

## **Seizing The Ripe Moment: A Critical Analysis of the Resolution of the Twenty Years Ethiopia-Eritrea Conflict in 2018**

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### **Abstract**

*After two decades of protracted conflict, Ethiopia and Eritrea resolved their differences in 2018 ending a conflict that had persisted between the two countries since their border conflict in 1998. The the two countries signed a historic peace agreement in July 2018 and committed to end their mutual hostility and embrace peace, friendship, development and cooperation. Nearly twenty years earlier, externally led mediation and arbitration had failed to resolve the conflict leading to a situation of “no peace no war” between the two countries. This paper seeks to critically analyze the successful conflict resolution in 2018 viz a vis the unsuccessful resolution of the same conflict nearly twenty years earlier. Applying the ripe moment and human needs theories of conflict resolution, this paper examines and finds that there were domestic and international conditions that ripened the conflict for resolution in 2018 leading to largely internally driven negotiations, mediation and that successfully resolved the conflict. The paper also finds that mediation and arbitration failed to resolve the conflict about twenty years earlier (1998-2002) owing to the fact that it was predominantly externally driven and thus lacked ownership by the parties to the conflict (Ethiopia and Eritrea) in addition to the fact that the conflict was at that time unripe for resolution. The paper concludes that internally driven conflict resolution coupled with the existence of the ripe moment is likely to succeed and be more durable compared to an externally driven conflict resolution.*

### **Introduction**

In 2018, the Horn of Africa caught world media attention, not for bad news of violent conflict but for good news that caught the whole world by surprise. Two arch enemies: Ethiopia and Eritrea had successfully resolved their conflict after twenty years of hostility towards each other. The two countries

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signed a historical agreement on July 9 2018 indicating their commitment to lay down their mutual animosity and embrace peace, development and cooperation in the Horn of Africa (Ylönen 2019:245). Speaking about these profound changes, Antonio Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations, made the following comments “ There is a powerful wind of hope blowing across the Horn of Africa”.... ‘We have seen a conflict that has lasted for decades, ending, and that has a very important meaning in a world where we see, unfortunately so many conflicts multiplying, and lasting forever’ (UN News 2018).

Sixteen years earlier, in 2000 when the two countries were engaged in violent confrontations over a border dispute, mediation and arbitration efforts from external actors were unable to resolve the conflict leading to a situation of “no peace no war” between the two Horn of Africa states. How then were the two countries able to silently resolve their conflict successfully? Why did conflict resolution fail in 2000 and why did it succeed in 2018? This paper analyses the alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, conflict resolution theories, approaches and models/frameworks that were applied in the two conflicts and seeks to establish the failure of the 2000 conflict resolution vis a vis the success of conflict resolution in 2018. It begins by discussing the theoretical framework to be applied in analyzing the Ethiopia- Eritrea conflict resolution and then looks at the background to the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict so as to put the conflict into perspective. This is then followed by the analysis of the two conflict resolution processes. The paper concludes that internally driven conflict resolution is likely to be successful and durable compared to one that is externally driven.

### **Theoretical Framework for the Analysis of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Conflict Resolution**

Wallensteen (2007:8) defines conflict resolution as a situation where conflicting parties enter into an agreement that solves their central incompatibilities, accept each other’s continued existence as parties and cease all violent action against each other. Tesfay (2012:189) contrasts classical and contemporary conflict resolution. He argues that while the classical view of conflict resolution focused on top-down intervention that addressed the core parties to the conflict and gave primary responsibility to external actors, the contemporary view focuses on a bottom up process that

appreciates the role of indigenous peacemakers. Contemporary view also takes a broad nature of the timing of intervention in conflicts.

Conflict resolution in the year 2000 sought to address the 1998-2000 border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The conflict resolution process was guided by the liberal theory which places a high value in international organizations in resolving conflict. Consequently, it applied the liberal peace model of conflict resolution. The liberal model is a top-down model that seeks to bring the leaders (especially state leaders) of the conflicting parties together for mediation with the help of an external party (Tesfay 2012). The external parties involved in the resolution of the 1998-2000 border conflict were international organizations such as the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) as well as powerful states such as the United States (U.S). The liberal theory and model also place value in international institutions such as international law in managing behavior of states and enhancing international peace and stability. The Ethiopia Eritrea Boundaries Commission was established so as to arbitrate the border conflict and give a verdict guided by international law. The approaches of conflict resolution applied were mediation and arbitration whose outcomes were a peace agreement (the Algiers Peace Agreement) and the binding ruling (the EEBC verdict) respectively. Bercovitch (1996:242) defines Arbitration as settlement of a dispute by a binding award rendered by an entity that is granted with such powers by the parties themselves. The award is arrived at by an authoritative legal process. This means that arbitration is a zero sum process that produces a winner and a loser in the conflict.

This paper applies the ripe moment theory and the human needs theory to analyze the 2018 successful conflict resolution and resumption of peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea. According to the ripe moment theory, a conflict can only be successfully resolved when it is ripe for resolution. Ripeness is a condition that is necessary for initiation of negotiations which must be seized by the parties to the conflict themselves or through persuasion by a mediator (Zartman 2001). There are two conditions for ripeness, the conflicting parties 'perception of a mutually hurting stalemate as well as a mutually enticing opportunity (Zartman 2001). This is coupled with the parties' cost benefit analysis leading to the realization that the conflict is costlier to them than peace. This paper argues that there were domestic and

international conditions that enhanced the ripening of the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict for resolution. The human needs theory posits that deprivation of basic human needs leads to conflict. Burton (1990) identifies the main human needs whose deprivation can cause violent conflict as needs such as the need for identify, recognition, and security. This paper maintains that, Ethiopia, which initiated the 2018 conflict resolution, recognized and fulfilled Eritrea's needs for identify and recognition as a sovereign state as well as security. Negotiation was adopted as the necessary approach of conflict resolution. Although some external intervention played some role, the negotiations were majorly driven by the key parties to the conflict (the leaders of the two countries) and the outcome was a peace agreement that both parties were willing to implement.

### **Background to the Ethiopia-Eritrea Conflict**

Mayer asserts that "the history of the people involved in a conflict , of the system in which the conflict is occurring as well as the history of the issues themselves can powerfully influence the course of the conflict ( Meyer 200:4, cited in Tesfay 2012:167). Thus the history of Eritrea which is intricately related to Ethiopia can help understand the conflict between the two countries and therefore inform the success and failure of various conflict resolution approaches.

#### *Eritrea's Colonization and Struggle for Independence*

The journey to Eritrea's independence began with colonization by Italy until the defeat of Italy during World War II in 1941. From 1941, Eritrea was administered by the British administration up to 1950 and then, following a United Nation resolution, it was federated with Ethiopia as an autonomous entity under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Emperor (Tefay 2012: 164); Abbay 2001; Negash & Tronvoll 2000:9). This affected the Tigrinya of Eritrea and the Tigreans of Ethiopia, who were of the same ethnic group but now belonged to different political entities. In 1961, the Eritreans formed a movement called The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and began an armed struggle for independence from Ethiopia (Abbay 2001:481, Makinda 1982) but were kept at bay by the powerful Ethiopian military. In 1975, The Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) which was formed in Ethiopia to fight against the repressive military junta of Megistu Haile-

Mariam supported Eritrea's struggle for independence (Negash & Tronvoll 2000:10).

In 1991, after the defeat of the Mengistu Haile Mariam's military junta in Ethiopia, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) entered into Asmara, signaling an emergence of a de facto independent state of Eritrea (Negash & Tronvoll 2000:31). However, Eritrea remained legally a part of Ethiopia until April 1993 when a referendum was held and Eritrea was formally declared an independent state on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1993 and Ethiopia formally recognized Eritrea's independence (Prunier 1998). Eritrea became a one party state with Isaias Afwerki as the president. He has remained president to date.

#### *Eritrea-Ethiopian Short Lived Cordial Relations (1991-1997)*

After Eritrea assisted Ethiopia in toppling Mengistu Haile-Mariam's military junta in 1991 a brief rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia ensued (Connell 1999:5). The two leaders of Eritrea and Ethiopia, Issaias Afwerki and Meles Zenawi promised to work together, to cooperate and uphold peace and democracy and work towards development. The two countries signed a Friendship and Cooperation Agreement (FCA) anchored on three essential points: i. the application of a common currency (the Ethiopian Birr) until Eritrea was able to issue its own currency, ii. That Ethiopia would have free access to the Eritrean ports of Assab and Massawa and iii. That Ethiopia would run and maintain the Assab oil refinery without paying taxes and duties (Negash & Tronvoll 2000:35; Mesfin 2012; Bereketeab 2010:18).

In spite of the spirit of cooperation that the leaders extended to each other, economic and political tensions persisted, deteriorating their relations. The agreement of a common currency was watered down a few years later, in 1997, when Eritrea introduced a new Eritrean currency (*the Nafka*) without consultations with Ethiopia (Negash & Tronvoll 2000:35). The Eritrean government proposed for the two currencies (*the Birr and the Nafka*) to have the same value and to be used in both countries, but the Ethiopian government rejected this proposal and insisted that all trade transactions between the two countries should be carried out using foreign currency (Negash & Tronvoll 2000; Bereketeab 2010:18; Mesfin 2012:97). Unable to reach an agreement, Ethiopia boycotted Eritrean seaports and instead

redirected its trade through Djibouti (Bereketeab 2010:18). This worsened the already deteriorating relations setting the stage for the 1998 border war. *Ethiopia-Eritrean Border Conflict and the Twenty Year Hostility*

Minor disagreements had been in existence between Ethiopia and Eritrea concerning border definition. In an effort to resolve this latent conflict diplomatically, a bilateral Ethio-Eritrean commission had been established in November 1997 to address the issue (Prunier 1998). The commission met regularly either in Asmara or in Addis Ababa. The Ethiopia-Eritrean border conflict began in May 1998 when Eritrean soldiers allegedly crossed into territories that were under the Ethiopian administration, sparking a shootout between Eritrea and Ethiopian forces (Tronvoll 2009). The Eritrean army later invaded Badme area and occupied several villages that had been perceived to be in Ethiopian territory sparking Ethiopia's reaction. Badme, the area of contention has surprisingly been described as a barren strip of land, piece of desert or an inconsequential piece of estate owing to its small size and absence of any known valuable resources (Tsfay 2012; Khadiagala 1999; Connell 1999). In a month's time what started as border skirmishes, escalated into an all-out bilateral war that attracted international attention.

The international community expressed concern about the outbreak of aggression between two of Africa's poorest and most militaristic countries (Tronvoll 2009:4). A joint proposal by the United States of America (USA) and Rwanda for a peace negotiation was accepted by Ethiopia but rejected by Eritrea (Tronvoll 2009, Khadiagala 1999). Later, the Organization of African Unity (now African Union) and the United Nations (UN) took over the responsibility of resolving the conflict, and international mediators moved between Addis Ababa in Ethiopia and Asmara in Eritrea trying to broker peace without success. Skirmishes continued intermittently for the next two years.

In May 2000, Ethiopia launched a major offensive leading to a *de facto* victory of the Ethiopian army and the withdrawal of the Eritrean army from the border deep into Eritrea. The Ethiopian Army took control of a wide stretch of Eritrean territories along the common border (Tronvoll 2009:5). In addition to the casualties, several people were internally displaced and others became refugees. Moreover, Ethiopia deported over 75,000 Eritreans while

Ethiopians of Eritrean origin were deported and stripped off their citizenship rights; Eritrea also expelled over 70,000 Ethiopians working in Eritrea (Tronvoll 2009:5). A United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission (UN peacekeeping mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea UNMEE) was deployed in 2001 to the Eritrean-Ethiopian border to temporarily guard a buffer zone between the two armies. It was later withdrawn in 2008.

### **Efforts to Resolve the Ethiopia-Eritrea Conflict**

The escalation of the border conflict from a low scale to a full blown war between Ethiopia and Eritrea attracted response from regional as well as international attention and called for efforts to resolve the conflict using various alternative dispute resolution mechanisms.

#### *Efforts to Resolve the 1998-2000 Border Conflict: Mediation and Arbitration*

The 1998 – 2000 conflict between the two countries, international mediation was pursued by the international community. The main parties involved were the United Nations, the Organization of African Union, the European Union and the USA. This led to the Algiers Agreement/Accord which was signed in June 2000 (Bereketeab 2019:6). The agreement consisted of an arbitration component in that one of its provisions was the establishment of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission whose mandate was to delimit and demarcate the border based on pertinent colonial treaties and applicable international law (The Algiers Agreement, 2000; Bereketeab 2019). The decision of the commission was to be final and binding to both Ethiopia and Eritrea. Thus, by signing the Algiers Agreement/Accord, Ethiopia and Eritrea committed to accept the decision of the commission without objection.

In April 2002, the commission gave its verdict. The commission's decision on Badme, the disputed region was that the Badme Plain was largely on the Ethiopian side but the village of Badme was on the Eritrean side of the border (Tronvoll 2009:5). The reaction to the ruling signaled a further conflict as it clearly highlighted incompatibility of goals between the two conflict parties. Ethiopia rejected the verdict terming it illegal, irresponsible and unjust and demanded renegotiation (Bereketeab 2019). On the other hand, Eritrea accepted it and called for its unconditional implementation. Ethiopia appealed arguing that the decision divided local communities on each side

of the border but the appeal was rejected since both countries had agreed to abide by the commission's decision. A nation-wide protest pressured the Ethiopian government to reject the commission's decision to grant Badme village to Eritrea. This however did not change the decision of the EEBC.

In spite of the ensuing stalemate, in 2007, the EEBC declared the border virtually demarcated and the case legally closed. The Commission's decision to adopt virtually demarcated borders on electronic maps as opposed to a physical demarcation on the ground was accepted by Eritrea while Ethiopia rejected it as "legal nonsense" (Nystuen and Tronvoll 2008, cited in Tronvoll 2009:6). Ethiopia called for dialogue to resolve the border dispute. Eritrea however maintained that there was no border dispute since the border had been legally delimited and demarcated and termed Ethiopia's presence in Badme as deliberate occupation of sovereign Eritrean territory (Bereketeab 2019:9).



Source: <http://www.eritrea.be/old/eritrea-maps.htm>

Ethiopia's rejection of the commission's decision led to a situation of "no war no peace, with occasional clashes between the armies of both states. The stalemate lasted 16 years until 2018 (Bereketeab, 2019:5). There was therefore every indication that the conflict had not yet been resolved. Both states remained diametrically opposed regarding Badme, the area of contention, with each party claiming to have sovereign authority over it. The border between the two countries remained closed separating families, relatives and friends that had lived on each side of the border as Eritrea-Ethiopian relations increasingly became sour. Embassies in both countries were closed, economic relations frozen and Ethiopia could no longer access



the Eritrean ports of Assab and Massawa. Consequently, the condition of the ports as well as their economic value deteriorated.

The unresolved border conflict led to wide raging repercussions in Eritrea. Before the border conflict, Eritrea was hailed internationally and domestically for upholding democracy, protecting human rights and freedoms and having an institutional set up and atmosphere that seemed to deliver the promised hope, peace and justice (Hepner 2014:154). However, following the end of a border conflict with Ethiopia in 2000, things took a dramatic turn. Citing security concerns and vulnerability to attacks by Ethiopia and other international enemies the government embarked on massive repression and torture of religious leaders, real or perceived political dissidents, journalists, student union leaders and gross human rights violations. Non-Governmental organizations and human rights organizations were repelled from the country (Hepner 2014:160). People began fleeing the country such that by the year 2011-2012, relative to its small population, Eritrea produced the highest number of refugees and asylum seekers in the world (Jopson 2009, UNHCR 2013). President Isaias Afwerki dismissed reports about his repressive government as a “boring joke” based on fabrications (Hepner 2014:153).

Eritrea was also accused of destabilizing the Horn of Africa region by supporting militia groups to destabilize the governments of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan. The United Nations on various occasions imposed wide ranging sanctions on Eritrea such as arms embargoes, asset freezes and travel bans on top leaders (Plaut 2010:576). Indeed, the UN declared Eritrea an international pariah state in 2013. Eritrea then turned its back on the West, the UN, International Organizations and even the African Union and opted to turn East, to countries such as China. The country alienated many of its former friends. Eritrea also carried out unprovoked aggression towards her neighbors including Ethiopia, Djibouti and Yemen (Milkias 2004:70). Consequently, the country suffered isolation not only regionally but also internationally.

The relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea was characterized by enemy perceptions towards each other. As the impasse between the two countries prevailed, both parties continued engaging in a war of words and proxy in

order to sustain their entrenched political positions. Ethiopia accused Eritrea of arming rebel and terrorist groups in Ethiopia in order to destabilize the country (Negash & Tronvoll 2000:88). On her part, Ethiopia worked hard to keep Eritrea isolated in the region and (Stauffer 2018:13).

### *Successful Resolution of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Conflict in 2018*

Since the 1998 border war, Ethiopia and Eritrea had remained arch enemies for twenty years until 2018, when a rapprochement marked a major resolution of the conflict. A series of events triggered the rapprochement which caught the whole world by surprise. The winds of change began with the selection of Ethiopian Prime Minister Ahmen Abiy, who took over after Hailemariam Desalegn announced his resignation amidst rising protests against his government earlier in the year (Lyammouri 2018). During his inauguration early in April, Abiy announced his intention to resolve Ethiopia's dispute with Eritrea which had led to thawed relations and a militarized border since 2000.

Two months later, on 5 June 2018, the Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced that his government had accepted the 2002 EEBC's border ruling and was ready to implement it completely and unconditionally. In a show of commitment to his words, he extended an invitation to the Eritrean government to conclude peace and end the "no war no peace" state that had characterized the relations between the two neighbors (Bereketeab 2019:14). The Eritrean president on 20 June announced his intention to send a delegation to Ethiopia, which he did a few days later.

A series of reciprocal visits followed and in July, amid huge jubilation and rejoicing, the two leaders: Isaias Afwerki and Abiy Ahmed jointly declared the end of the 20 year war between the two countries (Mohammed 2018). They signed a Peace and Friendship Agreement in Eritrea. The peace agreement consisted of five key points: (i) an end to the state of war; (ii). Cooperation on political, economic, social and cultural issues and the opening of embassies in their respective capitals; (iii) links in trade, communication and transport, (iv). Implementation of the border decision and (v) joint work toward peace and security in the region (Stauffer 2018:5; Bereketeab 2019: 14). Implementation of the agreement followed and on 11<sup>th</sup> September, Ethiopia reopened its land border with Eritrea. The two

neighbors further opened embassies and resumed flights as well as trade relations. They also agreed to cooperate on several areas including reopening of two roads that connect Ethiopia to Eritrea's seaports of Assaba and Massawa. Several other developments followed signaling reconciliation and the resumption of friendship between the two states. The developments snowballed further in the region whereby Somalia and Djibouti also resumed friendly relations with Eritrea after many years of thawed relations. This signaled a wind of hope in the Horn of Africa region indicating that the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict had been internationalized further and become a major source of strained inter-state relations in the region.

Across the globe, media focused on the Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement as a world event (Berekteab 2019:13). Pursuant to the Asmara agreements, the two leaders were invited to Jeddah on 16 September 2018 by the King of Saudi Arabia where they signed the Peace and Friendship Agreement in the presence of the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, and the king of Saudi Arabia (UN News 2018). This internationalized the peace agreement. All in all, the move by Ethiopia and Eritrea to resolve their conflict by themselves through negotiation was hailed as a great move in the right direction in the resolution of the long-term hostilities between the two neighbors. The implementation of the peace and friendship agreement began immediately unlike the Algiers agreement that the two countries signed back in 2000 but did not implement at all.

### **A Critical Analysis of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Conflict Resolution**

This paper has thus far presented two efforts to resolve the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict: the 2000 mediation and arbitration efforts by the international community and the 2018 conflict resolution in which negotiation was initiated by the leaders of the two countries: Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the Eritrean president Isaias Afwerki. While in 2000 conflict resolution failed and resulted in a situation of “no peace no war”, which is in itself a relatively latent form of conflict, the 2018 negotiation and some mediation initiated by the United States and Saudi Arabia was hailed as a great success. This part of the paper critically analyses the failure of mediation and arbitration as the main approaches to conflict resolution applied in 2000 and negotiation and some mediation as the approaches applied in the successful resolution in 2018.

### *Failure of International Mediation and Arbitration in 2000*

The efforts of the top-down approach that was applied by the international community in resolving the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict bore little fruit. Both parties still maintained their hardline stances. The international community actors involved in the mediation drafted the Algiers Agreement for Ethiopia and Eritrea to sign. Thus both Ethiopia and Eritrea did not own the process. Arbitration also did very little to resolve the conflict. The challenge with arbitration is that it establishes a winner and a loser. In the case of the Eritrea-Ethiopia border conflict, the ruling of the EEBC was in favor of Eritrea to whom it granted the village of Badme. Ethiopia contested the verdict but there was no alternative since the ruling was binding. Nevertheless, the commission concluded its work citing that the dispute was over. This was clearly unfinished business. The peace agreement as well and the ruling of the EEBC were not implemented by the parties to the conflict (Eritrea and Ethiopia). It also implies that the conflict was not ready for resolution since the parties to the conflict were unwilling to cooperate.

This therefore proves that although external interventions are usually important and sometimes decisive in ending conflicts, a crucial factor is the willingness of the conflicting parties themselves to consider a negotiated agreement (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall 2016:209). In addition external actors, interested in concluding agreements as a measure of success tend to overlook deep seated causes. For instance the mediators only focused on the border and failed to look into the history of the two countries and identify as well as other economic, political and socio-cultural factors.

The international mediators (the US, the UN, the OAU and the EU) who drafted the agreement were also the witnesses and guarantors of the peace agreement. As such, they bore the responsibility of supervising or enhancing its implementation. They however did nothing when Ethiopia refused to honor and implement the ruling of the EEBC. Their failure to take a position on Ethiopia thus undermined the arbitration as well as the whole arbitration process. They thus contributed to the “no peace no war” situation between Ethiopia and Eritrea which lasted 16 years causing a lot of human suffering (Bereketeab 2019: 42). It also undermined the credibility of international law.

The US later sought to twist the binding and final nature of the EEBC judgment by openly proposing a renegotiation of the border decision. In 2006 the US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer visited the Badme village which was under the control of Ethiopian forces and suggested that a referendum be held in order for the villagers to determine to which country they wanted to belong ( Bereketeab 2019:42). This would greatly undermine the Algiers Agreement. These moves by the US indicate the influence of power and geostrategic interests on international mediation as an alternative dispute resolution mechanism and it also highlights the fact that some of the external parties may not be neutral mediators.

### **Success of Internally Driven Negotiation and some Mediation in Resolving the Conflict in 2018**

For conflicts especially protracted conflicts to be resolved, the presence of the right conditions is imperative. This is the argument that William Zartman (2001) postulates in his ripe moment theory. Conflict resolution is predicated on the conditions being right (Bereketeab 2019:23). The conditions for ripeness may be influenced by both internal and external factors.

This paper argues that the success of conflict resolution in 2018 was as a result of the timing of the ripe moment for the conflict. Bereketeab (2018:23) submits that the conditions for ripeness of the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict entailed various objective and subjective factors in Ethiopia coupled with a trust factor from Eritrea. Objective conditions are external to human will but are essential for the maturity of subjective conditions. Subjective conditions on the other hand relate to human will and feeling. Other idiosyncratic factors such as experience and one's world view also matter. Objective conditions necessary to sustain or enhance the solution of a conflict include: economic, political, military, security, diplomatic and other material resources (Bereketeab 2019:24). Various conditions in both countries came into play that led to the ripeness of the conflict for resolution.

### **Conditions in Ethiopia that Ripened the Conflict for Resolution**

Ethiopia under the leadership of Abiy Ahmed made the first move towards conflict resolution by announcing the country's willingness and readiness to honour the Algiers Agreement and the verdict of the EEBC concerning Badme (the disputed village) unconditionally. Abiy, extended a hand of

peace to Eritrea's president. The following are some of the various internal and external conditions/factors in Ethiopia that ripened the conflict for successful resolution.

*Domestic uprisings and regime change in Ethiopia*

Since 2015, a popular youth uprising engulfed Ethiopia indicating deep seated popular dissatisfaction. There was a major opposition on the ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The party consists of four parties: the Oromo People's Democratic Front (now the Oromo Democratic Party (OPD); the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM (now the Amhara Democratic Party); Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM); and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) (Bereketiab 2019). Although the coalition consisted of different ethnic groups, the TPLF that represented only 6% of the population had dominated the political and economic sphere for close to 30 years, a situation that led to growing dissatisfaction in the country. People were also fighting for democratic space (Bereketiab 2019). The government's oppressive response to the political unrest led to arrest and detention of numerous people (Dixon 2018). It also deeply affected the economy and brought the country to a near collapse and the international community, particularly the European Union and the USA expressed their displeasure with what was happening in the country (Bereketiab 2019).

After years of resistance, the then Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigned early 2018 and was replaced by Abiy Ahmed. This change of regime presented an opportunity for conflict resolution. Abiy was aware of the political situation in the country and he knew that things had to be done differently. He began my making reshuffles in the ruling coalition so as to balance the government considering Ethiopia's ethnic and institutional dynamics and also to satisfy the EPRDF coalition parties.

He adopted a policy of reconciliation which involved releasing prisoners in Ethiopia and in foreign countries, to welcome those who had gone to exile back to their country, and to pacify rebels (OLF, LNLG, and Gin 7) as a step towards reconciliation. That consideration made reconciliation essential in the Ethiopian context owing to the fact that Ethiopia is a highly militarized state and that party opposition to the Ethiopian government had persisted in

the country. Abiy's nationwide tour asking for forgiveness and promising positive change to citizens can be interpreted as an act of humility which was essential to the reconciliation policy taking into account the political unrest that had prevailed. This enabled peace and cohesion, widespread support and domestic stability. Once things calmed domestically, the Prime Minister could now concentrate on international matters. He was aware that unless the conflict with Eritrea was resolved, reforms in Ethiopia would be incomplete (Bereketeab 2019:26).

### *Strategic Political Leadership and Leader's Idiosyncratic Factors*

It is also important to acknowledge some idiosyncratic factors that contributed to the ripeness of the conflict for resolution. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is very strategic and has a strong personality that enabled him to push Ethiopia's agenda domestically and internationally. He is a charismatic leader who is energy driven. Indeed, he was likened with renowned leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Barrack Obama (Burke 2018). This image has however changed since Abiy's government began a military operation against TPLF in November 2020 leading to the Tigray crisis (Kirby, 2021).

A number of Abiy Ahmed's background factors played a key role in enhancing his reformist goals. His Muslim-Christian (mixed) background enabled him to bridge communal and sectarian divides and this endeared him to majority of the population. Abiy Ahmed's educational background particularly his masters in transformational leadership and doctorate in peace and security studies added credibility to his qualifications and ability to make informed decisions based on his wealth of knowledge and worldview concerning leadership, peace and security issues pertaining his country, the country's neighbor Eritrea and the Horn of Africa region at large. He also possesses a wealth of professional experience that is essential for sound foreign policy decision-making on Ethiopia and Eritrea. Of particular interest is his military intelligence experience gained during his service in the military, including his participation in the revolution, whereby Ethiopia's EPRDF fought side by side with Eritrea's EPLF to oust Mengistu's junta.

This is coupled with the many years he has served in the Ethiopian government as well as international experience as a UN peace keeper in Rwanda. Due to his long experience with Eritrea, Prime Minister Abiy

Ahmed knew the strategy to use towards Eritrea's acceptance of his reconciliation proposal (The border issue which had been the main bone of contention). His past experience in which he witnessed his predecessor resign owing to antigovernment protests and political pressure kept him on his toes since from the onset, he was aware that he had to do things differently.

### *Ethiopia's Geopolitical goal*

Ethiopia wishes to strategically position herself as a regional hegemony in the Horn of Africa. The resolution of her conflict with Eritrea was one of the main moves towards that goal as it brought with it regional stability and prospects of economic growth. The Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had been keen on access to the sea ports in the Red Sea as a means to becoming a regional economic powerhouse. Through shuttle diplomacy, Abiy Ahmed was able to secure access to four sea ports in Somalia including Berbera port in Somaliland and the two ports in Eritrea following the two countries' reconciliation. Another port that Ethiopia has access to is Mombasa port in Kenya through the Lamu Port-South Sudan – Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor project. On the same note Ethiopia was seeking to position herself strongly in Africa's aviation industry. Under Abiy Ahmed's premiership, Ethiopian Airlines, Africa's largest carrier expanded international air routes, owns 45% shares in Zambian airlines and planned to establish airlines in other African countries such as Zambia and Guinea (Giles 2018).

In light of all the above considerations, it was apparent that the resolution of the conflict with Eritrea was the gateway to Ethiopia's prosperity domestically, regionally and even internationally. Eritrea on her part reciprocated Ethiopia's call for conflict resolution. It is therefore important to look at the factors that predisposed Eritrea to heed calls for conflict resolution by Ethiopia.

### *Changes in the International Environment*

Changes in the international environment also triggered conflict resolution between Ethiopia and Eritrea. For a long time, foreign powers have had keen interest in the Horn of Africa Region which is a strategic region that connects



Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. The US, Japan, Italy, France, Spain and Germany for instance have military bases in Djibouti.

However, of particular interest here regarding Ethiopia's motivation to resolve her conflict with Eritrea is Chinese presence at the Horn of Africa, especially in Djibouti which was worrying not only to Ethiopia but also to the West. China established its first ever overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, has constructed a port and is currently building Africa's largest Free trade Zone at the Djibouti port (Pieper 2018, Crabtree 2018). In addition it was (and still is) feared that Djibouti might be at the risk of falling into the China debt trap (Chaziza 2021). The country has borrowed more from China than it can pay back, most of the money having gone to infrastructural projects under the China Belt and Road initiative (Cheng 2018). Since Ethiopia is landlocked it had been heavily reliant on the Djibouti port (Fick and Kasolowsky 2018). Ethiopian government leaders led by Abiy Ahmed perceived Chinese presence at Djibouti as a threat to Ethiopia's economy and therefore had to find an alternative access to a sea port through Eritrea.

The construction of a Chinese military base in Djibouti and Beijing's increasing influence in the Horn of Africa raised triggered the US' interest in the resolution Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict. In order to expand its influence in the region, the US working closely with its ally Saudi Arabia initiated some external mediation to facilitate the rapprochement between the two countries (Ylönen 2019: 28).

### **Conditions in Eritrea that Ripened the Conflict for Resolution**

The call on Eritrea by the Prime Minister of Ethiopia Abiy Ahmed for a resolution of the conflict was not the first one. The former Prime Minister, Desalegn indicated that he had made similar calls for negotiation with Eritrea but Eritrea held a different position (Tsfay 2012:197). However, when Abiy extended the same hand, Eritrea trusted and reciprocated leading to the grand conflict resolution. This had to do with the shift of power in Ethiopia's ruling coalition EPRDF from TPLF dominated by the Tigryans to ODP dominated by the Oromo. From the time Eritrea peacefully seceded from Ethiopia up until the resignation of Prime Minister Desalegn, the EPRDF was dominated by the TPLF who had deprived Eritrea of her need for identity and recognition as a sovereign state with territorial integrity. Although Meles

Zenawi supported Eritrea's independence, his intention was for Eritrea to remain part of Ethiopia as he asserted "But we really hope that Eritrea can remain part of a federated Ethiopia" (Bereketeab 2019: 30). According to John Burton's human needs theory, group identity and recognition form key human needs whose deprivation can lead to protracted conflicts (Burton 1990).

In addition, after the 1998-2000 conflict, the TPLF dominated EPRDF tried to economically subdue Eritrea. Ethiopia also made efforts to isolate Eritrea regionally and internationally. Meles Zenawi, the then Prime Minister took advantage of Ethiopia's power to get the UN to impose sanctions on Eritrea for claims that Eritrea was supporting Al-Shabaab and other militia and causing instability in the region ( Bereketeab 2019). Simillar allegations from Ethiopia also led to Eritrea being blocked from the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) for about seven years.

Thus Eritrea deeply distrusted Ethiopia and any calls for conflict resolution were suspiciously received and dismissed. The shift in power from the TPLF (representing the Tigray people) to the ODP (representing the Oromo people) meant a reconfiguration of Ethiopia-Eritrea relations and by the same token the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict. There was a sense of trust, and that is why Eritrea's President Isaias Afwerki honored Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's invitation setting the ball rolling for a successful conflict resolution. The commitment of the Ethiopian government to respect the EEBC ruling that granted Badme to Eritrea signaled Ethiopia's respect for Eritrea's identity and recognition as a sovereign state.

### **Mutually Hurting Stalemates and Mutually Enticing Opportunities in Ethiopia and Eritrea**

In the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict case, this paper applies the terms mutually hurting stalemates and mutually enticing opportunities to refer to the common challenges and common opportunities respectively that encouraged the two states to resolve the conflict. The main challenge that the two countries experienced was the TPLF question. The TPLF had dominated Ethiopian politics and security forces for nearly thirty years and had persistently securitized the relations between the two countries (Ylönen 2019:247). The continued occupation of Badme by Ethiopian forces most of

who belonged to the TPLF faction of the EPRDF was a constant threat to Eritrea's sovereignty and territorial integrity. On his part, Abiy Ahmed who was carrying out sweeping reforms to rid the government of TPLF domination feared facing resistance or even a coup from TPLF hardliners who also dominated the Ethiopian military. Consequently the leaders of both countries, Isaias Afwerki and Abiy Ahmed faced an existential threat from the TPLF and therefore had to gloss over their differences and unite against a common adversary (Bruton, 2018). This cooperation came in handy when Abiy's government began a military operation against the TPLF in November 2020 reportedly in retaliation to the TPLF's attack and seizure of an army command centre near Mekele, the capital of the Tigray region (Ylönen 2021:7). Eritrean forces were reported to have been fighting alongside the Ethiopian government forces in Tigray (Gebre Egziabher, 2021). Abiy Ahmed could confidently count on Eritrea's military support in the operation.

The resolution of the conflict was also crucial in opening Eritrea to the international arena after years of diplomatic isolation owing to the country's gross violation of human rights and aggressive foreign policy behavior towards other states. In fact after the reconciliation, the UN lifted sanctions on Eritrea (Zere 2018). The US also started warming up to Eritrea Eritrea which is politically and economically weaker stands to benefit from Ethiopia's strong economic and political strength. Ethiopia on the other hand can access Eritrea's two ports Massawa and Assab, thus have access to the Red Sea which is of great importance for her geopolitical interests.

Both countries stood to gain and actually gained from the conflict resolution. Ethiopia was able to negotiate with Ethiopian armed rebel groups which had been destabilizing the country from Asmara. In deed Abiy Ahmed already negotiated with them and they abandoned armed struggle and were welcomed back home. This is of great importance for the stability of Ethiopia. For Eritrea, gains came in form of the end of the devastating war and respect for its territorial integrity and sovereignty (the need for identity and recognition were met) and lifting of sanctions that had been imposed on it almost ten years before by the UN Security Council (Berekteab 2019:16). Eritrea became integrated into region and the world and Ethiopia played a key role in this. Lyammouri (2008) observed that just as Ethiopia led the

change behind Eritrea's isolation since 2000, paving the way for the sanctions imposed in 2009, Ethiopia led the way behind Eritrea's regional and international integration.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has analyzed the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict focusing on two conflict resolution efforts pursued: the resolution of the 1998-2000 border conflict which applied mediation and arbitration as the key approaches and was mainly driven by external actors and the 2018 conflict resolution which applied internally driven negotiation mainly involving the state leaders in both countries with some little external mediation from the US and Saudi Arabi. While international mediation and arbitration failed to resolve the conflict, internally driven negotiation proved successful and brought about peace between the two long term rivals. The international mediators in 2000 were partly to blame for failing to enforce implementation of the agreement particularly by Ethiopia and for being partisan. Since they are the ones who drafted the agreement, there was no sense of ownership from Ethiopia and Eritrea and thus the agreement could be considered as an externally imposed agreement.

On the other hand, in 2018, there was successful resolution of the protracted conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This was mainly internally driven, and spearheaded by the top leadership of the two countries. This paper has identified that domestic conditions in both states especially in Ethiopia coupled with international conditions and Eritrea's trust in Ethiopia served to ripen the conflict for resolution. Challenges faced by both due to the conflict as well as opportunities that would result from a peace deal served as mutually hurting stalemates and mutually enticing opportunities respectively for both Ethiopia and Eritrea. Internally driven negotiations between the two parties produced a peace agreement that both were willing to implement and actually began implementing immediately. Their conflict resolution model was a hybrid model which combined top state leadership as well as people in the grassroots sparking euphoria in both countries, an indication that the conflict resolution was highly appreciated by the citizens of both countries. This was also hailed internationally. Although things might have taken a different turn in Ethiopia due to the Tigray crisis that began in November 2020, this paper concludes that internally driven conflict

resolution coupled with the presence of the ripe moment for conflict resolution likely to be successful and durable compared to one that is majorly externally driven.

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