

Why there will be no large scale civil war in Ethiopia

By

Worku Aberra

If “*war is the continuation of politics by other means*”, as Carl von Clausewitz once said, then we can equally say that the TPLF has been conducting a political war, an ideological war, against Ethiopia for more than 40 years before it started the actual war on November 3 by attacking the bases of the Northern Command.

In this war, as in any other war, there are concerns about the loss of life, the destruction of property, the resulting humanitarian crisis, and the possibility of destabilization in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. Each of these well-intended concerns need to be examined closely.

We all want peace. The Ethiopian people, who have experienced the horrors of war for the last 50 years, yearn for peace, but a negotiated settlement that leaves the TPLF’s army intact will not bring about enduring peace. Durable peace can only be attained when the TPLF is disarmed.

Unless the TPLF is defeated, the killings of innocent people and the political instability that we have witnessed over the past two years in Ethiopia will worsen over time. To avoid further bloodshed in this conflict and in the future, the TPLF must surrender and give up its arms, but so far it has shown no desire to do so. An armed TPLF poses a serious existential threat to Ethiopia.

We are all concerned about the loss of life and human suffering caused by the armed confrontation. The government should make every effort to avoid civilian casualties and not to mistreat the captured TPLF fighters as retaliation for the execution of the commanders and soldiers [of the Ethiopian Defense Forces](#) and the hacking to death of [about 500 Amhara civilians](#) in Mai Kadra on November 10, as reported by Amnesty International.

To minimize the number of casualties on both sides, the government should continue its campaign to convince members of the Tigrayan militia and special forces, who may have been misled, misinformed, misguided in joining the fighting, to lay down their arms. It must guarantee them that they will not be mistreated. It must assure them that its clash is with the TPLF leadership, not with the rank and file fighters. The government should ensure that the captured TPLF fighters are treated with dignity and the wounded given the care they deserve.

International aid agencies are worried that the conflict will prevent the supply of food aid [to 3 million](#) people in Tigray. Their worries are justifiable, but since the Ethiopian army now controls a good proportion of Tigray, food aid can reach the people living in the area it controls. As the area under government control expands, more Tigrayans will have access to food aid. The government will not intentionally starve its own population, contrary to TPLF propaganda.

No Civil War in the Rest of Ethiopia

The other concern is that the fighting will destabilize Ethiopia [and the region](#). This concern, although well intended, reflects a misunderstanding of the reality in Ethiopia and in the region. The Ethiopian people have lived together for centuries. And despite the TPLF’s efforts to fan ethnic conflict for 27 years and the subsequent occasional ethnic cleansing of minority groups in certain regions of the

country, there has not been any widescale ethnic conflict. The Ethiopian people do not harbor deeply rooted animosity towards each other. In the absence of strong animus among the different ethnic groups, it is unlikely that the armed confrontation in Tigray will trigger a civil war in the rest of Ethiopia. It should also be noted that the people of Tigray comprise only 5 percent of Ethiopia's population and mostly live in Tigray.

The Ethiopian people, including many leaders of the opposition parties, are solidly behind Ethiopia's Defense Forces in its campaign to subdue the TPLF. The anger, bitterness, and indignation towards the TPLF for its attack on the Northern Command is palpable. The huge demonstrations in different villages, towns, and [cities across Ethiopia against](#) the TPLF underscore the extent to which the Ethiopian people detest the TPLF.

Many more demonstrations in support of the national army are expected in the days to come. The people have expressed their solidarity with Ethiopia's Defense Forces and with each other. They are united against a common adversary. The chances of a civil war beyond the hostility in Tigray are minimal, almost non-existence. Even in Tigray, how much support the TPLF leadership enjoys in its armed confrontation with Ethiopia's Defense Forces is questionable.

Those who call for the cessation of hostilities are also concerned about the possibility of other countries getting involved, the fighting turning into a proxy war between the major powers, regional powers, or neighboring countries. Given the atrocities and destruction we have seen in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, their fears are justified, but the situation in Ethiopia is radically different from the conditions in these countries.

The likelihood of the major powers or neighboring countries supporting opposite sides of the conflict is low. All of the major powers support the Ethiopian government, particularly the US and China. Similarly, the neighboring countries, Djibouti, Eritrea, Kenya, and the Sudan support the government as well. None is willing to provide arms to the TPLF. The TPLF is internationally isolated.

Even if there is a foreign government that is willing to supply arms to the TPLF, the TPLF has no access to receive it. In the north and east, there is its arch enemy, Eritrea. To the south and west, it is surrounded by the Ethiopian army. The only potential supply line that the TPLF had with the external world was the road to the Sudan, but the Sudan has closed its border [with Ethiopia indefinitely](#), and the Ethiopian government [now controls this road](#), along [with western Tigray](#). The chances of the fighting leading to regional destabilization are therefore insignificant.

A Well-armed Private Army

In conjunction with the international pressure on the government, some politicians in Ethiopia and pundits in the diaspora, who know the TPLF well, are calling on the Ethiopian government to stop its offensive against the TPLF, but the federal government should not stop the fight until the TPLF surrenders unconditionally. There are at least two compelling reasons why the TPLF should be disarmed.

First, in a country, there can only be one army under the control of an elected civilian government, while regional states may have their own police forces. No government can accept an army under the command of a regional party or government. In Ethiopia, the TPLF would like to maintain its large, heavily armed private army to destabilize and eventually control Ethiopia and the region. That is unacceptable.

Debretsion Gebremichael, the leader of the TPLF, has asserted that the TPLF forces have a better and larger arsenal [than the national army](#). Getachew Reda, the spokesman of the TPLF government in Tigray, has boasted that the Tigrayan special forces have the capacity to destroy the fighter jets of the Ethiopian Air Force in the air or on the ground [anywhere and at any time](#).

Debretsion and Getachew's claims could be dismissed as blustering propaganda, but there is some truth in their assertions. The TPLF pilfered different types of weapons from the Ethiopian military during its stay in power, and has now looted a considerable amount of ammunition, arms, and artillery from the Northern Command, as Debretsion [claimed on November 4](#).

Others have also confirmed the TPLF's military capabilities. [Herman Cohen](#) advocates negotiation between the TPLF and the federal government because the government cannot win its fight with a well-trained, well-armed, and "battle-hardened" army. Reuters reports that the TPLF has [a large, well-equipped army, numbering 250,000 troops](#).

No government accepts another contending army in its territory. When the TPLF was in power, it would never have tolerated a well-armed army in the region of Amhara, commanded by the former officers of the Ethiopian armed forces. So, why should the Abiy government accept a TPLF army [that has proven to be treacherous](#), that has robbed banks, that has committed [war crimes](#), that is ready to destabilize Ethiopia? To have enduring peace in Ethiopia and in the Horn of Africa, this menacing force must be disarmed and disbanded.

The TPLF: The Hizballah of Ethiopia

In the long run, the TPLF's political objective is to have an independent Tigray, to establish The Republic of Tigray, for it knows well that it will not be able to return to power. Just as ethnic politics propelled the TPLF to power, ethnic politics has doomed it forever. Until independence, it aspires to be the Hizballah of Ethiopia, using its army to become a parallel government in Ethiopia.

If the TPLF army is left intact, Ethiopia will no doubt become another Lebanon with a weak, fragmented, paralyzed national government that is incapable of defending Ethiopia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, that is too weak to secure an enduring peace, that is too feeble to implement developmental economic policies or to establish democratic institutions. More than any other time in its history, Ethiopia needs a strong federal state.

If there is to be long-lasting peace, security, and stability in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, the TPLF forces must be demobilized. In fact, all of the regional special forces, that the TPLF created when it was in power to exercise indirect control over the local population, must be dissolved and incorporated into either the national army or the federal police. There can only be one national army in a country.

Second, according to the Ethiopian government, ever since the TPLF was forced out of power and its core leadership took refuge in Mekele in 2018, the TPLF has tried to [destabilize Ethiopia](#) by attempting to assassinate the Prime Minister on at least three occasions, by planning and executing the assassination of Hachalu Hudessa, by exploiting the ensuing unrest to assume power, and by outsourcing the killing of Amharas in different parts of Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian government reports that Mekele, the hideout of the TPLF leaders, has become the nerve center for planning terrorist activities and for plotting schemes to destabilize Ethiopia and that the TPLF

leadership is the chief financier, planner, and executer of terrorism and instability in Ethiopia today. If that is the case, this criminal group must be defeated, dismantled, and disarmed. The defeat of the TPLF will herald a new era, an era of peace, security, and freedom for all Ethiopians, including Tigrayans who have been oppressed by the TPLF for too long.

Worku Aberra Is a Professor of Economics a Dowson College, Montreal, Canada.