

RISE, FALL AND RETURN OF TIGRAYAN REBELS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Africa, African Union (AU) and India

When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered a military operation in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region in November 2020, he promised that it would be a short one. The trigger was a military raid carried out by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), an ethno-nationalist paramilitary group-cum-political party, on a camp of federal soldiers. A year later, the TPLF has not only recaptured Tigray but also moved south, towards Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital that hosts the headquarters of the African Union. On November 5, the TPLF and eight other opposition groups, including the Oromo Liberation Army, formed an alliance, the United Front of Ethiopian Federalist and Confederalist Force, to oust Mr. Abiy's government. Under pressure, Mr. Abiy has declared a nationwide state of emergency and asked citizens to take up arms and join the fight against the rebels.

Mr. Abiy seemed to have underestimated the rebels when he launched the war. The TPLF, which fought the military dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s and headed the country's ruling coalition from 1991 to 2018, has been one of the most powerful political forces in Ethiopia. Formed in the mid-1970s, the TPLF rose as a leftist ethno-nationalist group of Tigrayans against the Derg, the Marxist military dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam. In the 1970s, the TPLF, aligned with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (Eritrea was then part of Ethiopia), fought against the Derg. Founded by 11 guerillas, the TPLF had some 2,000 fighters by 1978, according to CIA estimates. In the 1980s, with support from the local people, it grew as the most formidable military opponent of the Derg. When Ethiopia fell into a disastrous famine in 1983-85, the TPLF was in the forefront of humanitarian works in Tigray, collaborating with international agencies, while at the same time, turning up the political and military heat on the Derg.

New rulers

When the dictatorship of Mengistu collapsed in 1991, TPLF guerrillas were welcomed in Addis Ababa as heroes. Ever since, the TPLF-led coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), ruled the country through a mix of federalism and authoritarianism. Ethiopia is a confederation of 10 provinces, which are largely divided on ethnic lines. The Oromos and the Amharas, who together make up more than 60% of the population, are the country's two largest ethnic groups. The Tigrayans, who constitute the core of the TPLF, are the third-largest group, making up some 7% of Ethiopia's 115 million people.

Under the new system, local parties had some autonomy in the regions. At the federal level, the EPRDF maintained its political monopoly. Meles Zenawi, the charismatic TPLF leader who became Ethiopia's President in 1991 and then Prime Minister in 1994 under the new Constitution, oversaw the country's transition from the military dictatorship to what he called "ethnic federalism". Under Zenawi's rule, Ethiopia found relative peace with itself and started a trajectory of economic modernisation and growth. This was the period when Africa's second most populous country demonstrated signs of economic transformation and political stability at home, even as it was fighting a brutal border war with Eritrea.

As a leader who founded the EPRDF and led the rebellion that brought down the military regime, Zenawi enjoyed popularity across regions and commanded loyalty within the ruling coalition. He built a state whose levers were controlled by the TPLF and yet he could keep his coalition intact. After Zenawi's death in 2012, the ethnic and political contradictions started resurfacing. His successor, Hailemariam Desalegn, found himself helpless as ethnic rebellions, especially by Amhara and Oromo groups, intensified, challenging the federal authority. It was against this

background that the EPRDF picked Mr. Abiy to lead the government in 2018. An ethnic Oromo, the challenge before Mr. Abiy was to calm the ethnic nerves, ensure unity among the ruling elite and put the country back on the track of growth and stability.

Mr. Abiy was initially welcomed as a reformer. He lifted the state of emergency, granted amnesty to thousands of political prisoners, lifted curbs on the media, legalised banned political outfits and dismissed military and civilian leaders who were facing allegations of corruption and other wrongdoing. He promised to strengthen “Ethiopia’s democracy” by holding free and fair elections. PM Abiy also resumed talks with Eritrea, ended the war, which began in 1998, and reached a final settlement. His reforms and peace-making earned him international recognition, including the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize.

Domestic angle

But most of Mr. Abiy’s reform measures had a domestic political angle. The political prisoners he released had been detained by the TPLF regime. Most of the leaders arrested or sacked were the TPLF’s old hands. Eritrea shares a long border with the Tigray region and the TPLF sees Eritrea’s ruling party as a sworn enemy. When Mr. Abiy mobilised power in hands through a host of political moves, the TPLF got sidelined. Mr. Abiy’s decision to dissolve the EPRDF, the TPLF-led coalition, and float a new party, Prosperity Party, practically ended the TPLF’s reign in Addis Ababa. The TPLF leadership, including former Deputy Prime Minister Debretsion Gebremichael, retreated to Tigray. The party has a 12-member executive committee, comprising politicians, ideologues and security czars, many veterans of the 1980s civil war. All of them are based in Tigray.

When Mr. Abiy decided to postpone elections in September 2020, citing COVID-19, the TPLF called it a coup, and went ahead with regional polls in Tigray, in defiance of the federal government. In November, the TPLF says, the government sent troops to the borders of Tigray for an attack and that the rebels carried out a pre-emptive raid, following which Mr. Abiy declared his war on Tigray. Later, the federal government labelled the TPLF a terrorist organisation. Clearly, Mr. Abiy wanted to finish the TPLF as a political force.

But it was easier hoped than done. Having been in power for 30 years, the TPLF had built a national defence force with a sizeable number of Tigray men. The war had created fissures in the military. To overcome this internal weakness, Mr. Abiy sought help from ethnic militias as well as the Eritrean army. They ran over Tigray within a month and captured most of the region, including its capital Mekele. On November 28, 2020, Mr. Abiy announced that “major military operations were completed”. But the war was far from over.

For the TPLF, the mountainous region of Tigray is its home. The mountains protected them in the 1970s and the 1980s from the wrath of the Derg. Once again, they regrouped in the mountains and struck back. By June, the rebels inflicted a humiliating defeat on the government troops, who had to withdraw from Tigray. And then, the TPLF has moved further south, seizing more territories in neighbouring regions.

Mr. Abiy is now on the back foot. He wanted to crush the TPLF, but in course, he pushed the whole country into a civil war. His troops and military allies, as well as the TPLF, face allegations of war crimes. There are reports of Tigrayans being rounded up by federal police and troops in Addis Ababa and elsewhere. Tigray, whose supplies and economic aid have been cut off by the federal government, is on the brink of a famine. Still, both sides refuse to talk. Already facing a credibility crisis and faced with not many good options, Mr. Abiy says he will “bury this enemy with our blood and bones”. The “enemy”, on the other side, faces little pressure to hold talks after the recent military victories. A bigger conflict seems to be brewing up in Ethiopia.

In Focus

Formed in the mid-1970s, the TPLF rose as an ethno- nationalist group of Tigrayans against the Derg, the Marxist military dictatorship

In 1991, a TPLF-led coalition toppled the military regime and established a transition government. The coalition would stay in power until the rise of Abiy Ahmed

Now, the TPLF, which controls Tigray, has joined forces with eight other opposition groups to oust the government of Abiy

[Our code of editorial values](#)

END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

CrackIAS.com