

The letters 'I', 'R', 'M', and 'O' are arranged horizontally, each inside a green puzzle piece that interlocks with its neighbors. The background is a light gray world map.The letters 'B', 'R', 'I', 'E', and 'F' are arranged horizontally, each inside a green puzzle piece that interlocks with its neighbors. The background is a light gray world map.

08

2024

## The Horn of Africa in the Face of the Changing Conditions in Ethiopia and the Tigray War

*By Dareskedar Taye*

### Introduction

Ethiopia is a country endowed with its own unique civilization around the Red Sea since the time antiquity. Historical evidences proved that it enjoyed working relationship with the Roman Empire during its heyday and with the Ottoman Empire during the medieval period. But, it was largely detached from renaissance and industrial Europe as it was blocked by the strong presence of the Ottomans along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Eden. When European nations with colonial ambition were coming to Africa in the second half of 19th century,

Ethiopia resisted fiercely and maintained its independence. The modern Ethiopia that we know today is therefore the result of the post-Adwa victory (the war between Ethiopia and Italy in 1896) boundary agreements that Ethiopia reached with the colonizers, i.e. United Kingdom, France and Italy. Though Ethiopia guaranteed its independence through those agreements, they remained to be the root causes to the hitherto challenges related with Ethiopia-Sudan boundary dispute, Ethiopia's quest to access to the sea, and fair and equitable utilization of the river Nile.

The greatest homework to Ethiopia in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the introduction of modern governance system to the age old traditional feudal nation. Even though Ethiopia is a country with rich historical and cultural values, it did not possess any trait of modern political and social systems. Hence, establishing a modern bureaucracy and mobilizing a well-equipped professional army were essential elements of the modernization attempt. It was also expected to introduce the Ethiopian public with secular educational system and help support the growth of the rudimentary urban settlements. It was also at this time that the first constitution and bi-cameral legislature were introduced. This organic development towards modern governance, however, was interrupted by the second invasion of Italy in 1939. Ethiopians resisted the invasion for five years and, with the help of allied forces, regained its independence. Improving the political and economic condition remained to be the major focus of Ethiopia after the WWII.

For three decades after 1944, Ethiopia was doing well in the expansion of modern education and the implementation of economic policies with the principles of market economies. The constitution was also revised towards the recognition of some of the basic human freedoms and re-institutionalization of the representative arrangement though without affecting the imperial system. Nevertheless,

the overthrow of the monarchy in 1974 by the Marxist-Leninist military group called Derg interrupted the previous efforts towards bureaucratized governance, market economy and fundamental individual rights. Few days after the removal of the ancient regime, the revolutionary government decreed an emergence rule to ban any form of political association and private ownership of property. The foreign policy orientation also shifted towards ideological rigidity which embraced the Soviet Russia as the patron state. The military regime itself was later ousted by the coalition of rebel groups which was led by the TPLF (Tigray People Revolutionary Front) in 1991.

### **The Post-1991 political restructuring in Ethiopia**

The armed opposition against the military regime had both an ethnic arithmetic and military capability dimensions. In terms of ethnic power configuration, it was the Tegar and the Amhara, politically core groups in Ethiopian politics for centuries, who were active in the fight against the military regime. The Oromos, the largest ethnic group in the country, are late rejoinders. In terms of military capability, TPLF was the leading and followed by the ANDM (Amhara Nation Democratic Movement). The fighting forces of the two groups later replaced the national defense

force of the country. The security and military apparatus of the country was totally dissolved after the defeat of the military regime and a new national army and security apparatus was institutionalized composed of the previously armed opposition fighters.

*Removal of military regime in 1991 was followed by fundamental changes in political structure of state.*

The removal of the military regime in 1991 was followed by fundamental changes in the political structure of the state. Firstly, a new constitution that embraced basic human and ethnic rights, parliamentary democracy with majoritarian winner-takes-all electoral system and market economy was put in place. Secondly, the unitary state structure was dissolved and federal state structure composed of nine regional states was established along ethnic lines. The political party structure was also critical in shaping the fate of the country. A coalition of four ethnic political parties from Tigray, Amhara, Oromia and Southern Ethiopia peoples -TPLF, ANDM, OPDO, SEPDM respectively - coalesced to establish a bigger party called the EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front). Though each party represented different size of population, each had supposed to possess a quarter share,

both in the party and government positions. In practice, however, none had enjoyed a lion's share as the TPLF had up until the political reform in 2018. The political and economic reforms began to bear fruit especially after the 1998-2000 Ethiopia-Eritrea war. Its peace making and peace keeping efforts around the Horn of Africa was something to be worth mentioning. It was also praised frequently by the international community as the anchor of peace in the Horn of Africa.

**The road to the regionalized Tigray War**

Mostly known as 'Tigray war,' it is both a civil war which involved the Tigray fighters, the Amhara fighters and the federal government, but it is also a regionalized civil war as Eritrea and Sudan were dragged into the theatre. Ethiopia never experienced an internal war of such a scale after 1991. Some of the reasons that led to the war are intertwined with the established political structures of the country and the political reform introduced after 2018 by the new political leadership. This is because the regime that came into power in 1991 was the one that was forced to leave office in 2018. The removal from office has caused an overhaul to the established political system. There was two years long political resistance by civilians mainly in Oromia and Amhara regional states which was concluded by the coming into power

of PM Abiy Ahmed in March 2018. Though Abiy himself was from the coalition front, the EPRDF, he was from the OPDO, a party that was mobilizing the opposition in Oromia regional state. Contrary to his predecessor, Hailemariam Dessalegn, he embraced frequent political reforms in the policy matters and the political party structure that he was drawn from.

*‘Tigray War’ is both a civil war and a regionalized civil war as Eritrea and Sudan were dragged in.*

For long, the TPLF had an upper hand within the EPRDF. Reforming the party incurred lots of cost upon the ideological and political relevance of TPLF. The reform relegated TPLF into a minority position and its ideology jettisoned for redundancy. The reform also touched upon the security apparatus of the country. The defense and the intelligence-security apparatus were largely dominated by TPLF affiliated personnel. Once the new government launched a security sector reform, TPLF began to lose its presence in the national army and other relevant security institutions. The army was supposed to be the guardian of the ideology of the TPLF as many other socialist countries have organized their army to be the guardian of their ideology. One aspect of the security sector reform is making the apparatus free from political allegiance to any of the political parties operating throughout

the country. The political change in Addis Ababa also brought about the president of Eritrea, Isaias Afewerki, into the capital for renewal of bilateral relations. Ethiopia and Eritrea entered into a boundary dispute, 1998-2000, during the reign of late Meles Zenawi, from the TPLF. Though the war was concluded by the Algiers agreement, the two nations remained in a status called ‘no war, no peace’. The Horn of Africa regional alignment had been carefully crafted in a way to sideline Eritrea from the Horn. More than 80 percent of Ethiopian mechanized army was stationed in Tigray with the assumption of possible threat coming from Eritrea. The political change since 2018, however, opens a new window of opportunity to avoid hostility amongst the two nations.

*Horn of Africa regional alignment had been crafted in way to sideline Eritrea from the Horn.*

The al Bashir government in Sudan also crumbled following the political change in Ethiopia. It is well remembered that the TPLF-led government in Addis Ababa had a very intimate relations with the government of Sudan, especially after the Ethiopia-Eritrean War which began in 1998. In the post-Bashir government, there was incompatibility of interests concerning the roadmap for the future of Sudan between the civilian groups

and the military group. Abiy Ahmed, not TPLF, played an active role in an attempt to settle the dispute and reach some form of agreement. The political dynamics inside, the rapprochement with Eritrea and the fragile condition in Sudan might have frustrated the TPLF that lost hope of finding any potential supporter from within and the surrounding. The Tigray War is therefore an outgrowth of the changing conditions both in Ethiopia and the neighboring countries. The Tigray War began in November 2020 when the TPLF mobilized regional armed force and its affiliates in the national army waged a surprise attack on the Northern Command of the national army. The government army had to reassemble itself to reverse back the march of Tigray forces into the capital. There is no doubt that the war incurred lots of human and material damage to Ethiopia. It had also attracted global attention for different reasons as pointed out below.

*Tigray War began in 2020 when TPLF regional armed force waged a surprise attack on Northern Command.*

Firstly, the widespread humanitarian crisis caused by the war was tantamount. The fact that the war occurred in an already frequently drought affected and food insecure areas of the northern Ethiopia helped the violence to easily worsen the life conditions of the

civilians affected by humanitarian crisis. The displacement of non-combatants from their home, sexual abuse and rape, and shortage, inaccessibility and diversion of food aid were the major manifestations of the humanitarian crisis mainly during the war time. Even nowadays, more than a year and a half after the peace agreement, civilians are still in danger of lack of adequate food access. Bringing perpetrators into justice did not yet start. Secondly, Eritrea joined the Tigray War immediately following the assault of Ethiopian national army by the TPLF. The participation of Eritrea was not an easy game to Ethiopia since its drawbacks outweighs the benefits. For long Eritrea was diplomatically isolated from the international community and was facing numerous sanctions due to its rogue state nature. Friends of Ethiopia openly expressed their concern to see partnership with Eritrea in such a scale. It was difficult time for Ethiopia diplomatically to prove itself to the international community which otherwise was forced to lose friendly nations.

*Eritrea joined Tigray War following the assault of Ethiopian national army by the TPLF.*

The other cost was associated with the way the Eritrean army was operating during the war time. It was largely criticized for violating rules of engagement by committing indiscriminate

civilian attack, sexual abuse and robbery, to mention a few. In addition to Eritrea, Sudan was also involved indirectly in at least two ways. Thousands of Tigray combatants and civilians fled to Sudan either to regroup themselves for counter attack or in search of shelter. Sudan also used the volatile condition in Ethiopia as a good opportunity to invade the contested boundary area called Al Fashga. The intervention of Eritrea and Sudan marked the regionalization of the Tigray War. Thirdly, the mass mobilization of local militia and informal forces was another critical development observed during the war. The Amhara regional state alone mobilized a militia force and *Fano*, an informal but well-trained military group. Though these forces played an instrumental role in defense of the TPLF forces, demobilizing them after the peace agreement remained a bigger challenge to the government. To present day, *Fano* forces have converted into guerilla fighters against the central government. Though the Tigray War is concluded with peace agreement and resulted with a ceasefire, the Amahara regional state entered into another form of violence.

*Sudan used the volatile condition in Ethiopia as an opportunity to invade the contested boundary area Al Fashga.*

Fourthly, the battle field on the ground had also

been replicated in the bilateral and multilateral diplomatic platforms. As it has been said above, most of traditional friendly states to Ethiopia were very critical to the overall condition of the war. The US and most European nations repeatedly challenged the government, especially against the involvement of Eritrea and the ensuing humanitarian crisis. The war and associated effects were presented to the UN Security Council for deliberation for more than ten times. Without the veto of Russia and China, Ethiopia would have faced lots of sanctions. The Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement to end the violence was signed between the TPLF and the federal government by the mediation of the African Union and the United States.

### **Impending challenges to the realization of the Pretoria peace agreement**

The full realization of Pretoria agreement demands permanent ceasefire among warring parties, the demobilization of TPLF and other informal combatants, the instalment of transitional regional administration in Tigray, and the facilitation of humanitarian assistance to the war-affected civilians. The Agreement signed in November 2022 helped to end the war and resume civilian administration in Tigray though the demobilization and rehabilitation is not yet materialized. Different actors involved in the war show diverse positions concerning

the Pretoria agreement. The government of Eritrea is largely dissatisfied with the agreement as it has an interest of totally eliminating or dissolving TPLF. The two parties have long history of suspicion to one another, which has been apparent since the beginning of the Ethiopia-Eritrean War in 1998. For Eritrea, let alone an armed TPLF, even a TPLF as a political entity is a national security threat. The dominant political elite in both Eritrea and Tigray share the same ethnic identity whereby both fear each-other.

The Pretoria agreement is not also positively viewed by the Amhara elites and the informal armed groups operating in the Amhara regional state. The political elites in Amhara and the Fano members and fans to the group oppose the agreement for the reason that it sidelined them. Of course, the agreement is signed between TPLF and the federal government, but this does not mean that the interests of the Amhara elites are not addressed in the agreement. The dissatisfaction with the agreement might be one of the reasons for the Amhara regional state to simmer into a new form of violence. There is also a plausible accusation from the Ethiopian side that Eritrea is behind the violence in Amhara. After the Pretoria agreement both Eritrea and the Amhara forces are dissatisfied by the actions of the federal government which may serve as a glue for the two actors to collaborate with one another.

*Dissatisfaction with agreement might be one of the reasons for Amhara regional state to simmer into violence.*

The situation in Tigray itself does not look like there is a possibility of achieving sustainable peace in the foreseeable future. Post-Pretoria developments within the ruling circle of Tigray show that TPLF is facing a tough challenge of internal division between groups who are in favor of peace by strictly applying the terms of the Pretoria agreement and those who want to exploit every possible means to advance the interest of Tigray. There are some individuals within the TPLF who support the full realization of the Pretoria agreement, which by default requires active engagement with the government in Addis Ababa and refraining from any form of army mobilization. But, there are also others who are still poised with the rhetoric of violence as a mean to pursue their ambitions. Another important development that is expected to reconfigure the Horn of Africa in the near future will be the ambition of Ethiopia to have its own access to the sea. Months after the Pretoria agreement, Ethiopia raised its claim to have access to offshore land in the Red Sea which on the other hand sends a shockwave to Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia.

*Situation in Tigray does not look like there is possibility of achieving peace in foreseeable future.*

In the months between September and December 2023, the rumor around the corner was about the inevitability of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This was later changed when Ethiopia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Somaliland to lease a port in exchange for recognition. The government in Mogadishu is the leading figure in expressing its opposition to the MoU. The recent conflict dynamics in the Horn of Africa, especially after 2018, is highly intertwined with one another and is linked with the political condition in Ethiopia. The major developments related with the position of Eritrea, the condition in Amhara regional state, the internal condition within the TPLF and the opposition to the MoU are major manifestations of the connection between the domestic politics in Ethiopia and

its implications upon the Horn of Africa. It is also worth remembering the condition in Sudan whereby the fight between the ASF and RSF, began few months after the Pretoria agreement, is far from amicable solution as there is no sign of possible peace agreement between the warring parties. Neighboring countries to Sudan are receiving refugees from Sudan as a result of mounting humanitarian crisis. This leads to the conclusion that the future stability of the Horn is anchored on the stability of Ethiopia and its responsible management of its foreign relations.

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