

The Tigray War and the African Union

By Hisham Aidi

The ongoing war in the Tigray region of Ethiopia has resulted in the world's worst humanitarian crisis in a decade. The escalating conflict has led to the death and displacement of thousands of civilians, raised ethnic tensions in Ethiopia, and caused a food crisis that could lead to widespread famine. Much can be said about this conflict—how it revolves around models of governance and conflicting visions of self-determination, and how its impact will be felt across the region. Here, we look at the short-term causes of this war, highlighting Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's strategic errors, in light of long-standing debates about Ethiopian statehood and ethno-federalism. We also examine the role of the African Union in this conflict, including the debate between Realist and Liberal scholars about the African Union's agency.

In her 2019 book *Ethiopia in Theory*, historian Elleni Zeleke argues that a discourse of exceptionalism exists both within and outside Ethiopia's borders¹. Historians with an Orientalist bent tend to stress Ethiopia's ancient roots, its role as a stronghold of the Orthodox Church, a nation rooted in Semitic and Byzantine civilizations. While Ethiopian studies have highlighted the country's "exceptional non-blackness," Afro-diasporic studies and political thought (from the Ethiopianism of the nineteenth

century to the Rastafarianism of the twentieth century) have seen Ethiopia as an exceptional black nation, the only African state that was never colonized. The current conflict in Tigray has revived these tired tropes. Writing in *Foreign Policy* (July 2021), veteran journalist Robert Kaplan described Ethiopia as "simply too substantial to fall apart" because of its "imperial past" and its history as an "outpost of Middle Eastern and Semitic civilization." Critics promptly responded that such a fanciful representation ignored the conflict between the 'unitarianist' forces that want centralized rule, and different ethnic groups calling for a federalist system of self-government in Ethiopia². The exceptionalist narrative also tends to ignore Ethiopia's history of "internal colonialism," as marginalized groups term Menelik II's late-nineteenth century military conquest of the south and the subsequent Amhara domination of populations in southern Ethiopia. This era is critical to understanding the current situation and the country's periods of fragmented statehood³.

As historians have demonstrated, even at its apogee, the Abyssinian empire had limited institutional reach, and did not control Ethiopia's vast hinterland. Haile Selassie

1. Elleni Centime Zeleke, *Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964-2016* (Brill Books 2019)

2. "Conquest and Resistance in the Ethiopian Empire, 1880 – 1974: The Case of the Arsi Oromo" *African Social Studies Series* (Volume 32 2014) <https://brill.com/view/title/24518>

3. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/22/ethiopia-problems-stem-from-internal-colonialism/>

was an absolute despot, but he regularly negotiated the allegiance of provincial elites through religious authority and material inducements. This practice of political bargaining collapsed on September 1974, when Mengistu Haile Mariam came to power and abolished the monarchy. The president and commander-in-chief put in place the Dergue, which was a mix of military junta and Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary party-state. This regime, which ruled from 1974 to 1987 (when it began to civilianize the administration), also had limited bureaucratic capacity. The Dergue abolished feudalism, instituted land reform, and expanded literacy, but Mengistu's attempts at state-building faltered in face of economic decline and persistent armed conflicts, namely, the Ethiopian civil war and the Eritrean War of Independence. The Dergue, which would become the Communist People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, was overthrown by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991.

The EPRDF was a federalist coalition composed of four political parties, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Amhara Democratic Party (ADP), Oromo Democratic Party (ODP), and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM). It would dominate Ethiopian politics until 2019. Aware of the Dergue's institutional weakness, Meles Zenawi began building state institutions, extending state bureaucracy to the country's hinterland, with different regions governed by parties either funded by or linked to the EPRDF. A premium was placed on economic growth. A government Foreign Affairs and National Strategy White Paper from 2002 stressed the need to reduce material deprivation, noting bluntly that if rapid growth was not achieved in Ethiopia, "the process of disintegration cannot be totally ruled out"⁴.

Through a policy of ethnic federalism, the Zenawi regime sought to transcend Abyssinian hegemony, and to remake Ethiopia as a post-imperial "nation of nations." In 1991, the EPRDF negotiated an ethno-federal pact with Oromo leaders, an agreement that sought the linguistic and political emancipation of Ethiopia's myriad peoples and nationalities. Yet behind the facade of formal decentralization, a repressive EPRDF state apparatus exercised centralized control. The EPRDF did deliver growth and stability to the country (according to the

World Bank, between 2000 and 2017, Ethiopia was one of the fastest growing economies on the continent⁵), but democracy didn't happen. And the "ethnicization of political life," would deepen Ethiopia's ethnic fissures, prompting calls for a unitary state, and inspiring a curious nostalgia for Haile Selassie and the Abyssinian empire. The limitations of the ethno-federalist system would set the stage for the current crisis.

When Abiy Ahmed came to power April 2018, Ethiopia's economy was growing, and the country's main political institutions (the army, party, treasury, and foreign ministry) were functioning fairly well. Abiy had run on a platform of political reconciliation but faced with intensifying and contradictory popular demands, he opted to dismantle the EPRDF, the party apparatus, which had ruled Ethiopia for decades, and was arguably stronger than the civil administration. He would also revamp the military's leadership, sideline the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and purge former TPLF leaders from the political leadership (figures, who as members of the TPLF, had been part of Ethiopia's ruling coalition for thirty years). When Abiy decided to postpone elections in mid-2020, TPLF leaders declared that the Tigray region would go ahead with the voting. In November 2020, after an alleged attack on federal army camps in Tigray by TPLF loyalists, Abiy launched an invasion of Tigray. It has been eight months since the fighting began. The Ethiopian government backed by Eritrean troops initially appeared successful, seizing the Tigray capital of Mekelle in November 2020. But in July 2021, the TPLF took back Mekelle, inflicting a defeat on the Ethiopian army. Tigray is the province most obviously embroiled in this war, but the Oromo region, the country's most populous, is also restive, as is the Ogaden area bordering Somalia. There has also been fighting on the Ethiopian-Sudanese border. In mid-December 2020, Sudan moved troops into al-Fashaga, an area on the frontier, violating a decade-old land-use arrangement, and expelled thousands of Ethiopian (Amhara) farmers. In response, Ethiopia deployed federal forces and militias, leading to deadly clashes with Sudanese troops.

The conflict has severely strained the Ethiopian Federal Government's resources and institutions. If the war in Tigray were to escalate or spread to other parts of Ethiopia, different scenarios could obtain. As political scientist Alex de Waal has argued, one possible outcome is "state contraction," whereby the Federal Government would

4. FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND NATIONAL SECURITY. POLICY AND STRATEGY. Ministry of Information. Press & Audiovisual Department. November 2002. Addis Ababa (cited by Alex De Waal)

5. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.KD?locations=ET>

solidify its rule over the capital, but gradually lose the ability to control areas outside Addis Ababa. (Ironically this situation would parallel the limited state capacity of imperial Ethiopia, when Haile Selassie's infrastructural power barely extended beyond the capital's confines⁶). Other scenarios could be the fragmentation of Ethiopia, with different provinces and mini-states (like Somaliland) emerging and pushing for independence.

Amid media reports of atrocities, looming famine, and a possible regional conflagration, analysts are also pondering what the African Union can do about the war in Tigray. Scholars of international relations are predictably split on the African Union's possible role potential. Realists tend to view international institutions as reflecting the underlying balance of power, and as shaped by the preferences of the strongest states. As John Mearsheimer famously observed, "institutions have no independent effect on state behavior." Liberal institutionalists, on the other hand, see international organizations as playing a critical role in shaping international agendas and discourse, and in producing norms, rules, and laws. Thomas Kwasi Tiekou made just this argument in a January 2021 study, demonstrating how the African Union Commission exercises "significant agency" through agenda setting, norm development, and rule creation⁷. African Union officials have more independence than often thought, and not simply because organization's founding documents explicitly state that African Union Commission staff are not to "seek or receive instructions from any government or any other authority external to the union." As evidence of the organization's ability to affect state behavior, Tiekou pointed to the African Union Commission's regulation on unconstitutional changes of government, first adopted as a declaration in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1998, and which enabled the suspension of regimes that took power through military coups. This regulation has slowly gained more enforcement power, as seen in the suspensions of Guinea Bissau (2003), Togo (2005), Mauritania (2005, 2007), and Guinea (2008) from the African Union. This norm against military coups eventually became codified in the Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance adopted by the African Union in 2007⁸.

6. <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/07/26/five-scenarios-of-state-collapse-in-ethiopia/>

7. Thomas Kwasi Tiekou, "Punching above Weight: How the African Union Commission Exercises Agency in Politics," *Africa Spectrum* (January 2021)

8. Samuel Makinda, Wafula Okumu, and David Mickler, *The African Union: Addressing the Challenges of Peace, Security, and Governance* (Routledge 2015)

Realists and dependency theorists, on the other hand, stress that the AU is financially dependent on member states⁹, and can therefore be manipulated by the Great Powers, but also by African states, particularly Ethiopia, given that the organization was created in and is based in Addis Ababa. In this vein, a commentator writing in *The African Report* (July 30) argued that the African Union is reluctant to address the conflict in Ethiopia, because of the host nation's reputation as an anti-colonial stalwart and its influence on the organization¹⁰. The analyst offers as evidence the statement that Moussa Faki Mahamat, chairperson of the African Union Commission, made about the war in Tigray, noting that it favored the Ethiopian government's position. As Mahamat wrote, "In Ethiopia, the federal government took bold steps to preserve the unity, stability and respect for the constitutional order of the country, which is legitimate for all states." Critics promptly pointed out that Mahamat's claim lent support to Abiy's argument that the Tigray conflict was a matter of "domestic jurisdiction." But also that the Constitutive Act of the African Union via Article 4(h) stressed "the right of the Union to intervene in a Member State pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances, namely war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity." This article goes back to 1995 when the Organization of African Unity created a Conflict Resolution Mechanism aimed at preventing and resolving African conflicts¹¹.

In July 2021, the African Union started a commission of inquiry to investigate allegations of ethnic cleansing in Tigray. Based in Banjul, Gambia—at a distance from Addis Ababa—the commission is operating under the aegis of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. In a statement, its mission was described as follows: "The Commission of Inquiry has a mandate to, inter alia, investigate allegations of violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, and to gather all relevant information so as to determine whether the allegations constitute serious and massive violations of human rights"¹². The Ethiopian government promptly

9. George Mulingi Mugabe, "African Union (AU) and Dependency: A Critique of AU's Dependency Syndrome and Dawn of New Alternative Sources of Funding," (2019) <https://journals.bdu.edu.et/index.php/ejrirf4/article/view/218>

10. <https://www.theafricareport.com/113662/ethiopia-why-hasnt-the-african-union-intervened-in-tigray/>

11. <https://africanarguments.org/2020/11/the-situation-in-ethiopia-is-a-unique-war-and-the-african-union-has-a-legal-duty-to-silence-the-guns/>

12. <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20210616/press-statement-official-launch-commission-inquiry-tigray-region-federal>

slammed the initiative, calling on the African Union, to cease the new commission of inquiry “immediately”. An Ethiopian foreign ministry official dismissed the inquiry as “misguided” and called for a joint investigation. The African Union, Commissioner Maya-Sahli Fadel responded that a joint probe conducted with Ethiopian government would “alter and dilute the independence of the commission.” The months to come will serve as a test and challenge for Africa’s premier inter-governmental organization.

About the Author, Hisham Aidi

Hisham Aidi focuses on cultural globalization and the political economy of race and social movements. He received his Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University and has taught at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), and at the Driskell Center for the Study of the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is the author of *Redeploying the State* (Palgrave, 2008) a comparative study of neo-liberalism and labor movements in Latin America; and co-editor, with Manning Marable, of *Black Routes to Islam* (Palgrave, 2009).

In 2002–2003, Aidi was a consultant for UNDP's Human Development Report. From 2000 to 2003, he was part of Harvard University's *Encarta Africana* project, and worked as a cultural reporter, covering youth culture and immigration in Harlem and the Bronx, for *Africana*, *The New African* and *ColorLines*. More recently, his work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The New Yorker* and *Salon*. Since 2007, he has been a contributing editor of *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics and Society*. Aidi is the author most recently of *Rebel Music: Race, Empire and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (Pantheon, 2014), a study of American cultural diplomacy. Aidi teaches the SIPA MIA survey course *Conceptual Foundations of International Politics* and seminars in SIPA's summer program.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.



Policy Center for the New South

Suncity Complex, Building C, Av. Addolb, Albortokal Street,
Hay Riad, Rabat, Maroc.

Email : contact@policycenter.ma

Phone : +212 (0) 537 54 04 04 / Fax : +212 (0) 537 71 31 54

Website : www.policycenter.ma