

It has been demonstrated in history that empires either democratize or disintegrate, and Ethiopia at least until the 1970s, was an empire ruled by Amhara Abyssinian emperors. The last Emperor, Haile Selassie the 1st, was deposed in 1974 by his own military. It has also been the case, that democratization or disintegration of empires has never been quick and peaceful. The current situation in Ethiopia needs to be seen from that context.

Years of struggle to separate from or modernize and democratize the Ethiopian Empire has continued since the Second World War. These efforts led to a power grab by the Imperial Military in 1974, and later by a multiplicity of ethnic liberation movements that toppled the military government in 1991. It was no surprise that the different ethnic liberation fronts that defeated the military decided to form a federal state led by a coalition of the different ethnic liberation fronts, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

In reality however, the coalition was firmly controlled by the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), which ruled the country more like a centralized state than a federation. Rebellions again ensued particularly by the largest ethnic group, the Oromos, who form 38-40% of the total population of the country of more than 80 different ethnic groups. The new leader that was selected to head the coalition federal government in 2018, Abiy Ahmed Ali, is of Oromo-Amhara mixed lineage.

Instead of ensuring greater devolution of powers to the federal states which was the overwhelming demand, Abiy slowly demolished the coalition of different ethnic parties, and formed his own new multiethnic party, the Prosperity Party, declaring his intention to form a centralized unitary state under his party's control. That to him meant modernizing Ethiopia.

Naturally, rebellion soon ensued, again erupting into open war in November 2020 starting with the Tigrayans. And the war continues with more rebellions erupting within the other ethnic groups in the country, including inside the current Prime Minister's own Oromo federal state.

The war in Tigray, has continued for over a year now, with the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF), dislodging the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) and their Eritrean allies out of the territory of the federal state of Tigray. Other ethnic wars have also started in Oromiya, Beni Shangul and Gumuz, Afar, and other states with many elements of the national army deserting to join their ethnic armies.

The TDF had been surrounded in Tigray. With food, medicine and other supplies denied entry into Tigray, this led the Tigrayans to push further outside of the Tigray region to gain access to supplies, and of course to link up with other rebellions in the country for a possible takeover of power.

Although they have pushed the much-weakened national army further towards the east (Afar area) and the South (Amhara and Oromo areas), the Tigrayans constitute only 6-7 percent of the Ethiopian population. Without the support of the other ethnic rebellions that have started but are still divided and weak, they would find it difficult to push further and open the road from Djibouti or the border with Sudan, or capture the capital city Addis Ababa and depose the Abiy government altogether.

Furthermore, the TDF army has found it difficult to push into the more open territory in the Afar region through which the road to the port of Djibouti passes, or the more open Ethiopian plateau where Addis Ababa lies. In these open areas (plains), the Tigrayans have been vulnerable to attack from the government's deployment of heavy artillery and drones acquired from and manned by, the Tigrayans assert, Turks, Emiratis and Iranians.

Dragoman

The Tigrayans have thus withdrawn from some of the areas and towns outside their state which they recently took control of back to defensible areas inside Tigray – “while the other ethnic rebellions widen and strengthen their fighting capacity, and the different rebel groups reach agreement [on] the future shape of the Ethiopian state, and a transitional arrangement to get there”, as the TDF leadership put it. Thus, there is a temporary reprieve in the fighting, but one can only assume it will pick up again.

Efforts for a peaceful resolution have not made any headway so far. The AU has appointed former Nigerian President Obasanjo as a mediator, and a number of foreign governments and agencies, in particular the United States and the EU, have appointed Special Envoys to the Horn to help the AU effort. So far however, PM Abiy has refused to negotiate with “terrorists” as he dubs the TDF, calling instead for a “national dialogue” chaired by his government – a non-starter as it will not be attended by any of the rebel forces. Would the Abiy government be able, with its Eritrean allies, to defeat the rebel forces in Tigray, Oromia and elsewhere and establish control of the country? Or will the rebel forces strengthen, regroup and take control of the country? This is a question best left for time, but it would hardly be an easy move either way. The likely scenario is that the conflict will continue without a clear winner for some time to come.

Such a stalemate naturally provides an opportunity for either side of the conflict to consider possibilities for negotiations, for a peaceful solution. It is thus likely that there will be increased activity by the AU, regional African countries and other concerned parties, the Americans and Europeans included, to reactivate their initiatives for dialogue.

In fact, regional leaders led by Kenya’s Uhuru Kenyatta have started an initiative to facilitate talks between the warring parties. Kenya is a fitting mediator from many angles, including sharing a common border and a population (Oromos) around the border who have become increasingly radicalized and armed, as well as large refugee inflows, etc. Besides, Kenya is a current member of the UN Security Council and chair of the three African members of the Council on issues regarding the Horn.

A number of other African leaders are also collaborating with Uhuru to push for a negotiated settlement by strengthening the AU mediator Obasanjo through the provision of a team of African mediation experts. Such an initiative, however, even if accepted by the parties now most visible, i.e., the Tigrayans and Abiy’s government, would need to be accepted by the different ethnic based movements in the country which would demand their full and equal participation in any talks on the future of the country.

Indeed, it is this so far unconsidered majority that would be the decisive force in any settlement that could lead to stable peace in the country. Such an inclusive national dialogue for a peaceful definition and arrangement of the modern Ethiopian state – although the only way to avoid possible fragmentation of the state a la Yugoslavia – may not be readily accepted by those that have so far been dominant in Ethiopia and are now fighting to form and define the former empire in their own image. They will have to be forced by the other so far marginalized majority of the population to accept a new definition and arrangement of the Ethiopian multi-ethnic state. In the opinion of many close observers, we are not there yet.

Dragoman



Haile Menkerios

Haile Menkerios is an Eritrean-born South African diplomat who specialises in conflict resolution. Haile is a career diplomat, and his most recent positions include Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General and head of the United Nations Office to the African Union. Haile's previous roles included serving as Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for Sudan and South Sudan, as well as head of the United Nations Mission in Sudan, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs in New York, and several senior posts in United Nations Headquarters and missions in the field dealing with issues of peace and security.