



Toward an End to Ethiopia's Federal-Tigray Feud

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What's new? Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government and his rivals in Tigray are on a collision course over the latter's plan to hold regional elections in defiance of federal authority. If Tigray proceeds, Abiy's government is ready to consider any new regional administration illegitimate.

Why does it matter? Although Abiy has ruled out military intervention, federal officials threaten other punitive measures that could lead the parties to blows. Ongoing tensions also could push Tigray to trigger constitutional secession procedures, further raising the stakes and intensifying conflict risks with Addis Ababa and Amhara region.

What should be done? To defuse the situation, Tigray should pause its election plans and Addis Ababa should embrace talks over potential compromises. Given the acrimony, mediation by continental heavyweights may be needed. Abiy should also consider backing a national dialogue to reset Ethiopia's vexed transition.

I. Overview

Ethiopia's federal government and Tigray region are edging toward confrontation over a disputed regional election plan. The country is already reeling from more deadly unrest after the 29 June murder of a musician regarded as a folk hero in Oromia region, the epicentre of protests that eventually brought Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power in 2018. Now it faces another crisis, this time pitting federal against Tigray's authorities. Abiy has been at odds with Tigrayan elites, many of whom he has purged from government and state institutions since taking office. A June decision by the Tigray State Council to hold regional elections, defying a federal ruling that all polls should be delayed due to COVID-19, has further ratcheted up tensions. While previously threatening to take "any measures" to stop the vote, the prime minister has now ruled out military action against Tigray. To end the standoff, Tigray should pause its elections plans and Addis Ababa should embrace dialogue with Tigray to address the electoral dispute and ease the underlying causes of their destabilising acrimony.

The row over Tigray's decision comes after the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia abandoned vote preparations in March due to the arrival of COVID-19. In June, just two days after a separate federal ruling stated that no elections could take place until nine to twelve months after federal health authorities deem the pandemic under con-

trol, the Tigray State Council announced that it would still hold its own election, scheduled between 17-20 September. In theory, it makes little or no material difference to the balance of power within Tigray whether these elections occur or not. The region's ruling party would continue to govern even if they were deferred, and if the polls go ahead it would likely win them anyway. But the issue of whether Tigray can legally hold elections has taken on existential significance for Ethiopia. Tigray officials insist that it is their constitutional right to run polls, saying the federal decision to extend all regional governments' terms was illegal. Federal officials, meanwhile, reject Tigray's constitutional interpretation and so categorise its actions as unlawful.

Underlying the argument between the federal and regional governments is a power struggle between Abiy and Tigrayan elites, once at the helm of Ethiopia's ruling coalition that the prime minister took over when he came to power in 2018. Tigray officials feel that federal authorities are out to punish their ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), ever since Abiy assumed office and especially since the TPLF refused to merge into Abiy's new Prosperity Party that formed in 2019. The spat has escalated in recent months, playing out via federal arrests of senior TPLF officials, federal probes into TPLF-linked companies and accusations from Abiy's allies that the TPLF is behind a campaign of national destabilisation, including the late June assassination of Hachalu Hundessa, a popular Oromo musician whose murder set off some of the worst intercommunal violence the country has seen during its troubled transition.

Despite Abiy's recent statement committing to avoid military confrontation or cutting federal funds to Tigray over the election standoff, there are others in his political corner spoiling for a fight. Federal officials indicate that the election could justify a range of punitive measures against the region, which could bring the parties to blows. Such measures could also provoke Tigrayan leaders into triggering constitutional secession clauses in response to what they see as a steady erosion of their self-rule rights within Ethiopia's federation. This step would be deeply provocative not only to the federal government, but also to Tigray's southern neighbour, Amhara region, whose elites say they would fight to gain control of territories that Tigray would take with it if it were to secede. Any armed confrontation over this or other flashpoints, and federal involvement in them, would test the national army's cohesion, given the large numbers of mid-ranking Tigrayan officers, some of whose loyalties may be to the region.

Given the seriousness of all this, respected African statesmen and Ethiopian elders, including religious leaders, should seek to coax the parties away from conflict. Ethiopian governments have historically brooked no outside intervention and Abiy may bristle at the idea of external meddling in domestic affairs, but a continental heavyweight could make a difference. The African Union's chair, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, who should have both sides' ears, could work with other African leaders to bring them to the table. The aim should be to persuade Tigray to pause its elections, pending constitutional interpretation from the House of Federation, the upper house of parliament, on the legality of such a vote, and press the parties to begin dialogue on steps to address their rift. If Tigray proceeds with a vote before the House gives its opinion or in defiance of it, Addis Ababa should accept this decision, as long as the region agrees to hold another poll when the rest of the country does,

thereby reducing the duration of this irregular arrangement. Abiy should stick to his pledge not to intervene militarily.

More broadly, it is time for the prime minister and other Ethiopian leaders to give serious consideration to a national dialogue. Abiy and his aides are unenthusiastic, given their conviction that the opposition has already been given unprecedented opportunities to voice their grievances since 2018. Yet the country's multiple, growing and interrelated fault lines have made such a national dialogue more necessary than ever. Such a process should aim at resetting Ethiopia's vexed transition and ironing out bitter divisions among its most powerful regions as well as between supporters and opponents of the country's ethnic federalist system.

II. The Election Dispute

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has added complexity and tension to Ethiopia's already fragile transition.¹ In March, after the pandemic struck, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia abandoned preparations for a general election that had been set for 29 August. Parliament approved a five-month state of emergency the following month. On 10 June, the House of Federation, the upper house of parliament tasked with constitutional interpretation and populated by delegates from regional councils, almost all dominated by Prime Minister Abiy's ruling Prosperity Party, decided that elections would be held nine to twelve months after health authorities determine that the pandemic is sufficiently controlled.² Two days later, the Tigray State Council, the only such council in which the Prosperity Party does not hold sway, announced that it would nonetheless proceed with regional elections to determine who sits on that council.³

The tussle over electoral timetables comes after opposition voices expressed frustration at what they see as the prime minister's unilateral manner in bringing about an "indefinite" suspension of national elections.⁴ Parts of the opposition, especially in Abiy's home state Oromia, were instrumental in bringing him to power and resented being shut out of decision-making, especially after the government extended its own term due to COVID-19. They want a formal role or at least for Abiy to consult them more regularly during the interim period, at a minimum over election-related issues; they also seek an electoral timetable that is neither open-ended nor decided by Abiy appointees.⁵

Delaying polls due to the pandemic was arguably a necessary step, but deadly unrest in Oromia in early July demonstrates the potential dangers in Abiy's doing so

¹ For background, see Crisis Group Africa Reports N°269, *Managing Ethiopia's Unsettled Transition*, 21 February 2019; and N°283, *Keeping Ethiopia's Transition on the Rails*, 16 December 2019. See also Crisis Group Commentary, "Managing the Politics of Ethiopia's COVID-19 Crisis", 15 April 2020.

² "House extends federal, regional State Councils' terms", Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 10 June 2020.

³ Samuel Gebre, "Ethiopia's Tigray region to proceed with vote, stoking political tensions", Bloomberg, 12 June 2020.

⁴ Morris Kiruga, "Ethiopia: indefinite postponement of polls raising political tempers", *The Africa Report*, 25 May 2020.

⁵ Crisis Group Commentary, "Managing the Politics of Ethiopia's COVID-19 Crisis", op. cit. "Seven opposition parties propose one-year extension with limited government power", Ezega, 13 May 2020.

without consulting his rivals. The violence was triggered by the murder of Hachalu Hundessa, a popular Oromo musician.⁶ But even before his killing, two main Oromo opposition parties had warned that the situation in the region was combustible, largely as a result of the Abiy government's unilateral decision to extend its term.⁷ Despite the TPLF and other opponents urging the federal government to adopt a more inclusive approach in managing the election delay, the administration moved against opponents in response to the July turbulence, arresting 7,000 people, including much of the Oromo nationalist opposition leadership.⁸

The most vociferous objections to the House of Federation's vote delay came from the Tigray People's Liberation Front, which calls it unconstitutional. The TPLF announced that it would proceed with the vote in Tigray, which it is set to hold between 17-20 September.⁹ Without asking for a formal ruling from the House of Federation, the ruling Tigray party declared that self-rule rights granted by Article 39 of the constitution are non-negotiable and supersede the National Electoral Board's role overseeing votes.¹⁰ It insists that any election delay beyond the constitutional deadline, even given the pandemic and the House of Federation's decision on the matter, breaches the constitution.¹¹ Further entrenching the dispute, Tigray established its own election commission in mid-July after the national board declared on 24 June that Tigray's government lacked the mandate to hold a vote.¹²

Federal officials also believe that the law is on their side. Article 55 of Ethiopia's constitution states that the federal parliament enforces "political rights established by the constitution and electoral laws and procedures". The 10 June House of Federation decision explicitly stated that it applied to regional administrations as well, while the constitution also says the National Electoral Board runs all votes. In a late July letter sent to Tigray's government, the House of Federation reiterated that holding a regional election would violate the constitution, and thus by implication that any new Tigray administration sworn in after such an election would be illegitimate.¹³

Addis Ababa's rhetoric has at times been belligerent. Federal officials in June claimed that the government would stop the vote and would consider any newly elected Tigray government illegitimate.¹⁴ Some officials asserted that they would reassess

⁶ See Crisis Group Statement, "Defusing Ethiopia's Latest Perilous Crisis", 3 July 2020.

⁷ Ibid. A top ruling-party official told Crisis Group in a July telephone interview that an "axis of evil" comprising the TPLF, Oromo nationalist rebels and Egypt was behind the destabilisation. "Shimilis Abdisa: TPLF and OLA Shane behind assassination of Hachalu Hundessa", Halgan Media, 2 July 2020.

⁸ Mahlet Fasil, "Inside the trial of Ethiopia's opposition politicians", *Addis Standard*, 30 July 2020.

⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, TPLF politburo member, August 2020.

¹⁰ "Proclamation No. 1/1995: A Proclamation of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia", *Federal Negarit Gazeta of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia*, 21 August 1995.

¹¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, TPLF politburo member, July 2020.

¹² "Tigray State Council approves appointment of regional electoral commission officials", *Addis Standard*, 16 July 2020. "Ethiopia rejects Tigray region's call for election, citing pandemic", Reuters, 24 June 2020.

¹³ "HoF urges Tigray to stop unconstitutional move to hold election", Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 1 August 2020.

¹⁴ On 13 June, the prime minister's spokesman Nigusu Tilahun said the federal government would enforce its election postponement decision, implying action to prevent Tigray's poll. "Since the decision of the Tigray Regional Council to hold elections is unconstitutional, the government will respect the decision of the Electoral Board", Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 13 June 2020.

financial grants to Tigray, which amount to half the region's budget, if it were to go ahead with its election.¹⁵ In late 2019, a federal official told Crisis Group that the government had a case then for interrupting transfers to Tigray because the region was allegedly using the money to fund a regional security apparatus hostile to federal rule.¹⁶ Other officials went so far as to hint at military action. According to one interviewed in July: "If they [the TPLF] continue to undermine the existing constitution and government structure, then we will do whatever it takes to stop them doing that. The federal government will take all necessary measures".¹⁷ In May, Abiy himself said:

Unconstitutional attempts to undertake illegal elections will result in harm to the country and the people. Therefore, the government will be forced to take any measures to assure the safety of the people and the country.¹⁸

In late July, the prime minister issued a helpful and forceful clarification, characterising the idea of military action against the region as "insane talk" and stressing that he would not punish Tigray with budget cuts.¹⁹ This clarification has not assuaged the concerns of Tigrayan leaders, however. Many among them read Abiy's May statement as a threat to send in troops to stop the vote and dismiss his late July remarks as a public display of peaceful intent on the part of a prime minister whose actions and allies – they maintain – are pushing the parties toward confrontation and belie his *medemer* (roughly translated as "synergy") doctrine preaching unity and peace.²⁰ Tigrayan officials say their party and regional government still face sustained pressure from Addis Ababa, and maintain that holding the election is a matter of principle.²¹

III. The TPLF vs. Abiy

Underlying the rancour between the Prosperity Party and TPLF is a power struggle pitting Abiy and his allies against Tigrayan elites. Once at the helm of ethno-nationalist rebel groups that overthrew a centralising military regime in 1991, the TPLF was key to building an ethnic federalist system that established semi-autonomous units along

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, senior Tigray officials, July 2020. Tigray received 50 per cent of its budget from the federal government in the fiscal year ending 7 July 2020. "Analysis of the 2019/20 Federal Budget Proclamation", UNICEF, November 2019; "Tigray regional state approves annual budget of 16.7 billion birr", Zehabesha, 7 July 2019.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, federal official, Addis Ababa, December 2019.

¹⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, federal official, July 2020. In response to a question about whether "all necessary measures" could lead to civil war, the official said: "Could be civil war. Premature to give it a name. Maybe internal resistance will surface in TPLF".

¹⁸ "Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed: 'We are building a constitutional democracy'", *Ethiopia Insight*, 14 May 2020.

¹⁹ Abiy said, "What could possibly make the federal government wage war on Tigray region? This is insane talk". Regarding the Tigray budget cut issue, he added, "We've never done that, nor will we ever do that". "Interview with PM Dr Abiy Ahmed conducted in Tigrigna language", Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 27 July 2020. Tigrigna is an alternate spelling of Tigrinya, the name of the Tigray language.

²⁰ Crisis Group telephone interviews, TPLF politburo members, June 2020.

²¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Tigray official, July 2020.

ethno-linguistic lines.²² It spearheaded the four-party ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which held power for a quarter-century until 2019, overseeing rapid economic growth but severely restricting civil liberties. The TPLF entrenched itself in federal security institutions and its top officials managed important state-controlled economic sectors. Opponents criticise its conduct in these years, pointing to its suppression of civil and self-determination rights even as it presented itself as the guardian of autonomy for groups downtrodden before 1991.²³ Others oppose the ethnic federalist system the TPLF instituted, saying it fosters communal division by devolving power to regions organised according to ethnicity.²⁴

The protests that brought Abiy to power and steps he has taken since to weaken the TPLF form the backdrop to today's dispute. Beginning in 2015, protesters in Oromia and Amhara, the country's two most populous regions, rose up against perceived TPLF hegemony and state repression. They were supported by ruling elites from those two regions, who outmanoeuvred the TPLF to instal Abiy as prime minister in April 2018. Amid economic and political liberalisation, in June 2018 the premier removed the TPLF head of national intelligence Getachew Assefa – now wanted by federal prosecutors though still serving in the TPLF's politburo – and gradually ousted all federal ministers belonging to the party.²⁵ These moves were popular with many Ethiopians who blamed the TPLF for the previous authoritarian system's oppression.

TPLF leaders chafe at their treatment. They accuse Addis Ababa of unduly purging Tigrayan civil servants and depict federal prosecutions against Tigrayan officials for graft and rights abuses as unfair, insofar as ruling elites from all regions engaged in such behaviour during the EPRDF era. As they see it, these measures reflect a broader effort to blame the TPLF for all Ethiopia's woes. They point in particular to the accusation levelled by federal officials against the TPLF for killing Hundessa, which they dismiss as a "flat-out lie".²⁶ They say mobs have killed and displaced Tigrayans in Oromia and Amhara partly because of the political atmosphere created by Abiy.²⁷ The TPLF's decision not to join Abiy's new Prosperity Party, which he pulled together with his allies in December 2019 to replace the EPRDF, on the grounds that its unitary structure would undermine hard-won regional autonomy, represents a significant crack in Ethiopia's political edifice. The move made the TPLF's 38 lawmakers the sole opposition bloc in the federal parliament while Tigray is the only region not run by the Prosperity Party.

Increasingly angry relations between Addis Ababa and Mekelle, Tigray's capital, thus colour the election dispute. In itself, if Tigray's government were to cancel elections for its state council, it would not matter to the regional balance of power, as the TPLF would continue to control the regional administration. Nor would Addis lose out materially if it allowed the elections to go forward – the TPLF would win and continue to rule. That both sides have stuck to their positions on the elections has

²² For background, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°143, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, 4 September 2009.

²³ See, eg, Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°146, *Time for Ethiopia to Bargain with Sidama over Statehood*, 4 July 2019.

²⁴ See Crisis Group Report, *Ethnic Federalism and its Discontents*, op. cit.

²⁵ See Crisis Group Report, *Managing Ethiopia's Unsettled Transition*, op. cit.

²⁶ "TPLF denies involvement in singer's death", *Ethiopia Observer*, 10 July 2020.

²⁷ See Crisis Group Report, *Managing Ethiopia's Unsettled Transition*, op. cit.

less to do with the polls themselves than with broader issues of power. For Tigray leaders, it is about resisting erosion of the regional autonomy granted by the constitution.²⁸ They are determined to stop any such change because they, and other ethnic federalism supporters, suspect that Abiy seeks to centralise power in Addis over time.²⁹ For the federal government and for the TPLF's opponents, it is about Tigray's blatant defiance of federal authority. Giving way, they feel, would set a dangerous and unwelcome precedent.³⁰

IV. The Spectre of Conflict?

The prospect of imminent armed conflict, which was looming as a potential reaction to a Tigray vote, has receded. Abiy's statement ruling out military intervention certainly helped. There are also good reasons why the federal government would hesitate before sending in troops: the army is stretched thin, facing major domestic challenges, notably in Oromia, where an insurgency simmers, and in the multi-ethnic Southern Nations region where groups demand their own regions. Further, tensions have risen with Egypt and Sudan due to the Nile dispute.³¹ With all these other worries, it is hard to imagine the federal army taking on Tigray's security forces – which Mekelle has considerably reinforced in the last year, to federal officials' alarm.³² For its part, Mekelle appears confident in its military capabilities, asserting that its security measures are defensive. On 20 July, TPLF chairman Debretsion Gebremichael said, "Preparations are about putting our people on high alert. The conflict has reached its extreme edge".³³ He added that the confrontation was already in effect a "war without bullets".³⁴

But deep concerns persist. First, and despite Abiy's recent conciliatory noises, some government officials appear keen to use other punitive legal and administrative measures to keep the pressure on Mekelle. Arguably, they already began doing so in July. Federal security forces arrested two TPLF officials whom they accuse of assisting terrorism.³⁵ The Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority also tried to take Tigray state television off the airwaves for allegedly fanning unrest. Federal authorities have meanwhile launched probes of TPLF-linked companies while withdrawing government houses and vehicles from former TPLF federal officials.³⁶ Notwithstanding Abiy's

²⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Tigray official, July 2020.

²⁹ Crisis Group Report, *Keeping Ethiopia's Transition on the Rails*, op. cit.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior federal official, July 2020.

³¹ For background, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°271, *Bridging the Gap in the Nile Waters Dispute*, 20 March 2019; and Crisis Group Statement, "Nile Dam Talks: A Short Window to Embrace Compromise", 17 June 2020.

³² Crisis Group interviews, Tigray security sources, February and June 2020; senior federal official, July 2020.

³³ "Ethiopia, Dr. Debretsion Gebremichael Speech on Current Issue, Part Two. July 20, 2020", video, YouTube, 20 July 2020.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ "Police accuse detained senior TPLF officials of passing classified materials to terrorists, intent to incite violence", *Addis Standard*, 21 July 2020.

³⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, TPLF politburo member, July 2020; also "Housing corporation kicks ex-gov't officials out", *Fortune*, 13 July 2020; and "Police accuse detained senior TPLF officials of passing classified materials to terrorists, intent to incite violence", op. cit.

promise to the contrary, top ruling-party officials have warned that they could still impose budget cuts on Tigray.³⁷ Some Tigrayan officials fear that federal authorities could also interrupt power and telecommunication services to the region. Although any such action certainly would be preferable to armed intervention, it nonetheless would fuel Tigrayan anger and deepen the divide between Addis Ababa and Mekelle.

Secondly, and relatedly, actions by either side provoke rash decisions with unforeseen consequences. “They are playing Russian roulette”, a veteran regional observer told Crisis Group. “They are trapped in their own narratives and the depth of ill feeling means they are not talking to one another. It is a small step from there to a conflict that will worsen the chronic crisis the country faces if parties across the board do not step back”.³⁸ For instance, if Tigray at some point were to trigger constitutional secession provisions, it would not only further fuel tensions between Addis Ababa and Mekelle but could also quickly escalate into conflict with neighbouring Amhara region, as many Amhara claim territory that is now part of Tigray.³⁹ The federal government may wish to avoid military intervention, but a Tigray-Amhara showdown would likely drag it in.

Tensions between Amhara and Tigray have been brewing. TPLF leaders believe that Abiy has asked Temesgen Tiruneh, Amhara’s president and Abiy’s former national security adviser, to “literally declare war” on their region.⁴⁰ Temesgen said his region planned to retrieve lands the TPLF annexed as part of a “political conspiracy”.⁴¹ Road closures by anti-Tigray groups on the main routes between Addis Ababa and Mekelle that the federal authorities have done little to halt had already heightened Tigrayan grievances, deepening the sense within the TPLF that they face a hostile federal government.⁴²

Needless to say, a military confrontation would be catastrophic. So far, the armed forces have remained united despite several shocks, including a military security guard’s June 2019 killing of the Tigrayan chief of staff. But a sudden outbreak of fighting involving Tigray and the federal authorities, or Tigray and Amhara, could undo mili-

³⁷ For example, in early August, a federal official wrote: “The administration cannot be expected to appease the axis of chaos that has repeatedly rebuffed the olive branch extended to it by the federal government. After all, it has an inherent mandate, as the government of the day, to maintain law and order and the territorial integrity of the state. Overtures for amicable resolution of differences have been met with scorn time and again. Perhaps this is the time to adopt a different approach to make the axis of chaos more amenable to reason”. “Ethiopia: Who and what is behind the Oromia crisis – a view from Abiy’s camp”, *Africa Report*, 3 August 2020.

³⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, July 2020.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, former senior Ethiopian government official, Addis Ababa, February 2020. See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°158, *Bridging the Divide in Ethiopia’s North*, 12 June 2020.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group telephone interviews, colonel based in Tigray, June 2020; TPLF politburo member, August 2020.

⁴¹ “Amhara president announces plan to regain ‘illegally taken lands’”, *Ezega*, 23 July 2020. He added that in July, 85 “insurgents” disguised as priests and mentally disabled people entered from Tigray to assassinate Amhara leaders and attack cultural and historical sites.

⁴² Crisis Group telephone interview, TPLF politburo member, July 2019. See also “Blocking roads and prohibiting grains from coming to Tigray is a grave crime”, *The Reporter*, 15 June 2019. In the interview with *The Reporter*, Tigray region President Debretsion Gebremichael complained that the road closures, mainly of highways cutting through the Amhara region, had been done “under the watchful eye of all concerned government bodies” to put pressure on Tigray. See also Crisis Group Briefing, *Bridging the Divide in Ethiopia’s North*, op. cit.

tary cohesion.⁴³ Tigray officers hold positions throughout the armed forces in different parts of the country; some might prove more loyal to their region than to federal authorities. Tigrayan elements also are present in their home state in the north, where they could be more likely to break and join up with Tigray regional forces.⁴⁴

Hostility between the federal government and Tigray could also have regional implications. Already, it has infected Ethiopia's peace deal with Eritrea. Senior Tigrayans believe the rapprochement is tantamount to an alliance between Addis Ababa and Asmara against the TPLF.⁴⁵ After initially welcoming the 2018 thaw with their neighbour, TPLF leaders criticised it, claiming President Isaias Afwerki was motivated by anti-TPLF enmity stemming partly from the devastating 1998-2000 Ethiopia-Eritrea war when the TPLF was at the helm of Ethiopia's EPRDF coalition. Eritrea's international border, which primarily abuts Tigray on the Ethiopian side, remains heavily fortified. Some TPLF sympathisers fear that Ethiopian federal authorities could, under certain circumstances, ally with Eritrean forces against Mekelle.⁴⁶

V. A Necessary Rethink

Both sides' positions hinder resolution of the crisis: the TPLF has vowed to hold the vote; the federal government is using confrontational pressure tactics to weaken Tigray's ruling party. These stances also inhibit dialogue. Because a number of federal officials believe that the TPLF's election plan is the latest in a series of ploys it has pursued since it lost power to destabilise the country, they equate negotiations with ill-judged appeasement.⁴⁷ For its part, the TPLF has rejected bilateral talks with Abiy, instead calling for a comprehensive national dialogue to address the country's faltering transition.⁴⁸ The federal government has given no indication that it thinks such a process is necessary, presenting itself as a champion of reform undermined by disgruntled, irresponsible actors such as TPLF elements.⁴⁹

The parties' rival perspectives and animosity are jeopardising the country's future. The Prosperity Party is formally in a strong position, given its control of parliament, but opponents question its legitimacy given its roots in a discredited ruling coalition.

⁴³ See Crisis Group Statement, "Restoring Calm in Ethiopia After High-Profile Assassinations", 25 June 2019.

⁴⁴ For example, the Ethiopian Northern Command and some of the army's heavy equipment is based in Tigray, where troops were dug in for years in a frozen conflict with Eritrea. Months after taking office, Abiy ordered the army to transport some of its heavy military equipment from north east Tigray to a base near Addis Ababa. Protesters blocked roads and stopped the army from effecting the transfer, a ploy widely blamed on the Tigray region's leadership. "Tigray protests halt army's attempt to move heavy weapons to Oromia", *Eritrea Focus*, 1 January 2019. Some of this information was confirmed to Crisis Group by an Ethiopian intelligence official. Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, February 2020.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, TPLF loyalist and former government official, Addis Ababa, February 2020.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior federal official, July 2020; Crisis Group telephone interview, senior ruling-party official, July 2020.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, TPLF politburo members, July 2020.

⁴⁹ "Context and Updates on Current Issues in Ethiopia", Office of the Prime Minister, Federal Republic of Ethiopia, n.d.

Its authority is set to become more tenuous after its original five-year governing mandate ends on 10 October. The TPLF's political standing is arguably weaker as it has few allies outside Tigray; indeed, its legitimacy is questioned even in Tigray due to a range of issues including TPLF repression. Arena, a major opposition Tigrayan group, plans to boycott the vote (along with the Prosperity Party).⁵⁰

Finding a middle ground will be difficult given the competing principles held by the two sides – Tigray's belief that its right to hold autonomous regional elections stems from its right to self-rule, on one hand; the central government's conviction that no regional state can defy the constitution and parliament's decision on electoral matters, on the other. Third-party mediation will likely be needed. Religious leaders and other elders visited Tigray in June to see if they could help; they may be able to encourage both sides to adopt more conciliatory stances. Still, given the stakes, the parties' entrenched positions and the atmosphere's toxicity, a weightier arbiter may also be required. Prominent African statesmen with strong ties to both the TPLF and Abiy could play this role. They will need to be particularly skillful, given Ethiopian governments' traditional allergy to outside intervention.

The African Union chairperson, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, could play the role, if necessary in association with other continental leaders. The statesmen could start by encouraging Abiy and his administration to avoid provocative measures, including cuts to Tigray's finances (let alone military intervention), and to engage in a dialogue with Tigray to discuss possible electoral compromises and steps to mend the rift.

In parallel, they could press Mekelle to pause its election plans as a response to Abiy's recent overtures and to express its grievances exclusively through legal channels. Finding a middle ground on the electoral standoff will be no easy task given the parties' opposing views. But some ideas could be considered: insofar as the TPLF is making a constitutional and legal case for its right to hold the vote on schedule, its leaders should first exhaust all avenues for legal redress. They could, for example, appeal to the House of Federation, the upper house of parliament tasked with constitutional interpretation, for a view on whether regions have the right to run a vote. That chamber is packed with Prosperity Party delegates, so the TPLF will be understandably sceptical of its chances of receiving a fair hearing – though, given the stakes, that is precisely what the body ought to do to defuse a looming and damaging confrontation.

Assuming this tactic fails – because Tigray does not take this route or because it proceeds in defiance of a negative view from the House of Federation – Tigray's government could agree to hold a second regional poll simultaneously with the rest of the country. Abiy's government arguably could live with this approach, as it would substantially shorten the period during which Tigray has a government that it considers illegitimate.

Given the state of Ethiopia's transition, a broader effort may well be necessary. As Crisis Group has advocated in the past, and as the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights also has suggested, sustained dialogue among Ethiopia's politi-

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Arena leader, senior Tigray official, July 2020. That said, on 7 August regional lawmakers amended Tigray's constitution to ensure that 20 per cent of seats in an expanded State Council will be assigned based on proportional representation rather than the first-past-the-post method. Crisis Group telephone interview, TPLF Central Committee member, August 2020.

cal elites has become critical given the multiple, interconnected fault lines in the country's politics.⁵¹ Although Abiy appears to regard such a dialogue warily, it is likely the most realistic and viable way to reconcile the diverse visions for the country's future, notably on how to balance power between the centre and state governments and whether to modify the ethnic basis of administrative units. Talks could start by focusing on immediate priorities, such as the electoral timetable, paving the way for subsequent discussions on deeper-seated rifts, including over autonomy demands by groups in the south, competing Amhara and Oromo nationalist activism, and a simmering Oromo insurgency.

Such a dialogue inevitably would be highly contentious given the divisiveness of the issues and today's political polarisation. To mitigate risks of it collapsing in recriminations or worse, it likely would need to be organised by respected, independent civil society actors and be preceded by intensive preparatory work. But at this point, given the accumulating sources of disagreement, a careful effort to create a new consensus on the path forward seems timely.

Ethiopia's outside partners, notably the EU and U.S., should encourage Abiy to shy away from the Prosperity Party's unilateralism and embrace a more inclusive approach to governing. They should simultaneously push the TPLF to halt its provocative rhetoric toward the prime minister; request a formal opinion from the House of Federation on the constitutional dispute, as a sign of faith in federal institutions (and, if it insists on going forward with its regional election, agree to hold another together with the rest of the country when it is held); and embrace dialogue with the Prosperity Party on how to narrow the gaps between them.

VI. Conclusion

The recent outbreak of violence in Oromia sounded a serious warning regarding Ethiopia's political transition; any significant deterioration in the central government's relations with Tigray could pose a threat to the integrity of the federal state itself. Both sides ought to take a step back. Tigray's elites cleave to the position that self-rule gives them the absolute right to hold regional elections regardless of the federal authorities' stance. The federal government asserts that the constitution prohibits Tigray from proceeding no matter the regional government's wishes. They both could be headed toward a cliff. Tigray's elites should understand that their electoral gambit is hazardous. Abiy, both as prime minister of Ethiopia and as Nobel laureate, should assume the moral high ground, translate his conciliatory words into action and offer a meaningful olive branch to the opposition, including his prime antagonists from the TPLF.

Addis Ababa/Nairobi/Brussels, 14 August 2020

⁵¹ See, eg, Crisis Group Commentary, "Managing the Politics of Ethiopia's COVID-19 Crisis", *op. cit.*; "Press statement on the situation of unrest in Ethiopia", African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 9 July 2020.



International Crisis Group

Headquarters

Avenue Louise 235, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38. Fax: +32 2 502 50 38

brussels@crisisgroup.org

New York Office

newyork@crisisgroup.org

Washington Office

washington@crisisgroup.org

London Office

london@crisisgroup.org

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