Why International Pressure Is Not Helping End Violence in Ethiopia

July 9, 2021 by Zerihun A. Woldeselassie

Eight months into the conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, it's estimated that thousands are dead, 1.7 million are displaced, and hundreds of thousands are living in famine conditions. Despite intense pressure and punitive measures, the international response—led mainly by the United States (US) and the European Union (EU)—is not helping. Some critics have labeled the response a mistake. Others fear that it may be counterproductive and destabilize Ethiopia and the region.

The Ethiopian government has accused the US of meddling in its internal affairs, putting strain on existing alliances and future international cooperation. While it has already agreed to allow unfettered humanitarian access and conduct a joint investigation of alleged atrocities, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali's government has continued to resist US pressure and attempts to subdue it to its foreign policy aims.

Even if the Eritrean forces withdraw, following the latest US Senate unanimous resolution, neither the Tigray conflict (which has now become guerrilla warfare) nor other similar ethnic-related armed conflicts will be resolved quickly. Ethiopia's lawmakers have designated two ethnic-based armed groups operating actively in the country—the Tigray People's

Liberation Front (TPLF) and the OLA (Oromo Liberation Army)—as terrorist groups, making it even harder to stop the ethnic-related violence.

Why is the international response not helping end Ethiopia's violence? There are four explanations based on the broader internal dynamic and peacebuilding perspective.

Country-Wide Ethnic-Related Violence; Selective Response

Ethiopia's violence is diverse and interlinked; it is ethnic-related, and spread throughout the country, including in the Benishangul-Gumuz, Amhara, and Oromia regional states.

The violence includes:

1) identity (ethnic, religious, or political) targeted killings

2) civilian (armed and non-armed) deaths

3) displacement (internal and external)

4) incidents of property destructions (private, public, and government); and

5) sexual violence, reports of which are either already confirmed—including by the Ethiopian government—or believed to be committed based on credible sources.

However, the international response has isolated the armed conflict in Tigray, emphasizing its implication on regional security and so-called rules-

based international order. Many experts have also focused on the Tigray conflict, emphasizing its spill-over effect.

Such a selective approach and framing has neither deescalated the regional tension nor halted the hostilities in Tigray.

The external response also appears to sympathize with various internal and global actors, and seems based on social media misinformation and disinformation campaigns and activists that claim or play a victim role vis-a-vis the alleged perpetrators. However, this approach does not recognize how commonplace conflict binaries (i.e., victim-perpetrators, civil-military) have become fluid and ambivalent in Ethiopia due to radicalized ethnic mobilization, militarization, and small arms proliferation in the country.

Ethnic Federalism and State Reform

The international response has failed to acknowledge the problematic aspects of ethnic federalism. Some major international community actors have not considered helping to reform or change it, arguing that it has contributed to the country's relative peace and economic development.

There was, in fact, relative peace in Ethiopia between 1991-2018 under the TPLF-dominated autocratic government (though not through the entire period). Ethiopia was also then perceived, especially by its allies in the West, as an anchor state in the region.

What Ethiopia had under the TPLF, however, was only temporary political stability built on a fragile victor's peace.

In addition, politicized ethnicity has also been gradually resulting in a [new pattern of conflicts](#) and human security problems, evident in the recent violence across the country.

Today, Ethiopia's major ethnic related problems include:

1) the creation of a new hierarchy in ethnic regions (in the form of natives vs. settlers) within historically integrated communities;

2) the rise of inter-group and intra-group ethnic and political polarization among political elites;

3) the growing problem of displacement, discrimination, and violence against ethnic minorities residing in a majority ethnicity-controlled areas or regions; 4) the continued violence related to claiming or maintaining territorial boundaries of ethnic administration;

5) the naturalization of patriarchy and, therefore, [gender-based violence](#) in the process of legitimizing ethnic nationalism; and

6) the growth of ethnically organized radical youth or vigilante groups.

Legal and Political Aspects of the Violence

By focusing on human rights and international law, external actors are giving primacy to the legal aspects of the violence. [Global and regional experts](#), [human rights organizations](#), activists, and the [international](#)

[media](#) have also focused on the criminal aspects of the violence, intending to generate global attention and outrage.

This approach, however, undermines the political nature of Ethiopia's violence, which is essentially political, where state and non-state actors employ violence to achieve their political ends.

This political violence is expressed in the overt or covert ideas and practice of:
1) challenging or protecting state sovereignty;
2) reforming or consolidating formally recognized ethnic-based politico-administrative regions;
3) controlling territories inhabited by populations with mixed and multiple ethnicities and cultural heritages; and
4) privileging (including) or denying (excluding) citizens ethnic-based political belonging and rights, including access to means of livelihood, mainly land.

Proponents and supporters of ethnic nationalism argue that the violence is not mainly about elite competition for power and privilege. It also concerns resistance and emancipation. Many instances of violence, including the Tigray conflict, are expressed and committed in the name of defending and protecting the interest and dignity of historically and politically marginalized ethnic or minority groups.

Nevertheless, since external and internal competing interest groups also trigger, fuel, and manipulate the violence for political and economic gains, every instance of violence does not necessarily stem from righteous indignation or self-defense, as many ethnonationalists contend.

Political Settlement and Normalization Processes

Major actors of the international response are pushing for and aiming to achieve an immediate political settlement. However, this is not something that can be achieved in the short term.

Aiming for a quick fix, some of the major powerful actors of the international community, including the US and EU, have imposed punitive measures to force the government to halt the Tigray conflict and hold a national dialogue.

A political settlement is, in fact, vital for peacebuilding efforts in Ethiopia. However, a series of factors make a complete halt of the ethnic-related violence and an immediate political settlement not only challenging but also unrealistic, considering:

1) the continued use of violence by outlawed or ethnic-based armed resistance groups;
2) the ethnic and political polarization of local- and diaspora-based political elites;
3) the inherited autocratic form of governance and undemocratic political

culture within the incumbent;

4) the fragmented political mobilization, activism, and loyalties of the Ethiopian population; and

5) the multiple regional security problems involving Sudan, Egypt, and Eritrea.

What is needed now is normalization processes of maintaining and directing the political change and reform in Ethiopia toward a democratic transition. This effort entails at least two significant simultaneous political processes.

On the one hand, it demands a scaling up of humanitarian support without abandoning the questions of accountability and responsibility of actors in the conflict.

On the other hand, it also calls for a collective internal and external effort of depolarization, demilitarization, and deradicalization of the broader Ethiopian political milieu as a precondition for any sustainable and honest peacebuilding endeavor, without abandoning human rights.

While the local and diaspora stakeholders, including the government, have the ultimate and irreplaceable roles, the international community can and should play a concerted but impartial and facilitating role.

What Should Be Done?

Ethiopia first needs comprehensive international peacebuilding support that considers the diverse and interlinked nature of acts of violence thriving across the country. International responses must also recognize and incorporate state or constitutional reform as an integral component of the comprehensive international peacebuilding assistance.

Often, the main actors of the international community, including the United Nations Security Council and the US, unequivocally state that it is in their interest to see a sovereign and united Ethiopia. If this is true, they need to help Ethiopia tackle the challenge of political violence that is affecting the country's sovereignty and unity.

Only Ethiopians themselves can resolve their conflict. Instead of pushing for an unrealistic political settlement among ethnically and politically polarized elites, the main actors of the international community should continue their engagement and support and facilitate a more comprehensive political normalization process in Ethiopia.