ANALYSIS / İBRAHİM MULİSHEVA

THE SEVEN-PARTY ALLIANCE AND THE ABIY GOVERNMENT: OFFENSE, DEFENSE, AND THE DEEP LOGIC OF ETHIOPIA'S POLITICAL CRISIS

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On September 20, 2026, a coalition of seven Ethiopian armed and political opposition groups formally announced the formation of the "Ethiopian Peoples' Forces Alliance for Survival." That day, Zemene Kassie, chairman of the Amhara Fano National Movement (AFNM), read a statement live on Tigray Television declaring that the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), and four other organizations would act jointly to remove the Prosperity Party-led federal government and establish an "inclusive transitional government."

The announcement marked a new phase in Ethiopia's political crisis. Since the signing of the Pretoria Agreement in November 2022, the fragile peace had unraveled in less than four years. Yet the formation of the alliance does not represent a simple "opposition versus government" confrontation. A closer examination of both sides' strengths and dilemmas reveals a more complex picture: the opposition coalition is held together by an ideological vacuum and economic incentives, while the federal government has regained strategic initiative through military strikes and a diplomatic realignment. Neither side can decisively defeat the other, but the government clearly holds more of the cards that will shape the outcome.

The Alliance's Tactical Advantages: Economic Incentives, External Support, and an Expanded Battlefield

The seven-party alliance's most immediate asset is the structural foundation it provides for a protracted war of attrition. Ethiopia's current economic predicament—the 2023 sovereign debt

default, soaring inflation, and high youth unemployment—supplies a continuous pool of recruits for armed groups. But more important than poverty itself is that the armed organizations have developed a sophisticated "political economy" to sustain their war machines.

The TPLF's control over the gold trade in Tigray provides it with a source of hard currency. The OLA's kidnapping and ransom operations in Oromia, though widely condemned by human rights organizations, constitute a practical funding base. Fano's taxation system in the Amhara region—coercive though it is—enables it to sustain thousands of fighters without stable external funding. This "war-feeds-war" model means that even without a decisive military victory, the alliance can keep the conflict going indefinitely.

External support is the alliance's second tactical advantage. Although Eritrea and Egypt both deny involvement, senior Ethiopian military officials—including Chief of the General Staff Berhanu Jula—have publicly accused "Sudan, Egypt, and powers beyond" of "pushing, supporting, and supplying" the alliance. From a geopolitical standpoint, Cairo's hostility toward the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam gives it ample motive to support any force that weakens Addis Ababa; Asmara's confrontation with the Abiy government over Red Sea access provides a similar incentive. TPLF officials themselves have acknowledged that "this time Eritrea is the supporter, and the supply line reaches us through Eritrea."

The third advantage is the geographic expansion of the battlefield. The alliance's members span six of Ethiopia's twelve regional states—Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, Somali, Afar, and Benishangul-Gumuz. This means the federal army must fight on multiple fronts simultaneously. The fighting at the end of September 2026 already displayed this characteristic: clashes along the Tigray-Afar border, drone strikes in North Wollo, and guerrilla activity in East Wollega and North Shewa occurring at the same time. For a resource-constrained national army, multi-front warfare is always a strategic nightmare.

The Alliance's Fatal Fragility: A Patchwork Unity and Internal Rifts

Yet the alliance's greatest strength—bringing former enemies under one banner—is precisely the source of its deepest vulnerability. The unity of the seven-party alliance is essentially a "procedural consensus," not a strategic alliance based on a shared political program. Jirenya Gudeta, advisor to the OLA commander, said bluntly in an interview with BBC Afaan Oromo: "In politics, there is no such thing as trust; there is only protecting the people's interest." He made clear that the OLA "has not abandoned its position that the empire's system must be dismantled."

This candor exposes the coalition's core contradiction. The AFNM and the TPLF fought on opposite sides during the 2020–2022 Tigray war—Fano fought alongside federal forces against the TPLF. And the territorial dispute over "Western Tigray" (including Welkait, Tsegede, and Raya) remains unresolved. Immediately after the alliance's announcement, the Welqait Tsegde Amhara Identity and Border Restoration Committee issued a statement rejecting any cooperation with the TPLF and calling on the Amhara people to "carefully examine the past positions of the participating forces."

Even more embarrassing for the alliance, several organizations listed as members publicly denied participation. On September 22, the ONLF issued a statement saying its name had been "used without authorization" and reaffirmed its commitment to the 2018 peace agreement. The Benishangul Peoples' Liberation Movement (BPLM) and the Gumuz Peoples' Democratic Movement (GPDM) likewise denied participation, with the latter emphasizing that it is a "legally registered political party" that has halted armed struggle since 2015 E.C. These denials not only undermine the alliance's claimed representativeness but also suggest that its formation may have been rushed and lacking adequate consultation.

The ONLF case is particularly telling. The organization has two rival factions: one led by Abdirahman Sheikh Mahdi, which reportedly joined the alliance; the other led by Abdikarim Sheikh Musa, which operates as a registered political party in Jigjiga and explicitly rejects armed alliance. By equating one faction of a divided organization with the entire organization, the alliance exposed the crudeness of its political operation.

The Government's Hand: Military Attrition, Diplomatic Realignment, and the "Oromo Government" Narrative

In the week following the alliance's announcement, the federal government demonstrated its asymmetric advantages. First, militarily, the ENDF claimed to have killed 436 TPLF fighters, wounded 220, and captured 44 in a counter-offensive in the North East Command, along with seizing large quantities of weapons and ammunition. These figures cannot be independently verified, but their propaganda effect lies in signaling that the government army can still deliver effective blows.

More important is the shift in the diplomatic landscape. European states had been relatively sympathetic to the TPLF during the 2020–2022 Tigray war, but after the alliance's formation, Britain explicitly "opposed" the "Alliance for Survival" and condemned the TPLF's "attacks" and

airport seizures. Although the EU statement also criticized the federal government's drone strikes, its core demand was "immediate de-escalation," and it treated the TPLF's airport seizures as a key node in the escalation. The US ambassador expressed "disappointment" over the TPLF's "bad decision to launch a major offensive."

The significance of this diplomatic shift cannot be overstated. During the 2020–2022 war, the TPLF enjoyed considerable international sympathy while the federal government faced isolation. Now the situation has almost completely reversed. Regional actors such as the UAE also side with the government, condemning the TPLF for "starting the war." The direction of international pressure has shifted from "urging government restraint" to "urging both sides to de-escalate," effectively weakening the alliance's space to gain political legitimacy through military means.

On the domestic political level, a subtle but important dynamic is the strengthening of the "Oromo government" narrative. Although the OLA continues to fight in Oromia, Abiy—as an Oromo prime minister—has a government perceived by a significant portion of Oromos, as well as some non-Oromo groups, as "a government of Oromos." This identity-politics calculation makes it difficult for the OLA's armed struggle to gain a broad ethnic mobilization base. The OLA itself faces a severe legitimacy deficit: an Amnesty International report in March 2026 documented in detail sexual violence, summary executions, and torture carried out by OLA fighters in Oromia, acts that may constitute war crimes. When the opposition alliance's "liberation" narrative coexists with the OLA's record of atrocities, its moral appeal is substantially diminished.

The Prospect of Stalemate: Attrition, Not Decisive Victory

The formation of the seven-party alliance is undoubtedly the most dramatic event in Ethiopian politics in 2026. It marks a shift by the opposition from scattered insurgency to coordinated action and forces the federal government to confront a multi-front strategic dilemma. Yet the manner of the alliance's formation—the rushed announcement, the public denials by members, and the "procedural consensus" nature—reveals a deeper truth: this is a union defined by a common enemy, not by a shared vision.

History offers a sobering precedent. In 2014 E.C. (2021–2022), the TPLF, OLA, and six other armed groups formed a similar alliance that ultimately failed to achieve any major objective. The current alliance faces similar obstacles: no unified command structure, no permanent political organization, and irreconcilable territorial and identity demand among its members.

For the Abiy government, its advantages lie in controlling state resources, holding international-

ly recognized legitimate status, and—at least for now—enjoying a more favorable international environment than the alliance. But the government also has its limits: it cannot simultaneously defeat the insurgencies in Tigray, Amhara, and Oromia; and although economic reforms have improved macroeconomic indicators, the daily pressures on ordinary Ethiopians remain a breeding ground for recruiting opposition fighters.

The most likely prospect is not a decisive victory for either side, but a prolonged, low-intensity, multi-regional war of attrition. The alliance cannot "march on Addis Ababa"—as former US Ambassador Tibor Nagy put it, that idea "won't happen." The government also cannot "militarily eliminate these groups." Ethiopia's political crisis will persist in a gray zone without an endpoint: violent enough to destroy lives and livelihoods, but not decisive enough to produce a political settlement.

In this situation, the government's advantages are structural: it controls the state's finances, the army, and international recognition. The alliance's advantages are tactical: it can create chaos, exhaust government resources, and exploit economic hardship to sustain recruitment. But tactical advantages cannot be converted into strategic victory. As long as the alliance cannot resolve its internal territorial disputes and ideological divisions—especially the "life-and-death struggle" between the TPLF and Fano over Welkait—it will remain only a temporary military coordination mechanism, not a political alternative capable of governing the country.

Ethiopia's tragedy is that neither side can win enough to end the conflict, nor can either afford to lose enough to accept compromise. This stalemate will not bring peace; it will only bring a slower, more dispersed, more forgotten violence. And the price is always paid by those stockpiling food in air-raid shelters in Mekelle, by tourists waiting in the dark in Lalibela, and by civilians on buses in Gambella who become statistics on the "road of death."

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