



Brief summary of events that led to the deterioration of relationships between Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s Ethiopian Federal Administration on one side and State of Tigray on the other side

Since Abiy Ahmed took power in April 2018, he and his government took many actions that can be grouped into **2 broad categories**, all of which led the Tigray people to feel marginalized & their contributions not recognized. They also perceived that the federal system they fought for and helped establish was being eroded and changed gradually into a unitary system run by an emerging autocrat.

1. Measures that sidelined and marginalized the Tigraian contributions to the Ethiopian state

- A.** On many occasions, PM Abiy characterized the 27 years of EPRDF, where the TPLF was the dominant political party in the coalition government, was only an era of darkness and state terror. Rather than showing a fair assessment, appreciating the many great things achieved including the federal constitution, a decade of double-digit economic growth etc. and then criticizing the shortcomings, he almost always chose to use broad brush, a negative one at that. This negative approach from him was appreciated by many political forces who are known to have grudge and animosity towards the Tigray people. This unfair characterization for obvious reasons is deeply resented by the Tigray people.
- B.** At the end of the 27 years of EPRDF rule, there was evidence of widespread corruption in the federal and regional governments. While the corruption was practiced by leaders of all backgrounds, coming from all the 4 constituent parties of the EPRDF, Abiy and his administration decided to focus only on demonization of Tigraian leaders using a biased government media. Tigraian leaders were being detained through choreographed and televised process creating massive media coverage while their colleagues at the other parties of EPRDF, who worked with them for decades, were being promoted. The Tigraian detainees were being labeled as criminals through public media and this included the Attorney General coming out on TV declaring criminality before the court and the due process of law. This was again championed by many political forces with an axe to grind at Tigray and its people; while the Tigray people, resented it as a clear act of discrimination and marginalization of anything Tigraian.
- C.** Many Tigraian ministers and top-level officials were removed and replaced by non Tigrayians, leading to an almost complete absence of Tigraian leaders in the federal government system.
- D.** The government media started stoking anti Tigray conspiracy. People who were defeated during the 17 years armed struggle of TPLF, and who have grudge against Tigray were being brought on TV advocating for punitive military attack on Tigray.
- E.** PM Abiy and his colleagues created derogatory ‘animal’ phrases in Amharic to label officials and by extension, Tigrayians as well. Some stayed as rallying insults. For example, the Amharic phrase, “የቀን ጅብ” “ye-Kegn jib” which literally means “daytime Hyena” was coined in reference to the TPLF members, and by extension to the Tigray people. Those types of terms led to sudden mobs attacking Tigrayians throughout the country, and there were few innocent Tigrayians that lost their lives as a direct consequence of these attacks. A couple of them were even stoned to death.
- F.** The late Chief-of-Staff of the Ethiopian armed forces, General Seare Mekonnen, who was of Tigraian origin, was tragically and cold-bloodedly killed at his home in 2019, with his friend, another



retired General of the same ethnicity. The government version is that it was killed by his bodyguard, but to this date, no transparent investigation has been done to find the culprits. To this date, his wife, who was on sight when the killing took place, has never been formally asked to give her statement to the court. To many, this looks like a premeditated murder, and the fact that no transparent investigation is taking place indicates the government might be a complicit. Many believe this was an important step for the government to open the way to fill the army leadership by PM Abiy loyalists.

- G.** The late Chief Engineer of the Renaissance Dam (aka GERD) Simegnaw Bekele (Non Tigraian origin), who was a fierce advocate for the Dam was killed in Addis under mysterious and suspicious circumstances. The government says it was suicide, but there were many grounds to rule out suicide to be the case for his death. There were no independent and conclusive investigations and the accounts given by the government leave more questions unanswered. Many Ethiopians believe that he was assassinated, as a part of the government's effort to tarnish projects started during the EPRDF era and create a space to maneuver the GERD talks to win huge political support and money from relevant geopolitical actors. PM Abiy is on record saying the GERD project, which was started by PM Meles Zenawi, leader of was not started for the right reasons but rather there is a nefarious one- the same narrative Egyptian leaders and President Isayas Afeworki of Eritrea advanced in earnest.
- H.** When PM Abiy decided to "normalize" relationships between Ethiopia and Eritrea, he did it excluding the Tigrai people in the process, knowing fully well that Tigrai is the part of Ethiopia which is closely associated with Eritrea in terms of geography, language and culture. In addition, though the border war was between Ethiopia & Eritrea, at its core was the decades of love and hate relationship between TPLF (governing party in Tigray) and EPLF (the leading party in Eritrea in its former name). Therefore, any normalization without including Tigrai in the process was halfhearted at most and sinister at worst. The Tigrai people suspected the relationship between PM Abiy and President Isaias was being built at the expense of Tigrai. Recent developments including the ongoing war in Tigrai did confirm this fear that their alliance had one thing in mind: the weakening and destruction of TPLF.

2. Measures that led to the perception by Tigrai that PM Abiy at his heart does not support the current ethnic federal system and the constitution and he will undermine it with the ultimate goal of removing it using extra constitutional means

- A.** PM Abiy uses imperial era language of a unitary country when describing Ethiopia, ignoring the fact that it is now a federation of many nations, nationalities and the people. For many in Tigrai, this is very scary, taking into consideration the fact that the people of Tigrai with their leadership fought for 17 years and ushered an era of new federal constitution in 1991, which governed the country until 2018 (for 27 years).
- B.** Many of the people close to PM Abiy including many of his advisors are known (on record) in their detest of the current constitution and some even have advocated to simply scrap it unilaterally without going through the legal process of changing a constitution. Many Tigrains believe those people are trying to exploit the situation and figure out a short cut to ban the constitution, knowing fully well that they may not have the votes to do it through the legally accepted mechanism.



- C.** Many of the Oromo opposition leaders, who are fierce advocates of the current federal constitution, have fallen out of his favor and have been put into prison with trumped up charges.
- D.** The Sidama people, who have been fighting to get their own autonomous state for decades, voted for it. And yet, he initially denied them of their constitutionally guaranteed referendum right. After many riots and loss of life, he finally relented and allowed them to voice and vote. They voted 98% for having their own autonomous region. The way he handled the Sidama issue was seen by many in Tigrai and elsewhere as someone with misgivings on the current constitution.
- E.** Several zones with in the Southern Ethiopian Region (in particular the Wolayta zone), decided to go the constitutional rout to get autonomous regional designation, but PM would not let them exercise their very right. There were many riots in the Wolayta zone, which culminated in PM Abiy putting the entire leadership of the zone in prison. This shows his reluctance to follow the constitution.
- F.** Though the constitution foresees that each of the regions have autonomy in selecting their leaders, PM Abiy used the federal military to imprison some regional leaders. In addition, in an unprecedented move, he invites the entire leadership of some of the regions to his office, to “help” them elect their leaders. For any keen observer, this is an outright interference in the functioning of regional states. That way he was able to put loyalists in all the regions except Tigrai. Tigrai believes his approach and deed indicates he does not respect the constitution and stood firm in resisting his attempt to interfere in Tigrai.
- G.** The way the Ethiopian federal system was installed in Ethiopia works as follows: each region has its own leading political party which governs the region and then negotiates/ participates in running the federal government. In the eye of many Tigrarians (and other federalists), PM Abiy, in his desire to dismantle the federal system he created a new unitary Prosperity Party by rapidly merging all the regional parties (except TPLF). The way he rushed the merger did not follow the established party laws of the country by which other mergers were managed in the past. The merger took place without any formal election of party leaders. In this unitary party structure, the leadership of the regional branches will be selected by the national party leadership in a manner antithesis to the concept of federal structure. TPLF refused to join the merger because of the concerns about losing Tigrayan autonomy within the merged party.
- H.** According to the constitution, national and regional elections take place every 5 years. Based on that the election was supposed to take place the latest by September 2020. Using the COVID epidemic as an excuse, PM Abiy Ahmed decided to postpone it. Though the constitution does not have any provisions to postpone the election, he used a very controversial maneuver of “constitutional interpretation” to postpone. His maneuver was labelled as illegal by many independent legal experts as well as most major opposition political parties, but he proceeded, nonetheless. TPLF decided to follow the constitution and run its own regional elections, which run very smoothly, but was not recognized by PM Abiy and his government leading to a political confrontation.

In summary, it is the culmination of all those differences that has brought us to the current confrontation, conflict and an all-out war. It should be noted that while on the surface, the confrontation & war seems just between the Ethiopian government and the Tigrayan government, the Tigrayan people do perceive it as a war against them and their legitimate leaders. The Tigrai regional state government does have an



overwhelming support from the entire Tigraian elites as well as the Tigraian people. The 98% election result for TPLF in September 2020 was a real official statement of the public. It was an indication that given the way Tigrai is being cornered and portrayed by the Ethiopian government, the Tigraian people are united in supporting their leaders at these trying times. Many forget that while many Tigrains may have misgiving on their leaders when it comes to governance and policy issues, the current confrontation is viewed as an existential issue of survival and hence the overwhelming support the Tigrains have to their leaders.

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