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MID-YEAR UPDATE: 10 CONFLICTS TO WORRY ABOUT IN 2021

The Armed Conflict
Location & Event
Data Project
(ACLED)

August 2021

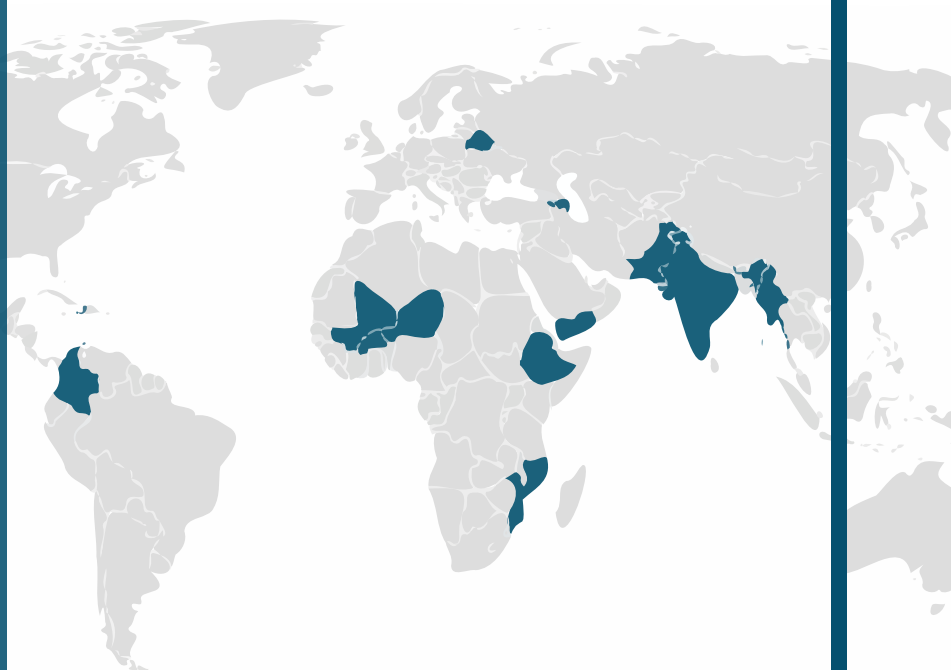


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EDITED BY:

Timothy Lay, Roudabeh Kishi, and Sam Jones

GRAPHICS BY:

Adam Miller, Josh Satre, and Elliott Bynum

LAYOUT BY:

Sogand Afkari

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY:

Braden Fuller and Clionadh Raleigh (**Ethiopia**)

Ashik KC (**India and Pakistan**)

Elliott Bynum (**Myanmar**)

Sandra Pellegrini and Maria Fernanda Arocha (**Haiti**)

Franklin Holcomb (**Belarus**)

Bhavani Castro (**Colombia**)

Franklin Holcomb (**Armenia and Azerbaijan**)

Emile Roy (**Yemen**)

Sam Ratner (**Mozambique**)

Héni Nsaibia (**The Sahel**)



Ethiopia: Administrative contests in the context of rising ethno-nationalism

Braden Fuller and Clionadh Raleigh

The summer of 2021 has been the most destabilizing time yet in Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's tenure. While the general election resulted in the Prosperity Party's (PP) overwhelming victory, violence from multiple active insurgencies in Ethiopia has overwhelmed federal resources, with the threat posed by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) most apparent in recent summer months.

Despite these threats, violence was minimal on the day of Ethiopia's long-anticipated election on 21 June 2021, with few security incidents reported. Although logistical issues and scattered violence took place during voting, election day was generally peaceful and widespread violence did not occur (see [EPO Weekly: 19-25 June 2021](#) for more detailed analysis). Yet difficulties remain: voting did not take place in many locations of the country due to ongoing clashes; popular opposition parties boycotted the election after top leaders were arrested; and the government lost control of the Tigray regional capital, Mekele, following a heavy offensive by the TPLF. Even with a sweeping electoral win, solving Ethiopia's complex political puzzle will be a challenge for the prime minister and the ruling PP.

Ethiopian federal troops have been battling multiple insurgencies throughout the country in 2021, the most serious being in the northern Tigray region. An initial victory for the federal government came after pushing the TPLF from their strongholds in the region's major cities in late 2020. Nevertheless, further military operations have spiraled into a quagmire for federal troops as TPLF forces regrouped in remote mountainous villages and launched a crippling insurgency. On the ground, Ethiopian army troops have faced a guerrilla force that assassinated interim authorities and attacked military convoys, complicating

efforts by the central government to govern the region ([VOA Amharic, 1 June 2021](#); [Office of the Prime Minister – Ethiopia, 3 June 2021](#)). As federal soldiers struggled to maintain territorial control, Ethiopia's top officials have faced heavy diplomatic pressure — including sanctions — over the involvement of Eritrean troops, civilian targeting, and sexual violence ([New York Times, 24 May 2021](#); [Reuters, 15 April 2021](#); [EBC, 3 July 2021](#)). Frustrated and facing a humanitarian and military disaster, the government decided to withdraw in the last days of June 2021.

Federal and regional authorities have likewise struggled to contain smaller insurgencies in Oromia; Benshangul/Gumuz; and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR). Attacks against civilian minority communities have increased across the country. Serious violence has also broken out in areas of contested territory between the Afar and Somali regional states, as well as in areas surrounding Ataye city of the Oromo special zone of Amhara region. Hundreds of people have been killed and thousands displaced in conflicts largely overshadowed by the highly publicized Tigray war.

As the finalized electoral results emerge, Ethiopia will enter a new political phase as elected officials debate constitutional issues built into the country's ethno-federal system of governance. Territorial questions, secession, and identity politics will be central to these debates — along with the management of security and international relations regarding the war in Tigray.

The power that central authorities have to address these issues, however, lies with whatever capacity remains in the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF). The extent of damage inflicted on the Ethi-

opian and Eritrean armies in Tigray is difficult to estimate, as troops were evacuated quickly in the face of the TPLF advance into Mekele in the last days of June. By the government's admission, however, conditions in Tigray had become "unbearable" for Ethiopian soldiers prior to withdrawal ([New York Times, 30 June 2021](#)). As many as 7,000 troops of the Ethiopian military were reported by international journalists to have been taken captive ([New York Times, 2 July 2021](#)), though government sources have insisted that the number of ENDF members held by the TPLF is exaggerated ([Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, 3 July 2021](#)). If it is the case that federal forces have been incapacitated or the ranks cannot be filled, military power will devolve to ethnically exclusive forces loyal to the regional governments, like the Amhara special forces controlling Western Tigray zone. There is some evidence that this has already occurred, given the prominent role Afar and Amhara militias have played in holding off TPLF advances in July 2021.

As noted in the [original installment](#) of this report series at the beginning of the year, authority shifts involving regional officials in Ethiopia have been a key driver of conflict and remain difficult issues to resolve. The administration of Western Tigray zone has long been contested and was inhabited by both ethnic Tigray and Amhara prior to the start of the conflict in November 2020. Both TPLF and the Amhara regional forces have been implicated in massacres of civilians during the conflict, including at Mai Cadera where an investigation found that at least 600 ethnic Amhara were killed ([Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 24 November 2020](#)). Forces from the Amhara region have also been accused of forcibly removing ethnic Tigrayans from the zone — an act that American authorities claim amounts to ethnic cleansing ([AP, 7 April 2021](#)). The TPLF has insisted on the withdrawal of all Amhara forces from Tigray regional state boundaries and a return to the status quo — a condition that the Amhara regional state is unlikely to accept ([Getachew K Reda, 29 July 2021](#); [Addis Standard, 14 July 2021](#)).

In the state's largest region of Oromia, elected regional authorities are unquestionably loyal to the PP, but the federal government may face legitimacy issues especially around proposed changes to the constitution which may limit the demographic power of the Oromo group. Oromo parties other than the Oromo Prosperity Party (O-PP) — including Oromo Federal Congress (OFC) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) — denounced the election, calling instead for a national dialogue, the establishment of a transitional government, and for new elections to be held with-

in a year ([OFC Statement, 23 June 2021](#); [OLF, 1 July 2021](#); [Addis Standard, 26 June 2021](#)). They will also be opposed to any proposed changes to the federal constitution that reinforce ethnic-based territorial authority.

Violence levels in Ethiopia are likely to remain high during the remainder of 2021. The federal government will continue to face multiple ongoing conflicts, as well as another round of voting in regions that did not participate in the last round of elections due to electoral disputes and ongoing violence. The country's Somali region and select zones of Benshangul/Gumuz region are scheduled to vote in September of this year. Voting will not take place in the Tigray region due to continued instability and a loss of control by the federal government ([France 24, 21 June 2021](#)).

Conducting and winning a national election was an enormous task completed by Prime Minister Abiy in June. However, with opposition figures jailed and large swaths of the country in turmoil, the victory may be considered somewhat hollow. What remains to be seen is if the electoral win will provide Abiy the strength to overcome the forces rising against him from across the country.

FURTHER READING:

- [It Cannot be Known: Ethiopia's Election and Abiy's Political Prospects](#)
- [2021 Conflict Dimensions in Ethiopia](#)

ETHIOPIA

Administrative contests in the context of rising ethno-nationalism



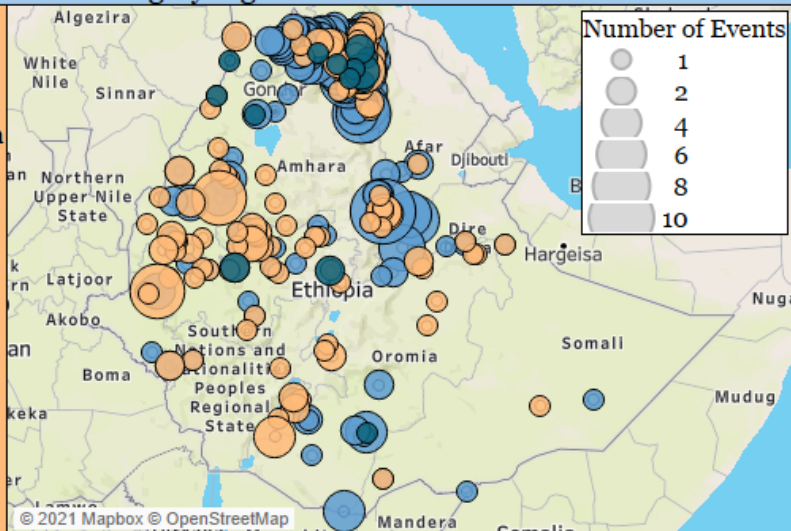
Ethiopian federal troops have been battling multiple insurgencies in 2021. The most serious has been in the northern Tigray region, but federal and regional authorities have likewise struggled to contain smaller insurgencies in Oromia; Benshangul/Gumuz; and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR).

- Battles
- Violence against civilians
- Protests
- Explosions/Remote violence
- Riots

In 2021, most organized political violence in Ethiopia has continued to be concentrated in the northern Tigray region.

As of mid-2021, most violence has remained concentrated in the peripheries, especially in and around Tigray. An initial victory for the federal government came after pushing the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) from their strongholds in the region's major cities. Nevertheless, further military operations have spiraled into a quagmire for federal troops as TPLF forces regrouped in remote mountainous villages and launched a crippling insurgency.

Elsewhere, attacks against minority communities have increased, and serious violence has broken out in areas of contested territory between the Afar and Somali regional states, as well as in areas surrounding Ataye city of the Oromo special zone of Amhara region.



After a decrease in organized political violence starting in April, events have begun to increase in recent months.

