

Conflict in Ethiopia extends the Greater Middle East’s arc of crisis

JAMES M DORSEY and ALESSANDRO ARDUINO

ETHIOPIA, an African darling of the international community, is sliding towards civil war as the coronavirus pandemic hardens ethnic fault lines. The consequences of prolonged hostilities could echo across East Africa, the Middle East and Europe.

Fighting between the government of Nobel Peace Prize winning Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Tigrayan nationalists in the north could extend an evolving arc of crisis that stretches from the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict in the Caucasus, civil wars in Syria and Libya, and mounting tension in the Eastern Mediterranean into the strategic Horn of Africa.

It would also cast a long shadow over hopes that a two-year old peace agreement with neighbouring Eritrea that earned Abiy Ahmed the Nobel prize would allow Ethiopia to tackle its economic problems and ethnic divisions.

Finally, it would raise the spectre of renewed famine in a country that Ahmed was successfully positioning as a model of African economic development and growth.



PHOTO: COURTESY

Tension between Tigray and the government in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa has been mounting since PM Ahmed earlier this year diverted financial allocations intended to combat a biblical scale locust plague in the north to confront the coronavirus pandemic.

The rising tensions come as Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan failed to agree on a new negotiating approach to resolve their years-long dispute over a controversial dam that Ethiopia is building on the Blue Nile River.

US President Donald Trump recently warned that downstream Egypt could end up “blowing up” the project, which Cairo has called an existential threat.

Fears of a protracted violent confrontation heightened after the government this week mobilised its armed forces, one of the region’s most powerful and battle-hardened militaries, to quell an alleged uprising in Tigray that threatened to split one of its key military units stationed along the region’s strategic border with Eritrea.

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The tension was further fuelled by a Tigrayan rejection of a government request to postpone regional elections because of the pandemic and Ahmed’s declaration of a six month state of emergency. Tigrayans saw the moves as dashing their hopes for a greater role in the central government.

Tigrayans charge that reports of earlier Ethiopian military activity along the border with Somalia suggest that PM Ahmed was planning all along to curtail rather than further empower the country’s Tigrayan minority.

Although only five percent of the population, Tigrayans have been prominent in Ethiopia’s power structure since the demise in 1991 of Mengistu Haile Mariam, who ruled the country with an iron fist. They assert, however, that Ahmed has dismissed a number of Tigrayan executives and sidelined businessmen in the past two years under the cover of a crackdown on corruption.

Like Turkey in the Caucasus, the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, Ahmed may be seeing a window of opportunity at a moment that the United States is focused on its cliffhanger presidential election, leaving the US African Command with no clear direction from Washington on how to respond to the escalating tension in the Horn of Africa.

Escalation of the conflict in Tigray could threaten efforts to solidify the Ethiopian-Eritrean peace process; persuade Eritrean leader Isaias Afwerki, who has no love lost for Tigray, to exploit the dispute to strengthen his regional ambitions; and draw in external powers like Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, who are competing for influence in the Horn.

The conflict further raises the spectre of ethnic tension elsewhere in Ethiopia, a federation of ethnically defined autonomous regions against the backdrop in recent months of skirmishes with and assassinations of ethnic Amhara, violence against Tigrayans in Addis Ababa, and clashes between Somalis and Afar in which dozens were reportedly injured and killed.

Military conflict in Tigray could also accelerate the flow of Eritrean migrants to Europe, who already account for a significant portion of Africans seeking better prospects in the European Union.

A Balkanisation of Ethiopia in a part of the world where the future of war-ravaged Yemen as a unified state is in doubt would remove the East African state as the linchpin with the Middle East and create fertile ground for operations by militant groups.

“Given Tigray’s relatively strong security position, the conflict may well be protracted and disastrous. (A war could) seriously strain an Ethiopian state already buffeted by multiple grave political challenges and could send shock waves into the Horn of Africa region and beyond,” warned William Davison, a senior analyst at the International Crisis Group.

A podcast version of this story is available on Soundcloud, iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher, TuneIn, Speaker, Pocket Casts, Tumblr, Podbean, Audible, Patreon and Castbox.

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Recognise the tragedy of November 7, 1975

MAHJABEEN KHALED

ON August 15, 1975, at dawn, the sound of gunshots and loud explosions of artillery fired at the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s Dhanmondi Road 32 residence shook people awake. On the radio, they heard the shocking announcement of Bangabandhu’s killing, along with his family members, in a brutal coup staged by a section of military officers. The political landscape of Bangladesh slid into chaos. The military killers installed Khondaker Mostaq Ahmed as the President and continued to stay beside him at Bangabhaban, from where they virtually ran the country. The army command chain broke down.

This situation outraged Khaled Mosharraf, who was at the time the chief of army staff (CGS). He decided to expose the killers of Bangabandhu and bring them to justice. Most of the officers who fought valiantly in the Liberation War and played key roles in raising the army joined hands with Khaled and staged a counter insurrection that overthrew Mostaq. Justice Abu Sadat Mohammad Sayem was appointed as the new President.

Ahead of that November 3 coup of 1975, a 1971 veteran and commander of the Dhaka-based 46th infantry brigade, Colonel Shafaat Jamil, requested the then army chief Major General Ziaur Rahman to take action against the August 15 murderers to bring back the military chain of

command, but Zia took no action. His continued inaction made his weakness for the killers clear, because Mostaq had appointed him as the army chief days after Bangabandhu’s murder.

This scenario prompted the November 3 coup leaders, led by Khaled Mosharraf, to detain Zia at his own official house while they were consolidating their position to restore the discipline of the army. At that stage, retired colonel Abu Taher emerged at the scene and the captive Zia reportedly contacted him and sought his assistance.

On November 5, 1975, a group of unruly, ordinary soldiers under the left-leaning Taher’s stewardship staged

a so called “sepoy-janata revolution”, actually discarding the *janata* or people under the banner of the Biplobi Sainik Sangstha, which later appeared to be a sporadic grouping of some soldiers, mostly belonging to some non-combatant military units.

The August 15, 1975 right wing coup plotters managed to leave the country soon after the November 3 uprising, leaving behind the soldiers and few officers of their rebel units—the Bengal Lancer (tank regiment) and 2 Field Artillery. These abandoned soldiers, being led by their sense of insecurity, quickly joined hands with Taher’s Biplobi Sainik Sangstha. They launched a campaign against Khaled

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Major General Khaled Mosharraf, Bir Uttom (1937-1975)

PHOTO: COLLECTED

and his comrades, distributing leaflets in their efforts to label him as an Indian agent in order to mislead their fellow ordinary soldiers in different units. They also spread rumours that numerous soldiers were killed by the November 3 coup leaders in several units.

On November 6, Khaled Mosharraf, along with his two compatriots Colonel Khondkar Nazmul Huda (Bir Bikrom) and Lt Colonel ATM Haider (Bir Uttom), decided to take refuge at the makeshift abode of the 10th East Bengal Regiment at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar.

By that time, Zia was freed by Taher’s men and the remaining plotters of the August 15 carnage. They also reached the 10th East Bengal Regiment and agitated the fellow soldiers there while two unruly officers—Major Jalil


and Major Assad—gunned down the three valiant, patriotic sons of the soil. Their hunger for blood did not stop there. Within hours, they killed many other officers and their family members as well.

A great son of the soil—Major General Khaled Mosharraf—was killed on this day, November 7. Bangladesh regards him as one of the finest commanders of the 1971 Liberation War while freedom fighters under his command treated him as a guardian angel—endowed with extraordinary bravery and brilliant natural leadership qualities.

It’s been 45 years since then. Till today, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) observe November 7 as a National Revolution and Solidarity Day and the Sepoy Janata Revolution Day, distorting history again and again. But for Bangladesh and for the people who fought for the independence of this country, today marks a very sad day. We now have a government who supported the Liberation War and who follow the principles of Bangabandhu. Therefore, we believe that the truth of November 7, 1975 can only be attained through an investigation and by bringing the criminals to justice. The dark day of November 7 should also be declared as Freedom Fighters and Soldiers Killing Day, which will finally set the record right.

Mahjabeen Khaled is a Member of Parliament and the daughter of Major General Khaled Mosharraf Bir Uttom.

QUOTABLE
Quote



MUHAMMAD ALI
(1942-2016)
American professional boxer and social activist.

Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Watch part

5 Indian prince

9 Make a speech

11 Modify

13 Showed over

14 Home design

15 Some crime evidence

16 Intermittent sparkle

18 Feudal warrior

20 Bullring cry

21 Rental choice

22 Proceed slowly

23 Chop off

24 Kraken’s home

25 Checkout act

27 Fixes, as holey socks

29 Pet perch

30 Meeting record

32 Put to use

34 CPR pro

35 Moved a raft

36 Like Poe tales

38 Place

39 Inferno describer

40 Spot

41 Not new

DOWN

1 River crossings

2 Sports spots

3 Halloween treats

4 Letter after zeta

5 Arm bones

6 Yemen port

7 Halloween props

8 God of sunlight

10 Snare

12 Cornered

17 Pale

19 Japanese noodles

22 Lima’s land

24 Smoothed, in a way

25 Strikes

26 “In Cold Blood” author

27 Conk out

28 Near East native

30 Annapolis student

31 Spirited horse

33 Bound

37 Water, in the Seine

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10-30




YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

S	E	L	L	P	O	R	K	Y
T	R	O	U	A	R	E	N	A
R	I	N	G	A	A	R	O	N
A	C	E	W	A	R	L	O	C
W	A	R	D	E	N	T	E	E
S	A	M	E	H	E	E	D	
S	A	M	D	E	E	R		
E	Y	E	W	A	R	H	O	L
W	A	R	B	L	E	R	A	P
E	M	I	L	E	V	I	T	A
R	E	C	U	R	D	A	T	E
S	N	A	R	E		L	I	D

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

