



10
Aug 21

POLICY BRIEF

Ethiopian All-out:
Conflict Bonding of Smaller Nations to Build the Nation

SCOFIELD ASSOCIATES
Horn of Africa Research Partner

Brief by Oltetia Pere

Introduction

The present situation in Ethiopia is punctuated by a puzzling conflict that seems to take different phases every day, and evading the possibilities of de-escalation. It becomes complex to troubleshoot the conflict when there are emergent alliances crafted to strengthen the means to an end. The struggle in Ethiopia was rekindled when Ethiopian government forces launched an offensive campaign in the Tigray region, whose main political party – Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) – was drawn into conflict with the Prosperity Party led by the current Prime Minister as reported by media outlets (BBC News 2021). Allegations of Eritrean military engaging in the Tigray conflict in alliance with the government forces were also reported (Ibid).

Recently, the worrying turn of events has been characterized by verbal exchanges that has started balkanizing the country. The Prime Minister began by issuing a statement declaring the Tigray as an acute illness to Ethiopia “cancer” and that there was need to move in and pluck the “weed” out (Gavin, 2021). The immediate impacts from the statement is the profiling and harassment of the Tigray community by the government law enforcement agencies, and starving off the Tigray region from humanitarian aid (Ibid).

Following the Prime Minister’s comments, the regional leader of the Amhara region also made statements that called for a consolidated violence action against the Tigray. The statement from the regional leader bordered on ethnic cleansing and terrorism labelling of the Tigray. He appeared to appeal for action to preserve the Amhara (Tadesse, 2021). While media outlets are already reporting increased aggression and confrontation, these perceived “political correctness” by the leaders will likely escalate to an outright ethnic conflict (Al Jazeera 2021).

The Fury

Ethiopia’s federal structural setup is touted as one of the main problems driving the conflict. Teferi Mergo (2021) in a rebuttal to Robert Kaplan’s arguments; that the Ethiopian State will be least affected by the war, argues that the battle in Tigray is an exposition of the reeking relationship between the center and the periphery. Teferi proceeds to conclude that the conflict is the proponents of a unitary system against those supporting ethnic federalism (Mergo, 2021). The regional governments envision more devolution and autonomy as compared to the micro-management from the central government, as the scholar opines.

The journey to soliciting and fronting for the unitary system gained momentum with the entry of the current leadership. The remaining concerns feature questions of how a unitary system is achieved within a “State of many Nations;” and one that has a bitter history. Max Bearak points out that some of the actions, considered by the government as building unity, end up creating animosity. As an example, the governments’ reconstruction of Menelik II as a key

historical personality “angered” a section of Ethiopians who remember the leader’s cruelty (Bearak, Max 2019). Yeraswork Zwede (2021) affirms Bearak’s views and terms the narrative construction for unification, as turning history into a “controversy”. There still exist constructed or perceived “victimhood” among the communities which is used to justify vengeance (Ibid).

John Markakas captures this deeply rooted hatred in a song that is famous within the Afar Region:

They are taking our land; We don’t know why
They are digging our land; We don’t know why
Motorcars overwhelm our animals
Foreign Languages overwhelm our language
 Markakas (2021a, Pp. 83)

The Afar region had undergone a lot of land nationalization during some of the regimes like the Derg. The community was dispossessed by the State (central government) and contributed to its hostility towards the central government (Markakis, 2021a, Pp. 84). These acts destabilized a pastoralist Nation that initially had social order under its *Maada* customary law (Ibid). On the other hand, the Tigrayans believe they were sidelined by the current government and have minimal representation (Al Jazeera 2021). The Tigrayans consider the actions of the central government as ‘expansionist’ since the expansion of Addis Ababa could claim some territory within Tigray (BBC News 2021).

In analyzing the Horn of Africa stability, through the prisms of Nations and States, John Markakis (2021b, Pp.20) downplays the convenience adopted by social sciences scholars who simplify conflicts the context of Ethiopia to be an outcome of weak institutions, incoherent policies, or corruption. The main causes of conflict in the Horn of Africa are the age-old Westphalian state characteristics of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and regime legitimacy.

Makau wa Mutua (1995) delves into this state and Nation State debate through the perspective of the post-colonial State being a product of colonial delimitation and therefore disregards the indigenous established Nations. The result is that the lack of moral legitimacy makes most African States a “straitjacket ready to explode” (Mutua, Pp. 1114-1116). The bottlenecks applied when discussing colonization have been disregarded by scholars like Teferi Mergo, who terms the turmoil in Ethiopia as a consequence of domestic colonization; (Mergo, Teferi 2021) where previously independent Nations were rounded up and bound into an empire. Considering the narrowed colonisation approach by Makau Wa Mutua and the broadened perspective of Mergo, it is evident that instead of an explosion, Ethiopia’s case

may turn out to be an implosion. The lack of legitimacy of the State will give impetus to the Nations' claim for violent self-determination.

The other challenge presented by Mutua's arguments show the pledge of allegiance to territorial indefinites that was created by the colonial State; while also embracing what Markakas terms as "the simplistic social science arguments of States facing threats due to corruption, political elitism, and institutional effect" (Mutua, M 1995). The underlying problem in Ethiopia is the discord over territory and the State termed; custodian of wealth and privilege (Markakis, 2021b), lacking the legitimacy it deserves to survive.

Conclusions

Territory is at the center of struggle in the Ethiopian conflict and Tigray, Oromo Amhara, Ogaden and Afar. Internal Nations have been the mobilizing strategy used in the internal scramble for the regions within Ethiopia, thus making it very emotive and volatile. The current calls to violence against a particular group will likely dampen the avenues for peaceful negotiations because of the fragility with identities which can end up creating an "us" vs "them" clash, as Huntington famously put it¹.

The survival of the African State – and to an extent most of the developing States – is at threat because of the failure to establish a Nation at the expense of the Nation State. The perceived State in Ethiopia is tagged as an objective to control internal Nations (Markakis, 2021b). Concentrating all the power at the center in Ethiopia will not work for stability of "Internal Nations" within the State, that are inherently suspicious of each other and the State itself. The unpredictability of stability of the Ethiopian State will further affect its international standing and its diplomatic relations.

Recommended Approaches

A desk-based approach may not have discreet recommendations but this review attempts at providing options for engagement and salvage to the situation. It suggests the following:

1. An immediate cessation of hostilities by all parties to help in preventing the possible extreme push of the TPLF -by the joint forces, which may make them more radicalized in the conflict and closing avenues for negotiation.
2. The opening of humanitarian aid to the Tigray region, which is staring at a famine is crucial. Continued starving will give fodder to the TPLF opposition and prompting them to use similar tactics on other regions which may double the humanitarian crisis.

¹ The quote is drawn from Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order.

3. A condition placed on the central government to allow peace processes to commence without stalling them, for quick de-escalation and the long-term efforts to bring peace to Ethiopia.
4. A focused process for Nation building and linkage of the internal “Nation States” within Ethiopia. This will also touch on a common understanding of who the national heroes are and healing from bitter histories.

References

- Al Jazeera. 2021. "Ethiopia's Amhara rallies residents to fight Tigrayan forces." *Al Jazeera*, July 25. Accessed July 26, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/25/ethiopias-amhara-state-rallies-residents-to-fight-tigrayans>.
- BBC News. 2021. "Ethiopia's Tigray war: The short, medium and long story." *BBC*, June 29. Accessed July 22, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54964378>.
- Bearak, Max. 2019. "A place of ghosts: Ethiopia opens controversial palace to a divided public." *The Washington Post*, October 11. Accessed July 23, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/a-place-of-ghosts-ethiopia-opens-controversial-palace-to-a-divided-public/2019/10/11/4ddd2d9c-ead5-11e9-a329-7378fbfa1b63_story.html.
- Gavin, Michelle. 2021. "Risks Grow as Tigray Conflict Enters New Phase." *Council on Foreign Relations*, July 22. Accessed July 24, 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/risks-grow-tigray-conflict-enters-new-phase>.
- Markakis, John. 2021. "The Afar." In *The Nation State A Wrong Model for the Horn of Africa*, by John Markakis, Günther Schlee and John Young, 83-106. Max Planck Research Library for the History and Development of Knowledge.
- Markakis, John. 2021. "The Crisis of the State in the Horn of Africa." In *The Nation State A Wrong Model for the Horn of Africa*, by John Markakis, Günther Schlee and John Young, 19-54. Max Planck Research Library for the History and Development of Knowledge.
- Mergo, Teferi. 2021. "Ethiopia's Problems Stem From Internal Colonialism." *Foreign Policy*, July 22. Accessed July 24, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/22/ethiopias-problems-stem-from-internal-colonialism/>.
- Mutambo, Aggrey. 2021. "Ethiopian war resumes, and this time, even children are not spared." *The East African*, July 17. Accessed July 22, 2021. <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/ethiopian-war-resumes-children-are-not-spared-3476338>.
- Mutua, M. 1995. "WHY REDRAW THE MAP OF AFRICA: A Moral and Legal Inquiry." *Michigan Journal of International Law* 16 (4): 1113-1176.
- Tadesse, Fasika. 2021. "Ethiopian Regional Chief Seeks Broader Force to Fight Rebels." *Bloomberg*, July 25. Accessed July 24, 2021. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-07-25/ethiopian-regional-leader-urges-amhara-ethnic-group-to-join-war?utm_source=twitter&cmpid%3D=socialflow-twitter-africa&utm_medium=social&utm_content=africa&utm_campaign=socialflow-organic.
- Yeraswork, Zewde. 2021. "Ethiopia's social divisions masked by ethnicity." *Ethiopia Insight*, July 7. Accessed July 22, 2021. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/07/07/ethiopias-social-divisions-masked-by-ethnicity/>.

HORN OF AFRICA RESEARCH PARTNER

GIVE US A CALL TODAY!

Scofield Associates is a private research consultancy firm that focuses on Conflict Management Consulting, Market Research, Big Data Analytics and Monitoring and Evaluation. We operate in the Larger Horn of Africa Region.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE PROJECTS FOR SCOFIELD ASSOCIATES VISIT SCOFIELDASSOCIATES.CO.KE OR CALL US ON (+254) 020 7868306