

The Consequences of Ethiopia's Civil Conflict Will be Acute

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The most intense phase of Ethiopia's several-week-long civil conflict appears to be drawing to a close after the country's national defense forces gave an ultimatum to Tigrayan rebels in the restive region's capital to surrender or face utter destruction, but the consequences of this conflict will likely linger for long after the war formally concludes considering just how significant of an event this has been for the country.

Calamitous Contradictions

War broke out in the Horn of Africa just a week after the author warned late last month that ["Ethiopia's Internal Contradictions Might Lead To Its Collapse"](#). The reader is encouraged to review that analysis if they're not already familiar with the background of the latest conflict in the continent's second most populous country. In a nutshell, the primary contradiction is between the centralizing ruling authorities led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his newly formed Prosperity Party, and the rebellious decentralizing Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) faction of the former ruling coalition that used to exercise disproportionate influence over the country for nearly the past two and a half decades up until a few years ago.

Centralization vs. Decentralization

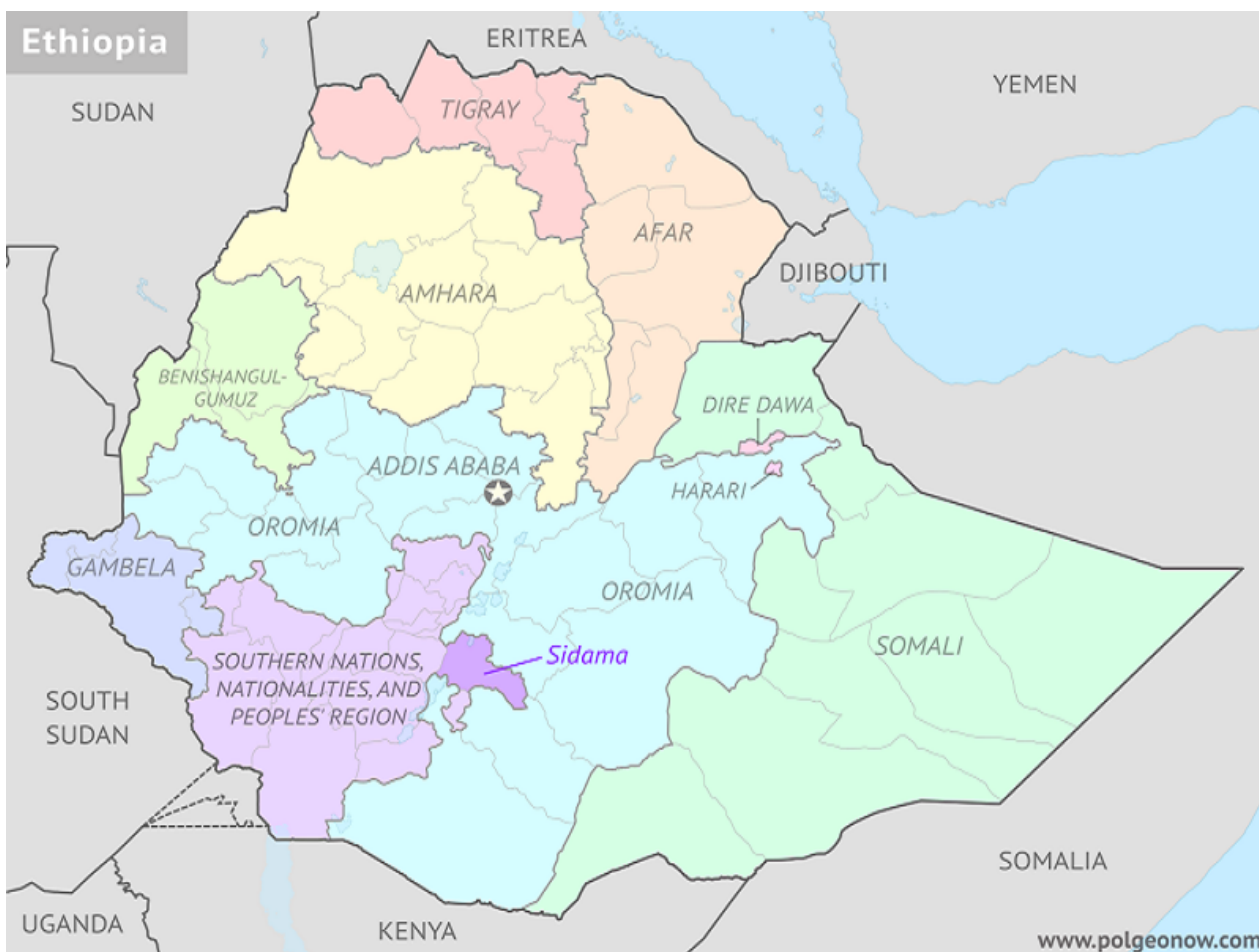
Digging a bit deeper, the prevailing question is whether a civilization-state as diverse as modern-day Ethiopia can even (re-) centralize at all after everything that it's been through over the past several decades since its first civil war broke out from 1974-1991. Abiy appears to think that it's still possible to cultivate a unifying sense of "Ethiopianess" among his people from the top-down while the TPLF regards this as impossible following the country's formal (though never fully implemented) decentralization into ethnic regions from the promulgation of its most recent constitution in 1995 onward. The contradiction between these two visions was exacerbated after Abiy turned his back on decentralization despite previously signaling that he'd pursue it.

The resultant conflict has seen the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) march towards the TPLF-held Tigrayan regional capital of Mekelle, which in turn provoked a flood of several tens of thousands of refugees into neighboring Sudan and potentially an exponentially much larger number of internally displaced people in this mountainous region of around 5 million people. The official pretext for launching the war was that the TPLF attacked a military base in its home region, a claim that the group denied. In response, it launched missiles against Eritrea and the neighboring region of Amhara, while the ENDF pounded Tigray with airstrikes. The TPLF also claimed that Eritrean forces have invaded with the ENDF's

permission, though Asmara denies this.

Why Haven't Other Regions Risen Up?

Unlike what some observers predicted, including the author had he written about this conflict during its opening week, other anti-government groups elsewhere in the country didn't join the TPLF in launching a nationwide campaign against the state, which in turn allowed the ENDF to concentrate its full firepower on Tigray. There are several possible explanations for why this hasn't happened, at least not yet. The first is that the most militant among them might have already been neutralized or are too scared of the state. The second is that the ethno-regional constituents that they purport to represent wouldn't support another anti-state insurgency. And the third is that this might still happen, but for whatever reason, the conditions aren't yet ripe.



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Whatever the case may be, the ENDF's potentially imminent crushing of the TPLF's decentralization rebellion would greatly promote Abiy's centralization cause. It would send a strong message to any potential copycat movements that they'll be the next to be destroyed if they dare to follow in the footsteps of the most powerful faction of the former ruling party. The TPLF and its supporters might resort to guerrilla warfare in that event, which in turn could inspire other movements elsewhere to join it, but that scenario still remains to be seen and will be dependent on how strict the ENDF's post-war occupation of the region will be. About that, there are already growing international concerns about the humanitarian situation in the rebellious region.

The “Perfect” Example Of “Pacification”

Tigray has been cut off from the outside world since the start of the conflict, and observers fear for the well-being of the civilians who are caught in the crossfire. Regrettably, because of the area’s remoteness, it’s unlikely that independent outsiders will have access to it until the ENDF allow them to, and even then, their movement will likely be severely restricted. Abiy’s primary goal is to snuff out all support of decentralization in Tigray and then present the “pacified” region to the rest of the country as the “perfect example” of what could happen to them next if they dare to rise up as well. The most immediate consequence could be that even those peaceful individuals who support decentralization might be intimidated into staying silent or even become radicalized.

Abiy’s Ambitions

States across the world all throughout history have resorted to brute force to crush regional uprisings, especially in recent times that aim for decentralization against a government that attempts to centralize their diverse country from the top-down. It’s very difficult to sustain such a system without relying on the use of force and “perception management” techniques intended to cultivate a new national identity among the population. Ethiopia is no different in this respect, and it’s for this reason why those who sincerely believed that Abiy would decentralize the country like many of his supporters previously thought that he’d do will be extremely disappointed with him as time goes on.

From his perspective, however, decentralization is just a ploy for secretly centralizing the country since any visible moves in this direction should just be superficial in his view. For instance, he allowed the Sidama Region of the ultra-diverse Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples’ Region (SNNPR) to secede as its own regional state following a referendum. It’s possible that the rest of that region might eventually “Balkanize” as well, though in as “controlled” of a manner as possible, after which existing regional borders might be “corrected” from the top-down to more accurately reflect ethnic composition like some have wanted. However it happens, he as a former military-intelligence official believes that he must exert full control over the process.

Superficial Decentralization

That management style, however, contradicts the spirit of what decentralization is supposed to be about. In a sense, one can say that Ethiopia is destined to decentralize in one way or another, but the substance of the resultant model might not match people’s expectations, which in turn could fuel more discontent that might take a while to finally boil over in a kinetic way (especially if people are regularly reminded of the Tigrayan example as a deterrent). By reforming the former ruling coalition as the newly established Prosperity Party (minus the TPLF of course) and cracking down on the opposition, Abiy is laying the seeds for replicating the former governing model albeit after having rebranded it to rapturous international applause.

The TPLF was the only force influential enough to call Abiy out for what he was doing, which was nevertheless ironic and arguably self-interested of them since it might have simply been out of spite after having been excluded from this newly rebranded power apparatus that they themselves let him take control of a few years ago. In any case, their message was heard loud and clear across the country, though no other have groups have yet to rise up in their wake, likely fearing for their own future despite possibly sympathizing with them

after realizing that they'd stand less of a chance of success if not even the powerful TPLF could challenge the ENDF. This means that the de-facto continuation of one-party rule will likely be a fait accompli in the near term.

Concluding Thoughts

Still, the medium-term consequence could be that anti-state resentment might silently spread throughout the country, especially if there's rising dissatisfaction with Abiy's top-down "decentralization" ruse for solidifying his centralization model. Thus, while the short-term implications might suggest that the situation could soon stabilize, that might be just as superficial as his possible "decentralization", meaning that the medium- to long-term consequences could be that instability becomes more acute as time goes on and resentments continue to grow. The best way to avoid that scenario and thus a repeat of the latest conflict elsewhere in the country in the future would be for Abiy to realize that decentralization must be substantive and not just superficial.

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