

ARGUMENT

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A Blueprint for Peace in Ethiopia

Ending the civil war will require a resolution to a dispute over territories and a national dialogue on federalism.

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A year after Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) forces launched a self-styled preemptive attack on the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), the war has left a trail of death, destruction, and humanitarian catastrophe.

Battlefield fortunes have turned multiple times, with TPLF forces recently gaining ground and, in one of the three main war fronts, controlling the cities of Dessie and Kombolcha in eastern Amhara, some 250 miles by road north of Addis Ababa, and even considering a dangerous drive to advance on the capital.

The conflict has roots in contestations over the balance of power between the federal and TPLF governments and a war of attrition, with each side accusing the other of seeking to eliminate it. The political differences were exacerbated by historical identity-based territorial contestations between the neighboring Amhara and Tigray regions and by Tigray-Eritrea animosities.

Militarily, the war has pitted against one another soldiers and commanders who stood shoulder to shoulder for years as part of the ENDF and is destined to be a grinding stalemate. There will not be a winner on the battlefields, and the diverse array of forces must learn to live together.

Rather than the quick victories that both parties plotted, the war has led to civilian tragedies, as unveiled in the joint investigative report of the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. Initial violations and gruesome massacres by the TPLF and allied forces set off widespread killings and sexual violence by the ENDF

and its Eritrean and Amhara allies during the period they controlled Tigray. Since June, when the federal forces announced a unilateral cease-fire, the battleground has shifted to the Amhara and Afar regions, with the TPLF now reportedly responsible for brutal killings, sexual violence, and systematic looting, as captured in Amnesty International's latest report.

The recent TPLF offensive has coincided with highly restricted humanitarian access to Tigray, which has left hundreds of thousands of people in the region on the brink of famine. While the joint report has absolved the government of charges of deliberate deprivation of humanitarian access, and the TPLF offensive naturally continues to disrupt aid efforts, the federal government could and should do more to facilitate humanitarian access. Humanitarian needs should always have priority over military maneuvers.

As with all wars, this war has generated enough new grievances to sustain itself. Calls for a negotiated settlement have been ignored. Orchestrated U.S. and European efforts to pressure the federal government—including through the suspension of financial aid and Ethiopia's tariff-free access under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), threats of sanctions, and diplomatic maneuvers involving the U.N. Security Council—have failed.

The African Union and neighboring African states have also increasingly called for peaceful resolution of the conflict, with the AU appointing former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo as special envoy for the Horn of Africa. Obasanjo has met with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and was allowed to travel to the Tigrayan capital of Mekelle to meet the leader of the TPLF, Debretsion Gebremichael. He has also reportedly met with the leaders of the Afar and Amhara regions. Obasanjo has so far hit a cautious tone but signaled that an initial proposal for peace could emerge soon.

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The pursuit of peace requires two distinct but complementary phases, each with a different set of objectives, time frame, and set of actors.

The first and immediate priority should be silencing the guns. Accordingly, all parties must cease their military campaigns and suspend their media recriminations.

Moreover, all services to Tigray, including telecommunication and banking, should resume as soon as is practical and without preconditions. The two parties must work together as this will require maintenance of key infrastructure. The federal government and the Amhara and Afar regions should also facilitate, not simply allow, the provision of humanitarian assistance to Tigray.

The federal government and the TPLF should also mutually recognize their legitimacy, regardless of the problematic electoral processes that affirmed their respective mandates. This requires the removal of the terrorist designation of the TPLF, which is a political process involving parliament. Tigrayans detained unjustly across the country in relation to the war should be released.

Crucially, the federal government should offer to enact a general amnesty concerning the commencement and prosecution of the war. This should not include violations by all sides, particularly against civilians, not related to the war and constituting war crimes and crimes against humanity, which the joint report recommended must be investigated. Those perpetrators should be brought to justice and victims provided compensation and support.

The federal government should commit to resume the provision of federal subsidies to the Tigray regional government. Considering the complete absence of Tigrayan representation in the federal parliament, the TPLF should be allowed to send representatives to both houses of the federal parliament, until such time as elections can be held in the region.

The stickiest part of the first phase will inevitably be the issue of territorial control. Amharas have historically laid claim to Welkait-Tsegede (western Tigray), bordering Sudan, and parts of Raya that had been administered under Tigray since the 1990s. Notably, repeated attempts by Amhara residents of Welkait-Tsegede to return the areas to Amhara were rebuffed, and the proponents were killed, harassed, detained, or exiled on multiple occasions by the TPLF-led federal government at the time. Similar efforts in Raya were also suppressed.

Following the start of the war in November 2020, Amhara authorities took control of both areas. Since June, the TPLF has managed to retake Raya, and push deep into the Amhara and Afar regions, but not the much-fortified Welkait-Tsegede area.

The contestation over Welkait-Tsegede has shifted from an identity issue before the war to one of fundamental security. For the federal and Amhara (as well as Eritrean) governments, on top of the historical claims, the handing over of security control of a strategic international corridor to a group that has shown the capacity and willingness to attack federal forces would be unacceptable. At the same time, the TPLF could consider continued Amhara control of these areas as a red line.

A possible compromise is for the TPLF to withdraw its forces from Afar and Amhara areas, while Amhara forces also withdraw from Welkait-Tsegede. In place of the Amhara government administration, a parallel interim political and security arrangement could be considered, pending sustainable and negotiated solutions on the future of both areas.

Accordingly, political control over the contested areas of Welkait-Tsegede and Raya (both the Tigray and Amhara parts) could be exercised by a joint body representing both Amhara and Tigrayan residents (not the two regional governments) of the respective areas.

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This political arrangement is workable because the residents of these areas have a cultural and territorial identity that transcends the Amhara-Tigray linguistic divide. While the war has upset the intercommunal harmony, notably in Welkait-Tsegede, the connections are historically strong, and accompanying reconciliation efforts should be able to resuscitate the harmony. In parallel, the joint body could lead efforts to ensure the return of Tigrayans who have been displaced since the war started, as well as Amharas displaced during decades of Tigrayan administration.

Responsibility for security, including for the border with Sudan, would fall under federal forces. Understandably, Tigrayans consider federal forces unrepresentative, particularly as Tigrayan members of the federal forces have either defected to the TPLF or were purged and detained by the federal government. Nevertheless, a recognition of the federal authority requires acceptance of its mandate to be present across the country.

While an international peacekeeping mission could be considered, it would not only unduly delay a peace process but would also be unacceptable to the federal and Amhara governments. Instead, a small group of international civilian observers could be deployed quickly to monitor the situation on the ground, support peace and reconciliation initiatives, and coordinate international assistance.

The proposed joint political administration could draw experience from an unlikely place: South Tyrol in northern Italy. South Tyrol has a predominantly German-speaking Austrian community and was annexed to Italy after World War I, following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The German speakers there suffered decades of discrimination and attempted assimilation under fascist Italy. At the end of World War II, Austria and Italy agreed to establish a special autonomy structure for South Tyrol. The arrangement was recognized in the Italian Constitution and, following protests from the Austrian community and pressure from Austria, refined in the 1960s and 1970s.

Today, South Tyrol features a complex arrangement where all three of its major communities (the dominant German- and Italian-speaking groups and a small Ladin-speaking group) are entitled to representation in the provincial legislature and, most importantly, proportionate representation in the provincial cabinet and local authorities. The system is broadly based on linguistic equality (hence both German and Italian are official languages), cultural autonomy, and representation of all groups. Each group also enjoys a veto on matters that it considers of fundamental importance, which would trigger intervention by the Constitutional Court.

The proposed joint administration system could arguably work in the context of Welkait-Tsegede and Raya because of the strong cultural and territorial identity the residents enjoy beyond the Amhara-Tigray linguistic lines, a factor that is arguably absent in South Tyrol. The proposed joint administration could

generate an unprecedented opportunity to work together and lay the foundation for broader Amhara-Tigray reconciliation.

Beyond this, the federal government and the Amhara, Tigray, and Afar regions, with support from the international community, should also discuss and adopt a reconstruction plan to rebuild affected areas and compensate individuals who lost their livelihoods and properties and family members who lost their loved ones.

While immediate peace is the priority, addressing the roots of the political contestation underlying the war in Tigray (as well as insurgencies by the Oromo Liberation Army in Oromia and smaller insurgencies in other parts of Ethiopia) requires an inclusive national dialogue and not just among the parties to the current war.

Fortunately, the federal government has announced plans to launch such a dialogue. The dialogue will not be successful and legitimate without the release and inclusion of key political figures who are currently in detention—notably, the prominent Oromo opposition leaders Bekele Gerba and Jawar Mohammed and the human rights activist-turned-politician Eskinder Nega.

The dialogue must first agree to a process through which decisions and compromises will be reached. The parties should not seek to impose preliminary substantive red lines, which would undermine the process. The government should also accept that it is one of the participants in the dialogue, rather than seeking to impose its way. For this purpose, a steering committee of independent experts, which could include African experts, could be set up with agreement from all key political forces.

The national dialogue will have to untie knots that have plagued Ethiopian politics particularly since the 1960s, including the official historical narrative of the country, the institutional features of linguistic self-determination, the power balance between national and regional governments, the manner of representation of regions and linguistic groups in the center, the distribution of national revenue, dispute resolution mechanisms, and arrangements to ensure institutional representation of minorities in the regions.

Central to the dialogue should also be the future and demobilization of all regional militaries, which have grown exponentially in significance and power in the last few years. Peace may be a pipe dream in a country with multiple

armed forces. In a country unaccustomed to solving differences peacefully, the existence of readily available force creates inherent instability. Moreover, the combination of linguistic federalism and language-based parties, alongside linguistic armies, should be seriously reconsidered.

If the federal government commits to these proposals and guarantees an end to any military offensive, the international community, notably the United States and the European Union, should support the efforts. They could particularly support reconstruction efforts, including by possibly considering hosting a Summit for Ethiopia, restarting suspended aid, and supporting the federal government in the investigation and return of allegedly illicitly transferred money during decades of TPLF rule.

They should also support initiatives within the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to assist economic reforms in Ethiopia. The suspension of AGOA benefits should also be lifted. Instead, benefits from tariff-free exports could be directed to a fund that will support reconstruction efforts.

Ethiopia has suffered enough. Ultimately, beyond concessions, the pathway to peace lies in the recognition of the grievances of the other. The protagonists of the war should engage in a hard mental reboot away from reflexive mistrust not only to bring peace but crucially to mend the physical and mental scars of war.

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