

WHAT'S BEHIND THE CONFLICT BETWEEN ETHIOPIAN GOVT. AND TIGRAY REBELS?

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Ethiopia's Nobel Prize winning Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed started a military operation in the rebellious Tigray region earlier this month. Mr. Abiy has said it would be a limited campaign focusing on the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the militia-cum-political party that runs the northern region. However, almost two weeks into the conflict, Ethiopia risks falling into an ethnic civil war with regional implications.

Who is TPLF?

The TPLF was founded in 1975 as a resistance army of the Tigrayan people against the military dictatorship, which was called the Derg. The leftist Derg, which was established in 1974, would change its title in 1987 but practically remained in power till it was ousted by the armed rebels in 1991. The TPLF played a crucial role in ousting the junta and they were welcomed as national heroes in 1991. TPLF leader Meles Zenawi took over as the interim President in 1991 and became the first elected Prime Minister in 1995. He is largely seen as the architect of the country's ethno-federal system and remained in power till 2012.

But over the years, the government led by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition put together by Mr. Zenawi, was accused of being increasingly authoritarian and there were frequent mass protests in the regions. Though the EPRDF contains regional political parties such as the Amhara Democratic Party, the Oromo Democratic Party and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement, the TPLF remained the dominant political force. In 2018, the EPRDF chose Mr. Abiy, a former military intelligence officer, to lead the government amid growing protests and a political deadlock.

Rise of Abiy

Though the EPRDF provided a stable rule with high economic growth for 17 years, there was mounting criticism against the country's ethno-federal arrangement. The Tigray people make up roughly 6% of the population, while the Oromos have a 34% share and the Amharas 27%. While the TPLF controlled the levers of power through the EPRDF, the Oromos alleged marginalisation.

As Prime Minister, Mr. Abiy took a host of steps to cut the outsized influence of the TPLF in the government. He purged TPLF functionaries from key government posts, released political prisoners (jailed by the TPLF-led government) and promised freer media. He reached out to Eritrea, a sworn enemy of the TPLF, which shares a long border with the Tigray region.

Mr. Abiy, the country's first Oromo leader, claimed that his actions are not driven by ethnic calculations but rather aimed at addressing the historic power imbalance in the country and making peace with the neighbours. But the TPLF saw his moves as hostile.

War begins

The tensions were building up for a while. When Mr. Abiy formed a new political coalition, the Prosperity Party, all constituents of the EPRDF, except the TPLF, joined the new platform. The TPLF saw the formation of a new party as an attempt by Mr. Abiy to consolidate more power in

hands. The party's leadership shifted from Addis Ababa to Mekele, the Tigray regional capital.

In August, when Mr. Abiy's government decided to postpone parliamentary elections, citing COVID-19, the TPLF openly challenged the decision. They accused the Prime Minister of power grab and went ahead holding elections in the region in defiance of the federal government. Then on November 3, TPLF militants attacked a federal military command in the Tigray region and captured military hardware and equipment, prompting Mr. Abiy to declare the military operation.

Geopolitical angle

Mr. Abiy's outreach to Eritrea had outraged the TPLF, which had fought a prolonged war with the Eritrean government along the Tigray border. The TPLF now accuses Eritrea of backing Mr. Abiy's offensive. On Sunday, the rebels fired rockets into Eritrea from Tigray, threatening a wider regional war in the Horn of Africa. Tigray rebels also fired rockets into the neighbouring Amhara region.

Even if Mr. Abiy is serious about keeping the operation short, it could spill out of control, given the underlying complexities of the conflict. The TPLF's old guard cut their teeth in the resistance against the Derg and they have thousands of fighters under their command. Also, the Tigray region shares a border with Sudan. The TPLF enjoyed good relations with Sudan's ousted dictator Omar Bashir.

Sudan has a border dispute with Ethiopia. If Sudan's new rulers (the transition government includes civilian and military leaders) keep the old links with the TPLF active and the border open for the rebels, the conflict could go on. If it does, it could derail Mr. Abiy's reform agenda at home as well as the diplomatic agenda abroad.

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