

Webinar: African peace and stability in the light of the Ethiopian crisis - Special Report

## **Ethiopia: from stability to instability in the Horn of Africa?**

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### **Premise**

The installation of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed immediately seemed to bring a breath of fresh air and stability to Ethiopia and, from here, to the Horn of Africa.

Abiy has presented itself as "the novelty"

- both ethnically: after decades of representatives of the Federal Government of Tigrinya ethnicity, the new Prime Minister is of the Oromo ethnic group;

- both on the political level: after decades of conflict with Eritrea, the new Prime Minister, in 2018, started an exchange of visits that reopened relations between the two countries.

The Western celebrated this desirable scenario by awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to Abiy Ahmed in 2019, confirming Ethiopia as the new example of African democracy.

But the European dream does not last long: the war in Tigray breaks out in November 2020 and upsets the cards of the Horn of Africa and the scenarios of the region.

Neither internal ethnic fragmentation nor external pressures are alien to the conflict. Ethiopia, a Federal Republic, has 5 main ethnic groups among the 85 that characterize it. These are the Oromo, the majority group that has Addis Ababa as their capital; the Amhara, in the homonymous region south of the Tigray region; the Somalis of the Somali Region; the Tigray of the Tigray region, in the north; finally, the Sidama, located in the center of Country. In short, a kaleidoscope of ethnic groups that have never stopped using each other's violence, even when the Country was told as pacified in recent years. If then to the characteristics of internal fragmentation, we add the interests of external division, the stability of Ethiopia, but the entire

Horn of Africa assumes a very relevant political value but inevitably ... utopian, as a concrete possibility.

**Prime Minister Abiy has a central role in all this.**

Abiy's parents are Oromo and Amhara; he is of Pentecostal evangelical religion and is married to Zinash Tayachew, Amhara of Protestant religion.

Abiy is very attached to Ethiopian history, to the great kings and emperors, such as Menelik II, Amhara emperor victorious in Adua, who became a bulwark of colonial penetration in the Horn of Africa. The Prime Minister often resorts to this narrative and those who know him say that Abiy feels bound by a thin thread to the great kings of the past and like them wants to lead his army in battle against the invaders. His is an almost messianic dream: to save Ethiopia again from a new Western invasion.

Abiy Ahmed's *coup de théâtre* is on November 22 of this year, when he transfers powers to his deputy Demeke Mekonnen, to dress the army uniform and lead the counteroffensive against the Tigrinya forces of the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) and the Oromo forces of the OLA (Oromo Liberation Army)

With this personal initiative of the Prime Minister, the ENDF (Ethiopian National Defense Force) has gone from forced recruitment among Ethiopians, to being able to count on a mass of volunteers from all over the country, from all religions and all social backgrounds. The symbolic call to resistance against colonialism, the ancient Italian and the modern foreign invaders, made Abiy the emperor back to save the country, in the eyes of many Ethiopians.

As a result, at the political level, it would seem that the current situation in Ethiopia is very stable around a strong leader who has created a sense of national unity.

Indeed, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's exemplary narrative created in Ethiopia a perception of national unity based on the threat of a foreign invasion of the Country led by Americans, and to a lesser extent also by the British and French, who used the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) Tigray guerrillas as a kind of mercenaries at their service.

Ethiopia, in widespread perception under Abiy's leadership, is regaining the pride of a great power that has already repelled a foreign invasion, the Italian one, and now led by a great leader is again defeating Westerners in a new battle against colonialism.

This initiative, widely mediatized, has allowed Abiy to relaunch Ethiopia's leading role among the countries of the Horn of Africa, finding consensus with the President of Somalia Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed Formajo and the Eritrean Isaias Afewerki. This is an interesting reversal of the traditional colonialist front, which identified in the old powers present in the Horn in the last century, now leaves room for the emerging powers in Africa, favoring a new form of colonialism of the XXI century with the same collaboration of the local African power. Abiy is building a very strong axis with Qatar, Iran, Turkey, Russia, and, in particular, with China: all countries supplying weapons to the Ethiopian Federation. And large economic stakeholders in the Horn of Africa, their privileged way of penetration.

**The situation on the ground is rich in light and dark.**

Abiy's governance undoubtedly contributes to creating a feeling of national unity and the figure of a strong leader who embodies the values of a united and non-ethnic Ethiopia fascinates. On the other hand, internal problems related to various factors should be noted: among the latter, the Oromo issue; opposition to the government by small Amhara groups; the differences in the vision of future united Ethiopia (federal, confederal, "imperial", etc.); the role of foreign powers supporting Abiy; the role of the Islamic world; the split in the Christian world (Catholic and Orthodox); the issue of human rights.

In this context, therefore, Ethiopia is not characterized by any stability and, the most recent military events show how these internal factors are at the root of a conflict that seems to be festering.

If the ENDF (Ethiopian National Defense Force) and the support militias are advancing towards the Tigray, regaining key positions, also supported by the Afar militias; the guerrillas of the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) declare that the retreat is only functional to the reorganization of their troops. While the Oromo troops of the OLA (Oromo Liberation Army) continue to fight announcing victories over the federal army; the Amhara Fano paramilitary militias (the last Amhara military force) maintain, indeed expand, their strength; and the Eritrean army ensures the control of the conflict in the border areas.

In essence, the situation on the ground sees the presence of different actors and clashes with a radical difficulty in obtaining and evaluating the information that arrives. When Abiy started the war against the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) he probably thought of a faster and

more decisive conflict. A possible reading, supported by internal sources, reveals three subsequent complications: the Prime Minister did not believe that the behavior in the conflict of Eritreans and Amhara had such relevant vengeful aspects in terms of brutality towards the Tigrayans; underestimated the military forces of the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) and the international support for them.

### **The Oromo factor.**

The Oromo world is deeply divided within itself towards Abiy.

The Oromo, except for the minority fringe of the OLA (Oromo Liberation Army – OLF Oromo Liberation Front), tend to side against the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front), but within it, they are experiencing strong divisions regarding the relationship with the Amhara and some aspects of Abiy's policy.

Jawar Mohammed (leader of Qeerroo, the Oromo youth movement born in 1991) from the prison denounced the possible authoritarian drift of Abiy. Jawar himself was the subject of an assassination attempt by assassins who entered prison. There are various readings on this plot: on the one hand, those who think it would have been useful to create chaos and raise the population against Abiy: internal pro-government Oromo sources claim that the assassination attempt would have been carried out by an Amhara group in contrast to Abiy; on the other hand, those who think that it would have been made to fall on the Tigrayans when they had occupied Addis Ababa. However, the killing of Jawar would have led to a strong institutional crisis and a significant resumption of inter-ethnic and intra-entity clashes (among the Oromo).

In addition, the Oromo world has been deeply shaken by the massacre of the traditional leaders of Gadaa (Gadaa is the indigenous democratic system of governance used by the Oromos) of Karaayu (the Karaayu pastoralists, with Borena, represent the two main Oromo pastoral communities in Ethiopia) with over 60 deaths, which occurred in December 2021 of which the Amhara were accused: the massacre has awakened even more in the Oromo the painful memory of the massacres of Menelik II and the ethnic conflict with the rival group.

However, both Jawar's words from prison on Abiy's authoritarian drift and the Karaayu massacre do not seem to have shifted the Oromo axis towards the war against the Tigrayans or increased support for OLA (Oromo Liberation Army), so much so that there are new voluntary enlistments in the ENDF (Ethiopian National Defense Force) for the great patriotic war.

## **The Amhara Factor**

The Amhara entered the war alongside the ENDF (Ethiopian National Defense Force) and Eritrean forces to "regain" their dominance over the Tigrayans: this strongly ethnic component of the war showed itself in claims actions that led to massacres against the civilian population, such as participation in the massacre in the symbolic city of Axum, where according to local tradition it is preserved, in the church of St. Mary of Zion, the Ark of the Covenant.

The Amhara, as they conquered Tigrinya territory, did not raise the Ethiopian flag but the imperial one, emphasizing the idea of not fighting only to regain dominance over the Tigrayans but to claim the ideal of a united Ethiopia according to their imperial and Christian vision. One of the keys to understanding the abandonment of the ENDF (Ethiopian National Defense Force) forces from Tigray, is not only linked to the strong military push of the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) but to distance oneself from the Amhara and the atrocities committed by them. This situation, probably, was exceeding the limit of embarrassment acceptable to Abiy, who at this point let the Tigrayans humiliate the Amhara, driven city after city, to the borders of Oromia. Only then, after having contained the Amhara claims, the countless defeats on the ground and the story of the imminent possible fall of the capital, Addis Ababa, with a return to power of the Tigrayans, provided the motivation that mobilized the Nation, in a unitary spirit that had not been seen for decades. Volunteers came from all over the country to support the ENDF (Ethiopian National Defense Force) in the fight against the Tigrayans, especially after seeing Abiy at the front leading the troops. Abiy has deployed the Ethiopian war machine and also with the help of the militias is quickly recapturing the cities previously occupied by the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front), probably wanting to get to a surrender of the Tigrayans with the possibility of granting a referendum for the eventual secession.

## **Conclusions**

The role of Prime Minister Abiy is central to understanding the conflict and to trying to outline the uncertain scenarios of the Horn of Africa, in the light of this Ethiopian protagonism. The federal government has been able to show that it is not the Amhara who defend the nation, but the whole country united in a choral effort supported by Abiy's communicative war, structured in a national-popular narrative corroborated by some specific topics such as

- recall the horrors of the colonial war against the Italian invader and appealing to the war of liberation and the great victory of Adua (1896), but also against the Somali invasions (such as the reference to David II against Ahmad ibn Ibrahim, called al-Ghazi);
- focus on the Tigray, leaving the Oromo front in the background;
- promote the image of the Tigrayans as invaders of Ethiopia, in the pay of foreign interests;
- spread the warning of a rapid fall of Addis Ababa, the capital.

Abiy's management of the communicative war is very accurate and well structured: it ranges from psychological operations to media orientation, to the blocking of communications, to economic warfare, to the fight against foreign journalists.

From several sources there is talk of a conflict carefully prepared also on the military level, having secretly deployed in Eritrea troops of both the ENDF (Ethiopian National Defense Force) and Somali, waiting for the first Tigrinya move, to make the war appear as a defense against the attack of the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) with foreign support, and thus favoring the intervention of the Amhara special troops.

Nothing arises by chance: much less a conflict, which will have significant effects on the new structure of the Horn of Africa and, from the East Coast, on the entire central part of the continent.

In the coming months, it will be better understood because of some important events such as the elections in Somalia, which could lead to the non-re-election of Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed Farmajo, president since 2016 and a great ally of Abiy. Somalia and Eritrea, in addition to being involved with their troops, did not vote for the UN resolution to open investigations into the Tigray conflict (equal abstention of China and Russia). In Somalia, both the decision to abstain has been contested by many political actors and the sending of Somali troops to fight alongside Abiy, testifying to another divided, fragmented and uncertain Country of the region.

Not only that, the uncertainty in the area could be increased by the results of the upcoming elections in Kenya, another key country in the region.

The international dimension of the conflict is latent on the directly operational level but is the foundation of the anti-colonial narrative of Abiy (the Tigrayans in support of Old Colonial Western interests) and substantial in support with arms supplies. In particular, the international actors involved (China, Qatar, Turkey, Emirates, Iran) will not easily accept losing the positions

acquired, even in the face of the large investments made (especially Chinese) and this is a further element to be evaluated for the stability of the Horn of Africa.

On the other hand, the very theme of stability is not objective: stability can only be defined in terms of powerful interests that confront, not concerning the mere presence or absence of dynamic processes. In international politics, it is not stable what is immovable, but it is stable what is recognized within an organized sphere of power. Therefore, in the Horn of Africa, we are witnessing a progressive replacement of power between the colonial countries of the now old history, those of western Europe, with those of neo-colonialism well represented by the interests of China, Qatar, Turkey, Emirates, Iran. To which we can add Russia, which thanks also to a progressive withdrawal from the Sahel of France (the end of the Barkhane mission) has acquired a greater power of penetration towards the center of Africa.

If we can speak of instability, therefore, it is appropriate to do so because we assume a vision of replacing the old colonial influences with the new powers that, thanks to European foolishness, are being established quickly and effectively, for the interested support of local governments. In essence, we are moving towards a "change of colonial front". That is, to different stability, in which the European West is a loser, without any advantage for African countries.