

Interview with Mulugeta Berhe: the Ethiopian election dispute

This is a transcription of an interview with Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe, conducted on September 18, on the recent election in Tigray region and its political repercussions. It continues and concludes the podcast.

Alex de Waal: So Mulugeta you are currently in Mek'ele, which is the capital of Tigray region in Ethiopia, and last week, Tigray region held its elections which were extremely controversial because while the election accorded with the schedule laid down in the Ethiopian Constitution, the federal government of Ethiopia headed by prime minister Abiy Ahmed has postponed elections and has declared the Tigrayan elections to be unconstitutional. So, can you tell me what has been going on?

Mulugeta Berhe: All this started [in March] when the federal government decided to postpone the scheduled regional and federal elections unlimitedly, meaning contingent on the resolution of the health challenge that came out of the coronavirus. And not only that, once it unlimitedly postponed the election, it also made the decision that it has interpreted the constitution in a way that it allows it to continue as a government despite the expiration of its mandate by the end of this month up until a certain time when the election is going to be held and the new elected government can sit.

So, the opposition, including the TPLF and several other opposition parties, said “there's no way that the constitution can be interpreted in such a way. Yes, there is the problem of the pandemic, but we have to have a dialogue.” And the government says “there is no dialogue, I have interpreted the Constitution and it allows me to stay there.” But unlike the other opposition, the TPLF is the government in Tigray. It runs a state government and therefore it can oppose a declaration saying, “okay, you can postpone the federal elections, there is nothing that we can do alone, but here in Tigray it's our right to have an elected government and therefore we will hold the election as scheduled.” That's how the crisis started.

I've heard many media outlets reporting it simply as a defiance, not only as an election, but as a defiance to the federal government. I can see there is an element of defiance as well, but the central point is that they are deeply convinced that they've fought for their right to self-administer and they are deeply convinced that nobody should have any say on how they govern themselves, and therefore they are exercising their rights. They were just saying, "no way, this constitution has to be respected, and we're constitutional by casting our votes to elect our own government, and we're not included in someone else's affairs. We're not electing a government for the Amharas. We're not electing a government for the Oromos. It is for the Amharas and the Oromos to elect their own government as much it is for us to elect our own government and that's what we are exercising." So that's what's happened.

Alex de Waal: Would you see this as the ultimate manifestation of the right to self-determination as enshrined in the spirit of the federal constitution of 1994?

Mulugeta Berhe: Yes, of course. I mean the constitution of 1994 not only allows nations and nationalities to govern themselves and the constitution itself talks about a divided sovereignty. Sovereignty is shared between the federal government and the regional states. It recognizes the right for nations' and nationalities' self-determination, including and up to succession. And the clause for secession, the procedures for such a measure are broad and therefore these people are saying, "well, it's our right if and when we felt we will be better by doing it, we can have our own state, but we are not demanding that, we are just saying that we have our own constitution, as the rest of the regional states have their own constitutions, which of course is in line with the constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia." They said that they are just exercising their rights and I think they are right.

Alex de Waal: So we now have a situation in which there is a government in Addis Ababa, a federal government, that refuses to recognize the government in Tigray, and vice versa, a government in Tigray that has essentially said or is about to say to the federal government, we have followed the constitutional procedures, and you, in Addis Ababa, have not; your term has actually expired. So, what does it mean to have this standoff between a region and the central government refusing to recognize one another?

Mulugeta Berhe: Well, I don't know but it's very serious. This is the climax. It's is the climax of the political crisis that the country is in. It's beyond the capacity of any single one of them. It's not even within the capacity of the federal government to resolve this. There has to be a political process that brings political settlement on how to transition into a stable form of government. The last two years we've been in turmoil. So many people have been advocating on the need for a national dialogue in order to reach a political system that is peaceful and constructive.

You know last week you might have heard that there is an ongoing crisis in Benishangul-Gumuz state, an Amhara region where over 120 people are reported dead and this is not a one-time incident. This time, in Benishangul. The week before was Wolayita and then few weeks before was Oromia and then Dire Dawa and so on and so forth. This is a manifestation of the tips of the political crisis that we are in and a wider dialogue, probably a facilitated dialogue, towards a political settlement is mandatory. I don't know what would happen if the government in Addis doesn't recognize the government in Mek'ele and if the government in Mek'ele doesn't recognize the government in Addis.

Alex de Waal: Do you think this might take us towards the breakup of Ethiopia?

Mulugeta Berhe: Yes, the risk is there. It's written in black and white, and there's no confusion, there's nothing grey there.

Alex de Waal: What sign of Hope do you see in the current situation in Ethiopia?

Mulugeta Berhe: One thing is that there is an increased realization of the depths of the crisis both nationally and internationally. So, people are getting out of a certain type of euphoria and are being realistic, which could possibly lead them towards finding solutions. It's only the last few months, if not the last few weeks, that the international media and international organizations have started reporting about the depth of the crisis in Ethiopia. It was a surprise when the international community was just coming and telling us that there is a very futuristic type of transition.

We are not in a transition. Initially, there was a very strong authoritarian state. Then it continued to get weak having inherited a weak government. And that weak government

is fast approaching a failed state. That's what we're seeing, we're not seeing any transition.

Therefore, one of the hopes I have is there is an increased realization of the depths of political crisis that Ethiopia is in both domestically and internationally. This might lead the key stakeholders towards looking for a way out of this crisis.

Alex de Waal: Well, thank you very much, Mulugeta, that's been absolutely fascinating and also very disturbing. We will come back to you shortly for more updates about what is going on and what might be done to stop this political crisis resulting in the worst possible outcome.

Mulugeta Berhe: It is a pleasure.