



# Elections? What elections? Abiy is Counting on a Military Victory

By Mehari Taddele Maru



Selected by the ruling party and later appointed by the Ethiopian parliament in 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed was expected to deliver the long hoped for post-EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) era. For some of his domestic and international backers, the post-EPRDF era meant the ushering in of political democratization, further economic liberalization, and "post-ethnic" Ethiopian politics. He has failed to deliver on all three counts.

More than ever, Ethiopian politics is bitterly polarized along ethnic lines. Ethnic divisions have split the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF). Now, Ethiopia has two armies: the Tigrayan Defence Force (TDF) and the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF). Nor is economic liberalization faring any better. In 2020, foreign direct investment (FDI) dropped significantly to US\$[2.4 billion](#) from US\$[7.1 billion](#) in 2016. Creditors are not more optimistic. The birr has become the worst performer among 20 African currencies following a slump of 11 per cent against the dollar.

After a decade of double-digit GDP growth, Ethiopia is now growing at only two per cent, an economic slowdown Kevin Daly [describes](#) as "the shine [having] come off the star in a big way". Ethiopia's democratization, which is the focus of this piece, has also stalled, as illustrated by the uncompetitive and non-participatory elections of 21 June 2021.

## **False start**

Ethiopia's new leadership was widely expected to spearhead a democratic dispensation in which elections would be freely and fairly contested by all the major political forces in the country. The June 21 election was expected to be both participatory and competitive. It was neither and its outcome was predictable, if not preordained. As everyone expected, the ruling party won overwhelmingly, with some leftover seats going to other parties.

Against the hopes of many, Abiy Ahmed found ways to effectively exclude the [real contenders](#) with any chance of defeating the incumbent.

## **Liquidating the former ruling party and extending the term of office**

The first step was to [liquidate](#) the former ruling party, the EPRDF, and place the new [Prosperity Party](#) in power. The Tigray People's Liberation Front, one of the core parties forming the EPRDF and currently ruling Tigray, vehemently opposed the formation of the new party, and decided not to [join](#) it.

The second step was to [postpone](#) the much-anticipated 2020 elections on the pretext of the [Covid-19 pandemic](#). The legality and legitimacy of this decision was fiercely contested, especially by opposition leaders from Oromia and Tigray. Inevitably, those opposition leaders from Oromia with a large following and constituency were [jailed](#) or placed under [house arrest](#). By opting to postpone the election and arresting opposition leaders, Abiy extended his own tenure by using a controversial [constitutional](#) interpretation.

## **Waging war**

The third step was waging war on Tigray. The postponement of the election qualifies as [one of the triggers](#) of this war. The ruling party in Tigray rejected the postponement, asserting that regular elections are a necessary tool for the exercise of a people's right to self-determination. Accordingly, Tigray [conducted](#) its regional election on 4 September 2020. The election was considered illegal by the incumbent and the federal government cut ties with the Tigray government and suspended the transfer of the regional [budget](#), a move viewed by Tigray as a [declaration of war](#). On 4 November 2020, Tigray was invaded by the combined Ethiopian, Eritrean and Amhara forces.

## **Subverting the will of the people**

These early steps to subvert the will of the people call into question the incumbent's commitment to a fair and democratic process. Providing a detailed contextual [analysis](#) on the state of Ethiopia before the polls, US Senator Bob Menendez and Representative Gregory Meeks said:

Against this grim backdrop, few believe Ethiopia's upcoming national elections stand a real chance of being free or fair. . . . Prime Minister Abiy and his ruling Prosperity Party have made it clear they intend to continue working from the same authoritarian playbook as their predecessors, squandering Ethiopians' hopes for the country's first-ever genuinely democratic elections.

The EU withdrew its earlier decision to send election observers. Though it fell short of denouncing the election, the US government in its [statement](#) provided precise reasons why the election would not meet the requisite democratic standards:

The United States is gravely concerned about the environment under which these upcoming elections are to be held. The detention of opposition politicians, harassment of independent

media, partisan activities by local and regional governments, and the many inter-ethnic and inter-communal conflicts across Ethiopia are obstacles to a free and fair electoral process and whether Ethiopians would perceive them as credible. In addition, the exclusion of large segments of the electorate from this contest due to security issues and internal displacement is particularly troubling.

The US statement added, “these elections [are conducted] at a time when so many Ethiopians are suffering and dying from violence and acute food insecurity caused by conflict”.

### **Elections without credibility**

The credibility of elections is assessed based on international standards such as those set by the [United Nations](#). Unfortunately, Ethiopia’s recent election does not meet the minimum international threshold of being free, fair, participatory and competitive.

First, this election was conducted during a period of violent conflict that effectively denied the citizens their fundamental democratic rights and the opportunity to participate on an equal basis. Over [100 constituencies](#) in Tigray, Somali, Harari, Afar, and Benishangul-Gumuz, representing well over 18 per cent of parliamentary seats, did not vote. For close to [4](#) million internally displaced persons (IDPs), this election was a luxury. In Tigray, [constituencies](#) in Oromia, Amhara (Oromo special zone and parts of north Shewa), and the border areas of the Amhara, Oromia, Somali and Afar regions face violent conflict. With 7 per cent and 1.7 per cent of the total constituency in Tigray and Benishangul-Gumuz respectively, wars for survival still rage. In parts of Oromia, the region with the largest population and 33 per cent of the total constituency, armed conflict continues. Furthermore, the election was conducted under conditions of [pervasive discrimination](#) and profiling based on ethnicity that targeted Tigrayans, Oromos and Gumuz.

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Second, at the subnational levels and in some urban areas such as Amhara regional state, a few “opposition” parties did manage to [win seats](#). However, in terms of presenting alternative policy options for Ethiopia, these parties failed, as their electoral manifestos were just versions of that of the ruling party. In addition, such results at the subnational level are anomalies, not trends. The trend is the incumbent attempting to re-establish a durable authoritarian regime, this time with a centralizing vision at its core that is diametrically opposed to the federalist vision set out in the current constitution.

Third, this election – like the previous one – was marred by [claims](#) of [killings](#), assault, detention, intimidation and harassment of opposition candidates and supporters. In addition, the [cancellation](#) of political parties’ registration, [litigation](#), anomalies in voter and candidate registrations, and [ballot printing](#) problems have damaged the credibility of the electoral bodies. Moreover, the deferral in holding [referenda](#) on requests for state formation in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Region has stoked discontent. And nor did the media environment allow competitive elections; local media was rigorously [censured](#), and journalists were [killed](#), [arrested](#), and [intimidated](#). International media outlets were not spared either, with the permits of many foreign correspondents [cancelled](#).

It thus came as no surprise when five parties [criticised](#) the ruling Prosperity Party for allegedly influencing the electoral process to favour its candidates. The National Movement of Amhara, Ethiopian Social Democratic Party, Afar People’s Party, Balderas for Genuine Democracy and Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice complained of heavy security and cited a failure to meet

minimum [standards](#).

### **Legitimacy hanging on military victory**

Abiy has clipped the wings of democracy. A day after the country went to the polls, and as Addis Ababa enjoyed the [fanfare](#) surrounding its “first democratic election”, the Ethiopian army continued its indiscriminate aerial [bombardment](#) of Tigray.

Abiy has plunged the country into a civil war that is now spreading from Tigray to other parts of Ethiopia. The war has been manipulated with a view to bolstering Abiy’s popularity and serves as the glue holding his internally fractured support base together. Military victory in Tigray has replaced an electoral win as the litmus test for the legitimacy of his rule.

Yet following the defeat and withdrawal of the Ethiopian army from Tigray, Abiy’s popular base is fast eroding. Now his legitimacy hangs on conjuring up an improbable military victory in the total war he has declared on the people of Tigray. The recent military advances made by the Tigray Defence Forces show that it is not just Abiy who is losing the unwinnable war in Tigray. Ethiopia is also losing its army.

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