

ETHIOPIA: A POTENTIAL (DE) STABILISING PRESENCE IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

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The Ethiopian government ended its military intervention in the Tigray region last December after five weeks of open conflict against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Far from the crisis being over, there is a serious risk that it will become entrenched and turn into a guerrilla war. Domestic instability and growing diplomatic tension with Sudan and Egypt make Abiy Ahmed's Ethiopia a potential destabiliser of the Horn of Africa and the continent as a whole.

Ethiopia is not just any country. Ethiopia is a mirror that reflects the good and bad fortunes of the whole continent of Africa. Far from the famines of the 1980s that still lurk in our imaginary, Ethiopia's economic growth today is above the African and world average. It speaks with its own voice, resists foreign interference, and takes national pride in being the only non-colonised territory in Africa. It is also the headquarters of the African Union, and the coming to power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who received the **Nobel Peace Prize in 2019** for ending the long conflict with neighbouring Eritrea, embodied African hopes for this century. But just one year later, the country stands out as a focus of internal, regional, and international instability.

Ahmed's inauguration itself was a milestone as his agenda was transformative and driven by the demands of his community, the Oromo people, the country's majority group that has hitherto been excluded from power. As Ethiopia's first Oromo leader, his bold first steps were applauded around the world: peace agreements with domestic insurgents, release of political prisoners, advances in freedom of the press and of association, and his **naming of the country's first female president**. However, resistance from political, economic, and community sectors soon appeared and, with it, backpedalling on his own progress began: more repression, persecution of dissidents, and restrictions on freedom of information. Back to square one, albeit with different correlations of power.

One of the basic causes of the current conflict in Tigray is the perceived loss of power and privileges of the elites of this semi-autonomous region who were the builders of today's state of Ethiopia. Together with Amhara and Oromo hierarchies, united in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), they overthrew the dictator

Mengistu in 1991 and established the present model of **ethnic federalism**, a system of community balance seeking to appease ethnic demands. After functioning—or contributing to dysfunction, depending on how one looks at it—for three decades, the model now seems to be collapsing. The attempt to address the role of ethnicity within the state was both risky and praiseworthy but, in the end, it resulted in community compartmentalisation of the public administration and its **heritagisation by the ruling elites**.

Ahmed's moves to liberalise the public sector, the overcoming of tribal favouritism by means of a new political tool, the Prosperity Party, and a national discourse based on the Great Ethiopia of bygone empires, were seen by Tigray elites as an affront. The region's leaders declared rebellion and refused to accept mandates of the central government. An attack on a military base was the ideal pretext for starting the conflict. It was one more demonstration of how the new policies caused tempers to flare at the top without assuaging the grievances of those at the bottom or checking the growing inequality. Ethnic suspicions were exacerbated and discontent and dissatisfaction erupted not only in the north but also the south, in the Oromia region, especially after the **murder of a well-known singer and activist**. Too many battles on too many fronts for a young leader with airs of grandeur.

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The media blackout on the war in Tigray, UN reports of **human rights abuse** by both parties in the conflict, and the retreat but not defeat of the insurgent leaders makes one think that what has happened in the north of the country is only the beginning of a long period of instability inside Ethiopia, which could spread throughout the region. The fighting has displaced more than **50,000 refugees into Sudan** and reignited border disputes between the two states with **open hostilities and several deaths**. Moreover, there are signs of a **new and unprecedented alliance** between Ahmed and Isaias Afewerki, the authoritarian leader of Eritrea, the former archenemy of the Tigray-led Ethiopian state, which has now provided military cover in the fighting against the TPLF. Geopolitical approaches would be mistaken if they overlooked the importance of ethnic issues in these tensions. To undervalue the ethnic construct as a social tool or to confuse it with ethnicism, which leads to exclusion or supremacy, does not placate identities but, rather, reinforces them. Ahmed's Great Ethiopia is going ahead and, with it, an escalation of violence that could reach unimaginable proportions unless the greatest challenge for the zone in recent times—the **Grand Renaissance dam**—is managed by means of diplomatic channels.

The construction and operation of this macro infrastructure built by Ethiopia on the waters of the Blue Nile threaten to detonate a regional conflict of unforeseeable consequences if nobody remedies matters. Ahmed's government has begun filling the dam, the biggest and most powerful in Africa, in what amounts to a wholesale amendment to the colonial sharing of management of the waters of the River Nile, which, until now, has been based on the British Empire's 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty which favoured Egypt and Sudan with shares of 75% and 25% respectively, and gave them veto powers over the construction of any dam. Ethiopia has thus made a conscious move on the regional and global geopolitical chessboard on which it has historically been a skilful player. A traditional ally of the United States, the government has, in recent years, intensified relations with China and Russia and cultivated synergies with **Persian Gulf** monarchies like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which supported it in its domestic conflict. Qatar took the side of the insurgents. It is not yet known whether Joe Biden will countermand Trump's order by withdrawing troops from Somalia, where the future of East Africa is also largely at stake. In the interim, Ahmed's meteoric career still raises questions about his capacity for endurance within the country. This depends on his policy of alliances and, above all, his possibilities of—or interests in—escalating still more the conflict over water with Egypt or Sudan.

Both these unknowns are key factors when assessing whether Ethiopia will end up representing a haven of regional stability or, on the contrary, as seems portended, will eventually stir up old ghosts of ethnic violence and postcolonial and neocolonial battles. This is a serious situation and all scenarios are open. The Gulf States, the new US administration, Russia, and China, will certainly have a role in what is to come, despite Ethiopia's bragging about noninterference. Ahmed, wanting to emulate Menelik II, the Ethiopian emperor of whom he considers himself heir, will soon be judged by history as the Nobel Peace Prize laureate who was quickest to start a war.