

# The Justice and Reconciliation Imperatives in the Tigrayan-Ethiopian War

By  
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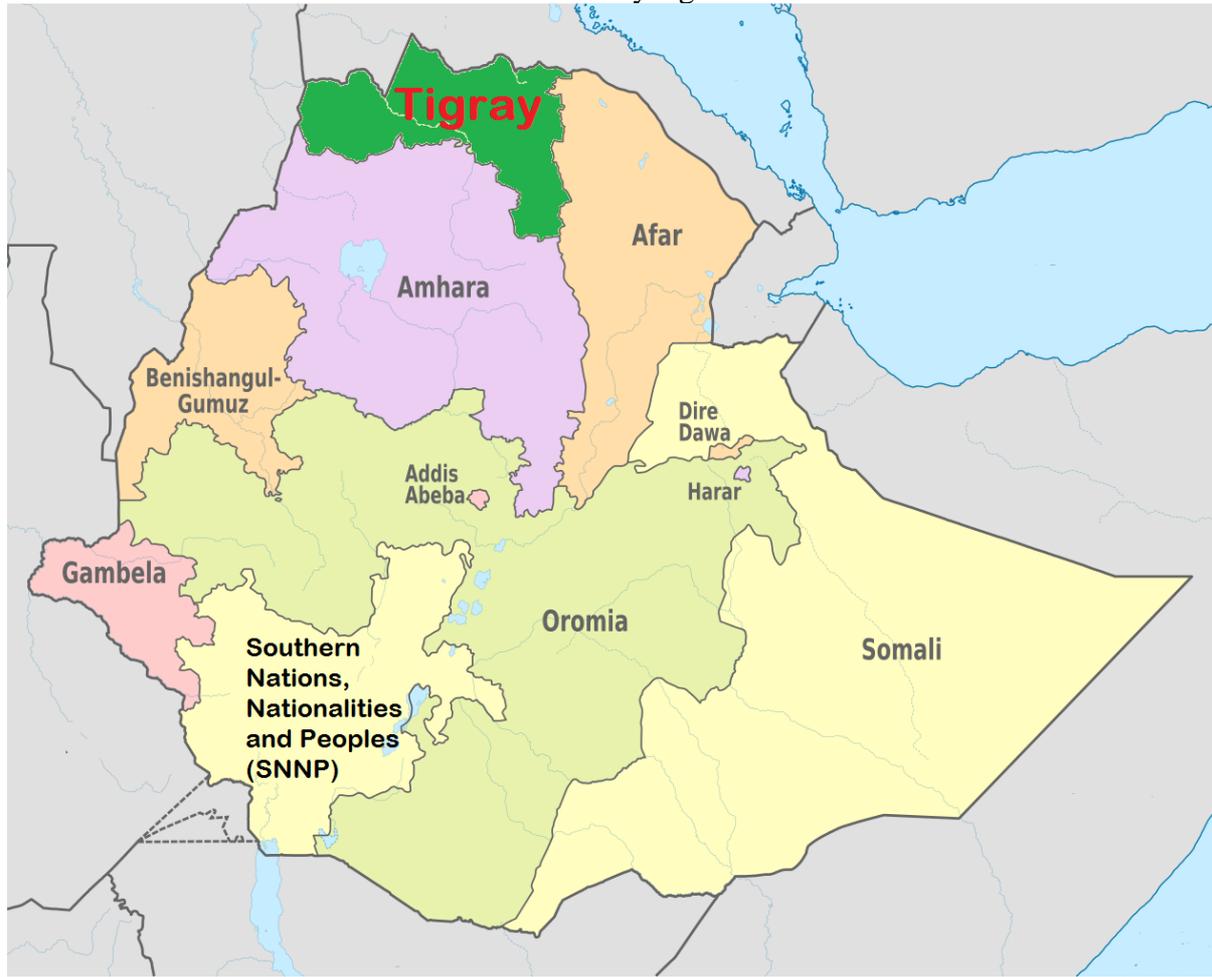


Figure 1: Map of Ethiopia showing the map of Tigray region highlighted green<sup>2</sup>

## Summary:

*On the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2020, the federal troops of Ethiopia entered the Tigrayan region with the stated intention of restoring law and order. At the time, the Tigrayan region was under the control of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) who had captured the federal state military barracks on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020. By the 28<sup>th</sup> of November, the federal state declared victory. However, that was not the end of the conflict as the military action worked to destabilised peace in the Tigrayan region and left the once ruling and powerful TPLF dethroned from power. Presently, there is dire need for humanitarian assistance in the*

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.ywcapdx.org/community-solutions/tigray-on-a-map/>. Accessed on 26.07.21

*region. There are also claims of human rights abuse and mass displacements of civilians as the Ethiopian Defence Forces declared a unilateral ceasefire and the newly formed Tigray Defence Force entered Makelle (Tigrayan region city) and vowed to keep fighting. What is needed now is for the rule of law to prevail. It is argued in this policy brief that the rapid political and economic reforms initiated by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the rejection of these reforms by the once powerful TPLF political elites, are at the heart of this conflict. Looking ahead, reforms should be implemented in the spirit of justice and reconciliation. Ethiopia is a strategic regional partner to the United States of America, the European Union and African Union, to name a few. In the spirit of these partnerships, the international community should support Ethiopia and help to manage the reforms. A fair and just implementation of reforms will help prevent further hatred among ethnic groups. Ethiopia should also seek peaceful resolution of boundary disputes with its neighbours, notably, in eastern Sudan and the north with Eritrea. Stability in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa is of strategic interest to peace loving nations.*

### **The Tigrayan-Ethiopian Conflict System**

After two years of political unrest in Ethiopia, intensified by uprisings instigated by youth in the Oromia region from 2015, and followed by a series of arrests, detentions and the declaration of emergency in October 2016 by the federal state; Abiy Ahmed eventually took the reins of power in Ethiopia on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2018 (ACLED, 2017: 1). Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took power in Ethiopia promising political and economic reforms to address grievances by Ethiopians across ethnic divides (ICGa, 2019; ACLED, 2017).

However, the reform process is facing many challenges (ICGab, 2021; ICGab, 2021; ACLED, 2021; CFR, 2021; ICG, 2020b; ICGab, 2019; EUISS, 2019; ACLED, 2017). The cogwheels in the engine of the current conflict in the Tigrayan region are the TPLF political elite and Prime Minister Abiy (ACLED, 2017). TPLF has been characterized by the Prime Minister's camp as the instigator of ethnic divisions and bitter loser whose aim is to destabilize Ethiopia (ACLED, 2017; ICG, 2021). TPLF is pitted against Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the Prosperity Party he created in 2019 (ICGb, 2020).

Prime Minister Abiy has initiated many political and economic reforms that have targeted the TPLF (ACLED, 2017). He made moves towards addressing the problem of ethnic-based federal system by dissolving the Ethiopian People's Liberation Democratic Front (EPLDF) and formed the Prosperity Party. He also moved Ethiopian economic system

from the state-driven development to liberal market economy. Subsequently, he removed many TPLF political elites from various responsibility positions in government (ICGb, 2021:1). These moves caused a lot of discomfort among the TPLF. The result has been an action reaction from each camp.

On the one hand, TPLF is unbowed in its demands on Prime Minister Abiy's government to step aside (ICGb, 2020). TPLF asserts that Prime Minister Abiy's transitional government is illegitimate as its mandate expired in October 2020 (ICGb, 2020). While on the other hand, Prime Minister Abiy's government are outrightly dismissive of TPLF leadership and insist that TPLF are mutinous who have to face justice ( I CGb, 2021: 2).

The Prime Minister Abiy and his hard line camp accuse TPLF of presiding over an ethnic based federal system and rent seeking regime since 1991(ACLEDE, 2021: 2-8). In the midst of the political disagreement between the TPLF and Prime Minister Abiy's Prosperity Party, there are many other political disagreements involving opposition parties in Oromia, Amhara, and other regions (ACLEDE, 2019). There are also existing land disputes such as between the Tigrayans and Amhara, Sudan and Ethiopia, and so on.

The Tigrayan-Ethiopian problem is political, socio-economic and legal. The disagreement is mainly anchored on how Ethiopia should be governed, socio-economic inclusion and disputes regarding land and boundaries. The road to peace and security in Ethiopia is through justice and reconciliation involving all contending parties (ACLEDE 2021; ICGab, 2021; ICGab, 2020). This policy brief analyses the Tigrayan-Ethiopian conflict; context, reforms and impact on the domestic and regional milieu. The brief recommends having a national dialogue; justice and reconciliation. The policy brief concludes that peace and security in Ethiopia is of strategic importance in the Horn of Africa region. The conflict should not be left unattended.

### **The Delicate Domestic and Regional Milieu**

Apart from the conflict pitting the TPLF against Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, there are many other domestic and regional conflict fault lines that require attention if durable peace and security is to be achieved and sustained in Ethiopia (ACLED 2017; ACLED 2021; CFR, , 2021). Power holders in Ethiopia should be aware of the many ethnic-based fault lines in Ethiopia and should avoid falling prey to the machinations of short-term power wheelers and dealers who have corrupted past regimes. It all comes down to playing fair because anyone who plays the ethnic card to remain in power, is bound to only score temporary victories. In the long-term, ethnic grievances are bound to explode.

Politics in Ethiopia is ethnic-based and thrives on the ethnic federal system introduced by the coalition government of the EPRDF that ruled Ethiopia under the control of the TPLF from 1991 to 2018 . EPRDF was disbanded by Prime Minister Abiy in December 2019 when he formed the Prosperity Party. The EPRDF is perceived by aggrieved Ethiopians to be an umbrella used by TPLF to entrench its hold onto power and create ethnic identities and divisions in Ethiopia. TPLF promoted EPRDF to the public as a neutral arbiter of conflicts in the ethnic federal system of devolved power since 1991. Those who criticise the TPLF rule accuse TPLF of entrenching centralisation of government to favour the minority Tigrayans who make up only 6% of the Ethiopian population.(ACLED, 2017:6).

Political parties in the populous and ethnically divided Ethiopia, derive their name and membership from their ethnic bases (EUISS, 2019; ACLED, 2017). Ethiopia has a population of 110 million people, and has over 80 ethnic groups (ACLED, 2017: 6). The political tapestry of the EPRDF ruling coalition that took power in 1991 was woven along four major parties from four major regions of Ethiopia divided along ethnic lines. The Oromos are the largest ethnic group at 30% followed by the Amhara at 20% ( ACLED, 2017: 8-11).

The TPLF is from the Tigrayan region, Amhara National Democratic (ANDM) is from the Amhara region, the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) is from the Oromia region. The Oromo spread out into Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital city. The fourth key political partner in the EPLDF coalition was the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Front (SEPDF), which is made up of over 40 small ethnic groups (EUISS, 2019: 4-5). Many other small ethnic groups are spread out in the regions controlled by the main ethnic groups. The EPRDF coalition government took power in 1991 after overthrowing the Derg regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam (ACLEDE 2017, 17).

Balancing the various ethnic group political interests, adjudicating land and boundary disputes, as well as finding a settlement to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) dispute are delicate and complex matters in Ethiopian politics (ICG, 2021; ACLEDE, 2021). There are quite a number of intra-communal land disputes to resolve, and many opposition groups to contend with. The land dispute between the Tigrayans and Amhara in the south has to be settled. The Amhara claim the lands in Walkayt district and Raya area. They claim TPLF settled Tigrayans on land belonging to them in the 1990s (ACLEDE, 2017: 7).

Another land dispute is between Sudan in the East and Ethiopia in the West. Fighting is going on between Ethiopian and Sudanese forces at the border areas that Sudan claims which were mostly settled by Amhara farmers. There are tensions at the border in the areas adjacent to Tigray. There is conflict in the Benishangul-Gumuz region where ethnic Gumuz militias are reportedly killing Amhara people living in the region. The grievances in the Ogaden region are yet to be settled (ICG, 2013). Furthermore, the Oromo opposition leaders as well as other opposition political parties boycotted the elections that were held on 21<sup>st</sup> June 2021. There were no elections in the Tigrayan region which is engulfed in conflict. The involvement of Tigrayan rivals, Eritrean troops and Amhara paramilitary and militias in the

Tigrayan-Ethiopian conflict are widening the already soaring ethnic hatred in the region. To seal it all, the tensions emerging from the GERD are yet to be settled (ACLED, 2021).

### **Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's Reforms and their Impact**

The political and economic reforms initiated by Prime Minister Abiy are full of contradictions and have had impact on the domestic and regional contexts.

When it comes to political reforms, he worked to get rid of ethnic-based political parties. To achieve this, the Prime Minister dissolved his political parties - the regional OPDO and the ruling coalition EPRDF - to form the Prosperity Party. He dislodged TPLF elites from federal government and state agencies, as well as from the leadership of the regional government in the Tigray region. He also released political prisoners across the country and invited them to compete for political power in an expanded democratic space. Adding to this, he arrested many opposition leaders in a move perceived by critics to silence his opponents in the June 2021 elections.

On a foreign policy level, he made peace with Eritrea. He also invited Eritrea to fight the TPLF. He also encouraged Amhara to move into the disputed areas between themselves and the Tigray. He used Amhara militias to fight in the TPLF controlled region. He also withheld welfare funds from the destitute Tigray people and appointed a new administration in the area (ALCED, 2017; ICGab, 2021).

On his economic reforms, he moved Ethiopia from a state-centric economic dispensation programme that the TPLF-led EPRDF government introduced, to more a liberal market economy (EUISS, 2019:3-5; ALED, 2017). These economic reforms are at the centre of Prime Minister Abiy's collision with the TPLF political elites. The EPRDF government, heavily under the influence of TPLF, introduced a development-statist vision in Ethiopia since 1991. In this vision, the state controls many resources and own two-thirds of businesses in Ethiopia (ACLED, 2017: 2). Ethiopia achieved rapid economic growth at 10% under the

leadership of the EPRDF. EPRDF sought to establish and consolidate an effective development state while promoting a form of democratic participation (ALED, 2017).

However, in reality the EPRDF centralised resources and in many cases favoured the Tigray region (ACLEDE, 2017). The privatisation of land to accommodate the impressive economic growth fuelled more grievances among the various ethnic groups in Ethiopia that accused the TPLF of economic exclusion and political marginalisation (ACLEDE, 2017). The expansion of Addis Ababa in particular triggered protests in Oromia in 2015. The land where Addis Ababa is located belongs to the Oromo people. They feared that the proposed expansion of the city without proper consultation would lead to displacements without proper compensation. Other grievances relate to flower farming, local businesses development, mining, manufacturing and tourism (ACLEDE, 2017).

The impact of the political reforms introduced by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed on the domestic and regional levels have been vivid, and have especially fuelled insecurity in the country. The Ethiopian Chief of Defence (a Tigrayan), General Seare Mekonnen, was assassinated by his bodyguard in June 2019, purportedly on orders of the Amhara State, Head of Security, General Asamnew Tsige. General Tsige had attempted a coup in June 2019 at the time of the assassination in Amhara region which was foiled. General Tsige had been one of the released political prisoners. He was later appointed Head of security by the Amhara regional authorities. He was later pursued and killed.

Other actions by Prime Minister Abiy that brought tension between him and the TPLF include the firing of the Ethiopia's chief of intelligence, Getachew Assefa in 2018. TPLF refused to hand him over for prosecution after the Ethiopian Attorney General brought criminal charges against him. In June 2020, Hachalu Hundessa, a popular musician and political activist from Oromia was murdered. His murder was blamed on the TPLF political

elites. The TPLF has been accused of causing divisions along ethnic lines and for instigating violence in Ethiopia.

The impact of economic reforms manifests in revolts by the TPLF elites. Prime Minister Abiy's economic reforms have had direct impact on the relations between his Prosperity Party and TPLF (under whose leadership the centralized system was introduced). The reforms have sent fears (among the TPLF elites) of being economically disenfranchised by the Prosperity Party through the liberal market system. TPLF presided over massive acquisition of land in Ethiopia which were then leased for private farming. Many companies associated with the TPLF have since had their accounts frozen and placed under Trust. Prime Minister Abiy's is dismantling the economic foundation the EPRDF set for Ethiopia since 1991.

The EPDRF had concentrated on improving agricultural outputs, building roads, promoting large scale land deals and investing in education and health in rural areas. These areas comprise of 80% of the country's population. The coalition government also invested heavily in core transport areas meant to make better commercial corridors with neighbouring countries such as Djibouti, Kenya and Sudan. Prime Minister Abiy's government has characterised the 27 years of the EPDRF rule under the TPLF as rent-seeking, exploitative, centralizing, and ethnic-based. The impact of this extreme approach is increased insecurity in Ethiopia and at the border between in the West of Ethiopia in the East of Sudan.

### **The Roadmap to National Dialogue: the Justice and Reconciliation Imperatives**

Ethiopia is a strategic peace and security partner in the historically conflict troubled Horn of Africa region. Some fault lines in the region and in the country are worth highlighting before recommending justice and reconciliation as pathways to peace and security. The Sudanese peace is currently unpredictable following the dethronement of Omar Bashir from Power. Eritrea's dictatorial regime often defies International Law. Somalia is

undergoing an unpredictable electoral period. South Sudan has a fragile peace deal with the opposition. Kenya remains stable but upcoming elections in 2022 will play out amid economic devastation from COVID-19. Ethiopia has withdrawn some of its stabilizing AMISOM troops from Somalia. Ethiopia has fired some of its troops because they are from Tigray, while also relocating some troops from Somalia to fight in the Tigrayan region. Somalia has been left vulnerable to the preying designs of Al-Shabaab.

While the Prime Minister is currently winning in his design to isolate the TPLF political elites from power, the simmering ethnic tensions in Ethiopia are deeply rooted and cannot be settled or resolved by military action to decimate the TPLF. Prime Minister Abiy has so far managed to rally many leaders of the various regional authorities to isolate the TPLF, with particular success in the Amhara region. However, various opposition leaders in the country may also seek to exploit differences and rally their people to win power. The cycle of mobilising along ethnicity while also using force to acquire and maintain power works on a short-term basis but fails in the long-run. Eventually, justice and reconciliation should be used to achieve durable peace and security.

Both Prime Minister Abiy and the TPLF leadership should put Ethiopia first and negotiate to achieve durable peace and security pact. The grand standing between the two main contending political parties is not good for Ethiopia or the region. TPLF should make reasonable demands. Prime Minister Abiy should also acknowledge the good that TPLF has done in Ethiopia in the past instead of condemning them outrightly, and making irrational demands. In the end, there are no winners or losers in the conflict; probably, the main loser would be the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia wars of secession engulf the republic.

Promoting national dialogue that encompasses a tolerant and diverse Ethiopian identity that is strengthened by ethnic diversity will be an important facet of reconciliation as well as nation building. Prime Minister Abiy should promote an inclusive and just national

dialogue. The use of force to subdue any ethnic group into compliance is a temporary mechanism to manage conflict. The tactic provides no long term strategic solution because it fails to address root causes of conflicts. While the whole process of reconciliation, consensus building and compromise should be driven by Ethiopians, the US, EU, AU and IGAD should be at the forefront in providing the required resources to support the peace and security process. Durable domestic and regional independent institutions should be established by a Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission formed through the dialogue process to address the current conflict and heal national divides that might give rise to future conflicts in the country and region.

### **Aspiring for a Just, Equitable, Reconciled Ethiopia**

A justice and reconciliation national dialogue is needed in Ethiopia to address the dangers of negative ethnicity, and to also support a more equitable distribution of national wealth. Ethiopians whose lands are affected by economic expansion should be consulted and compensated. Governance and rule of law should be respected by all Ethiopians. Ethnicity should not be the basis for federalist systems. Democratic and economic reforms in Ethiopia should be welcomed as a means to address the historical vulnerabilities within the country and to also build resilience among Ethiopians. Equitable and inclusive development help strengthen peace and social cohesion so that in future people do not fall back on the historical ethnic disputes to manage their vulnerability. Reforms should be implemented in an atmosphere of justice, reconciliation, peace and security. No citizen of Ethiopia should feel left out to have a say in the process of nation-building. Those who control the levers of power should not use counterproductive methods that fuel conflicts. Instead, controlling the levers of power should be a constructive pursuit that is used to build peace and security in the country and region.

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