

CURRENT HISTORY

May 2022

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The Anatomy of Ethiopia’s Civil War

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On the evening of November 3, 2020, Ethiopia once again succumbed to a devastating civil war. The combatants differ over what triggered it. The federal government claims that a surprise attack on its army’s bases in the northern region of Tigray by troops loyal to the regional government sparked the war. The Tigray administration asserts that the strike was an act of self-defense in response to an operation launched earlier that day, when federal authorities flew in a group of commandos to arrest the regional leadership. No matter who fired the first shot, the buildup to war had been ongoing for years as the political cohesion of the central government coalition withered. Some international observers have characterized it as the most pre-announced war in recent African history.

The war has engulfed Tigray Regional State (RS) and deeply affected other regional states, including Amhara, Afar, and to some extent Oromia. The destruction of civilian infrastructure, the displacement of millions of civilians, and a politically motivated blockade of the famine-stricken population of Tigray have led the United Nations to characterize the situation as the world’s most pressing humanitarian crisis. There are no exact estimates of how many civilians and combatants have perished in the war, but some local sources claim that 50,000 Tigrayan civilians have been killed; others put the number of combatants killed between 100,000 and 200,000. Whatever the actual death toll, the Ethiopian civil war was the world’s largest armed conflict in 2021.

A confounding element in the Ethiopian war is the involvement of a host of belligerent parties.

The key conflict pits the alliance of the Tigray Defense Force and the Oromo Liberation Army against Ethiopian federal and regional government troops and militias, irregular Amhara militias, and—not least—the Eritrean Defense Forces. Minor resistance movements and local militia or vigilante groups have allied themselves with one or another of the key belligerents, further complicating efforts to analyze the war, attribute responsibility for war crimes and atrocities, or pursue an overall peace process.

To dissect the dynamics of the overall conflict in Ethiopia, it can be read as four separate civil wars conflated in time and space. These wars have diverse political objectives and involve different belligerent parties, anchored in distinct politico-historical narratives. Each conflict concurrently creates intersecting tactical and strategic alliances among the various combatants.

The main conflict is between the *federal government and Tigray*, stemming from their opposing visions of what the Ethiopian polity is and how it should be configured—based on either devolved power and regional political autonomy or centralization. The *Amhara–Tigray* conflict is primarily a territorial war over contested historical homelands. The *Eritrea–Tigray* conflict may be interpreted as a war of hegemonic domination and the continuation of an earlier conflict between two liberation movements currently in power in Asmara and Mekelle, respectively. Finally, the *Oromo–federal government* conflict is over political representation in, and affiliation to, the Ethiopian state.

Ethiopia’s tendency to relapse into civil war, as has been observed repeatedly in modern history, is rooted in a complex set of factors arising from its history of statehood, experience of authoritarianism, perceptions of identity, and traditions of

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political culture. The perennial contested issue involves what “Ethiopia” is and should contain—in other words, how the state should be configured, and what an Ethiopian identity should comprise and invoke. These questions have been debated by politicians, revolutionaries, and researchers for decades.

One should obviously be careful not to essentialize the challenges confronting Ethiopia today. It is nevertheless vital to know about the deep and contested history of this ancient polity in order to understand the current political dynamics that are once again pitting its people against each other.

THE TIGRAYAN PATH TO POWER

Tigray is seen by many as the cradle of Ethiopian civilization. It is the site of the ancient Aksum kingdom, the predecessor state of what would become modern Ethiopia. Tigray thus has always been at the core of the evolving Ethiopian polity. Its ruling elites competed with feudal lords from Gondar Shewa and other Amhara-speaking areas to claim the throne as *negus negast*—the “king of kings,” emperor of Ethiopia.

The seat of power shifted to the Shewan–Amhara elite at the end of the nineteenth century, followed by a process of centralization of authority during the twentieth century. Tigrayan elites felt marginalized by the imperial court. The reinvigorated modernization and centralization policies implemented by Emperor Haile Selassie I beginning in the early 1940s sparked renewed resistance against the center by the Tigrayan people, manifested in a widespread rebellion (*woyane*) across the region in 1943.

The introduction of higher education and the evolution of the student movement in the 1960s brought about the growth of an intellectual elite articulating deep-rooted sociopolitical grievances through the ideological doctrines of Marxism-Leninism. Representatives of the Tigrayan student body organized politically into what came to be known as the Tigray Peoples’ Liberation Front (TPLF) in 1975. They interpreted the problems and contradictions in Ethiopian society as products of the suppression of “nationalities”—the many ethnic groups in the country—by a state reflecting and protecting what were perceived to be the cultural values, historical narratives, and language of one dominant group: the Amhara.

In 1975, just after the overthrow of the emperor and the establishment of the Derg military junta, the TPLF launched an armed struggle against the central government. It was followed by a flurry of other resistance movements. During the rest of the 1970s and into the 1980s, Ethiopia experienced a devastating civil war, as several of these mostly ethnic-based political fronts conducted armed struggles for political autonomy, or even secession, from what they viewed as an “Amharized” state.

After assuming territorial control over Tigray in 1989, the TPLF organized the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of ethnic movements including Amhara, Oromo, and southern Ethiopian peoples, to march on Addis Ababa and topple the Derg government. Tigray’s “seventeen years of struggle” culminated with the takeover of central power in Ethiopia in 1991. In consultation with the other movements, most notably the Oromo Liberation Front, the EPRDF replaced the unitary state structure with a multinational (or “ethnic”) federal system, granting, in theory, full political autonomy to the country’s “nations, nationalities, and peoples.”

The Ethiopian constitution of 1995 enshrined a devolved federal state model, whereby initially nine member states were defined according to language and ethnic criteria. The multinational federal system was clearly a form of victor’s justice. No political representatives arguing for the continuation of the unitary state, or any other alternative federal model, were allowed to participate in political discourse after EPRDF’s takeover of power. Despite introducing multiparty democracy and a comprehensive bill of rights, the EPRDF never allowed any political opposition to challenge its grip on power. The strongman Meles Zenawi presided over the coalition government from 1991 until his death in 2012, keeping all opponents at bay.

Although Amhara, Oromo, and southern ethnic parties were constituent members of the EPRDF, the TPLF maintained control of policy development and implementation under the ideological doctrines of “revolutionary democracy” and “democratic centralism.” Widespread human rights abuses and manipulation of elections led, beginning in 2014, to waves of large-scale popular protests against the TPLF/EPRDF regime, which the government was unable to quell. The Oromo youth movement

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(Qerroo) spearheaded the protests, later joined by the Amhara youth movement (Fano). They called for genuine political representation at the federal and regional levels, regional autonomy, and accountability for human rights abuses and mismanagement including corruption, nepotism, and land-grabbing.

The sustained protests led to disagreements within the EPRDF leadership on how to handle citizens' demands for political reforms and liberalization, pitting the TPLF core against a new Oromo faction, as well as Amhara representatives. The stalemate eventually compelled Hailemariam Desalegn to step down as party chairman and prime minister to facilitate an end to the internal power struggle. This led to the selection of the Oromo candidate Abiy Ahmed as the new EPRDF chairman and prime minister in April 2018.

ABIY'S UNITARY VISION

By apologizing for EPRDF "state terrorism" and human rights abuses and promising a raft of liberal reforms, Abiy immediately became immensely popular across Ethiopia. In his first eight months in power, he initiated a diplomatic dialogue with Eritrea that led to a peace agreement, released thousands of political prisoners, invited exiled opposition leaders and activists to return, and opened space for political pluralism and freedom of expression. These initiatives earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019.

Initially, the TPLF grudgingly accepted losing control of the government coalition. But as the peace process with Eritrea gained momentum during the summer and fall of 2018, Tigrayan representatives in the security, military, and state-owned sectors were being dismissed, while some were arrested and accused of human rights violations and mismanagement. Consequently, an increasingly wary TPLF started to relocate its key officials back to Tigray to concentrate on regional interests, abandoning federal leadership positions. It also began to push back against and obstruct political processes put in motion by the new national government.

Although his elevation to the premiership represented Oromo aspirations for control of the center under the multinational federal system, Abiy soon muted the ethnic discourse of the EPRDF. Instead, he started to emphasize Ethiopian unity and the need to reinvigorate a strong, unified state. Launching the concept of *medemer* ("synergy" or "addition" in Amharic) as a way forward to reunite

a divided society, he stressed the need to be proud of *Ethiopiawinet* (Ethiopianness)—an all-embracing national identity. Since he used rhetoric harking back to the country's "glorious past" to explain these concepts, however, the TPLF leadership and other advocates of multinational federalism in Oromia and the south perceived his moves as a drive toward recentralization of power and the restoration of the repressive Amharized state.

On his return to Ethiopia after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Abiy abolished the EPRDF coalition, replacing it in December 2019 with the new, unitary Prosperity Party (PP) to carry forward his vision. All EPRDF coalition partners and affiliated parties in the outlying regions were invited to join the new party. The TPLF declined this invitation. TPLF chairman Debretsion Gebremichael declared that the process establishing the new ruling party was illegal. He alleged that long-held policies and norms had been openly violated by Abiy, whom he accused of undermining the federal system and imperiling the constitution. In a press release, Debretsion asserted that the new ruling clique was planning to "finish off" Tigray. "This is what we call betrayal," he asserted. "They didn't only betray us, they have betrayed their people, the poor people; they betrayed the country, and we consider them traitors."

The rupture of political relations between the TPLF and the PP in late 2019 led to the withdrawal of all TPLF members from federal government positions. Attempts to reconcile the two parties were organized by groups of elders, religious leaders, and civil society representatives. But the ideological contradictions between the new PP policy of enhanced national unity and *Ethiopiawinet* and the TPLF's insistence on the multinational federal order and emphasis on ethnic autonomy were too deep to bridge.

Several conflict-triggering events occurred in 2020, including the postponement of national elections and Tigray's decision to conduct separate regional elections by its own fiat. That, in turn, led to the suspension of federal funding for Tigray, which again spurred the two parties to issue dueling statements of denunciation and derecognition in early October 2020. At that point, there was no turning back from an armed confrontation between a centralizing government and a rebellious Tigrayan leadership.

This political trajectory mirrored earlier patterns during the reigns of Haile Selassie and the Derg. On both sides of the conflict were deep-

rooted sentiments of politico-cultural entitlement to power, in the form of either self-rule (*woyane*) or state control (*Ethiopiawinet*). This is Ethiopia's "forever war," which comes back to haunt every generation.

AMHARA AMBITIONS

The war on Tigray is ostensibly about political control. The federal government's stated objectives for what started as a "law-enforcement operation" were to arrest the political and military leadership of the regional government and bring the region back under federal control. But from Amhara political actors' standpoint, the war is broadly interpreted as an attempt to regain what they perceive as lost territories. Western and southern parts of Tigray RS have been reclaimed by arms and are currently being brought under Amhara administration and control.

Access to and control of land are essential in any subsistence agricultural society, particularly so in parts of Ethiopia where land has been cultivated for millennia. Life in rural Ethiopia revolves around land: it defines who you are, where you belong, and your status in society. Rural agricultural land is state-owned, and usufruct rights are traditionally allocated based on proven descent from the community.

The administrative borders of provinces have been altered during all regime changes in Ethiopia. They were often used by the central government as a means of divide-and-rule strategies to maintain political control over local nobility and political elites with aspirations of gaining central power. The latest such redesign took place after the EPRDF assumed power in 1991.

In the process of restructuring Ethiopia from a unitary state to a federal model, nine new regional states were created, as specified in the constitution (Article 46.2), on the basis of "settlement patterns, language, identity, and consent of the people." Most of the states were given new ethnic names; only Tigray and Harar had previously existed in name as administrative regions. Before 1991 there was no region called "Amhara," and the Amharic-speaking population was divided between several administrative regions.

The borders of the new regional states crisscrossed those of former regions. None of the

ethnic groups were consulted, and no referenda were held to reflect local sentiments of belonging. The Amhara territorial claims to areas currently within the Tigray RS are based on pre-1991 borders demarcating predominantly Amharic-speaking administrative regions.

The new regional state of Tigray gave away territories in the east to the new Afar RS, while incorporating the western areas of Welkait, Tsegede, and the fertile lowland plains of Setit-Humera, at the expense of the former Gondar administrative region. The lowland areas contain the key sesame cash crop belt in Ethiopia, originally inhabited by a mix of Amhara- and Tigrinya-speaking farmers. The demographic composition of this area has shifted over different periods, as a consequence of political edicts or war. After the civil war of the 1970s and '80s, many Tigrayan refugees from Sudan, as well as internally displaced people, settled in this area. At the outbreak of the new war in 2020, a large majority of the population in western Tigray was Tigrinya-speaking.

On the southern border of the new Tigray, the Raya territory was split between Tigray and Amhara. The Raya people inhabiting the area are a distinct ethnic subgroup of the Oromo; many are bilingual in Amharic and Tigrinya. A part of the earlier Raya-Kobo district, which had been administered by the Wollo region, was included in Tigray.

In 2016, protests erupted in western Tigray, organized by the Welkait Amhara Identity Committee (or Welkait Identity and Self-Determination Committee), demanding a return of the zone to the Amhara RS. The protests were quickly quashed by the regional authorities, and the leaders were arrested. After the resignation of Hailemariam Dessalegn as prime minister in February 2018, the committee leaders were released and immediately resumed the campaign to return the Welkait-Tsegede area to Amhara control. This position was subsequently adopted by the regional ruling party, the Amhara Democratic Party, deepening internal discontent about TPLF domination within the EPRDF coalition. The party subsequently argued for Amhara control of western Tigray during the EPRDF congress in Hawassa in 2018. This was later seen as one of the key triggers for the current war.

In Raya, in south Tigray, a similar committee was established for the Reconstitution of Raya

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Identity. The Amharic-speaking Rayas also expressed a wish to return their area to Amhara administration. This movement was likewise stifled by the TPLF.

When the war broke out in November 2020, it became clear that Amhara regional special forces and militia had been preparing for a long time. The offensive in western Tigray was mostly carried out by Amhara forces, motivated by the cause to reclaim the “lost territories” of the three districts of Welkait, Tsegede, and Setit-Humera. In a subsequent commemoration ceremony, the Amhara RS president at the time, Agegnehu Teshager, stated that “the people of Amhara have been liberated and will never return to slavery again.” He called for Amhara resettlement of the reclaimed territories, a settlement policy reflecting the age-old Ethiopian adage, “To cultivate the land is to rule the land.” The Tigray regional government insists on the withdrawal of all Amhara and Eritrean forces from western Tigray and a return to the status quo ante of territorial borders.

Abiy may not necessarily endorse this territorial realignment by force, but he appears to be in no position to confront the Amhara political elites on the issue, since he is dependent on their support to stay in power. Amhara political activists are also laying claim to territories currently administered by the neighboring regions of Oromo and Benishangul-Gumuz. This could expand the territorial civil war dynamic in the future.

ERITREAN PAYBACK

The two key resistance fronts against the Derg military junta during the 1970s and '80s, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the TPLF, had a troubled relationship for years, even before each group claimed power, in Eritrea and Ethiopia respectively, following the fall of the junta in 1991. The EPLF was the oldest and the largest movement during the struggle, but when the TPLF took control of a country twenty times larger than newly independent Eritrea, EPLF and its leader Isaias Afwerki were soon dwarfed on the international scene by Meles Zenawi and the TPLF/EPRDF. The leadership of both fronts hailed from the same Tigrinya-speaking highland populations, which are divided by the Ethiopia–Eritrea border. The cultural intimacy between them made their ideological differences even more fierce.

The gradually declining economic and political relationship between the two countries resulted in a new war in 1998, when Eritrean forces seized

a strip of territory administered by Tigray. Initially, Afwerki defined the conflict as an internal “Tigrinya affair.” The TPLF-led Ethiopian government, however, responded by mobilizing the national army, and a two-year war ensued, claiming more than 100,000 lives. The Eritrean military was eventually driven out of Tigray and crushed in a final devastating offensive in May–June 2000.

From then until 2018, Eritrea and Ethiopia were locked in a “no war, no peace” impasse. The Ethiopian government had resisted implementing in full the border demarcation decision of the Ethiopian–Eritrean Boundary Commission, the international arbitration mechanism put in place to solve the issue of disputed territories as part of the comprehensive peace agreement of 2000. Instead, Addis Ababa imposed a diplomatic and economic containment strategy aimed at neutralizing Eritrea's influence and agency in the Horn of Africa. The sustained hostility between the two countries was used as an excuse by Afwerki to suspend the Eritrean constitution and civil rights, and to maintain full war mobilization for 20 years and counting, including compulsory conscription of indefinite duration for both men and women.

The coming to power of an Oromo prime minister in Ethiopia, on the back of sustained anti-TPLF protests, changed Afwerki's approach to his archenemy. In June 2018, he accepted Abiy's invitation to commence a political dialogue and forge a new relationship. But Afwerki's intentions for the process became clear in the speech he gave on June 20—Martyrs' Day, one of the most important public holidays in Eritrea, honoring the fallen fighters in the war of liberation—with his infamous statement, “Game over, TPLF!” He was cheering the ouster of the Tigrayan political leadership from the EPRDF and from government positions. The subsequent outbreak of war and the brutal campaign carried out by Eritrean troops in Tigray, where they have been accused of committing widespread war crimes, indicate that the Eritrean president seized the opportunity to forge an alliance with the new powerholders in Addis Ababa in order to pursue his long-sought revenge on the TPLF.

Afwerki has been the strongest critic of the TPLF-favored multinational federal system in Ethiopia since its introduction. In an interview in early January 2022 on Eritrean national television, he again called on Ethiopia to dismantle its federal system and criticized Abiy for acting too slowly to eradicate the legacy of the TPLF. He

predicted trouble for Ethiopia in years to come as a result.

FRUSTRATED OROMO HOPES

As the country's largest ethnic group, comprising about 35 percent of the total population, the Oromo people have a complex role in Ethiopia. Oromo political actors' perceptions of Ethiopian statehood are divergent, reflecting the heterogeneous cultural makeup of the group and the different ways Oromo elites position themselves vis-à-vis the political center. The Shewan-Oromo, for instance, have been represented at the royal court for centuries, whereas Muslim Oromo clans in Hararghe, Bale, and Arsi have been "othered" by the Ethiopian state, politically marginalized and subjugated. Oromos in these areas were ruled by outsiders dispatched by the emperor, and local interests and concerns were usually neglected.

Localized Oromo rebellions against the central government had flared up irregularly, but it was in the 1960s that a pan-Oromo political consciousness started to emerge. A new class of educated Oromos challenged the Amharization policy of the centralizing and repressive state, establishing the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in 1974 and launching an armed struggle. The political objective of the Oromo cause has oscillated between secession and the establishment of an independent Oromia state on the one hand, and assuming control of the central government through the ballot box (since the Oromo constitute the largest voting bloc) on the other.

Ideologically, the OLF and the TPLF are cut from the same cloth, both emphasizing political and cultural autonomy at the ethnic group level. Yet the TPLF refused to recognize the OLF as the front representing the Oromo or to include it in the EPRDF coalition. Instead, it set up a competing Oromo organization under its control, sowing further seeds of mistrust.

After the fall of the Derg, however, the OLF joined the transitional government headed by the EPRDF. It was instrumental in drafting the principles of ethnic federalism enshrined in the Transitional Charter of 1991, which was converted into the 1995 constitution. But TPLF machinations during the transitional phase led to an OLF boycott of the first local and regional elections in 1992, igniting a resumption of its armed struggle to establish an Oromo state.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the OLF claimed to be the genuine political voice of the

pan-Oromo struggle against a repressive state, casting the Oromo representatives in the EPRDF as "traitors" selling out *Oromummaa* (Oromeness and Oromo nationalism). As the coercive capacities of the state increased, the OLF leadership and fighters were forced to relocate to Eritrea. This opened space for other Oromo political organizations to redefine the Oromo struggle within an Ethiopian framework.

Sustained, massive demonstrations organized by the Oromo youth movement known as *Qerroo/Qarree*, starting in 2014, were harnessed by the Oromo faction within the EPRDF to propel Abiy to the helm of both the coalition and the government. For the first time in Ethiopian history, an Oromo representative would occupy the apex of power openly, not cloaked in an Amharized guise as in earlier periods. This created great optimism among Oromos. By inviting the OLF and other dissenters to rejoin the political process, Abiy demonstrated an interest in accommodating long-held Oromo political aspirations. But the OLF's deep distrust of the EPRDF led to a "tactical" split of the front into a political wing, which became a legally registered party, and an armed wing, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), which continued fighting.

Abiy's subsequent establishment of the Prosperity Party, and his shift away from an ethnonational discourse and toward an emphasis on *Ethiopiawinet*, stirred resentment among Oromo politicians both within the ruling party and in the opposition. The surge of pan-Ethiopian and Amhara nationalism as a consequence of the war on Tigray further contributed to strengthening the Oromo armed struggle. The OLA has reportedly drawn thousands of new recruits and has become a considerable military actor, challenging regional and federal forces in combat across the Oromia RS.

Advocates of *Oromummaa* now believe that Abiy will not fulfill their aspirations of genuine Oromo representation at the center of politics in Ethiopia. If the democratic space remains securitized and controlled by the PP, it is likely that the pan-Oromo struggle again will coalesce around secessionism, possibly in an alliance with the TPLF.

PEACEMAKING CHALLENGES

The resurgence of civil war has exposed the deep, old fissures in Ethiopian statehood. The multinational federal model was born out of years of civil war and introduced by the victors as a means to keep the fractured state together under a new dispensation. By granting full political

autonomy to the country's many ethnic groups, it was argued, trust in the central government could be restored. If any group feared the restoration of a repressive and culturally subjugating central government, the constitution included an "exit clause" in Article 39, which allows for the possibility of withdrawing from the federation and establishing separate states.

Today, these same principles are invoked by one side in the war and contested by the other. The reformed ruling party has expressed an interest in revisiting the constitutional framework in order to amend and mute the "ethnic" aspects of the federation. Other political actors, including those denied inclusion in the constitutional deliberations after the fall of the Derg, argue for scrapping the current constitution altogether and creating a new one from scratch.

Arguably, the multinational federal system was successful in pacifying some ethnic-based conflicts, while concurrently deepening old fault lines and creating new ones. But since the constitutional framework for the past 30 years has primarily been in effect on paper, not in practice, it is empirically unwarranted to conclude that the multinational federal order contributed either to peacemaking or to conflict-creation in Ethiopia. The continuation of authoritarian practices and the subjugation of regional political aspirations and general political opposition, during TPLF/EPRDF rule and beyond, appear to be the main conflict drivers.

The Ethiopian government released some key opposition leaders in early 2022 and dropped charges against them, while launching a so-called National Dialogue process. The initiative was hamstrung from its inception, however, by the exclusion of the political opposition from the development of the dialogue's framework, which largely rests on the Prosperity Party's understanding of *Ethiopiawinet*. Further complicating the situation is the continued detention of some opposition leaders, as well as the exclusion of the other belligerent parties in the

conflict, which have been designated as "terrorist organizations" by the government.

The complexities of Ethiopia's civil war make it a challenge for peacemaking. So far, the conflict has exposed the international community's incapacity to handle the situation, let alone provide basic humanitarian aid to the conflict-stricken populations. The UN Security Council is stymied—the insistence of Russia and China on noninterference has blocked any resolution addressing the conflict. In August 2021, the African Union appointed former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo as a high representative to seek a settlement, but his efforts have brought no tangible results as of this writing. The United States and the European Union have likewise designated special envoys to the Horn of Africa to assist in peace diplomacy, but so far those efforts have also been in vain. After a Tigrayan retreat in December 2021, armed clashes have continued along the borders of the Afar and Amhara regions, along with aerial bombardment of Tigrayan towns by federal forces.

To create a sustainable solution to the Ethiopian civil war, if one were at all possible, would necessitate a comprehensive, inclusive, and multi-pronged approach reflecting the four different conflict dimensions outlined above, and more. But the broader political context is packed with domestic and international tensions. There is an increasingly fraught geopolitical situation in the Horn of Africa as Middle Eastern powers compete for influence in Ethiopia, clashes continue in a border conflict between Sudan and Ethiopia, and Egypt denounces the newly activated Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile. In this context, the declaration of a truce in Tigray in late March may be seen as a sign of ongoing confidential talks between the parties, though it has not facilitated the promised unimpeded humanitarian access. It thus seems unlikely that a sustainable solution to the Ethiopian civil war will be reached anytime soon. ■