# Armed conflict in Tigray threatens break up of Ethiopia

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Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has ordered repeated air strikes against military targets in Tigray, one of Ethiopia's semi-autonomous, ethnically defined provinces, and declared a six-month state of emergency. With phone and internet lines cut, the region has been effectively sealed off.

Abiy launched the strikes in response to what he claimed was an "attack" by Tigray's ruling party on an army compound that he said had the support of an unnamed "foreign hand."

While details are unclear, amid claims and counterclaims, the United Nations has reported armed clashes in eight different locations with dozens of casualties and warned that nine million people could be displaced by the fighting.

The parliament, meeting in an emergency session, declared Tigray's regional government illegal and voted to dissolve it. The Tigray leadership had "violated the constitution and endangered the constitutional system" and a new caretaker administration would hold elections and "implement decisions passed on by the federal government."

The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that heads the regional government has refused to back down in the escalating conflict with the federal government in Addis Ababa. With more than half of Ethiopia's army based in Tigray, a legacy of its war with Eritrea, Abiy cannot rely on the military's support or a brief skirmish. Yesterday, he sacked his army chief, head of intelligence and foreign minister.

Tigray is only one of the country's festering ethnic conflicts and there are fears of a civil war that threatens the breakup of Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous country that is a mosaic of ethnicities and languages. As the regional powerhouse, Ethiopia's risks the broader destabilisation of the Horn of Africa.

The Tigrayan conflict has been brewing for some time. The TPLF, an armed ethno-nationalist movement that emerged in 1975, played a prominent role in defeating the Moscow-aligned government of Mengistu Haile Mariam, known as the Derg, in 1991. Mengistu's regime had brutally suppressed the politically amorphous social movement that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, jailing its political opponents, carrying out a series of civil wars against separatist movements of Eritreans and Tigrayans, as well as the Oromos and Somalis, and presiding over droughts and famine in 1984 and 1985 in which hundreds of thousands perished.

The TPLF was the dominant party in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of several militia groups and parties, that governed the country after Megistu's overthrow in 1991. The EPRDF was to remain in power, courtesy of rigged elections, for nearly three decades, presiding over an increasingly authoritarian state.

In 1995, the government, under the leadership of Meles Zenawi, a Tigrayan, had devolved some powers to the regions, including the right in principle to secede. Resentment grew against Tigrayan political and economic dominance—Tigrayans constitute six percent of the population—as politicians whipped up ethnic tensions as a diversion against a unified struggle by the impoverished masses against the Ethiopian elites.

There were huge protests starting in 2014, precipitated by a central government land grab of historic Oromo lands that were handed over to overseas companies—often from the Gulf and China, for infrastructure and export-orientated agribusiness. Ethnic protests in Oromia and Amhara, who constitute about 35 percent and 27 percent of the population respectively, saw thousands killed and tens of thousands arrested.

In February 2018, as the protests and political crisis mounted, Hailemariam Desalegn, who became prime minister after Meles' death in 2012, resigned as both head

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of government and the EPRDF. His successor, Abiy Ahmed, a former military intelligence officer and an Oromo, was welcomed at home and abroad as a "reformer," receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for making peace with Eritrea one year later. In November 2019, he disbanded the EPRDF, replacing it with the Prosperity Party (PP), which TPLF refused to join.

Abiy released tens of thousands of political prisoners, ended the internet blackout imposed by the previous government, lifted a ban on several political parties, some of which had been designated "terrorist" groups, paving the way for the leaders of the banned groups to return to Ethiopia and ended the 20-year long war with neighbouring Eritrea. He introduced a raft of measures aimed at reducing the TPLF's dominance, including retiring their military and government officials, instigating corruption charges against some members and announcing plans for the privatisation of swathes of the state-owned economy and liberalisation of the banks, in a bid to secure Washington and the International Monetary Fund's approval.

This sparked furious opposition within the military and led to last year's abortive coup. Viewed as collectively responsible for the crimes of the previous regime, some 100,000 Tigrayans have been driven from their homes and are living in internally displaced people's camps due to racist violence.

Despite Abiy's promise to end ethnic discrimination, ethnic violence has increased, with some 1.7 million internally displaced people living in camps as the danger grows of still bloodier ethnic violence. The sale of land has also continued, under conditions where 80 percent of Ethiopia's 104 million people are dependent upon the land for their subsistence and at least 25 percent of the population ekes out an existence on less than $2 a day.

The COVID-19 pandemic has served to intensify the social, economic and political crisis, with Abiy announcing the postponement of this year's general election, viewed as an important component of Ethiopia's transition to democracy—initially to August, but now indefinitely. His decision was backed by parliament and a Council of Constitutional Inquiry (CCI), prompting Abiy's opponents to accuse him of illegally extending his term in office. The Tigrayan regional government rejected the postponement, holding its own election in September.

After the federal government declared the result illegal, the finance ministry announced plans to bypass the Tigrayan regional government and send funds directly to local authorities, reportedly also blocking welfare payments to poor farmers and preventing people travelling to Mekelle, the regional capital—moves that the TPLF said were tantamount to a "declaration of war."

The country has also been destabilised by the widespread protests that took place throughout Oromia, in the wake of the assassination of the popular Oromian musician, activist, and former political prisoner, Hachalu Hundessa.

Abiy responded by deploying troops to put down the riots, shutting down the internet and media offices, and arresting thousands of people. These included journalists accused of inciting violence and a leading opposition politician Jawar Mohammed, also an Oromo and former ally turned opponent of Abiy. The state-controlled media blamed Hachalu's assassination on the Oromo Liberation Army, a rebel group, and the TPLF.

The last few weeks have seen several massacres, mostly of Amharas, with Amnesty International reporting the killing of dozens of women and children in a schoolyard in western Oromia on November 1, adding to this year's 147 clashes that have left several hundred dead. There are widespread fears that the open conflict in Tigray will inspire secessionist sentiment in other parts of the country.

This crisis takes place amid an escalating international conflict over Ethiopia's giant Renaissance Dam over the Blue Nile, that supplies 80 percent of the Nile's downstream waters. Defeated United States President Trump has backed Egypt and Sudan against Ethiopia, amid threats that Egypt could blow up the dam and cuts in Washington's aid to Addis.

The desperate situation in Ethiopia is part of the ongoing fragmentation and disintegration of the countries in the Horn of Africa, which includes Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia and Djibouti. The Horn is an arena of intense great power and regional rivalry for control of oil reserves and mineral resources in neighbouring countries and the sea route through the narrow Bab al-Mandeb straits—through which much of Europe's oil passes—with the US and Europe engaged in a ferocious struggle with China.

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