

IGAD and the Mediation of Conflict in the Horn of Africa

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Abstract: *IGAD is mandated to provide peace and security in the Horn of Africa. Based on IGAD's establishing principle, mediation of conflicts is one of its top priorities. In line with this, IGAD engaged in mediating conflicts in the sub-region, yet it failed to engage in the ongoing Ethiopian Tigray conflict. This essay interrogates why IGAD failed to mediate the Ethiopian conflict with a comparative analysis of the South Sudan conflict. Employing qualitative methodology with secondary and soft primary data; the findings revealed that IGAD's institutional weakness is a major contributing factor to its failure to mediate the Ethiopian conflict. If IGAD was a strong institution it could easily manage conflicts in the sub-region based on its establishing agreement and could effectively serve its purpose.*

Introduction

IGAD, revitalized in 1996, after replacing the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD), has played a prominent role in the Pacific Settlement of Disputes. Since its revitalization, mediation became one of its top priorities. According to the principle in Article 6A of the 'Agreement Establishing of the IGAD', peaceful settlement of inter-and intra-State conflicts through dialogue; and maintenance of regional peace, and stability are IGAD's core areas of focus (IGAD, 1996). In line with this, IGAD actively engaged in the mediation of intrastate conflicts in the past, yet it failed to engage in Ethiopia's 18-month-old Tigray conflict. This essay seeks to interrogate why IGAD did not get actively involved in mediating the Ethiopian conflict with a comparative analysis of IGAD's mediation in the South Sudan conflict. IGAD's failure in this regard reflects its limitation in living up to its establishing principle.

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The reason for investigating IGAD's mediation role, particularly, its failure to mediate the Ethiopian Tigray conflict emanates from two major assumptions. Firstly, Ethiopia has been a regional security stabilizer that shares borders with all members of IGAD except Uganda. With this fact in mind, long and unabated conflict in Ethiopia has the potential to destabilize the entire turbulent Horn of Africa (HoA). Secondly, IGAD has a legal responsibility to deal with conflicts and promote regional stability. Therefore, in light of this assumption, this essay poses a central question to deal with: Why does IGAD fail to honour its commitment to mediate Ethiopia's Tigray conflict and solve the region's security challenge? I argue that IGAD's institutional weakness is a major contributing factor to its failure to mediate the Ethiopian Tigray conflict.

The rest of the paper is organized into six sections. Section two briefly outlines the theoretical debates on how regional organizations are mandated to mediate conflicts, emphasizing liberal institutionalism which supports the central argument of the paper. Sections three and four explore the methodology and case studies respectively. Section five analyses the findings of the study and the last section provides a concluding remark.

Regional Organizations and Conflict Mediation

Regional organizations that have close political, economic, social, and cultural ties to civil war belligerents, seem to be ideal third-party mediators (Gartner, 2011). Such regional organizations are frequently established to deal with this type of dispute resolution, and member states, fearing the diffusion of war, have a strong interest in resolving the conflict. Gartner (2011) provides three main reasons why regional organizations can be effective at mediating civil wars and facilitating the development of long-lasting peace agreements. Firstly, member states of regional organizations are likely to share political, economic, social, and cultural features with the

disputants. Secondly, neighboring states fear the spread of conflict through the region. Thirdly, as opposed to far international organizations, regional organizations are more popular with civil war leaders. Combining these three factors, Gartner concluded that 'regional organizations have a positive conflict management process that makes them attractive to the disputants' (Gartner, 2011).

On the other hand, other scholars are skeptical of the mediating roles of regional organizations. For instance, Amoo & Zartman (1992) argued 'since regional organizations are meeting places for sovereign states, and much less corporate entities in their own right, they are under pressure from their members to endorse rather than to mediate' (Amoo & Zartman, 1992). They argued that in most of their mediatory activity, the regional organizations are a locus and a flag, not corporate actors (Ibid.). That being partly true, however, there are plenty of empirical pieces of evidence where regional organizations such as IGAD, the Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) were the leading actors in mediating conflicts in Africa, albeit with varying outcomes (Hellmuller, Federer & Pring, 2017).

Additionally, the timing of mediation is a crucial point that should be taken into consideration when deciding to engage in mediation (Zartman, 2001). Likewise, regional organizations responsible for the mediation of conflicts are expected to consider this timing. According to Zartman, there are 'ripe moments' in any conflict in which mediators can intervene (Zartman, 2001). Conflicting parties also demand the intervention of third parties when they are exhausted fighting (Ibid.) and states will only support third-party mediation in the most serious disputes—when the dispute is unlikely to be resolved by themselves (Gartner, 2011).

Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal institutionalists advocate for the establishment of organizations and policies that promote cooperation (Sheriff, Uke & Adams, 2015) because they believe in the inherent qualities of institutions in fostering interdependence. According to liberal institutionalism, institutions are a framework for cooperation, which can help to address the risk of security competition between states and promote peace and stability.

Liberal institutionalism explains institutionalized cooperation among states (Milner, 2009). For such institutionalized cooperation to exist, states must comply with the norms and rules embodied in the institutions (Ibid.) because norms can regulate and define what actors can or cannot do, define new actors, behaviors, and interests or prescribe human behavior (Katzenstein, 1996; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Ruggie, 1998 in Hellmuller, Federer & Pring, 2017).

For liberal institutionalists, strong institutions are important to deal with the impediments of peace and development since they can promote cooperation and are guided by shared values and norms. In strong institutions such as the EU, for example, member states had relinquished part of their sovereignty for mutual benefit. Strong institutions are also difficult to change or dismantle easily once they begin operating on solid foundations (Johnson & Heiss, 2018). Such institutions will have the capacity to strictly oversee the major principles and norms they have been established for.

Hence, in analyzing IGAD's role in mediating conflicts in the sub-region, this paper relied on the assumption of liberal institutionalism due to its emphasis on rule-based institutionalized cooperation. Liberal institutionalism can be used as a lens for analyzing the role of regional organizations in mediating intrastate conflicts since cooperation and compliance with a rule are needed for mitigating the destabilizing effects of such conflicts. Moreover, liberal institutionalism is best fit to be used as a lens for evaluating IGAD's role as a regional security provider due to its adherence to the liberal international norms as a subsidiary organ of the AU. As a result, the commitment of member states coupled with established norms and procedures are key to the mediating success of regional organizations.

Research Methodology

The study employed qualitative methodology with both primary and secondary data sources. Whereas primary data were gathered through consulting soft primary sources such as official press briefings, meeting minutes, and digital newspapers; secondary data were collected from books, journal articles, and available online databases.

The Role of IGAD in Mediation of Conflicts: Case Studies

Mediation is a pacific means of resolving conflicts through an impartial third-party intervention (Zartman, & Touval, 2007). IGAD, as a sub-regional actor, is actively involved in mediating conflicts in the sub-region. It also engages in strengthening its institutional capacity to effectively deal with conflicts. For example, the IGAD Mediation Support Unit (MSU) came into existence to respond to conflict (Lanz, Pring, Von Burg & Zeller, 2017). As a result of its active engagement, IGAD's mediating role can be seen as a manifestation of African 'sub-regional solutions to African sub-regional problems' (Adar, 2000; Back, 2020).

Africa's second-most populous country and the regional security stabilizer, Ethiopia, is hit by a year and a half-long devastating civil war in its northern part. The war had brought a devastating impact on the socio-economic situation of the country and the peace and security of the region. It resulted in an unprecedented number of human casualties, perpetrated severe human rights abuse, resulted in a massive humanitarian catastrophe, (Felbab-Brown, 2022), and led to the displacement of millions of civilians (BBC 10 June 2021).

While IGAD's response to the South Sudanese conflict was immediate, as an immediate security provider of the HoA region, it did not take the lead in brokering peace among belligerents in the Tigray war. Why IGAD failed to mediate the Ethiopian conflict while it had the experience of mediating the South Sudanese conflict, is the driving question of this essay.

The South Sudanese and Ethiopian Tigray civil war, despite differences between the two countries (discussed in the findings section) and the relatively complex nature of the Ethiopian conflict, are taken as comparable case studies for the following reasons. Firstly, both countries, as members of the conflict-ridden HoA, have suffered from prolonged intrastate conflicts. Secondly, in both cases, the conflicts can be drawn with some form of power competition and a split of a leading party. Where in the South Sudan case, it was between the president and former vice president; in Ethiopia, it is between the federal government and a regional government. Thirdly, both conflicts also have ethnic elements. Where in South Sudan, it was between the Nuer and the Dinka ethnic groups (Back, 2020); in Ethiopia, the conflict gradually develops and seems to be a fight between the Tigray ethnic group and other Ethiopians. Finally, in both cases, neighboring countries were involved in the conflict by supporting one of the warring parties.

When civil war erupted in South Sudan in December 2013, as many attributed it as a result of a power struggle within the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (Chol, 2020), IGAD quickly

responded by appointing three special envoys tasked with ensuring mediation. After a long and tiring mediation effort, IGAD came up with the IGAD PLUS initiative (ICG, 2015; Chol, 2020) which led to the signing of the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCISS) in August 2015 (Chol, 2020). Pressures from IGAD, the AU, and regional countries played a crucial role in the signing of the agreement (Back, 2020). The signing of ARCISS, however, does not prevent the parties from relapsing into conflict. Yet, IGAD's continued effort led to the signing of the Khartoum Declaration Agreement on 27 June 2018 committing the South Sudanese parties to a permanent ceasefire (Back, 2020).

Conversely, in the Ethiopian case, IGAD, as an actor, neither initiated any tangible peace talk nor did it appoint special envoys tasked with mediating the major belligerents, the Ethiopian federal government and its allies, and the Tigray forces led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The conflict began on the night of 3rd November 2020, when the Tigrayan forces attacked the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) Northern Command bases in Tigray (UNHCR, 27 November 2020), and the subsequent military offensive by the federal government against the Tigrayan forces (ICG, 2021). Within three weeks, the federal government declared victory by ousting TPLF leaders and controlling several towns (Ibid.). The Tigrayan forces then recaptured Tigray later in June 2021 further expanding into neighboring Amhara and Afar regional states.

At the time of writing, however, active fighting is slowed and the belligerents are in a humanitarian ceasefire. The ceasefire, however, can easily be broken and the parties may relapse into active fighting unless the daily humanitarian needs of the Tigray population are met and third party mediators seize the opportunity to help parties sign a comprehensive ceasefire and insist on a follow-up negotiated settlement. On the whole, it seems IGAD is weak when it comes

to Ethiopia. This is IGAD's second failure in mediating conflicts in Ethiopia next to the Ethio-Eritrean war. During the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean war, IGAD remained powerless and failed to bring peace talk among belligerents (Healy, 2009).

IGAD's Failure in Mediating the Ethiopian Conflict

One reason which paralyzed IGAD from mediating the Ethiopian conflict is manifested in regional power politics. Ethiopia's major role in stabilizing the region and its domination of IGAD's chairmanship for a long period is a reflection of Ethiopia's acting hegemony in the sub-region (Collins, 2021). Related to this, there are some accusations of Ethiopia's exploitation of IGAD as some contend 'the organization increasingly becoming an arm for expediting Ethiopia's foreign policy' (Kassahun, 2021). Hence, IGAD's abstinence from initiating peace talks in the Tigray crisis could be emanated from its institutional weakness perpetrated by Ethiopia's domination. On the other hand, IGAD's quick response to the South Sudanese conflict could attribute to Ethiopia's domination because South Sudan is not on par with Ethiopia's capability in terms of population, military, and regional playing to dominate the workings of IGAD. Moreover, in attempting to mediate conflicts, member states always undertake their initiatives independent of the structure of IGAD (Apuuli, 2015). Such practices of mediation largely remained ad-hoc and anchored on the elite personalities of the mediators or the leverage of the state(s) (Hellmuller, Federer & Pring, 2017). In this regard, Ethiopia's dominance in the IGAD is manifested by its leaders' active engagement in the mediating tasks of IGAD and organizing continuous peace conferences for Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan.

There is also competing national interest among member states (Bereketab, 2019) when engaging in mediation. In addition to competing for national interest, there is suspicion of one another in meddling in one's internal affairs— 'mutual intervention' by member states in each other's conflicts (Healy, 2009; Asnake, 2015). Related to this, Gartner (2011) noted, insurgents that get support from neighboring states who are members of the same regional organization would make the organization a less attractive mediator. Likewise, the mediation offer provided by Abdalla Hamdok, the recently resigned Prime Minister of Sudan, was rejected by the Ethiopian government claiming the Sudanese government lacks credibility (Office of the Prime Minister-Ethiopia, 5 August 2021). Sudan's annexation of the contested Al Fashaga agricultural land immediately after the war broke out in northern Ethiopia, the historical friendly relations between the Sudan government and the TPLF leaders as well as the Sudanese unstable position over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) could be the major factors that explain the Ethiopian government's decision to reject the mediation offer.

The lack of strong international political pressure is another reason that partly explains IGAD's failure in mediating the Ethiopian conflict despite the increasing accusation of the federal government by the international community for a humanitarian crisis. Even though the recent development shows an increasing pressure exerted on the Ethiopian government, the international community did not strongly pressure either the IGAD to initiate peace talks or the government of Ethiopia to comply with the rulings of IGAD despite making Ethiopia's conflict a UN Security Council agenda several times. The UN, for example, did not threaten Ethiopia into imposing restrictions on arms sales as it threatened the South Sudanese combatants.

Division has also been observed in the international community while discussing the Ethiopian conflict in the UN Security Council (SC 8812th meeting, 2 July 2021; SC 8843rd meeting, 26

August 2021). While some great powers tend to influence the federal government and opt for some sort of sanction, others remained in support of the Ethiopian government to handle the internal matter by itself (Ibid.). But in the case of South Sudan, international instruments were better than in the Ethiopian case, pressuring the South Sudanese belligerents into accepting IGAD's mediation. As a result, it is reasonable to argue that IGAD's involvement in the South Sudanese conflict was because the strong powers exert influence on the belligerents in accepting the peace deal through the use of threat of sanction.

In terms of Zartman's theory of ripeness, the two conflicting parties in Ethiopia did not see the cost of continuing fighting over the cost of negotiation until recently. During the initial period of the war, the TPLF forces disintegrated. At that time, there cannot be ripeness as the victory went to the federal government. By the same token, the increasing offensive and counteroffensive in the mid-2021 depicted no mutual sense of inability to win as both parties claim decisive military victory and vowed to eliminate one another. In this regard, the absence of ripeness could be one reason for lacking mediation. However, waiting for a ripe moment could not prevent IGAD from initiating peace talks as it quickly did it without expecting ripeness in the South Sudan conflict. Moreover, the recent humanitarian truce accepted by both conflicting parties could serve as an entry point for brokering peace. But, IGAD is not as active as it was in the South Sudan case. Hence, ripeness cannot fully explain IGAD's failure, though the ripe moment is a prerequisite for effective mediation. In a nutshell, all the aforementioned factors have a significant influence on the power of IGAD in mediating conflicts albeit they are secondary to the institutional capacity dimension.

The major reason why IGAD failed to mediate the Ethiopian conflict is due to its weak institutional capacity. Bereketab (2019) outlined three underpinning factors for the institutional

weakness of IGAD: the structure of IGAD; its dependence on external financing; and the human capacity problem. These factors undermine IGAD's operations, efficacy, and performance (Ibid.). IGAD lacks strong mechanisms for dealing with conflicts in the sub-region. It also lacks shared norms for managing conflicts (Asnake, 2015).

IGAD is dependent on the AU and UN as well as regional powers for its activity. This dependency hinders it from initiating peace talks by itself. The support of regional powers such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan as well as the international powers during the South Sudanese civil war helped IGAD to mediate the belligerents, however, this is a manifestation of its institutional weakness where IGAD is unable to take action in the Ethiopian case when such support is absent. Therefore, this institutional weakness made IGAD fail to mediate the Ethiopian conflict.

The absence of an independent institution tasked with conflict management is a major manifestation of IGAD's institutional weakness. IGAD has no special organ that is responsible for the facilitation of peace and security (Wulf & Debiel, 2009). Leaders in the sub-region are not ready to be constrained by the rulings of IGAD because they did not cede their authority to the technical and bureaucratic elements to act on their behalf. They seek instead to direct IGAD's activity in pursuit of their interests (Ibid.). Hence, this requires the unreserved political will of member states to develop shared norms and institutional setups that supersede their self-interest in helping IGAD develop an autonomous conflict mediation capability.

Financial and resource constraints are also IGAD's major impediments to dealing with conflicts. Lack of resources weakens its capacity to undertake mandates. Associated with this, IGAD's institutional weakness is manifested by the absence of a binding mechanism for member states that cannot pay their membership fees regularly as this will open room for dominating the

workings of IGAD by those who paid regularly. In a nutshell, why IGAD is not involved in Ethiopia's conflict has to do with its institutional weakness. IGAD's domination by a regional player(s) as well as its reliance on external donors is a result of its weak institutionalization.

Overall, even though IGAD may not be acclaimed as a successful independent regional security actor like other similar organizations in Africa and beyond, 'it has played a crucial agenda-setting role in directing African and wider international responses to conflict in the region' (Healy, 2009). Furthermore, the context where it is established also significantly matters. For instance, its previous relative success in mediating the conflicts in Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan could make it an independent regional actor that greatly contributes to the security of the sub-region and provides a sign of hope for the future. In line with this, utilizing the assumptions of liberal institutionalism could better improve its institutional setup and decision-making procedures.

Conclusion

IGAD's major problem is related to its institutional weakness. Due to its weakness, it failed to initiate peace talks and mediate the Ethiopian Tigray conflict. Even in other cases where IGAD was involved in mediation such as the South Sudan conflict, the mediation process was dominated by interested regional and external powers which made IGAD paralyzed to prevent the self-interest of member states and was critiqued for its failure to sustain peace agreements.

The paper underscores the necessity of peace and security by focusing on how IGAD failed to mediate the Ethiopian conflict. While IGAD is expected to effectively handle regional peace and security and promote greater integration of states in the HoA, it remained powerless in serving its

purpose. This hopefully will help to scrutinize how IGAD can better be institutionalized to deal with regional peace and security and live up to its expectation.

The paper contributes to research on the role of regional organizations in the mediation of conflicts. The argument opens room for discussion on whether IGAD has the potential of mediating conflicts in all member states and promoting enduring peace and stability in a region ravaged by conflicts and dominated by partial democracies. In this regard, investigation of the IGAD MSU helps to understand whether it strengthened IGAD's future role in mediating conflicts and, therefore, should be a focus of further studies. Furthermore, emphasis on how to best strengthen IGAD and institutionalize norms of mediation through the assumptions of liberal institutionalism should be a focus for policymakers of the IGAD region.

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