



The Plough and the Kalashnikov: Ethiopia After the Election

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Greg Mills heads the Brenthurst Foundation. He holds degrees from the Universities of Cape Town and Lancaster, and was the National Director of the SA Institute of International Affairs from 1996 to 2005. He has directed numerous reform projects in African presidencies, sat on the Danish Africa Commission and on the African Development Bank's high-level panel on fragile states, and has served four deployments to Afghanistan with the British Army as the adviser to the commander. A member of the advisory board of the Royal United Services Institute, he is the author of the best-selling books *Why Africa Is Poor* and *Africa's Third Liberation*, and most recently, together with President Olusegun Obasanjo *Making Africa Work: A Handbook for Economic Success*. In 2018 he completed a second stint as a visiting fellow at Cambridge University, writing this time a book on the state of African democracy, which was published as *Democracy Works* in 2019. *The Asian Aspiration: Why and How Africa Should Emulate Asia* has followed in 2020, which identifies the relevant lessons from Asia's development and growth story.

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‘The population is being moved out of here, and here,’ pointed out the UN officer on a map of Ethiopia’s northernmost Tigray region.

‘Western Tigray is being extensively depopulated,’ he said tapping the location of the now ‘ghost-town’ of Humera, once an important regional agricultural centre. As the last Ethiopian city south of the border with Eritrea and Sudan, it is considered a strategic gateway to Sudan. ‘What we are seeing,’ he notes, ‘is that Tigrayans are being “encouraged” to abandon their homes and lands in large areas of the southern part of eastern Tigray as well. What we hear repeatedly,’ he adds in echoes of the former Yugoslavia, ‘is the need to “clean the bloodlines” of Tigray.’

Ethiopia hosted a much-delayed general election on 21 June 2021 the midst not only of Covid-19, but an ongoing civil war in Tigray, instability in the Oromiya and Amhara regions and continuing frictions with its neighbours, notably Sudan. The event reminds that while elections can be an important component to ending conflict, they are only a means to an end and cannot bring peace and prosperity on their own.



Ethiopia is divided into eight ethno-linguistically based regional states

With the right set of following actions led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the elections could yet prove the start of Ethiopia’s democratic transition.

Renowned for his self-confidence and energy, Abiy was appointed Prime Minister in April 2018 following the resignation of Hailemariam Desalegn in the face of ongoing domestic protest and violence. At the time Abiy appeared a man on a clear mission to reshape regional relations and domestic politics, for which he quickly earned domestic sympathy and international support, being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for making peace with Isaias Afwerki’s neighbouring Eritrea. Ethiopia’s relationship with its one-time guerrilla ally had collapsed into bitter warfare in 1998 ostensibly over the border town of Badme, costing an estimated 100,000 lives during three years of fighting.

Abiy’s rise also signalled the relative demotion of the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) as the major political power in Ethiopia. This was formally represented by his dissolution of the TPLF-dominated ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition of four ethnically based parties formed in 1988 to fight the ‘Derg’



Marxist regime of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. The EPRDF was replaced by the 'Prosperity Party' in December 2019. When Abiy postponed national elections scheduled for August 2020 on the grounds of Covid-19, the TPLF upped the political ante by holding its own regional election the following month.

The government in Addis Ababa then launched a military operation into Tigray in November 2020 aimed at decapitating the leadership of the TPLF. The co-ordination of Eritrean and Ethiopian forces along with Amharic irregulars and drones from the United Arab Emirates suggests that the plans for the invasion had been laid some time before.



Underlying the TPLF rebellion was a fundamental refusal to accept the loss of power in 2018 with the installation of the Abiy government, and still more basically a deluded assessment of their ability to maintain the same level of control over the national government that they had enjoyed until then.

There seems little doubt, too, that the TPLF did instigate the military conflict by attacking federal bases in Tigray in order to get their hands on the heavy weaponry that they lacked. Their own line is that this was a pre-emptive measure, given that the government was about to attack them anyhow. But underlying the TPLF rebellion was a fundamental refusal to accept the loss of power in 2018 with the installation of the Abiy government, and more basically a deluded assessment of their ability to maintain the same level of control over the national government that they had enjoyed until then. There was absolutely no way that most of Ethiopia, and especially both Oromo and Amhara, would accept a government essentially run by a group with a base among some 6% of the population. On the government side, of course, resorting to an alliance with Eritrea in order to control Tigray was always going to be catastrophic, and resulted in the mess in which they have quickly become mired, both domestically – Eritrea is unsurprisingly not held in high regard by most Ethiopians – and internationally.

The resort to war represented thus a massive leadership failure in Asmara, Addis and Mekelle, one compounded by a series of miscalculations about how quickly the war would end – Abiy promised just days at the outset, and declared victory in three weeks – and by the TPLF, which apparently did not anticipate the Eritrean incursion.



The Tigrayan conflict also, however, came on the back of several years of ratcheting domestic political instability, mainly in the Oromo region, home to 35% of Ethiopia's 110 million population. While Abiy's military move against Tigray may have been aimed at reducing ethnic and political tensions by bringing the province's rebellious leadership back into line, it simultaneously unlocked a regional conflict involving Eritrea and Sudan, the former as backers of Abiy, the latter as the regional bedfellow of the rebel Tigrayan Defence Force incorporating elements of the TPLF.

It has also brought economic stresses in Africa's second-most populous country, compounding the effects of Covid-19.

Growth in the Ethiopian economy, which had become used to rates of more than 10% for the last quarter century, fell during 2020 to just 2% according to the IMF. Its fiscal and forex positions are strained, inflation is topping 20% and the gap between official and blackmarket forex rates have widened. This has slowed an ambitious infrastructure development agenda and left little room for manoeuvre. Its pivot towards manufacturing in its giant SEZs has been slowed by Covid-19, with manufacturing businesses complaining they are not only negatively affected by the forex shortages, but they are targeted by revenue authorities given the fiscal pinch.

Together political and security problems can only divert resources and attention away from dealing with the crisis of development in Ethiopia, which is at the heart of these difficulties in the first instance. Ethiopia ranks at 159th out of 190 countries on the World Bank's Doing Business Index for 2020, with especially poor rankings in 'getting credit' (176) and 'protecting minority investors' (189).

Touted as the first free and fair election in Ethiopia by both government and some opposition figures, the organisation of the June 2021 election was imperfect. It could not be held countrywide given a combination of security concerns and registration problems. The contest in more than a hundred of the total of 547 parliamentary seats was postponed, including 38 in Tigray, while, in a further 104, only the ruling Prosperity Party put up a candidate.



37 million voters registered for the June 21 election, with 9,000 candidates and 49,000 polling stations across most of Africa's second most populous country, a logistical feat.





The election turnout was anticipated to be over two-thirds of those registered, though concerns exist about the extent of the democratic space.

Political space was limited. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission reported 9,000 people had been detained in 2020, for example, following outbreaks of violence after the killing of the popular Oromo singer Hachalu Hundessa which left hundreds dead, while on election day itself there were reports of hindered access to ballots and acts of violence, causing delays in the voting process.

No-one expected that Abiy would lose the election; it was a question simply of the scale of his majority, whether he would obtain the two-thirds required to change the constitution, and if they proceeded peacefully. This explains why the European Union failed to send an election observer mission, and the US government indicated its disquiet over the poll before the event.

Opposition leaders such as Merera Gudina of the Oromo People's Congress, described the event as 'political theatre' which would make matters worse, where a combination of militarisation and co-option of the opposition through 'political commercialisation' ensured that the elections would not, from his perspective, deliver 'Ethiopia's three greatest needs of peace and stability, the birth of a democratic state after 3,000 years of authoritarianism, and meaningful economic development.'

To the contrary, dismemberment of Tigray will only deliver a basket-case dependent on the charity of international donors.

The capital of Tigray, Mekelle, has all the signs of a city under stress, and in conflict.

The Toyota Land Cruisers of humanitarian organisations from Catholic Relief to Medicines Sans Frontier, Oxfam, Samaritan's Purse, Save the Children and Care, plough the streets flying their flags literally and liberally stickered with signs illustrating they were unarmed. The number of NGOs in Tigray had, by June 2021, increased to over 100, most of them focusing on food delivery and shelter. And then there are a welter of UN bodies, including UNICEF, UNHCR, the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), and the 'Super Bowlers' of food supply, the World Food Program. Many performed a critical function. 'Without the likes of MSF,' says one UN officer, 'the hospitals would have been overwhelmed.'





Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s opponents say the democratic space was too limited to claim the election as free and fair, but was it a forward step in the direction of democracy?

Ethiopian military forces are clearly evident in Mikelle’s markets and streets, on foot patrols and cruising around in their crudely camouflaged ‘technicals’, usually with a Ray Banned soldier ‘riding’ behind a loaded machine-gun.

Tigray’s economy is badly broken. Largely dependent on agriculture, land has, too, become a weapon of war.

Mitiku Haile is the founding president of Mekelle University. A soils specialist, he estimated before the election that just 20% of lands had been harvested, ‘setting the stage for a catastrophe in the next year’. Access to food and sexual violence have reportedly been weaponized to cause Tigrayans to flee, with countless harrowing stories of lives destroyed in the process. ‘Addis appears to believe,’ notes one European diplomat in Addis, ‘that if a couple of hundred thousand Tigrayans die from famine, that the TDF will give up. Mengistu tried the same tactic in attempting to drain the sea to catch the fish of the guerrilla. This never worked, and the fish came to Addis in flip-flops’ he recalled of the role of the TPLF in ending the Derg’s bloody rule.

The politicisation of the access to food and aid largely explains Ethiopia’s history of famine.

The worst offenders have apparently been the Amharic militia and Eritrean forces which Abiy has had to continue to rely on to subdue the rebel Tigrayan Defence Force (TDF) which has sprung up in the wake of the invasion. The Prime Minister denied the presence of the Eritreans until March 2021, and maintains that they were not invited in the first instance. Without a Status of Force Agreement, commonly agreed Rules of Engagement and a joint headquarters, the Eritreans, Amharic forces and the Ethiopians are bound only by the presence of a common enemy – the Tigrayans.

On the eve of the June election an estimated two million Tigrayans were internally displaced, while there have been some 15,000 cases of rape in the seven months since the invasion, with an estimated five million (of seven million Tigrayans) requiring food aid. Virtually no children were in school, while over 80% of the health-centres in the province remain ‘inoperable’. The government’s own Human Rights Commission, headed by a former political prisoner Daniel Bekele, issued a critical report on abuses in the historical Tigrayan city of Aksum.



A more traditional political playbook was employed elsewhere in the country. In Oromiya, for example, the Prosperity Party rolled out a 50% pre-election rise in the minimum cereal prices among this largely farming community, while making a strong pitch to the youth. But they also imprisoned opposition figures, including Jawar Mohammed of the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), making a normal political process impossible.

In such an environment, at best the election could tick off the constitutional necessity of having one – and offer a step in the right direction for reform.

These reforms will immediately have to include improving humanitarian access into Tigray and getting the Eritreans to leave. The latter will be easier said than done even though ‘The longer the Eritreans stay in Tigray, the more the conflict will intensify and the longer it will continue,’ as one Addis-based diplomat put it.

The problem for Abiy is, however, that the Eritreans are needed for him to maintain a military grip over the estimated 20,000-strong (and growing) TDF. With just 40,000 Ethiopian troops available, and perhaps 20,000 Amharic militia, the 30,000 Eritrean soldiers helped him get close to the preferred counter-insurgency ratio of 10:1 (or 200,000 government troops). Even at alternative benchmark ratio of 20 troops/1,000 population, 140,000 government forces are required.



There was a discreet presence of police and militia around most Amhara voting stations, including this one in the Gondar region.

With 6,000 Ethiopian troops on UN peacekeeping missions and 4,000 stationed on the disputed border with Sudan, the Prime Minister possesses some military wiggle room, though recalling the peacekeepers would end that source of income for a cash-strapped Ethiopian economy. And the Sudan border force is required settling the ongoing dispute over the al-Fashaga region, another area where some Amhara have sought their version of *lebensraum*, and with both Sudan and Egypt over the building of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (better known as the GERD).

The constant tussle over access to land goes to the core of the nationalist tensions in Ethiopia, with the constant settlement and re-settlement of ethnic groups, land being central to welfare where just 15% live in the urban areas. It reflects the imperative of Ethiopia addressing its own decolonisation debate; not the usual African one about the



obligation of Europeans to the continent on the grounds of historical dispossession, but an internal discussion about the forces of expansion and settlement which produced modern Ethiopia, whereby many Oromiya, in particular, feel subjugated.

In this way Tigray is not the disease in Ethiopia, but rather a symptom of more general political failure. Addis' preferred method of dealing with it, through annexation and ethnic dismemberment, sends a message to other regions, and it may not be positive. And making the war about the last 27 years of oppression by the TPLF neglects an honest assessment of the role of the EPRDF in this period: 'neither democratic nor revolutionary' as one activist noted.

'Ethiopia's politics is zero-sum,' says Dr Gudina, whose Oromo party elected to stay out of the June election. 'Those that are ruling want to control most things. But simply picking people and giving them positions is not akin to a democracy, and nor is it a way to run the country properly and fairly. You can't,' adds the university professor, 'impose a road-map of only one person. With millions of young people without employment, the solution has to be,' he says, 'democratic stability and governance.'

All this relates to seemingly inexorable demographic changes. Ethiopia's population, which was just 15 million in 1935 and 84 million in 2012, is projected to reach 172 million by 2050.

Running an election with 37.4 million registered voters choosing from more than 9,000 candidates from 47 registered parties across 49,407 polling stations represents a considerable achievement, though the success of the elections is to be determined by what happens afterwards, not on the day.

The key factor in the election is not simply how much Abiy would win by, but whether it provides the government with some means of recruiting and identifying groups and individuals, especially in Oromiya and Amhara, which it is prepared to recognise as having some basis of support and with which it will be able to establish a working relationship.



Above and below: Whether the election proves the start of Ethiopia's democratic transition depends on what actions Prime Minister takes now. Voters proudly display their registration cards at Barhie Ginbe 01 voting station, 20kms from Ethiopia's second-largest city of Gondar.





There is some cause for optimism. There have been key steps in liberalising the political space, not least the establishment of a Human Rights Commission with teeth. Daniel Bukele notes that while ‘there is no denying the problems, the good news is that we are staging much improved and inclusive election than in the past.’

This highlights the critical aspect of post-election actions, without which Ethiopia can only continue its political and economic slide into civil conflict: the need for an inclusive national dialogue to address the constitutional tension between the powers of a unitary state and ethno-nationalist provinces, the agenda for electoral reforms, the relationship with Tigray beyond just the TPLF, and key economic issues especially around land reform.

These aspects are key to Abiy’s ambition of Medemer, an Amharic term for ‘coming together’ among Ethiopia’s 80 ethnic groups. As the Mayor of Gondar, Ethiopia’s second-largest city, Molla Melkamu says, the election represented ‘the start of a transition to democracy and unity’ hopefully enabling him to deal with his pressing challenge of high youth unemployment.



Youth unemployment is steadily climbing in Ethiopia, reflecting tightening economic conditions and a demographic explosion.



Abiy could now seize the initiative and surprise the world, but he will have to find the means and make the concessions to back up his rhetoric. Without a reconciliatory agenda, as Professor Mitiku observes, 'My fear is that, if the farmer's hand does not hold the plough, it will hold the Kalashnikov.' By June 2021, more than one thousand students from his university had left to join the TDF 'in the bush'.

None of Tigray's problems are going to be resolved without an end to the fighting. That will require a political settlement and that, in turn, demands dialogue and reconciliation. At the very least, the longer the Tigrayan war goes on, the more difficult it will be to solve, and the longer the period of recovery.

The immediate post-election period offers a window to put this right.

