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Ethiopia

High tensions and fragile peace in Ethiopia

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The Ethiopian government is proposing national conciliation after more than 18 months of a war that has torn the country apart. While the country is experiencing a precarious calm, important issues remain unresolved, including relations between Addis Ababa and Tigray, the status of land claimed by several communities, the emergence of a new armed front in the Oromia region, and all this is against a backdrop of an acute economic, social and health crisis.

Abiy Ahmed's coming to power as prime minister in 2018 reflected an exhausted regime marked by significant popular struggles. The EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) had had a stranglehold on the country since 1994. This front, which was supposed to bring together several parties from the country's different ethnic groups, was in fact largely controlled by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which represents only 6 per cent of the population. Its bureaucratic and authoritarian policies were increasingly challenged. Thus, in 2005, a popular uprising against electoral fraud took place. Later, in 2015, the Oromo mobilized against attempts to grab their land. They were joined by the Amhara protesting against their marginalization. These two communities represent respectively 30 and 25 per cent of the population.

The son of an Oromo father and an Amhara mother, Abiy raised many hopes with the measures taken as soon as he came to power release of political prisoners, expansion of the democratic space and peace with Eritrea, which earned him a Nobel Prize, but quickly the situation deteriorated.

The war in Tigray

Abiy set out to abandon the EPRDF in order to build a new organization, the more centralist "Prosperity Party", and above all he eradicated the power of the Tigrayan elite. War broke out between Addis Ababa and Tigray over electoral issues. It was punctuated by offensives and counter-offensives with the capture of cities and territories accompanied by crimes against humanity on both sides. Human rights organizations report summary executions related to the ethnicity of the victims. Rape is used as a weapon of war. A conflict in which many civilians from both sides enlisted, reflecting the real support of a large part of the population for the warmongering speeches and acts of their leaders.

Although the guns have fallen silent today, Addis Ababa's blockade against Tigray threatens the people with famine. To avoid international isolation and retaliatory measures, Abiy has resolved to allow the movement of humanitarian convoys, but in quantities far too limited in relation to needs. Addis Ababa is using the blockade as a weapon in the negotiations that are beginning.

Complex problems

Since the end of the conflict, new problems have emerged, such as the idea of Tigray's secession or questions of legitimacy in territories recently conquered by a community. This is the case with the Wolkait region, won by the Amhara whose leaders have carried out a veritable ethnic cleansing, expelling more than 700,000 Tigrayans. Their justification is that these lands belonged to the Amhara and that they were dispossessed of it when the EPRDF came to power. Each advances a part of truth to occupy these coveted lands. The solution would certainly be a mixed

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management of the territories by the two communities. This would imply the pacification of a shared hatred.

Another source of concern is that some Oromo organized in the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), who participated in the war alongside the TPLF, are demanding more autonomy for their region. The question raised is whether or not to maintain the political translation reflecting ethnic diversity. Since 1994 this was the rule. The reality is that the federal character of the plan was only on paper in favour of centralized management. However, there is a desire to have a genuine federal management based on the different communities of the country. While the importance for some of belonging to an ethnic group must be taken into account and respected, this should not automatically imply a particular political reference. Behind these very real questions lies another agenda for the country's various elites - that of accession to power, synonymous with access to financial and land resources. Demagogy and hate speech are used in this competition.

The tens of thousands of deaths, the three million displaced and the 22 million in food crisis are tragic proof that these leaders are unworthy of representing the people to lead the country.

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