

REBELS AND RULERS: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON ETHIOPIA CRISIS

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

[Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed](#)'s year-long war on the rebels in the northern Tigray region threatens to pull the whole country into a deadly civil war between the federal troops and several ethnic militias. When the war began, [Mr. Abiy, a Nobel peace laureate](#), wanted to oust the [Tigray People's Liberation Front \(TPLF\)](#), an ethnic paramilitary group-turned-political party, in Tigray and install a friendly regional government. Within a month, he met his objectives and declared that major combat operations were over. But retaining control over a rebellious region was harder than ousting the rebels. Moreover, Mr. Abiy seemed to have overlooked Tigray's complex history. The mountainous region that shares a long border with Eritrea was the base of resistance against the military dictatorship in the 1970-80s. The TPLF, which fought the Derg, the military regime, for 16 years before ruling Ethiopia through a multiparty coalition for three decades, was not an easy pushover. It retreated to the mountains, regrouped and hit back, forcing the federal troops and their allies, including paramilitaries from Eritrea, to withdraw. Now, after taking Tigray and key towns in neighbouring regions, the TPLF, joined by other militias, has threatened to take Addis Ababa, the capital city that is home to five million people, "within weeks".

In his attempt to shake up Ethiopia's power structures and crush the former ruling elites, Mr. Abiy has unleashed a series of events that he is no longer in a position to control. When the country moved to a parliamentary system from military dictatorship in the early 1990s, it adopted a model called "ethnic federalism" in which the regions, largely divided on ethnic lines, enjoyed some autonomy, while the federal government, controlled by the TPLF, focused on national unity, economic growth and defence. This model worked, at least for a decade, as Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous country that was devastated by a famine in 1983-85, emerged as East Africa's strongest economic powerhouse. But ethnic tensions started resurfacing late last decade, and Mr. Abiy, an ethnic Oromo, was chosen to put the country back on the trajectory of growth and stability. But his moves to sideline the TPLF triggered a bigger political crisis, which eventually led to the war in Tigray. Mr. Abiy is now on the defensive. The move to take control of Tigray has failed. If he stops the military operations now, it would be seen as weakness and the rebels, emboldened by their recent victories and political support they gained from opposition groups, could march southwards. An all-out civil war would be disastrous as it could open old ethnic wounds. To avoid such a calamity, there has to be a mutually agreed upon ceasefire. But neither side has shown any interest in talks. The international community, particularly the African Union, should press both the rulers and the rebels to immediately end the fighting and start talking.

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