Nile which originates from the highlands in Ethiopia as both the Blue Nile and Red Nile meet in and cross as a one main Nile River through Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, all the way down to Egypt. The river is crucial for Sudanese economy as the agriculture of the country mainly depends on the Nile waters. So, not only Egypt but Sudan is also concerned about Ethiopia's dam over the Nile. So, the region would find very difficult to deal with another arising conflict while struggling the already existed difficulties.

Despite the call of the United Nations secretary general, António Guterres, for an immediate ceasefire and halting the conflict through a peaceful dialogue, the United States presidential election has been the centre of the world attention which made the UN and the world in general, one way or another, pay no heed to the fading situation in Ethiopia's Northern Tigray region.

According to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), approximately 600,000 people in Tigray depend on food aid to survive, while another 1 million obtain other forms of aid, all of which are blemished by the recent conflict in the region. On the other hand, a desert locust infestation in East Africa has hit Tigray region hard in particular. The efforts to combat the insect swarms are feared to have stopped because of the conflict, risking further damage to crops as the reports of UN show and so that makes the situation in the region far more complicated if the ongoing conflict prolongs.

As conflict may destabilize the Horn of Africa region at large because of Eritrea's bad relations with the Tigray and now is getting even worse than ever before as the northern TPLF forces already started launching multiple artillery strikes directly to Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. On the other hand, the world super powers, particularly US and China, have also several strategic military bases in Djibouti, the next door. If these military bases were to be affected by the turbulence in any way or what so ever, it could eventually cause these powers to get militarily drawn into the conflict.

There is also a presence of Ethiopian troops in Somalia and the conflict in Ethiopia will clearly affect their presence in there since there is a fear that Ethiopia may withdraw some of its troops, if not all, from Somalia. So, as a result, the Al-Shabaab militant group may find this as a life time opportunity to fill the vacuum and this could be a huge blow to Somalia's efforts and path towards a full stability as the withdrawal of the Ethiopian troops may affect the dynamics of current and future security situation in Somalia.