

What Explains Ethiopia's Stunning Military Reversal in Tigray?

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Addis Ababa's unexpected decision to implement a unilateral ceasefire in its rebellious Tigray Region following eight months of war there was influenced by its opponents' unconventional military advantage fighting on their mountainous home turf, neighboring Eritrea's military withdrawal from the conflict following international criticism of its activities, and the immense Western pressure put upon the aspiring Horn of Africa hegemon to prevent what the US predicted might become the world's worst famine there.

Observers were shocked by Monday's [announcement](#) that the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) withdrew from the capital of the country's rebellious Tigray Region and implemented a unilateral ceasefire until the end of the planting season there that's usually sometime in September. Addis Ababa had presented its actions there as a law enforcement operation against separatists led by the previously leading force of the former ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which was later designated as terrorists. Government accounts claimed that the ENDF was winning though these assertions couldn't be independently verified the entire time due to the difficulty that independent journalists had in accessing the war-torn region. The protracted conflict there also led to accusations of human rights abuses by all sides, and the US recently [warned](#) that Tigray risked suffering from the world's worst famine if the conflict didn't end soon.

There are several possible explanations for this dramatic turn of events. The first is that the TPLF commanded an unconventional military advantage by fighting on their mountainous home turf. The allegations of human rights abuses by the ENDF might have also inspired a massive recruitment drive among the locals if they began to view the conflict through a national liberation lense, thereby making it impossible for the military to indefinitely control the region. Neighboring Eritrea, which also militarily intervened in the region, earlier [accused](#) the US of supporting the TPLF so it's possible that some degree of foreign backing was responsible for the militants regrouping in recent months and thus being able to more effectively launch their latest counteroffensive that coincided with the country's long-delayed elections last week. Regardless of however they came to be so strong, the outcome is still the same, and it's that the ENDF were just defeated by the TPLF.

The second explanation concerns Eritrea's withdrawal from the conflict zone under

international pressure. This former Ethiopian region recently emerged as the Horn of Africa's [most influential country](#) after its decisive intervention in Tigray at least temporarily prevented its neighbor's "Balkanization" which could have been disastrous for the region since it's Africa's second most populous country. Eritrea was also accused of human rights abuses and still largely remains a "pariah" state. It could have been the case that its leadership concluded that it might not be able to withstand any more international pressure so it decided to pull out of the conflict for now. Whatever its strategic calculations may have been, its departure from Tigray seems to have directly affected the ENDF's ability to retain control of the region. This could explain the military's unexpected defeat at the hands of the TPLF, which if truly the case, would then show how much stronger Eritrea is than [Ethiopia](#).

The third explanation concerns the US' dire warning that up to 900,000 of the region's approximately 6 million people faced the threat of what it predicted might become the world's worst famine if the conflict continues to drag on. This placed tremendous pressure upon the aspiring Horn of Africa hegemon and especially its leader Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who received the Nobel Peace Prize two years ago for peacefully ending Ethiopia's nearly two-decade-long conflict with Eritrea. Just like its neighbor, Ethiopia was quickly on the path to becoming a "pariah" state in Western eyes and would have arguably been the world's largest one had that scenario come to pass, which it still might. PM Abiy earlier claimed that foreign aid might be exploited as a front to arm the TPLF so his volte face speaks volumes about how desperate the military and also possibly the international political situation had become that he'd order the ENDF's withdrawal in spite of that.

With these three interconnected reasons in mind for explaining Ethiopia's stunning military reversal in Tigray, it's now time to consider the strategic consequences of this development. The TPLF will likely consolidate and become stronger than ever, including as a result of foreign support that'll enter the region disguised as aid. Addis Ababa won't have much if any influence over this de facto independent region of the country, but a continuation war might break out after the planting season ends sometime in September if the ENDF also successfully regroup by then. It also might not, though, especially if a large part of the reason for the ENDF's withdrawal was to reduce international pressure resulting from the US' dire warning of the world's worst impending famine. PM Abiy might not have the political will to risk the Western political and economic (sanctions) response to restarting the conflict under those conditions.

Unlike during the (first?) Ethiopian Civil War, the TPLF is unlikely to make a run on the capital but it might [pursue](#) hostile forces a bit beyond Tigray. That's because the people of the neighboring Amhara Region and Eritrea will fight to the death to stop the TPLF's invasion. Ethno-regional animosity is at an all-time high and Amhara militias have also reportedly been active in Tigray during the recent conflict in order to reclaim territory that they believe is theirs. It's extremely unlikely that they'd roll over and let the TPLF sweep through their region en route to Addis Ababa in order to overthrow the same Prime Minister who's emboldened them and their claims on parts of Tigray. This state of affairs suggests that the conflict might remain frozen for the indefinite future, thus creating a prime opportunity for foreign meddling. In addition, the TPLF might activate its nationwide network of agents to stage attacks behind enemy lines and incite rebellion in other regions.

The conflict between PM Abiy and the TPLF is of an existential nature. Each regards the other as illegitimate and a threat to Ethiopia. PM Abiy sees the TPLF as a terrorist group that'll do anything to return to power even if this includes provoking another civil war while they believe that he's the one that's ruining the country through his ambitious socio-

economic reforms that risk opening up the same Pandora's Box that they tried so hard to keep closed during their rule. In other words, they blame one another for "Balkanizing" Ethiopia, and this worst-case scenario might actually happen whether in full or in part if the conflict isn't politically resolved as soon as possible. Regrettably, no such peaceful resolution appears possible since neither side is willing to compromise on their maximalist aims: PM Abiy wants to wipe out the TPLF while they want to overthrow him. This creates the ideal space for foreign meddling, which will certainly exacerbate the conflict.

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