



MAY 2026

## Managed elections, unmanaged conflicts

### Ethiopia at the polls in 2026

Ethiopia is gearing up to conduct general elections for the second time since the 2018 transition that promised to open the country’s political space. The ruling Prosperity Party, which won 96% of parliamentary seats in the last elections in 2021, presents the process as a demonstration of democratic progress under its rule. This policy brief shows that the situation in the country tells a different story. The elections are taking place in a repressive political environment and amid widespread instability, including active conflicts in the two most populous regions of the country. In this context, the elections are unlikely to be free and fair or to address the core drivers of instability. The brief shows that the main issues affecting Ethiopia’s stability – most notably active armed insurgencies in Amhara and Oromia, and the unravelling of the Pretoria Agreement in Tigray – operate entirely outside regular political processes and will not be resolved by any electoral outcome. In this context, international support to the electoral process risks legitimising the government’s military-centred approach and reducing the urgency to negotiate with its opponents. The brief concludes with recommendations for the European Union and the Netherlands, urging them to resist treating the elections as a marker of democratic progress or stability, and to redirect their diplomatic capital to support negotiated settlements to the country’s multiple active conflicts.

### 1. Introduction

Ethiopians are heading to the polls on the first of June for the second time since Abiy Ahmed became prime minister in 2018. Coming to power on the back of popular protests against state repression and declining economic opportunities, the new government pledged to open up the country’s political and economic space.<sup>1</sup> **The ruling Prosperity Party, which currently holds**

**96% of parliamentary seats, views the elections as a testament to democratic progress.** Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has gone further, claiming these will be the most open and democratic elections in the country’s history.<sup>2</sup>

1 International Crisis Group, “[Keeping Ethiopia’s Transition on the Rails](#),” Africa Report No. 283, 16 December 2019.

2 Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), [ጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር ዐቢይ አሕመድ \(ዶ/ር\) ከምክር ቤት አባላት ለተነሱ ጥያቄዎች የሰጡት ምላሽ እና ማብራሪያ ክፍል 2](#) [Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s Responses and Clarifications to Questions Raised by Members of Parliament, Part 2], 3 February 2026.

This policy brief shows that **the situation in the country is much more complex**. First, the brief argues that while the ruling party is keen to use elections to shore up its legitimacy, both at home and abroad (section 2), its control over state institutions and over the electoral process means that **no genuine opposition force is in a position to challenge the incumbents' grip on power** (section 3). Moreover, the brief argues that **the upcoming electoral process is not set to address in any meaningful way the core drivers of the country's instability**, i.e. the multiple armed conflicts affecting large parts of the country – rather, the elections risk further entrenching the government's resolve to continue with its military-first approach, rather than engaging in a comprehensive political dialogue with its opponents (section 4). As a result, while elections are often viewed as markers of democratic governance and, implicitly, stability, in Ethiopia today they are neither.

This analysis **has implications for Ethiopia's international partners, including the European Union (EU), which have an interest in supporting long-term stability** in the country and in the broader Horn of Africa region. Rather than supporting a process that simply entrenches the ruling party's hold on power, Ethiopia's partners should deploy their diplomatic capital towards what matters: concrete efforts to achieve negotiated settlements to the multiple armed conflicts that threaten to further fracture the Ethiopian state. The concluding section of this brief (section 5) offers concrete entry points in this direction.

## 2. What does the ruling party want?

**From the ruling party's perspective, the electoral process is a useful tool to gain legitimacy, both at home and abroad, without making meaningful political concessions to its opponents.** Despite the prime minister's claims about the openness of the elections, the process remains tightly controlled by the ruling party, with no real possibility for opposition forces to challenge its hegemony (see below). In a departure from past practice,

however, the party appears to be planning to boost the credibility of the process by ceding a number of seats to opposition groups closely aligned with it.<sup>3</sup> The prime minister himself has indicated that his party would work to increase opposition representation in parliament.<sup>4</sup> While observers and opposition groups view this as a predetermined allocation of seats,<sup>5</sup> the government is likely to present any increase in opposition representation as evidence of democratic opening. This tendency reflects the approach taken by the government in the case of other recent formal processes, most notably the National Dialogue and the Transitional Justice processes, which have been widely criticised for being largely controlled by the ruling party.<sup>6</sup>

### Domestically, a fresh democratic mandate provides the ruling party with an opportunity to reinforce its legitimacy despite widespread

- 3 The ruling party has opted not to field candidates in several constituencies in Addis Ababa and the Amhara region. The expected beneficiaries are two parties with close ties to the ruling party, Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZeMA) and the National Movement for Amhara (NAMA), both of which have members currently serving as government ministers.
- 4 In a parliamentary speech on 3 February 2026, prime minister Abiy Ahmed stated that his government will actively work to increase the number of opposition members of the parliament.  
Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), [ጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር ዐቢይ አሕመድ \(ዶ/ር\) ከምክር ቤት አባላት ለተነሱ ጥያቄዎች የሰጡት ምላሽ እና ማብራሪያ ክፍል 2](#) [Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's Responses and Clarifications to Questions Raised by Members of Parliament, Part 2], 3 February 2026.
- 5 Meseret Media, [“በዘንድሮ ምርጫ ዲሞክራሲን አትጠብቁት፤ ምክንያት ግን ፈልጉላት”](#) [“Don't Expect Democracy from This Year's Election, But Find a Reason for It!"], Meseret Media, 20:02  
Addis Standard, [“The Standard Signal Ep.18: Ethiopia's 2026 Election 'Dead on Arrival'? | Prof. Merera on Oromia”](#), Addis Standard, 15 May 2026.
- 6 On the National Dialogue, see: Amanuel Dessalegn Gedebo, [“Rethinking Ethiopia's National Dialogue: Navigating Conflict and Growing Repression Ahead of 2026 Elections”](#), Clingendael Policy Brief, The Hague, August 2025, pp. 7–9. On transitional justice, see Aaron Maasho and Martin Witteveen, [“Abiy Ahmed's Ethiopia Transitional Justice Initiative Is a Farce”](#), *Foreign Policy*, 27 February 2024; and Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, [“Civil Society Concerns in Achieving Transitional Justice and Accountability for Atrocities in Ethiopia”](#), November 2024.

**popular dissatisfaction with the country's trajectory.** In the latest Afrobarometer survey, conducted in 2023, a majority (56%) of respondents reported that the country was heading in the wrong direction, with the management of the economy identified as the main challenge (and the one on which government performance was rated the lowest).<sup>7</sup> While the Prosperity Party remained the most popular party, only 14% of respondents said they felt close to it – on the other hand, 75% of respondents reported not feeling close to any political party, reflecting a widespread disillusionment with the political class.<sup>8</sup>

Crucially, a renewal of the electoral mandate also **risks entrenching the government's resolve to pursue its force-first approach towards its opponents, regardless of what Ethiopians think of it.** A 2023 survey of 6,689 randomly selected Ethiopians conducted by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative found that only 18% rated the country as peaceful, only 28% trusted the federal government to act in their best interest (a figure falling to less than 10% in Amhara, Tigray, and Addis Ababa), and 50% held federal government members primarily responsible for the violent conflicts in the country.<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that both security and economic conditions have markedly deteriorated since the surveys were conducted in 2023.

While shoring up its domestic legitimacy is a key concern for the ruling party, **equally important is the need to project an image of reform and democratic intent to international partners,** for whom the mere exercise of conducting elections is often considered sufficient to continue their

engagement.<sup>10</sup> This is particularly significant **at a moment when Western partners are deepening their ties with Addis Ababa following a period of strained relations** over human rights concerns during the Tigray war. Sustaining growing investor interest, partly driven by rapid economic reforms and intensifying geopolitical competition in the region, further necessitates projecting stability, and elections – if organised well – are one instrument for doing so.

**This is not the first time the Abiy government has conducted elections whose outcomes were effectively predetermined.** The 2021 elections, held in the middle of an active civil war, functioned less as competitive democratic exercise than as a mechanism to consolidate the ruling party's power and political legitimacy.<sup>11</sup> Those elections are instructive precisely because they preceded the most brutal phase of the conflict.<sup>12</sup> Tacit approval from international partners effectively normalised the government's policies, signalling that international legitimacy could be maintained without any movement towards a negotiated settlement.<sup>13</sup> **The current**

7 Afrobarometer, [“Ethiopia Round 9: Summary of Results.”](#) Afrobarometer, 2023, pp. 15–16, 80–85.

8 Afrobarometer, [“Ethiopia Round 9,”](#) 2023, p. 50. Over half of respondents reported low levels of trust in the ruling party (29% “not at all” and 22% “just a little”). Opposition parties were reported to enjoy even lower levels of trust (42% “not at all” and 27% “just a little”).

9 HHI Ethiopia Survey: Pham et al., [“Ethiopia Peace & Justice Survey 2023.”](#) Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, November 2023.

10 The tendency of international partners to treat elections as sufficient markers of democratic progress regardless of quality is well-documented. A 2012 report by the Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security noted that democratic governments too often “have turned a blind eye to electoral malpractice by regimes and incumbents with whom they have friendly relations,” with strategic and economic interests consistently overriding democratic conditionality. Kofi Annan et al., [“Deepening Democracy: A Strategy for Improving the Integrity of Elections Worldwide.”](#) International IDEA, 2012. See also Nic Cheeseman and Marie-Eve Desrosiers, [“How \(not\) to Engage with Authoritarian States.”](#) Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2023.

11 Terrence Lyons and Aly Verjee, [“Asymmetric Electoral Authoritarianism? The Case of the 2021 Elections in Ethiopia.”](#) *Review of African Political Economy* 49, no. 172 (April 2022): 339–354.

12 Shawn Davies, Therése Pettersson, and Magnus Öberg, [“Organized Violence 1989–2022, and the Return of Conflict Between States.”](#) *Journal of Peace Research* 60, no. 4 (July 2023): 691–708.

13 Girmay Berhane and Mirjam van Reisen, [“How to Get Away with Mass Murder: 4 Tactics Ethiopia Used to Hide Tigray Atrocities from the World.”](#) *The Conversation*, 13 February 2026.; Nesrine Malik, [“From Nobel Peace Prize to Civil War: How Ethiopia's Leader Beguiled the World.”](#) *The Guardian*, 20 June 2024.

**elections follow the same template, which is legitimacy at minimum cost and maximum insulation from pressure to negotiate.** For Ethiopia’s partners, however, they are a test of whether any lessons have been drawn from 2021.

### 3. Elections under captured institutions

**Independent institutions insulated from political control are a foundational building block of democratic systems.** Free and fair elections depend on their existence – without them, no group other than the incumbent can be guaranteed a reasonable chance of winning. **Ethiopia’s current political landscape falls far short of this standard.** The ruling Prosperity Party has systematically tightened its grip over key state institutions and narrowed the space for free association and expression.<sup>14</sup> The line between party and state has been so thoroughly blurred that public institutions and resources are frequently deployed for partisan political ends.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Prosperity Party officials use their control over the state apparatus to collect financial contributions from state employees and businesses, including members of opposition parties.<sup>16</sup> This reality prevents a credible political alternative from emerging.

**While the Prosperity Party claims commitment to democratic principles – and has made some gestures towards openness, including**

the organisation of televised debates – **it is using the force of the state to systematically undermine opposition parties and silence its critics.** Opposition party members and leaders are frequently harassed, detained, and their offices closed in several parts of the country.<sup>17</sup> As the election drew closer, the ruling party further intensified its repressive methods, preventing opposition parties from organising public gatherings and press conferences.<sup>18</sup> This repression also extends to journalists and civil society actors that are often subjected to revocation of credentials, detention and harassment.<sup>19</sup>

**Even though the ruling party faces no serious challenge, electoral procedures are marred by problematic practices by both the electoral commission and the ruling party.**<sup>20</sup> Several opposition party candidates were excluded

14 Human Rights Watch, [“Ethiopia: Surge in Arrests of Journalists, Media Workers,”](#) 22 September 2025; Addis Standard, [“Ethiopia’s 2026 Election: Democracy’s Last Stand or Authoritarian Coronation?”](#) Addis Standard, 2026.  
15 See for instance statement from Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice Party [ኢ.ዲ.ሞ.ገዥው ፓርቲ ዜጎች በውድም ሆነ በግድ የማጠናከሪያ ገንዘብ እንዲያዋጡለት እየደረገ ነው አለ - ሪፖርተር - Ethiopian Reporter - #1 Reliable News Source In Ethiopia መንግሥትና የሕዝብ አስተዳደር በኢትዮጵያ - ሪፖርተር - Ethiopian Reporter - #1 Reliable News Source In Ethiopia](#)  
16 Meseret Media, [ለጥይት መግዣ እና ለብልፅግና ፓርቲ ህንፃ ግንባታ የሚል አዳስ አስገዳጅ የህዝብ መዋጮ በበርካታ ቦታዎች መጀመሩ ታወቀ](#) [New Compulsory Public Contributions for Ammunition and Prosperity Party Building Construction Reported in Multiple Locations], Meseret Media, 2026; Ethiopian Reporter, [“ኢዲሞ ገዥው ፓርቲ,”](#) 2026; መንግሥትና የሕዝብ አስተዳደር በኢትዮጵያ, [Ethiopian Reporter](#), 2026

17 On harassment and detentions of opposition members see: Addis Standard, [“Ethiopia’s Electoral Crossroads, Quest for Legitimate Democracy,”](#) 2026. And Reyot Media, [“የማያቋርጥ ክትትል እየተደረገብኝ ነው” :: | ምርጫ፤ ጦርነት እና አስጨናቂው ወደፊት! | ቆይታ ከምስጢረሥላሴ ታምራት ጋር።](#) [“I Am Being Continuously Monitored” | Elections, War and the Anxious Future! | Interview with Mistireselassie Tamrat], Reyot Media, 22 March 2026.  
18 Ashenafi Endale, [“Rights Commission, Election Board, Security Officials at Odds over Election Prep Pitfalls,”](#) *The Reporter Ethiopia*, 9 May 2026.  
19 In recent months, there have been several instances of tightening of the media space, including the revocation of licences of media outlets (e.g. Wazema Radio, Addis Standard), as well as the detention of journalists (most recently in the case of Addis Standard’s Million Beyene). Human Rights Watch, [“Ethiopia: Surge in Arrests of Journalists, Media Workers,”](#) 22 September 2025; Samson Berhane, [“Press Freedom Under Siege: Ethiopia’s Democratic Test,”](#) *The Reporter Ethiopia*, 2026; Addis Standard, [“Abducted, Banned, Prosecuted: Systematic War on Ethiopia’s Independent Media,”](#) Addis Standard, 2026.  
20 The Ethiopian Coalition of Civil Society Organizations for Elections reported widespread irregularities during the voter registration period, including killings, intimidation, and abductions targeting voters and registration officials. The coalition’s 522 observers documented voter registration conducted inside police stations and military barracks, the presence of unauthorised personnel, and registration without proper identity verification. Wazema Radio, [“Eritrea Signals Possible Lifting of U.S. Sanctions,”](#) Wazema Substack, 7 May 2026.

from the polls on questionable grounds.<sup>21</sup> Faced with large-scale public abstention, the ruling party used coercion, including threats of denial of public services and civil servants' salaries to force voter registration.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, party officials gained illegal access to voter registration data on multiple occasions, including the electoral commission's digital database, entirely removing the facade of confidentiality the system promises, thereby exposing citizens to the state's repression apparatus.<sup>23</sup>

**Adding to the uncertain legitimacy of the polls is the exclusion of large parts of the country, including Tigray and parts of the Amhara and Oromia regions.** Tigray remains outside formal political processes in the federation since the outbreak of the war. Oromia and Amhara, on the other hand, are in the middle of active civil wars affecting large parts of their territory. Nonetheless, the commission and the ruling party insist that most of the country offers a conducive environment for elections, a claim opposition parties and observers strongly reject.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. Where the key to stability lies

The most important question, however, is not only whether the planned elections meet the free and fair criteria. Rather, it is whether they can produce a political outcome that leads to long-term stability. As repeatedly argued by observers of Ethiopia and opposition groups alike, the country's crisis demands far more than a tightly managed electoral process. While the official narrative of the government – often echoed by donors – frequently portrays stability and economic vibrancy,<sup>25</sup> Ethiopia faces an existential threat from multiple violent conflicts and growing insecurity. Seen from this perspective, **the elections function primarily as a formal process to project an image of stability rather than an undertaking with any significant bearing on the crises Ethiopia currently faces.**

- 21 Addis Standard, [“Coalition for Ethiopian Unity Denounces Electoral Process, Cites Widespread Irregularities,”](#) Addis Standard, 19 May 2026.
- 22 It is widely reported in local media that government officials used coercive methods to compel voter registration, including threats to withhold government employees' salaries, denial of public services such as health services and subsidised fertiliser, and detention. Wazema Radio, [የመንግስት ሰራተኞች “ባግዳጅ” የምርጫ ካርድ እንዲወስዱ እየተደረገ ነው](#) [Government Employees Are Being Forced to Obtain Voter Cards], Wazema Radio, 23 March 2026; Meseret Media, [ደቡብ ጎንደር ዞን ውስጥ የወባ መከላከያ አገልግሎት ለማግኘት የምርጫ ካርድ ማውጣት እንደ ቅድመ ሁኔታ መቀመጡን ነዋሪዎች ተናገሩ](#) [Residents Say Obtaining a Voter Card is a Prerequisite for Receiving Malaria Prevention Nets in South Gondar Zone], Meseret Media, 24 April 2026; Meseret Media, [የምርጫ ካርድ አለመውሰድ የመንግስት አገልግሎት ከመከላከል እስከ እስር የሚደርስ እርምጃ እየሰነዘተለ መሆኑ ታወቀ](#) [Not Obtaining a Voter Card Has Been Found to Result in Measures Ranging from Denial of Public Services to Detention], Meseret Media, 30 March 2026.
- 23 Multiple reports indicated that ruling party officials gained access to voters' personal information through various means. In Addis Ababa, polling station administrators were pressured by woreda officials to surrender their NEBE login credentials, giving party officials direct access to the voter registration database, including names, phone numbers, and voter IDs. Separately, Commercial Bank of Ethiopia employees faced pressure to submit their voter card and Fayda digital ID numbers to institutional management. In rural areas, voters were in some cases required to deposit their voter cards at local administration offices. Meseret Media, [በአዲስ አበባ ያሉ የምርጫ ጣቢያ አስፈጻሚዎች የመራጮችን ማስጠራዊ መረጃ በግዴታ አሳልፈው እንዳሰጡ በወረዳ አመራሮች ጥያቄ እየቀረቡላቸው መሆኑን ተናገሩ](#) [Polling Station Administrators in Addis Ababa Say They Are Being Asked by Woreda Officials to Forcibly Hand Over Voters' Confidential Information], Meseret Media, 9 May 2026; Meseret Media, [የኢትዮጵያ ንግድ ባንክ ሰራተኞች የምርጫ ካርዳቸውን እና የፋይዳ ቁጥር አምጡ የሚል ግፊት እየተደረገባቸው መሆኑን ተናገሩ](#) [Commercial Bank of Ethiopia Employees Say They Are Being Pressured to Submit Their Voter Cards and Fayda Numbers], Meseret Media, 8 May 2026.

- 24 According to the Electoral Board, 97% of constituencies in Oromia and the Amhara region have a sufficiently stable security environment to conduct polls. The Coalition for Ethiopian Unity directly contests this assessment, arguing that only a few towns in the Amhara region meet the minimum conditions for holding elections, while most areas outside major urban centres in Oromia remain too insecure. This view is shared by other major opposition parties, including the Oromo Federalist Congress. Wazema Radio, [“Opposition Coalition Threatens to Reconsider Election Participation,”](#) Wazema Substack, 2026; Ashenafi Endale, [“‘Upcoming Vote Will Fail to Establish Democracy or Lasting Peace’: Professor Merera Gudina,”](#) *The Reporter Ethiopia*, 2026.
- 25 European External Action Service, [“Global Gateway: Commissioner Sikela Announces New Investments on his Mission to Addis Ababa,”](#) EU Delegation to Ethiopia, 24 April 2026.

**The government’s authority is directly challenged by rebel movements in the two most populous regions of the country**, home to roughly two-thirds of the population. **In the Amhara region, the Amhara Fano National Movement (AFNM) has entrenched itself across most rural areas**, establishing civilian administrations in territory under its control.<sup>26</sup> Now in its fourth year, the conflict shows no signs of abating while its human and material costs continue to mount. In recent months, AFNM has extended its operations into neighbouring Oromia, including areas in proximity to Addis Ababa. Moreover, widespread public gatherings organised by the movement across all four sub-regions of Amhara in late April suggest deepening territorial control and growing political organisation.<sup>27</sup>

**Large parts of Oromia, the prime minister’s home region, remain engulfed in active conflict between government forces and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA).** The OLA returned to armed insurgency after initial peace negotiations with the government collapsed in the early days of Abiy Ahmed’s premiership. Ever since, years of brutal counter-insurgency campaigns and half-hearted negotiation efforts have failed to bring peace to the region.<sup>28</sup> While the government secured partial agreements with splinter factions, the group remains a formidable challenge to federal authority. More worryingly, clashes are increasingly spreading beyond the OLA’s traditional strongholds in western Oromia to areas closer to Addis Ababa, signalling an expansion in the geographic scope of the conflict.<sup>29</sup>

Even in Tigray, where negotiations succeeded in halting the devastating civil war of 2020 to 2022 that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, the risk of renewed conflict has been rising.<sup>30</sup>

**The failed implementation of the Pretoria Agreement**, compounded by deepening internal divisions within Tigray, has brought the region to the precipice.<sup>31</sup> A dangerous deadlock now reigns between the federal government and the TPLF, following the latter’s decision to replace the federally appointed interim administration with its own regional council and government.<sup>32</sup>

Taken together, these three conflict theatres paint a picture of **a state whose authority is being violently contested from multiple directions simultaneously**. Reports of a budding alliance between the armed groups challenging the government, alongside the involvement of regional actors such as Eritrea and Sudan,<sup>33</sup> suggest the government may soon face a coordinated rather than fragmented internal challenge. Several of these armed groups – most notably the AFNM and the OLA – have threatened to actively disrupt the electoral process, suggesting a potential spike in violence around the election date.<sup>34</sup> **Meanwhile, violent episodes in other parts of the country are claiming a growing number of lives.** In the past year alone, regions such as Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz, Sidama, Afar, and Southern Ethiopia have experienced varying levels of armed conflict resulting in hundreds of casualties.<sup>35</sup> Even in

26 For a background on the conflict, see: Ethiopia Peace Research Facility, [“Understanding the Fano Insurgency in Ethiopia’s Amhara Region,”](#) Rift Valley Institute, February 2024.

27 The AFNM leadership claims more than 170,000 people attended the gatherings. Thio News, [አስረሰማረ “ቃልኪዳን አድሰናል” / ቤተሰብ ረዳ ስለ አዲስ ዓለም ባሉም / “ህወሓት ወደ ጦርነት ሊገባ ነው”](#) [“We Have Renewed Our Covenant” / Getachew Reda on the Addisalem Balema / “TPLF is About to Go to War”], Ethio News 1 May 2026.

28 For a background of the conflict, see: Ethiopia Peace Research Facility, [“Ethiopia Conflict Trend Analysis: Western Oromia,”](#) Rift Valley Institute, March 2023.

29 Borkena, [“Ethiopia: Oromo Liberation Army Claims Significant Military Gain,”](#) Borkena, 25 March 2026.

30 Ethiopia Peace Research Facility, [“Peace and Instability: Tigray since the Pretoria Agreement,”](#) Rift Valley Institute, 26 March 2026.

31 Al Jazeera, [“Fears over Ethiopia Peace Deal as TPLF Restores Tigray Government,”](#) Al Jazeera, 20 April 2026.

32 Deutsche Welle, [“Renewed Tigray Tensions Raise Fears of Ethiopia-Eritrea War,”](#) DW, 13 May 2026.

33 Addis Standard, [“ENDF Says Diplomatic Community Briefed on Potential Response to Tsimdo Initiative,”](#) Addis Standard, 2026; Borkena, [“Fano: Ethiopian Rebels Want Opposition Political Parties Not to Take Part in the Election,”](#) Borkena, 16 March 2026

34 Borkena, [“Fano: Ethiopian Rebels Want Opposition Political Parties Not to Take Part in the Election,”](#) Borkena, 16 March 2026.; Addis Standard, [“OLF-OLA Joins Fano in Criticizing Ethiopia’s Upcoming Election, Calls it a ‘Hollow Ritual’,”](#) Addis Standard, 24 March 2026.

35 Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), [Ethiopia Country Data](#), ACLED, 2026.

regions not directly affected by clashes, **the gradual erosion of the state's monopoly on violence has produced a marked deterioration of law and order.**<sup>36</sup>

In such a context, even technically well-run elections would have little positive impact on the ground. The insurgencies in Amhara and Oromia, as well as the growing tensions in Tigray, are driven by grievances, power struggles, and security dynamics that operate entirely outside formal democratic processes. Resolving these conflicts requires negotiated political settlements, credible security arrangements, and sustained implementation efforts. The Pretoria Agreement offers a sobering lesson in what happens when that last element is neglected. Even when a deal is reached, the absence of sustained political will to implement it can undo years of diplomatic effort and push a region back to the brink of war.<sup>37</sup> Yet, **rather than pursuing the sustained political engagement these conflicts demand, the ruling party appears prepared to claim legitimacy through a controlled political process, which in practice excludes the very groups with the leverage to constrain its authority.**

## 5. Policy recommendations

Beyond falling short of democratic standards, the electoral process in Ethiopia risks further fracturing the country by entrenching the ruling party's determination to resolve political differences by military force rather than political negotiations. This trend should be a source of **concern for Ethiopia's international partners, as instability in Ethiopia poses a significant threat to the wider Horn of Africa region and beyond.** With a population of over 120 million people and sharing borders with seven countries,

most of which are already struggling with their own crises,<sup>38</sup> Ethiopia is arguably the most consequential country in the Horn of Africa. In addition to the catastrophic consequences for its people, the impact of increasing instability in the country and the consequent displacement is likely to be felt in the region and beyond, including in Europe.<sup>39</sup>

With this context in mind, this policy brief offers **recommendations to policymakers in the Netherlands and the European Union** on how to structure their engagement with Ethiopia at this critical juncture. Ethiopia's partners should resist the temptation to treat the elections as a sign of democratic progress or a marker of stability. Rather, the EU and its member states should **engage the Ethiopian government in a critical but constructive discussion on the country's growing instability.** To this end, the various forms of support the EU provides to Ethiopia offer useful entry points for these sensitive discussions, as the following paragraphs outline.

**The EU's support to the National Dialogue process offers the most evident entry point to advocate for a negotiated solution to the country's conflicts.** So far, the process has suffered from capture by the ruling party, which has hampered its effectiveness.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the process has been largely de-linked from negotiations with armed groups that oppose the government, thus reducing its ability to address the conflicts that plague the country.<sup>41</sup> **EU support should aim to reduce ruling party control over the process** while strengthening its ability to bring together groups that contest the government's approach to the country's political future.

36 Addis Standard, "[Rights Group Reports Surge in Kidnappings amid Escalating Conflicts and Government Control Eroding in Oromia and Amhara Regions.](#)" Addis Standard, 3 September 2024. Samuel Getachew, "[Jobs Lost, Livelihoods Upended as Insecurity Smothers Tourism.](#)" *The Reporter Ethiopia*, 5 July 2025.

37 Ethiopia Peace Research Facility, "[Peace and Instability: Tigray since the Pretoria Agreement.](#)" Rift Valley Institute, 26 March 2026.

38 See forthcoming analysis by Clingendael.

39 Recent escalations in the Wollo area of the Amhara region have reportedly resulted in people from the region arriving in Europe. Sarah Vaughan, "[Tigray and Ethiopia on the Brink | War as a Means of Governance | Fall of the TPLF.](#)" Sarah Vaughan" Tighat, 9 May 2026.

40 Amanuel Dessalegn Gedebo, "[Rethinking Ethiopia's National Dialogue: Navigating Conflict and Growing Repression Ahead of 2026 Elections.](#)" Clingendael Policy Brief, The Hague, August 2025.

41 Exchange with Ethiopian political analyst, May 2026.

Cooperation around the National Dialogue process could be coupled with **concrete offers of non-financial support, such as mediation or facilitation efforts** aimed at supporting political negotiations, particularly in Amhara, Oromia, and Tigray. These efforts could be led by EU member states – including potentially the Netherlands, which enjoys a strong reputation as a leading European investor with networks and activities across the country – or by partner countries with a mediation tradition, such as Switzerland or Norway. As part of these efforts, the EU can also leverage the specialised mediation organisations that it funds to provide technical support for negotiations.

Discussions around budget support also offer entry points for discussions on conflict related issues. **The recent decision by the EU to resume direct budget support – at a moment of worsening tensions, mounting human rights violations, and widespread repression of opposition voices in the lead-up to elections – is hard to reconcile with the EU’s stated commitments to human rights and conflict sensitivity. However, follow-up discussions on the implementation of budget support could be used to address key conflict-related questions –** for instance, how to ensure that the EU’s financial support reaches all areas where it is needed, in a context where the federal government is withholding budget transfers to the interim administration in Tigray.<sup>42</sup>

In addition, **the EU should use its influence within the international financial institutions (IFIs) to strengthen its push for a political solution to the country’s conflicts.** The IMF and the World Bank are the two institutions that mobilise the largest amounts of financial support to the federal government. While these organisations formally avoid political conditionality and frame their mandates around economic issues,

political and economic issues are deeply entwined. Macroeconomic stability or poverty reduction (key objectives of the IMF and the WB respectively) are simply not achievable in a context of widespread armed conflicts, as the World Bank’s own analysis shows.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, providing large-scale financial backing to a government actively engaged in multiple internal conflicts is not a politically neutral act. The EU should thus press both institutions to align their engagement with demonstrable progress towards political solutions, for instance by tying disbursements to concrete milestones in the implementation of the Pretoria Agreement.

**Discussions around foreign investment also create relevant entry points for the EU and other international actors to engage the Ethiopian government on issues related to long-term stability.** Attracting foreign investment is a key priority for the Ethiopian government, and investors have shown considerable appetite for the Ethiopian market. Yet the current conflict environment is fundamentally incompatible with the depth of economic engagement both sides are seeking.<sup>44</sup> The EU should encourage European investors to join forces to create economic incentives for the political stability that sustainable investment requires. The regular

42 Addis Standard, “[Tigray Interim Admin Says 8.5 Billion Birr Budget Shortfall Has Triggered Severe Financial Crisis.](#)” Addis Standard, 24 April 2026.

It should be noted that the withholding of subsidies predates the latest takeover of the interim administration by the TPLF in May 2026.

43 According to the World Bank’s Poverty and Equity Brief (October 2025), Ethiopia’s national poverty rate has risen sharply from 33 percent in 2016 to a projected 43 percent by 2025, reversing more than two decades of progress. The Bank cites conflict as one of the major reasons for this reversal, alongside persistent droughts, slow economic growth, and soaring inflation. World Bank, “[Ethiopia Poverty and Equity Brief: October 2025.](#)” World Bank, October 2025.

44 While an investment forum in March 2026 managed to secure pledges totalling USD 13 billion – a very high sum, considering that a recent forum by neighbouring Kenya attracted less than USD 3 billion – the structure of these investments is highly concentrated, with a single pledge accounting for over USD 10 billion and another accounting for USD 2 billion. Ethiopian Investment Commission, “[Invest in Ethiopia 2026 Forum.](#)” March 2026. Conversations with European business actors and diplomats in Ethiopia (held in November 2025 in Addis Ababa) suggest that prospective European investors remain wary of engaging in Ethiopia due to the highly unstable context and the issues faced by foreign businesses active in the country.

dialogues held by the European Chamber in Ethiopia with government officials offer an important opening in this regard. The impact of such efforts, however, depends on the EU's ability to speak with one voice. Competition between member states for bilateral investment deals with Ethiopia remains a significant obstacle to a coherent EU commitment to long-term stability.<sup>45</sup> The EU should also consider broadening these discussions to include companies and governments of other countries with significant investments in Ethiopia.

**Beyond these broader engagement tracks, the EU should also use the electoral process itself as an opportunity for critical conversations with the Ethiopian government.** With the date of the elections quickly approaching and no EU electoral observation mission foreseen, the window has closed on supporting the electoral process itself to make it freer and fairer. Yet, options for follow-up action remain. The bloc and some of its member states have provided support to actors involved in the electoral process, including not only state institutions but also civil society observers.<sup>46</sup> The EU should use this support as a channel for engagement on key issues with the Ethiopian government. At the very minimum, **the EU should provide its backing to civil society actors** (e.g. non-governmental organisations, journalists and independent media, etc.) **who expose irregularities in the electoral process**, particularly if they come under pressure from government authorities in the lead up to and/or in the wake of the elections.

Ultimately, the question for Ethiopia's partners is whether the country's stability and their own interests are served by the current trajectory.

**Elections that provide the ruling party a renewed mandate while the country's conflicts continue are unlikely to deliver stability** for Ethiopia or serve the long-term interests of its partners. The EU and the Netherlands have the relationships, the leverage, and the interests to push for a trajectory that is more conducive to long-term stability.

---

45 Conversations with Horn of Africa expert 22 May 2026

46 European Centre for Electoral Support (ECES), "[EURECS II Launched](#)," ECES, 7 May 2025

### About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

www.clingendael.org  
info@clingendael.org  
+31 70 324 53 84

✉ @clingendaelorg  
f The Clingendael Institute  
in The Clingendael Institute  
@ clingendael\_institute  
▶ Clingendael Institute  
📄 Newsletter

### About the authors

**Amanuel Dessalegn Gedebo** – Researcher at the Clingendael Institute's Conflict Research Unit.

Amanuel contributes to the work of CRU, specialising in the intersection of politics and economics with a focus on the Horn of Africa. His expertise lies in analysing the political economy of conflict-affected regions and contributing to policy discussions that promote sustainable peace.

**Guido Lanfranchi** – Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute's Conflict Research Unit.

Guido contributes to CRU's Horn of Africa programme, focusing on Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia. Guido's research interests revolve around the interplay between economic, political and security dynamics, with a focus on how economic interests and business elites shape governance arrangements and conflict patterns. Guido also conducts research on geopolitical dynamics in the Horn of Africa, including the engagement of various foreign powers (Russia, China, Arab Gulf states, etc.).

### Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the financial support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Department of Stabilization and Humanitarian Aid), and the valuable input and feedback from our Clingendael colleagues Megan Price, Anette Hoffmann and Jos Meester, as well as an Ethiopian researcher who wishes to remain anonymous.