



Summary Online-Discussion from 19. March 2021

Anchor of Stability or Problem Child – Quo Vadis Ethiopia?

Background: Since November 2020, the Ethiopian army and units led by the *Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)* have been facing each other in a warlike conflict in the federal state of Tigray. But despite the soon announced success of the “law enforcement operation” and the arrest of many *TPLF* leaders, the fighting continues. In the meantime, more than 60,000 people have fled to Sudan. Human rights violations and possible war crimes are being reported from the part of the country that is still partly sealed off. And Tigray is not Ethiopia's only conflict region.

Elections are to be held throughout the country on 5 June 2021. In order to be able to start with a national party beyond ethnic borders, Prime Minister Abiy has transformed the former rallying movement *EPRDF* into the “Prosperity Party”. The *TPLF*, which was the driving political force in the state from the early 1990s until Abiy became prime minister, did not join the new party. Critics of Abiy fear the further concentration of state power in the centre, and international observers also see the arrest of high-ranking opposition politicians as a departure from Abiy's policies of enlarging the democratic space. At the same time, the policy of the heavy hand has helped Abiy gain new popularity in the country.

Highlights:

- The humanitarian situation in Tigray has reached a critical point and is coming to a climax.
- The fundamental problem in Ethiopia lies in the country's identity issue – it is lacking a common narrative.
- Abiy's “Prosperity Party” is an attempt to overcome the extremes of the past. However, in order for elections to be implemented, real and fair competition must take place between all parties.

Welcome Remarks

Dr. Uschi Eid,
President,
Deutsche-Afrika-Stiftung

Discussion

**Prinz Dr. Asfa-Wossen
Asserate,**
Author and Chairman of
the Board of Trustees,
Deutsche-Afrika Stiftung

Prof. Belachew Gebrewold,
*MCI Management Center
Innsbruck*

Mehret Haile,
Consultant

Moderation

Dr. Gerrit Kurtz,
Research Fellow,
DGAP

- Ensuring peace and security as well as political dialogue is imperative for democratic elections to take place in June.

The current situation in Ethiopia

In her opening statement, **Dr. Uschi Eid** emphasized the importance of Ethiopia for the African continent and highlighted the positive developments in recent years - the country's peace agreement with Eritrea and the reforms of Abiy. At the same time, she underlined her concern regarding the conflict between the *TPLF* and the Ethiopian army and the foreign policy challenges, such as the conflicts with Sudan and Egypt. **Mehret Haile**, who worked in the Tigray region for a long time, reported on the humanitarian situation in the country, which she described as dramatic and worsening. Around 600,000 people are currently dependent on food aid, and access to clean drinking water and medical care is poor. Banks are also largely closed and people have no access to cash, which exacerbates the situation, according to **Haile**. In addition to the political disputes, the country must also cope with the challenges posed by the Covid 19 pandemic and the locust plague. Exact information about the situation in Tigray can hardly be obtained because the region is cut off from the outside world. International organizations are only allowed to use main roads and can hardly reach people in more rural areas.

A search for causes of the divisions

With regard to the conflict between the *TPLF* and the government, the causes and backgrounds of this conflict were discussed and the focus was on ethnic federalism and the various ethnic regions. In this context, **Prof. Belachew Gebrewold** spoke of the problem that has been central to him and has long existed - the question of Ethiopia's identity. It is true that the country has prevailed against Western states in the past and is the only African country that has never been colonized, hence acting as a single entity towards the outside world. Internally, however, it never found a common narrative and was rather shaped by different extremes. In the 1970s, the 800-year-old monarchy was followed by a socialist one-party dictatorship that unified the country. The rebel alliance *EPRDF*, which came to power after a civil war, introduced an ethnic federalism that divided the country into nine regions along the largest ethnic groups and provided it with the right of self-determination and territorial autonomy. According to **Gebrewold**, however, this failed as did the socialist approach because the *TPLF* completely dominated the alliance and thus Ethiopian politics. **Prince Asfa-Wossen Asserate** called the ethnic federalism of Ethiopia apartheid, which defines people based on their races. In this he sees the roots of the current conflicts and declared that there had to be a democratic instead of an ethnic federalism in which the people were the sovereign. In Abiy's approach and the founding of the "Prosperity Party" **Gebrewold** saw an attempt to overcome the extremes of the past. However, this takes time and leads to friction, which is evident in the current conflict between the *TPLF* and the government.

The elections scheduled for June 2021

After the elections in 2020 were postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, they should now take place in June. The *Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)*, the second largest party in the country,

has already announced that it does not want to run because leaders of the party have been arrested and some offices have been closed, said **Gerrit Kurtz Gebrewold** was not sure whether it would be possible to hold the elections in June, but regards Abiy's will to do so as an important signal of confidence. Nevertheless, according to **Gebrewold**, the participation of the most important opposition parties is a prerequisite for holding democratic elections. To do this, however, a political dialogue would first be necessary. **Haile** also underlined how crucial a political dialogue would be. However, she also stated that elections should not have the highest priority, but that peace and security in the country must first be guaranteed.

Asfa-Wossen Asseerate identified the postponement of the elections last year as the trigger for the current conflict. He also stated how important the Tigray region was for the country and that there could be no Ethiopia without Tigray. In this context, he also stressed that the current conflict is a conflict between the government and the *TPLF* - and not with the Tigray region itself. **Asfa-Wossen Asseerate** also stated that there had not yet been any real democratic elections in Ethiopia and that the 2015 elections, in which the ruling party won with 99 percent of the vote, were a farce. With regard to the upcoming elections in the summer, he believes that real competition between all parties is essential. In addition, he considered it necessary to call in international election observers.

Germany's role

In November 2019, Germany agreed a reform partnership with Ethiopia - a deeper form of development cooperation with reform-oriented African countries as part of the *G20* "Compact with Africa" initiative. Germany supports programs in the core topics of training and sustainable growth for good jobs, as well as the "A world without hunger" initiative. In this context, **Haile** emphasized the importance of Ethiopia as a partner country for Germany and emphasized that development cooperation should be continued, especially in areas of agriculture, nutrition and education. Nevertheless, more transparency needs to be created and greater investments must be made in micro-enterprises, added **Haile**, because higher employment leads to more stability. According to **Asfa-Wossen Asseerate**, development cooperation is essential for the entire continent in order to ensure sustainable growth. However, this should be linked to certain conditions.