

DEMOCRACY, POLITICAL PROTEST AND TRANSITIONS

# The Ethiopia of Abiy Ahmed and the Pending Transition

Elsa Aimé González

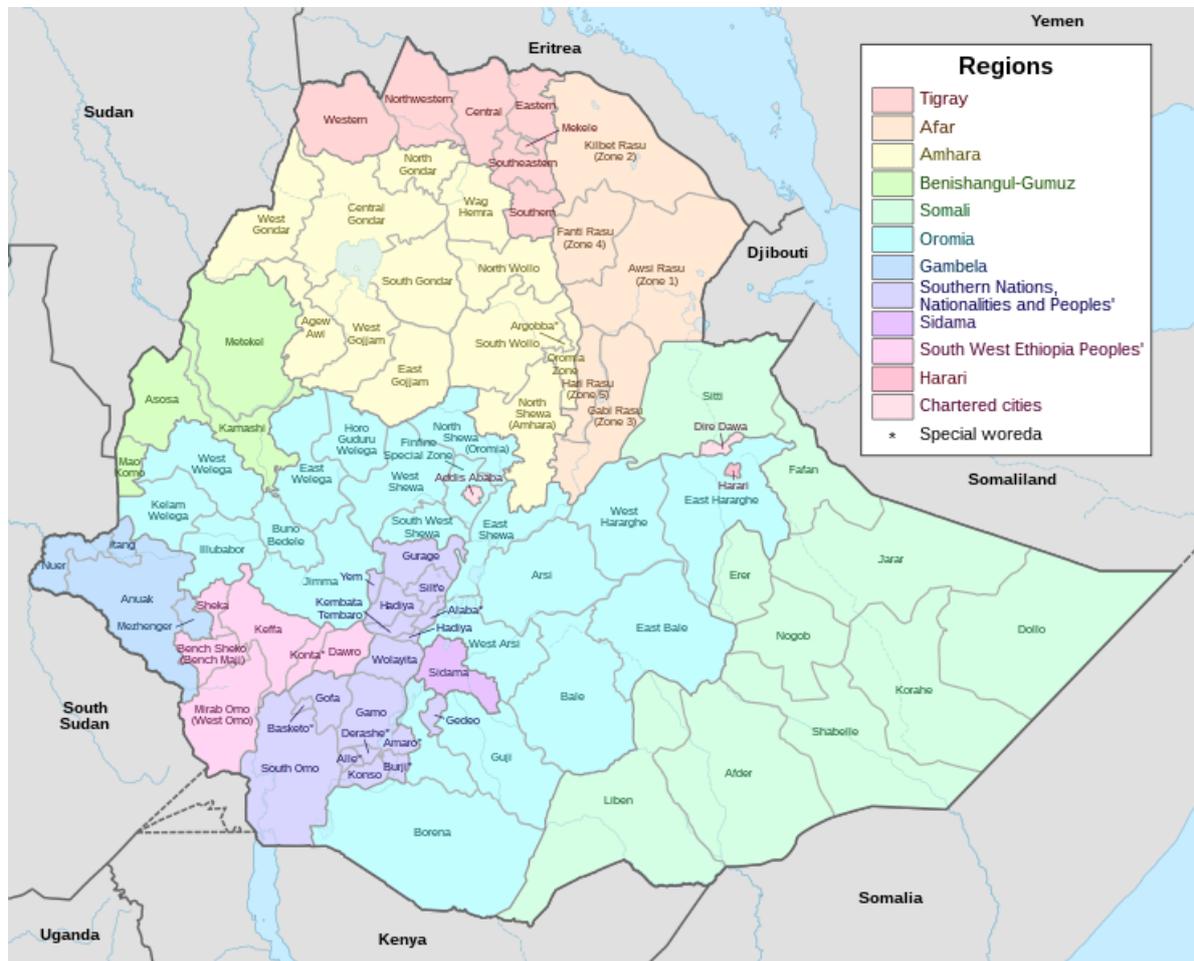


Fotografia: "Our heart speaks in Flowers", [Derrick Ofosu Boateng](#)

In April 2018, following Abiy Ahmed's appointment as prime minister by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the political coalition in power since 1995, Ethiopia seemed on track for a possible transition. However, on the night of 3 to 4 November 2020, armed conflict erupted between the central government and the government of the Tigray region. The outbreak of civil war nipped the fledgling transition in the bud and marked a new chapter in the history of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE).

The clash between the government of Abiy Ahmed and his new party, the Prosperity Party (PP), and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) represents a political dispute over the form the Ethiopian state should take. Initially confined to the Tigray region, the war involves various actors and other regions and has clear ramifications outside Ethiopia's borders, particularly due to the Eritrean army's intervention in support of the Ethiopian Government. Despite the fact that the government of Abiy Ahmed declared victory on 28 November 2020, the conflict was far from over.

30 years after the fall of Mengistu Haile Mariam’s dictatorship in May 1991, the conflict lays bare the political contradictions that have characterised the Ethiopian regime since the last transition, the difficulties in opening up political space and the limits to free expression in Ethiopia of the diversity and plurality that characterise the country.



Political map of Ethiopia, with the 11 current regions (Wikipedia)

## A bloody conflict

The war between the Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray region is rooted in different conceptions of the Ethiopian state, the future of the regime and the type of transition the country needs. Abiy Ahmed’s rise to power marked the beginning of a new political project, the essence of which may be summed up in the concept *Medemer*, the subject of a book published in October 2019. Interpreted as a return to Ethiopian nationalist political centralisation and perceived, as a result, as a break with the ethnic federalism of the 1990s, in the words of Abiy Ahmed himself, “Medemer, an Amharic word, signifies synergy, convergence and teamwork for a common destiny. [...] In essence, Medemer is an act of peace that seeks the unity of our common humanity.” Nonetheless, armed conflict broke out less than one year later, showing just how difficult it is to apply this concept and forge lasting peace.

Inhabited by approximately 5% of the Ethiopian population, the Tigray region, in the north of Ethiopia, has, since the beginning of the dispute, found itself isolated, with virtually no

telecommunications, electricity, petrol, staple food or goods, its bridges destroyed and humanitarian aid arriving in dribs and drabs. The presence of NGO and international organisation staff, who have also been the target of specific attacks, is highly limited. The impact of the conflict on civilians has been particularly severe. There are at least 63,000 refugees in Sudan, and four million people are estimated to be displaced within the country, of which three million have become so as a result of the war.

A joint investigation by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights into alleged human rights violations in the conflict has identified numerous crimes, including attacks on civilians, including children, older persons and persons with disabilities; extra-judicial executions; torture; arbitrary detentions and forced disappearances; sexual violence; forced displacement; attacks on the Ethiopian refugee population; and the looting and destruction of property, including cultural property, by individuals on both sides. Despite its limitations and the controversy surrounding its methodology, the report unmaskes the crude reality facing the population, compounded by the famine in the region caused as a result of the war.

Discursive manipulation has led to extreme polarisation between supporters of the Ethiopian Government and the TPLF, and greater misinformation, prompting attacks on, the arrest and even the killing of prominent journalists, researchers, politicians and media organisations (such as *Addis Standard*). Social media has become yet another battleground, in which various campaigns have been orchestrated. This situation reflects the difficulties in establishing a space for dialogue between people with different conceptions of the Ethiopian state, as well as the unwillingness to find a negotiated solution to the dispute.

The war between the Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray region is rooted in different conceptions of the Ethiopian state, the future of the regime and the type of transition the country needs

The immediate circumstances surrounding the beginning of the war are somewhat confusing. It seems no accident that the conflict broke out the night of the US presidential elections; rather, the timing sought to ensure that the incident escaped international media attention. According to the official explanation, troops were deployed in response to an attack orchestrated by the TPLF against an Ethiopian army base in the capital of the Tigray region, Mekelle. However, reports indicate that troops and weaponry had been dispatched to the region months earlier, and that an attempt to overthrow the regional government had been perpetrated that very night. The Ethiopian army, despite being one of the continent's most consolidated forces, suddenly found itself embroiled in a difficult conflict, against a TPLF whose leaders played an active role in the fall of the previous regime. Abiy Ahmed enlisted the Eritrean army and authorised the intervention of paramilitary forces such as the Ahmara Special Forces and other local militias. Understanding this war requires, however, an understanding of the FDRE's political framework.

## The configuration of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

Ethiopia is one of many countries in Africa and other parts of the world that, in the early 1990s, underwent —at least formally— a democratic transition. The new regime emerged amid controversy regarding its form, and soon turned not only belligerent, in the war with Eritrea, but also authoritarian, belying the democratic principles contained in the Constitution approved in 1994.

The FDRE's structure and political system were designed to lay to rest decades of centralised, unitary and elitist governments in a profoundly diverse country. Firstly, the implementation of so-called ethnic federalism was viewed as the solution to the tensions resulting from the centralising model that marked the construction of the modern imperial Ethiopian state in the second half of the 19th century, reinforced by the military dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam (1977-1991). The aim was to reshape the political map to reflect the country's main communities and regions, affording them greater political power in efforts to decentralise the government. This was reflected in the Constitution, which outlines a federal structure that is today comprised of 11 states or *kilils*, and which explicitly grants their right to self-determination.

One key actor in this process was the TPLF and, within this organisation, its leader for over two decades, Meles Zenawi, president of the Transition Government (1991-1995) and prime minister from 1995 until his death in 2012. Created in 1975, the TPLF joined other political movements in opposing the absolute control that Addis Abeba wielded over the rest of the country. Contrary to the narrative purporting one single national Ethiopian identity, these movements posited a re-reading of modern Ethiopian state-building process as an imperial creation characterised by the unequal political participation of the various ethnolinguistic communities and regions that make up Ethiopia. A number of different political projects emerged; while some were secessionist, others like the TPLF defended a federal structure based on the autonomy and self-governance of the various ethnolinguistic communities, within a democratic and multi-ethnic Ethiopia.

The TPLF's mobilisation capacity enabled it to play a central role in defeating Mengistu's military government, and in the subsequent transition and configuration of the FDRE. However, the new political regime's federal structure proved controversial: to some, ethnic federalism signified the fragmentation of the country, rendering its dismantlement a real possibility; others believed that it failed to give sufficient power to regional governments; while many took issue with the location of the new internal borders.

Ethnic federalism was accompanied by democratic centralism, testimony to the TPLF's Marxist-Leninist origins, with the aim of securing political control by the EPRDF. This coalition was promoted by the TPLF in 1989 to present a common front in the struggle against the Mengistu dictatorship and incorporate movements from other communities and regions. Ultimately, the EPRDF was composed of four regional political parties: the TPLF, plus three other parties linked to the Amhara, Oromia and Southern Nations, Nationalities

and Peoples' regions. The EPRDF also encouraged the creation of other ethnic-oriented regional parties, which acted as satellite parties. Within this political framework, the coalition and, within the coalition, the TPLF took firm hold of the political space.

## The FDRE's inescapable international context

The configuration of the FDRE has also been influenced by the international context in the period between the transition and today. The transformations of the 1990s following the dissolution of the USSR and the end of the Cold War and the explicit political conditionality of international aid were key in the TPLF/EPRDF's shift towards a democratic discourse, in efforts to secure international backing during the political transition.

This decade also saw major changes throughout the Horn of Africa. One such change was undoubtedly the secession of Eritrea, the result of an agreement between the TPLF and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) during the struggle against the Mengistu dictatorship, under which, in the event of victory, Eritrea would hold a referendum on self-determination, which took place in 1993. Relations between the two countries gradually deteriorated, ultimately resulting in war between them between 1998 and 2000. Despite signing a peace agreement in Algiers in 2000, whereby they undertook to uphold the decisions of the commissions formed to resolve the dispute, Ethiopia failed to comply. The conflict severed all relations between the two countries and sparked a deep-seated enmity between Isayas Afewerki's dictatorship and the TPLF/EPRDF. Further changes and political turmoil in the Horn of Africa, including the outbreak of civil war in Somalia and the dispute between Sudan and present-day South Sudan, independent since 2011, helped Ethiopia stake its position as a key actor on which regional stability depended.

The move towards heightened securitisation in international politics in the early 21st century allowed the government of Meles Zenawi to instrumentalise this role for personal gain. Ethiopia stood as the counterpart on which the contention of Islamist extremism, and regional peace, depended, as evidenced by the country's involvement in Somalia between 2006 and 2009. This made it possible to simultaneously strengthen its control over its own population, particularly following the controversial elections of 2005, which yielded the EPRDF its worst results in the five polls held between 1995 and Abiy Ahmed's rise to power. The fear of relinquishing power triggered a brutal repression and curtailed already limited freedoms. Such was the case that, in 2010 and 2015, the EPRDF and its affiliated parties won the elections with over 99% of the votes.

The dissolution of the USSR, the end of the Cold War and the explicit political conditionality of international aid were key in the shift towards a democratic discourse, in efforts to secure international backing during the political transition

Ethiopia set about securing additional and more diverse political and economic support, not only from traditional Western partners such as the United States and international institutions such as the World Bank and European Union, but also from other countries which, particularly after the turn of the century, have significantly scaled up their presence on the African continent, such as the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and the People's Republic of China. In fact, Ethiopia became a shining example of the Africa Rising narrative, due also to the implementation of a developmental model with which the Government sought to reduce its commodities export dependence through public capital investments aimed at developing infrastructure and increasing productivity in key sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing. Between 2004 and 2020, Ethiopia recorded growth rates above 5%. The construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, a project conceived during Meles Zenawi's government, is the product and reflection of this developmental state, and has been a source of tension with other riparian countries, namely Sudan and Egypt.

## The post-Meles Zenawi era

While Ethiopia's political transformation since the 1990s has brought significant changes, it has failed to unite Ethiopian society around a common political project that recognises its social and political diversity. This challenge became increasingly more patent in the 2010s, especially after the death of Meles Zenawi in 2012. In that moment, the coalition appointed Hailemariam Desalegn prime minister, a manoeuvre viewed as a ploy for the TPLF to maintain its relevance within the coalition. However, within just two years of his arrival, Hailemariam Desalegn faced the discontent of a population who had become more actively critical of his government. Ethiopia is Africa's second most populated country, with an estimated population of 115 million people, of which two-thirds have only ever been governed by the current political regime.

In April 2014, the government of Hailemariam Desalegn came to grips with the Oromo, the country's main ethnic group, initially on account of a controversial plan to expand Addis Abeba into the Oromia region, home to approximately 35% of the country's population, in which the capital is located. The so-called Oromo protests quickly snowballed and sparked demonstrations in the Amhara region, where approximately 27% of the Ethiopian population lives. Although Hailemariam validated his position in the 2015 elections, maintaining a tight grip on political power, he failed to complete his term due to the constant demonstrations against his government. It is in this context that the EPRDF, again between electoral cycles, appointed Abiy Ahmed prime minister after his predecessor resigned, in an attempt to restore the legitimacy of a debilitated government and prevent its downfall, as had occurred elsewhere on the continent.

Abiy's rise to power was met with a certain amount of surprise and hope, both in Ethiopia and among its international partners. Younger than his predecessor, and of Oromo, Muslim and Christian origin, despite being himself Pentecostal, his designation seemed to send a message that the past four years of social protest and demands for change had not fallen on deaf ears, and reflected the country's diversity. In fact, his arrival marked a break with the

politics of the previous governments and even sparked a certain amount of euphoria by releasing political prisoners, resuming talks with opposition parties and leaders, appointing a gender-equal government, which included Sahle-Work Zewde as the country's first female president, and encouraging exiles to return. Several leaders and activists who had opposed Meles Zenawi's government were chosen to head public institutions, such as Birtukan Mideksa, director of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia, and Daniel Bekele, chief commissioner of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, both of whom were persecuted following the 2005 elections. Economically, Abiy also seemed to embark on a new phase with several privatisation processes. The euphoria caused by Abiy Ahmed's appointment and initial months in government were also palpable outside the continent, when he was awarded the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, "for his efforts to achieve peace and international cooperation, and in particular for his decisive initiative to resolve the border conflict with neighbouring Eritrea."

Regionally, the summit held in July 2018 in Asmara between Ethiopia and Eritrea restored relations between the two countries and formally concluded the war between them, sealed in a peace agreement signed in September in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. That same month, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia held in Asmara the first in a series of high-level tripartite summits, in which they signed an agreement to promote peace and security in the Horn of Africa. Abiy Ahmed also looked to serve as mediator in other processes such as the Sudanese Revolution in 2018-2019.

The about-face made by the EPRDF in appointing Abiy Ahmed was surprising and unusual given the party's history. In fact, in December 2019, right after Abiy travelled to Oslo to collect his award, the coalition was dissolved and replaced by a new party, the Prosperity Party (PP), into which all EPRDF's members merged except the TPLF. If the arrival of Abiy Ahmed reflected the TPLF's loss of power within the coalition, the creation of the PP drove the TPLF out of the central government altogether.

Abiy's rise to power was met with a certain amount of surprise and hope: his designation seemed to send a message that the years of social protest and demands for change had not fallen on deaf ears, and reflected the country's diversity

While the founding of the PP had supporters, it was also criticised by those who questioned its return to classic centralisation and those clamouring for greater political openness, which included some of Abiy's former allies. The general elections of 2020 were to be a litmus test for Abiy, as they would allow him to gauge his project's level of support and the scope of the changes. However, the elections were postponed indefinitely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a decision that was contested due to its unilateral nature, particularly by the TPLF. The mounting political tensions also surfaced following the arrest of a group of opposition leaders with highly distinct profiles, all accused of fuelling unrest after the killing of musician Hachalu Hundessa in June 2020 amid unclear circumstances. In this

context, the tensions between the central government and the TPLF began to escalate, prompting the unilateral organisation of elections in Tigray in September, which the TPLF won with 98% of the votes, and the subsequent severance of relations between the two governments in October. A month later, war erupted.

## The pending transition

The Ethiopian state is, at present, undoubtedly more decentralised than it was three decades ago. However, this process of decentralisation has been heavily controlled by the central government, in the hands of the EPRDF until its disappearance in 2019. The Constitution of 1994 outlined a model that has not been implemented per se, but rather twisted under this central control. The stumbling block in this regard is not so much the constitutional model but the central and regional governments, the manner in which the EPRDF retained power since the last transition, the use of ethnic identities as political instruments and, today, Abiy Ahmed's control of the political space. Despite the changes, it is possible to identify certain parallels that remind us that Abiy Ahmed's government is indeed a product of the EPRDF.

Abiy Ahmed seemed to embark on a transition to democracy that is, today, a distant prospect. While some of the difficulties in opening up political space were inherited from previous governments, others are the result of a personalist leader who has failed to maintain the dialogue that democracy and, in particular, peaceful change require. His refusal to recognise the TPLF, branded a terrorist organisation, and whose members are referred to as a "clique", and the pressure and persecution of the Tigrayan population are obstacles to negotiating a solution to the conflict that brings the needs of its victims to the forefront. The TPLF's refusal to recognise Abiy's government, and the expansion of the conflict into the neighbouring Amhara and Afar regions, have also protracted the conflict and impeded dialogue.

The accusations of genocide against the Tigrayan population must be examined as part of an in-depth investigation into war crimes perpetrated by all sides. Objecting to this by decrying a "neocolonialist mentality", as the Ethiopian Government has done in relation to the December 2021 meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Council on the human rights situation in Ethiopia, shows just how difficult it is to find a solution to the conflict, while doubts surrounding the impartiality of the National Dialogue Commission, created immediately afterwards, have already been raised. Although general elections in most of the country finally took place in June 2021, the context in which they unfolded prevented the Government from achieving the legitimacy it needs, despite winning with 97.3% of the votes, as was the case with the EPRDF. The aim of the Great Ethiopian Homecoming campaign, launched by the Government so that one million members of the Ethiopian diaspora could travel to Ethiopia to celebrate the Ethiopian Christmas in January 2022, was to reassert the Government's authority both inside and outside the country, to "show to the world that Ethiopia remains a stable country" and "to change the Western media's negative perception of Ethiopia". On 7 January, during the festivities, the central government announced the release of several political prisoners, which it justified as a sacrifice in the

name of dialogue and national unity.

Although Ethiopia has played the Pan-African card to question an alleged Western interference in the conflict, pressuring Abiy's government in favour of the TPLF, the reality is that Western states and institutions have failed to present a common front, and their response has been erratic. At the same time, new international alliances forged within the framework of this war, such as, inter alia, the peculiar Asmara-Addis Abeba-Mogadishu axis or Turkish, Emirati and Chinese backing, raise doubts about Abiy's project beyond the war against the TPLF, and have been challenged.

African Union's attempts to mediate in the conflict have been arduous, but may have borne fruits. In March 2022, information emerged about the first telephone communication between Abiy Ahmed and the TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael since the beginning of the war. Days later, the federal government announced an indefinite humanitarian truce with immediate effect, which was accepted by the TPLF. It was the first good news since November 2020.

Ten years after the death of Meles Zenawi, the FDRE is faltering, and, so far, Abiy Ahmed has fared no better with the TPLF or the EPRDF's legacy. Meanwhile, other disputes, tensions and needs have been eclipsed by the war. A conflict that, just as the EPRDF did in the war against Eritrea, has been used to rally the country around Abiy Ahmed's project. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated in December 2021 that 22 million Ethiopians would require humanitarian aid in 2022, and not solely as a result of the conflict, but also due to drought, flooding, disease and plagues, which are expected to affect the Afar, Amhara, Tigray, Somalia and Oromia regions particularly severely. The challenges facing Ethiopia's current regime run deeper than the war in Tigray. They are, however, unlikely to be addressed so long as the war continues.



#### **Elsa Aimé González**

Elsa Aimé González és professora associada del Departament de Relacions Internacionals de la Facultat de Ciències Humanes i Socials de la Universitat Pontifícia de Comillas. També és investigadora del Grup d'Estudis Africans i del Grup d'Estudi de les Relacions Internacionals a la Universitat Autònoma de Madrid, i coordinadora de l'àrea d'Àfrica Subsahariana de la Fundació Alternatives. És Llicenciada en Història i Doctora en Relacions Internacionals i Estudis Africans per la Universitat Autònoma de Madrid. Les seves principals àrees d'investigació giren al voltant de la història d'Etiòpia i de la Banya d'Àfrica i la teoria de relacions internacionals. També ha reflexionat sobre les polítiques de cooperació d'Espanya i de la Unió Europea a l'Àfrica. Ha realitzat estades d'investigació al Centre d'Études d'Afrique Noire (CEAN) de Bordeus, al Centre d'Études des Mondes Africains (CEMAf) de París i al Centre Français des Études Éthiopiennes d'Addis Abeba. Ha participat com a investigadora en el projecte de recerca "Monitoring Conflicts in the Horn of Africa" dirigit per Alexandra Dias.