

DEBATE



## Evaluating the Pretoria Agreement: the limitations of presentist analysis of conflicts in Ethiopia

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### SUMMARY

This debate piece contains an assessment of the debate on the 'Pretoria Agreement' (or Cessation of Hostilities Agreement) concluded on 2 November 2022 regarding the armed conflict in Ethiopia. On the basis of a critical discussion of a paper by F. Gebresenbet and Y. Tariku (2023) published in the Spring issue of the *Review of African Political Economy* (ROAPE), the author here contests the short-term analysis of the authors, who miss essential points of the wider context of political conflict in Ethiopia and also scholastically misrepresent some other authors in the debate.

### KEYWORDS

African politics; Ethiopia; armed conflict; ethno-political tensions

Most people welcomed the proclamation on 2 November 2022 of a 'Cessation of Hostilities Agreement' (CoHA) in Ethiopia, after weeks of negotiations behind closed doors (AU 2022). Concluded under the auspices of the African Union (AU) and with big pressure from the USA, it stopped the fighting and opened venues for a negotiated resolution of the conflict that ravaged the north of the country. The *Review of African Political Economy* (ROAPE), on 25 April 2023, published online an article by two academics on the prospects of this CoHA and on post-peace agreement conditions in Ethiopia (Gebresenbet and Tariku 2023). While the agreement was barely six months old, the authors already claimed to know what its historical importance was and gave confident predictions on Ethiopia's future after this devastating conflict.

Although it has an appropriate question mark in the title, the paper is unsatisfactory, due to its short-term and selective focus, its superficial and incomplete treatment of the conflict situation(s) in the country, and its lack of documentation of assertions made. It comes out in favour of the view that the CoHA heralds 'a new era' (pp. 97, 103). In the paper's second part, on 'experts in the era of infodemic/mis- and disinformation' (*sic*), there is unnecessary and ranting text expressing the authors' apparent need to misrepresent and disqualify academic colleagues (p. 100). The paper overall does not 'elucidate the implications of ending the war ... for the Ethiopian state and society' (p. 96), except in the most provisional way. While I agree with one, quite evident, point of the paper (as noted below), I think that their text made no substantive contribution to fundamentally understanding the import of this CoHA. The text lacks academic clarity, context appraisal and fairness to fellow academics. Such a piece should rather have gone to a blog site<sup>1</sup> or an

Internet magazine. Their paper is a quick, presentist-oriented product that is not enlightening. There are no other 'academic' papers discussing the CoHA and its 'historic' role: other commentators were wise enough to make no big claims and publish their (very provisional) assessments in more suitable forums like online news magazines and blogs (for example, Rahman 2022; Matfess and Lauder 2023).

As one of the academics 'addressed' in their piece, let me briefly discuss some of the points raised above. A full refutation of their paper would need a lengthier article.

The point on which one *can* agree with the authors is that the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and its ambitions have received a major blow. But that the era of TPLF hegemony over Ethiopia is finished for good cannot be asserted with such certainty. The insurgents aimed to restore that by means of the war they started on 4 November 2020 but after which they were decisively defeated, although at a huge cost to both sides. But does the paper ultimately contribute to a better understanding of the context and nature of the conflict? Hardly. It is belabouring the obvious to say that the federal government (supported by the large majority of Ethiopians) came out on top and the insurgent TPLF suffered a major, crippling defeat. Easy to see and no need for academics to point that out. What would be more enlightening is to analyse *why*: it was due to the TPLF's miscalculation and inevitable defeat in a reactionary war it started, and due to the deep resentment its war practices and massive abuse of civilians evoked among the mass of the Ethiopian population. What should be analysed is why 'donor countries' like the USA and those of the EU kept supporting the TPLF until the very end – in the name of a biased, selective human rights agenda – and did hardly anything to support the federal government to defend the sovereignty of the country in very challenging circumstances. What should also be analysed is why the mainstream global media and activist human right groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch often went along with an ill-checked, TPLF-orchestrated propaganda narrative<sup>2</sup> that in the post-war period since November 2022 has been shown to be biased and false, and why these players showed a remarkable condescension towards an African country trying to defend its sovereignty and agency.

Secondly, the main claim of the paper that the CoHA marks the solidification of the Ethiopian state (and federal army) and the demise of ethno-nationalist challenges to it is entirely premature and not at all decided (see below). Such longer-term predictions of the meaning and impact of the Pretoria Agreement cannot really be given yet. They will largely depend on the policies of the federal government (and that of international parties that have so much interfered in this war), the responses of the general population, and a recovery of the economy. Here the paper fails to place its interpretations in the wider context of Ethiopian (geo)politics and domestic politics. For instance, we have seen that the political system that generated the conflict is still in place, operating on the same constitutional and ideological premises, and not performing well in the past 10 months, with major governance issues preventing rapid progress.

In more detail, to assess whether a new era was achieved by the CoHA (p. 103) requires a point-by-point evaluation of the agreement. If the authors had done so, they would have seen that a range of issues were not solved: the TPLF was not totally disarmed; it did not vacate all occupied lands (as reported in Borkena 2023); and it is trying to reestablish its problematic hegemonism over Tigray's population (as the movement was allowed under the terms of the CoHA to stay alive as a political group). Stability

in the north and a lasting peace were by a considerable distance not achieved; the connection of TPLF subversion with other armed insurgencies (e.g. the ‘Oromo Liberation Army’, whom they supported) is still there; and while, since 3 January 2023, there is a Ministry of Justice Green Paper on a ‘transitional justice’ process (as foreseen in the CoHA, articles 1.6–1.7 and 10.3), no results are visible after more than nine months. Neither was the rehabilitation of the victimised citizens in Afar, Amhara and Tigray (hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons) decisively tackled. Nor has the national economy recovered from the major hits it has received,<sup>3</sup> and foreign investors are not lining up to reinvest in the country. The point is to assess whether Ethiopia, allegedly ‘entering a new era’, is connected to much more than only the Pretoria Agreement and the halt of the fighting in and around Tigray. So, the authors do not sufficiently address that wider context, and as a result their assessment of the situation based on the ‘impact’ of that agreement is unsatisfactory.

In the second section of the paper (pp. 99–100), the authors discuss (TPLF) elite cohesion and fracture. To sing the praises of the TPLF as the cohesive party that held Tigray together in the time of war and before is misleading. This party hegemony was enforced and imposed on its ‘own’ people, who had little choice; dissent was punished. That the TPLF lost popularity is sure, but that the CoHA would have shattered the grip of the Front is by no means clear. The ordinary Tigray population has voiced its discontent since November 2022 with the way the TPLF ruled and conducted the war, but that has not prevented this party from trying to regain regional power. It should be noted that the TPLF presently forms 50% of the members of the transitional regional council and interim government and is busy rebuilding its networks across the region and on the federal level with the dominant part of the ruling Prosperity Party.

And in contrast to what the authors claim, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ethiopia was not in doubt, as the large majority of the population and the federal army always embodied these notions (and the CoHA did not need to cement that). In addition, how they, in the light of their remarks on precarious state sovereignty and territorial identity, can claim that ‘arguments about the likelihood of the imminent dismemberment of the state can no longer be taken seriously’ really beats me – assuming that the authors were correct in saying that any TPLF victory would have led to that dismemberment. That is hardly likely, because starting the war was an effort to again *take over* the federal state.

The authors also draw a wrong conclusion in saying (pp. 96–97) that the events marked ‘the beginning of the end of ethno-nationalism’s hegemonic centrality to national politics’. Many observers of today’s Ethiopian politics would disagree and point to the fact that *another* ethno-nationalist group may take over from the TPLF and self-declare as hegemonic. While the ‘Prosperity Party’ of the prime minister is formally in charge nationwide, the ruling elite is changing in composition and the regional states get stronger, at the expense of the federal order and its implementing institutions. The CoHA is therefore in no way ‘the birth of a new epoch of redefining political discourse and practice’ (p. 97). Ethnic-based violence is not gone, the same old authoritarian tropes and ethno-nationalist identity politics are reemerging (i.e. overriding Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s cooperation or *Meddemer* discourse), institutional reforms have yet to yield results, and top-down political practice is unchanged.

Hence, a proper assessment of the CoHA today should have addressed the entire political context of Ethiopia's fractious politics, and also looked at all the key clauses of the agreement and assessed the feasibility and progress made so far on each of them. Further evidence that the 'peace agreement' certainly did *not* herald a new era in Ethiopia can be seen in the following: the terms of the agreement regarding full disarmament of the insurgents were not fully kept;<sup>4</sup> there was ambivalence about the implications of the 12 November 2022 follow-up 'Kenya Agreement' regarding TPLF disarmament;<sup>5</sup> no serious prosecution of the war abuses has yet been initiated (with many perpetrators going scot-free), no substantial rehabilitation of the victimised populations has been started; and new violent campaigns have been seen, especially in the Amhara Region (still not fully vacated either by TPLF forces in early 2023). Violence in other parts of Ethiopia, notably by the so-called 'Oromo Liberation Army' (OLA), allied to the TPLF, continues (Anna 2021). This group, the majority of which is recruited from unemployed youths, is frequently reported to be terrorising 'non-Oromo' people and has no positive programme for Ethiopia. It is accused of carrying out mass killings and 'ethnic cleansing' (AP News 2022) of such people of non-Oromo origins that resided for several generations in the Oromia Region. OLA was strongly connected to the TPLF insurgency and is still not under control of the federal government (Al-Arabiya News 2023) – and there are growing doubts whether the federal Prosperity Party-dominated government even wants to control it. These conflict dynamics were not mentioned in the Gebresenbet and Tariku paper. While some Horn of Africa dynamics were superficially discussed in section four of the paper ('Realignment of security and power dynamics in the Horn of Africa', pp. 102–103), the wider international dimensions of the northern war were not reflected upon, although the disturbing pressure (if not financial blackmail) and misperceptions of notably the USA and the EU (as 'donors') were influential factors to be reckoned with from the start. Also, the role of the UN and its agencies (the United Nations Development Programme, the UN Human Rights Council) in the war was quite problematic and needs attention.<sup>6</sup>

In assessing the prospects of the CoHA, it also is problematic to omit mention of the burning issue of Wolqait: a contested territory between the Tigray and Amhara regions with a mixed population but historically belonging more to the Gondar-Begemdir region. In 1991 it was detached from Gondar Administrative Region and quickly annexed to Tigray by the TPLF authorities (and labelled 'Western Tigray') after their military victory against the *Derg* regime.<sup>7</sup> On 9–10 November 2020 Wolqait was blighted by one of the worst 'ethnic cleansing' massacres in the war at Mai Kadra town, whereby TPLF-affiliated forces murdered more than 1200 Amhara civilians. The memory of this deed weighs heavily upon the prospects of any agreement (compare Adugna and Aleminew 2022) and it has also generated new ethno-nationalist sentiments. A just solution to the status of Wolqait will have to take the massacre's aftermath into account. A satisfactory solution will to a large extent determine the stability of northern Ethiopia and of the CoHA. It remains to be seen if the federal government can successfully achieve this kind of solution.<sup>8</sup>

The third section of the paper is reserved for a string of condescending remarks on writers/academics on Ethiopia. Gebresenbet and Tariku try to delegitimise them, as 'mere activists' or as arrogant foreign scholars. This pushing away of academic authors/colleagues comes at a time when it is apparently 'safe' for them to do so.

During the entire two-year period of this appalling and abjectly cruel war, Gebresenbet and Tariku emitted not a sound on the conflict and kept their mouths safely shut. No commitment to their country was expressed, no criticism of the violent insurgent party TPLF or of federal army transgressions, not a sign of concern about the tens of thousands of civilians displaced, robbed, or killed (mostly taxpayers who contributed to supporting the university system in Ethiopia where they work). No word in public debate on the need and constitutional duty of Ethiopia's federal government to defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. Their argument in this section of the paper (p. 101) that truth did not matter in the 'activist' debates on the war is entirely misconceived. That the authors do not address sources and materials and their contents to assess the truth and lies produced is not acceptable. The reports and publications available on these matters must be used and compared to improve the interpretation of events. The assessments of the truth of various statements and media utterances (invisible in their account) have, on the contrary, been very important and they must be discussed. Just two examples: the lie that Ethiopia used phosphorus bombs on Tigrayan civilians, reported by the British newspaper:<sup>9</sup> totally untrue. Another: that the Ethiopian federal army 'drone-bombed' a university campus in Tigray: no proof found.<sup>10</sup> The dismissal of sincere and committed scholarship by others is further attested in Gebresenbet and Tariku's denigration of scholars like Clapham and Markakis. These people have not claimed dominance or authority above others in 'framing the situation in Ethiopia'. Their contributions were debated and argued with from the start, and they have – with scores of others Gebresenbet and Tariku forget to mention – done a tremendous job to put Ethiopian studies on the map and inspired countless scholars both in Ethiopia and abroad.

The two camps of 'activists' they identify (p. 101) are presented as mirroring each other, but that is entirely misplaced. From the start of the conflict on the night of 3–4 November 2020<sup>11</sup> the pro-TPLF supporters did not care much about the truth and waged harsh digital warfare. They did not shun lies and explicit disinformation.<sup>12</sup> The so-called other camp – certainly the four people mentioned there<sup>13</sup> – were bent on correcting the balance, criticising the amazingly biased global mainstream press that had hardly any people on the ground in Ethiopia, but relied on TPLF propaganda-machine informants. The style of argument of Gebresenbet and Tariku here shows that they were very selective in their reading on the conflict as it unfolded, and equally so in what they cited. Nor do they reference the work of the so-called pro-government people to back up their accusations. Presumably they saw some tweets from the people they criticise that expressed opinions and personal assessments. Apart from the fact that many such tweets were backed up by the facts, posting them is the right of every concerned citizen and they cannot be used to judge the academic merits of people.

Among the academics/authors that they accuse of being 'pro-government' there has certainly been a strongly expressed but also well-documented commitment of (conditional) sympathy with the Ethiopian *people*, the *nation*, and at times with the federal government that defended their rights against an aggressive insurgent force. If a proper assessment of the facts of this war coincided with the views or approach of the federal government, so be it. The contributions of the authors criticising TPLF statements were usually informative and to the point, correcting much of the ill-researched propaganda going around, even in the *Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph*,

the *Washington Post*, CNN, and others. For instance, Professor Ann Fitz-Gerald published an excellent piece in April 2022 on the views of TPLF war captives who told her about the abuse and forced recruitment they were subjected to by the TPLF (Fitz-Gerald 2022). Her information in that paper, contradicting strange reporting in the *New York Times* or the *Guardian* or the ICG statements, was corroborated time and again by others after the CoHA was concluded. Bronwyn Bruton's comments and articles (e.g., in *Foreign Policy*) are characterised not by 'mere activism' but by sharp analysis and acute observations that were also confirmed by events in the past couple of years. Author and journalist Jeff Pearce has been indefatigable in correcting the gross errors and wilful misunderstandings produced in the global media, the UN and human rights groups, and has refuted recurring pro-TPLF propaganda myths on factual grounds. To brush such people aside, probably on the perusal of some of their Twitter messages, as 'mere activists' or as 'in the government camp' is not proper at all. Such labels substitute for what Gebresenbet and Tariku *should* have done: analysing the well-argued and double-checked analyses of these authors on the Ethiopia conflict and related issues. Neither was my own work cited by Gebresenbet and Tariku, so as to make it easy for them not to have to deal with matters of content.<sup>14</sup> Next to surprise about the repetition of patent lies about the conflict in global media and policy discourse, my commitment in writing on the conflict was also motivated by information that civilians from my fieldwork area in northern Ethiopia (South Wollo) had been killed by the insurgent TPLF force. I think it is not strange that we as researchers publicly plead for protection of the lives of our respondents victimised by an unprovoked and unjust war.

In contrast, no such words of concern about the war and its impact on Ethiopian civilians were heard from the authors of the paper under discussion; they safely kept quiet in Addis Ababa, and only now, after the end of the war, they come out, cheaply criticising authors/researchers who stuck their necks out for a country and people they have affection for. Gebresenbet and Tariku also have no idea of the harassment and lies these authors have received from the pro-TPLF club. The latter group – with many representatives in academia as well, for example, in Belgium, Germany and the USA – has done incomparably more damage to a truthful public debate on the conflict than the ones they accuse.

Certainly, Gebresenbet and Tariku are right that in this conflict the modes of reasoning and responding have shown polarised and uncompromising attitudes, notably in cyberspace. But it is disappointing to see in their paper that they themselves seamlessly fit into this mode of accusing people that has characterised political discourse in Ethiopia (and in Ethiopian overseas communities). To suggest that 'we' to a large extent are 'willing to defend [our] side's actions' (p. 101) is incorrect: we tried to compare and examine actions and allegations from the warring parties against the known facts, and these have substantially refuted the narrative concoctions of the TPLF and its dogmatic supporters. Their labelling of others shows the authors have little interest in decent dialogue or reaching some agreement on contents and truth. Such quick accusation, labelling, and antagonistic talk inhibits proper attention to the relevant facts and to context, and this may even perpetuate conflict discourse in the country.

As we see now in Ethiopia, fighting is continuing in many areas<sup>15</sup> and a hardening of political exchanges inhibits the finding of durable solutions for the country's political

conundrum. It is as if new ‘enemy discourses’ are being created and Ethiopia is entering a new phase in the ‘securitisation’ of national politics. Gebresenbet and Tariku, in their short-term view on the CoHA, underestimate this, and have not produced a helpful or constructive paper. Apart from slighting other scholars, whom they only label and make big claims about but whose work they do not refer to or discuss properly, their presentist ‘analysis’ makes us neither much wiser about the future of the CoHA and the contending parties nor about ‘the path to peace’ in Ethiopia.

## Notes

1. Like the excellent piece by Fitz-Gerald and Segal (2023).
2. Already widely known since 2021: see [www.worldmedias.net/horn-of-africa-tplf-sympathizers-use-infiltrators-for-its-destabilizing-propaganda-action/](http://www.worldmedias.net/horn-of-africa-tplf-sympathizers-use-infiltrators-for-its-destabilizing-propaganda-action/). Examples are the systematic TPLF statements on ‘food aid blockade’ and ‘man-made famine’ in Tigray (disproved by the World Food Programme Ethiopia (see Omamo 2022); and the ‘Tigray genocide’ meme (disproved by UN-Equality and Human Rights Commission research) and post-war reporting. See also Sheba and Pearce (2022). All this does not mean that Tigray’s population did not gravely suffer in the war (like those of Afar and Amhara regions).
3. And the federal government in 2020 seems to have other priorities, like building huge new government palaces; compare Hochet-Bodin 2023. In fact, the economy is in dire straits: see [www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2023/04/11/abiy-ahmed-s-loyal-allies-tasked-with-keeping-the-money-coming,109933716-eve?cxt=PUB&utm\\_source=AIA&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=AUTO\\_EDIT\\_SOM&did=1747468](http://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2023/04/11/abiy-ahmed-s-loyal-allies-tasked-with-keeping-the-money-coming,109933716-eve?cxt=PUB&utm_source=AIA&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=AUTO_EDIT_SOM&did=1747468).
4. Still in March 2023, a faction of the TPLF led by top cadres/military leaders like Migbe Haile, Getachew Aseffa, Abraha Tesfay and others was holding out and is in a state of armed vigilance (see <https://twitter.com/jbirru/status/1635480052186873857>). Other TPLF leaders, some of them now in the ‘interim government’ in Tigray, prevaricate on the Pretoria Agreement.
5. In this agreement between the ‘senior commanders’ of both the federal army and the TPLF armed forces, it seemed that TPLF disarmament was conditioned on withdrawal of ‘non-ENDF’ forces from the war areas – highly contested.
6. A new scandal erupted in June 2023, when it was revealed the massive quantities of humanitarian aid in Tigray were stolen or disappeared – allegedly under TPLF auspices. The entire WFP leadership resigned (<https://abren.org/ethiopia-wfp-controversy-leads-to-resignations/>). This continued a pattern of food aid theft and diversion by TPLF during the 2020–2022 war ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Elelx4QLHQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Elelx4QLHQ); [www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9SjilttgYk&t=3s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9SjilttgYk&t=3s)).
7. For the complexity of the issue, see [www.hornofafricansight.org/post/welkait-ethiopia-geo-strategic-importance-and-the-consequential-annexation-by-tplf](http://www.hornofafricansight.org/post/welkait-ethiopia-geo-strategic-importance-and-the-consequential-annexation-by-tplf). See also the research-based heavy indictments in Geta Asrade et al. (2022).
8. The CoHA in Art. 10.4 announces to resolve this ‘in accordance with the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia’ (see AU 2022), but that will not be smooth because this TPLF-made and imposed constitution of 1994 (adopted three years *after* the TPLF’s unilateral annexation of the Wolqait area) did not have majority support and is in itself highly contested. A ‘constitutional solution’ without assessing the historical facts and the interventionist TPLF policies of the last three to four decades (including demographic engineering) in this region will not bring stability.
9. ‘Exclusive: Ethiopians Suffer Horrific Burns in Suspected White Phosphorus Attacks’, in the *Daily Telegraph*, 23 May 2021.
10. See [https://twitter.com/Eyob\\_Belachew33/status/1569760736515088384](https://twitter.com/Eyob_Belachew33/status/1569760736515088384). Examples of lies could be multiplied. Countering them matters.

11. With the massive attack on sleeping, unarmed (non-Tigrayan) soldiers of the federal army in camps in Tigray. See the shocking eyewitness-survivor account of Gashaye T'enaw (2022).
12. Remarkable is, for instance, the start of a digital media campaign by pro-TPLF activists entitled 'Tigray genocide' – on the first day of the conflict – even before the federal army had counter-attacked (see Abren.org, <https://abren.org/premeditated-tigray-genocide-cyber-warfare-in-the-age-of-social-media/>). The 'genocide' lie was perpetuated throughout the conflict but was later demonstrated to be entirely false.
13. There were many more, doing great damage, but they are conveniently not mentioned by Fana and Yonas.
14. For instance, [www.ascleiden.nl/sites/default/files/j.abbink\\_working\\_paper\\_152\\_18-10-2021\\_final.pdf](http://www.ascleiden.nl/sites/default/files/j.abbink_working_paper_152_18-10-2021_final.pdf); <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/11/21/the-ethiopia-conflict-in-international-relations-and-global-media-discourse/>; <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2021/01/tigray-conflict-ethiopia-ramifications-international-response/>; or <https://canopyforum.org/2022/10/26/has-religion-been-fueling-the-politics-of-conflict-in-ethiopia-a-cautionary-tale/>.
15. According to data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project, armed conflict overall has declined since November 2022 but has also shifted from the Tigray area to Amhara and Oromia Regions: see <https://epo.acleddata.com/2023/05/06/epo-april-2023-monthly-volatility-in-amhara-region-while-the-rest-of-the-country-stabilizes/>; <https://epo.acleddata.com/2023/04/05/epo-march-2023-monthly-political-violence-trends-decline-amid-opportunities-for-peace/>; and <https://epo.acleddata.com/2023/06/01/epo-weekly-20-26-may-2023/>. Since May 2023 the federal army has engaged in a one-sided and politically ill-advised 'disarmament' campaign in the Amhara Region, which has provoked massive popular resistance.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes on contributor

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