

The Political and Humanitarian Repercussions of Ethiopia's Tigray War

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Ethiopia's war in the northern Tigray regional state has killed thousands of people and about a third of Tigray's 6 million people have been displaced since the brutal conflict started early last November.

Millions need emergency food aid, and hundreds of thousands are reportedly facing starvation. The war has fuelled deadly ethnic violence in some regions of Ethiopia and stands to severely impact Ethiopia's general elections, scheduled for June 2021. Ethiopia's federal government must first allow life-saving aid to follow to the region, expel Ahmara fighters and Eritrean soldiers from the region, and initiate an inclusive national reconciliation.

Introduction

Following several weeks of heavy fighting, the Ethiopian government announced a victory against the TPLF (Tigrayan People's Liberation Front)—the then ruling party of the country's regional Tigray region—after capturing Mekelle, the capital city of Tigray, on 28 November 2020. Shortly after, Addis Ababa installed a new transitional administration in the region. Ethiopia's Federal Government has described the operation as restoring the rule of law and declared a six-month state of emergency throughout the Tigray Region.

The war started when the forces of the Tigray Regional Administration attacked a federal army base in the Tigray capital Mekelle, killed or arrested soldiers who refused to defect and seized large amounts of military hardware. On the same day, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered a full military operation in the restive region by deploying thousands of Ethiopian army soldiers supported by Amhara paramilitary forces and militias. From the north, the Eritrean army joined the offensive against the Tigray leadership and their TPLF party, which has dominated Ethiopian national politics for close to three decades.

The Federal Government-TPLF conflict is a result of major divisions over power-sharing. The TPLF lost its political dominance following three years of anti-government protests that eventually brought Abiy Ahmed to power in April 2018. Tensions further increased when Abiy consolidated power by disbanding the ruling EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) coalition and formed a new party, which the TPLF refused to join, in late 2019. However, the final trigger of the war was the postponement of the national elections due to the Covid-19 pandemic and an indefinite term extension of all federal authorities in June 2020. The Tigray leadership disregarded the federal decision and conducted its own regional polls in September 2020. Prime Minister Abiy's government declared the new Tigray leadership unconstitutional while the TPLF accused the federal government of lacking the legal authority after its mandate expired in October 2020. These competing and conflicting positions have finally led to the outbreak of the war.

Ethiopia's Federal Government has declared the war over and has stated that it is working to stabilise the region, although deposed TPLF members and international organisations, including the UN, have reported that the fighting is still ongoing in rural areas of the region. The TPLF, whose leadership withdrew to the mountains in late November, has stepped up attacks on federal troops and allied forces from the neighbouring Amhara region and Eritrea. The war has resulted in a humanitarian crisis amid accusations of [extrajudicial killings and rights abuses](#). Thousands have been killed and about a third of Tigray's population of 6 million (of which more than 150,000 of them have fled to neighbouring Sudan) have been displaced since the brutal conflict started early last November. Additionally,

an estimated 80 per cent of Tigray's population requires emergency food aid, and hundreds of thousands are reportedly facing starvation due to government refusal to let humanitarian organisations access the region during the initial stages of the war.

The conflict has also exacerbated ethnic tensions, which threaten to engulf the whole country. Militias from the Amhara region, which claim areas they say the TPLF annexed in the 1990s, have supported Ethiopia's national defence force. Aid workers and rights groups have accused these militias of targeting ethnic Tigrayans and forcing thousands of people off the land in western Tigray, thus paving the way for [ethnic cleansing](#). In the western Benishangul-Gumuz region, which is home to the country's \$5 billion Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, the Tigray war has inflamed deadly ethnic tensions over the region's fertile agricultural land. The latest wave of intercommunal violence has claimed hundreds of lives and displaced over 100,000 people. The notorious Amhara militias who have participated in the Tigray conflict have vowed to intervene in the region if the violence does not stop immediately.

The Tigray war has not only exacerbated ethnic tensions in Ethiopia but also casts doubts on the forthcoming national elections scheduled for June 2021. It also opens Pandora's box of regional instability. Regardless if it secures all its military objectives in Tigray or not, Ethiopia's federal government will need to immediately allow humanitarian aid access to the whole region and work with members of the TPLF to achieve popular acceptance from the region's population. Removing the Amhara paramilitaries and militiamen as well as Eritrean troops from the region also remains a significant factor for stabilising the region. Finally, an inclusive national reconciliation is necessary to address the Tigray conflict as well as other political tensions in Africa's second-most populous country.

This policy outlook aims to provide an overview of the humanitarian crisis in the Tigray region and explain the Tigray conflict's impact on the national and regional elections in June 2021. Finally, it seeks to shed light on the regional ramifications of the Tigray war in the context of the renewed Sudanese-Ethiopian border clashes and neighbouring Eritrea's involvement in the conflict.

The humanitarian cost of the conflict

The Tigray war has created a humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia's northern Tigray regional state. Thousands have been killed and about a third of Tigray's 6 million population (of which more than 150,000 of them have fled to neighbouring Sudan) have been displaced since the brutal conflict started early last November when the Prime Minister ordered a military offensive after the TPLF attacked a federal army base in the southern region. An estimated [3.8 million](#) of Tigray's roughly six million population now requires

emergency food aid, and hundreds of thousands are reportedly facing starvation due to government refusal to let humanitarian organisations access the region during the initial stages of the war.

During the first weeks of the “law and order” operation against the then regional government in Tigray, the Federal Government imposed a communication blackout that saw telephone and internet services swiftly cut off. More than four months down the road, humanitarian organisations report that many of the basic services, including communications, electricity and banking, remain disrupted across much of the region. The lack of electricity and communication services is reportedly affecting about 4.5 million people in Tigray and represents a formidable challenge to the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Furthermore, the war has seen accusations of [extrajudicial killings and rights abuses](#) against the Ethiopian military and allied forces from the Amhara region as well as Eritrean troops resulting from reportedly indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure. At this time, the number of casualties remains difficult to verify, however, estimates by rights groups and local observers indicate that over [1600 civilians](#) have been killed during the course of the conflict. According to Human Rights Watch, shelling by the Ethiopian army at the beginning of the war [destroyed](#) homes, hospitals, schools, and markets in the city of Mekelle, and the towns of Humera and Shire, killing many civilians. Reports mention that over half a million people have lost their homes and at least two refugee camps have been destroyed by the federal army. Similarly, Amnesty International has documented serious human rights violations and abuses by Eritrean troops committed in the ancient city of Axum. The troops reportedly killed [hundreds of unarmed civilians](#) by carrying out “systematic house-to-house searches, extra-judicially executing men and boys” in late November last year. The persistent reports of cases of sexual and gender-based violence remain another factor in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. Most recently, the Tigray interim administration women’s bureau reported that over [500 women](#) had been raped in the cities of Mekelle, Adigrat and its surrounding areas between December 2020 and February 2021 by Ethiopian federal soldiers and allied Eritrean troops.

Heavy fighting in some areas continues to restrict humanitarian action with millions facing a dire humanitarian situation. Social services have reportedly collapsed and the majority of health centres have been destroyed and looted while health workers have not been paid in several months. According to multiple reports, approximately 70 per cent of Tigray’s 106 health facilities have been vandalised by conflicting parts with only 10 per cent of the medical centres working normally. Vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and the ill, have been disproportionately affected by the crisis as they are unable to access emergency medical services.

National ramifications of the conflict

The conflict has exacerbated ethnic tensions in Ethiopia, which threatens to engulf the entire nation. Militias from the Amhara region, which claim areas they say the TPLF annexed in the 1990s, have supported Ethiopia’s national defence force. These militias have been accused of targeting ethnic Tigrayans and forcing thousands of people off the land in western Tigray. A recent confidential US government [report](#) obtained by the New York Times accused Amhara officials and militiamen of systematic ethnic cleansing in Tigray. According to the document, Amhara fighters are “deliberately and efficiently rendering Western Tigray ethnically homogeneous through the organised use of force and intimidation [...] whole villages were severely damaged or completely erased.” Although the Ethiopian government has rejected the US allegations, the Amhara militia’s participation in the war and their presence in the war-torn northern region is likely to fuel Tigray-Amhara ethnic tensions in the country. The two northern groups are locked in a contentious land feud, which started in the early 1990s when the TPLF seized Ethiopia’s national power as the hub of the multi-ethnic coalition. The Amharas claim that the TPLF leadership annexed their historical land to the Tigray region.

In the western Benishangul-Gumuz region, which is home to the country’s \$5 billion Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the Tigray war has inflamed deadly ethnic tensions over the region’s fertile agricultural land. Despite government-sponsored [reconciliation initiatives](#) aimed at bridging communal divides, conflicts over land ownership and resurgent ethnic violence remain drivers of instability in a region bedevilled by deep undercurrents of ethnonationalism and resentments resulting from large-scale land acquisitions by local and foreign investors. Between 2017 and 2018, repeated episodes of communal violence killed hundreds of people and displaced around 100,000 people—mainly Oromo and Amhara. The latest waves of inter-communal violence started with a devastating dawn attack by armed fighters from the local Gumuz ethnic group last December that killed [over 200](#) people, mainly ethnic Amharas and Oromo. Amhara officials have warned that their administration would intervene in the region to defend ethnic Amharas. Similarly, Amhara militiamen who have participated in the Tigray conflict have vowed to intervene in the region if the violence does not stop immediately.

The federal government has accused the TPLF and [Egypt](#), which is opposed to the GERD project and considers it as an existential threat, of fuelling ethnic conflict in the region. However, the ongoing conflict in Tigray and Benishangul-Gumuz ethnic violence highlight that the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed—the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize winner—is faced with a serious security crisis that threatens to engulf the whole country. In particular, the rising tensions in Benishangul-Gumuz are recipes for further

violence and could well make the region the next front in Ethiopia's ongoing civil war.

Another domestic ramification of the Tigray war is that it threatens the peaceful conduct of the upcoming general elections. This is particularly evident as Ethiopian federal troops are engaged in Tigray amid deadly TPLF guerilla attacks. Late last December, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia [announced](#) that the elections for parliamentary members and regional councils will take place on June 5, 2021. However, widespread insecurity in some of the country's 10 federal states represents a considerable challenge to the smooth running of the votes. In the war-torn Tigray state, the national electoral body has delayed the vote citing security concerns. As previously mentioned, the recent attacks in the western Benshangul-Gumuz region remain another source of electoral insecurity.

In Oromia regional state—Abiy's constituency and the country's most populous region—authorities are facing a long-running insurgency. The national army and special forces of the Oromia regional government have been [battling with](#) the rebel group Oromo Liberation Army in western and southern Oromia. Following the June election date announcement, the opposition Oromo Liberation Front said that PM Abiy wanted to conduct elections to divert attention from Ethiopia's looming security issues. The group recently [declared](#) that it will not be participating in the polls due to a government crackdown that severely restricts its organisational capacity. Leading Oromo opposition politicians are in jail, including Jawar Mohammed, a popular media figure and member of the Oromo Federalist Congress party. Jawar and party officials were detained and charged with terrorism following the June 2020 assassination of prominent Oromo musician Haacaaluu Hundeessaa, whose death resulted in unrest that killed over [230](#) people in the Oromia region and the capital Addis Ababa. The Covid-19 pandemic is another source of concern impacting the election process in several aspects. The virus threatens to disrupt voter and candidate registration, voter education, organisation of polling stations and constituencies, election campaigns and voting. All these issues have real potential to disrupt Ethiopia's upcoming elections and will test the federal authorities' ability to hold a peaceful vote.

Regional ramifications of the conflict

The Tigray conflict has exacerbated tensions in the Horn of Africa—Africa's most volatile region. Until recently Ethiopia, Africa's diplomatic hub and a close American military ally was considered as an oasis of stability in the volatile region. However, as the Tigray war continues, regional observers worry Ethiopia might become a source of instability. The involvement of Eritrean troops in the conflict has been a particular bone of contention in the broader region.

Soon after the launch of the anti-TPLF offensive, Eritrea joined the conflict by firing artillery from the Tigray-Eritrean border and later deployed troops into the region in support of the Ethiopian army campaign. Consequently, Eritrean troops have been accused of many of the gravest atrocities committed in Tigray. During the initial days of the war, the TPLF fired rockets into the Eritrean capital Asmara, targeting critical infrastructure including the airport and key government buildings. The government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed denies the participation of Eritrean forces in the deadly Tigray conflict. However, persistent reports by local organisations, aid agencies and the international community confirm Eritrea's role in the conflict. Earlier this month, the UN Human Rights has said its Office has [corroborated information](#) that Eritrean armed forces among other actors committed grave human rights violations and abuses in Tigray. In January, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken described atrocities in Tigray as ethnic cleansing and called for all Eritrean troops to leave the region immediately.

Eritrea, which gained independence from Ethiopia in 1991 following a three-decade-long struggle, has an ongoing border dispute with Ethiopia. The disputed area is the Badme town and its environs in the Tigray region. A two-year (1998-2000) Ethio-Eritrean border war claimed over 100,000 lives with the TPLF-led Ethiopia capturing the majority of the disputed territory. Over the next 15 years or so, the two neighbours were locked in a state of no war, no peace. Abiy's ascension to power in early 2018 changed the dynamics: he inked a peace agreement with the Eritrean leader and ceded the disputed border area to Eritrea. Isaias Afwerki, Eritrea's longtime authoritarian leader, and Abiy joined hands against their common enemy, the TPLF leadership. Mr. Afwerki might also be envisaging making his country a power broker in the Horn of Africa. However, the border issue remains institutionally unsolved; Eritrea had only regained the area, including Badme and its surrounding areas, after the start of the conflict in Tigray last November. Many Tigrayans believe that Eritrea forcibly annexed their land and a conflict between Tigray and Eritrea is likely to restart if TPLF even regains power in Tigray or on the national level in Ethiopia.

Additionally, the Tigray conflict has led to renewed Sudanese-Ethiopian border clashes over a decades-old unaddressed border dispute in the al-Fashqa region—agricultural farmland where Sudan's eastern Gedaref state meets Ethiopia's northern Tigray and Amhara regions. The area is claimed by both countries. The latest deadly flare-up in violence began following the Tigray conflict in November. According to Sudanese military expert Amin Ismail, Sudan reportedly [sent troops](#) into the area to recapture a stolen land fearing "the situation in Tigray would slip out of control, and armed fighters infiltrate into the country." Sudan declared it has regained control of the majority of the re-

gion, which is internationally recognised as part of Sudan. Consequently, Ethiopia accused its neighbour of invading and annexing Ethiopian land and warned of military action.

Sudanese fears mainly revolve around concerns that the Amhara militiamen fighting in Tigray could cross into the disputed region. Amharas consider the area as their own and authorities in Khartoum believe that Prime Minister Abiy would be unable to control the Amhara fighters' expansionist agenda. The dispute, if not addressed, could lead to further instability in Ethiopia and Sudan who both face their own internal challenges, including economic problems and unstable political transitions. The tension could also complicate efforts aimed at solving the contentious GERD dam dispute, which Sudan and Egypt consider a threat to their own national security. Ethiopia has been building Africa's largest hydroelectric project on the Blue Nile and the three countries have been unable to reach a deal over the filling and operation of the dam's reservoir.

Conclusion

Ethiopia's four-month war in the northern Tigray regional state has proved costly. Thousands of people have been killed and about a third of Tigray's 6 million population have been displaced since the brutal conflict started early last November when the Prime Minister ordered a military offensive after the TPLF attacked a federal army base in the southern region. Over 60,000 have crossed into neighbouring Sudan. Currently, an estimated 3.8 million people need emergency food aid, and hundreds of thousands are reportedly facing starvation due to government refusal to let humanitarian organisations access the region during the initial stages of the war.

The war has fuelled deadly ethnic violence in some regions of Ethiopia. Amhara paramilitaries and militiamen who backed the federal army in the offensive have been accused of ethnic cleansing in Tigray in pursuit of land expansion. In the western Benishangul-Gumuz region, the Tigray war has inflamed deadly ethnic tensions over the region's fertile agricultural land. The latest waves of intercommunal violence have claimed hundreds of lives and displaced over 100,000 people. There are risks that Amhara fighters will cross into the region and worsen the precarious situation.

The war in Tigray and its resulting tensions have the potential to severely impact Ethiopia's 5 June 2021 general elections. Although the election board has postponed the vote in Tigray due to security challenges, the Benishangul-Gumuz violence, insurgency in Oromia and the election boycott of the Oromo Liberation Front—Oromia's largest opposition party—entail looming security and political challenges to the peaceful conduct of elections. The war has also opened opportunities for Eritrea to meddle in Ethiopian affairs and re-ignited a decades-long border dispute with Sudan. To address these multiple challenges, Et-

hiopia's federal government must first allow life-saving aid to follow to the region, expel Ahmara fighters and Eritrean soldiers from the region, and initiate an inclusive national reconciliation.