#HandsoffEthiopia: ‘Partiality’, Polarization and Ethiopia’s Tigray Conflict

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Abstract

Over a year since the outbreak of war in Ethiopia’s northern Tigray region, the fighting continues. Indeed, the conflict theatre has now expanded considerably, with devastating consequences for many Ethiopians. With atrocities committed by all sides and a profound humanitarian crisis underway, the conflict currently stands as testament to the emptiness of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) commitments made by states and organisations across the world. This essay highlights two problematiques the Tigray conflict, and its consequences, raise for supporters and practitioners of R2P. The first relates to the relationships between R2P, social media access and governance, the second the ease with which R2P calls by Western actors especially can intersect with domestic discourses around cynical, untrustworthy and disingenuous outsiders. This is particularly so in a region where Western agendas have traditionally focused on their own geo-strategic and security concerns. Both, it is suggested, have served to reinforce the positions of the respective belligerents, making peace – sadly – a more distant prospect.

Keywords

Tigray conflict – Ethiopia – social media – access – intervention – disinformation

At the time of writing, the devastating war in Tigray is far from over. With a year having passed since Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed declared victory

and a 'return to normalcy',¹ the fighting continues in the region – and, indeed, has intensified in other parts of the country, with devastating results for many.²

However, the conflict comes to an end, though, its formal conclusion will represent only the beginning of efforts to resolve the now shattered relationship between Tigray and Addis Ababa and the humanitarian crisis which has unfolded in its wake.³ Tigray's place in Ethiopia itself now remains an open question, and bringing to justice those who are responsible for the many atrocities committed since the war broke out in November 2020 seems a distant aspiration indeed.

There are already at least two lessons that can be drawn from the crisis to date, or which, at least, the crisis amplifies and reinforces. Both challenge those who care about the norm of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) to reconsider approaches and positionalities, in the midst of a war where the international community, however that entity is understood, has, to date, manifestly failed.

First, states, and to a lesser extent in the case of Tigray, insurgencies, are able to exercise immense – and sometimes unchallengeable – control over regions in conflict and crisis. This can serve not only to cut off critical humanitarian support to communities that need it, but also to restrict information available to external actors on what those needs are, and what is happening on the ground. Throughout much of the conflict, Tigray has been without internet – and at times electricity and other basic infrastructure – courtesy of the federal government's draconian effort to isolate the region, while access by journalists and aid organisations to the region has been heavily restricted.⁴ This has made some of the most basic details almost impossible to independently verify, and provided one of the belligerents – the federal government – an unparalleled advantage, at least at times, in curating and managing external perceptions of the crisis.⁵

1 Cara Anna, 'Ethiopia Declares Victory as Military Takes Tigrayan Capital', *AP*, 28 November 2020; Jason Burke and Dan Sabbagh, 'Ethiopia-Tigray War: Who is Fighting and What Has Been the Toll?', *Guardian*, 5 November 2021.

2 Abdi Latif Dahir, 'Tigray Rebels in Ethiopia Celebrate a Victory', *New York Times*, 2 July 2021.

3 UN OCHA, 'Ethiopia – Tigray Region Humanitarian Update', 11 November 2021, <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/>, accessed 17 November 2021.

4 James Jeffrey, 'Ethiopia's Tigray Conflict and the Battle to Control Information', *Al Jazeera*, 16 February 2021; Max Bearak, 'Unable to Control Tigray, Ethiopia Isolates Region Already Beset by War and Famine', *Washington Post*, 2 July 2021.

5 The federal government's primary antagonist in this conflict – the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) – has struggled to compete in this regard, following their early routing and retreat. As their position has strengthened since June 2020, senior figures have sought to challenge online and media narratives via Twitter and interviews with Western journalists using satellite telephones.

The online information space has therefore been deliberately and strategically targeted and restricted in parallel with the closing-off of physical access to the region. This has been accompanied by a concerted campaign by Addis Ababa – and, to a significant degree, its opponents in, or with links to, Tigray – to denigrate and undermine those sharing information on social media related to the crisis which they consider to be critical (or not critical enough).⁶ Encouraged, on the government's side, by nationalist calls to 'stand against any attempt to intervene in the domestic affairs of the country through any pretext' ('Hands off Ethiopia'),⁷ online analysis and discussion of the Tigray conflict has become utterly toxic, to the extent that commentary is rapidly directed by trolls and propagandists on all sides down a highly polarised route characterised by *ad hominem* attacks, insinuations, threats and triumphalist revelry around military successes or setbacks of different sides, regardless of the human cost.⁸

For much of the conflict to date, this has served the interests of the federal government and its allies especially. Toxifying social media and painting critics as TPLF flunkies renders the space for critical debate virtually non-existent, transforming Tigray-related discussions into opportunities to throw insults (and worse), entrench ideological and personal positions, and – virtually – settle old scores. In the midst of an online blackout in Tigray itself, this neutralises social media as a space for sharing information on humanitarian need and the committing of atrocities.

For R2P practitioners and researchers, this raises the critical question of where online and social media space should fit into contemporary policy debate and engagement. What role is there for social media platforms and service providers in such circumstances, and what responsibilities do they have? Where does social media and internet access feature in international debates on protection – and where should it feature? To what extent should protecting access to the internet form part of the R2P norm?⁹

6 Nic Cheeseman and Yohannes Woldemariam, 'Ethiopia's Perilous Propaganda War', *Foreign Affairs*, 8 April 2021; Michael Oduor, 'Misinformation, Propaganda, Carry the Day in Tigrayan, Oromo Conflicts', *Africanews*, 4 November 2021.

7 *Ethiopian Herald*, 'Hands Off from Ethiopia!', 22 May 2021.

8 This approach has also involved developing images which depict particular commentators as a pro-TPLF conspiratorial clique; for example, this image – <https://mobile.twitter.com/RABdiAnalyst/status/1369304963579580436> – highlighted here, on 9 March 2021, by a frequent target of these attacks, analyst and journalist Rashid Abdi.

9 Camilla Buzzi, 'Mass Atrocities in Myanmar and the Responsibility to Protect in a Digital Age', *Global Responsibility to Protect*, 13(2–3) 272–296 (2021).

The second lesson from the crisis thus far, and linked to the above, concerns the positionality and responsibility of external, particularly Western, stakeholders in these contexts. The #HandsoffEthiopia campaign promoted by Addis Ababa has resonated with many Ethiopians in particular because it speaks, in part, to the country's history as an opponent, and victor against, Western colonialism. Indeed, the campaign itself explicitly references the transnational social movement of the same name founded in 1935 in the midst of Italian threats to invade Ethiopia.¹⁰

There is a broader global and continental context, though, which reinforces a wider distrust and lack of confidence in the role of outsiders (including the UN system) in many African states – a distrust which governments such as Ethiopia's can readily tap into. In the African context, the 1994 Rwandan Genocide remains the key point of departure for many R2P practitioners and underlines a past failure of the international community which must never be repeated. We cannot discount, though, the more recent impact of multiple devastating Western-led military interventions in the Middle East, North Africa, and Afghanistan; unmet calls for colonial reparations; and police brutality, racism, and impunity in the Global North; all of which position Western powers as hypocritical, self-serving, nefarious, and ultimately unconcerned with racial and global justice.

On social media, and in the context of the Tigray crisis, this has translated into the questioning by some sympathetic to Addis Ababa (or, at least, hostile to the TPLF) of the right of non-Ethiopians to offer comment or analysis on the conflict, this too – for them – representing a form of outside interference. A linked critique has been around partiality and foreign journalists and academics presenting arguments considered to be 'biased' and lacking in 'objectivity'.

It is somewhat unclear what an objective analysis of a devastating conflict such as this would look like, particularly when one belligerent in particular has at various points succeeded in cutting the region off from the world as a diplomatic and military tactic. Indeed, calls for 'objective' analysis of this conflict often conceal efforts by those leading such calls to delegitimise viewpoints or analyses they disagree with – under the guise of upholding a notional model of 'neutral' commentary.

The point here, though, is that the norm of R2P faces profound challenges in the contemporary era. In part this is because of the kinds of strategies and approaches described above. In part, though, this is because campaigns like 'Hands Off Ethiopia' resonate with African and diaspora audiences, whether

10 Joseph Fronczak, 'Local People's Global Politics: A Transnational History of the Hands Off Ethiopia Movement of 1935', *Diplomatic History*, 39(2) 245–274 (2015).

or not they are cynically instrumentalised by politicians. African governments do not all share the same views on R2P, of course – as African Union debates surrounding the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya reveal.¹¹ They are provided with plenty of reasons to distrust and question the intentions of Western governments and institutions, however, whose words and actions often stand in complete opposition to one another when it comes to Africa, and to the Horn of Africa in particular. R2P policy-makers and practitioners must reckon with this reality, and tackle it head on with Western as well as African interlocutors.

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¹¹ Sandy Africa and Rentia Pretorius, 'South Africa, the African Union, and the Responsibility to Protect: The Case of Libya', *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 12(2) 394–416 (2012); *The East African*, 'Kagame Endorses Libya Bombings', 24 March 2011.