

THE PLOUGH AND THE KALASHNIKOV

Ethiopia After the Elections – and Tigray

Greg Mills

Greg Mills is the director of the Johannesburg-based Brenthurst Foundation and was in Ethiopia during the election

‘The population is being moved out of here, and here,’ the UN officer pointed out on a map of Ethiopia’s northernmost Tigray region, speaking just days before the June election. ‘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 in the midst of not only COVID-19, but also an ongoing civil war in Tigray, instability in the Oromiya and Amhara regions, and continuing friction with its neighbours, notably Sudan.

With the right set of following actions led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, there was hope that the elections could prove to be the start of Ethiopia’s democratic transition. That hope appears to have come crashing down with the arrival of rebel Tigrayan Defence Forces to liberate the regional capital, Mekelle, within a week of the election.

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.

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, 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 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 black market 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 are also targeted by revenue authorities, given the fiscal pinch.

Together, political and security problems would 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. Authorities were reportedly unable to hold elections in four of Ethiopia's ten regions, according to the election board chief Birtukan Midekssa. In two of the regions that did vote, she said, opposition observers were reportedly chased away from polling stations. It was a logistical feat: 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.

Because of security concerns and registration problems, the contest in more than one 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. The Prosperity Party was expected to win a handsome victory, not least because of the fragmentation of the opposition across 45 other parties and the decision by major Oromiya parties not to contest the election.

Political space was limited. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission reported that 9 000 people had been detained in 2020, for example, following outbreaks of violence after the killing of the popular Oromo singer and civil rights activist Hachalu Hundessa which left hundreds dead. On election day itself there were reports of hindered access to ballots and acts of violence causing delays in the voting process. The election turnout was anticipated to be over two-thirds of those who registered, though there were concerns about the extent of the democratic space.

No-one expected that Abiy would lose the election; it was simply a question 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'.

Before the election the capital of Tigray, Mekelle, had all the signs of a city under occupation, and stress. 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, liberally stickered with signs illustrating they are 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 was 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.'

Ethiopian military forces were 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. It is largely dependent on agriculture and land, too, has 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 weaponised 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 access to food and aid largely explains Ethiopia's history of famine. The worst offenders have apparently been the Amharic militia and Eritrean forces on which Abiy continues to rely to subdue the rebel 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 forces agreement, commonly agreed rules of engagement and a joint headquarters, the Eritreans, Amharic forces and Ethiopians were 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, and 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 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.

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 is 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's preferred method of dealing with it, through annexation and ethnic dismemberment, has also sent a message to other regions. And making the war about the last 27 years of oppression by the TPLF has neglected 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 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 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.

The hope after the 21 June election was that Abiy would seize the moment and institute an inclusive national dialogue, without which the country would

continue its seemingly inevitable slide to civil conflict. An inclusive national dialogue would 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.

Now, with the fall of Mekelle, the chance of such a dialogue appears faint.

Abiy could still seize the initiative and surprise the world, but he will have to find the means and make the concessions to back up his rhetoric. He is firmly on the back foot, and fighting, it seems, for his political survival. And yet 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'.

None of Tigray's problems are going to be resolved without an end to the fighting. That will require, first, enabling humanitarian access and, second, a political settlement. The latter, 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.

Acknowledgement

An earlier version of this article was published in the *Daily Maverick* on 24 June 2021.

This version is published with their kind permission.