



A Spiraling Crisis:

The different scenarios of Ethiopia's Civil War amid Tigray's Military Advancement

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Over the past nine months, Ethiopia has been reeling under a civil war that broke out between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The conflict, however, saw two important developments, with the first being that the war has spilled over the region's border into Amhara and Afar. The second development is that Addis Ababa refused to allow corridors via Sudan for humanitarian aid bound for Tigray Region. Addis Ababa took this stand despite the United Nation's warning that 400,000 people are left on the verge of famine in the beleaguered region and that 90 per cent of the population need lifesaving food aid.

Signs of further escalation of the conflict

The Ethiopian crisis is heading to further escalation as revealed by the following signs:

1- Tigray's endeavor for taking control of strategic axes: the Tigray People's Liberation Front advanced towards Afar in a bid to cut off the road and railway connecting Addis Ababa to Djibouti, through which Ethiopia receives 95 per cent of non-coastal trade. Following its success in making incursions into Amhara and on August 6, the Front's forces captured the historic town of Lalibela pushing closer to the capital Addis Ababa. Additionally, the Front rejected calls to withdraw from Afar and Amhara unless the government lifts its blockade on humanitarian aid.

2- Tigray declares plans to capture the capital: the TPLF announced that its army is not willing to stop its attacks on Ethiopia's federal forces unless Addis Ababa ends the siege laid on the region. Additionally, on July 31, the front announced that battles will continue until the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is ousted. The announcement is a sign that the ceiling of demands has been raised by the Front driven by its recent successes.

3- Addis Ababa's call to arms: the Ethiopian government announced a unilateral ceasefire on June 28, after it lost Mekelle, the capital of Tigray. But the TPLF refused the ceasefire and announced that it was continuing the fight. This prompted the federal government and allied local leaders of other regions to mobilize civilians across the country in late July to

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join the war on the Tigray forces. The move was of special importance because the government forces were making progress into Afar and Amhara regions, to a distance of 80 kilometers from Gondar, the historic capital of Ethiopia.

4- Addis Ababa’s Weaponization of Starvation:

The Ethiopian government rejected calls from Western relief and aid agencies on August 3rd to open a humanitarian aid corridor from neighboring Sudan into Tigray, and described such calls as illogical. Addis Ababa reiterated that the sole such corridor should run through Afar and neighboring Djibouti.

The development came amid accusations of the Ethiopian governments’ attempt to stifle the people of Tigray and use starvation as a weapon the in ongoing war, although the United Nations’ World Food Program’s affirmed that some 5.2 million people, or 91 per cent of the population of Tigray, need urgent food

assistance.

5- Rejection of regional and international mediation efforts:

on August 5, Ethiopia rejected a proposal by Sudan to mediate in the crisis with the TPLF, describing Khartoum as a ‘incredible’. Both parties to the conflict, however, rejected calls from the United Nations to bring their conflict to an end. U.S. President Joe Biden called for a ceasefire in Tigray and demanded an end to “large-scale human rights abuses” in the region. Further, the US Administration threatened to impose sanctions if humanitarian aid do not get through to Tigray.

6- Emergence of the Turkish variable:

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, during a phone conversation with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed on August 1, vowed to extend all kinds of support to Ethiopia and said that Turkey attaches great importance to peace and stability in Ethiopia. However, no



signs are there yet of an active Turkish role in the Ethiopian crisis.

Roots of Escalation of the Civil War

The roots of the current conflict can be outlined as follows:

1- Exclusion of Tigray from power: the TPLF was a major party in the successive Ethiopian governments since the ousting of former president Mengistu Haile Mariam from power in 1991 to 2019, when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, an ethnic Oromo, formed a coalition from which he excluded the TPLF.

Despite the exclusion of the TPLF from the federal government, it maintained power in the federal region of Tigray. In September 2020, it also held regional elections, which the federal government refused to recognize as legitimate claiming that it postponed all elections across Ethiopia due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, the TPLF succeeded in winning a majority of the regional parliament in elections in which 2.7 million voters cast their ballots.

2- Abiy Ahmed's receding legitimacy: the Prosperity Party led by Abiy Ahmed won 410 seats out of 436 in the legislative elections held in May. The win empowers him to party to stay in power for another five years. But on the other hand, the elections witnessed widespread violations where a fifth of the population of Ethiopia, including Tigray, did not participate in the elections. The European Union accused the Ethiopian government of failing to guarantee the independence of the elections. On its part, Washington criticized the elections saying they were not free nor fair because of acts of violence as well as boycott from the opposition parties. For Ethiopian citizens, the government's call to the Eritrean forces to participate in the offensive against the Tigray as well as its involvement in human rights violations in the region weaken its legitimacy and push people to back the TPLF.

3- Failure to manage multi-ethnicity: the ongoing civil war poses a threat to the integrity of Ethiopia, especially because of Abiy Ahmed's failure to manage multi-ethnicity in the past three years which caused relations between Addis Ababa and the regions to deteriorate.

Additionally, the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia revolves

not only around Tigray, but spilled over into other regions such as Amhara, where frequent acts of violence claim hundreds of lives, prompt displacement of civilians and the torching of houses.

Potential trajectories

Three main trajectories of the ongoing civil war between the government and the TPLF can be perceived as follows:

1- Military resolution: this scenario is, now, the most likely as both parties to the conflict insist on embracing a military approach to achieve all their goals while refusing to put a ceasefire in place. Moreover, each party put forth crippling demands for the other party. That is, while the TPLF demand a transitional government replace Abiy Ahmed, the prime minister insists on deploying new recruits to militarily defeat the TPLF. This scenario implies two subsidiary scenarios, which are:

A- Ousting Abiy Ahmed: the TPLF may be able to achieve its goal of gaining control of Addis Ababa using military force and consequently ousting Abiy Ahmed. This subsidiary scenario is supported by the following three factors:

- The TPLF's military experience: the majority of troops mobilized by Addis Ababa are civilians, who do not have extensive military experience other than a quick training course on how to carry arms. That is why, they are not expected to confront the Tigray soldiers who are a majority in the Ethiopian armed forces although the Tigray ethnicity account for only six per cent of the population.

- The historic precedence of the 1990s: in 1991, the TPLF succeeded in establishing a 100000-strong army which, thanks to its alliance with the Eritrean forces, were able to capture the capital Addis Ababa and topple the regime of former president Mengistu Haile Mariam.

- Cutting off the flow of supplies to Ethiopia: the Tigray forces can stifle Addis Ababa and deprive it from fuel, food and pharmaceutical supplies by taking control of the passageway from Djibouti.

B- Defeating the Tigray troops: this scenario is unlikely because the Tigray soldiers pushed back the



government forces which sometimes withdraw without fighting from the battlefield. Most recently, the government forces had to pull out from the historic town of Lalibela. Despite this, this scenario can be possible if:

- the Ethiopian government receives foreign support, from countries such as Eritrea and Turkey;
- if Ethiopia succeeds in starving the Tigray and block the flow of food aid from reaching their grounds.

2- Peaceful resolution: this trajectory is possible if the conflict becomes stagnant where either party fails to achieve their goals. Factors that might drive this trajectory are as follows:

- Abiy Ahmed receiving popular support against the Tigray leaders. A large number of Ethiopians reject the TPLF's bid to make a comeback to power.

- The TPLF troops facing popular resistance as they advance outside their strongholds in Tigray.
- US placing pressure on both parties, to sit at the negotiating table, over fears of a collapse of the Ethiopian state that can trigger a refugee crisis with consequences spreading as far away as Europe.

3- Stagnation of the conflict: this scenario would see either party to the conflict failing to achieve their military goals taking the conflict into a state of stagnation where the international community fails to place enough pressure to force the involved warring parties to sit at the negotiating table. This might open the door for secession of the Tigray region, driven in particular by Article 39 of Ethiopia's constitution. The consequences include the disintegration of the state, especially if other regions walk in the steps of the Tigray region.

In conclusion, the current civil war in Ethiopia poses threats to the integrity and unity of the state. Reaching a peaceful solution is among the best options, especially in the light of existing regional and international interest in supporting such course so as to prevent Ethiopia's internal turmoil from spreading and threatening the security of the whole of Horn of Africa.

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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