

## **Jawar Mohammed's quest for peaceful resolution of the crisis**

Ethiopia is back in the global spotlight once again with the outbreak of the war in Tigray. I am saddened but not surprised. For anyone with a cursory understanding of the fragility of Ethiopia's transitional politics, the escalation of tensions between the federal government and the Tigray state into a full-blown military conflict does not come as a surprise. The tell-tale signs were there for everyone to see as the warring parties openly prepared their respective forces for the eventuality of an all-out armed confrontation.

While the specter of war had been hanging over our heads for at least two solid years, the weeks before the formal commencement of the war were particularly alarming. As antagonisms between the federal government and the Tigray state reached a climax, federal and Tigray state media outlets regularly showed military parades, highly drilled commando paratrooper units, and red-beret Special Forces performed in mock-operations in an apparent show of force. All indications were that clashes were in the offing in a not so distant future. Then came November 4, 2020: The country woke up to the news of yet another deadly war.

We, in the Oromo Protest movement, had precisely anticipated this danger long before the drums of war began to reverberate between Finfinne and Mekelle, and put a considerable amount of effort in a desperate attempt to avert the unfortunate bloodshed. Regrettably, all political actors and outside stakeholders -including us- failed to prevent the war despite having ample time and incentive to do so in what now appears to be a collective failure of imagination. But why did we fail?

Below I will highlight some of our efforts and reflection as to why we could not attain the desired outcome in the interests of setting the record straight and as a useful lesson as we continue to navigate the treacherous terrains of Ethiopia's utterly mismanaged political transition. Note that since I don't have access to my journal and other useful reference materials as I sit inside the four walls of a prison cell, I rely on retrieved recollections from memory to outline the sequence of events on the topic.

Long before Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed emerged as chairman of the then ruling coalition and eventually took over the stewardship of the transitional process -in fact way before the Oromo Protests erupted- we knew that one of our main tasks was designing a strategy to dislodge the principal handlers of the authoritarian regime from power without plunging what was already a polarized country into a civil war, or even worse, without turning it into a failed state.

We believed that the process of inducing change into a minority-dominated authoritarian rule and its aftermath would have extremely dangerous consequences if not carefully handled. Our fear of a carelessly handled regime change possibly leading to a civil war and/or state collapse, was based on the following assessments of present and historical factors.

### **History of Ethiopian state formation**

Ethiopia is a polity created via the conquest of various national groups, and the successive nation-building projects attempted through forced assimilationist policies aborted with the rise of the national question. The last attempt at nation and state-building through the formation of a multinational federation was also undermined by the authoritarian nature of the regime. Thus, the failure to build a state whose legitimacy is unquestioned by constituent national groups led to the birth of competing nationalisms.

In such a situation, the contest between the power holders and its challengers is highly likely to take an ethnic dimension as each side taps into those competing nationalist narratives, paving way for horizontal conflicts among various national groups. By the time we were designing the strategy against the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), these competing nationalisms were already robust and institutionalized. The risk for horizontal conflicts to arise and transform into a civil war was very high.

### **Nature of the regime**

EPRDF was dominated by the coalition's senior partner, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), whose political base is a minority ethno-linguistic group representing merely six percent of Ethiopia's population. When such minority political groups disproportionately dominate power, as much as holding power yields disproportionate material and sentimental dividend to members and affiliates of this group, the loss of this power or threat thereof, poses perceived or real existential threat both to their accumulated wealth and/or to their safety.

Although authoritarian rules of this type mostly enrich only a small clique of voracious sharks in the upper echelons of power, the fear of existential threat is usually shared by the rank and file within the party structure as well as by the entire population from which the dominant group hails.

The power holding political elite also tap into this fear to mobilize the mass and thereby insulate themselves from potential harm. Given this scenario, power contestations between those in power and their challengers could easily turn into a horizontal ethnic conflict. The fact that institutions of the federal government were dominated by elites of TPLF's minority group meant that such a sense of existential threat and subsequent horizontal conflict could fracture those institutions, risking state collapse. I have written about this in 2010 on Tigrayan Nationalism. Our concern was exacerbated when we witnessed events in Syria and how a threatened power holding minority could wreak havoc, as I argued here in September 2012.

The above factors weighed heavy on our minds when designing a strategy to induce change towards a democratic transition in Ethiopia. The core principles of our strategic approach were as follows:

While demanding that the TPLF cede power by mounting pressure through popular protests that indicated that change was inevitable, we also advocated that they should be given assurances against a punitive redistribution of wealth, aggressive persecution, and prosecution for past crimes should they give up federal power without further bloodshed. The assurances would also include a guarantee of autonomy for the Tigray Regional State so it could continue to be protected by federal forces against external threats. It was agreed to clearly and repeatedly communicate this to them formally and informally. We were very much aware of the gross human rights violations and corruption the TPLF dominated EPRDF had been engaged in. After all, Oromos and Oromia were the primary victims of brutality and exploitation. Yet, as painful as

it is, we felt that sacrificing justice would be necessary to avoid a catastrophic civil war and broaden the chance for the transition into a sustainable democratic system.

To reinforce this assurance and reduce uncertainty, it was believed that we should adopt a non-violent popular movement rather than an armed struggle. We believed civil disobedience posed less existential threat than armed confrontations. Furthermore, the transition should be through reform rather than overthrowing the regime entirely, and that is it should be led by reform-minded elements or factions within the ruling party who hold onto power rather than the opposition. We thought it would be simpler to assuage fears by the TPLF leadership of aggressive persecution, if they relinquished power to members of their ruling coalition than opposition groups that they considered more hostile.

During the resistance movement, civilian members of the minority group should be protected to reduce the development of a sense of collective insecurity among the Tigrayan people. This was effectively implemented during the four and half years of the Oromo Protest. No Tigrayan was harmed by protesters. Even senior political and security elites were spared from direct attack. These strategies worked better than we could hope for. The resistance movement overall cost us thousands of lives but the TPLF finally understood that it was no longer tenable to cling on to power in the face of mounting pressure. The leaders wisely accepted the golden parachute, agreeing to hand over power to then OPDO, and retreated to their home state.

It all went according to plan thus far but our scheme had a second phase. The first, as discussed above, was dislodging the TPLF from power without causing a civil war in the process. The second phase was reintegrating and reconciling TPLF members to be part of the new democratic multinational federation. We believed that reconciling and reintegrating them was as crucial for the success of the transition as carefully dislodging them from power was.

It was the failure to effectively implement this second phase that significantly contributed to the current crisis. There are many reasons and enough blame to go around on why this phase failed. From my perspective, the following are a few of them:

The plan to implement the second phase began to falter from the very beginning of the transition. On the eve of the transition, tension began to increase between TPLF hardliners and the incoming reformist team. At the ruling coalition council's meeting convened to elect new leadership, the TPLF lodged a harsh and abusive criticism on the designated chairman and Prime Minister-elect, Abiy Ahmed, and went as far as refusing to cast even a single of their 45 votes for him. This created a bitter rift between the group that needed to be reconciled and the person responsible for presiding over the reintegration process.

Another reason is that those tasked with implementing the second phase had different understandings, motivations, and tactics from those who planned it. In other words, those who came to power to lead the transition and those at the forefront of the protest movement had a different understanding of the way forward. The freshly minted "reformist" leaders saw the TPLF as a mortal threat to consolidating power rather than an old regime that could be useful to facilitate the transition process if properly reconciled with and reintegrated into the plan. Part of the problem was that individuals who came to play a decisive role in government were not active

participants in the negotiations that led to the transition – not only did they not share our concerns nor did they feel that they should abide by the terms of those agreements. Instead of actively reassuring TPLFites and the larger Tigrayan elite, they pursued aggressive purging, harsh criticisms of their track records, and persecution of many key members of the TPLF including army generals and businesses. This led the TPLF and majority Tigrayan elites to believe they were deceived into giving up power with false promises strengthening the position of hardliners and silencing moderates.

They immediately resorted to aggressive and combative rhetoric, having felt that they immediately became a target despite holding onto their end of the bargain to relinquish power. Their fear was exacerbated by how the peace deal with Eritrea was handled. Their exclusion from the peacemaking process with their archenemy made the TPLF feel the reproach was motivated by the desire to create an alliance against them rather than a sincere effort to end the decade's long hostility between the two countries.

Those who ascended to federal power also had reasons to feel insecure and threatened by TPLF's deep state. They suspected TPLF operatives to be behind several acts of violence, such as communal clashes and the attempted assassination of Abiy himself. For the new power holders, the TPLF was sabotaging the reform effort as a means of blackmailing and undermining the federal government. The TPLF did not do much to reassure them either. In fact, harsh criticisms forwarded by some of its senior officials against the Prime Minister further heightened the sense of insecurity by the central government.

The grenade attack at the rally organized in support of the new Prime Minister in June of 2018 was officially blamed on former chief of intelligence, Getachew Assefa, yet he was re-elected to the Executive Committee in a clear act of aggression. The fact that key elites in both camps had known each other for long has also resulted in personalized animosity. More importantly, leaders of the two sides grew up under an authoritarian culture where imposing one's views and interests on the other with the use of force was a norm, and reaching compromises to bridge differences was regarded as a sign of weakness.

It was obvious that the ruling coalition needed to reform, or at least rebrand itself, to remain in power and remain relevant. In fact, the coalition partners had agreed to reform the party even before the transition had begun. It was also obvious that TPLF's dominant role would be reduced to reflect the new power order. And such reduction of power would create sour feelings in various sectors, hence the need for careful negotiations, power bargains, and discussions. Yet no such negotiations and discussions were undertaken during the early period of the transition.

On the contrary, such possibilities were deliberately avoided in favor of false harmony. For instance, at the 11th EPRDF Congress in Hawassa, the TPLF gave 100% of its vote to PM Abiy to continue as chairman of the coalition; this was despite their increasing resentment and fear towards his actions such as the purging of Tigrayan security and military officials and his right-wing leaning political rhetoric that contradicted EPRDF's core leftist ideology and the perceived threat Abiy's rhetoric carried to their regional autonomy.

During the early months of the transition, at the time when deeper discussion and negotiations were needed, the coalition stopped its usual culture of holding regular meetings and debates guided by the coalition's principles of 'democratic centralism' in which differences are supposed to be ironed out internally rather than exposed to the public.

The EPRDF's Executive Committee of the 36 powerful individuals rarely met. Even the crucial issue of merging the party, which was agreed upon in Hawassa, was avoided until the last minute. There was no real and genuine discussion and negotiation about the matter. When the issue was finally tabled, it was presented as a take it or leave it to matter on both sides with no desire for finding a middle ground.

Instead of negotiations, power bargains, and persuasions, deceptions and threats were deployed in public from both sides. After such a badly managed merger affair, the bond that tied the Tigray region and the new power holders in the federal government was all but severed. In a polity where a single party rule from federal to village level was the norm, two parties with an ugly break up began ruling the federal and regional governments, making their relationship more cumbersome than that between two sovereign countries hostile to one another. After the merger fiasco, the enmity between the two sides became official and preparations to forcefully assert their respective interests began to be pursued publicly.

To say that the postponement of the regional and national elections due to the COVID-19 is the single most important factor that ignited the current conflict is to arrive at an erroneous conclusion.

The relationship between the two had been severely damaged way before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. As I have argued in several interviews the two sides were already preparing for war long before election politics gripped public consciousness.

One could safely argue that the election postponement was a missed opportunity to reset the relationship and to negotiate an amicable political settlement but the two sides only used it as an opportunity to further de-legitimize each other as they prepared behind the scenes for today's armed showdown. The postponement might have sped up the war, but for anyone closely observing Ethiopia, it was obvious that the two sides had made up their mind to settle their differences by the barrel of the gun rather than around the negotiating table. The writing was on the wall.

In the absence of mutually reassuring communication and negotiation, insecurity on both sides, that is TPLF's fear of retribution for past misdeeds and Abiy's concern of losing control due to acts of sabotage by TPLF's deep state was worsening. Hence each side focused on taking defensive actions to neutralize perceived threats. Abiy by purging them from security and bureaucracy and TPLF by building its military capability and attempting to broaden its political and security alliance outside Tigray.

The securitization of the relationship facilitated for hardliners to dominate TPLF's decision making while pushing Abiy and the federal government to rely on and come under increasing influence personalities and entities that advocated violent resolution of the TPLF issue. Sadly, international actors, perhaps underestimating the likelihood of a war breaking out, did little to diffuse the ever-growing tension. Even worse some foreign states and ambassadors took sides emboldening the quarreling forces to be more aggressive and combative.

Thus, the war in Tigray did not suddenly erupt due to the attacks on the Northern Command of the National Defense Forces. The Northern Command has been a hostage of the Finfinne – Mekele political gridlock for the last two years. The Tigray regional government had openly declared that no weapon could leave the region and the army's movement had been severely restricted. As the tension increased, Tigray feared the federal government would use the Northern Command to forcefully take over the region from within the territory, while the federal

authorities were worried that the heavy armament in possession of the Northern Command could be used by the TPLF to launch an attack not only within the regional state but even on the center. In other words, the Northern Command was seen as a crucial element that could tip the balance of force in the power struggle between Finfinne and Mekelle. After squandering opportunities to negotiate a mutually reassuring deal during the early months of the transition and with external actors fanning the tension rather than pressing for resolution, the war was inevitable. Finally, at the risk of self-praise, let me highlight some of those little efforts. As one of the people involved in designing the Oromo Protests strategies, I spent a considerable amount of time pondering, writing, and speaking to stakeholders about how to dislodge TPLF from power and safely reintegrate them. I played an active role in the first phase – in dislodging the TPLF – and tried to play a bit of an advisory (mediator) role in the second.

In the first phase, I had direct participation in the discussions and negotiations. In the second phase, I tried to urge the two sides charged with the matter to take reconciliation and reintegration as a priority. For instance, when PM Abiy and President Lamma came to the US, one of the main topics of our discussion was how to handle the TPLF conundrum.

Having had a positive reaction from them, I called President Debretsion while Abiy and Lemma were still in the U.S. and explained to him the urgency of this task. I also informed both Abiy and Debretsion that activists and public intellectuals would wage campaigns to shape public opinions in favor of reconciliation and reintegration. To work towards this end we would travel to Mekelle right after my return to Ethiopia. Both sides thought this was a good idea. Upon my return, I communicated with both sides to arrange the trip to Mekelle. Those in Finfinne advised me to travel to Bahir Dar first to prevent possible suspicion and negative reactions from the Amhara side. Mekelle also agreed and I first traveled to Bahir Dar. However, my travel to Mekelle was repeatedly delayed and postponed primarily as the relationship between the two sides deteriorated. Those at the federal government were reluctant while Mekelle also grew suspicious of our true intentions. The plan was finally canceled when the former spy chief, Getachew Assefa, was elected to TPLF's Executive Committee (EC) in defiance of the federal government's arrest warrant against him.

Although the plan to travel to Mekelle to help with public opinion did not materialize, I did not give up lobbying for the two sides to solve their differences through negotiations. That tragic day the chief of armed forces and the president of the Amhara region were assassinated, I was extremely alarmed by how state media in Amhara and Tigray regional states were fanning the tension. I decided to reach out to veterans of the ANDM and TPLF in the respective regional states to plead with them to tone down the hostility and honor the martyrs of both sides.

This conversation developed into an idea of veteran politicians, drawn both from the EPRDF and opposition side, conducting back door negotiations between Mekelle and Finfinne to facilitate formal negotiations among the officials. Six individuals from both sides were selected. The plan was endorsed both by PM Abiy and president Debretsion. But for reasons I still don't know it was abandoned before any face-to-face meeting was held. After the effort failed, I realized any effort to solve the problem amicably would prove futile. When we talked to them, officials of the two sides were more interested in soliciting our support for the inevitable confrontation.

Reconciliation and reintegration of TPLF was one of the primary focuses of my advocacy when meeting foreign diplomats as well. For instance, a few days after returning to Ethiopia I had meetings with ambassadors of some 20 countries including that of the U.S. and the European

Union. In those meetings, I emphasized the crucial importance of resolving the TPLF/ Tigray issue for the success of the transition and emphasized that failure to reconcile would have serious ramifications for the country and regional stability. I urged these diplomats to put pressure on both sides to negotiate. In several meetings with foreign diplomats and officials in the last two and half years in the Horn Region, Europe, and the US, I have been pleading the same point, but I am not sure if it was taken seriously.

## **Conclusion**

We dreamed of and planned for a peaceful transition to democracy. Nonviolently dislodging and then reintegrating the power holders in TPLF's base was the centerpiece of our plan. We strongly believed successfully dislodging followed by reconciliation would be an essential component of not only successfully transitioning Ethiopia to democracy but also building on the multinational federal state by avoiding falling back into a catastrophic civil war. It did not work as we hoped. While our plans to weaken and dislodge the TPLF turned out to be more successful than we had anticipated, efforts to reintegrate them into the transitional set up proved inadequate, forcing us to confront our worst fear – a civil war. Ironically, we choose to let EPRDF, the party that tyrannically ruled, continue to lead the transition believing that opposition taking over through regime change carries more risk of war.

Yet it is the split within the ruling coalition that brought about what we hoped to avoid. This reminds me of what the chairman of Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), Professor Merera Gudina, said at the start of the transition that 'Abiy's main difficulty was managing the EPRDF rather than dealing with the opposition' or something to that effect.

As I jot down this piece, the war is raging and the federal government has said it was marching to capture Mekelle. Regardless of which side wins in key battlefronts or the war itself, it's obvious that Ethiopia loses on multiple fronts. Even before the war erupted the much-hoped-for transition was severely harmed by confrontations of the two sides and several other factors.

The main reason why we wanted to ease out TPLF with the offer of a golden parachute – assuring them that they would not be targets of vengeful persecutions and punitive redistribution of wealth, they would preserve their regional autonomy as well as receive protection from foreign adversaries – was to save the federation from eventual fragmentation.

We operated with a working assumption that any perception of an existential threat by the TPLF, which dominated the political and security apparatus of the Ethiopian state for almost three decades, could lead to the collapse of some of the federal institutions it built and held together. A look into the impact this war is having on the cohesion of the Ethiopian army provides a glimpse into the disastrous outcome of this fallout.

The war in Tigray is a direct result of a poorly managed transition into a democratic dispensation, which should not be viewed as an isolated problem. It is a tragic collective failure of the country's political leadership – all of us, not just Abiy and the TPLF. There is enough blame to go around. One person or party could bear larger or lesser responsibilities but we all played a role. Through our acts of omission and commission, we squandered this great opportunity for a peaceful democratic transition and placed the country at a horrible civil war that could rip it apart.

From my prison cell, I cannot pretend to be up to speed with everyday developments on the war and the efforts of external actors to end it before it causes irreversible damage. It would therefore

be presumptuous of me to try to offer concrete recommendations with limited information at hand. All I could do for the time being is plead with all sides to give peace a chance; remind various political groups to refrain from fanning the war and instead exert pressure to end the hostility.

Even if this war ends with the defeat of the TPLF leadership, genuine efforts must be made to reconcile and reintegrate the disenfranchised Tigrayan political, security, and economic elites into the country's governance structures. The defeat of TPLF does not necessarily mean the end of the 'Tigrayan problem' for the Ethiopian state. The resurgence of wounded Tigrayan nationalism is inevitable unless extra care is given to avoid the victimization of Tigrayans. For instance, the disputed border between Amhara and Tigray states should be carefully handled not to leave cause for future conflict.

The unfinished issue of the Eritrean border also requires sensitive handling. In both border disputes, a 'winner takes it all' approach must be avoided.

The international community and regional players should exert maximum pressure to save this country from further mayhem by insisting on the immediate cessation of hostilities and encouraging Ethiopia's political forces to resolve their differences through an all-inclusive national dialogue.

Finally, if any actor, be it state or non-state, believes they can achieve victory through a war in this country, they are mistaken. Certainly, one can defeat the other on the battlefield, but neither side would be victorious in building a peaceful and sustainable political order. We are poised to lose the country if we keep insisting on advancing our particular interest through the use of force. In our part, during the Oromo Protests, we consciously chose to wage nonviolent struggle because we believed it would give us a better chance of bringing about a transition to a multinational democratic federal system.

At the OFC, we firmly believe -as always-that nonviolent struggle and an all-inclusive dialogue remain Ethiopia's best hope to successfully transition into a democratic order, ensure enduring stability and achieve sustainable development, and are committed to abiding by these principles. It has worked for us in the past. We hope it serves us better in the future as well.

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Qaliti Federal Prison, Ethiopia