

## **THE CIVIL WAR IN ETHIOPIA (2020-2022) AND THE AFRICAN UNION'S ROLE IN THE PEACE PROCESS**

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### **Abstract**

The war that erupted between the government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in November 2020 left the country embedded in an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, combining internal displacement, famine, and widespread human rights violations by external forces still present in the region. This research examines the conflict using the Contentious Politics Approach to Civil War (Florea, 2017) and discusses the role of the African Union in the peace negotiations in Pretoria, South Africa. After understanding the structural conditions that led to the authority and legitimacy crisis, and consequently, civil conflict, we identified in the war cycle in Ethiopia several mechanisms of radicalization and militarization. The interference of AU's shuttle diplomacy resulted in the beginning of the peace negotiations and represented a remarkable achievement in independent African conflict resolution. Nonetheless, AU failed to oversee the full implementation of the agreement. The disarmament and demobilization phases were never completed, for instance, and Tigrayans currently find themselves on the edge of another conflict.

### **Keywords**

Civil War, Ethiopia, African Union, Peace Negotiations.

### **Resumo**

A guerra que eclodiu entre o governo da República Federal Democrática da Etiópia e a Frente de Libertação do Povo Tigré (FLPT) em novembro de 2020 deixou o país mergulhado em uma crise humanitária sem precedentes, combinando deslocamento interno, fome e violações generalizadas dos direitos humanos por forças externas ainda presentes na região. Esta pesquisa examina o conflito usando a Abordagem Política Contenciosa da Guerra Civil (Florea, 2017) e discute o papel da União Africana nas negociações de paz em Pretória, África do Sul. Após compreender as condições estruturais que levaram à crise de autoridade e legitimidade e, consequentemente, ao conflito civil, identificamos no ciclo de guerra na Etiópia diversos mecanismos de radicalização e militarização. A interferência da diplomacia de vaivém da UA resultou no início das negociações de paz e representou uma conquista notável na resolução independente de conflitos africanos. No entanto, a UA não conseguiu supervisionar a



implementação integral do acordo. As fases de desarmamento e desmobilização nunca foram concluídas, por exemplo, e os tigrés se encontram atualmente à beira de outro conflito.

### **Palavras-chave**

Guerra Civil, Etiópia, União Africana, Negociações de Paz.

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### **Introduction**

On the 15th of February 2025, the African Union elected a new leader. Held in Addis Ababa, home of the AU's headquarters, delegates from the member countries elected Mahamoud Ali Youssouf for the new mandate. Not far from there, Tigrayans of Mekelle were (and still are) facing the increasing fear of their region relapsing into another civil war. The same AU that elected its new leader last weekend mediated the negotiations and the signature of the peace agreement in November 2022. On the edge of a new conflict, Ethiopia is back in the international eye. The criticism of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement reemerged, and the role of the AU in the negotiation process is being discussed again. In this direction, the present article aims at understanding the role of AU in the peace negotiations in 2020. In order to have this discussion, the conflict itself and its causes must be put under investigation.

During the night of November 3rd, 2020, the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) base in Mekelle, capital of the Tigray Regional State, known also as the Northern Command, was attacked. The federal government, represented by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, blamed the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) for the attack and announced military activities against the group.

The Prime Minister's announcement was followed by two years of intense military and violent conflict between the federal government forces and the Tigray People's Liberation Front. The federal government quickly gained control of Mekelle, forcing the TPLF fighters to disperse and retreat. Nonetheless, regrouping and adopting guerrilla tactics, the TPLF made advances, inflicting heavy losses on the government forces, including plundering military equipment and kidnapping personnel. Amongst change of tactics, human rights violations, and ceasefire announcements, the federal government and the TPLF fought "the most preannounced war in recent African history" (Tronvoll, 2022, p. 163).

Being a multiethnic society, Ethiopia's cultural diversity is usually the primary aspect considered to be the cause of the conflict. However, as advocated in this research, ethnicity alone cannot be the sole explanation for Ethiopia's civil war between 2020 and 2022. To assume this argument is valid would represent enduring Westernised interpretations of African politics, focused on the idea of "tribalism" as the primary driver of conflicts on the continent. We advocate for a comprehensive and multifaceted interpretation of the context in which the conflict occurred, taking into account the



country's multiethnicity, and include topics such as ethnic fragmentation and polarization in our research.

The research relies on the critical historical analysis method. Through the heuristic phase, we collect data and information from primary and secondary sources. After critically evaluating our sources, we commit to synthesizing information and constructing a narrative that explains the political causes of the conflict between 2020 and 2022. Regarding its structure, this article is divided into four sections, besides the introduction and the conclusion. The theoretical framework will be introduced first; the conflict between ENDF and TPLF is discussed and, after, analyzed using the Contentious Politics Approach to Civil War onset (Florea, 2017). Finally, we discuss the role of the AU in the peace negotiations.

### **The Contentious Politics Approach to Civil War Onset**

Using the Contentious Politics Approach to analyze civil war onset implies considering the flexible and uncertain nature of the cycles of contention as essential shapers of the conflict dynamics, from the escalation to its resolution. The framework provides an understanding that a combination of structural conditions and specific contextualized factors generates conflict in a country. Firmly rooted in a mechanism-based approach, the Contentious Politics Approach explains civil conflict as a result of a crisis of authority and legitimacy and two distinct but interdependent mechanisms: radicalization and militarization (Florea, 2017).

The combination of structural conditions and specific mechanisms is central to the argument, considering that many contentious politics have happened across history, and not all of them necessarily turned into civil war. A crisis of authority or legitimacy is required but not sufficient. Radicalization and militarization must shape the conflict's outburst (Florea, 2017). Nonetheless, it is essential to consider that this does not mean other mechanisms have not influenced the contention cycle and its outcomes.

When a country faces a crisis of authority or legitimacy, several indicators emerge, including multiple power contenders challenging the central government's sovereignty, a fragmented political body with undermined functions, and declining capacities. These types of crises are common in weak states, authoritarian regimes, and newly established governments, especially in contexts after an imperial or federal collapse and in ethnically and culturally diverse and fragmented societies (Florea, 2017).

Low-capacity, undemocratic countries are the most common hosts of civil wars worldwide. In contrast, low-capacity democratic countries are known for experiencing military coups and other contentious struggles (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Furthermore, in undemocratic regimes, social movements often have to opt for more extreme and violent performances and repertoires to have their claim heard, considering that peaceful and institutional options have been removed from community reach. Contentious politics can be even more hampered in high-capacity undemocratic regimes due to the most considerable resource availability for repressive actions.



Countries with successful democratic governments and transitions over the decades have been the least common scenarios for civil conflict or other forms of violent contentious politics (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Elections, term limits, and other forms of democracy institutionalization are essential to build a political context that welcomes political participation from ordinary citizens or opposition parties, deepening and entrenching democracy. There is no such thing as a fully consolidated democracy. However, authors have shown that extending the life expectancy of democracy beyond the short term is necessary and assists in preventing authoritarian regression (Schedler, 1998). In other words, long-lasting and stable democracies host political contexts where claim-making is not only accepted but facilitated, and contentious and violent political claim-making tactics are not chosen by civil society and opposition. Hence, where societies have seen multiple and frequent democratic backslides, including regime collapses, democratic values are improbable to take root in a society.

Contention and violence can be ethnically shaped, and hence, so can civil wars. In this direction, some authors have argued that ethnic distribution (polarization and fractionalization) is linked with the intensity of conflicts. Through empirical analysis, studies have shown that polarization influences conflict over public goods, and fractionalization increases conflict when private components are involved (Esteban et al., 2012).

However, there is a distinction between ethnic fractionalization and polarization - the latter having a more considerable influence on civil conflicts. Fractionalization is the probability of two random individuals not belonging to the same group. At the same time, polarization refers to the population distribution among groups, with high polarization indicating a bipolar system. Ethnic conflicts are less likely in highly homogeneous or heterogeneous societies but more likely in countries with a significant minority facing a dominant majority (polarization) (Esteban et al., 2012).

Ethnic-shaped contention can generate structural conditions necessary for civil war to emerge. Nonetheless, in the same direction as Florea (2017), Fearon and Laitin (2003) argued that neither ethnic polarization nor ethnic fractionalization generated civil conflict. Instead, internal wars were mainly the result of conflict accumulation across decades. Also, civil war can be seen in terms of insurgency. Local grievances based on ethnicity can be essential for the local population to support the insurgents (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). Hence, ethnicity influences civil conflict, but there is no causal relationship between ethnic diversity and the conflict.

### **The Ethiopian Civil War (2020 – 2022): the path from hope to war**

On November 4th, 2020, Abiy Ahmed, the Ethiopian Prime Minister, issued a statement informing the Ethiopian population that the last red line had been crossed. The TPLF attacked the Ethiopian National Defense Forces Base, also known as the Northern Command, located in Mekele, the capital of the Tigray region, after "months of continued provocation and incitement for violence." The ENDF was, hence, authorized to carry out military activity to "save the country and the region from spiraling into instability" (Office of the Prime Minister – Ethiopia, 2020a).



Ethiopian Airlines planes, intended for civil use only, were reportedly arriving at Mekelle with special forces troops and equipment. Shots were exchanged at the airport and surrounding areas as Tigrayan political leaders received information about the federal government's activities. The fighting moved to the Northern Command's main base, from where the Tigrayans captured heavy weaponry (Plaut, 2021; Plaut & Vaughan, 2023; Tronvoll, 2022). The Parliament unanimously approved a State of Emergency and, on November 6th, the Prime Minister's Office report informed that the Federal Defense Forces were determined to finish the "criminal enterprise with the least possible cost to the civilian population" (Office of the Prime Minister - Ethiopia, 2020b).

Two weeks after the beginning of the attacks, Mekele was surrounded by federal troops, and as the 72-hour deadline for Tigrayan surrender expired, the civilian population of Tigray's capital was subjected to military attacks. With Mekele under federal control, Tigrayan forces were forced to flee the capital and relocate to rural areas (Ethiopia, 2020; Plaut & Vaughan, 2023).

The central government interpreted taking control over Mekele as a sign of the war's end (Ethiopia, 2020). However, TPLF, momentarily defeated and separated, still had resources and interpreted the takeover of their capital as only the beginning of the conflict. From this moment onwards, Tigrayan troops reorganized, adopted guerrilla strategies, and increased their military arsenal with every attack on federal troops. The first phase of the conflict was marked by TPLF tactical successes (Ethiopia's Tigray Conflict, 2021). Tigrayans recovered many territories previously taken by the federal government, caused heavy losses on enemy troops. Unable to respond to the attacks, the government and allied troops "took out their frustration on the civilian population" (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023, p. 229). During the invasion of cities and houses, women and girls were systematically raped and sexually assaulted. Expectedly, Tigray forces also were accused of committing mass killings, sexual assaults, and systematic rapes after taking over several cities in Afar and Amhara regions (The Acute Risk of Further Atrocity Crimes in Ethiopia, 2023).

As June 2021 ended, Ethiopian forces were forced out of Mekelle after a significant battle that allegedly captured over 9,000 ENDF men. TPLF was in control of Mekelle, and the Central Government declared an instant and unilateral ceasefire (Ethiopia Peace Observatory, 2021; Plaut & Vaughan, 2023; The Acute Risk of Further Atrocity Crimes in Ethiopia, 2023). The announcement was received with hope. However, what happened was "an extension of the genocidal war campaign on Tigray, perhaps the worst stage" (The Acute Risk of Further Atrocity Crimes in Ethiopia, 2023). Using the ceasefire as an instrument for violence, the central government cut the internet signals, discontinued banking activities, and restricted electricity availability, severely constraining the provision of aid (Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update Situation Report, July 9th, 2021 - Ethiopia | ReliefWeb, 2021).

Federal government responses indicated that some damage was done: Abiy revoked the unilateral ceasefire and, with the assistance of different media vehicles, convinced the population that war was necessary, a patriotic endeavor, even asking citizens to march against the 'terrorist' TPLF "with every weapon and power" (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023; Standard4, 2021). Categorizing TPLF as a terrorist group was strategic, considering that



it opened possibilities of counterterrorism attacks that would not be available otherwise, restricted by international humanitarian law and human rights regulations.

TPLF forces attempted to capture the city of Mille but were targeted with intensive aerial bombing. Drones sent by Turkey and China, for instance, led Ethiopia to a significant victory in the Afar region and rapid advances toward the north (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023; The Acute Risk of Further Atrocity Crimes in Ethiopia, 2023).

As a strategy to hold the enemy, Tigrayans started to call on the international community to initiate peace talks and intervene. Christmas Eve saw, after more than one year, both sides announcing ceasefires. Nonetheless, by January 2022, drone attacks resumed, especially in civilian areas. Both sides of the conflict exchanged accusations of perpetrating military attacks, while requesting the international community to act and lead the peace negotiations (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023).

### **Ethnic Polarization and Fragmentation in Ethiopia**

Ethiopia is both ethnically fragmented and polarized. The second largest population of the African continent (more than 126 million) is composed of approximately 90 ethnic groups, divided into nine regional states and two administrative councils. The most significant part of the population belongs to four ethnic groups (Oromo, Amhara, Somali, and Tigray), and more than half of the ethnic groups (at least 56 Indigenous groups) of Ethiopia are concentrated in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region. ("Country Summary," n.d.).

Numerically, there is some level of polarization in the country, as the biggest ethnic group comprises more than one-third of the population (Oromo, 35,8%). Nevertheless, when considering the political aspect of the concept of "majority," other groups stand out as the most prominent ethnicities: Amhara and Tigray have been representing political majorities by controlling state resources alternatively since the establishment of modern Ethiopia, without being the numerical majority (24,1% and 5,7%, respectively) ("Country Summary," n.d.).

Party formation and proliferation in Ethiopia are processes intensely influenced by ethnicity. As we consider the constant overlapping of ethnicity and aspects of public life in Ethiopia (agriculture, land demarcation, economics, administrative routines, education, etc.), the expected consequence is a high number of political parties to reflect an ethnically diverse society with ethnic-based political agendas.

NEBE published a list of the accredited political parties in the country in 2022, which contained 67 parties. Of the total, more than 40 have ethnic groups mentioned in their names, being the Ethiopian party system a concrete example of the ethnically fragmented society it represents (Political Parties | National Election Board of Ethiopia, n.d.).

Ethnicity plays a vital role in Ethiopian politics and the 2020 conflict. Ethnic divisions shaped contention and contentious performances, as well as the mechanisms of radicalization taken by both actors during the conflict. As discussed previously, the role of ethnicity in the conflict is important. However, there is no direct causality relation between ethnic diversity and conflict, neither in theory nor in the case of Ethiopia.



## **Contentious Politics Approach to the Ethiopian Civil Wars Onset (2020 - 2022)**

Exactly three weeks after the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic, the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) announced the indefinite postponement of regional and national elections, to take place initially in May and, later, at the end of August of 2020 ("Ethiopia Postpones June 5 Parliamentary Elections," 2021).

In June 2020, the Tigray Regional State Council announced its decision to hold elections despite the federal decision. The Council claimed that neither NEBE nor any other federal government institution had the authority and legal grounds to announce the postponement of the regional elections: the holding of polls was predicted in the regional Constitution ("Ethiopia Postpones June 5 Parliamentary Elections," 2021).

The Ethiopian population had to choose members for the House of People's Representatives (HPR) and the Regional Legislative Councils. The 2020 elections were expected to be the freest, fairest, and most competitive since 2005. The timing was also an issue: the mandate of the Parliament was supposed to end in September 2020. Hence, elections needed to be held by August at the latest (Steering Ethiopia's Tigray Crisis Away from Conflict | Crisis Group, 2020). NEBE and TPLF exchanged accusations for months, with NEBE claiming that TPLF had no legal grounds to organize an election logistically and deploy a workforce, for instance. NEBE was the only institute with the mandate to execute an election impartially. However, the TPLF claimed that the institute was only a tool to facilitate elections when they happen, not an organ that holds any decision-making power (Tsehay & Chekol, 2021).

The Board was created in 1992, after the end of the Derg regime, as an independent electoral institution under the 1995 constitution, with responsibilities to conduct elections, announce results, register voters and political parties, for instance (*Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*, n.d.). In this direction, NEBE was the institution overseeing all Ethiopian elections, many of which were criticized for impartiality and for favouring the leading party of the ruling coalition, the TPLF.

Reformed after Abiy's ascension to PM, Birtukan Mideksa, a former TPLF opposition leader, was appointed as chairperson (*Birtukan's Appointment as NEBE's Chief Crucial to Realize Genuine Election System*, n.d.). None of those reforms explicitly equipped NEBE with the power to postpone elections. Articles of a proclamation from 2019 include mentions to the responsibility of deciding on "matters necessary for the proper execution of free, fair and peaceful elections" and taking measures "to resolve issues that may arise in the electoral process" (*Election Laws | National Election Board of Ethiopia*, n.d.).

Further analysis of the issue of the postponement of the elections is made on Tronvoll (2024) and Mengie (2022), for instance. The main goal here is to locate NEBE's announcement in a broader context of the authority and legitimacy crisis in Ethiopia: the federal government instrumentalized NEBE's decision to extend its mandate and weaken opposition, and the TPLF leadership criticized NEBE and defied its instructions, questioning the legality and authority of the whole government.



After a closed-door meeting, the House of Federation (HoF) decided that the elections in Tigray were illegal. Hence, whatever the results were, they would be considered non-applicable, non-effective, and non-binding. Abiy Ahmed, in the same direction, mentioned taking "the necessary actions against those who are engaged in illegal political acts that threaten the constitution and constitutional order." (Abbay Media apud Tsehay & Chekol). Despite these two precise positions from the central government, TPLF opened polls in September (Tsehay & Chekol, 2021).

The party violated the decision of the federal government, questioning not only its authority but also its legitimacy. The 5-year term for federal political positions has ended, and elections need to be held to fill public offices in Addis - the same elections that were not conducted. Hence, TPLF argued that neither the HoF nor the HPR officeholders represented Tigray and its people. The very existence of the federal government was being denied by Tigrayan leaders (Tsehay & Chekol, 2021).

As discussed previously, there is a bigger probability of finding problems with authority and/or legitimacy in four contexts: weak states, authoritarian regimes, newly established governments, and ethnically plural societies. Despite the difficulty of inferring the level of democracy of any country, it is essential to highlight here that Ethiopia, immediately before the conflict onset, presented itself with three out of the four contexts mentioned. Ethiopia can be labeled as an undemocratic and low-capacity regime, given its low level of democracy institutionalization, the limited power transitions over decades, and the persistent and numerous electoral issues, among other factors. In addition, considering the cycle of the war, Abiy's government was extremely recent and was showing clear signs of authoritarianism, as the PM was growing to be the next African Big Man.

### **Radicalization and Militarization: Actions taken by the Central government**

It is essential to understand that the federal government has invested in an anti-TPLF campaign composed of several fronts since Abiy's ascension to power. In this piece, we consider them as radicalizing actions, as the central government increased the resources mobilized to achieve a specific goal: to undermine the TPLF influence in Ethiopian politics.

TPLF interpreted the creation of the Prosperity Party as an active movement to remove power from the hands of TPLF. In a meeting with only three out of the four founder parties of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition, the creation of a new unitary party system was voted on. Although almost anything was done to institutionalize the new ruling system, the TPLF interpreted Abiy's action as unconstitutional. In an attempt at a conciliatory movement, the PM tried to convince TPLF to join the new party under particular and already defined circumstances. In its turn, TPLF refused to integrate the Prosperity Party. In addition, a large number of Tigrayans were removed from public office, especially from security and military institutions, prosecuted, and imprisoned. Former members occupied high positions in the chain of command (Colonels, Majors) and were responsible for defence logistics, intelligence, and tactical operations coordination - having strategic access to information and resources ("Ethiopia Parliament Dissolves Tigray Leadership"). The primary justification for the



arrests was accusations of corruption and human rights violations. Most accusations were made in sentences without proper evidence to back up the process (Tessemi, 2018).

Removed from the government, the new party, and even from public positions across different government institutions, the Tigrayan leadership left (or was forced to leave) to return to Mekelle. The pro-government media vehicles reported that returning was an embittered announcement of defeat, while TPLF and its supporters were interpreting it as a necessary homecoming embedded in a bigger narrative of a sacrifice done for the greater good (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023).

In addition, following the general discourse of the public manifestations between 2015 and 2018, TPLF was the chosen culprit for all and every negative aspect of the country. Abiy's various proposed reforms were presented to the population against the backdrop of previous government errors. From the initial speech of "You are the motor that runs Ethiopia" (PM Abiy to Tigray, 2018), the Prime Minister has come a long way to characterize the TPLF-led government as "the dark years" and to describe the opponents of his reforms as saboteurs and "daytime hyenas" (Gardner, 2024).

Leaders of opposition groups and political enemies of TPLF, previously exiled or in the diaspora, returned to the country after Abiy issued their forgiveness or dropped any charges. Many of them were even named to occupy public offices. After the 2005 elections, many people were prosecuted for crimes against the Constitution by the TPLF-led government (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023).

Regarding militarization, the federal government invested heavily in reforming and modernizing the military, especially training and reorienting the regional special forces allied to the central authorities. Reports indicate an 88% increase in military spending directed towards expanding surveillance and enhancing drone capabilities, among other initiatives. Also, agreements with Western partners (United Kingdom) to train pilots, and special forces were reached (Tian et al., "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2022.", "Shifts in Ethiopia's Military Strategy - World - Al-Ahram Weekly.")

The federal government invested in a campaign of securitization and authoritarian control, including mass arrests, human rights violations, and blockages, increasing repression and violence towards ethnonationalist groups not only in Tigray but also in the Oromia and the Benishangul-Gumuz regions (Kelecha, 2021; Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). Also, Tigray government insiders reported using Ethiopian Airlines to move military personnel and equipment across the country. Forty heavily armed men were detained at Mekele airport without any explanation or justification for their presence in the region.

### **Radicalization and Militarization: Actions taken by the TPLF**

Most TPLF acts of radicalization came as responses to federal government positions and in the form of public speeches and answers in interviews. After the publication of a report implying that TPLF was involved in the assassination of the Oromo singer Hachalu Hundessa, Getachew Reda, the party spokesman at the time, said that scapegoating TPLF was a trend and accused the Prime Minister and his government of being in chaos



(AfricaNews, 2020). Accusations of lies, controlling the media, selective justice, and attempts to corner the people of Tigray were common, amongst many others. After the decision of the finance ministry to send resources directly to Tigray local administrations as a sort of punishment for the holding of elections, the party leadership accused the decision of being unconstitutional and 'tantamount to a declaration of war' (Steering Ethiopia's Tigray Crisis Away from Conflict | Crisis Group, 2020).

By holding regional elections, despite the federal decision to postpone and the numerous threats and speeches made by the PM regarding the consequences of such an act of defiance, the TPLF was responsible for a significant escalation in the already tense relationship between the regional and federal governments. No federal government would remain indifferent to an extensive and public demonstration of disrespect to its authority and legitimacy. The TPLF leadership, as once the ruling party of Ethiopia, was not naive to believe their acts would not have consequences.

Considering TPLF militarization actions, an investigation by the Attorney General's office generated a report pointing to the crimes committed by TPLF against the ENDF. Besides pointing to the fact that the TPLF as a whole was making sure that enough food and fuel were available before initiating war, the report indicated that after Abiy's ascension to power, Tigray Regional State started training an extra 5,000 special forces per year (Abrehet, 2021).

It is relevant to highlight that acquiring military resources during the fighting was extremely important for TPLF forces to defend, advance, and conquer many territories across Tigray and Amhara, for instance. In fact, on the very first day of the conflict, during the attack on the Northern Command base, TPLF fighters seized a large number of weapons and killed and captured a high number of high-ranking officers and resistant soldiers. TPLF guerrilla tactics were also crucial for several victories during the conflict and, consequently, for taking hold of military equipment. These strategies were deployed in the attack on the Northern Command buildings, initiating the conflict, and in the attack on Kombolcha, a strategic location between Addis and the northern region. TPLF forces were accused of killing 100 ethnic Amharics and looting military equipment ("Tigray Rebels Accused of 'Summarily Executing' 100 in Kombolcha"). Also, after the beginning of the conflict, TPLF implemented force enlistment strategies, augmenting their military personnel (Paravicini & Houreld, 2022).

### **Strategies, expectations, and peace negotiations**

The initial phases of the peace negotiation process, led by the African Union, was marked by what the AU itself calls shuttle diplomacy between Addis Ababa and Mekele. The High Representative for the Horn of Africa had begun discreet and direct engagements with parties involved and key political actors in the country, where he advocated for unconditional ceasefire and cessation of hostilities, unhindered humanitarian access and political dialogue without any preconditions. When both parties showed disposition for negotiating, the AU began the bureaucratic process to bring everyone to the table (Kodjo, n.d.).



According to Zekarias Abebe (2022), there were some sticking points about the AU leadership of the peace negotiation process. The TPLF leadership expressed reservations about the neutrality of the institution's representatives, citing the proximity of former Nigerian President Obasanjo to Abiy Ahmed. In addition, the TPLF also demanded the lifting of the blockade and restoration of basic services in the region before the beginning of the talks. The federal government wanted to see more indications of an agreement before resuming basic services (Abebe, 2022). This proves that human rights were being violated as electricity and banking services remained cut and aid was impeded in the region in order to have negotiation leverage.

Despite apparent impediments, negotiations started in Pretoria, South Africa, on October 25th, 2022. The AU organized a High-Level Panel where representatives had direct and confidential negotiation and plenary sessions were held to monitor progress and confirm areas of agreement. Representing AU were the African Union High Representative for the Horn of Africa and former Nigerian President, Olusegun Obasanjo, by the former Kenyan President, Uhuru Kenyatta, and by the former Deputy President of South Africa, Dr. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngucka. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the United Nations, and the Government of the United States also participated as observers. The AU report on the negotiation process highlights the three mediation principles followed by the organization during the talks: consent, relevance and ownership, with the Panel adopting a mere facilitative approach. On November 2nd, the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) was signed – also referred to as the Pretoria Agreement (Opata, 2022).

The role of the African Union in the peace negotiations was unprecedented and became a concrete representation of the motto "African Solution to African Problems". The document published by the AU about the process includes the lessons learned during the process and mentions AU's leadership and ownership promoting, as well as management of the media vehicles and engagement with observers (Abraham, 2025). Considering the high complexity of the conflict and topics discussed, mediating the signature of the CoHA is an excellent achievement for the African Union.

Nonetheless, when discussing the implementation of the Agreement, the AU was not as successful. A direct channel of communication was established between the senior military commanders to implement the measures agreed in Pretoria and a Joint Planning Committee was formed to develop a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) strategy. However, there were few advances, especially when it came to dialogue, accountability, reconstruction, the DDR process and the presence of non-ENDF forces in Tigray (The Acute Risk of Further Atrocity Crimes in Ethiopia, 2023).

The power struggle is currently migrating inwards the TPLF, and the region is on the edge of another conflict (Cascais, 2025). The head of the interim administration and the party leader, Debretsion Gebremichael, were replaced by Getachew Reda. The TPLF is divided regarding this replacement and its implications for the relationship with the central government. Getachew was part of the peace negotiations in Pretoria and is criticized for being more aligned with Abiy, as the PM nominated Getachew as his ministerial advisor on East African Affairs.



Eritrean interference in the region also exacerbates the tense relationship between the central government and Tigray. While Getachew supporters seek alignment with the central government, Debretsion supporters are aligning with Eritrea to explore the current rivalry between Ethiopia and Eritrea over sea access. Abiy formally denied any intention to militarily invade Eritrea to grant access to the Red Sea, but mentioned several times its preparedness to military action, if that is needed. The conclusion of the construction work on the Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam (GERD) also affects stability in the region, considering Egypt and Sudan, for instance, are long opposing Ethiopia on the topic - as the GERD will affect the water levels of the Nile, resources which Egyptian and Sudanese government are highly dependant on.

Lasting peace is far from being a reality in Tigray - but it could have been closer if the AU had maintained its efforts during the agreement implementation phase. It seemed more concerned with receiving praise for an unprecedented win than with actually working towards stability and peace in the region. It is clear that the complexity of the issue and the involved parties' predisposition to peace are important factors to be considered, and there is only so much AU can do if the parties involved are not willing to compromise. In this direction, the same structural conditions that facilitated the onset of the civil war may also be acting as impediments to the full implementation of the agreement. Weak and undemocratic regimes, as well as ethnic fragmentation, are possible factors, amongst many others, influencing the lack of sustainable peace - just as they influenced the presence of violent contention. This is an open path for research.

## Conclusion

When analyzing the period immediately before the conflict that erupted on November 3rd, 2020, we can conclude that the authority and legitimacy crisis occurred when some mobilization performances related to the mechanisms of radicalization and militarization were already underway. The government had already begun its media campaign against Tigray. It intensified the ethnic discussion inside the political realm when TPLF refused to comply with the decision to postpone regional elections. The crisis of legitimacy and authority is a consequence of the central government's and TPLF's increased use of radicalization mechanisms.

Also, we argue that Abiy Ahmed, representing the central government, focused more on radicalization mechanisms, considering that he, as the country leader, controlled an already satisfactory array of material resources, such as military equipment and trained personnel. These military resources were already deployed to control and suppress opposition in other regions, such as Oromia. The balance of power, initially, was explicitly pending towards the central government.

However, at the official beginning of the conflict, TPLF drastically intensified its militarization mechanisms, acquiring considerable amounts of weapons and other equipment and organizing and training units to use guerrilla tactics. This strategy brought some military victories for TPLF forces and, even if momentarily, altered the balance of power in their favor.



As the humanitarian crisis worsened, international eyes focused more frequently on Ethiopia. The beginning of peace negotiations between ENDF and TPLF resulted from international pressure and intervention, as well as from resource draining and claims that both parties were ready to negotiate. When conversations in Pretoria, South Africa, resulted in the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, the balance of power tilted back to the central government.

As per the negotiation process, it is possible to conclude that the African Union leadership was essential for the signature of the CoHA and without the shuttle diplomacy missions and the High-Level Panel and talks facilitated by the AU representatives, the conflict would not have ended within two years. What the international media and international community saw happening in Pretoria in 2022 was an incredible demonstration of power, diplomacy and African agency in regards to African conflicts. No external participant played a pivotal role in the preparation, negotiation or implementation phases.

What remains to be seen is a more active role from the AU in guaranteeing the affected region can see stable peace and human rights being restored unhindered, mitigating further radicalization and militarization actions from the parties involved - TPLF, the federal government and Eritrea, as well.

Press releases strongly encouraging the parties to uphold the obligations agreed during the signature of the CoHA may not be enough. A closer look to the post-war context in Tigray is needed, as the population is still suffering from the consequences of the conflict, such as lack of infrastructure and job opportunities, for instance. The AUs' position of promoting ownership and allowing the own parties to establish the agenda, as it assumed a facilitator role, was appropriate for the peace negotiations only. At this moment, AU needs to provide more assertive guidance and actions towards conflict prevention and peacebuilding and investing resources into projects in key areas in the region: governance, free and fair elections, human rights, justice and disarmament.

Activating networks with local NGOs and cooperatives can be the solution for increasing formal employment and improving the post-war economy; reinstating the Joint Monitoring Committee with the participation of local leaders and activists can provide inside insights about what are the actual needs of the Tigrayans and provide more accurate humanitarian assistance; implementing international elections observers and providing technical assistance for an electoral reform can represent a significant step towards fair elections, and officially discussing accountability and transparency in regards to the issue of war crimes can be an important milestone for the victims and their families. In addition, mediating the tense relationship between Ethiopia and its neighbours is crucial to prevent further conflicts, as the relationship with Eritrea is a key point of contention within the TPLF, and any Ethiopian military incursion into the neighboring country may reignite the conflict in Tigray.

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