




RESEARCH ARTICLE

Voting for war, to secure peace: weaponising the Tigray 2020 election in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Elections in divided societies and in countries undergoing political transitions are precarious events. Hastened democratisation may ignite inter-communal antagonism and mobilise voters for conflict. Sub-national elections are even more prone to challenge national policies to defend regional autonomy and self-determination. The relationship between the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian Federal government had been deteriorating since the coming to power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018. It was formally breached in September 2020 when the TPLF insisted on organising a separate regional election in Tigray in defiance of the federal government's decision to postpone national elections due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to one of Africa's most devastating civil wars in modern times. In the pursuit of democratic legitimacy, and conversely consciously framing the federal government as non-democratic, the TPLF 'weaponised' the election. This article analyses the process leading up to the decision to conduct separate elections in Tigray, its conduct and result. The analysis demonstrates how elections and the contestation to claim a democratic legitimacy in transition countries may contribute to a politics of violence, ultimately leading to war.

Keywords: Ethiopia; Tigray; elections; war; political transition

Introduction

We are voting for our right to self-determination and security; to be protected from the abuse and harassment we have experienced over the last two years. We know [Prime Minister] Abiy Ahmed is preparing to attack us, he wants to subjugate Tigray. Hence, we need to prepare for war and to vote TPLF, as they are the only ones who can defend us and our interests.¹

A large body of scholarly work has argued that post-conflict elections are precarious events, which may provoke recurrence of hostilities. Hastened

democratisation after conflict is, under specific circumstances, liable to sustain instability instead of consolidating peace (Brancati & Snyder 2012; Flores & Nooruddin 2012; Letsa 2017). Few studies, however, have assessed how claims for democratic legitimacy through the conduct of elections during political transitions may in itself be a trigger for war. In fragile transition countries, even a sub-national election may have a significant impact on national-level politics and the stability of the country. This article will explore how the September 2020 regional election in Tigray, the northernmost regional state in Ethiopia, was the last and critical point in a chain of events that led to the devastating civil war ravaging the country for two years starting in November 2020 and was settled through a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in November 2022.²

In September 2020, the situation in Tigray was tense and bristling with anxiety. By postponing the 2020 federal and regional elections indefinitely, ostensibly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had provoked the regional government in Tigray, constituted by the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), to organise an autonomous Tigray election. The TPLF had dominated the federal government party coalition Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) since toppling the Derg military junta in 1991. However, with the coming to power of Abiy Ahmed, representing the Oromo party in the coalition, as chair of EPRDF and Prime Minister in 2018, TPLF lost control over the federal government. To quickly consolidate power at the cost of TPLF's previous dominance, Abiy Ahmed abolished the EPRDF in 2019 and replaced it with his own construction, the Prosperity Party. The TPLF refused to join the new party and pulled out of the federal government. The relationship between the federal government and Tigray regional authorities was eventually formally breached when the TPLF persisted in conducting regional elections, in blatant defiance to the federal dictate.

Initially, this appeared to be a struggle to claim constitutional credentials to legitimise one's power and political agenda. The TPLF argued that as the constitutionally defined five-year governance term was about to expire, fresh elections were needed to protect and sustain Tigray's constitutional right to self-determination. The federal government, on the other hand, had declared a State of Emergency in the country to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, arguably bestowing it with authority to suspend the term limit (*Al Jazeera* 08.04.2020). The TPLF's decision to organise regional elections was thus viewed as a rebellious act challenging the power and authority of the federal government, and was called out as unconstitutional and the election rendered 'null and void' (*Reuters* 05.09.2020).

Despite known threats of military intervention by the federal government to quell Tigray's rebellious action, the TPLF was adamant to carry out the elections, 'no matter the consequences' (*Reuters* 04.09.2020). The Tigray election was conducted in a context of increased insecurity and harassment experienced over a longer period by Tigrayans. The collective persecution of Tigrayans was given as the primary motivation for people to participate in the election and to vote for the TPLF. Put simply, from a Tigrayan perspective, the vote was conceived as a preparation for war, to secure lasting peace. A few

weeks after the election, on 4 November 2020, Ethiopian federal forces, with assistance from Amhara regional forces and the Eritrean army, entered Tigray and unleashed a devastating civil war which would result in hundreds of thousands of Tigrayans killed.³

In the pursuit of local, and possibly international, democratic legitimacy, and conversely consciously framing the federal government as non-democratic, the TPLF weaponised the election. This article will thus demonstrate how elections and the contestation to claim democratic legitimacy in transition countries may contribute to a politics of violence, ultimately leading to war.

Elections may be considered as the most important ritual of political legitimation in modern states (Kertzer 1988: 49). Election periods comprise and condense political contestation and discourse as no other time. In a matter of a few weeks, one may observe and interact in events to collect data, which otherwise would take months if not years to obtain. In contexts of contested politics, violence and conflict, ethnographic fieldwork is the preferred methodological approach to develop the needed contextual understanding to map and access various positioned political actors, and tapping into the plurality of voices of people being affected by such disruptive politics (Robben & Nordstrom 1995; Nordstrom 1997; Tronvoll 2009; Millar 2018).

Having studied nearly all Ethiopian elections since the fall of the Derg in 1991, I obtained an invitation by the regional government of Tigray to observe the election, was granted a visiting federal government visa and registered as the only international election observer with the Tigray Regional Election Commission. I spent about three weeks in Tigray prior to and during the election, interviewing key political representatives from the TPLF and regional government and all leaders of the participating opposition parties, as well as a range of civil society representatives and a number of voters in Mekelle and rural Tigray.

This article⁴ first presents a theoretical framing of state-building, elections and conflict relevant to the peculiar, contested politics in Ethiopia. An outline of the collapse of the TPLF-led government coalition the EPRDF follows, explaining TPLF's decision not to join Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's new Prosperity Party. Thereafter, the breakdown of trust between the federal government and Tigray regional authorities and the increased individual and collective insecurity of Tigrayans across the country is examined, as this was a determinantal factor leading to TPLF's decision to conduct autonomous regional elections. A presentation of the electoral process, campaign, voting, and results follows. The conclusion explains the election outcome, and how the Tigray electoral process led to the outbreak of war in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia's political transition and propensity to war

Electoral violence as such is not relevant to the argument in this article, which seeks to explore how elections in transition countries may influence and contribute to a broader 'politics of violence'. Most transition studies focus on the 'liberal peace' dividend, i.e. how post-war elections may contribute to

sustainable peace (Lyons 2005; Jarstad & Sisk 2008; Höglund *et al.* 2009; Fortna & Huang 2012). Another strand of research, however, argues that democratisation and conduct of elections may indeed increase the risk of conflict (Mansfield & Snyder 1995; Snyder 2000; Brancati & Snyder 2012; Cederman *et al.* 2012; Flores & Nooruddin 2012; Letsa 2017). The nexus of elections and violence is thus difficult to reach, as the impact of elections on the likelihood of violence or civil war depends on several factors, in addition to the specific historicity and politico-cultural context in which the election takes place. Furthermore, as most of the research on the topic consists of quantitative large N-studies, it does not speak to the peculiarities of the Tigray election, nor the contested political history of Ethiopia, and hence holds little explanatory value to understand Ethiopian political trajectories. There are, however, various broader themes discussed in the literature on state-building, democratisation and war which may help us understand the political dynamics in the run-up to the election, contributing to making sense of why the TPLF–Prosperity Party dispute could turn into one of Africa’s most atrocious civil wars in recent times.

First, countries with a deep history of violence, conflicts and civil wars are more prone to reverting to violence as a means to impose a hegemonic position or to solve political discords, if institutionalised politics such as elections fail to produce the result wanted (Goldstein & Arias 2010). Hardly any country in the world is as conflict prone as Ethiopia, which has experienced large-scale civil wars in more or less every generation for two hundred years, and continuously encounters multiple small-scale conflicts spread across its vast territory up until today (Tareke 1996; Tronvoll 2009; Markakis 2011; Reid 2011; Berhane-Selassie 2018). There may be many explanations for this fact, from a manifestation of path-dependency, expression of political culture, inclination of warrior traditions, exhibition of masculinity or remnants of a feudal tradition. Politics in Ethiopia exhibits all these characteristics which are detrimental to stability, increased democratisation and nation-wide civilised, or non-violent, politics.

This leads us to the second factor, the institutional capacity and capability of the state and the composition of society. Paul Collier describes the states inhabited by the world’s ‘bottom billion’ as ‘structurally dangerous’ (Collier 2009: 7), as they lack: institutionalised and agreed-upon procedures to manage political discords; institutions of checks-and-balances to restrict executive power and protect minority concerns; equitable distribution of public wealth and resources; and an independent judiciary which can subject officials to the law. These are all essential elements to ensure and secure government accountability and legitimacy to discourage political protest and armed rebellion. Politics in such states thus tends to be a zero-sum game and is cast in the language of an existential struggle in which contestants are willing to use all means, including mass violence, to obtain or sustain power. Collier claims that elections conducted in such ‘dangerous places’ often seem to precede the outbreak of conflict, an argument tailor-made for the case under scrutiny in this article as both the TPLF and federal government characterised their pre-war political discord as an existential conflict.

Adding to the dangers of the inherent structural weakness of Ethiopia is also the heightened insecurity created by the political transition itself. Ethiopia is in all practical terms an autocracy, although a democratic multi-party constitution was ratified in 1995.⁵ The country has gone through two revolutions in modern times, first the fall of the imperial order in 1974, which led to the establishment of military rule under a one-party constitution (Clapham 1988; Tareke 2009). This order was again toppled in 1991 by the EPRDF, a coalition of ethnic resistance movements founded by the TPLF (Young 1997). Since then, it has been argued that Ethiopia has been 'transitioning' to democracy, although every multiparty election since 1995 has been deeply rigged and manipulated (Tronvoll & Aadland 1995; Lyons 1996; Pausewang *et al.* 2002; Tronvoll 2011; Arriola & Lyons 2016; Lyons & Verjee 2022). As the process of democratisation involves dismantling old institutions of control and coercion to be replaced by new organs with initially little authority, this facilitates opportunities of contestation and conflict (Mansfield & Snyder 2002). Particularly susceptible to conflict are countries transitioning from repressive authoritarian and military rule (Cook & Savun 2016), as Ethiopia.

The final characteristic about Ethiopia relevant to this case is its extreme identity-based and driven politics. Although with some ambiguity, research indicates that ethnic divisions in general influence conflict (Esteban *et al.* 2012). Moreover, the federal system in Ethiopia, which puts emphasis on group rights and ethnicity, is attributed by many to enhance ethnic conflicts in the country (Abrha 2019; Barata 2019). When political visions and positions are articulated and aligned with the ethnic group in contestation with other groups with conflicting interests and demands, it follows that if no political middle-ground is found, a possible mobilisation of support will be based on ethnicity. In such contexts, elections will often intensify identity-based divisions and polarisation in society. If political actors thus emphasise and manipulate the identity element in an electoral campaign and casting it as an existential threat to the group's survival, existing tensions will be exacerbated and likely lead to violent outcomes, as observed in Tigray.

All the above characteristics of Ethiopian politics and society were framing the political transition and influenced agency of individual and collective actors across the country during the breakdown of EPRDF and TPLF's disassociation with Prosperity Party, and subsequently in the run-up to the Tigray election. Adding to these country-specific characteristics were some Tigray-peculiar factors, which entrenched authorities in Tigray and Ethiopia on the path towards war.

Tigray marginalisation and the development of a siege mentality

How could a government turn against a segment of its own people in a war of annihilation so rapidly after coming to power by peaceful means? Several compounding factors explain the breakdown of trust between the TPLF and Prosperity Party, creating new enemy images that expedited the civil war. From the Tigrayan perspective, they seemed encircled by enemies, as both

the federal government and regional authorities in Amhara turned against them and created an alliance with TPLF's long-term enemy President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea.

After the passing of the EPRDF strong-man and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in 2012, internal discords between the component parties within the EPRDF coalition had increasingly stymied the government's capability and capacity to rule. As the coordinated coercive control of the central government weakened, youth protest in Oromia regional state started to surface in 2014. The Oromo Qeerroo movement demanded accountability and an end to corruption and maladministration in Oromia, as well as reforms of the EPRDF. TPLF's continued influence and control over the coalition and the federal government, and the lack of genuine and proper representation of Oromo interests at the centre, was the source of the protest. Soon, the protest spread to Amhara region, creating an alliance between the two biggest population groups in the country against the TPLF domination at the centre (Dias & Yetena 2022).

The rhetoric of the protest movements and political pundits conflated the TPLF with the Tigrayan people, attributing the authoritarian misconduct of TPLF to Tigrayans at large. The explicit anti-Tigrayan discourse articulated in the protests shocked the Tigrayan constituency (Forsén & Tronvoll 2021). As the protest movements gained traction, Tigrayans in general became increasingly vulnerable and exposed to targeted repercussions. For instance, in Amhara region in 2016, allegedly over 20,000 Tigrayans were driven out of Gondar and had to relocate to Tigray for protection, and several dozens were killed (Quartz 30.10.2016). Tigrayan business owners in Addis Ababa and other regional cities were forced to close shops, and tens of thousands Tigrayans living outside their home region relocated to Tigray for safety during the 2016–2018 period.

The popular protests augmented the internal divisions within the EPRDF, leading to a gradual withering of TPLF's dominance of the party coalition, culminating with the coming to power of Abiy Ahmed as party chair and Prime Minister in April 2018 (Tronvoll 2022). From Tigrayan people's perspective, Abiy's first months in office evolved into a mission to persecute and insult them, individually and collectively. Nebiyu Sihul Mikael, at the time a Tigrayan political analyst and social activist and later appointed head of Prosperity Party in Tigray, described Abiy's intention in the following way during his first visit to the region after claiming power:

With a covert ambition to degrade the TPLF, and therefore debase the Tigrayan people, detectable in his first visit, Abiy then showed his hand by openly assailing the region's ruling party. This encouraged the state- and party-affiliated media to slam the 27-year administration in which the TPLF, and by extension Tigrayans, were perceived as the main actors and beneficiaries. (Mikael 2019)

To consolidate his power and eliminate any threat of counter-coup, Abiy Ahmed immediately ordered a reorganisation of the military leadership,

resulting in the dismissal of over a hundred Tigrayan army generals and detention of over 50 high-level military officials on charges of corruption and human rights abuses (*Reuters* 16.12.2018). Of particular importance was the removal of the Tigrayan Chief of Staff and the head of Intelligence services, clearly signifying a change of guards at the helm of power in Ethiopia (Fisher & Gebrewahd 2019). This resolute action by Abiy Ahmed and his call for peace with Eritrea made the autocratic President Isias Afwerki express in joy the 'end of the TPLF's shenanigans' as 'Game Over' (Eritrean Ministry of Information 2018). This was the start of the realignment of interests between the new Ethiopian leadership and Eritrea to further the marginalisation of TPLF from political influence in the region, disguised as a 'peace process' between the two countries which would subsequently appear as a war alliance. Abiy Ahmed was keeping TPLF and the regional government of Tigray in the dark regarding the renewed bilateral relations, which had been frozen for 20 years during the TPLF/ERPFD reign (Tronvoll 2020a). In the eyes of Tigrayans, this was perceived as suspicious and as a plot to further the downgrading of TPLF. Abbay Tsehay,⁶ one of the founding members of the TPLF in 1975 and its leading ideologist after the passing of Meles, explained to me his interpretation of the situation in February 2020, a couple of months prior to TPLF's decision to conduct autonomous elections:

Isaias is very vindictive. He is determined to have his revenge on TPLF and Tigrayan people. And he has used this situation to pursue that. He wants to dismantle TPLF for revenge, but also to get a free hand in interference in Ethiopia. He wants full access to Ethiopian economy and internal politics. And Abiy will allow this. Abiy has also an interest of marginalizing Tigray and dismantle TPLF. They have a common goal. (Abbay Tsehay 2020 int.)

Parallel to adjusting Ethiopia's regional relations, Abiy Ahmed introduced radical party policy changes and new operational routines, which according to TPLF went against party bylaws and long-term ideological underpinnings. Replacing the ideological orientation of 'revolutionary democracy' with liberal market economy, advancing centralisation of power at the cost of ethnic self-determination and abolishing the principle of democratic centralism, Abiy Ahmed defied both the TPLF ideology and hegemony in ERPFD, which subsequently ended in open hostility when the coalition was dissolved in December 2019 and replaced by Abiy's own creation, the Prosperity Party (Vaughan 2023). In a strong statement, chair of TPLF Debretsion Gebremichael made it clear that 'the TPLF refused to participate in their unprincipled goals, and the ruling forces are working on their plans ... to finish off Tigray...'. He concluded that 'this is what we called betrayal, they didn't only betray us, they have betrayed their people, the poor people, they betrayed the country, and we consider them traitors' (*Gedab News* 30.12.2019). Subsequently, the TPLF representatives in the federal government and institutions pulled out of Addis Ababa and regrouped in Tigray, where they started to design their

own development policies and a political vision of a Tigray ‘*de facto* state’ with a looser relationship with the federal government (Tronvoll 2020c).

With their backs against the wall with a hostile President Isaias in Eritrea, the blockade and increasing tensions on their southern border towards Amhara regional state substantiated the Tigrayans’ suspicion and anger against PM Abiy. For a long time, there had been a simmering tension over disputed territories along the Tigray–Amhara border. During the process of crafting out the regional states under the new federal dispensation in 1995, the former Tigray province was reshaped in a manner where it shed territories on its eastern flank to the new Afar regional state and gained ground in western (Welkeit) and southern (Raya) parts, territories previously administered under Amhara-dominated provinces. In 2016, protests erupted in western Tigray, organised by the Welkait Amhara Identity Committee, demanding a realignment of the administrative status of the zone under the Amhara regional state. The protests were quickly quashed, and Welkait Committee leader Col. Demeke Zewdu and others were arrested. This sparked massive demonstrations and protests across Amhara state, leading to dozens of people being killed. After the change of EPRDF leadership in 2018, Col. Demeke, together with thousands of other prisoners, was released, whereupon he promised to continue the struggle to return the Welkait, Setit-Humera and Tsegede districts to Amhara control. This position was subsequently adopted by the Amhara regional government, making it an official threat to Tigray administrative territorial control (Tronvoll 2021).

The Tigrayan people and leadership perceived the developments in Eritrea, Amhara and the federal government with increasing concern since the changes of 2018. The conflation of security threats perceived to be real and detrimental, compelled the region to prepare for all eventualities. Because of these events, a siege mentality started to fester, influencing Tigrayan interpretations and perceptions of political dynamics in Ethiopia and beyond. As explained by Getachew Reda, TPLF Executive Committee member and spokesperson of the party, already in the beginning of 2019:

We can tackle President Isaias if he wants to attack us. We can also handle whatever the Amhara can throw at us, or the federal government if they would try to intervene. But our fear is a coordinated attack by all three at the same time. This is the worst-case scenario we need to be prepared to handle. We are building our regional capacities to win such a three-front war. (Getachew Reda 2019 int.)

Increased persecution and hostility towards Tigrayans across the country led to a re-conceptualisation of their relationship to central authorities and their understanding of an Ethiopian identity. Thus, in the run-up to the election, the TPLF, comprising the old guerrilla army leadership which toppled the Derg military junta in 1991, once again became a representation of protection for a collective Tigrayan security, as explained by a prominent Tigrayan opposition member ahead of the election:

Tegaru [a vernacular term for Tigrayans] are all rallying behind TPLF now, even though we have been criticizing their performances for a long time. But now our collective security is in peril. Hence, strategic voting will take place. Even I as a member of Salasay Woyane, would nevertheless vote TPLF now. We are threatened by all; thus, we need TPLF to protect us! People appreciate TPLF's extensive military skills and hence they are the only one who has the capacity to defend us. (Senior member of SAWAT 2020 int.)

To hold, or not to hold, elections

Amid this political turmoil, the discourse on the forthcoming scheduled May 2020 elections arose. The political reforms introduced by Abiy Ahmed after taking power in 2018 promised a fair and free election, for the first time in the country's history. Expectations were high among political parties and the public for a genuine election process, so much so that the reformed and inexperienced National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) warned as early as December 2018 about a possible delay of the election due in part to various claims brought forward by the opposition parties (*Addis Standard* 28.12.2018). As the political reforms were stalling and localised ethnic-driven conflicts were increasing across the country producing hundreds of thousands of IDPs (internally displaced people),⁷ members of the House of Representatives from both opposition and the ruling party in the fall of 2019 warned about the likelihood of post-election violence and questioned the preparedness and ability of the administration to hold a peaceful election the coming year. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed dismissed any suggestion of a postponement, however, arguing:

With regard to the election, what this House [of Representatives] needs to take into consideration is that whether it is this year's election or the next, in Ethiopia it is impossible to hold an election without problems and free of challenges. Democracy is an exercise and a culture, and it is so when we exercise it, when we do it, not when we run away from it. (*Addis Standard* 22.10.2019)

Just a couple of months later, the Prime Minister was forced to accept, however, that the Election Board was not ready to conduct a May election and re-scheduled the elections for mid-August 2020 (*Reuters* 15.01.2020). In the meantime, the COVID-19 virus had arrived in Ethiopia, and a renewed debate about conducting the election during the pandemic arose. Going back on his earlier words, arguably due to the pandemic, Abiy Ahmed in end of March 2020 endorsed an indefinite postponement of the federal and regional elections (*Reuters* 31.03.2020).

Interviewing key political stakeholders from both opposition and the incumbent regime in the run-up to the decision in the spring of 2020 to postpone the federal elections, most respondents predicted an election process collapsing into violence and instability. Sebhat Nega, a founding member of the

TPLF and its 'éminence grise' during three decades in power, outlined a dramatic scenario for Ethiopia when I interviewed him in February 2020:

What will come? Civil war. Civil war is inevitable. 100%. Either before election or for sure after. The consequences will be terrible. The civil war will be all-embracing, between regional states over territory, intra-region between various elites, and between religions. It will be all-encompassing. The triggering factor will be a cancelled or rigged election. (Sebhat Nega 2020a int.)

The postponement sparked criticism from both supporters and opponents of the government (*Dutche Welle* 16.06.2020), as it was believed that the pandemic was used as an excuse by Abiy Ahmed to the stay in power as he feared an electoral defeat (Østebø *et al.* 2021). The strongest resistance to the postponement was articulated by the TPLF, and its Executive Committee passed a resolution in early May 2020 to conduct regional elections in Tigray in defiance of federal government's decision (*Addis Standard* 04.05.2020). Subsequently, TPLF Central Committee issued a lengthy statement accusing Abiy Ahmed of being an 'parvenu dictator with unchecked lust for power' and claiming that 'the process of the dissolution of the Constitutional order and the disintegration of the country is approaching its final chapter due to the nature of the "Prosperity" clique'. The statement emphasised that:

as if the 'Prosperity' clique's illegal measures and conspiracies in order not to hold elections and to extend its grip on power were not enough, the leader of the 'Prosperity' clique has, in his utter disregard for basic rights and peoples' right for self-determination, publicly declared war following our party's Executive [Committee]'s decision to uphold the rule of law and the continuation of order by holding elections at the level of [the Regional State of] Tigray because 'Prosperity' was working on cancelling the election; it is a known fact that the people of Tigray neither bow to the threat of war and war drums nor do they give up their rights. (TPLF CC 2020)

The portrayal of the political conflict between TPLF and federal authorities as an existential threat to Tigray had been in the making since the coming to power of Abiy Ahmed. In Tigray this was generally acknowledged, as the combined threats emanating from Eritrea, Amhara and federal government against Tigrayan collective and individual security compelled the people to rally round their leaders.

However, the election was not only about adhering to the term limits for the regional assembly and government, and preserving the right to self-determination for Tigray, but arguably also involved securing local, and perhaps international, legitimacy for TPLF and their continued rule. The defiance of federal authority was anchored both in Tigrayan invincibility and their generational struggle for self-determination, as well as in a forward-looking vision of a new *de facto* Tigray statehood. What better way of bolstering

perceptions of legitimacy among both domestic and international audiences for this 'rebel cause' than to conduct a democratic election, signalling their intent and ability to uphold democratic and constitutional principles negated by their adversary (Cunningham *et al.* 2020).

A snap election on a shoestring budget

From an organisational and logistical viewpoint, the overall Tigray election process was remarkably speedy and well-conducted, which attests to TPLF's organisational capacity and the collective support among the Tigrayans for conducting an election. Within three months, a process of legislating, appointing and establishing an electoral commission, registering voters, registering parties and candidates, campaigning and logistically preparing for an election involving more than 2.7 million voters – and all during a state of emergency due to the COVID pandemic and in a hostile political environment – was carried out.

Based on the request from the regional government, Tigray regional council decided formally on 12 June 2020 to conduct a regional election and subsequently requested the NEBE to organise it, as per constitutional procedures. The Board dismissed the request due to the pandemic and stated that Tigray regional council had no legal bases to decide on regional elections (*Addis Standard* 24.06.2020). The regional government dismissed NEBE's warning and instructed the Justice Bureau of Tigray and scholars from Mekelle University Law School to draft a new regional election act with input from opposition parties, which was subsequently passed by the Regional Council legislating the electoral process and the establishment of a Tigray Electoral Commission (TEC) (Proc. 351/2020).

From the point of view of bolstering legitimacy, it was important that the TEC appeared as an autonomous entity, independent of TPLF. The public could thus submit candidates to a selection committee comprised of civic representatives. Some 776 individuals were initially nominated, and the committee shortlisted 177 individuals which were submitted to an inter-party committee composed of the TPLF and the three main opposition parties, which eventually forwarded ten names to the regional Council. The Commission were sworn in on 16 July 2020, making Muluwork Kidanemariam, an independent academic, chief commissioner, together with four other commissioners.⁸ The lower-level structures of the Commission, at zone and woreda levels, were the incorporated NEBE structures. To get to work as soon as possible, the TEC adopted 17 directives from NEBE of operational character.

The Commission was operating on a shoestring budget. An initial 250 million birr was allocated to the Commission by the regional government's local budget, but with promises that more could be obtained if necessary. All equipment and ballot paper were produced locally and distributed to the 2,762 polling stations across 38 constituencies in the region.

The proclamation prescribed a new mixed electoral system, where four candidates were to be elected from each constituency making a total of 152 constituency seats (based on multiple member first past the post constituency

system). Additionally, 38 seats (20%) were to be allocated based on proportional representation principle.⁹

Electoral preparations

To conduct the election prior to the 4 October expiry date of the incumbent regional government (5 years since they were sworn in), the electoral process had to be densely packed with activities from the outset with the establishment of the Tigray Election Commission on 17 July 2020. Recruitment and training of election officials started immediately, followed by civic education of the public and preparing local election offices.

The eligibility to register candidates for the election reflected the political objective of the TPLF. Only political parties acknowledging Tigray's right to conduct the election were invited to register. ARENA Tigray for Democracy and Sovereignty, the oldest registered opposition party in Tigray, declined to register due to the uncondusive context of the pandemic, as well as the unconstitutionality of the elections (*Addis Fortune* 01.08.2020). Tigray Democratic Party (TDP) and of course Prosperity Party Tigray also declined to register. Neither TDP nor PP had any local representatives in Tigray, as their party offices and leadership were based in Addis Ababa. Not one person interviewed during my stay in Tigray would admit that s/he supported PP, and it seems unlikely they had any base in the region. Apparently, PP did have some support among Tigrayan business owners and civil servants in Addis Ababa, but no one dared to express this in public in Tigray during the period of election. I tried to get hold of any local PP representative in Tigray, but in vain. Neither did the Tigray PP leadership based in Addis respond to any invitation to comment on the election by this author.

Only five parties thus opted to register for the election: TPLF, Tigray Independence Party (TIP), Salsay Woyane (SAWAT), The National Congress of Great Tigray (Baytona) and Assimba Democratic Party (ADP).¹⁰ Out of the five parties running, all but ADP filed 152 candidates in all the 38 constituencies in Tigray. ADP, a more parochial party (mainly representing the Irob minority group), filed 13 candidates.¹¹

The voter registration process also drew some excitement, although it was apparently carried out without any significant hurdles. A total of about 2,760,000 voters were registered, outnumbering the projected estimate of 2.6 million. The Commission had to deny registration to a large number of Tigrayans residing outside the region (particularly in Addis Ababa), as the election law prescribed a six-month residence in the region and possession of a local ID card as criteria for registering to vote. There were no indications of pressure on people to register to vote, as it appeared to be a general broad-based enthusiasm among all sectors of society that to participate in the election was the right and duty of all Tigrayans. However, whether there was voter intimidation in the contested areas of West Tigray and Raya is not known, as there was no independent observation in those areas.

TEC claimed that all civil society organisations in Tigray were invited to observe the election, on the condition that they accepted Tigray's right to

organise the vote. This excluded some organisations, although no official list of rejections was made available. The registered political parties also filed observers, however only TPLF had the capacity to have party observers at every polling station in the region.¹²

Election campaigning

The State of Emergency imposed due to the pandemic put severe restrictions on the election campaign, designated to take place during four weeks from 11 August. On-the-ground campaigning and rallies were prohibited; consequently, communication was conducted through broadcasting programs, posters and pamphlets, as well as driving vehicles with loudspeakers through local communities.

The main campaign activities were five political debates broadcast on regional TV and radio, centring on the topics of democracy, self-determination and the future of Tigray; trade and investment policies; rural and urban development; peace and security; and education and health policies. The cross-cutting dominating issue was, however, Tigray's relation to the federal level and Ethiopia as such. For the opposition parties, it was important to distance themselves from TPLF's continued insistence on protecting and defending the established ethnic-federal constitutional order. The three key opposition parties could, simply, be ordered according to their view on Tigray's relationship to Ethiopia, where TIP argued for an immediate and outright secession and independence, Baytona championed a confederal system, whereas SAWET advocated a 'loose' federation model.

All opposition parties were critical of TPLF's doctrinal leftover from Marxist-Leninism, such as the concept of 'revolutionary democracy' and the state-controlled economy. The opposition parties considered themselves to be more liberal democracy oriented, with a market economy platform. However, the election campaign was centred fully on the current security situation in Ethiopia, hence economic development policy, or agriculture, education and health sectors were hardly mentioned at all. Since public gatherings and discussions were banned, political campaigning became slogan-driven where the contenders pushed key catchphrases on posters and through loudspeakers to the audience. With the exception of the ADP, which drew its support from the minority group Irob in north-eastern Tigray, none of the three main opposition parties had any specific ethnic or parochial anchoring. However, they were all 'over-represented' among the younger, educated, urban-based population, representing a more 'modern' constituency than the traditionally oriented, rural-based farming community, favouring the TPLF.

Disregarding concrete policy recommendations, TIP concentrated on distancing Tigray from Ethiopia in primordial-anchored slogans under the main motto of 'Independence for National Pride'. A Tigray identity was anchored in pre-Ethiopian times, projecting Tigrayan exceptionalism: 'We Tigrayans are Axumites and Axumites have never been Ethiopians'; 'Tigray was a country and it will be a country' and 'Ethiopia is dark to Tigrayans and has never been bright'.

SAWET seemed to focus on very few issues, presenting its overall policy under the slogan 'New Deal, New Chapter', in addition to one identity marker: 'Tigray's interest will be ensured by a struggle driven in Tigray'. Baytona, on the other hand, had a number of campaign slogans, but all projecting a Tigrayan identity and strength, as for instance: 'The dream of greater Tigray is to be realized by Baytona'; 'Baytona is not a party only for power but for civilization'; 'Self-determination of Tigray will be ensured with Baytoyan democracy' and 'Self-reliant economic development will be sustained by popular participation'.

For the TPLF to justify its continued rule of the region after 29 years in power, they had to build on past achievements and cast the party as the guarantor for continued development and preservation of self-determination. With slogans such as 'TPLF is a party of the past, today, and tomorrow!' and 'All the successes and achievements are earned through the pathway of TPLF', the incumbent built on its leadership experience during the 17-year struggle against the Derg military junta (1975–91), to present itself as the natural protector and leader of the Tigrayan people. Whilst TPLF's democratic credentials were questionable, the party still promised to deliver on them: 'The pathway of TPLF is the pathway of democracy, peace, and development'. As insecurity and apprehension were the prevailing mood in Tigray, TPLF capitalised on this by slogans such as 'An absolute unity of purpose and strength of the people of Tigray is assured by TPLF' and 'The right of self-determination and administration of Tigray will be ensured by TPLF!'

Old habits die hard: inhibition of opposition

Throughout its 29-year tenure, the TPLF had never allowed an organised political opposition to take root in Tigray and had enforced a limited political space for opposition activities (Tronvoll & Aadland 1995; Aalen 2002). During the 2020 process, however, there was an unprecedented openness and in urban areas opposition candidates and voters had no fear of speaking their minds on political issues and criticising the TPLF performances or policies. In rural areas, on the other hand, deference to power is more ingrained in the socio-cultural order, so farmers were more careful in criticising local cadres out of real or perceived fear for repercussions, as has been normal elsewhere in Ethiopia (Lefort 2007).

Initially, the opposition parties were satisfied with the apparent liberalisation and change of practice of TPLF, as they were allowed to open branch offices and organise a party structure throughout Tigray where they had followers. Girmai Berhe, chair of TIP, pointed to the new election guidelines and code of conduct for TPLF officials and members as a fundamental shift in how the party perceived opposition activity. He praised these guidelines and training provided by the TPLF leadership to the party organisation to change bad habits and accept opposition activity: 'Since this training we observe a clear change on the ground. I hope this change we see is a permanent change of ideology and practice' (Girmai Berhe 2020 int.). Kidane Amene, chair of Baytona, on the other hand, argued that the TPLF was the same and

had not changed its authoritarian character: 'TPLF cadres are going around threatening local villagers to vote for the "bee" [TPLF election symbol], and if they tick any other box, the ballot will be spoiled, they claim. ... TPLF has not changed. They are still revolutionary democrats. And they use all the state resources to make sure they win again' (Kidane Amene 2020 int.).

A similar perception was held by Hayalou Godefay, chair of SAWET, who also reported harassment of members and candidates by local district (*woreda*) officials, and that many of his lower-level party officials had been detained for shorter periods of time to instill fear and frustration among their followers. When he himself was on a campaign trip to his home constituency in southern Tigray, he claimed local militia had been mobilised to construct checkpoints at every village to delay and harass his delegation. Although some improvement was experienced later, Hayalou claimed the situation drastically changed two weeks prior to voting day: 'With the exception of our 25 candidates who also are party Central Committee members, all other candidates were approached by TPLF *woreda* leaders and asked and pressured to withdraw their candidacy. So, this seems like a coordinated strategy, which must have been decided from higher up in the TPLF organization' (Hayalo Godefay 2020 int.).

The pressure on rural opposition candidates carried out by local TPLF cadres and *woreda* leaders reportedly led five of SAWET's candidates to withdraw from the election, as well as three of TIP's, and two from Baytona (interviews of party leaders, Mekelle, September 2020). The three key opposition parties had raised these complaints to both the Election Commission and TPLF central leadership. According to the opposition leaders, the Commission investigated some of the cases to address the concerns; but the Commission had also stated that it is the prerogative of a candidate to withdraw their candidacy if they so wished and that it was beyond the scope of the Commission to follow-up further. Kidane Amene of Baytona explained that they had approached the top TPLF leadership with their complaints, and that a joint committee would be established to look into the matters, without it materialising into a concrete process. The TEC, moreover, acknowledged that they had received complaints about intimidation or undue influence on opposition candidates, which had immediately been assessed and forwarded to the TPLF leadership for them to take action on the ground where the incident occurred. The TEC commissioner admitted, however, that the Commission did not have the resources to follow-up complaints on the ground to confirm whether the grievances had been solved: 'We need to rely upon the responsibility of the TPLF leadership who we believe want a fair election to allow opposition and to discipline their cadres' (Meressa Tsehaye 2020a int.).

The culture of 'power' and 'deference'

Tigray society was and remains haunted by its recent history of the 17 years of struggle (1975–1991), as well as memories of the devastating 1998–2000 war with Eritrea. The TPLF has for two generations been viewed as the 'sons and daughters' of the soil, generally perceived to be struggling to protect Tigrayan people, culture, interests, and security. A deeply ideological

organisation, originally rooted in Marxist-Leninist doctrines, the TPLF has always contained inner dissent (Young 1997; Berhe 2009), but since early 2000s, a party schism emerged between an 'old guard' accused of protecting the original doctrines of the Front and a reformist camp who claim to understand the need to adapt and change to new political and demographic circumstances in Tigray (Tadesse & Young 2003; Tronvoll 2022).

In the 2020 election process, TPLF was torn between an interest to appear reformist and forward looking to obtain both domestic and international legitimacy, and the ideological obsession to remain in total control. Several party leaders had advocated reforms for a long time. Earlier in 2020 I discussed this in-depth with TPLF ideologue and founding member Abay Tsehaye, who admitted that they had failed and that the lack of reforms had become the Achilles heel of the party:

There are serious grievances against the TPLF government in Tigray, which should be heard and represented in regional affairs. ... We need to make the elections free and fair. We cannot accept any abuse or manipulation. We will educate our cadres on this. We should be tolerant, disciplined, and all cadres will be held to account. (Abay Tsehaye 2020 int.)

Despite expressed interest for reforms by the TPLF leadership, the view of opposition politics was hesitant among some, as explained by the 'father' of the Front Sebhat Nega: 'It is totally wrong to open up for plural elections in Tigray. These organizations are not political parties. They are interest groups. A political party must have an ideology, and the ideology has to be class based' (Sebhat Nega 2020b int.).

Old ideological doctrines and over-zealous cadres at local level who were resisting changes for fear of being voted out of power and privileged positions, in combination with a deep-rooted association with the 'revolutionary spirit' (*Woyane*) and a rural deference to power, created an ambiguous political context in many parts of Tigray. TEC commissioner Meressa Tsehaye exemplified this by one incident which had come to the ears of the Commission. A young, educated man had registered as a candidate for an opposition party. His father, an old TPLF fighter, had joined the struggle in early age and fought for many years in the mountains of Tigray against the Derg army in the 1980s. When he heard about his son's candidacy, he was deeply shocked and chastised his son calling him a traitor to the cause of the struggle, forcing the son to withdraw his candidacy.

Election day

On 9 September 2020, the Tigrayan people went to the polls for the election of a new regional assembly. The polls opened at 6 am; but already at 2 am people started to line up to vote. At the opening in Mekelle, the lines stretched down the streets and around the blocks as people eagerly waited to cast their ballot in defiance of federal dictates.¹³

Voting took place in a calm, orderly and peaceful manner across Tigray, as reported by media and confirmed by interlocutors in several cities throughout

the region.¹⁴ Several groups of youth volunteers provided security of the polls and organised crowd control. Local observers were present at all polling stations, representing the local community (elders) and civic organisations. Only TPLF had party observers at all polling stations. The opposition had not had time or capacity to mobilise any significant presence of party observers, and at many polling stations visited, there were no opposition observers present.

The context of the vote was perceived to be open and no incidents of explicit intimidation or pressure were observed. The secrecy of ballot was protected at all polling stations observed. Voters were seemingly free to select their personal preferences. However, allegations were posted online by Amhara activists about voter intimidation and suppression in the contested Welketi and Raya districts. These allegations were, however, dismissed as baseless by Tigrayan authorities and the Election Commission.

Opposition's dilemma: complaining or complying?

No formal complaints were logged at the Election Commission during voting day (Meressa Tsehaye, TEC Commissioner, 10.09.20). However, local grievance mechanisms at the polling station level may have received and solved complaints on site, without that being recorded at HQ.

The leaderships of the three key opposition parties were in doubt however, on how to handle alleged irregularities they had experienced during the electoral process. These incidents, few in number but serious in the violation of the spirit of a free vote, can be grouped together under the following categories: (1) undue pressure put upon opposition candidates to withdraw from the election; (2) in a few cases, undue pressure put upon some party observers and also in a couple of instances preventing them to enter polling stations to observe opening of polls or during counting of votes; (3) in some very few cases (three or four) it was claimed that results announced did not correspond to the actual ballot, lowering the support for the opposition candidate; and (4) pressure put upon voters by local administrators and cadres to vote TPLF, as it was claimed that it was the only party who could guarantee their security.

The opposition leaders were critiquing the issues above, concomitantly as they acknowledged that all people of Tigray supported TPLF in the defence of their collective security and right to self-determination. The opposition leaders were thus in a quandary on whether to formally report on irregularities experienced. They were cognisant of the dilemma that crying out foul might backfire on them and label them as 'spoilers' in the eyes of their constituents, as well as undermining the legitimacy of the elections and 'play into the hands of Abiy Ahmed and our adversaries', as it was expressed. In the end, no formal complaints on pre-election procedures, voting day activities or counting were submitted to the TEC (Meressa Tsehaye, TEC Commissioner, ph. int. 12.07.23).

Result and its explanation

It was expected that TPLF would win an overwhelming majority, but also that the opposition would fare well in urban centres. The results announced by TEC

came thus as a surprise to all: TPLF won 98.2% of the votes, followed by Baytona (0.8%), TIP (0.71%) and SAWET (0.28%), whereas ADP received only a few hundred votes.¹⁵ All the 152 constituency seats were thus won by the TPLF. The turnout was overwhelming at 98.67%, substantiating the massive support for the election exercise itself, as well as for the TPLF.

Rural voters in Ethiopia embedded in cultural hierarchies and relations of social deference have been prone to vote for power, i.e. the most likely party to win (Lefort 2007). In a context of a looming conflict, moreover, constituents tend to use their vote to appease the most powerful party in hope that they will provide the necessary deterrence against threats and be the most capable to protect the collective security of the electorate (Lyons 2005: 61). Against this background, it made sense that Tigrayans were casting their vote in favour of the TPLF; even opposition members confirmed this behaviour. A long-term military leader of the TPLF during the 17 years of struggle and former Chief of Staff of Ethiopian defence forces and critic of the TPLF leadership, Lt. Gen Tsadkan Gebretensae, offered the following explanation for the election outcome:

This was a vote for the security and self-determination of Tigray. There is a lot of grievances against TPLF on maladministration, corruption, lack of justice, and so on. But people have decided that this is not the time to address accountability with TPLF. We all decided we need security now. ... Abiy has done a tremendous job for TPLF in pushing all people away from him and into the arms of TPLF. (Tsadkan Gebretensae 2020 int.)

Following interviews conducted with TPLF officials during 2020, it became clear that the party leadership wanted opposition to be represented in the regional Council, at least minimally. A hundred percent dominated TPLF assembly would be an embarrassment, as it would resemble the 'old ways' of conducting elections (Arriola & Lyons 2016), at the same time as it would undermine the legitimacy of the decisions of the Council moving forward in such a precarious time.

The results thus immediately sparked a discussion on how the 38 proportional seats should be distributed, as the election law was somewhat ambiguous on the issue (as for instance not defining any specific threshold). A massive online campaign for TPLF to waive their right to the proportional seats materialised, for the opposition to be represented with 20% of the seats in the regional Council. Also, prominent citizens such as Lt. Gen. Tsadkan Gebretensae advocated such a solution, explaining: 'We need to make the regional Council vibrant. The political discourse needs to be taken off the streets and into the assembly'. From a legal point of view, such a position was also endorsed by a law professor at Mekelle University: 'This is not a legal issue; it is political. And TPLF must find a political solution which resonates most justly with the Tigrayan people' (legal scholar 2020 int).

The TPLF leadership appeared to be in a quandary on how to respond to the demands to accommodate the opposition. In the end, however, the incumbent applied a formalistic interpretation of the election act and distributed the

proportional seats accordingly, giving TPLF 37 and Baytona one of the representatives. However, Getachew Reda, spokesperson for the regional government, explained that various models were discussed, inter alia to formalise the inter-party forum as an 'advisory committee' to the Council (Mekelle 12.09.20). After further deliberations, the newly elected State Council approved a new bill on 24 September 2020, which legislated opposition parties to have non-voting representation in the Council, offering them the opportunity to participate in the discussion in the Council and propose policy and bills.¹⁶ In such a set-up, Baytona received seven non-voting seats, while TIP, SAWAT and ADP gained five, two and one seats, respectively. Although facing stiff criticism from hardline TPLF members of the newly elected Council, the head of the TPLF and regional president, Debretsion Gebremichael, defended the bill hoping it would 'ensure accountability and transparency of the regional government' (*Addis Fortune* 24.09.2020). Furthermore, some senior TPLF members, such as Abay Tsehaye and Seyoum Mesfin (both founding members of the Front and later to be executed during the war on Tigray by allegedly Eritrean forces), endorsed the bill and advocated its adoption. The reaction from the opposition parties to the initiative was mixed, however, while Baytona, TIP and ADP welcomed it, SAWAT declined to take up the non-voting seats in the Council.

The election results attest to the fact that this was not an election in a normal sense of the term. It was rather perceived to be a referendum on Tigray's right to self-determination and collective security, and the only party believed to be capable to defend the territorial integrity and security of the people of Tigray was the TPLF. The participating opposition were praised by Tigrayans of all walks of life, but as one farmer expressed it: 'We like the leaders of the opposition parties, but they should join TPLF so we can elect them' (Farmer 2020 int.).

Conclusion: from voting to war

In a context of increasing ethnic tensions and security concerns, political entrepreneurs may easily mobilise support along ethnic lines against perceived or real adversaries. An election process will thus become a potent vehicle to harness and mobilise such support. Research indicates that sub-national elections are even more likely than national elections to ignite warfare when previous civil wars were fought over demands for political self-determination or independence (Brancati & Snyder 2012: 827). In such contexts, former combatants with a territorial base, like the TPLF, are best positioned to win the election, as they draw legitimacy from previous wars of resistance.

The day after election, I visited the Heroes' Quarters in Mekelle, a tranquil area where fighters who were seriously injured and disabled during the 17 years of struggle reside. On a street corner a group of four elderly war-injured fighters, two sitting in wheelchairs, were chatting and I asked them about their view on the election.

We paid dearly for this day. We struggled 17-years for justice and democracy. Having seen the election, we feel happy. ... Ethiopia is on the verge of

disintegration; there is no peace, people are harassed and arrested, there are turmoil in many regions. But we have peace here in Tigray. ... We have now elected our Council and government here in Tigray. Whatever happens next is up to Abiy Ahmed and the federal government. We do not threaten anyone. But if anyone attacks us, we will all fight back and defend our right to self-determination. (Disabled fighter 2020 int)

The regional election was a definite manifestation of Tigrayan nationalism, orchestrated by the TPLF to demarcate a distinction between their 'responsible' and 'constitutionally anchored' political leadership, in contrast to the imprudent rule of Abiy Ahmed and Prosperity Party. Conducting an election is an utmost exercise in self-rule, and an ample means to cast themselves as 'democrats' in contrast to a non-democratic federal government that suspends the election 'in fear of losing'. Moreover, it reflects an interest to broaden civilian inclusiveness and to increase domestic legitimacy in the pursuit of an expressed politics of defiance, as well as bestowing the organisers with increased international understanding and legitimacy (Cunningham *et al.* 2020: 87–8). Furthermore, the extreme high voter turnout witnessed in the Tigray election was in itself a strong predictor of subsequent outbreak of conflict. Comparative research has shown how high voter turnout in elections in post-conflict and fragile societies enables 'insurgents to restart conflicts' as it bestows their cause with greater legitimacy, showing a much greater likelihood for outbreak of war than in elections with lower turnout (Letsa 2017: 435).

In late afternoon the day after election, I sat down with Dr Abraham Tekeste, the Vice President of Tigray and former Minister of Finance in Ethiopia, to hear his views on what the election signified. After a long contemplative pause, he expounded:

Personally, it provides a sense of security, legitimacy, and really a connection with the people. It is reassuring to see the turnout. It gives me confidence in what we are trying to achieve. ... It legitimises what we in public office are doing. ... It signifies that Tigray has an organised and functioning state that is capable to provide government services, security, development, etc. (Abraham Tekeste 2020 int.)

Arguably, the election was perceived as a mandate to the TPLF to pursue its defiance politics versus federal authorities. Although the election was presented by the TPLF as a democratic and peaceful way to show dissatisfaction with federal dictates, the understanding in Addis Ababa was the contrary. No doubt, the election sharpened the ethnic differences and enhanced the clashing nationalists' aspirations projected by Mekelle, in contrast to the Ethiopianist policies advocated by Abiy Ahmed in Addis Ababa, and the contesting nationalist visions championed by Amhara elites in BahirDar. From the perspective of Tigrayan voters, their nationalistic aspirations were not however to come back to the centre to resume control of Ethiopian affairs (although some TPLF hardliners may have wanted to), nor to break away from Ethiopia – but to be left 'alone' by perceived aggressors. All but one of the voters talked to during

election day expressed the view that Tigray belonged together with Ethiopia, as explained by a voter in Adigrat: ‘Ethiopia has been Tigray since antiquity, and Tigray has been Ethiopia. Without Tigray, “Ethiopia” does not exist. So yes, we are Ethiopians too. But, if the rest of the country does not want us, and if Abiy continues to attack us and harass us, we have no other option than to leave’ (anonymous 2020 int.).

The Tigray regional election was the final trigger which led to the decisive breach of relations between Mekelle and Addis Ababa and the outbreak of war. The military preparations commenced immediately after election day, with mobilisation of military assets along the Tigray border (Tronvoll 2020b). Telling signs of what to come were many, as for instance the evacuation of the Ethiopian Airlines training centre in Mekelle, relocated to Addis Ababa. The formal breach of relations and suspension of federal grants to the region was declared by the House of Federation on 7 October 2020, which decided that ‘federal government should sever any kind of relationship with the Tigray regional state assembly and the region’s highest executive body’ (*Al Jazeera* 07.10.2020). Tigray’s regional president Debretsion Gebremichael appealed to international leaders in the end of October to intervene to avert the outbreak of war, with minimal international acknowledgement.

The question of which party fired the first shot on the night of 3 November 2020 remains somewhat obscure and of little relevance to this article. Suffice to say it unleashed a civil war which would ravage Tigray region and parts of Amhara and Afar regional states for the two years (Plaut & Vaughan 2023). It thus appears that the election may indeed be interpreted as a vote for war, in Tigray’s generational struggle for self-determination and lasting peace.

Competing interests. None.

Notes

1. Discussion with a group of young men at a street-side café in downtown Mekelle, Tigray, 06.09.20.
2. An ‘Agreement of Lasting Peace’ was signed by the TPLF and the federal government in Pretoria on 2 November 2022. See: <https://igad.int/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Download-the-signed-agreement-here.pdf>
3. Estimates of civilians killed in the war vary greatly. Ghent University ‘Tigray war Project’ has likely provided the best empirical assessments on excessive deaths as a direct and indirect consequence of the warfare and humanitarian blockade inflicted upon Tigray, and its estimate ranges from 311,000 to 808,000, with an average of 518,000 killed. See: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/casualtyrecording/cfis/hrc-res-50-11/subm-casualty-recording-academia-ghent-university-51.docx> (accessed 21.11.23).
4. I have consciously withheld any data or observations on the Tigray election as long as the war was ranging, in order for the information not to be misused by either side in war propaganda.
5. BTI Transformation Index characterises Ethiopia as an ‘authoritarian state’ and ranks it at 114 out of 137 countries in its 2022 report (<https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/ETH>); Freedom House in its 2022 ranking classifies Ethiopia as ‘Not free’ (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/ethiopia/freedom-world/2022>).
6. Abbay Tsehay was captured and executed soon after the outbreak of war, allegedly by Eritrean troops.

7. Ethiopia had 1.8 million IDPs in 2020, according to International Organization of Migration (<https://www.iom.int/news/iom-report-ethiopia-records-more-18-million-internally-displaced-2020>, accessed 21.11.23).
8. Tsegreda Dibekul was deputy commissioner, with Dr Tseg Berhane, Meressa Tsehaye and Mohammed Sied as members.
9. During the political reforms discussions in 2017–2018, the EPRDF decided to adopt a mixed electoral system in Ethiopia, however this was not followed-up when the coalition was dismantled and replaced by the Prosperity Party.
10. Assimba DP is generally perceived to be championing the rights and development of the Irob minority group in Tigray.
11. Additionally, four independent candidates were running for the election, all in Mekelle area.
12. Baytona registered about 900 observers, SAWET about 150 and TIP around 100. No international observers were accredited, but this researcher.
13. I started observation in Mekelle at 6 am and visited four polling stations in the centre of town and its outskirts, before travelling north where I stopped to observe the polls and talk to voters, party officials and administrators in Wukro, Negash, Adigrat and finally Zalambessa at the Eritrean border. I returned to Mekelle in the early evening to observe the closing of the polls at 6 pm.
14. This author has no specific empirical information on the voting in the contested areas of West Tigray and Raya, and the context in these areas may differ. One security incident was reported in Welkeit, however, when individuals from across the border in Amhara region had entered the Tigray side and allegedly started a firefight during early morning hours. The attack was deflected by Tigrayan militia and special forces.
15. Vote break-down: TPLF: 2,590,620; Baytona: 20,839; Tigray Independence Party: 18,479; Salsay Weyane Tigray: 3,136 and Asimba Democratic Party: 774.
16. This model was suggested by TEC to the regional executive, when the formal election result was presented (phone interview with TEC Commissioner Meressa Tsehaye, 13.07.23.).

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