



# Steering Ethiopia's Tigray Crisis Away from Conflict

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**What's new?** A clash over budget transfers is the latest flashpoint in a bitter dispute between Ethiopian federal authorities and Tigray region's government. Addis Ababa sees a September regional election Tigray held despite a federal poll postponement as unlawful and consequently plans to redirect funding away from Tigray's executive, infuriating regional leaders.

**Why does it matter?** The standoff could trigger a damaging conflict that may even rip the Ethiopian state asunder. Federal rulings have authorised military intervention in Tigray, which boasts its own large regional security force. The worsening dispute is only one crisis among many rocking Ethiopia's troubled transition.

**What should be done?** Both sides should embrace comprehensive dialogue. To kickstart such a process, the federal government should suspend the budgetary measures for now and Tigray should water down its preconditions for talks, particularly that all jailed leaders must participate and a transitional government assume power.

## I. Overview

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Ethiopian federal authorities and Tigray's regional government are barreling toward a major crisis. In normal circumstances, Addis Ababa would transfer a budgetary allocation to Tigray on 4 November. But in early October, the upper house of parliament asked the treasury to redirect funding away from Tigray's executive after it held regional elections the month before, in defiance of a federal order postponing balloting nationwide due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The finance ministry has said it will instead send the money directly to Tigray's local administrations, bypassing the leadership in Mekelle, the region's capital. Tigray leaders say this would be unconstitutional, contrary to Ethiopia's federal pact and thus "tantamount to a declaration of war". Cooler heads in Addis Ababa and Mekelle should work urgently to defuse this dangerous situation, which could lead to federal military intervention in Tigray and then a wider conflagration. The cabinet should suspend the fiscal measures for now in order to buy time for talks, while Tigray should relax conditions for dialogue.

## II. A Dangerous Standoff

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Tensions have been mounting between Addis Ababa and Mekelle since April 2018, when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in the wake of protests, bringing an end to the predominance of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Tigray's governing party, within the ruling coalition that had held power since 1991. Abiy soon purged many TPLF appointees from federal institutions and transformed the coalition into the Prosperity Party, which the TPLF refused to join.<sup>1</sup> Frictions worsened in March after the electoral board said it could not run polls set for August because of COVID-19.<sup>2</sup> In June, Ethiopia's upper chamber, the House of Federation, extended the federal and regional governments' terms beyond their five-year mandate until a point nine to twelve months after authorities deemed the pandemic sufficiently under control.<sup>3</sup> Arguing that the move was unconstitutional, Tigray pressed ahead with an election for its regional council on 9 September over Addis Ababa's warnings the vote would be illegal, as Crisis Group discussed in an August briefing covering the bitter spat.<sup>4</sup> The TPLF won in a landslide.

After it ruled Tigray's election "null and void" in advance of the polls, on 7 October the House of Federation said the government should not deal with the unlawful regional assembly or cabinet. For its part, Tigray says Abiy's administration has no authority as its term expired on 5 October, and it will not adhere to new federal laws and regulations. With the finance ministry planning to redirect funding to district and city administrations, the TPLF told Crisis Group that would breach the constitutional order by cutting out the regional government that belongs to Ethiopia's federation and so hearkening back to pre-federal days when Addis Ababa dealt directly with local authorities.<sup>5</sup> As a reciprocal measure, the politicians continued, they could withhold taxes collected on the federal government's behalf. On 24 October, Mekelle said the finance ministry had retained 285 million birr (\$7.6 million) for social welfare programs in Tigray funded mainly by donors and distinct from the budget transfer.<sup>6</sup> Addis Ababa could also disrupt Tigray's trade, banking, energy transmission and telecommunications.

Acrimony between the two sides runs high. Addis Ababa perceives the Tigrayans as spoilers unable to accept their 2018 loss of power on the back of the three-year wave of popular protests. Abiy's allies accuse the TPLF "criminal top brass" of engendering some of the many crises that confront Ethiopia and cast Mekelle as hell-bent on undermining his administration to try and force the premier to make way for a transitional government.<sup>7</sup> "These are demands for power, to break the reform and

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<sup>1</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Report N°283, *Keeping Ethiopia's Transition on the Rails*, 16 December 2019.

<sup>2</sup> See "Managing the Politics of Ethiopia's COVID-19 Crisis", Crisis Group Commentary, 15 April 2020.

<sup>3</sup> "Ethiopian PM's term extended as election delayed for virus", Associated Press, 10 June 2020.

<sup>4</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°160, *Toward an End to Ethiopia's Federal-Tigray Feud*, 14 August 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group interview, TPLF politburo member, Mekelle, October 2020.

<sup>6</sup> "Tension rises as Tigray accuses Central gov't of holding up funds", *The Reporter*, 24 October 2020.

<sup>7</sup> In a statement following the unrest triggered by the June killing of Oromo musician Hachalu Hundessa, the prime minister's office accused "disgruntled forces" supporting "anti-peace elements" of

come to power in a short-cut manner,” a ruling party official told Crisis Group.<sup>8</sup> The TPLF sees things differently, accusing Abiy of working to weaken the region and monopolise power. They vow to push back against authorities in the national capital.<sup>9</sup>

Any conflict between the sides might threaten the Ethiopian state's integrity. After Addis Ababa opposed its election, Tigray sees federal meddling with the budget allocation as another violation of the region's right to administer itself under the federal constitution.<sup>10</sup> Tigrayan sentiment in favour of secession, a constitutional right for Ethiopia's regions that a number of new Tigrayan nationalist parties support or consider a viable last resort, is thus inching ever higher. In this instance, however, the federal government would deem an effort to break away illegal as it considers Tigray's current executive unlawfully constituted. A move toward Tigray's independence would also trigger resistance among Amhara nationalist factions fearful that it would mean the permanent loss of territories they claim Tigray annexed from Amhara in the early 1990s, as Crisis Group documented in June.<sup>11</sup>

Making matters worse, tensions are building around the control of federal military units stationed in Tigray. On 24 October, Tigray's government rejected a federal decision to reshuffle the leadership of the military's Northern Command. According to former Tigrayan officers who spoke to Crisis Group, because the command was at the forefront of the struggle with neighbouring Eritrea since the 1998-2000 war, it still comprises more than half of the armed forces' total personnel and mechanised divisions.<sup>12</sup> The TPLF, keen to maintain the status quo and confident that many in the command's leadership and rank and file are broadly sympathetic to Tigray, argued that an “illegal” federal administration had no authority to make such changes.<sup>13</sup>

Several conflict scenarios are thus possible. Although Abiy himself has said he will not attack Tigray, the House of Federation has warned the region that federal military intervention is justifiable, offering Addis Ababa the legal basis to launch an offensive.<sup>14</sup> Such an intervention could occur if, for example, Tigray refuses to participate in elections next year or moves ahead with secession, or if Amhara and Tigray forces clash in contested border regions.<sup>15</sup> If violence escalates on any front within Ethiopia, the Eritrean government, which has a longstanding grudge with the TPLF but is

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being behind much of Ethiopia's ferment. The statement did not directly reference the TPLF but was viewed by many as pointing a finger at Tigray's ruling party. In response, a TPLF spokesman accused Abiy of scapegoating the Tigrayans. See “Context and Updates on Current Issues in Ethiopia”, press release, Ethiopian Prime Minister's Office, 8 July 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, October 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Crisis Group interview, TPLF politburo member, Mekelle, October 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group interviews, TPLF politburo members, Mekelle, October 2020.

<sup>11</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°156, *Bridging the Divide in Ethiopia's North*, 12 June 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former military officers, Mekelle, October 2020.

<sup>13</sup> “Statement from the National Regional Government of Tigray Regarding Current Affairs”, TPLF, 26 October 2020.

<sup>14</sup> “Interview with PM Dr Abiy Ahmed conducted in Tigrigna language”, Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 27 July 2020. The existence of the legal basis for federal intervention in Tigray was confirmed by a House of Federation official. Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, October 2020.

<sup>15</sup> A senior federal official told Crisis Group that the federal government may intervene militarily if Tigray did not allow national elections in the region and that there could also be an attempt by Amhara elements to take back the territories they claim in Tigray. Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, October 2020.

allied with Addis Ababa, may also be tempted to wade in. Tigray itself is prepared for a struggle. Its well-armed regional paramilitary force is led by former national army generals. It also boasts a large militia full of war veterans. TPLF leaders say that many officers in the units of the Northern Command, which still patrols the Eritrea border, would not be likely to support any federal intervention, and some could even break and join Tigray's forces.<sup>16</sup>

### **III. An Increasingly Imperilled Transition**

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If the dispute between Mekelle and Addis Ababa is occupying the airwaves in Ethiopia, it is still just one symptom of a broader crisis. Deadly intercommunal violence is now a regular occurrence in the country, amid frequent protests against the government and a rebellion in parts of Oromia region. In early July, popular unrest in Oromia killed 167, with authorities now prosecuting more than 4,000 people, including top Oromo and other opposition leaders.<sup>17</sup> In the country's south, after Sidama Zone became a region this year, splitting from the Southern Nations region, more than ten ethnic administrative zones still in that federal state are pushing to obtain their own regional status in campaigns to hold referendums that have also involved lethal violence.<sup>18</sup>

At their core, all these conflicts are about tensions related to federal politics. On paper, the federal system offers regions considerable autonomy, including their own constitutions, legislatures, security forces and the right to secede, although the former ruling coalition's iron-fisted control ensured cohesion. The constitution also allows Ethiopia's ethnic groups to hold referendums on whether they want greater self-rule. Some who back Prime Minister Abiy seek to dilute some of these provisions, seeing them as cementing ethnic identity and thus creating division or otherwise representing a threat to his vision of a more unified country.<sup>19</sup> Others, including both Abiy allies and opponents, view these aspects of the federation as non-negotiable. The TPLF, being a principal architect of the system, is particularly adamant in rejecting any watering down of regional autonomy. Instead, it wants to see federal executive powers constrained and minority representation guaranteed in the federal government.<sup>20</sup>

Mutual suspicion between the sides makes it harder to pursue a compromise. As outlined, Addis Ababa views the TPLF as troublemaker in chief.<sup>21</sup> A top federal ruling-party figure told Crisis Group that the TPLF orchestrated recent attacks on ethnic Amhara civilians in Metekel Zone in westerly Benishangul-Gumuz region that left dozens dead.<sup>22</sup> The TPLF denies this and earlier allegations of involvement in the assassination that triggered July's violence in Oromia.<sup>23</sup> Ruling party claims of TPLF

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<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former military officers, Mekelle, October 2020.

<sup>17</sup> See Crisis Group Statement, "Defusing Ethiopia's Latest Perilous Crisis", 3 July 2020.

<sup>18</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°146, *Time for Ethiopia to Bargain with Sidama over Statehood*, 4 July 2019.

<sup>19</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Keeping Ethiopia's Transition on the Rails*, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interview, former and current TPLF politburo members, Mekelle, October 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interviews, ruling party and federal officials, Addis Ababa, October 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, October 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interview, TPLF politburo member, Mekelle, October 2020.

efforts to sabotage the transition have angered the region's party leaders, feeding a sense of betrayal and victimisation among Tigrayans that in turn has whipped up secessionist sentiment. The TPLF is outraged that Abiy has labelled the TPLF-led federal era "27 years of darkness" and targeted Tigrayan officials for graft and human rights abuses while, in their eyes, cosyng up excessively to long-time foe, Eritrea's President Isaias Afwerki.

There are formidable obstacles to getting the parties to the table. To avoid a looming showdown between Addis Ababa and Mekelle that could trigger broader instability, Abiy's government and Tigray's leaders must adopt more flexible stances. Yet the TPLF insists that talks must come in the form of an all-inclusive, comprehensive national dialogue to address Ethiopia's deep fault lines. Players across much of the political spectrum, including from within the federal ruling party, as well as European partners, back calls for such talks. The TPLF's negotiating conditions are stiff, however. It demands that all prosecuted political leaders be able to participate and that a transitional government led by someone other than Abiy be formed to oversee national elections (they envisage no repeat of Tigray's regional vote).<sup>24</sup> Tigray's leaders also want Addis Ababa to end federal control of regional security operations and what they allege is Isaias's increasing involvement in Ethiopia's affairs.<sup>25</sup>

Nothing suggests that Addis Ababa is inclined to take such steps. On the contrary, Prosperity Party officials say that before talks, the TPLF must admit the illegality of Tigray's election and reinstate the former regional executive and assembly (both were also monopolised by the TPLF, but reinstating them is a matter of principle for Addis Ababa).<sup>26</sup> "The only way out is for the TPLF to accept constitutional provisions [that regions cannot run autonomous elections] so we can come to the table", said one senior figure.<sup>27</sup> Despite the TPLF's recent electoral win, indicating popular support, Addis Ababa officials cast Tigray's resistance as stemming from the desperate actions of a clique opposing reform and clinging to their privileged status.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, some of Abiy's opponents across the country believe his party is focused on winning elections expected in the first half of 2021 and for now has no interest in renegotiating Ethiopia's political dispensation, even if the country appears close to breaking point and voting in such conditions will likely be fraught.

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#### **IV. Toward National Dialogue**

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As a first step to ease tensions, the federal government could transfer Tigray's monthly allocation as usual on 4 November and release the social welfare funds in order to buy time for talks, thus temporarily suspending implementation of the House of Federation decision. While hardliners would object to this conciliatory political move, which would run against the House of Federation's ruling, it may well be necessary

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<sup>24</sup> Jailed leaders include leading Oromo opposition politicians such as Jawar Mohammed, a former activist who is accused of plotting to overthrow the government, among other charges. "Ethiopian prosecutors charge Jawar with training terror group in Egypt", *Ethiopia Insight*, 25 September 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interviews, TPLF leaders, October 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Prosperity Party officials, Addis Ababa, October 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, October 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Addis Ababa, October 2020.

to prevent the crisis escalating beyond a point of no return. Likewise, to get dialogue moving, the TPLF will have to drop the release of all political leaders as a precondition for talks and soften its transitional government demand. Instead, it and other opponents could insist that a national dialogue include all major political parties and that the federal government grant opposition representatives a formal role in election-related decision-making, as they demanded when the election delay was first tabled earlier in 2020.

The initial dialogue's aim would be to work out how to create the conditions under which Tigray agrees to participate in national polls next year. Talks also need to reach consensus on conditions for a fair vote, perhaps including an eventual amnesty for all jailed leaders, before moving on to discuss issues relating to Ethiopia's multiple fault lines, notably political fractures and rebellion in Oromia, the southern regional statehood requests and disagreements over constitutional reform between groups that oppose the ethnic federalist system and those that cherish it.

International partners need to rally round the idea of a national dialogue if they want to reduce the probability of the country's transition drifting further off course. The European Union and the next U.S. administration should urge the federal government to halt further punitive measures in order to sincerely engage the TPLF and other opponents in negotiations over the country's future, while imploring Tigray's leaders to desist from pursuing any actions and statements perceived by Addis Ababa as a further provocation. China and the Gulf powers, which also have substantial involvement in Ethiopia, should join calls for talks, as should the African Union chair, Cyril Ramaphosa, who would have both sides' ear. The alternative, given the country's multiple and bitter divides, is a potential march to war that would be catastrophic for Africa's second most populous country and would send shock waves, and refugees, into other Horn of Africa countries as well as across the Mediterranean Sea.

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## Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

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Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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