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The Ethiopia conflict in international relations and global media discourse

Abbink, G.J.

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JON ABBINK, NOV 21 2021

Since 4 November 2020, a devastating armed conflict has been raging in northern Ethiopia. Developments in this war, which started with a well-prepared nightly assault of the then-ruling Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF[1]) on federal army bases in Tigray Regional State, are going fast (see also Abbink 2021a, 3-4). The war was expanded by the TPLF into areas outside Tigray, where major abuses on local inhabitants were perpetrated. No end is yet in sight to the fighting, which had expanded deeper into the Amhara Region to the important cities of Dessie and Kombolcha by early November 2021. Although this conflict is primarily a domestic problem within an African state, there are ramifications towards neighbouring countries, such as Sudan, Somalia and Egypt. As Walt (1996) has argued, revolutions or domestic turmoil in a country can have a disruptive impact on international relations. Sudan has been manoeuvring at the Ethiopian border and Ethiopia's withdrawal of troops from the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) force in Somalia has led to more terror activities by the Al Shabaab movement. But in turn, international relations can also have an impact on such a national crisis.

The Ethiopia conflict has evoked a specific response pattern by the 'international community', primarily the United States of America (USA), the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN): they address, or rather 'target', the Ethiopian government and not the insurgent TPLF which has caused most of the killing and destruction. A subsidiary role is played here by global media discourse toward this conflict, reporting haphazardly on a succession of events, but unconnected to historical lines and context of the state in question. Such reporting – in dominant news producing media like Reuters, AFP and AP (see Swiss Policy Research 2019) as well as global newspapers (see below) – often uncritically supported the insurgent TPLF, despite its appalling human rights record and its devastating campaigns against civilian populations. This again had an effect on international policymaking towards Ethiopia. Indeed, the omissions and failures of the global media and the (Western) international community which tend to blame the Ethiopian federal government for the armed conflict and the events since its outbreak, have an impact on the Ethiopian state and reveal a misplaced normative streak in international relations thinking among these actors. Especially remarkable in this case is the lack of commitment to the ideal of 'democracy' in international relations, nominally proclaimed by the USA and EU. This ideal was easily side-lined in their policy approaches to Ethiopia, as they *de facto* preferred the deeply undemocratic TPLF above the democratically elected government of Prime Minister (PM) Abiy Ahmed and the agenda of democratization that he implemented since in April 2018.

This paper therefore argues that the media and policy approaches to this conflict demonstrate the weakness of the international system (including the UN) and of policy interventions. My supportive hypothesis is that media representation of the conflict and the international policy responses have also been inadequate, based on untested normative notions, superficial humanitarian concerns and lack of full factual evaluation. This in effect led to the conflict and the suffering being prolonged and contributed to endangering the future of the Ethiopian state.

Notably the Western 'donor country' policymakers and the UN were selective and incomplete in their appraisal of the conflict and in diplomatic actions towards it, despite their alleged 'concern' for civilians as victims of violence and food scarcity in the first phase of the conflict. Especially the Ethiopian federal government, led since April 2018 by the reformist prime minister Abiy Ahmed, initially widely acclaimed as a leader and reconfirmed in credible elections in June 2021, has been blamed for the conflict by international parties, notably the USA, the EU and the global media. It

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is indeed worrying how the global news media, like CNN, AP, the New York Times, the Daily Telegraph, Le Monde and others have often played an obfuscating and biased role in reporting on this year-long conflict, e.g. by routinely accusing primarily the federal government of excesses. Numerous items in these media have distorted or misrepresented events in an incomplete and tendentious manner, akin to sensationalist and attention-grabbing not backed up by the facts or by proper investigation. These reports, in addition to the cyber 'warfare', and the repeated lecturing by Western countries of Ethiopia as the 'bad guy' taking on a smaller region (Tigray), reveal a measure of ignorance and misplaced 'victim bias', and evoke a host of questions not only on the interests of the global media but also (again) on the role of social media propaganda and on the workings of the international system and the UN.

Most of those tabling resolutions, doing news items or writing press articles do not know much either – or perhaps do not care – about the history and complexity of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa region (Hibist 2021). One major example is the neglect of the first mass killing that occurred in this conflict on 9 November 2020: an 'ethnic cleansing' operation in the town of Mai Kadra perpetrated by TPLF-affiliated militia on Amhara-speaking inhabitants (non-Tigrayans). An estimated 1500 non-combatants were killed, causing a shock effect throughout Ethiopia because of its exceptional nature. But this defining event and its implications are hardly discussed in the global media or in policy circles. Regarding this aspect of what often seems Western lecturing and selective outrage, recent controversial talking points are: a) US President Biden's 'Executive Order' of 17 September 2021 announcing sanctions; b) the EU Parliament's resolution of 8 October 2021 on 'Tigray', Ethiopia (RC9-0484/2021), and c) the expulsion of seven UN officials from Ethiopia on 30 September 2021, and d) recent USA sanctions.

The EU resolution is an embarrassing document that does not take into account a whole range of facts on the ground regarding the war. It primarily shows a wish of EU parliamentarians (from left, right and centre) to score 'moral points': wanting to be seen as concerned about the civilian population in Tigray suffering for food scarcity. That is of course legitimate. But they stopped there and did not consider the equal if not much worse suffering from both mass displacement, food scarcity and gross violence that was seen in Afar and Amhara Regions. Those watching the debate in the EU Parliament on this resolution saw a level of ignorance hard to swallow, reflecting indeed a lingering neo-colonial mindset of Europeans towards an independent African country that 'does not listen to the good-willing Europeans'. On the third point, an inquiry into the facts behind this decision of expelling UN personnel makes it clear that it was justified: several UN officials *were* transgressing the mandate of their function (e.g., in their assisting the TPLF insurgent leaders with several kinds of services, allegedly including in getting them advanced radar communications equipment[2]). They flouted the neutrality and professionalism that their job prescribes. The reactions from UN Secretary General A. Guterres, the EU and of course the ever-angry USA, were predictable.

The USA gave an unconsidered response on the same day that the expulsion was announced, contesting the legitimacy. But the USA themselves have been expelling diplomats and UN staff left and right over the years.[3] It is also to be noted that in 1998, when the TPLF-EPRDF government expelled 30 UN officials, there was protest from the UN but no sound from the US or other foreign powers. The same in 2020 when Burundi expelled four UN functionaries. The indignation is also unproductive, because Ethiopia or any other nation has the right to expel such officials under Article 9 of the 'Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations', the UN resolution 46/182 of 1991 ('Strengthening the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance'; annex, articles 2 and 3), and the additional Memorandum of Understanding signed between the federal government and the UN. In any case, UN staff has no mandate under any law in any country to undermine the government, as these people have done.

So, in general, the responses of the 'international community', notably the 'donor countries' of the EU and the USA in the current conflict in Ethiopia have been a problem and have even prolonged the conflict. Although the war started with that surreptitious attack by the TPLF (and collaborating Tigray soldiers) on sleeping soldiers of the federal army and the theft of numerous heavy weaponries, the TPLF was labelled as the 'underdog'. There is still a peculiar 'positive bias' towards the TPLF and the Tigray Region, related to the alleged and real abuses in the first phase of the war and perceptions of the so-called 'humanitarian aid blockage' – which is a TPLF propaganda point disproved by the recent joint report of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. However, the war and the gross human rights abuses are no longer there in Tigray – apart from serious food shortages and TPLF repression – but to the south, due to the TPLF expanding its campaigns there.

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When a unilateral ceasefire was offered by the Ethiopian federal government on 28 June 2021, followed by its troop withdrawal, the TPLF refused and mocked it. They took the opportunity to glorify their alleged military victory in Tigray and to extend the armed conflict into the Afar and northern Amhara regions outside Tigray – an unacceptable move endangering humanitarian aid routes and stabilization. This conflict is often labelled in global media as a ‘civil war’, but it is not: a civil war would be an all-out protracted fight between big parts of the country’s population against each other. But here we have an elitist, authoritarian movement – TPLF – that fights to retain its elite material interests and impunity against an elected federal government that contested its armed insurrection.

So far, the ongoing conflict has produced TPLF’s military expansion, which is however unlikely to be durable. It has also chiefly led to unspeakable civilian suffering and great material destruction in these two newly occupied areas. The expansion on several fronts seemingly had two purposes: a) ‘revenge’ – for having been defeated in the first months of the war and having been frustrated in their ultimate but questionable aim to march to Addis Ababa, and b) to induce the federal army to reassign troops from the Sudan-Wolqait[4] border to the north-central Amhara Region so as to force an opening for TPLF access to Sudan. This would have allowed TPLF to bring in troops (from the refugee camps, where several 10,000s of them seem to have been trained), and to bring in new arms and equipment. This failed, as the border remains virtually sealed.

Meanwhile, the devastation in Afar and northern Amhara has continued and led to ongoing gross abuse of the local population in campaigns that the TPLF knew would not yield them durable military success. The fighting was hardly against federal troops because these were not stationed there in the initial weeks. The TPLF campaigns seemed intended to inflict maximum damage on local society, infrastructure, public facilities and village communities, including religious and cultural institutions. They were allegedly motivated by TPLF wanting to ‘break the humanitarian blockade of Tigray’ and ‘stop Tigray genocide’. But these are memes that do not have a real basis in fact, although the food scarcity in Tigray is serious. Many civilians in Amhara and Afar were arbitrarily killed by retreating TPLF units, churches and monasteries were attacked and looted, schools and clinics levelled, and all things of value taken by the TPLF troops and/or transported to Tigray. This is not the kind and scale of violence that happened in Tigray in the first phase of the war: indeed, there we saw transgressions and harsh suffering inflicted on the population but not purposeful destruction of communities and wanton mass killing of civilians. Serious incidents did occur in Tigray since the onset of the conflict – with people killed in the crossfire, abuse and gender-based violence, and food scarcity sharply increasing. But the federal government’s attorney-general’s office undertook prosecution of soldiers’ transgressions, and the government let in food aid to Tigray. The federal army also left huge supplies (including seeds for planting crops) when they *left* Meqele, the capital of Tigray. The army had neither pursued the scorched-earth tactics of destruction or massacres of civilians that we have seen perpetrated by TPLF in northern Amhara and Afar regions since 28 June 2021.

There is an underlying ‘ethnic’ dynamic in this conflict, produced by 27 years of ethno-linguistic-based administrative federalism in Ethiopia (cp. Smith 2013; Bekalu 2018; Meckelburg & Abbink 2020). This political model has led to recognition of diversity but also to increasing group conflict based on the ‘politics of identity’. The armed conflict of the past year has exacerbated these antagonistic tendencies through the practices of extreme violence, with the TPLF specifically targeting Amhara communities by killing young people and destroying the economic bases of village life in the Amhara region. It led to new military mobilization of people in the Afar and Amhara Regions and thus to the entrenchment of conflict. This all poses a major challenge to the reform agenda proclaimed by the current prime minister and his party, aspiring for democratic politics, judicial reform, and national synergy in developing the country and its economy.

The (Western) international community, however, has played a disappointing role, and seems to leave a longer-term strategic perspective on Ethiopia aside. They still carp on the things that happened earlier in Tigray, not adapting their narrative toward a balanced view on causes and effects. In Ethiopia (and Africa) this undermines trust in the West as a steady or reliable ‘development partner’. As we noted, the global news media do not help here, because they have tended to uncritically follow the pro-TPLF narrative, often not properly checking the facts on the ground, which reveal a much more complex picture. Policymakers and the UN have difficulty in striking a fair balance and tend to ignore discussions on the current misery in Amhara and Afar. Especially the responses of the USA are baffling. The UN, the State Department and USAID seem to stick to the story they were already telling in December

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2020-January 2021: of demanding 'unrestricted', 'unfettered access' to Tigray for foreign aid organisations to 'prevent famine', and 'prosecution of all federal army abuses' in Tigray. As said, the federal government had already taken action on both points, despite that much remained to be done, hindered by the fighting and the repeated infrastructure sabotage of the TPLF.

The US and other international players would do better to recognize that after 28 June 2021 the character of the war has significantly changed, and that TPLF's escalation and abuse – from employing child soldiers (Fitz-Gerald and Segal 2021), civilian massacres, torture and rape, burning houses and crops to sabotaging communications, telecom, roads, or humanitarian aid transports – has been appalling. Policy needs to be adjusted. As far as food aid to Tigray is concerned, the 'mystery' of the disappearing food aid lorries is one of the latest scandals. The federal government, international NGOs and the UN WFP were doing their best to bring in more aid supplies to Tigray. As of 16 September, 466 trucks were sent to Tigray since late June, but only 38 returned. Two months later they still were not all back. Why? The WFP and other UN staff could not provide an answer, but they unconvincingly appeared to blame the inspection of the trucks by the federal army at checkpoints (needed to check on hidden arms and equipment). There are strong indications that what really happened was confiscation of the trucks by the TPLF to be used for their troop transports. Such facts are even not well-considered by the American 'special envoy' for the Horn of Africa, Jeffrey Feltman, who has so far not extended any serious pressure on the TPLF despite mounting evidence of their bad record, but only on the Ethiopian government. His visit on 4 November 2021 to Addis Ababa appears to have aimed at imposing an ultimatum on the federal government, as also his recent statement suggests. It was preceded by a US arms embargo on Ethiopia on 2 November and more sanctions on 12 November. But nothing on TPLF to speak of. This is not constructive diplomacy, because it threatens the existence of a sovereign nation and a (former?) US ally.

It is somewhat puzzling that after 28 June 2021, hardly any serious international appeal was heard to TPLF to respect the ceasefire, de-escalate, protect food convoys to Tigray, or start thinking about an exit strategy to get back to a state of normality. The lack of encouragement or pressure on them meant that so far, no negotiations towards a peaceful solution are in sight. This was confirmed in a TPLF press appearance in Megele on 1 October 2021, when TPLF army commanders, in sombre and delusional tones, announced the continuation of the struggle, at all cost. For what? No one knows. The federal government sees itself compelled to respond and defend the country. As long as positive signs towards credible negotiation, or surrender, or a radical political reset on the side of (part of) the TPLF are absent and Western/UN parties do not put pressure on them, the fighting and suffering will continue: in Tigray among a people held in a stranglehold by their self-serving leaders, and in the Afar and northern Amhara areas by an occupation that has no military aims and leads to death, economic destruction, and deep resentment. In recent weeks, cases of starvation among people in TPLF-devastated areas have also been heard.

Ethiopia needs a fair deal from the international (Western) community and from the global media. Western (donor) countries, who always professed an interest in Ethiopia, its development, and its role in Africa, e.g., in the struggle against Islamist extremism and as an AU peace-keeping force (like in Darfur) should treat it as a *partner*, not as a patient in need that has to follow orders. The idea of 'regime change' that was recently even floated in US policy circles cannot be a part of such a partnership. Global media might try and improve their reporting and be less sensitive to propaganda points.

What an analysis of this conflict in the Horn of Africa has made clear is that the global system of international relations is in crisis, is often susceptible to propaganda and cyber-space warfare, has a – what some people (such as Hibist 2021) say – is a neo-imperialist bias towards weaker (African) countries, lacks evidence-based background research or evaluations, and does not respond adequately to new challenges. Respecting the sovereignty of Ethiopia and its government, confirmed in democratic elections in June 2021 and developing a wider strategic view on Northeast Africa by Western powers would help. Hopefully, the mediation mission by AU envoy and former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo between TPLF and the federal government can crack an opening in the conflict, although there is some scepticism. It is likely that only military and diplomatic pressure on the TPLF will induce them to talk about any 'negotiations'. In addition, the new PM Abiy-led Ethiopian government, installed on 4 October 2021 after the relatively successful parliamentary elections of June 2021, will not be inclined to yield to undue international pressure but strive to maintain the country's integrity and pursue its broad reform agenda. The government will not

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give up on its national developmental trajectory and announced an inclusive 'national dialogue process', both of which could have a stabilizing effect not only on the country but also on international relations in the Horn and beyond.

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Notes

[1] The authoritarian ruling party in Ethiopia from May 1991 until March 2018, and later in Tigray Regional State. It dominated the four-party EPRDF coalition created by it (EPRDF = the 'Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front', allegedly representing the largest 'ethnic groups'/peoples in the country)

[2] An Amharic-language documentary on the Feta Daily channel of 1 October 2021 demonstrating this (www.youtube.com/watch?v=38o4-46py4E) was incorrectly deleted by YouTube due to 'complaints' – another instance of 'cyber-warfare'.

[3] Like in 2003, 2004, 2018, 2019 (twice) and recently in April 2021.

[4] Wolqait is a contested territory in the west, formerly part of Tigray Regional State (1991-2020), but historically part of the Amhara-Gondar region.

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About the author:

Jon Abbink is a professor of Politics and Governance in Africa at the African Studies Centre, Leiden University.