



Ethiopia's Next Elections

Ethiopian-American Council

San Jose, California, March 13, 2021: To say that Ethiopia has had a troubled history with elections would be a gross understatement. The infamous 2005 elections resulted in government-sanctioned killings and years of human rights abuses by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government. Fourteen years after the EPRDF overthrew the dictatorial Dergue government, elections were scheduled that initially appeared to elevate opposition parties to take control of government. However, using the jailing of opposition leaders and manipulation in the counting of votes, the EPRDF government forestalled its apparent loss. Outlawing opposition parties and jailing or exiling their leaders, the EPRDF prevented even the possibility of free and fair elections.

In 2010, the EPRDF won 99.6 percent of parliamentary seats and continued to restrict political space for the opposition. Independent media was decimated, civil society groups virtually eliminated and peaceful public demonstrations were shut down, often by force. In the 2015 elections, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) announced that the EPRDF coalition won 546 of 547 parliamentary seats.

The next national elections were supposed to be held in on 29 August 2020, but were delayed by the House of Representatives due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In late December of last year, the NEBE stated that it would take place on 5 June 2021. However, the election postponement, along with the dissolution of the EPRDF and the creation of the new Prosperity Party sparked a conflict that threatens to prevent the possibility of free and fair elections in Ethiopia that could at long last resolve cycles of dictatorial government and inter-ethnic conflict.

It was the Tigray elite, using their Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), that ran the EPRDF government that doomed the country to decades of human rights abuses and lost years for Ethiopian democracy. For too many outside observers, the TPLF was the invisible hand behind the political killings, brutality and manipulation of democracy. While in power for 27 years (1991 - 2018), TPLF implemented an apartheid-like system complete with an ID card that documented the bearer's ethnicity (for the first time in Ethiopian history). Blatant favouritism was demonstrated in all sectors of society, including the economy, military, education, and even religious institutions, thus creating simmering resentment and tension in the remaining 94% of the population.

The TPLF re-drew boundaries of regional states in Ethiopia along ethnic lines in a clear divide-and-rule strategy. Large swaths of land were taken from other ethnicities, including Amharas and Afars and

incorporated into a suddenly much larger state of Tigray, causing new animosities. Any residents of a different ethnicity were now suddenly seen as outsiders, leading to innumerable cases of gruesome killings, mass displacement of people and instability. They particularly targeted the Amhara ethnic group (about 30% of the population) and fabricated false narratives that portrayed the Amhara in particular as being historic enemies of other ethnicities, especially the Oromo. This led to hundreds of gruesome killings of Amhara civilians for more than 15 years. In addition, hundreds of Anuak were murdered and thousands displaced so that their fertile land could be given to foreign investors.

Since losing power and retreating to Tigray in 2018, TPLF has left no stone unturned in its effort to destabilize Ethiopia, sponsoring terror groups to destabilize the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and force a return to a state of emergency once it was clear that he would not be a TPLF puppet ruler. Now they have endangered the latest opportunity for Ethiopia to emerge from decades of misrule to say the least.

It has been widely acknowledged that the current conflict in Tigray was started by TPLF attacks on the government's Northern Command. The TPLF itself admitted shelling Eritrea, which led to that government sending in military forces. In his 19 November 2020 briefing, Tibor Nagy, then-U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs said: "We remain deeply concerned over reports that civilians have been purposely targeted and attacked. We condemn the November 12 massacre in Mai-Kadra, apparently perpetrated by TPLF soldiers and militia as they retreated from the town".

The resulting chaos has played to the sympathies of the world community for the Tigrayan people caught up in the conflict and brutalized by errant military forces. But sympathy for the Tigrayan people must not include the Tigray elite, who are responsible for this conflict and its resulting mayhem.

Since 2018, the TPLF has been openly accelerating a build-up of a large regional army and even openly paraded their soldiers and military hardware. Confident about their arms build-up over the last two years, TPLF officials themselves very openly bragged on video about a pre-emptive strike on the Ethiopian National Defense Forces on 3 November last year – only days before launching such an attack. They separated out soldiers based on their ethnicity and specifically targeted hundreds of non-Tigrayan soldiers to be brutally murdered, a treasonous act condemned by then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Yet once they were defeated by Ethiopian government forces, they completely changed the narrative and denied ever launching an attack in the first place, portraying themselves as victims.

The Tigray elite has been helped in this masquerade by a large and well-funded effort by TPLF supporters globally to obfuscate the truth by inundating news media, social media, and government officials with gross misinformation. It is critical that U.S. policy be formed by careful investigation and not be based on easily available misinformation. TPLF supporters have over the last 30 years invested funds stolen from Ethiopia to put themselves in strategic positions at human rights organizations, various international news media outlets, U.N. agencies, etc., and they are now using their position to wage a public relations war on an Ethiopian government they no longer control.

As an example of the success of this Tigrayan public relations effort, pronouncements such as S.Res. 97 by Senator James Risch quotes the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission as stating that more than 600 civilians died in the 9 November 2020 massacre in Mai Kadra "for no reason other than their ethnicity," but without further elaboration fails to mention ethnic groups hurt in that carnage. In fact, while there is passing reference to Amharas, Oromos and other ethnic groups, it is the Tigray who are singled out as victims in Ethiopia despite years of evidence that the Tigray elite mounted a reign of terror against other ethnic groups in Ethiopia. By being unbalanced, this legislation is much less helpful than it might have been.

According to a 19 November 2020 article in *Foreign Policy* magazine, the current conflict was always about restoring TPLF control over the government. “The TPLF’s political and military power eventually gave rise to economic dominance as it enabled its leaders to exercise complete control of the country’s economy and natural resources—mainly its land — as well as aid flows and loans. In recent years, Ethiopia received, on average, about \$3.5 billion per year in foreign aid alone, which accounted for about half of the country’s national budget during the late (Prime Minister) Meles (Zenawi) years.”

There must be investigation of the theft by TPLF leaders of so much foreign aid and now of funds donated to relief efforts for those suffering due to the TPLF-initiated and sustained conflict. Even today, after having raised more than \$2.5 million for relief in Tigray, TPLF supporters in the United States have chosen to withhold these aid funds until the TPLF is restored to power. Donors to relief efforts to help those suffering from the conflict in Tigray must ensure that such funds are not misused. United Nations support for Rwandans fleeing from the conflict after the 1994 genocide allowed Hutu extremists to use refugee camps as bases from which to attack the incoming government there. That must not be repeated in refugee camps for Tigrayan refugees.

Meanwhile, Birtukan Mideksa, the founder and leader of the opposition Unity for Democracy and Justice Party that was denied electoral victory in 2005, is now NEBE Chairperson. Having been jailed twice and forced into exile, she understands how precious true democracy is for Ethiopia. She can be expected to be a faithful steward of the elections this year if TPLF manipulation doesn’t result in a discredited election process. The ongoing conflict will not help, and falsification of votes from refugee camps would further mar the process.

Ethiopia is Africa’s second largest population and has been an important factor in East Africa. After several denials of democracy in Ethiopian elections and resulting vicious human rights abuses, this election must succeed in ending the country’s long political nightmare.

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