

# Successive Setbacks

## Can the United Front seize control of Addis Ababa?

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From October 31 to November 3, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) managed to achieve strategic gains at the expense of the Ethiopian government, as it continues to draw closer to the Ethiopian capital, especially after its seizing control of the cities of Dessie and Kombolcha. Meanwhile, contrary to regional and international appeals, the Ethiopian Prime Minister continues to mobilize citizens to fight, refusing a cease-fire and any negotiations with the Tigray Front.

### An escalating conflict

There were many indications that the TPLF was able to expand its control, heading to control the capital Addis Ababa, which can be explained as follows:

**1- Tigray's control over three strategic cities:** The TPLF was able to capture Dessie and Kombolcha on October 30-31, 2021. The Oromo Liberation Army, which is allied with the Tigray Front, was able to control several cities South of Kombolcha, the last of which was Kamisi, which is located 327 km away from Addis Ababa. The three cities are located in the Amhara region, which is home to the Amhara ethnic group, the main supporter of Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed.

These cities are of great significance, as they are located on the A2 highway, which connects Mekele, the capital of the Tigray region, with Addis Ababa. This highway also connects Addis Ababa with Djibouti, through a port used for shipping most of Ethiopia's imports and exports.

The recent series of victories for the Tigray and Oromo forces represent a threat for the Ethiopian government, as this brings back the memory of the civil war. In the late eighties of the twentieth century, the TPLF and the Oromo Front managed to seize control of Dessie in May 1991, after years of disputes, and then march onto Addis Ababa, where Meles Zenawi, leader of the TPLF back then, managed to take over

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until his death in 2012.

**2- Forming an opposition political-military alliance:** Nine opposition groups formed “The United Front of Ethiopian Federalist and Confederalist Forces (UFEFCF)”, most notably the Oromo Liberation Army, as well as opposition groups from the Afar, Gambella and Somali regions. The UFEFCF is a political-military alliance that aims to overthrow the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, whether by force or by negotiations, and to form a transitional government.

“If the federal government falls, we will definitely have interim arrangements,” said Getachew Reda, a prominent member of the TPLF, referring to the consensus on the adoption of an alternative government to Abiy Ahmed’s government.

**3- Addis Ababa declaring a state of emergency:** Although the Ethiopian government has not acknowledged the fall of Kamisi, the actions it has taken reflect that the opposition seized control of it. Addis Ababa has declared a six-month state of emergency, which allows the government to enforce conscription to recruit people to join the fight against Tigray. The state of emergency will also allow the Ethiopian government to arrest anyone suspected of collaborating with the TPLF, which the government listed as a terrorist group last May.

The Ethiopian federal authorities also called on residents to obtain a license to carry weapons during the coming period to defend their areas. The state media also indicated that the governments of four of Ethiopia’s 10 provinces called on Ethiopians to mobilize to fight against the Tigrayan forces. The Ethiopian Federal Army also called on former members of the military to join the ranks of the army against the TPLF, and set November 24 as the deadline for registration.

**4- Turkish military support to the Ethiopian government:** Turkey announced its support for the Ethiopian government in confronting the TPLF. Ethi-

opia has requested the purchase of Bayraktar TB2 drones from Turkey.

Although the use of drones may help the Ethiopian government in its war against the opposition, it is worth noting that Addis Ababa possessed Iranian drones and did not succeed in curbing the progress of the opposition. This is related to the TPLF’s use of man portable Igla surface-to-air missiles, which it was able to use in the past battles to shoot down a MiG-23, an L-100-30 cargo plane, and a Mi-35 helicopter, and which is also likely to be used against drones.

This means that even if Ethiopia managed to obtain Turkish drones, it may not be able to reverse the battles in its favor, specifically since the TPLF clearly has extensive combat experience, given that they are basically the backbone of the Ethiopian army. This is what enabled it to withstand not only the Ethiopian army and the Amhara militia, but also the Eritrean army, and the Somali forces that were deployed at the onset of the battles against the TPLF.

**5- Foreign countries calling on their nationals to leave Ethiopia:** The US, Saudi, Qatari and Kuwaiti embassies advised their citizens to leave Ethiopia due to the deteriorating security situation. These calls come as a strong indication of the realization of a prominent combat approaching the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, as well as a real possibility of the collapse of Abiy Ahmed’s government.

## Domestic and Regional Repercussions

The Ethiopian Civil War had major internal and regional repercussions, which can be explained as follows:

**1- Extended humanitarian ramifications:** The siege imposed by Addis Ababa on the Tigray region prevented food and humanitarian supplies from reaching there. The UN estimates that up to 5 million people are in dire need for urgent food relief and that at least 400,000 people are living in famine-like



conditions. In terms of human losses, some reports indicate that thousands of people have been killed, in addition to the flight of more than two million people from their homes since the outbreak of the civil war in November 2020.

**2- A chronic economic crisis:** The economic conditions in Ethiopia have deteriorated as a result of the civil war. The debt rate has more than doubled since the outbreak of the Ethiopian crisis in November 2020. Moody's Investors Service downgraded the country's credit rating in October for the second time since last May to (Caa2), referring to the delay in the debt restructuring planned for the country.

The US also announced the suspension of the duty-free exemption of Ethiopian exports, under the African Growth and Opportunity Act, under which Ethiopia exports textiles and other goods to the US duty-free. Notably, Ethiopia exported USD 245 million worth of goods to the US last year under this law, which comprises nearly half of its exports to America. As the battles continue, the economic situation may exacerbate further, especially if the TPLF and Oromo manage to cut the highway linking Addis Ababa and Djibouti, through which most of Ethiopia's trade passes.

**3- Threatening the unity of the country:** The prolongation of the civil war in Ethiopia warns of the possibility of the state disintegration and breakdown, in the event of the outbreak of conflict between the Oromo and the Amhara groups, which are the largest ethnic groups compared to other groups, particularly since Abiy Ahmed depends on the ethnic support of the Amhara ethnic group.

Ethiopia suffers from various problems. In addition to separatist problems, there are disputed areas amidst different regions, such as the conflict between the regions of Tigray and Amhara over common border areas. At the beginning of the conflict with Tigray last year, the movement demanded expanded autonomy. In the event that Tigray fails to control Addis Ababa, it may seriously consider seces-

sion, specifically after Addis Ababa resorted to Eritrea in its fight against Tigray.

**4- Regional implications for the Horn of Africa:** Concerns are escalating about the conflict spreading to the Horn of Africa, particularly in light of the Eritrean-Somali military support for the government of Abiy Ahmed against the TPLF. Tigray's ability to seize power in Addis Ababa may re-write the map of regional alliances again, which warns of the possibility of a new escalation of tension between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

## Scenarios of the Ethiopian conflict

Four scenarios for the development of the conflict may be envisioned here, some of which could threaten the survival of the Ethiopian state, which can be portrayed as follows:

**1- The success of the armed rebels:** This scenario is represented in the victory of the Tigray and Oromo rebels over the Ethiopian army, which has been subject to successive collapses, in addition to the overthrow of Abiy Ahmed's government, and the formation of a new government. Perhaps Tigray's announcement of the establishment of the "United Front" of nine groups from the political and armed opposition, as well as the success of the TPLF in reaching Kamisi, which is about 327km from the Ethiopian capital, are indicators reflecting the possibility of this scenario coming true.

**2- Negotiated settlement:** This scenario may be likely if the Tigray Front and its allies fail to control Addis Ababa, and the Ethiopian government fails to defeat them. Secret negotiations are already underway between representatives of both sides in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, with limited progress, in part because both groups include hardliners who see the settlement as treason. Such a settlement would also be difficult, given that the Tigrayan leaders had previously asked for expanded autonomy.

**3- A military coup:** This scenario assumes that the army will turn against Abiy Ahmed, particularly



in light of his successive failures. The coup will not necessarily resolve the conflict, particularly since the Ethiopian army suffers from internal divisions, which renders it unable to defeat the TPLF and the Oromo Liberation Army.

**4- Military stalemate:** This is represented in the continued protection of the capital by Ethiopian

forces, while securing the supply line linking Addis Ababa and Djibouti. However, the government has failed to regain any of the territory controlled by the Tigrayan and Oromo forces. In the event that this happens, Abiy Ahmed will be exposed to major pressure to reach a negotiated settlement, otherwise in the event of a military stalemate, the matter may entail separatist risks for some Ethiopian regions.


In conclusion, there are no signs of a solution to the Ethiopian conflict in the near term, given the intransigence of the two parties to the conflict, especially the Ethiopian government. The most likely scenario to take place is that the Tigray rebels and their allies would seize Addis Ababa, particularly should the poor performance of the Ethiopian army persist.

## ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.

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