Recent Developments in Peace and Security in the Horn of Africa

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By

Redie Bereketeab

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-9403-3
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-9403-6

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PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

Dr Bereketeab's book provides invaluable insights on the trajectories of new developments in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa by shedding light on the implications of TPLF's removal from power for peace and security in the sub-region. Based on this, I state that it is a must-read contribution that adds up to his previous publications on similar themes.
—Kassahun Berhanu (PhD)
Professor of Political Science and International Relations
Addis Ababa University

This book examines (i) Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement, (ii) the challenges of transition in Ethiopia, and (iii) peace, security and development in the Horn of Africa in the aftermath of the TPLF- Ethiopia conflict. Redie Bereketeab is an expert on the Horn. His timely book will be invaluable for African studies and international relations scholars and policy makers.
—Dr Sumit Roy
School of International Relations & Strategic Studies, Jadavpur University, India and formerly Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, Sweden

This book offers a superb analysis of the impacts of the post-2018 political changes in Ethiopia on the politics of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. In particular, it gives a rare in-depth analysis of how the post-2018 political changes helped to reconfigure not only relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea but also inter-state relations in the Horn of Africa.
—Asnake Kefale,
Associate Professor of Political Science and International Relations, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia.

ABSTRACT

This book examines recent peace, security and development in the Horn of Africa (HOA) region. The most significant development in the region in recent years was the July 2018 rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The Algiers Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2000), also referred to as the Algiers Agreement, mediated by the international community – the United Nations, the Organisation of African Unity, the European Union and United States, the same parties that also served as witnesses and guarantors – was supposed to be final and binding. However, when the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission published its verdict in 2002, Ethiopia rejected it on the grounds that it awarded Badme, the flashpoint of the war, to Eritrea. The witnesses and guarantors, abdicating their responsibility, failed to exert pressure on Ethiopia, which led to a situation of 'no war, no peace'. This stalemate lasted for 16 years, from April 2002 until July 2018. The failure of the Algiers Agreement indicated the failure of international peace mediation.

The recent rapprochement has been driven by internal dynamics, rather than by external mediation. This has fundamentally reshaped relations between the two countries. The impact of the resolution of the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict goes beyond the borders of the two countries, and has indeed brought fundamental change to the region; following the Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement, a reconfiguration of diplomatic relations has occurred. Full diplomatic relations were restored between Eritrea and Somalia, and the leaders of Eritrea and Djibouti have met in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

This all raises the issue of whether a peace deal driven by internal dynamics fares better than one that is externally mediated. Nevertheless, the momentum of the much-celebrated rapprochement has been derailed by developments in Ethiopia. The transition in Ethiopia encountered veritable challenges that culminated in the war in Tigray, as well as widespread intra- and inter-ethnic unrest. These internal developments in Ethiopia certainly have negative implications for the region. Conflict between Ethiopia and

Sudan suddenly flared up due to a border dispute and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam; and Somalia is embroiled in challenges of state resuscitation and bloody insurgency.

This book has three central themes: (1) the Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement; (2) the challenges of transition in Ethiopia; and (3) peace, security and development in the HOA. Some of the issues the book seeks to address are: what factors led to the resolution of a festering conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia; the significance of the Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement for peace and security in the HOA; the factors that complicate the reform and transition process in Ethiopia; the post-Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) challenges for Ethiopia; and how a post-TPLF Ethiopia could contribute to peace, security and development in the HOA.

PREFACE

This book seeks to examine recent developments in peace, security and stability in the Horn of Africa (HOA). It analyses developments that began with the signing of the Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement, which was later expanded to include Somalia. The book consists of two parts. The first part deals with the rapprochement of July 2018. It draws on my previous book *The Ethiopia-Eritrea Rapprochement: Peace and Stability in the Horn of Africa* (2019). Much of the material in part one has been extracted from that book. The second part examines the crisis in the Tigray region, more specifically causal factors, the subsequent demise of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and its implications for Ethiopia and peace and security in the HOA..

The rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which ended the major chronic and festering conflict in the HOA, was received with huge exhilaration and relief by the peoples of the two countries and beyond. The public celebrations and massive street demonstrations to receive the respective leaders in both capitals was unprecedented. The rapprochement was also widely welcomed throughout the region, all of Africa, and the world over.

The change of leadership in Ethiopia, with the election of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali, in 2018 made rapprochement possible, which until then had been considered unachievable, breaking the stalemate between Ethiopia and Eritrea that had existed for 20 years, the war and no war no peace. The possibility became a reality due to the dethroning of the TPLF. The historical significance of the change was not only limited to the fall of the TPLF and two years later the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Its historical significance represented a shift of power; geographically, from north to south; and ethnically, from the Abyssinian power centre of Ethiopia to the Oromos. This change had multidimensional implications for Ethiopia, the Ethiopia-Eritrea relationship and the HOA. Presumably, expectations were grounded in the generic assumption that Oromo socio-cultural and politico-power relations are

based on an egalitarianism that could open wide the political space for the democratic dispensation, leading to a more democratic Ethiopia at peace with itself and the region.

Nevertheless, the agreement did not progress at the pace that had been expected when it began. Indeed, the initial border opening was quickly closed. The two governments claimed that it had been opened as an experiment. Therefore, before permanently opening it, necessary laws, procedures, conventions and infrastructures needed to be put in place. Most importantly, the implementation of the fifth element of the agreement, the border issue, could not be secured. It soon became clear that implementation of the agreement had encountered serious hurdles because of TPLF resistance. The TPLF rejected the Algiers Agreement, which had been mediated by the international community and accepted by the Federal Government, invoking its previous position that it could only be implemented with local communities' agreement. The TPLF also opposed reform in Ethiopia and claimed that the Abiy-led Federal Government was illegitimate. Moreover, the TPLF accused the Government of violating the constitution and national institutions. The TPLF's stand not only adversely affected the Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement, but also had negative ramifications for the tripartite Ethiopia-Eritrea-Somalia rapprochement. Moreover, it had the effect of retarding the reform and transformation process in Ethiopia.

In addition to the constraints on the rapprochement, the internal Ethiopian situation continued to worsen. Intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts resulted in massive displacement and killings, paralysing the country. Reports of alleged attempts on the prime minister's life and coup attempts were thought to be the work of the TPLF. Often, the TPLF was accused of being behind the unrest that rocked the country. The killing of a popular Oromo singer, Hachalu Hundessa, in June 2019 came as a serious blow to peace and stability; here, also, the TPLF was implicated. Amid all of this, the conflict between the Federal Government and the TPLF-run regional government of Tigray reached a dangerous level. The parliamentary election that was supposed to take place at its regular time in May 2020 was postponed due to the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) pandemic, which the TPLF condemned.

The TPLF, against the warning of the Federal Government and the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), convened its own regional

parliamentary election in August 2020 and declared its position of non-recognition of the Federal Government. The Federal Government responded by cutting the federal budget owed to the TPLF. Tension escalated dangerously, and exploded into full-fledged military confrontation in November 2020. On 4 November, the TPLF attacked the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) based in Tigray. The Federal Government declared a six-month state of emergency in Tigray and began a counter-offensive that it called 'operations to enforce law and order'.

Ethiopia is the epicentre of the HOA region. The centrality of Ethiopia rests on its power, geography (being at the centre of the region), demography, and diplomatic status. Peace, stability and security in Ethiopia are vital to peace, stability and security in the region. The tripartite agreement between Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea promised regional integration, which would include the neighbouring countries of Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya, and Djibouti. The 2018 Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement raised high hopes and opened a new chapter for the troubled region. But then came the Tigray crisis, dashing all hopes in the region. Eritrea was accused of becoming militarily involved in the Tigray crisis on the side of the Federal Government. In a surprise move, Sudan sent troops and occupied an area that was under Ethiopian control, but this control was disputed. Meanwhile Somalia was plunged into an election-related crisis. The disapproval of the West (the EU and the USA) of the tripartite rapprochement agreement also contributed to it losing momentum. As quickly as it had arrived, it seemed that the hope raised was turning into despair.

When the war broke out, there were fears – particularly among Western media, think tanks, and scholar-activists – that the conflict could lead to the collapse of Ethiopia, ethnic cleansing, and genocide, which would then spread across the whole HOA region. There was also a distortion of what was happening in the country, either deliberately or because of lack of adequate knowledge and understanding of the causes, scope, depth, and implications of the conflict. The danger of the TPLF's military build-up to the unity and integrity of Ethiopia was underestimated. This underestimation led to a focus on merely stopping the conflict and putting pressure on the Federal Government to engage in dialogue and negotiation with the TPLF.

This, in turn, may have had a negative outcome. The Federal Government and many Ethiopians saw it as an attempt to save the TPLF, while the TPLF interpreted it as international support and that it could therefore push its hard-line position.

Over a span of three years, the HOA has gone through a metamorphosis from immense hope to a depressing limbo. The TPLF, which many believe lay at the centre of the problems, is on its way out now – but Ethiopia's problems continue. Circumstances compel us to pose a number of relevant questions. What will happen to the Ethiopia-Eritrea relationship? Will the demise of the TPLF bring peace and stability to Ethiopia? And what are the implications of the demise of the TPLF to peace, stability and development in the HOA?

ABBREVIATIONS

ADP	Amhara Democratic Party
AI	Amnesty International
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Movement
AU	African Union
EEBC	Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission
EFDM	Eritrean Federal Democratic Movement
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ENA	Eritrean National Alliance
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defence Forces
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EU	European Union
DMLEK	Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrean Kunama
HOA	Horn of Africa
ICA	International Court of Arbitration
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICG	International Crisis Group
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
NCP	National Congress Party
NEBE	National Election Board of Ethiopia
NIF	National Islamic Front
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
ODP	Oromo Democratic Party
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
ONLF	Ogaden National Liberation Front
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organisation
PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PP	Prosperity Party
REC	Regional Economic Community

RSAM Red Sea Afar Movement
SNNPR Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region
SEPDM Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement
SPLM Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SPLM-IG Sudan People's Liberation Movement-In Government
SPLM-IO Sudan People's Liberation Movement-In Opposition
TFG Transitional Federal Government
TPDM Tigray People's Democratic Movement
TPLF Tigray People's Liberation Front
UAE United Arab Emirates
UIC Union of Islamic Courts
UN United Nations
UNGA United Nations General Assembly
UNSC United Nations Security Council
USA United States of America

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: CONDITIONS FOR BREAKING THE ICE

Introduction

Eritrea achieved its independence – de facto 1991, and de jure 1993 – following a bloody 30-year war of liberation. There followed a brief period of seven years of relative peace that was abruptly interrupted by a second war, sparked by border incidents in May 1998. The border incidents were preceded by various developments that stoked tensions and contributed to the progressive rupturing of relations, the root causes of which are complicated (Bereketeab 2010). The second war between Ethiopia and Eritrea (1998–2000) ended after international mediation brought about the Algiers Agreement, signed on 12 December 2000 (Algiers Agreement 2000a, 2000b; Bereketeab 2009b, 2010; Fessahatzion 2002). A central provision of this agreement concerned the establishment of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC), under the auspices of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) based at The Hague, which was mandated to delineate and demarcate the border between the two countries 'on the basis of pertinent colonial treaties and applicable international laws' (Article 14). The verdict was supposed to be final and binding: 'The Commission shall not have the power to make decisions *ex aequo et bono*' (Article 4(2), Algiers Agreement 2000a, 2000b; Kaikobad 2021: 2013; Bereketeab 2017). As authors of the document, the witnesses and guarantors – the United Nations (UN), Organisation of African Unity (OAU), European Union (EU) and United States (US) – assumed responsibility for ensuring that the decisions of the EEBC would be accepted and implemented unconditionally; and if either or both the parties reneged on their commitment, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) would invoke Chapter VII of the UN Charter (Article 14(a)).

Following two years of deliberations, the EEBC announced its decision on 13 April 2002. After an initial expression of acceptance, Ethiopia rejected the ruling, calling it illegal, irresponsible, and unjust, and demanded renegotiation (Tareke 2009: 346, Minale 2021: 648). Ethiopia's rejection of the verdict amounted to declaring the international judges it (Ethiopia) selected impotent. Eritrea, on the other hand, accepted the decision and called for its unconditional and immediate implementation (Kaikobad 2021: 257; Bereketeab 2009b). The reason for Ethiopia's rejection was the EEBC's award of the village of Badme, the flashpoint of the war, to Eritrea (Abbink 2003; ICG 2010; Swinkels 2018). It seemed, when signing the final and binding document, Ethiopia assumed that it would be awarded Badme, since it had won the war. Losing the village came as a shock to Ethiopia, although it gained other areas. The assumption was also shared by sympathetic scholars (cf. Clapham 2003; Healy and Plaut 2007; Jacquin-Berdal and Plaut 2005: xv; Plaut 2005: 110). These scholars criticised the EEBC for failing to reward the military winner, an unjustified criticism because the commission was under clear directives and instruction that it should not take into consideration anything beyond facts based on colonial agreements and related international conventions. The rejection of the verdict induced a stalemate of 'no war, no peace', a situation that lasted for 16 years (Clapham 2021: 206). After repeated efforts to convince Ethiopia to accept the decision failed, the EEBC, in November 2007, declared the border to be virtually demarcated and the case legally closed (Kaikobad 2021).

Ethiopia also rejected this virtual demarcation, calling it 'legal nonsense'; the absurdity of this was that legal illiterates were questioning the expertise of acclaimed international jurists. Ethiopia insisted on dialogue to resolve the border dispute. Eritrea, meanwhile, held to the view that there was no dispute over the border, since it had been legally delimited and demarcated, and instead there was a blatant occupation of sovereign Eritrean territory (Guttry 2021: 697). This deadlock perpetuated the no war, no peace situation, with occasional serious military clashes between the two armies. This situation persisted for 16 years, until 9 July 2018, when the leaders of the two countries signed an agreement of rapprochement (Minale 2021: 649). The rapprochement was sudden and unexpected; indeed, it took the world by surprise because it came about without the involvement of

external mediators. In fact, it came just as some experts and diplomats were urging and advising the guarantors and witnesses to assume – or resume – responsibility and inject life into the dormant peace process (Cohen 2013; Shinn 2014).

Other commentators believed that the parties were not amenable to mediation (Healy and Plaut 2007) and that there was no chance of finding a solution to the festering conflict. This view gained traction when the two countries (plus Sudan) came close to becoming embroiled in another bloody war in January 2018, after a report by Al Jazeera insinuated that Egypt had deployed soldiers, tanks, and combat aircrafts in western Eritrea, close to the border with Sudan. This generated frantic military activity, particularly in Sudan. Although the report was never substantiated, Sudan closed its border with Eritrea and sent thousands of its Rapid Support Force troops to the border, citing a security threat from Eritrea and Egypt (Al Jazeera 2018). Moreover, reports began to spread that Sudan and Ethiopia were coordinating military activities in eastern Sudan, in Kassala region, on the border with Eritrea. Unconfirmed reports suggested that a battalion of Ethiopian soldiers was stationed in the region and that Ethiopian generals were meeting Sudanese officials in Kassala town. Eritrea later accused Sudan, Qatar and Ethiopia of supporting Eritrean Islamist terrorist groups (Sudan Tribune 2018). It was amid this tension that the dramatic and sudden rapprochement occurred. The pertinent question is, why then? What were the factors that made rapprochement possible?

The rapprochement, as well as reform in Ethiopia, faced formidable challenges, however. Implementation of the five-point accord, in its entirety, proved difficult - the part of the accord that stated the border could not move an inch, in particular. The TPLF-led Tigray Government rejected the accord and maintained its worn-out position that the accord had to be negotiated by the people who live on border. The TPLF accused the Federal Government of violating the national constitution and institutions, thereby declaring it illegitimate. While the tension between the federal government and the Tigrayan regional government dangerously inched towards brinkmanship, the TPLF and the Eritrean Government increasingly engaged in hostile rhetoric. Finally, the accumulation of a series of events impelled the outbreak of war between the Ethiopian Federal Government and TPLF forces on 4 November 2020, leading to the demise of the TPLF. What the

end of the TPLF and the post-TPLF period would bring to the region is one of the questions this book endeavours to grapple with.

The book examines recent developments in peace and security in the HOA; more specifically, it analyses developments during the past four years and their implications for peace and security. To that end, the Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement, post-TPLF relations and their ramifications for peace, stability and development in the HOA are critically interrogated. The first part of the book examines the Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement, while the second part analyses the demise of the TPLF and the contributing factors involved. The book seeks to address central issues like: what factors contributed to the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea; what post-TPLF Eritrea-Ethiopia relations would look like; what the ramifications of the demise of the TPLF are for the HOA; what the post-TPLF Ethiopian challenges are; and what role external actors played in the conflict.

The book seeks to advance four central arguments. Firstly, it argues that the maturing of objective and subjective conditions in Ethiopia and the growth of trust in Eritrea of the new government in Ethiopia facilitated the rapprochement; secondly, that the inability of the TPLF to adjust itself to the new development led to its demise; thirdly, that the removal of the TPLF would open a new chapter in Eritrea-Ethiopia relations, as well as Eritrea-Tigray relations; and fourthly, that the new era could herald a new situation of peace, stability, integration and development in the HOA region. The following two sections discuss two conceptual and theoretical frameworks as an explanatory model for the thawing of relations: maturing of objective and subjective factors, and trust.

This introductory chapter consists of three sections. The next section, 'The maturing of objective and subjective conditions in Ethiopia', discusses the gestation of the objective and subjective factors that facilitated the thawing of a stalemate that prevailed for 20 years. The section provides a theoretical framework to help understand and explain why the opening of relations became possible at that specific time. The next section, 'The trust factor: Eritrea', analyses the growth in trust in Eritrea, reciprocating the maturing of the objective and subjective factors in Ethiopia to induce the rapprochement. The last section, 'Organisation and theme of the book', briefly describes the central themes and structure of the book.

The maturing of objective and subjective conditions in Ethiopia

For 20 years, in war as well as in a no war, no peace situation, Eritrea and Ethiopia were locked in destructive conflict (Minale 2021: 684), which had dire ramifications for the wider HOA region. Many observed the epi-centrality of the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict in the reconfiguration of diplomatic relations among states in the region. The rapprochement of July 2018 came as a great surprise. It came unexpectedly, confusing many experts. A variety of explanations are provided as to why it came to fruition at this particular point in time. Furthermore, its sustainability has also been widely debated.

It is well known that festering conflicts require the right conditions to be resolved. The longer they fester, the more complicated it becomes to resolve them. Many observers concluded it was meaningless to get involve in mediation, since the parties would not listen; therefore, it was better to allow matters to take their own course (cf. Healy and Plaut 2007). Taking their own course could mean many things. It could mean letting the parties fight it out - a cynical view. It could also mean waiting for the right moment to engage in mediation. However, it is not always easy to predict when conditions may be conducive. Neither epistemological nor methodological tools help us to predict how and when conflicts are ripe for resolution. One thing is clear, however: conflict resolution is predicated on the conditions being right. Conditions may be influenced by external or internal developments and any attempt to resolve a conflict may prove futile if the conditions are not ripe. This could be why some people advocated for or letting the two sides fight it out in the case of the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia, after which the international community would pick up the pieces. Though cynical, this attitude partly reflected the intractability of the situation. The conflict is a good example of the dictum that resolution of conflicts is dictated by the maturity of underpinning conditions. It was not the lack of attempts to resolve the conflict that meant it had lingered – as feeble as the attempts were – but rather that the conditions were not yet ripe.

Objective conditions are external to human will and feeling; but those conditions need to be right in order to allow the subjective conditions to mature. Subjective conditions, on the other hand, directly relate to human

will and feeling and are sufficient for the resolution of conflict because they derive from objective conditions. This sequential relationship between objective and subjective conditions follows the logic that external factors are more easily changed than internal factors. Only when the objective and the subjective conditions are aligned or fulfilled are conflicts ripe for resolution.

The objective conditions necessary to sustain a conflict invariably include issues surrounding the economy, politics, security, the military, diplomacy, and material resources. The total depletion of these resources makes it impossible to sustain a conflict and spawns change in people's mentality or subjective perception – notably, a realisation of the need for a change of course. This is what we mean when we talk of the *maturing* of a subjective condition, which paves the way for a resolution. We conclude that the maturing of objective and subjective conditions propelled reform in Ethiopia, which paved the way for the thawing of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea. So, what were the objective and subjective conditions that matured and that enabled the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict to be resolved?

A popular youth uprising against the ruling party exploded in Oromia in 2015, reflecting deep-seated popular dissatisfaction (Pinaud and Releigh 2017, Gedamu 2022: 204-6). The ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) consisted of four parties: the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO), which subsequently changed its name to the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP); the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), which changed its name to the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP); the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM); and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) (Markakis 2011; Woodward 2013). Yet, for the past 27 years, the TPLF – which represents only 6 percent of the Ethiopian population – has retained complete domination over Ethiopia's political economy (Milkias 2003).

The uprising was triggered by a plan to expand the capital Addis Ababa, infringing the land rights of the Oromo people around the city (Lyons 2019: 180; Tatek 2020). Resistance to the plan quickly developed into political opposition to the EPRDF and, in particular, to the TPLF. The popular uprising constituted a serious threat to the rule of the EPRDF. In summer 2016, young people in the Amhara region joined the uprising

(Dinberu 2018). This demonstration of unity between the country's two major – and hitherto antagonistic – ethnic groups constituted a real threat to the survival of the EPRDF and the TPLF's domination. Feeling intimidated, the coalition resorted to extreme measures: it declared a state of emergency and had tens of thousands of civilians, activists, journalists, bloggers and politicians arrested in the hope of containing the unrest. It also blocked the internet. However, in spite of the draconian measures, the unrest continued: the young people increasingly targeted economic and industrial institutions supposedly owned by the ruling coalition and particularly the TPLF.

This hit the economy hard. Investors began to abandon their investments and leave the country; inflation spiralled and the supply of foreign currency dried up, making it difficult for business. Above all, however, the unrest assumed an ethnic dimension: Tigrayans living outside their own region felt threatened and started to return home. Communal fighting, especially between Oromos and Somalis, displaced millions of people and hundreds were killed (Bruton 2018). The crisis also had serious political repercussions: the political tensions and internal divisions both within the ruling coalition and among members of the coalition parties grew (Maru 2018). The political crisis assumed unprecedented proportions and the country was pushed to the brink of collapse, causing the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) to send clear diplomatic signals that they were not happy with developments.

This set in motion the maturing of the necessary subjective conditions: the leadership began to realise that unless something was done, the country would drift towards a dangerous disintegration. The steps that were taken were, however, half-hearted, cosmetic, and too few: the EPRDF leadership was only ready to undertake minor changes to ensure the domination of the ruling coalition party. Saving the country was associated with saving the EPRDF, since the perception was that there was no ready alternative should the EPRDF suddenly collapse. The first step taken by Prime Minster Hailemariam Desalegn was to try to reform the political system, but resistance from within the ruling coalition party meant that matters could not proceed at full speed (ibid.; Schemm 2018). When the prime minister realised that he would be unable to carry out the desperately needed reforms, he resigned on 15 February 2018. In a statement, he said he had taken the decision 'in order to become part of the solution' and to

'help facilitate the ruling party's reform agenda'. He also admitted that the country was 'at a gravely concerning stage' (Addis Standard 2018). It was clear that Desalegn was not the right person to push through the fundamental changes required to save the country; he was too weak to undertake the necessary reform (Young 2021: 82).

After a power struggle within the EPRDF Council that lasted weeks, Dr Abiy Ahmed Ali of OPDO was elected chairman of the EPRDF in March 2018, a necessary prerequisite for becoming prime minister. The following month, Abiy was formally elected prime minister. He immediately undertook a range of sweeping measures that included releasing thousands of prisoners; lifting the state of emergency; repealing the ant-terrorism legislation; sacking senior military and security officers; and allowing websites that had been closed under the state of emergency to reopen (Gedamu 2022: 219, Berhanu 2921: 175).

A general amnesty was declared and all rebel groups that had been declared terrorists by the previous administration were invited to return to the country and pursue a peaceful political struggle. Accepting the invitation, many armed groups indeed laid down their weapons and returned, including Patriotic Ginbot 7, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and the Tigray People's Democratic Movement (TPDM) (Guttry 2021: 719). Many political activists and opposition groups also returned from the US. One of the things that may have convinced many of them to do so was that the Prime Minister seemed to be sincere and genuinely determined to push through the reforms. Unlike his predecessor, he possessed the necessary characteristics to succeed. His admission in a televised address to the House of Representatives that the EPRDF had committed crimes, and that he was asking for the people's forgiveness on its behalf, was sensational.

This admission came in response to those members of the house who opposed the general amnesty on the grounds that the opposition had committed crimes. The Prime Minister's admission, coming as it did from someone who was part of the system, exploded like a bombshell. The TPLF was furious, but the move indicated the Prime Minister's earnestness to reform the system and that reassured the Ethiopian people. Moreover, the galvanising concepts of love, conciliation, compromise, forgiveness, inclusivity and an overarching '*Ethiopianness*' that the Prime Minister used

in his speeches were well received, both inside and outside the country. The revivalist national ideal that imbued Ethiopians with self-respect, pride and long-lost glory rekindled the spirit in most Ethiopians that Ethiopia was a great nation. The idea of Ethiopianness was designed to tackle the ongoing drift towards the country's disintegration into its component elements, which led to the reforms, and became a sort of new social contract.

It is also the case that the majority of Ethiopians associate the crimes committed over the years with the TPLF, which has since been dethroned; therefore, Abiy is widely perceived to be untainted. Indeed, many Ethiopians wished to see the TPLF banned (Walle 2018). Those who regard ethnic federalism as a dangerous scheme that will tear Ethiopian society apart (Balcha 2008), and who hold the TPLF responsible for it, are demanding the removal of ethnonationalism and the TPLF itself (Dinberu 2018). The TPLF is no longer in the driving seat. It has moved onto the back foot, adopting a hostile stance towards the reforms and becoming very conservative, defending the *status quo ante.* It promotes itself as the defender of the constitution, national institutions, the rule of law and the old system – a position at odds with that of the overwhelming majority of Ethiopians. The maturing of the objective conditions inducing the maturing of subjective conditions undergirded the comprehensive reform measures undertaken in the country. Surpassing Ethiopia, the wind of reform blew through the Eritrea-Ethiopia relationship, too.

The acceptance of the EEBC's decision on the border and the invitation for Eritrea to engage in a move towards peace were well thought-out and decisive elements in the reform process. Abiy knew that unless the conflict with Eritrea was resolved, the reforms in Ethiopia would be incomplete. The only way of resolving a conflict that had been allowed to fester for 16 years was to completely and unconditionally accept and implement the border decision that followed the Algiers Agreement – something that his predecessors had failed to do. On 5 June 2018, the Prime Minister announced that his government would unconditionally accept and implement the border decision (Minale 2021: 651). He then extended the hand of friendship to the Eritrean Government, inviting it to respond positively so that the two governments could improve relations and work for peace, stability and development. And indeed, the Eritrean Government did respond positively.

The trust factor: Eritrea

In an interview, the former prime minister of Ethiopia, Desalegn, claimed that what Abiy had offered Eritrea was no different from what he and his predecessors had offered – and which Eritrea had consistently rejected. He went on to say that the difference was that times had changed. One could add that the sincerity and determination had also changed.

Desalegn may truly believe that his offer of peace through implementation of the Algiers Agreement border verdict was genuine. But powerful forces were not genuine in their peace offer – or at least that was the Eritrean perception. Desalegn was never taken seriously on matters as important as the border issue: the common perception was that it was the TPLF that wielded the real power, and it was not prepared to cede Badme. Moreover, what took place in 2018 in Ethiopia was more than sheer personality change. It was a change of centre in a double sense – that is, geographically and demographically. Geographically, it was a shift from north to south, while in terms of demography it was a shift from Abyssinians to Oromos. Ethiopian politics has always been described by centre-periphery dichotomy (cf. Markakis 2011). To many Eritreans, this shift heralded a new era, an era that could fundamentally reshape Eritrea-Ethiopia relations.

The trust between the TPLF-dominated EPRDF coalition and the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in Eritrea hit rock bottom following the outbreak of war in 1998. Both governments were convinced that the problem could only be resolved if the other vanished and therefore they both did everything in their power to depose the other, actively supporting opposition groups (Abbink 2003; Lyons 2009). The EPRDF government even tried to destroy the Eritrean state, resorting to economic, diplomatic, political and international campaigns to completely isolate Eritrea (Mengisteab 2014).

Following the end of the 1998-2000 war, the TPLF strategy shifted to economic strangulation. The Ethiopian Government expected Eritrea simply to collapse like a house of cards. The assumption was that an isolated and economically bankrupt Eritrea would sink under the weight of popular political discontent. When this economic pressure failed to provoke popular resentment and the collapse of the state, all manner of dubious ploys were

devised to get the United Nations (UN) to impose sanctions on Eritrea (Bereketeab 2013). These included unsubstantiated allegations of support for the militant Islamist group Al-Shabaab and fabrication of an attempt to bomb an African Union (AU) summit meeting; a border dispute with Djibouti; allegations that Eritrea was undermining peace in the region; and, more recently, claims of human rights violations – all designed to completely isolate Eritrea. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) was also drafted in and was instrumental in initiating the demand to impose the sanctions endorsed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 2009 (Mengisteab 2014). Later, when Eritrea tried to activate its membership of IGAD after an absence of several years, Ethiopia blocked the move (Andemariam 2015; Bereketeab 2018). The late PM, Mr. Meles, stated that either the PFDJ has to change or has to go. He, even claimed that his government had done everything possible to depose the PFDJ; they got limited support from the US Government, but it wasn't enough, and it was beyond the capacity of the Ethiopian Government.

For its part, Eritrea effectively used the Ethiopian rebels based in Eritrea to counter Ethiopia's hostile intentions (Lyons 2009, Minale 2021). Indeed, the tens of thousands of rebels may have served to deter Ethiopia from any military adventures, since it would also mean fighting Ethiopians alongside Eritreans who were located along their common border. As an Ethiopian colleague informed the author, following the 2015 elections in Ethiopia, junior military officers were ready to invade Eritrea and depose the government. Some EPRDF senior officials opposed the plan, however, on the grounds that it would mean fighting Ethiopian rebels based in Eritrea; therefore, the success of the plan was questionable.

Given all the temptations of the EPRDF led by the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and his successor's attempt to depose the Eritrean Government, there was no reason for Eritrea to believe in the sincerity of any peace proposal coming from Ethiopia. Clearly, given the absolute lack of trust, there was no possibility of settling the conflict. Any attempt by one side was perceived as malicious deception intended to outmanoeuvre the other, rather than as a genuine gesture designed to resolve the conflict.

The election of Abiy fundamentally changed the rules of the game. For Eritrea, it brought about a radical change in power relations in Ethiopia in two dimensions. As mentioned above, firstly, there was a geographical

shift, from the north to the south, away from Eritrea's borders. Secondly, power shifted from the TPLF (representing the people of Tigray) to OPDO (representing the Oromo people). The shift meant a reconfiguration of Ethiopia-Eritrea relations generally, and the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict in particular. The transition of power goes beyond a simple personality change or change of party colours. There has been a sea change: for the first time in recent history, the Eritrean issue in Ethiopian politics is being handled outside the Abyssinian establishment. No longer are relations with Eritrea under the control of the TPLF, which always reckoned that the Eritrean issue should serve the interests of Tigray. During the TPLF's struggle against the Dergue (Ethiopia's military regime) – and particularly when it dreamt of creating a republic of Tigray – it viewed its survival as intimately connected with Eritrea (Bereketeab 2009b, 2010). Meles, then chairman of EPRDF, in a 1990 interview with Paul Henze, put it this way:

> We look at this from the viewpoint of the interest of Tigray, first, and then Ethiopia as a whole. We would like to see Eritrea continuing to have a relationship with Ethiopia. We know that Tigray needs access to the sea and the only way is through Eritrea. Whether Eritrea is part of Ethiopia or independent, we need this access and, therefore, must have close ties. There are many Tigrayans in Eritrea. They are concerned. They don't want to be treated as foreigners there. There has always been close connections between Tigray and Eritrea for the highland people are all the same. They have the same history. (Ethiopia 2012: 9)

Also, following the independence of Eritrea and the ascendancy of the TPLF to state power in Ethiopia, Eritrea was perceived as the backbone of TPLF domination in Ethiopia. Despite the widespread perception that Meles unequivocally supported Eritrea's independence, this was his 1990 response to Henze's question of TPLF's stand on Eritrean independence: 'we really hope that Eritrea can remain part of a federated Ethiopia' (ibid.). The TPLF was a minority in the EPRDF and the people of Tigray constituted only 6 percent of the total population of Ethiopia: this made it very difficult for the party to sustain its domination of Ethiopian politics indefinitely. It became imperative to tie the Eritrean issue to the party's survival as a dominant force.

To this end the EPRDF promised the Ethiopian people that it would deliver the thing they valued most: access to the sea (Fessahatzion 1999). During the 1998-2000 Ethiopia-Eritrea war, in an attempt to mobilise the population and portray the party as the protector of Ethiopian interests, TPLF officials promised to deliver the Eritrean port of Assab to the Ethiopian people. Some commentators even claimed that the objective of the military was to capture Assab: '[t]he military… was victorious but came back grudgingly when Meles stopped it short of its goal: the occupation of Assab' (Milkias 2003: 52). According to the former leader of Tigray Gebru Asrat (2014), the division that occurred within the TPLF in 2001 was partly connected with the war with Eritrea. Senior TPLF leaders – including Siye Abraha, Tsadqan Gebretensae and Asrat – wanted to continue the war until the Eritrean Government had been deposed and Ethiopia's access to the sea also secured.

The fact was, however, that after Meles announced at the end of May 2000 that the war was over, there were about 10 failed attempts by the Ethiopian army to capture Assab before the ceasefire agreement was signed in Algiers on 18 June. The attempts to capture Assab and the subsequent human carnage on the Assab front tell a different story than claims that: '[f]or reasons that have never been fully clear, Meles ordered his commanders to halt, and Isaias [Afwerki] survived' (de Waal 2015: 145); one has to know war to talk about defeat and victory. The previous president of Tigray, Asrat, openly advocated reclaiming Assab (Asrat 2014). Meles, in a 2006 interview with local media, said that his Government had agreed to 85 percent of the border decision; however, on the remaining 15 per cent, Ethiopia would never concede. It was widely assumed that this referred to the village of Badme (a concession that the current leadership of the Tigray regional state also opposes). Therefore, Eritrea's mistrust of the TPLF went much deeper.

What may have further complicated the issue of Badme was that it was caught up in a larger territorial claim within Ethiopia itself: when the military regime was defeated and the TPLF-dominated EPRDF captured state power, it carried out a controversial regional reconfiguration. This meant that the Tigray region expanded, thanks to the inclusion of the territories of Raya from Wollo region and Welqait from Gonder region. Badme was caught up in this. When the power of the TPLF began to wane,

voices in Raya and Welqait began to question the legality of their incorporation into Tigray; now there are demands for the territories to be given back to the old regions. Just as the TPLF rejected the surrender of Badme to Eritrea, so it also rejects reinstating Raya and Welqait. The return of Badme could have implications for the future of those regions, too.

As far as Eritrea is concerned, the side-lining of the TPLF ushered in a new perspective on relations. There are two dimensions to the new Eritrea-Ethiopia relationship (and to the confidence that Eritrea has derived from it). The first concerns the Eritrean leadership and, in particular, the president; the second concerns the Eritrean people.

With regard to the Eritrean leadership, the shift in power has confirmed two things: firstly, the Eritrean president could claim to have been vindicated in his stated assessment of 'game over' for the TPLF in Ethiopia; and secondly, he could also claim to have won, while the TPLF has lost. For 20 years, the TPLF tried to depose his Government; but now, instead, it has lost power. He can now engage with the new Ethiopian leadership, which he believes is to be trusted. No more is Eritrea the political domain of the TPLF. There seemed to be good chemistry between the President of Eritrea and the Prime Minister of Ethiopia. The Eritrean President has visited Ethiopia several times, going to Addis Ababa, Hawasa and Amhara region; and the leaders of many of the regional states of Ethiopia have been to Eritrea. However, the Eritrean President has not been to Tigray and, likewise, the leader of Tigray has not visited Eritrea.

With regard to the Eritrean people, the shift in power is also a victory. There is a feeling among Eritreans that, for the first time in 27 years, Ethiopians might have genuinely accepted the independence of Eritrea. The Agreement of 9 July 2018 reiterated respect for Eritrea's independence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty (Agreement on Peace and Friendship 2018). This may have replaced the common view that it was a conspiracy between the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the TPLF that led to the illegal separation of Eritrea (cf. Milkias 2003). The presentation of a camel – a symbol of the Eritrean liberation struggle – to the Eritrean President during his visit to Ethiopia and commemoration of Nakfa – an icon of Eritrean perseverance and resilience – were clear indications of the recognition of Eritrean sovereignty. The emergence of a government that does not automatically include Eritrea in the Ethiopian power equation is