

# Ethiopia: Intersecting Domestic Politics, Armed Conflict and International Dispute

With Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's controversial re-election, how ongoing controversies both domestically, with the ongoing violence in Tigray, and internationally, with the continuing GERD dispute, are beginning to intersect.

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**RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES – ANALYSIS**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

On 10 July 2021, Ethiopia announced<sup>1</sup> the results of its delayed parliamentary elections with incumbent Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed retaining control of the government, and his Prosperity Party winning 410 out of the 436 available seats. However, despite this seemingly overwhelming endorsement of Ahmed's policies, his government continues to court controversy at home and abroad. From the election itself, to the ongoing violence in Tigray, to the latest developments in the GERD negotiations, Nobel Peace Prize-winner Ahmed's standing within the international arena looks increasingly tarnished. And even more importantly, the ongoing instability affecting many Ethiopian citizens' lives looks set to continue.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57791868>

## 2. DOMESTIC POLITICS: THE ETHIOPIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

It was dubbed<sup>2</sup> the first free vote in the country's history, but the 21 June 2021 parliamentary election within Ethiopia faced numerous challenges. From the outset, the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the election<sup>3</sup> from August 2020 to 5 June 2021, before a further delay meaning the vote was finally held on the 21<sup>st</sup>. Even with these date changes, four out of the country's 10 regions did not hold a vote<sup>4</sup>. Whilst one of these regions, Sidama, eventually went to the polls a day later on the 22<sup>nd</sup> following logistical issues, the other three regions have yet to hold a vote. This, of course, includes the conflict-region of Tigray that has faced severe violence since the end of last year. The Ethiopian election commission has indicated that a second vote for those unable to vote in June will be held on 6 September 2021, except for Tigray.

On the voting day itself there were reports of irregularities<sup>5</sup>, including the deaths of two security officials and one local official in Oromiya due to an attack that took place there. The majority of these reports were alleged by opposition parties. Some 207 complaints were filed by the Ethiopian Citizens for Justice opposition party due to allegations that election observers were blocked by security officials in Amhara region and elsewhere.

Prior to the election major international actors expressed reservations about the vote. The EU said<sup>6</sup> in a statement on 25 June that "*there have been many operational difficulties evident throughout the election process*". This comes following a cancellation of a EU electoral observation mission to Ethiopia due to a failure to meet standard requirements, more specifically, as High Representative Josep Borell himself said<sup>7</sup>, "*the independence of the Mission and the import of mission*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/polls-open-ethiopias-sidama-region-counting-continues-elsewhere-2021-06-22/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.africanews.com/2021/05/20/ethiopia-postpones-elections-again-to-21-june/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57791868>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/polls-open-ethiopias-sidama-region-counting-continues-elsewhere-2021-06-22/>

<sup>6</sup>

[https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ethiopia\\_mn/100742/Statement%20on%20the%20Ethiopian%20Elections](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ethiopia_mn/100742/Statement%20on%20the%20Ethiopian%20Elections)

<sup>7</sup> [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/97691/ethiopia-statement-high-representative-josep-borrell-cancellation-election-observation-mission\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/97691/ethiopia-statement-high-representative-josep-borrell-cancellation-election-observation-mission_en)

*communication systems*". Meanwhile, the US State Department said<sup>8</sup> in a press statement also on 25 June that the "*electoral process... was not free or fair for all Ethiopians*".

Unsurprisingly, the Ethiopian administration has dismissed these concerns, Ahmed himself having tweeted<sup>9</sup> on 22 June "*all sections of society have gone out to cast their voice in our nation's first free and fair election.*"

### **3. ARMED CONFLICT: THE TRAGEDY OF TIGRAY**

The aforementioned violence in Tigray is perhaps the most urgent challenge in Ethiopia. It only took a few weeks for government troops to take control of Tigray's regional capital Mekelle in November of last year, following the rejection of political reforms by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the first outbreak of political violence<sup>10</sup>. However, by the end of June 2021, the TPLF had regained control of the city, and the majority of the Tigray region, after troops withdrew. Fighting continued throughout that period, and still continues to this day.

But the violence has not been without significant cost to the civilian population. Civilians<sup>11</sup>, including the elderly and children, form a significant portion of the thousands of fatalities since November, while according to OCHA<sup>12</sup> nearly 2 million people have been displaced, with over 5 million needing to rely on humanitarian aid. The scale of this humanitarian disaster has been known for some time, with, for instance, Amnesty International reporting<sup>13</sup> of massacres back in November when the violent outbreak began. Yet, it was seemingly the retaking of Mekelle that prompted Ahmed to unilaterally declare<sup>14</sup> a "*humanitarian ceasefire*", without agreement of the TPLF. While this was supposedly to facilitate humanitarian aid delivery, BBC correspondent Vivienne Nunis instead suggests<sup>15</sup> the move was for

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.state.gov/building-a-stronger-democracy-in-ethiopia/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://twitter.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1407211966020653056>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethiopias-amhara-state-rallies-youth-fight-tigrayans-war-expands-2021-07-25/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/02/ethiopia-1900-people-killed-in-massacres-in-tigray-identified>

<sup>12</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-tigray-region-humanitarian-update-situation-report-3-june-2021>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/ethiopia-investigation-reveals-evidence-that-scores-of-civilians-were-killed-in-massacre-in-tigray-state/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57645282>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

the government to “*save face*” following the TPLF victory in Mekelle. Regardless of the motive, this move, insofar as it was an assurance of humanitarian aid access to Tigray, at the time drew praise<sup>16</sup> from UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

However, fighting has not stopped, and there are signs that the situation could deteriorate further. With the offensive by the TPLF, fighting has spread to neighbouring Afar and Amhara regions. In the latter, the takeover of the town of Adi Arkay coincided with a call<sup>17</sup> by the Amhara regional government for: “*all young people, militia, non-militia in the region, armed with any government weapon, armed with personal weapons, to join the anti-TPLF... war mission*”.

Lurking ever present are the fears of ethnic-based persecution<sup>18</sup>, especially by the Amharan people who have been caught in cycles of ethnic-based violence for many years. These fears have been stoked by political rhetoric both for political opportunity, as well as the cause of Amharan nationalism. The president of the region, Agegnehu Teshager, himself a member of Ahmed’s ruling Prosperity Party, said<sup>19</sup> in July that “*TPLF has proclaimed clear war on Amhara people and we’re undertaking survival struggle*”.

Then again, one of the most significant supporters of the military action in Tigray was Amhara. And there have sadly been little shortage of horrific accounts of crimes committed there, both by the TPLF but also the Ethiopian military. For instance, CNN and Amnesty International uncovered video evidence<sup>20</sup> of a particular massacre in January 2021, which was a video taken by Ethiopian soldiers executing 11 unarmed men in Mahibe Dego. This is just one example, as there are multiple witness accounts<sup>21</sup> of extrajudicial killings, rapes and other atrocities committed by both Ethiopian soldiers as well as allied Eritrean soldiers, who have also partaken in the conflict.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/07/1095612>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethiopias-amhara-state-rallies-youth-fight-tigrayans-war-expands-2021-07-25/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210726-massacres-war-fuel-ethnic-fervour-in-ethiopia-s-amhara>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/27/africa/ethiopia-massacre-tigray-mahibere-dego-cmd-intl/index.html>

<sup>21</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/19/africa/ethiopia-tigray-rape-investigation-cmd-intl/index.html>

#### 4. INTERNATIONAL DISPUTE: THE GERD'S SECOND FILLING

Also, the contentious issues of the GERD continued in July. In two weeks from 5 July to 19 July, Ethiopia filled the second water reservoir of the mega-dam which was announced on Twitter<sup>22</sup> by the Ethiopian Minister for Water, Irrigation and Energy, Seleshi Bekele. The second filling represents a blow for efforts to reach a consensus on the GERD operations as the action was taken unilaterally by Addis Ababa, without agreement from its downstream neighbours Egypt and Sudan. For example, the EU, who acts as an observer to the African Union-led GERD mediation talks along with the US and the UN, said<sup>23</sup> that "*[it] regrets that Ethiopia has announced the second filling of the... GERD without reaching a prior agreement with downstream partners on this issue.*"

Voices from Cairo have expressed dismay and anger at this recent news. Former Egyptian Minister of Irrigation Mohammed Nasr Allam is quoted<sup>24</sup> in Al-Monitor as saying, "*what Ethiopia is doing is an aggression and a clear threat to the Egyptian and Sudanese national securities.*" Likewise in Khartoum, Sudan's Foreign Minister Maryam El Mahdi in response to Ethiopia's notification regarding the filling said<sup>25</sup> in a letter to the UN Security Council that the move was "*a clear violation of international law and the Declaration of Principles, and an imminent danger and threat to Sudan.*" The aforementioned Declaration of Principles signed in 2015 is, as of yet, the only mutually accepted framework for negotiation between all three States, with the relevant part being, as one analyst summarised<sup>26</sup>, Ethiopia's commitment "*to take the necessary steps to avoid causing a significant harm to Egypt and Sudan, to mitigate this harm in case it happens, and to discuss compensation whenever convenient.*"

The risk of harm to Egypt and Sudan, whether perceived, as Ethiopia contend, or genuine continues to provoke worrying rhetoric of military escalation<sup>27</sup>. In May 2021, 22 African NGOs signed a statement<sup>28</sup> for the UN Security Council expressing

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/second-filling-ethiopias-giant-dam-nearly-complete-state-run-media-2021-07-19/>

<sup>23</sup> [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/101507/grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam-statement-spokesperson-announcement-second-filling\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/101507/grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam-statement-spokesperson-announcement-second-filling_en)

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/egypt-weighs-next-steps-after-ethiopia-completes-second-filling-nile-dam>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-outraged-as-ethiopia-announces-second-filling-of-gerd>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.die-gdi.de/die-aktuelle-kolumne/article/the-declaration-of-principles-on-ethiopias-renaissance-dam-a-breakthrough-or-another-unfair-deal/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.theafricareport.com/85672/is-a-war-between-egypt-and-ethiopia-brewing-on-the-nile/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/african-sudanese-ngos-raise-alarm-bell-over-ethiopian-dam-dispute>

concern that the GERD disagreement “could degenerate into full-blown military confrontations”. Meanwhile, in the aforementioned interview with Allam, he warned<sup>29</sup> “should the international community fail to resume negotiations on these terms, and should Ethiopia continue to act unilaterally, Cairo will move to defend its right to life by using military force.” These ‘terms’, refer to a draft resolution<sup>30</sup> to the UN Security Council submitted by Tunisia that request that the GERD negotiations should resume with the conditions that a timetable for negotiation should be agreed by all, and that international experts and observers should also intervene (Cairo and Khartoum have long-requested that the UN, EU and US should take a more direct role in the AU-led negotiations).

Tensions between Sudan and Ethiopia meanwhile are not only due to the GERD, but a flare-up in tensions at the disputed border region of Al-Fashaga, which developed in part due to the nearby violence in Tigray. Amidst a build-up of military forces of both countries along the border, isolated incidents of violence have occurred. One of the most recent occurrences<sup>31</sup> resulted in Sudan closing the border when a Sudanese Commander ‘disappeared’ while pursuing Ethiopian militias who allegedly had “kidnapped three Sudanese children”.

## 5. A NEW WAVE OF ETHIOPIAN UNILATERALISM?

Despite the range of contextual differences among the discussed tensions both domestic and international, there is a clear intersection between all, and is illustrated by the following event. The first public rally to be held in Addis Ababa after the controversial Ethiopian election was on 22 July 2021, when the government-controlled city administration of the capital held an event to celebrate the second filling of the GERD, which gathered thousands of pro-government supporters in their support for the mega-dam project. But the rally was not only for the GERD, as there was also clear support for the military action in Tigray. Mayor of Addis Ababa, Adanech Abebe said<sup>32</sup> at the rally that she was “standing with and supporting our defence and security forces more than ever before”.

Whilst it is not a complete given and the different factors enjoy varying levels of support, Prime Minister Ahmed enjoys significant domestic support for both his re-election and his policies in Tigray and with regards to the GERD. At least rhetorically,

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/egypt-weighs-next-steps-after-ethiopia-completes-second-filling-nile-dam>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.barrons.com/news/un-draft-resolution-calls-on-ethiopia-to-cease-filling-mega-dam-01625605207>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1899521/middle-east>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.africanews.com/2021/07/22/government-supporters-celebrate-the-second-filling-of-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam/>

to support the Ethiopian government is to support its military activities, and to support its infrastructure projects. With such a recent re-election, the vote, however compromised by irregularities and a lack of ballots in some regions particularly Tigray, has given a significant weight to his policies, and decisions to take such policies unilaterally in spite of international objections or calls for consensus. He has ignored international condemnations of the military campaign in Tigray since violence began last year, in the same way he ignored calls for a consensus on the GERD before its second filling.

The tone of political rhetoric used by Ethiopia towards some international partners, especially those who have criticised the violence in Tigray, demonstrates this strain in relations. For example, following a briefing by Finnish Foreign Minister, Pekka Havisto, to the European Parliament, following his visit to Ethiopia as a European Special Envoy, and his direct criticism of the actions of the Ethiopian government in Tigray, the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement with a level of extraordinarily negative language about Havisto. Whilst claiming<sup>33</sup> the Finnish Minister was stating "*outrageous information*" and "*ludicrous statements*", it went further saying, "*his self-assured confidence to claim nuanced understanding of the country and its people... is not only flawed but it also smacks of a colonial mindset that still lurks in the minds of self-righteous individuals like him.*" The level of language towards a Minister of a European State, both a partner of Ethiopia and acting as a representative of the European Union is alarming.

It is within these intermingled contexts that point towards the future, especially in terms of the viability of international mediation. With such a lack of compromise in these recent events in Tigray and for the GERD, international partners should not expect to have a simple time in negotiating concessions from Ahmed's government on any of these topics and should be prepared to change their approach.

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<sup>33</sup> <https://twitter.com/mfaethiopia/status/1405869818406920196?lang=en>

## About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

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