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LAURENZ FÜRST

War in Tigray

Ethiopia's Test of Power

Abstract

In November 2020, war broke out in Ethiopia's northernmost province of Tigray. What started out as a struggle of a breakaway province soon turned into a full-scale war, pitting the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front against the Ethiopian central government. Not being able to crush the insurrection on its own, Ethiopia invited troops from neighbouring Eritrea and potentially even Somalia to put down the rebellion.

When Abiy Ahmed assumed the office of Prime Minister of Ethiopia in April 2018, one thought that the winds of change had finally reached Ethiopia. It seemed that Ethiopia was able to perform the transition from an authoritarian one-party state to a Western-style democracy on the one hand and on the other hand be a force for stability and reconciliation in the Horn of Africa.

Table of contents

Table of contents	1
Love thy neighbour or how war returned to the Horn of Africa	2
Ex Africa semper aliquid novi	3
The Amhara expansion and the making and defending of modern Ethiopia	4
Ityopya teqdam: the Amhara fortress under siege	6
1995 constitution: Pandora's box or modus operandi?.....	9
Abiyot Ahmed and a new vision for Ethiopia	10
The author	12

Love thy neighbour or how war returned to the Horn of Africa

When full-fledged war broke out in the northern Ethiopian province of Tigray at the beginning of November 2020, Ethiopia was for a brief moment in the limelight of the world's attention. The Ethiopian government merely spoke of a police operation intended to re-establish full control over its northernmost province. Yet, what started out as a regional conflict that pitted the central government against a rebellious province turned into an all-out war involving the neighbouring countries of Eritrea and Somalia. Furthermore, drone strikes conducted by the United Arab Emirates Armed Forces, stationed in their military base in the southern Eritrean city of Assab, have given this war a whole new dimension. More and more does the current war waged in Tigray province resemble the 30-year struggle for independence that Eritrea was engaged in from 1961 up until 1991. At that time, Eritrea – whose autonomy inside Ethiopia was revoked in 1961 – was the theatre of a bloody insurgency war that was led by the Ethiopian central government supported first by the Americans, then by the Soviets and Cubans against the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the major force of resistance against the Ethiopian onslaught. The actors involved in the current struggle are considerably less powerful; yet, war has returned to the Horn of Africa, and it is a war that unquestionably has wide-ranging regional implications. Outright rebellion is certainly nothing new to Tigray province, already in 1943 a full-scale rebellion broke out against the rule of the last Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie (1930-1974).¹ With the help of the British Royal Air Force, the rebellion was brutally crushed. When Haile Selassie was eventually toppled in 1974 and consequently murdered in 1975 by a communist military junta under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Haile Mariam Mengistu – the Derg (Amharic for committee) – the Tigrayans of Tigray province were in the forefront to stage, once again, an open rebellion against the Ethiopian central government. The uprising was led by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and turned Tigray province into an area of heavy fighting. In the late 1970s, the Ethiopian Armed Forces led five major offensives against the TPLF.² The EPLF and TPLF were the two most prominent rebel groups to combat the Derg. Many of the leading cadres of the EPLF belonged to the Tigrayan ethnic group and when united against a common enemy, notably the Amhara-dominated Derg, both rebel groups were formidable allies. When Eritrea became independent in 1993, relationships between the Ethiopian central government – now controlled by the TPLF – and Eritrea soured. In 1998, Ethiopia and Eritrea went to war again. Narcissism of minor differences turned into a Cain-and-Abel-style fratricide. In a two-year long bloody war over the control of a few rocky hills on the border between the two countries, two of the world's poorest countries engaged in one of Africa's most brutal wars.

¹ Asserate, Asfa-Wossen: *Der letzte Kaiser von Afrika*. Berlin 2016, p. 202.

² Meredith, Martin: *The State of Africa. A History of Fifty Years of Independence*. London 2006, p. 334.

One cannot help but think of Borges' description of the UK and Argentina during the Falkland War as a fight between two bold men over a comb.

Ex Africa semper aliquid novi

Even though this current war encompasses all the ingredients to make it a frontline news story, it has been given only sparse notice. The world, grappled by the Covid-19 pandemic, only spared a few moments of attention in November 2020, when the war began. When the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019, it seemed that Ethiopia was able to perform the transition from an authoritarian one-party state to a Western-style democracy on the one hand and on the other hand be a force for stability and reconciliation in the Horn of Africa. Ahmed's rapprochement with Eritrea, a long-time foe and sponsor of various rebel movements inside Ethiopia and Somalia, convinced the Nobel Prize Committee to award Ahmed their most prestigious prize. A year later, Abiy Ahmed's record is unquestionably tarnished by the events in Tigray province. The Ethiopian central government is accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Additionally, the presence of Eritrean troops – a fact that has been confirmed by Ahmed himself³ – and the apparent presence of Somalian troops⁴ (up to this day these rumours have not been confirmed), invited by the Ethiopian government to crush the Tigrayan rebellion and the subsequent accusations of human rights violations, has certainly reduced Abiy Ahmed's standing amongst his Western friends and donors. Besides that, the infringement of Ethiopian sovereignty by the armed forces of countries that once used to be occupied by Ethiopia has highlighted the weaknesses of the Ethiopian Armed Forces. When Abiy Ahmed assumed the office of Prime Minister of Ethiopia in April 2018, one thought that the winds of change had finally reached Ethiopia. Ethiopia, a country with roughly 110 million inhabitants and an area of more than 1 million km², can without doubt be considered *sui generis* in Africa. Ethiopia is not just the only African country never to have been colonized, but it is also the only sub-Saharan country to have developed a written culture, its prime achievement of literature being the *Kebra Nagast*.⁵ Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic country, with the Habesha⁶ population constituting around one third of the country's population. The biggest ethnic group are the Oromos, a long discriminated against people that have demanded a fair share of power in Ethiopia in the last few decades. Furthermore, ethnic

³ Internet document: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56497168>, accessed on 20 April 2021.

⁴ Internet document: <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210127-parents-of-somali-soldiers-fear-sons-fighting-in-ethiopia>, accessed on 18 April 2021.

⁵ Often described as the finest creation of Ethiopian literature. This composite work was most likely written by the end of the 13th century to legitimize the rule of the kings that subsequently followed King Yekuno Amlak, founder of the Solomonic dynasty. The plot of the *Kebra Nagast* can be divided into two parts. The first one deals with the procreation of Menelik, being the offspring of King Solomon and Makeda, the queen of Sheba. The theft of the Ark of Covenant by Menelik from Jerusalem is the centrepiece of the second part. The descendancy of King Solomon and the abduction of the Ark of Covenant now awards the Ethiopian rulers a special claim to glory and legitimacy.

⁶ Habeshas are the Semitic-language speaking populations in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The two main peoples that are considered are the Amhara and the Tigrinya.

Somalis and Afar inhabit the easternmost part of Ethiopia and to the south one finds a vast array of different peoples and tribes. Abiy Ahmed is the first Oromo Prime Minister of Ethiopia. Even though Ethiopia is one of the most diverse countries in Africa, for 150 years it has been dominated by the Habesha. Modern Ethiopia has long been plagued by ethnic rivalries that turned violent on numerous occasions. Besides that, for many years of its existence did the central government struggle to fend off secessionist movements inside of Ethiopia and to repel attacks from neighbouring countries, notably Somalia. To many observers, the current conflict in Tigray province is a mere struggle by a breakaway province against the central government in Addis Abeba. This assumption is certainly not wrong; it nevertheless ignores the fact that whenever Ethiopia was ruled by the Amhara or the Tigrayans during the last one and a half centuries, the country waged a war of attrition for the preservation of Ethiopia against enemy forces inside and outside. This current struggle in Tigray province will be Ethiopia's test of power. The introduction of Western-style democracy as envisioned by Abiy Ahmed to a country that is plagued by tribalism, ethnic violence, separatist movements etc. would be like throwing a match unto gunpowder. If the concept of "one man, one vote" were introduced to Ethiopia, the numerically biggest ethnic group, the Oromos, would eventually end up in control – a vision that fills the Habesha, and especially the Amhara, with a sense of alarm and foreboding. If Abiy Ahmed manages to instil a new vision into Ethiopia and can prevent the country from falling apart, Ethiopia will beyond doubt play a decisive role, not just in the Horn of Africa, but will also be a force to reckon with all over the continent. If not, Ethiopia could potentially fall apart in a bloody fratricidal war that would destabilize all of Eastern Africa for decades to come.

The Amhara expansion and the making and defending of modern Ethiopia

Now this hath God showed me in the pit. And as concerning the King of Ethiopia, and Zion, the Bride of heaven, and her chariot whereby they move, I will declare unto you that which my God hath revealed unto me and hath made me to understand. Ethiopia shall continue in the Orthodox faith until the coming of our Lord, and she shall in no way turn aside from the word of the Apostles, and it shall be so even as we have ordered until the end of the world.⁷

The current borders of Ethiopia were established by the late 19th century. Preceding this settlement of boundaries that Ethiopia agreed on with the surrounding European colonial powers at the time was a numerous decade-long expansionist drive by the Amhara people from their heartland in the highlands of Ethiopia. The emperor to initiate this campaign was Emperor Tewodoros II. Tewodoros' vision was to unify the Christian empire and to expand the frontiers of Ethiopia. Indeed, there was a variety of

⁷ Budge, Ernest Alfred (translator): *The Queen of Sheba and her only Son Menyelek (Kebra Nagast)*. Cambridge 2000, p. 194.

reasons for the resurgence of the Habesha people by the mid-19th century. For more than two and a half centuries, the power that the Solomonid dynasty exerted over the Horn of Africa was in retreat. With Tewodoros having been crowned emperor in 1855 this was about to change. Outside factors played a major role in this undertaking. Armed forces of the Ottoman Empire and Egypt attacked Ethiopia from the Red Sea and the Sudan. Furthermore, Muslim Oromos were pushing towards the highlands. Desperately in need for help, Tewodoros called out to the British. However, since they did not want to become engaged in the affairs of Ethiopia, Tewodoros' plea remained unanswered. As he was a rash and vociferous personality, the small British community living in Ethiopia had to endure the worst from him for being ignored by the British government. The drop that made the barrel spill over was the mistreatment of a British envoy. Enraged by the behaviour of Emperor Tewodoros, the United Kingdom sent a punitive expedition to Ethiopia. Not standing a chance against a formidable equipped British army, Emperor Tewodoros committed suicide with a revolver, which had been a gift by Queen Victoria.⁸

Yet, the seed of Ethiopian expansion had been laid. Tewodoros II was able to prove that the ancient idea of an Ethiopian empire forged together by a descendant of the Christian Solomonid monarchy was a feasible endeavour to overcome the civil-war-like state that had ravaged Ethiopia for centuries. The emperor to pick up on the plan of expansion was Yohannes IV. Yohannes looked to the glorious past for inspiration. Fascinated by the history of the first Ethiopian Empire of Axum – an empire that ruled in northern Ethiopia for almost a millennium – Yohannes revelled in dreams of rebuilding this ancient empire. Self-confident about his divine mission, he certainly was in no mood of trading off territory to European competitors in the region. Once, while protesting in a letter to the Italians, he remarked, "How could I ever agree to sign away the lands over which my royal ancestors governed? Christ gave them to me".⁹ The first Tigrayan ruler on the throne of Ethiopia for more than 1,000 years, Yohannes was indeed a remarkable ruler. Equipped with wit, intelligence and a fine understanding of how political alliances work, Yohannes remains one of the most revered Ethiopian emperors. Establishing Amharic as the official language of the court and positioning many Oromos in key positions, Yohannes made it clear that his visions for an expanding Ethiopian empire would take into consideration the diversity of its peoples and religions.¹⁰ Just like his predecessor, Yohannes had to fend off Egyptian incursions from the north. After delivering the Egyptians a sound defeat, Yohannes had to wage a three-front war. The evermore-ambitious Italians, who managed to get a foothold in the former Ottoman port city of Massawa in 1885, were encroaching on Ethiopia from the north and a Dervish rag-tag army from the west and King Menelik of Shoa – an internal rival – was equipped and

⁸ Pakenham, Thomas: *The Scramble for Africa*. London 1992, p. 470.

⁹ Wrong, Michaela: *I didn't do it for you. How the World betrayed a small African Nation*. London 2005, p. 31.

¹⁰ Levine, Donald: *Greater Ethiopia. The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society*. Chicago 2000, p. 160.

paid by the Italians. In 1889, Emperor Yohannes died on the battlefield and his former rival Menelik became Emperor of Ethiopia two years later after coming out victorious in a struggle for succession of Yohannes. A former ally of the Italians, Menelik swiftly saw through the false gestures of friendship expressed by Italy. The Italians, growing ever more aggressive, had the intention to expand southwards, towards the highlands of Ethiopia, a natural mountain fortress. The armed forces of Ethiopia and Italy met on the 1st of March 1896, close to the village of Adwa. The battle that followed suit would go down as one of the most remarkable military encounters in history. Equipped with spears and a handful of guns and artillery pieces, the Ethiopians managed to deliver a crushing defeat to the Italians. In the words of historian Raymond Jonas, the battle of Adwa is “a national epic, the founding event in the modern life of the nation (...). Adwa deserves to be ranked among the great military campaigns of modern history.”¹¹ Emperor Menelik achieved what no other non-European ruler had ever done before, namely the defeat of a major European power in open battle. The humiliating defeat of the Italians at Adwa was the starting point for negotiations with European powers to settle the borders of Ethiopia. Besides defeating a major European power in battle, establishing official borders, and therefore guaranteeing the independence of Ethiopia, the last quarter of the 19th century also saw the territory of Ethiopia triple in size and add millions of people to Ethiopia. For many of these people, this process certainly was dramatic, yet the conquest of these new territories was also deemed beneficial in a variety of ways. Ethiopia’s position as an independent African country was enhanced, tribal warfare and brigandage in the conquered territories was reduced and it was the starting point for ending the slave trade in Ethiopia.¹² Furthermore, a unified Ethiopia would stand a better chance of defending the country from outside invaders. There were indeed many other attempts of imperialism by other African *states*, namely the Zulus or the Fulani; yet, only Ethiopia succeeded with her imperial ambitions.¹³

Ityopya teqdam: the Amhara fortress under siege

Since Menelik had not produced a male heir, his death in 1913 heralded a phase of uncertainty in Ethiopia. Ethiopia is an African nation but, as the historian Jeff Pearce duly noted, it had palace intrigues and feudal politics that rivalled the Borgias and the Ottomans.¹⁴ Menelik’s grandson Iyasu was chosen as his successor, but his pro Muslim sentiments made him unacceptable to many at the court. In 1916, he was deposed and Menelik’s daughter Zewditu became Empress of Ethiopia. At the same time, Ras Tafari, who would later on become Emperor Haile Selassie, was chosen as her regent. When Ras Tafari was crowned emperor in 1930, the feudal Ethiopian state was centralized. Up until

¹¹ Pearce, Jeff: Prevail. The inspiring Story of Ethiopia’s Victory over Mussolini’s Invasion 1935-1941. New York 2017, p. 29.

¹² Levine, Donald: Greater Ethiopia. The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society. Chicago 2000, p. 26.

¹³ Binns, John: The Orthodox Church of Ethiopia. London 2020, p. 197.

¹⁴ Pearce, Jeff: Prevail. The inspiring Story of Ethiopia’s Victory over Mussolini’s Invasion 1935-1941. New York 2017, p. 34.

the coronation of Ras Tafari, every descendant of the Solomonid dynasty was theoretically able to inherit the throne. The new emperor Haile Selassie abolished this old tradition, thus turning Ethiopia into a hereditary monarchy.¹⁵ Hand in hand with the establishment of a hereditary monarchy and the centralisation of the Ethiopian state went the *Amharization* of Ethiopia. Amharic became the official language of Ethiopia under the new andinet (unity) law, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church became the official church of Ethiopia, high-ranking positions in the military were occupied by Amhara and positions in the civil service were filled with Amhara. The five years of Italian occupation from 1936-1941 were too short to leave a lasting legacy in Ethiopia and in 1941 Haile Selassie returned to the country. First cracks started to appear in the structure of Ethiopia. A coup attempt in 1960 was crushed and an attack by neighbouring Somalia in 1964 was repelled, but the decision to revoke Eritrea's special status inside of Ethiopia can be seen as Amharic hubris and would eventually have the gravest consequences. From 1941 until 1952, Eritrea was under British rule and in 1952, Eritrea officially became a part of Ethiopia. The United Nations decided that Eritrea would join Ethiopia in a federal union. Ten years later, the special status Eritrea possessed inside of Ethiopia was revoked, which led to one of Africa's longest and bloodiest wars.

After the Second World War, Ethiopia enjoyed a considerable amount of prestige all over the world. Inside of Ethiopia the dominant culture associated with the national centre, the Amharic culture, was to a large extent accepted by Ethiopia's peoples. In the 1960s this was about to change. Peu a peu, Ethiopia lost strategic value to the United States. Haile Selassie nevertheless tried to position Ethiopia on the map, when it became a founder and influential member of the non-aligned movement and in 1963, the Organisation of African Unity was set up in Addis Abeba. As much as Ethiopia lost in strategic value, the internal decline in authority was even more profound. The source of legitimacy for the national centre always revolved around the national script laid out – albeit in a very mythical form – by the Kebra Nagast.¹⁶ The great German journalist, author and world traveller Peter Scholl-Latour, recounts the encounter he once had with an old European missionary in Ethiopia in the 1980s. When asked what had held Ethiopia together for more than two millennia, the monk drily replied, 'The emperor, the Coptic Church and the outside menace'.¹⁷ Yet, by the mid-20th century the Solomonid ideology was more and more put into question, on the one hand by a new urban intelligentsia¹⁸ and on the other hand by the non-Habesha majority in Ethiopia. Ethiopian intellectuals looked for another cultural script and the Kebra Nagast was replaced by Marx and Engel's communist manifesto.

¹⁵ Zewde, Bahru: A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991. Oxford 2007, p. 137-150.

¹⁶ Levine, Donald: Greater Ethiopia. The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society. Chicago 2000, p. XVI.

¹⁷ Scholl-Latour, Peter: Mord am großen Fluß. Ein Vierteljahrhundert afrikanische Unabhängigkeit. Munich 1989, p. 375.

¹⁸ Levine, Donald: Wax & Gold. Tradition & Innovation in Ethiopian Culture. Chicago 1972, p. 190-194.

The last year! Yes, but who then could have foreseen that 1974 would be our last year? Well, yes one did feel a sort of vagueness, a melancholy chaotic ineptness, a certain negativity, something heavy in the air, nervousness and tension, flabbiness, now dawning, now growing dark, but how did we go so quickly straight into the abyss?¹⁹

In 1973, the northern provinces of Ethiopia were on the verge of starvation. More than 200,000 people died in one of the worst famines in recorded Ethiopian history. Unlike during the last famine in 1958, a British reporter was able to film the starving peasants in northern Ethiopia. The images shocked the entire world, and they even circulated amongst radical elements in Addis Abeba. Haile Selassie's authority and legitimacy, erected by history and tradition, was now destroyed.²⁰ Who was to blame? The situation in northern Ethiopia, unrest amongst the new intellectual class and a bloody war in Eritrea all led to the eventual downfall of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. A Marxist-inspired junta made up of junior officers, the Derg, took over and put Ethiopia on the path of becoming a communist state. Ethiopia had a new vision, the vision of communism. In Leninist tradition, the new communist Derg junta promised the peoples of Ethiopia self-determination. Ideologically, Lenin believed that nationalism was a necessary phase that had to be attained on the way before achieving the socialist stage. Once socialism was achieved, all national differences would just evaporate. In the first few years after the Derg takeover, the ranks of the Derg swelled with non-Habesha. The land reform that was initiated by the Derg profited the Oromo considerably and many Oromo intellectuals supported the Derg. 60 % of the armed forces and around 80% of the militia mobilized by 1977 were made up of Oromos.²¹ Muslim holidays were introduced, and the Oromo language was used in official broadcasts and publications. Yet, disappointment was already looming on the horizon and the true nature of the Derg became visible. The Derg was the continuation of the Solomonid idea with other means. Just as Lenin's Bolsheviks never really planned on passing on the right to self-determination to the non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union, the Derg never did so in Ethiopia. After the Somali invasion of Ethiopia in 1977, Oromo influence within in the central government diminished. Oromos were purged from high positions and what at first seemed to be a blessing – i.e., land reform and the mass literacy programmes – soon became instruments of repression. The Amhara-dominated central government had to struggle against a variety of domestic and international opponents. Inside Ethiopia, overnight ethnic-affiliated resistance movements mushroomed and, as already mentioned, Somalia invaded Ethiopia in 1977. The Derg revolution began as a class struggle. Yet, the ethnic antagonisms that had shaped Ethiopia for centuries already became dominant and the Derg began to break down along

¹⁹ Kapuscinski, Ryszard: The Emperor. London 2006, p. 120.

²⁰ Kaplan, Robert: Surrender or Starve. Travels in Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea. New York 2003, p. 21.

²¹ Halliday, Fred/Molyneux, Maxine: The Ethiopian Revolution. London 1981, p. 196.

ethnic lines.²² The Tigrayans established the TPLF, the Oromos the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Somalis the Western Somali Liberation Front and the EPLF had struggled against the central government since 1961 already. Thanks to Cuban troops and Soviet equipment, Ethiopia was able to repel the Somali attack by 1978. Immediately after the war against Somalia, Mengistu declared that the “victory in the east shall now be repeated in the north”.²³ Eritrea was indeed a different case from Somalia. Eritrean nationalism was fundamentally against a greater Ethiopia vision.²⁴ The Derg waged a ruthless war against the EPLF and other resistance movements. Half of Ethiopia’s budget was spent on maintaining its 300,000 men-strong military. Besides conventional warfare, the Derg also used famines and resettlement programmes to crush its enemies, resulting in some of the most heinous crimes against humanity. The Derg’s slogan “We shall control the forces of nature” became bitter reality as tens of thousands of Ethiopians were starved to death. The then acting foreign minister Tibebe Bekele officially claimed, “Food is a major element in our strategy against the secessionists”.²⁵ Furthermore, Mengistu compared the rebels to fish swimming in water. Now he intended to drain the water. By resettling millions of people from the northern provinces in Ethiopia, the Derg on the one hand wanted to deprive the resistance movements of their natural human habitat and on the other hand tip the ethnic balance in the south, where these northerners would eventually be settled.

1995 constitution: Pandora’s box or modus operandi?

With Soviet power and support waning by the 1990, the resistance movements encroached Addis Abeba and overthrew the Derg dictatorship. Mengistu fled to Zimbabwe, where he still resides today and the Ethiopian civil war came to an end. In 1993, Eritrea became independent and in 1995, the new Ethiopian constitution was ratified. The concept of ethnic federalism was born and Ethiopia became a federal state, inspired by German federalism. Ten provinces were created along ethnic lines. Furthermore, the right to secede from Ethiopia was enshrined in the new constitution.²⁶ Equality amongst the different nations of Ethiopia stood in the centre of this constitution. Equality was, however, soon replaced by supremacy and the TPLF – by the end of the Ethiopian civil war the most formidable fighting force – was now in charge of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a loose umbrella party consisting of the TPLF, the Amhara Democratic Party, the Oromo Democratic Party and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement, reflecting the ethnic federalism of post-war Ethiopia. Ethiopia’s first prime minister after the Derg, Meles Zenawi (1991-2012), controlled the country with an iron fist, placing people of his own nation, the Tigrinya, in leading positions in the Ethiopian government, military, civil service etc. After his death, cracks started to

²² Kaplan, Robert: *Surrender or Starve. Travels in Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea*. New York 2003, p. 21.

²³ Zewde, Bahru: *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991*. Oxford 2007, p. 255.

²⁴ Reid, Richard: *Shallow Graves. A Memoir of the Ethiopia-Eritrea War*. London 2020, p. XXXI.

²⁵ Meredith, Martin: *The State of Africa. A History of Fifty Years of Independence*. London 2006, p. 343.

²⁶ Fisch, Jörg: *Das Selbstbestimmungsrecht der Völker. Die Domestizierung einer Illusion*. Munich 2010, p. 54.

appear and the Tigrayan hold on power was challenged. In 2016, massive protests erupted all over Oromo province, when the central government wanted to expand the territory of the capital city Addis Abeba at the expense of Oromo province. What started out as a bureaucratic plan led to the emergence of a massive protest movement. The most dangerous time for a bad government is usually when it begins to reform. Tocqueville's observation certainly was true in Ethiopia's case in 1974 and in 2016. Oromos were joined by Amhara, who too saw a common enemy in the Tigrayan-dominated central government. For years, the protests would drag on and in 2018, Abiy Ahmed was elected chairman of the EPRDF and became prime minister at the same time.

Abiyot Ahmed and a new vision for Ethiopia

Abiy, whose childhood name Abiyot means revolution, inherited a country on the brink of civil war. To preserve the unity of Ethiopia, he truly has to live up to his childhood name and transform Ethiopia. He does not just have the task of satisfying his own nation, the Oromos, who feel empowered by having an Oromo prime minister for the first time in the history of Ethiopia, but he also has to find a *modus vivendi* with the once dominant group, the Amhara, and the recently disposed dominant group, the Tigrayans. For more than three decades, the Amhara saw their traditional position being dismantled. Their political, cultural, and religious status was challenged. Amongst the non-Habesha population, protestant Pentecostalism has become the most widespread form of Christianity, Abiy Ahmed being a Pentecostal. Many of these minority ethnic groups have come to associate the Ethiopian Orthodox church with Amhara dominance.²⁷ Besides the loss of religious hegemony, the linguistic status of Amharic in Ethiopia was also challenged by the new government. Four new official languages were introduced in 2020: Oromo, Afar, Somali and Tigrinya.²⁸ In 2019, soon after Abiy Ahmed became Ethiopia's prime minister, an attempted coup d'état shocked Amhara province. Having finally got rid of the TPLF, some currents amongst the Amhara thought that it was time for them to assert their ancient position as the most dominant and influential nation in Ethiopia. The coup failed and left the Chief of Staff of the Ethiopian Armed Forces and the head of the Amhara regional province dead. Abiy Ahmed's vision for Ethiopia also included a reform of the ruling party, the EPRDF. The EPRDF was supposed to be renamed into "Prosperity Party" and should have kept its ethnic federalist stance. All branches of the EPRDF, besides the TPLF, agreed to the party reform. The TPLF's unwillingness to be part of this new party can be seen as the starting point of the war in Tigray. The war in Tigray will be Ethiopia's test of power. In order to hold Ethiopia together, Abiy Ahmed has to continue to find a *modus operandi* based on ethnic federalism in Ethiopia. The former dominant nations of Ethiopia have to be included into the government and a new vision has to be instilled into the nations of Ethiopia.

²⁷ Binns, John: *The Orthodox Church of Ethiopia*. London 2020, p. 226.

²⁸ Internet document: <https://qz.com/africa/1812085/ethiopia-adds-afar-oromo-somali-afar-tigrigna-languages-to-amharic/>, accessed on 3 May 2021.

Abiy Ahmed skilfully managed to dismantle all the foreign enemies of Ethiopia and can now focus on the domestic issues of Ethiopia. The spectre of secession and ethnic unrest today still haunts Ethiopia, yet with the new "Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam", a booming manufacturing and IT industry, prosperity can be brought to Ethiopia. This could potentially alleviate the pain of the once most dominant group, the Habesha, and would satisfy the Oromos, preserving in the long run the unity of Ethiopia and therefore making it once again a country that used to be a role model and the pride of Africa.

The author

Dr. Laurenz Fürst

Born in 1988; Studies of History and Slavistics and African Studies; 2019: European Union Training Mission Mali (EUTM Mali); 2020 – 2021: Austrian Military Journal ÖMZ.

