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Drivers of ethnic conflict in contemporary Ethiopia

Semir Yusuf

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Executive summary

Over the past two years, Ethiopia has experienced both rapid political liberalisation and a surge in violent conflicts. The surge in violence is largely due to a rise in militant, competing ethnic nationalisms in the context of perceived fragility of state and party institutions. The two forces have been closely and cyclically influencing each other for decades.

Exclusivist and authoritarian political institutions since the imperial (1930–1974) and military (1974–1991) eras have played a role in the emergence and ripening of contending nationalisms in the country. Centralised but federated political institutions during the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) era have further complicated the nationalist scene by creating multiple lines of ethno-nationalist struggles in Ethiopia.

From mid-2010 onwards, rising competing ethno-nationalisms led to the relative weakening of party and state structures, resulting in the intensification of ethnic mobilisations. The outcome was deadly. At a micro level, security challenges and a concern for group worth have fuelled violence.

With the perceived fragility of the state and ruling party, elites have further exacerbated the conflicts for opportunistic reasons. The economic downturn has played a role both as a source of grievance – facilitating ethnic mobilisation – and also as a factor that makes it easier for some to engage in violence, since they feel they have little to lose.

To sustainably tackle the problem of violence in Ethiopia, the institutional and ideological context of the country must urgently be changed. The ruling party, the main actor in charge of the country's political processes, needs transformation both within its constituent parties and the coalition as a whole. The constituent parties need to prioritise unity, with a clear negotiated vision and party discipline.

Then they need to strike a balance between their particular interests regarding their constituencies, and responsibility of the coalition as a whole. This is needed to maintain stability and ensure the country's smooth transition. Reprioritising interests is of critical importance. Candid interparty discussions with a genuine attempt to incorporate the reasonable fears and demands of all parties into the transition process are vital. The EPRDF leadership should prioritise such negotiated deals over rushed party merger.

Moreover, inclusive political dialogue among other political actors is necessary to help detoxify the political environment and pave the way for effective state reconstruction. These forces must focus their efforts on concrete constitutional design options or public policy alternatives that could incorporate the reasonable interests and tackle the fears of all political groups. Contentious issues and agendas over borders, territorial disputes, minority rights and autonomy demands should be part of the wider exercise to restructure the state in an inclusive manner.

Finally, the state should reclaim its autonomy from mob influences; renegotiate and clarify the new intergovernmental power relations; and step up its ability to contain and prevent violent conflicts in a professional and human rights-sensitive manner.

Introduction

Since April 2018, Ethiopia has seen a political liberalisation acclaimed worldwide for its pace and breadth. In its first year of office, the new government unblocked hundreds of jammed news sites, expanding media freedom; released thousands of political prisoners; welcomed banned political groups to operate freely in the country; appointed non-party figures to positions of influence; and revoked repressive laws once used to target political opponents. These moves lifted the hopes and morale of many Ethiopians who would remember the recent past unfavourably.

At the same time, however, Ethiopia has witnessed a surge in violent conflicts for much of the past two years. Despite an impressive record in the arena of political opening spearheaded by the new government, the country has experienced large-scale displacements, killings and destruction of property.

The incidents are not confined to a specific region, but are spread almost all over the country. In most cases, they have ethnic overtones or involve ethnic groups. Although Ethiopia is not new to ethnic-based conflicts, their scale and intensity in the short time since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali's rise to power has been alarming.

The question then is, why has ethnic-based[1] violence spiralled especially since 2018, in part coinciding with the onset of political liberalisation? What major underlying factors contribute to the fueling of conflicts and are common to most cases of conflict?[2] This monograph tackles this question. It addresses it based on extensive insights gathered from the existing relevant literature on conflicts and field work in different parts of the country.

The fresh and dynamic framework of analysis employed in this monograph emphasises two factors – state and party institutions and nationalist mobilisations, and their interactions.[3] It is argued that political institutions shape contentious nationalisms that in turn weaken those institutions, leading to further nationalist competition resulting in violence. Translated into the Ethiopian case, the monograph contends that:

- Institutional arrangements in the form of a 'centralised ethno federation' created fertile grounds for the simmering of various contending nationalist fault lines in the long term.

- Ascendant ethno-nationalisms[4] then contributed not only to a shift in the institutional arrangements, i.e., political liberalisation, but also to their fragility – that is, incoherence and brittleness.
- Under the watch of a fragile or incoherent state and party, and partly because of it, contending ethnic mobilisations further stepped up their fight both against the state and among themselves.

Economic downturn further complicated the already tense situation. The outcome was a worrisome proliferation of violent ethnic-based conflicts throughout the country. In the analysis, elite interests and calculations are factored in especially in the process of mobilisation, but their roles are amplified in the context of institutional dynamics. These dynamics shape their attitudes and interests, and facilitate nationalist propagation. This doesn't deprive them of agency but contextualises that agency and gives it certain predictability.

The research also zooms in on the nationalist dynamics at a micro level. How exactly do nationalist mobilisations end up being bloody? Two concepts are emphasised: the invidious comparison of Donald Horowitz and the security dilemma of the Realist school of thought in international relations.[5]

> Institutions shape contentious nationalisms that in turn weaken those institutions, leading to further nationalist competition

According to Horowitz, the bond that ties the individual's worth to the group's, and the drive to gauge the group's worth in contrast to another's, gives nationalism a strong appeal to the nationalist, making even killing or dying for the cause acceptable. Furthermore, once imbibed, as Realism affirms, nationalist competitions are informed by the self-reinforcing logic of power building to preserve one's security (and self-worth).

This spurs a spate of power build-up and counter-power build-up between groups, leading to a generally hostile and insecure environment for each, and perhaps to violent conflicts as well.[6] This doesn't however mean that all violent conflicts in Ethiopia happen for nationalist reasons. Hence the research adds another layer to the analysis by bringing in elites that promote their own material agendas to the extent that institutional conditions allow.

The goal of the monograph is not to map conflicts or produce a database of them. It rather aims to provide a theoretically informed and empirically grounded

analysis of the causes of the conflicts. It also provides some recommendations that could contribute towards transformation. The significance of the monograph lies not necessarily in providing detailed information on particular cases of conflict, but in offering a framework to understand factors giving rise to their eruption and intensification. It also helps in searching for holistic and effective ways to resolve the conflicts.

Despite widespread violence, Ethiopia hasn't descended into utter chaos as a country. Many people still lead ordinary lives, not necessarily directly affected by the recent round of conflicts, although with security concerns of differing levels of gravity. Hence the conflict-centred analysis offered here should not imply that the country is heading towards an apocalypse. Its goal is just to address the root causes of actual and potential conflicts in the country, without assuming that the trend will necessarily continue unabated or that it will engulf the entire country.

Moreover, it is recommended that more research be done especially from the side of peacemaking, investigating the diverse forces that have curbed further bloodshed in Ethiopia. Such works could complement the findings of the current study that focused on what actually happened, rather than what could have happened, and how that worst-case scenario was averted.

Field work was a major part of the research process. Perspectives and information on relevant issues were gathered from various sources. Trips were made to some hotspot areas of the country, and 60 people of diverse ethnic and professional backgrounds were interviewed. However due to the country's security situation, not all sites of violence could be covered in the field work. So instead of travelling to all those regions, people from or affiliated to those areas were interviewed. It is hoped that these interviews provide a perspective as close to the ground as possible.

The monograph begins with a short summary of the conflict scene in Ethiopia today. It then discusses the institutional context and development of ethno-nationalism. Next it delves into the proliferation of conflicts within the ambit of contending nationalisms. Then it returns to institutional dynamics to show the fragility of party and state, and how that also contributed to the prevalence of ethnic-based violence. The monograph ends a conclusion and recommendations.

Conflict in Ethiopia today

Violent conflicts have sporadically ravaged several localities in many regions in Ethiopia since early 2018,[7] although many are apparently now subsiding. This has led to a massive displacement of people. In 2018 Ethiopia 'had the highest number of new internal displacements associated with conflict worldwide.'

Inter-ethnic violence that year caused 'almost 2.9 million new displacements, four times the figure for 2017.'[8]

Although the government disputes this figure,[9] sources agree on the rise in displacements over recent years. The major hotspot regions in the country for the past year and a half include the north-eastern, north-western and western Amhara Region; several woredas in the Benishangul-Gumuz Region; western, southern and central Oromia; bordering areas between Oromia and Somali Region; and eastern and north-eastern parts of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region.

Most of these have been marked as areas that have witnessed high-intensity conflicts in recent times by conflict mapping conducted by the United Nations Development Programme this year.[10] Several other locations have also witnessed low- and medium-scale violence, at times perceived as high by locals comparing them with incidents of violence there in recent memory.

Chapter 1

Institutions shape ethnic relations and cause nationalist antagonisms

Pre-1991 Ethiopia

Understanding the causes of ethnic-based violence in Ethiopia should start with contending nationalisms. Contending nationalisms are not a new phenomenon in this part of the Horn of Africa. The country has been an ethnically divided society[11] since at least the eruption of the Ethiopian revolution of 1974. The unitary state of the imperial (1930–1974) and the Dergue (1974–1991) periods promoted nation building across the country using the arms of the state.

The peculiar 'Ethiopianising' project anchored in the promotion of common culture and language was not, however, seen favourably by certain groups of people, especially outside the Amharic-speaking north. It was rather understood as an attempt to destroy the existing cultures and languages of 'other nations' in the country. Hence counter-nation-building projects were crafted and put into practice on a massive scale.[12]

Several reasons interacted with the state's nation-building policy to produce counter-nation-building efforts. Factors such as the legacies of Italian colonialism (especially in Eritrea), and the decolonisation and Marxist-Leninist thoughts and movements of the 1960s and 1970s, contributed to the rethinking of the whole project of nation building that was under way at the time. These factors led to the ripening of sub-nationalist sentiments across the country.

Once initiated, consolidation of ethnic nationalism was spearheaded by a host of liberationist rebel movements that flourished throughout Ethiopia. More than a dozen insurgent groups fought the Dergue regime with variable intensity between 1974 and 1991. In the process, they galvanised ethno-nationalist consciousness among their constituencies. They also caused, aided by changing international political economy and regional politics, the downfall of the military junta in 1991. For the first time, Ethiopia was set to be ruled by an ethnically organised group, the

Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), orchestrated and led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

Post-1991 Ethiopia

The EPRDF government restructured the state along ethnic lines. The country was reorganised along ethnic units to form a federation. Ethnic parties were encouraged to prop up and lead their respective regions. The entire rhetoric of the government was undergirded by ethno-linguistic sensibilities. Ethiopian political economy, in short, since 1991 has been massively ethnically charged.

The ethnically charged state politics, mainly represented by ethnic federation, was however fraught with glaring ironies. Structurally speaking, ethnic federalism was grafted onto centralised statecraft.[13] On the one hand, the ethnic federal system created ethnic units with their own structures of administration, including their own executive, judiciary and legislative branches, and governed by their own constitutions. As a result, each region had its own distinct local politics and symbolism, manifested by a regional flag and working language in most cases.

On the other hand, hierarchical rule swayed across the country, whereby ideology, policies, programmes and projects were issued from the very top of the EPRDF leadership down to the lowest level of administration. Hence centralised state rule practically undermined the very principle of self-rule in the federation.

> Ethnic federalism both empowered and disempowered ethnic groups in the country

On a psychological level, the federal system generated two contradictory perspectives on the issue of ethnic empowerment. The protection of language rights and ethnically sensitive local governance gave rise to a sense of ethnic satisfaction among some historically marginalised groups in the country.[14] But the organisation of the federal rule also created feelings of marginalisation.

This happened in two distinct ways. The centralised party structure with the TPLF seats at the top generated a strong sense of Tigrayan domination over some major ethnic groups in the country.[15] Moreover, the ownership of each federal unit by one ethnic group gave rise to a divisive politics that set apart 'natives' from 'newcomers', and rendered the latter victims in the hands of the former.[16] Thus ethnic federalism both empowered and disempowered ethnic groups in the country.

The multinational state project of the EPRDF also contributed to the intensification of an array of nationalist mobilisations, both in the ethnic and Ethiopian nationalist

camps.[17] Ethnic nationalism ripened in two ways. On the one hand it fed on the opportunities given to it by the constitutional and political structural frameworks put in place to nurture it. Elites worked hard to develop their cultures and languages, and to entice self-contentment in one's ethnicity, using the institutions and rhetoric of the state.[18]

On the other, centralised rule led to a widespread perception of ethnic obstruction. Members of different ethnic groups went on inculcating the feeling that the full potential to ethnic blooming and the practice of self-determination were stunted by the policies of the ruling party.[19] This grievance was deployed by elites to incite anti-EPRDF ethnic opposition movements, and in the process step up ethnic nationalism – this time outside the legal and political realm set up by the ruling party. Hence sub-nationalism continued being nourished as a resistance ideology, simultaneously developing as a state-sanctioned one.

Ethiopian nationalism grew more formidable by the day. Ethiopian nationalists developed concerns about the EPRDF's ethnic-friendly rhetoric and emphasised its alleged negative impacts on the unity of the country. As Eritrea was amicably released to form its own state, the nationalists accused the TPLF of conspiring with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front to violate the territorial integrity of Ethiopia and subject it to being landlocked.

When the ethno-federal system was officially announced with the promulgation of a new constitution in 1995, many pan-Ethiopian nationalists worldwide saw the move as a step towards the dismemberment of Ethiopia.[20] Ever since, Ethiopian nationalism – just like ethnic nationalism – has been used to rouse anti-government movements of different types. For the past 27 years, spreading 'Ethiopianism' has no longer been among the official tasks of the government; and so some social forces took it as their foremost responsibility.

Elements in the two nationalisms (ethnic and pan-Ethiopian) that butted heads during the pre-EPRDF era appeared for a while to find peace (i.e., no war) as they both focused on the EPRDF, seen as a common enemy. That was only at face value, however. A deeper look showed that the fundamental disagreement between the two forces on ideological and methodological grounds remained intact.

Ethiopian nationalists, by accusing the TPLF/EPRDF of conspiring to dismember Ethiopia due to its ethnicist politics, frequently sent veiled messages to ethno-nationalist groups. Many ethno-nationalists, on their part, by labelling the Tigrayan organisation as being merely 'a continuation of Abyssinian rule', consistently propounded anti-pan-Ethiopian rhetoric. But in addition to the maintenance of disguised but tense relations between the two anti-EPRDF forces, they also directly exchanged accusations in various formal and informal political and academic spaces.

The EPRDF's rule also saw various inter-ethnic clashes intensify. Many people were killed and much property was destroyed in inter-ethnic violence over 27 years. Although numerous reasons could have contributed to these conflicts, some authors blame mostly ethnic federalism. Federalism had such an impact in three ways.[21] First, inter-clan conflicts over grazing lands were transformed into clashes between two ethnic groups or killils (regional states). Second, contestations over killil borders led to violent antagonisms. Finally, since ethnic federalism in principle bestowed ownership of regions to ethnic groups, they competed, at times violently, to achieve that status.

Hence the EPRDF era was suffused with triple lines of conflict. The first one entailed anti-regime struggles. These struggles were waged with varying degrees of intensity and durability in different areas. Diverse rebel movements took refuge in neighbouring Eritrea since 2001 to fight the regime. Most were low-intensity, low-durability conflicts.

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the veteran rebel organisation almost as old as the TPLF, posed a threat to the EPRDF in the early days of the transition, but was subsequently caught off guard and effectively routed. Much like the other smaller rebel groups, it tried to infiltrate its soldiers into Ethiopia and strike government targets, but failed to step up the intensity of its struggle.

The only exception among the rebel groups was the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), an organisation established in 1986 and which became active with the change of regime soon after. The ONLF commenced its armed struggle after it was thrown out of the system in 1994, and became a significant player in the Somali Region.

Despite the government's attempt to neutralise its activity – at times through negotiation, but mostly by force – the ONLF made the region difficult to govern especially after mid-2000. The return to a garrison state in the region began to bear fruit after 2010, when the regional Liyu Police (Special Force) became active and contained the front's operations.

Anti-regime struggles also took the form of peaceful activism. Ethiopian and ethnic nationalists as well as human rights advocates frequently castigated the government and mobilised people of diverse backgrounds to either change the regime or some of its policies. Diaspora and local activists spearheaded such movements. Also active, despite all odds, were legal opposition political parties.

Post-2011 especially saw more pronounced, defiant, persistent and semi-organised public protests. All these resistance attempts by legal and illegal organised groups, although unable to bring about regime change for some time, were at least successful in sharpening popular grievance against the regime. Most of them contributed to the fermentation of nationalist sentiments as well.

The second and third lines of struggle comprised contentions among nationalist groups, as mentioned earlier. The first fault line was Ethiopian nationalism versus ethnic nationalism. The two nationalisms harboured fundamental differences on the questions of Ethiopian history and identity and an appropriate political vision for the country.

On the issue of history, for instance, people from the two camps have different opinions about the length of the country's history, the moral worth of the emperors' reigns, the veracity of the country's alleged long-running independence and sovereignty, and others. These differences played themselves out on policy tables as well. For pan-Ethiopianists, policies that focus on uplifting ethnic identity are tantamount to dismantling the assumed sense of unity, while for ethnic nationalists, policies that advocate ethnic emancipation are the only way to save the country, if it should be saved at all.

Political parties, activists and ordinary people aired these differences in public and private engagements. Although it is difficult to unequivocally associate any violent conflict based on this division, non-violent contestations were rampant across the country and persisted throughout the EPRDF era.

> Grievances and low-scale conflicts along multiple lines simmered under a façade of overall stability

The third line was inter-subnationalist (i.e., between ethno-nationalists). The inter-ethnic clashes in Ethiopia were both effects and causes of the growth of contending ethno-nationalisms. Formerly tribal conflicts got bigger in scale and potentially included all members of the ethnic groups in conflict. With more conflicts, more ethnic mobilisation got under way, giving rise to a more hardened nationalist rhetoric, resulting in even more (intense) conflicts.

The three lines of conflict however did not get out of control for most of the EPRDF's rule; they were at times low-scale or remained latent. Ethiopia under the front's rule appeared, until the mid-2010s, more or less stable. Christopher Clapham characterises this period in modern Ethiopian history as the 'second-longest period of stable government in modern Ethiopian history, surpassed only by the reign of Haile-Selassie between 1941 and 1974.'[22]

The tight grip of the TPLF over the state worked quite well to maintain that appearance. The ideology and policies of the party reigned supreme from top to bottom, and when digressions occurred, coercive tactics kept a facade of order. However, grievances and low-scale conflicts along multiple lines simmered under that facade.

Since 2015, anti-regime protests – aided by splits within the ruling party[23] – have paved the way to the bursting forth of all suppressed contentions. As legal and organised opposition failed to seriously challenge the regime, social movements emerged as a new form of contender, and succeeded where political parties failed. The long-simmering popular grievances over administrative, political and economic problems, interacting with growing urbanisation and the use of cyber technology, scaled up into a series of ethnic-based movements. Loosely networked cells mushroomed across the country especially in Oromia, and transcended the organisational challenges of the past.[24]

Political opportunities arose as social movement activists got allies within the regime who put party structures to the service of anti-regime activities.[25] As protests escalated, contradictions within the EPRDF intensified when elements in the front challenged the hegemony of the TPLF, and re-alligned their position in favour of the social movements. In the process, the TPLF lost its control over the institutional levers of the EPRDF. The process gave a clear victory to the reformists, ushering in a series of political liberalisation measures.

Chapter 2

Era of political liberalisation and unbridled contending nationalisms

The political liberalisation under way in Ethiopia since April 2018[26] gave hope to many that the country was moving towards a significantly better future than its autocratic past.[27] The change came at a cost, however. As the EPRDF's tight 27-year grip over the state slackened, the institutionally induced long-simmering conflicts re-surfaced, raging across the country,[28] and with a magnitude rarely witnessed since the establishment of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in 1995. Many of the current conflicts have either some roots in the recent past or have been largely influenced by it. Moreover, they are marked by nationalist undertones.

Brief illustrations from examples from the northern, western and southern parts of Ethiopia are provided below.

The north

Northern Ethiopia has recently seen a spiral of (potentially) violent nationalist conflicts whose roots could be traced back to the pre-2018 political developments and their ramifications. The conflicts, for instance in areas inhabited by the Qemant people and in the Oromo Special Zone of the Amhara Killil, and the cross-border antagonisms that involved the Amhara (and the Regional State), the Tigrayan and Benishangul-Gumuz Regional States, are partly related to Amhara, Oromo, Qemant, Tigrayan and Gumuz ethnic mobilisations and counter-mobilisations. They can also be better understood in a historical context.

One of the paradoxes of the legacy of the EPRDF's multi-nationalist project is the creation and development of a peculiar brand of Amhara nationalism. Ethnic Amhara nationalism strengthened in those locations long assumed to be strongholds of Ethiopian nationalism, and competed with it. Moreover, anti-regime Amhara nationalism is one of the most glaring unintended consequences of the

TPLF's state project. The front has consistently nurtured the very nationalism that became its mortal enemy.

Amhara nationalism as a mass movement is a relatively recent development. In the past, the word 'Amhara' was loosely defined. The Amhara ethnic identity, as most literature on the subject illustrates, was for long subsumed under the wider Ethiopian nationalism, and it was difficult to distinguish between the two. Whether or not an Amhara identity exists separate from Ethiopiawinet (*Ethiopiannes*) has long been debated by Ethiopian academics and politicians in general, and Amhara elites in particular. Some elites deny the existence of such a consciousness.[29]

Rather than using the general rubric of Amhara, it was argued, people living in today's Amhara region usually refer to themselves using intra-Amhara regional identities such as Shewe, Gojjame, Gondere, Wolloye and Menze. When it was used, Clapham argues, being an Amhara, especially in the past, was 'more a matter of how one behaved than who one's parents were.'[30]

The lack of clarity of the Amhara definition impeded the growth of an ethnic nationalism anchored in that identity. Although different organisations were created on that basis during and after the 1991 transition, signs of Amhara nationalism as a mass movement to be reckoned with began to appear during the protests that contributed to the advent of the current political liberalisation.[31]

> As the EPRDF's tight grip over the state slackened, the institutionally induced long-simmering conflicts re-surfaced

Different factors explain the new phenomenon. One institutional factor, ethnic federalism, was seen as a political embodiment of everything in history and culture that downtrods the Amhara. It was seen as an instrument to downgrade and contain the Amhara and the past associated with them.[32] But the same federal structure and the narrative informing it also created a fertile space for the consistent production of an Amhara identity.

This was done both by rendering the narrative as the only viable game in town, and within the Amhara Killil, by encapsulating every aspect of public life within the discourse of Amharanet (i.e. being and becoming Amhara). Young people who had lived most of their lives in this discursive and structural space then started to express their rage within the discourse of Amhara-ness.

This led to the second most important factor that cemented Amhara ethnic consciousness – the emergence of organised agents who pushed the ethno-

nationalist cause forward. This is represented primarily[33] by the birth in 2018 of a nationalist party that claims to fight for the Amhara national interest, the National Movement of Amhara (NAMA).

At the same time, reformist elements within the regional ruling party, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), became influential during the protests and instilled strong Amhara nationalist rhetoric in it. The ANDM called a general assembly in 2018 and changed its name to the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP), and vowed to genuinely represent, and work for, the Amhara.[34] Ever since, NAMA has been a strong influence in the ADP.[35]

NAMA activists and their affiliates have used both opposition to and close cooperation with the regional ruling party to drive their influence. Some have also formally joined the party to push their ideas within the structure. According to many sources, although ADP officials are by no means unified on this issue, several top-level members, as well as many in the rank and file, at least do not oppose the NAMA agenda. Some are active proponents.[36]

The militant face of Amhara nationalism regarding conflict in that region is best represented by the regional state's security branch and the different armed forces under it. Controlled by Brigadier-General Asaminew Tsige, a former rebel fighter, military official and political prisoner, the security office assumed the role of safeguarding Amhara nationalist interests both inside and outside the Amhara regional state. Asaminew's fiery and militant nationalist rhetoric surpassed that of the administration, leading to a rift between the two.[37]

The security office marshalled state and other resources to build a huge military force not necessarily acceptable to or controlled by the killil leadership. One interviewee said the growing power of the security branch outside the control of the leadership was worrying. But the leadership feared addressing this issue as it could pit it against the Amhara nationalist youth, who regarded the Brigadier General as their source of hope.[38]

The rise of Amhara nationalism has also coincided with the strengthening of other contending nationalisms, for example that of the Oromo. Oromo nationalism has served as an ideology of anti-government struggle for over half a century. Inspired by the Bale rebellion and Macha-Tulama Association, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) became the leading organisation to fight for the Oromo cause.

Apart from its struggle against the Dergue regime, the OLF also worked towards reviving and recreating Oromo national identity. Its influence on the psyche of the Oromo peaked when it joined the transitional government after the overthrow of the military junta. When it left that government in 1992 due to disputes with the TPLF, it lost its organisational and military presence but left behind its cult-like status among the Oromo.

Oromo nationalist activism appeared toned down after that. But the simmering grievances anchored in perceived subjugation and exploitation by a Tigrayan ruling class, seen as a continuation of Abyssinian Amhara rule of the past, continued unabated. That was until 2015, when a new round of mobilisation began, catalysed by the government's plans to expand Addis Ababa into traditional Oromoland. Long-simmering grievances turned into a series of strong anti-government resistance.

Oromumma (Oromo nationalist sentiment) peaked again with protests leading to state repression, leading again to counter-mobilisation. The cycle ended with a loss for the TPLF-led regime. Oromo nationalism, appearing victorious, swept across Oromia and spread to the Oromo countrywide.[39] Feelings of triumph swayed over a large landmass that had long resisted successive rulers. The return of the OLF leadership from Eritrea marked a turning point in the long and bitter march to victory.

> Oromo effort to end the past power imbalance worries Amhara nationalists that a new imbalance of power is looming

As both Amhara and Oromo nationalisms rose, Tigrayan nationalism both gained and lost moving into the transition period. The TPLF, the most influential actor in Ethiopian politics for 27 years, was now effectively sidelined with the change of government. Moreover, the legacy that it left behind was quite severely and publicly castigated, most notably by the new leadership.[40] That was a severe blow not only to the front as an organisation, but also to all those who held its past leadership in high regard. Ironically, however, that same castigation served as a recipe for reinvigorating Tigrayan nationalism.

Although many Tigrayans supported Prime Minister Abiy's rule initially, his image began to deteriorate after a few months. Remarks made by the new administration and documentaries on state media were perceived to have painted the past as dark and as an attack on Tigrayans.[41] Efforts to apprehend people from the TPLF for alleged pre-Abiy crimes worsened the relationship between ordinary Tigrayans and Abiy's government. The TPLF used the opportunity to cement its relations with ordinary Tigrayans,[42] and activists helped it achieve that by mobilising people against Tigray's alleged enemies.

The three ethnic mobilisations have at times cooperated, but have usually competed and clashed over a range of issues. Amhara and Oromo activists and politicians had cooperated in order to sideline the TPLF, but soon failed to maintain

the warmth of their relationship. Amhara and Oromo nationalist causes have several differences.[43]

First, Amhara nationalists adopted several historical interpretations about the country that many Oromo elites rejected.[44] Moreover, the general feeling of unease that many Amhara elites harbour towards Oromo nationalism and vice versa is deep-rooted. More immediate differences relate to territorial boundaries, collective rights and balance of power. Nationalists from both sides see each other as revanchists scrounging on each other's lands. The conflict over Addis Ababa and Raya are examples.[45]

Political balance of power is another underlying concern for both. For Oromo nationalists, Amhara elites were beneficiaries of the past imbalance of power, at the expense of everyone else. The Oromo, as they see it, have now set out to reverse this. On the other hand, Amhara elites see the Oromo as the new power-wielders in the country and this is perceived as a step towards further Amhara subjugation. Thus the attempt by one to end the past power imbalance is leading to worries by the other that a new imbalance of power is in the making.

Another difference and source of conflict between the two is the status of minorities in each other's regions or zones. Amhara elites have concerns about their co-ethnics living in the Oromia region (and in other regional states where they are a minority). They argue that Amhara minorities have no formal political representation in the regions.[46]

They say a lack of representation or administrative autonomy has led to their loss of rights to stand for elections or use their own language in matters of education and administration, and has made them vulnerable to human right abuses. NAMA's main goal is to ensure the protection of the rights of such minority Amharas. Pursuing this goal – for example in the Benishangul and Kemise areas – has led to countrywide friction.

The Oromo Special Zone

The Kemise conflict is worth elaborating on here as it represents not only a violent inter-nationalist struggle, but also a struggle involving minorities within minorities. The Amhara Region constitutionally guarantees zonal autonomy to Oromo minorities. Through the Oromo Special Zone, the Oromo have exercised autonomy for the past 27 years.

But with the new dispensation of politics, Oromo and Amhara issues became a source of intense friction. While the Oromo felt an imminent threat of subjugation by the Amhara, the Amhara felt the need to contain the threat of rising Oromo nationalism in their homeland, and to protect their own minorities within the Oromo minority.[47] These rifts led to violent conflict involving the Amhara special forces and local Oromo and Amhara elites and ordinary people.

The conflict started in early April 2019 when the Liyu Police[48] were dispatched by the security apparatus of the Amhara region to the small village of Dewe. According to local elders and administrators, the Liyu Police harassed locals, targeting their ethnic and religious backgrounds and symbols and trying to disarm them.

Reaction and counter-reaction led to violent clashes in different places, sometimes involving ordinary Amhara and Oromo residents.[49] Only the intervention of the Ethiopian National Defense Force could help contain the violence in many of these areas. Differences of interpretations aside, the conflict could partly[50] be seen as a culmination of increasing tensions between rising Amhara and Oromo nationalisms and expectations.

With the declining power of the TPLF over the state, a sense of victory rose among the Oromo, one area being Kemise and its environs. Mobilisation of the people at times occurred through political groups such as the OLFs,[51] and at other times without them. Symbols of Oromo resistance swept across Kemise and nearby woredas.

This coincided with the proliferation of Amhara national sentiments of both non-state actors (the youth) and state actors (officials within the security apparatus) in the Amhara Killil. Zonal administrators indicate that some within the ADP started questioning the legitimacy of keeping the zone, perceiving it as a barrier to Amhara unification.[52]

Some dubbed the area as a reservoir for the propagation of an OLF version of nationalism and saw the region getting out of control. According to zonal security officials, the meetings they had with the killil security chief on the question of the OLF's role ended in disagreement. Accordingly, the entire zonal administration was labelled as a clique of OLF sympathisers and the killil leadership cut all contact with them after that.[53] When the special force was dispatched, everyone in the zone was caught off guard.

The Qemant

The conflict that involved the Qemant in the Amhara Regional State has deeper roots in the past, but its escalation could be associated[54] with the more recent conflicting expectations of Qemant and Amhara nationalist elites. Qemant activists had joined the trend of ethnic mobilisation in the early 1990s, but organised political activism only occurred in 2007. After a long hesitation by the government to accept the Qemant as a distinct ethnic group within the Amhara, it finally scrapped it and denied the group a code during the 2007 national census.[55]

That set the stage for the rise of a strong Qemant mobilisation to restore recognition, demand self-determination and revive Qemant identity. Elites organised themselves into a coordinating committee and, along similar lines elsewhere in the country, escalated the Qemant demand for self-administration in the Amhara

Region. That kicked off an era of tense relations between the Amhara regional administration and the committee that resulted in the arrest of activists.

Shuttle negotiations and House of Federation-orchestrated studies finally led to a recognition of 42 kebeles (administrative units) as a basis to establish a special woreda. Demanding more kebeles, the Qemant activists stepped up their activism. This led to a major standoff with regional security forces in which many were killed and much property was destroyed in 2015/16. In 2018, a series of negotiations and a referendum that involved the House of Federation expanded the special woreda to 69 kebeles.

> Conflicting expectations of Qemant and Amhara nationalist elites contributed to violence where the Qemant live

A demand for three more kebeles coincided with the new government coming to power in Ethiopia. After the committee's negotiations with the prime minister to resolve the issue amicably, the security situation got even worse, resulting in a major showdown in the few months after February. A series of clashes between Qemant activists and regional security forces saw the killing and jailing of hundreds of people and huge destruction of property, including houses being burnt. By the time Ethiopia's defence force intervened to stop the violence, thousands had already been displaced.

And so the Qemant issue is not a post-Abiy phenomenon, although the deadliness of the conflict involving the Qemant reached a peak only once the reform process got under way. The Qemant quest for autonomy was once a part of the wider movement towards the ethnicisation of politics, with the federal structure being its most quintessential manifestation.

The quest took others like it elsewhere as a precedent. As it operated in a highly controlled environment infused with coercive tactics, grievances anchored in a sense of ethnic obstruction escalated, further fuelling conflict. On the other hand, the Amhara largely felt that the Qemant issue was a sinister mechanism to dilute Amhara identity. Amhara nationalist leaders claimed that the issue was an offshoot of a Tigrayan anti-Amhara plot to weaken them.[56]

Tigray vs Amhara

Apart from those frictions in the Amhara heartland that have turned violent, Amhara and Tigrayan mobilisations, which haven't turned on each other directly, could be dangerous fault lines in the future. The major points of contention again relate to

changing power dynamics and disputed territories, but also claims of proxy wars. The Amhara and the Tigrayans have long seen each other as historic contenders to power.[57]

After 1889, Amhara rulers reigned over the country, maintaining a degree of autonomy for Tigray. Tigrayans increasingly felt marginalised, and during the emperor Haile Selassie's rule, grievances turned into rebellion. When the TPLF came onto the political scene, anti-Amhara ruling class sentiments were fuelled to establish an enduring insurgency that finally won power in 1991. Amhara elites subsequently took the position of the underdog, constantly agitating for change, and in turn inflaming Tigrayan suspicion and fear towards them.

The diminishing Tigrayan political influence post-2018 has led to the fast resurgence of Amhara confidence, hope and regional power. The resurgence has also hardened Tigrayan ranks by contributing to the creation of a siege mentality.[58] Militarisation in the Amhara Regional State has only confirmed Tigrayan fears of being under threat,[59] leading to a counter-build-up of military prowess inside Tigray.

> Amhara-Tigrayan nationalist contention relate to changing power dynamics, disputed territories, and claims of proxy wars

The contention is not just based on power struggles. There are other more concrete flashpoints, for example border disputes. The Wolqayt and Tsegede areas, now part of Tigray, have long been claimed by the Amharas. The Wolqayt issue has been part of the agenda of Amhara-dominated rebel groups that fought the EPRDF between 2001 and 2018.[60] That same agenda served as a rallying point for the Amhara youth protesting against the front's rule in 2016.

Most recently, the chief of the Amhara security branch was repeatedly heard advocating the liberation of Wolqayt by force if necessary. Raya, part of which is in Tigray, is a hotbed of activism of all sorts. Some prefer to remain in Tigray, while others are calling for the borders to be redrawn to include the area into Amhara or to carve it out as an independent killil. Although relatively quiescent for now, the Oromo also have claims over the area. The incessant agitations over these areas on the sides of both the Tigrayan and Amhara elites do not bode well for cross-border inter-ethnic coexistence.

Finally, the Amhara youth and some senior officials from the Amhara region have frequently accused the TPLF of destabilising the region by sponsoring rebel groups.[61] The most noted case is the Qemant movement. Whether Qemant

activism is, and to what extent it is, supported by the TPLF is a contested matter. But just as the OLF has been cited as the source of all the troubles in Kemise, the TPLF has been mentioned as a major shadow actor behind the Qemant movement. This perception has added to the already deteriorating relationship between the two regional states and much of their respective constituencies.

The west

To the west, ascendant Gumuz, Oromo and Amhara ethnic mobilisations have at different times turned bloody. The Gumuz have long had a troubled relationship with the Amhara and Oromo. Both the Amhara and Oromo are accused of committing slave-raiding and political subjugation and cultural genocide on the Gumuz. The creation of the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State automatically shifted that relationship.[62]

Titular (Gumuz and Bertha) groups became owners of the region (which had before been partly subsumed under either Amhara or Oromolands), while the non-titular ones (Amhara and Oromo), comprising some 40% of the total population, became dispossessed politically, and couldn't stand for elections.

Although some modifications were later made to create autonomous woredas and zones, the quest for proportional regional representation and for standing in elections as candidates led to frequent conflicts. Inter-ethnic conflicts were also rooted in land possession. Land, now perceived to have been owned by titular groups, left the settlers either threatened with dispossession or in an unequal relationship with the land (the titular ones owning the land and leasing it to the others).

The boundaries between Benishangul-Gumuz and Oromia are also not well defined and have led to friction in the past over control of farming lands and forests. The more recent flocking of Amhara and Oromo peasants to engage in farming activities in line with the resettlement policy of the government, and the refusal of Oromo farmers to pay taxes directly to the Benishangul-Gumuz government (due to contested borders), have only complicated the relationship.

The Oromo were now seen as harbouring plans to incorporate parts of the region (Asosa) into Oromia. Contestations have since 2007 led to violent conflicts especially between the Gumuz and Oromo along contested lands (and the resources they harbour) after the advent of ethnic-based parcelling of lands.

Citing land registration as a stride towards land ownership, regional authorities displaced Amhara peasants in 2013. Land grabs in the name of promoting large-scale agricultural investment led to the displacement of several Gumuz from their lands. This infuriated the latter, not only because of dispossession, but also because of the alleged legitimisation of land ownership by non-Gumuz farmers through registration.[63]

The more recent violent conflicts of 2018 and 2019 and attendant displacement in that region partly continue from that troubled past – intensified by rising ethnic mobilisations and shaped partly by changing institutional dynamics (see below). New political actors and the dawning of a generally new political environment in the region and the country as a whole add to this.

Liberalising trends in the country surrounding the change in government led to increased Gumuz ethnic mobilisation. Calls for restoring lost lands went rampant. At the same time, the Oromo sense of empowerment reverberated across Oromia, with dire repercussions for Oromo-Gumuz relations.
The two ascendant mobilisations in and around Benishangul, one keen on maintaining the status quo and another bent on changing it, finally clashed in 2018, leading to massive displacement of Amhara and Oromo farmers from their homes. After a brief lull in violence, a new round of infighting flared up in September when three officials of the Benishangul Killil were killed. Locals say the OLF is behind the killing, which the latter denies. Some OLF leaders believe splinter groups that once formed the front[64] could be responsible.

> Conflicts in Benishangul-Gumuz continue from a troubled past inter-group relations intensified by changing institutional dynamics

Meanwhile there was an Amhara nationalist resurgence across the country, even where the Amhara live as a minority, for example in the Benishangul-Gumuz Region. Youth mobilisations got under way in the region, especially after NAMA went into full operation. Claims in favour of an Amhara political resurgence in the form of ensuring proportional political representation and equitable land resource distribution, as well as reclaiming some parts of the Benishangul-Gumuz Region itself as part of historic Amharaland,[65] echoed both across Amhara proper and among the Amhara inside Benishangul.

This led to angry youth mobilisation on the part of the Gumuz. Elements in the two ethnic groups, in a potential collision course for a while, clashed in April 2019, leading to the killing of some Amhara. The Amhara youth retaliated after some days inside the Agew Awi Zone of the Amhara region. The conflicts were studded with stereotypical labels symptomatic of conflicting ethnic mobilisations with racist overtones.

Towards the south

Further south in Oromia, the Gedeo-Guji conflict also has antecedents in the recent past and is partly[66] an outcome of contending ethnic mobilisations. Guji (Oromo)

and Gedeo ethnic mobilisations were under way since 1991 when many actors, including the OLF and the Gedeo People's Democratic Organization (GPDO), as well as the government-affiliated Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Gedeo People's Revolutionary Democratic Movement (GPRDM), took part.[67]

Early on during the transition, conflict erupted when attempts were made to decide which kebeles should be included in the Gedeo and Guji zones. Since then, Gedeos and Gujis have locked horns, mainly involving 'sons of the soil' rhetoric. Gedeos, seen as settlers and accused of entertaining ideas of recarving boundaries into Gedeo proper, have been targeted by Guji youth as well as woreda and kebele officials.

Interestingly, the 'settler-revanchist' rhetoric, applied on the Oromo in Benishangul, is applied by the Oromo here. Rising Guji unemployment compounded the problem by lessening the perceived stakes of personal harm in conflict mongering among the economically aggrieved youth, and by rendering Gedeos easy outlets of economic grievances, and also by portraying them as the major cause of that grievance.

Just before the new government came to power, thousands of Gedeos were displaced. This was fuelled by the claim by some Gedeo nationalist elites[68] that they were agitating to remap Gedeo locations inside Guji into the Gedeo Zone in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR). With the rise of Oromo nationalist mobilisation and sentiments in the Guji area, Gedeo revanchist claims – promoted by a minority of activists – was an easy tool for the anti-Gedeo campaign.[69]

Micro level conflict: the security dilemma and invidious comparison

At the heart of most of these conflicts[70] lies a security dilemma of the classical type identified by Realist scholars of international relations. According to them, a security dilemma occurs when one state, fearing the potentially hostile behaviour of another, initiates power build-up to maintain its security.

This conduct, when discovered, leads to a reactive build-up of (military) power on the part of the other state, fearing that it could be a target. This kicks off a series of militarisation attempts by both states, increasing the fear one has for the other, and potentially leading to an arms race. The paradox is that the attempt by one state to protect its security ultimately increases its own insecurity.

Many ethnic actors in recent conflicts have expressed fear of others as a reason for their own ethnic mobilisation and weaponisation. According to a senior OLF leader, many Oromo elites including the most moderate ones have recently advocated, at times against the wishes and capabilities of some OLF leaders, that

the OLF keep its arms as long as the Amhara maintain their guns.[71] According to informants from Ethiopian intelligence units, Tigrayan militia build-up is a clear reaction to the fiery rhetoric of and militarisation agenda pushed by some elites in the Amhara Regional State.[72]

But Amhara state military build-up is also because of the long-accumulated military prowess of the TPLF, which now concentrated most of its force within the boundaries of Tigray. The Tigrayan-Amhara security dilemma is best captured by the words of the TPLF chair: 'We had not been prepared for defending ourselves from external attack, but when we found out that they [the antagonists in Amhara Region] were working to bring us to our knees, we fast girded ourselves. But when they saw us preparing, they turned the table on us and said, "We didn't see this coming," and they got militarised even more.'[73]

The proliferation of the special forces, the Liyu Police, in different killils reflects the same logic. Initially created to fight rebel groups against the regime (as in the Somali Region), the practice spread to other regions, purportedly as a deterrent to any potential attack coming from other killils or special zones within a killil. The Somali-Oromo conflict and resultant massive displacement were partly a culmination of the power struggle between the special forces and militias of the two regions.

Similarly, gun ownership has escalated in the Kemise woreda of the Amhara Killil, partly as a reaction to the threat posed by Amhara militarisation and actions taken by the Liyu Police.[74] With the further escalation of threats coming from the security chief after the last round of violent conflict, arms build-up peaked in the Oromo Special Zone. In most of these cases, hard-earned properties are being sold by poor families to buy weapons,[75] confirming the Realist notion, in times of hostile political environment, that security concerns trump economic calculations.

As analytically helpful as it is, the concept of security dilemma fails to answer two critical questions at the micro level: Why is the enhancement of power perceived as so important in the first place? And what political context makes it necessary? While 'invidious comparison' provides a useful answer to the first question, state fragility addresses the second.

First, invidious comparison. According to Horowitz, the strong attachment of personal fate with that of the group, and the determination of group worth in contrast to others competing with it, drives collective violence.[76] This explains some of the conflicts in Ethiopia today. Amhara nationalist discourse came about from indignation to what they regard as the post-1974 denigration of the Amhara as *neftegna*, coloniser and oppressor.[77]

According to the nationalists, apart from being hugely demeaning of their self-worth, this also led to their practical subjugation post-1991 by a Tigrayan ruling class

through a web of economic and political deprivation schemes. It is argued that this disproportionately disadvantaged the Amhara relative to other ethnic groups.[78]

Group worth is an oft-repeated rhetoric for many other nationalists as well. The Oromo have frequently resented past pejorative portrayals of their ethnic group as well as their political and economic subjugation by what they see as an Amhara ruling class. Their struggle, according to Oromo nationalists, is thus to enable them to achieve self-esteem as Oromo and exercise full group rights.[79]

Group worth sometimes trumps rationalist calculations. At the height of the Oromo youth (qerro) protests, when the risk of massive repression was imminent, some key qerro leaders deliberately downplayed serious collaborative efforts with non-Oromos to resist state action, even when it seemed necessary to minimise cost, arguing that it was only Oromos who should achieve the goal.[80] They thought it was necessary to boost their self-esteem. Ironically, while the struggle indeed boosted their self-esteem across Oromia, it unleashed another round of struggle for group worth where they were a minority.

The Kemise conflict and the Amhara nationalist rhetoric in the lead-up to that conflict brought back that old image of the Amhara oppressor who wishes to eradicate Oromo identity. The result was, as one elder maintained, 'We will fight until death for the preservation of our faith and ethnicity.'[81]

> Ethnic actors in conflicts expressed fear of others as a reason for their own mobilisation and weaponisation

At times the political and economic statuses of groups in relation to others appear contradictory, and groups use their political prowess to drive economic parity or hegemony. The Guji in Oromia and the Gumuz in Benishangul are good examples. Both groups have been accorded political superiority in their locations as a result of federalism and hence group worth is not directly at stake politically. However their economic precarity versus the relative economic stability of their competitors drives frustration,[82] which is then let out using the existing political infrastructures of repression against them. Thus perceived economic disadvantage can translate into violent behaviour, anchored on concerns for group worth and well-being.

A caveat is important here, though. Violent behaviour isn't always a consequence of group concern. At times economic downturn could lead to violence by aggravating personal frustration or by lessening the opportunity cost of engaging in conflicts.

Ethiopia since 2015 has been an economic paradox. Despite impressive GDP growth over the past decade and a half, the country has been stuck in a whirlpool of widespread poverty.[83]

The government's emphasis since 2010 on manufacturing and large-scale government investment, though acclaimed in some respects, didn't lead to the expected outcomes. With a huge unskilled labour force and inefficient infrastructure, agrarian activity still largely dominated the economy. The investment initiatives led to the deterioration of Ethiopia's balance of payment and the fall of foreign currency reserves. This created concerns for private investors. Moreover, the constant devaluation of the birr gave rise to high inflation and falling living standards.

Also, unemployment rose as the job creation rate dropped woefully below the population growth rate. The government kept wages low to attract foreign investors. The protests since 2015 added another layer to the economic malaise: foreign investments were attacked, accused of exploiting local resources, and government got busy policing the country rather than working to fix the growing economic problems. All these cumulative problems created fertile conditions for youth participation in inflaming conflicts, not always for 'ethnic' reasons. And the key factor driving opportunistic involvement in conflicts, as we will see below, is state fragility.

Chapter 3

Institutional fragility

So far we have seen group dynamics and relationships in the context of nationalist mobilisation and how that can be a source of conflict. I have also indicated, at the macro level, that contentious ethnic mobilisations have been shaped by institutional dynamics, most importantly political systems. Those explanations are important but are not complete.

Antagonistic ethnic mobilisations can be deadly in their own terms, but what macro-level institutional dynamics made that possible? Why did state and party institutions at times fail to prevent and contain violence? This question becomes critical since we are dealing with domestic politics that's meant to be more orderly and predictable relative to the fuzzy domain of international relations.

At this juncture it is important to emphasise that the state has indeed taken some measures to prevent, arrest or manage conflicts. The prime minister for example has pursued softer measures such as frequent calls for reconciliation and national harmony as a strategy to prevent violence. Federal and regional states have also, among others, organised peace conferences and worked with traditional elders to resolve conflicts.

In addition, the government has by no means been pacifist. It has deployed security forces to arrest violence in some places of unrest. The intervention of the National Defense Force in many of the conflict areas discussed previously has helped prevent the further intensification of violence in those areas.

But the security forces, especially the police, have usually acted too little too late, or at times not at all in the face of raging violence. At other times the intervention of state and party agents has worsened the situation. Hence it is reasonable to argue that the intensification of mostly inter-communal violence (or the failure to diminish it) over the past two years has something to do with the changes brought on the ruling party and state institutions during protests in the lead-up to the political liberalisation and after.

The party

The EPRDF was long known for being formidable, and for its internal discipline. It was also known for its impressive ability to control and manage political processes.

Recently, however, it has not only lost its ability to manage a stable political transition, but has become a source of conflict itself. In this sense, it has contributed significantly to the proliferation of violence in the country.

At the height of the protests, divisions in the EPRDF accelerated. An alliance between the OPDO and ANDM left the TPLF off guard. Different viewpoints began to surface on how to handle the protests, as the former two sympathised with the protesters. The sudden appearance of the OPDO as the leading organisation in the EPRDF added to the anti-TPLF rhetoric within the coalition. Following the 2018 political change, the TPLF started seeing the EPRDF in almost the same way opposition parties had viewed the EPRDF a few months before.

The entire body of knowledge (ideology and political principles) that governed the EPRDF system, from revolutionary democracy to democratic centralism, began to be censured – at times publicly, but more intensely during the internal party meetings of sister organisations. Accused of being intent on keeping the old system, the TPLF was relegated to the administration of Tigray, while the reformists ascended the heights of federal state power.

The internal lack of unity within the parties making up the EPRDF complicates conflict management in the country at large

Once in charge of that power, however, even the reformist camp couldn't keep its internal unity. According to informants, the divisions and disagreements are visible both between the ADP and ODP, as well as within each of the two parties.[84] After the ANDM changed its programmatic lines and name to ADP, it aligned itself more with Amhara nationalist rhetoric, while the ODP vacillated between Oromo nationalism and supra-ethnic Ethiopian identity.

Internal sources indicate that some influential elements within the ADP and ODP harbour and promote extreme agendas in their own ways, shattering the unity of purpose between the two parties. Conflicting party statements about sensitive issues such as Addis Ababa's status and that of the federal system confirmed that some major differences sit in their relationship as well.[85]

The internal lack of unity within the parties making up the EPRDF complicates conflict management in the country at large. None of the ADP, Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) or ODP speak with one voice. Sources indicate that the ADP, even after shedding some of its old guards, has members with various and sometimes opposing political agendas.[86]

Some of them follow the Amhara nationalist rhetoric of the NAMA; a few were heavily involved in NAMA's establishment and development. Others consider this approach to nationalism too extreme and advocate a more moderate form of Amhara movement. Among those who approve of NAMA's brand of nationalism, some advocate militancy to secure interests, while others prefer the softer and political way.

Internally the SEPDM is in even worse condition.[87] Increasing demands for more autonomy among the different constituent units of the SNNPR have pulled the members of the party in different directions. Some analysts even project that the SEPDM is 'on the verge of demise' because of SNNPR fragmentation.[88] Although in better shape, the ODP, too, is far from unified on major issues of ideology or policy. The party is torn between divided loyalties and competing perspectives.[89] Some senior members have loyally maintained their networks with protest leaders, while others see more hope in standing by the prime minister.

The OLF also has its own advocates within the ODP and government of Oromia. They supported it even at a time when it locked horns with the ODP leadership in the early days of the transition. Some elements find it hard to swallow Abiy's Ethiopianist agenda, questioning his legitimacy to lead the ODP. In short, as one major Oromo activist put it, 'the ODP people do not look like belonging to one single party.'[90]

The EPRDF's internal fracture is a major roadblock to enforcing law and order in the country in at least two ways. First, it has become increasingly difficult for the front to chart a general vision, programme and policy for securing peace. With deep divisions that range from locating where the problem is to how to collaborate to enforce law and order, a unified roadmap has remained a chimera. As one senior intelligence officer believes, the problem with the EPRDF is not that it entertains different views, but that it has not yet agreed on the need and meaning of transition itself.[91]

Elements within the TPLF, for instance, don't want to see a transition that starts from the assumption, as they see it, that the recent past was wasted time in recent Ethiopian history. They also don't have much appetite for the new balance of power between the sister organisations. Some also don't find it palatable that the transition flourishes at the expense of their stalwart members who now have arrest warrants or are already in custody for alleged past crimes.

Some other front members have diverse opinions on the meaning of restoring law and order. Those aligning themselves with grassroots ethnic mobilisation have or would like to have contrasting images of what a restored law would look like. Restoring law and order in practice could mean deflecting any attack from one's constituency and taking serious action against the perceived enemies of that

community. Hence a national plan for conflict resolution may not be in the interest of all parties or some of their influential members.

The second challenge is worse than the first. Multiple reports have it that some members of the front have actually turned on the ODP and the federal government it now leads to try to destabilise it or the transition it is purportedly managing. In this sense, the internal problem in the EPRDF is not just the prevalence of divergent opinions, but active infighting among groups to secure specific interests. The TPLF is singled out in this respect, and is frequently accused of waging proxy wars across the country. Although many conflicts are quite unscrupulously associated with 'Tigrayan skullduggery',[92] some are given more emphasis than others by intelligence sources.[93]

According to one intelligence source, the TPLF as a party may not necessarily be involved in supporting and sponsoring armed conflicts, but some senior officials are, and it may be difficult to decipher the exact source of the proxy wars.[94] The Somali-Oromo, Qemant-Amhara, Gumuz-Amhara and Gumuz-Oromo conflicts are alleged to have strong associations with elements in and around the TPLF. The TPLF has consistently denied any involvement in these conflicts.

Most interesting in this respect is the allegation that the TPLF is drawing close to its erstwhile foe,[95] the OLF, to try to forge an anti-ODP/ADP alliance. Attempts at courting the OLF appeared when the OLF army entered Ethiopia,[96] and relations might have warmed later with some elements of the Oromo front. OLF sources indicate that the front is divided on whether an alliance with the TPLF is the right way forward. Some, including the armed splinter group within the OLF, might have gone ahead with the alliance plan.[97]

How did the party's internal problems reach such a point of fracture? The answer lies both in the way the front was initially established and maintained, and the way it's been exposed to more recent external shocks. By the time the TPLF was about to capture state power, it realised it couldn't solely rule over a multi-ethnic Ethiopia. So it caused the formation or transformation of parties in different regions and then brought them together into a coalition to form the EPRDF.

At the same time, it chose not to discard ethnic boundaries within the coalition; it wanted to maintain the ethnic distinctions among the constituent parties. This could enable it to maintain its hegemony. Hence the constitution of the EPRDF was meant to both legitimise the new government's rule over the entire country, without flattening the distinction and hence the primacy of the TPLF over the rest.

The arrangement was indeed a source of internal stability for a long time. The TPLF's web and control tactics were impressive. It controlled the different members of the EPRDF and other ruling parties of the less developed regions through various formal and informal mechanisms.[98] Most importantly, the TPLF has for most of its

time in power been officially in charge of the major and critical sectors in the political system, such as the military, intelligence, foreign relations, the economy and the prime ministerial portfolio. It has also reportedly controlled the other sectors and ministries indirectly through its powerful members who officially served in positions just below the ministerial level (as ministers of state, for instance).

Furthermore, the regional governments have been under its control through its 'advisers' and military personnel on the ground, as well as its prerogative to unseat recalcitrant officials from power and control the financial resources of regional parties. Moreover, decision making on major issues of state affairs are made by its 'party leaders behind closed doors'.

As Theodore Vestal puts it: 'not a single important political or organizational question is decided by government officials or mass organizations without guiding direction from the party. The Front [TPLF] stands above all, and the leaders do not test their policies in a forum of free speech and fair elections. Instead they mobilize and enforce consent.'[99]

> The EPRDF reproduced, not overcame, the contentions and divisions among the Amhara, Oromo and Tigrayan nationalists

The governing principle of such decision making is democratic centralism, which the TPLF practises consistently and extensively along party and state structures. In line with this principle, top-level decisions 'are transmitted to party officials and state administrators and must be adhered to.'[100]

This institutional arrangement (the TPLF-controlled ethnic-based coalition) was however also the TPLF's weakest .point – potentially. For that weakest point to bite, it had to wait for exposure to appropriate exogenous shocks.[101] That took the form of resistant ethno-nationalist movements. As the Oromo and Amhara movements grew closer, the EPRDF tore apart along its ethnic constituent lines, the Oromo (OPDO) and the Amhara (ANDM) in particular.

Influential members of the two organisations, especially the OPDO, not only showed sympathy with the cause of their co-ethnics outside the party structure, but also put to service their structures to that cause. Intelligence networks were established connecting the OPDO with the youth leaders. Elements in the former helped foment mobilisation both passively, by not responding to the TPLF's call to repress protests, and actively by encouraging and joining it.

The sympathy for and engagement with the protesters' causes later turned into a conspiracy against the TPLF. The institutional arrangement that the Tigrayan front had established to advance its political interests ultimately contributed to its downfall.

But once the redistribution of power within the EPRDF began, the constituent organisations couldn't immediately offer a plan that could hold the front together. A sense of freedom reigned, shattering clarity and unity of purpose. Also, most importantly, each organisation got pulled away by its own ethnically mobilised constituency. Instead of managing conflicts from above, the party members became reflections of the views and tendencies from below. The EPRDF continued to reproduce, not overcome, the intense contentions and divisions among the Amhara, Oromo and Tigrayan nationalists.

The state

The Ethiopian state today is known for its (perceived) fragility in terms of restoring law and order. This fragility stems from three different inter-related factors, all of them outcomes of a series of ethno-nationalist anti-regime movements. First, the state structure in some localities was badly damaged or entirely dismantled during the protests, and part of this has continued throughout the political liberalisation.

In different locations in the Oromia and Amhara regions, security and administrative structures have been overtaken by protest networks or their sympathisers. Mobs have emerged influential among state functionaries, and have at times displaced them. Where staff remain intact, structures have lost their tightness. Chains of command have been broken as civil servants and security personnel change loyalties.

There are two consequences to this problem regarding conflict. First, the state institutions haven't been able to contain violence when it occurs. Second, worse, state functionaries have joined hands with other conflict entrepreneurs to inflame the conflict. The loosening of the overall security command and control, coupled with ethnic mobilisation, has emboldened these actors to further fuel violence.

For example in the Gedeo-Guji conflict, informants say that (potentially) corrupt state officials were complicit in the anti-Gedeo campaigns for various reasons.[102] Hiding behind the youth activist (qerro) movement was a useful way to deflect attention from potential criminal records of their own.

Likewise, the conflict between the OLF and the Ethiopian government in Wollega, although an outcome of a mix of factors, is one where state or party functionaries got involved en masse. The Oromo protests in the lead-up to political liberalisation caused the state in Oromia to fracture. Chains of command were broken down in the regional security forces, and some members became active or passive supporters of rebel organisations.

This became especially visible as the OLF army entered Wollega, and began to confront the state or the ODP. Along with many self-styled OFL-ites from the protest movement, the combination of OLF-led militancy, and the complicity of state agents, created a breakdown of order and unbridled violence.

According to OLF leaders,[103] people working in state institutions participated in various ways. Some joined camps with the opposition against the state for various reasons including (the corrupt ones) the quest to hide behind Oromo nationalism. Others fought by the side of the government but hunted down people indiscriminately, sometimes possibly due to vested interests (such as revenge) not necessarily sanctioned by top state officials.

Other sources[104] say the violence didn't so much reflect state fragility, but government conspiracy. From this viewpoint, the government intentionally allowed the OLF army to bloat, act arrogantly and earn the displeasure of the people. When that was gained, security forces fought back and cleared the Oromia house of any armed opposition. In any case, state fragility – perceived or actual – exacerbated the conflict and chaos in Wollega.

The second problem associated with state fragility is the renegotiation of federal-regional power relations in the new modus operandi. In the past, the relationship between the two layers of power was clear and definite. The federal government controlled by the EPRDF (controlled in turn by the TPLF) wielded much power regarding the regional governments.[105]

> Loose security command and control, coupled with ethnic mobilisation, emboldened state actors to fuel violence

Policy initiatives, finance and administrative priorities all ran down from the top, ensuring clear hierarchy and control. With the coming into being of a new dispensation of politics in the country, that relationship has remained neither feasible nor desirable. Regional governments have increasingly flexed their muscles regarding the federal government, thereby creating new facts on the ground. Neither the Tigrayan nor the Amhara regional states, for example, are run the way killils were governed in the past. Flouting federal orders to apprehend suspects is common in Tigray, while in both Tigray and Amhara, autonomy has steeply increased in security matters.

Formal armed units have been built up excessively without the consent of the federal government, and sometimes not even of the regional state itself. The recent assassination of senior party and state officials in Bahir Dar as well as the recent

violent conflicts within Amhara (involving the Qemant and the Kemise Oromo) also show links between rising militant nationalism and increasing regional autonomy.

The suspect behind the assassination, Asaminew, championed Amhara nationalism, on the one hand, and operated within and further escalated a new regional setting with remarkable autonomy from the centre. He formalised and empowered former bandits and rebel fighters into the Fanno structure; reintegrated previously dismissed members of the national defence force, giving them minimal training, and established the Milis ('returnees') force; and trained and armed tens of thousands of militias – all other than the Liyu Police officially recognised by the regional administration.[106] Here is one example where militant ideological undertones linked to institutional autonomy can produce violent conflicts.

There could also be a third problem associated with state fragility: the blurring of lines between upholding rule of law and order, and sliding back to authoritarianism. This specific issue may not strictly speaking indicate state fragility, as it could be due to a deliberate decision not to relapse to the authoritarian method of the past in containing violence.

> Militant ideological undertones linked to institutional autonomy can produce violent conflicts

The new leadership in Ethiopia, according to a senior government adviser, wants to radically shift the official thinking around peace enforcement to de-emphasise repressive measures in favour of softer approaches to peacebuilding such as reconciliation and national dialogue.[107] This shift has indeed helped bring about a general climate of freedom (i.e. from the state), and has also contributed to reducing the anti-regime struggles. However it has also brought about a general perception of weakness on the part of security agents and the state. It has even at times led to reluctance to take action during violence.

One senior EPRDF leader said this confusion between relapsing to heavy-handedness and establishing order was acute among the security enforcement agencies.[108] As a government trying to liberalise the closed politics of the past, there is a glaring awareness that the philosophical foundations on which security enforcement was based, as well as how it was done, needs rethinking.

While formal rules and legislation (such as the Ethiopian Constitution, the Ethiopian Federal Police Commission Establishment Proclamation No. 720/2004, and the Criminal Procedure Code of Ethiopia) are usually in tandem with principles of international human rights, informal rules were not. And the latter are critical here, since they more practically govern policing. The new philosophical foundation,

modality and scope of enforcing law and order is yet to be clearly articulated, codified and internalised throughout the state system.

Low morale to enforce order is another problem. The indiscriminate and excessive use of force against suspects during the EPRDF's era engendered a negative image of the security forces. Massive mobilisation against them as agents of authoritarian repression has given them a negative image, causing the erosion of their morale over time.[109]

As a result of these problems, the security forces at times fail to contain violence, even when it is right in front of them. In some situations, people have reported that police couldn't help prevent an attack or contain violence when it erupted in the police's presence.[110] In others, security forces arrive too late, and their actions afterwards are not helpful.

It is difficult to determine exactly why police are sometimes late, or why they don't act. Could it be because they or their superiors are sympathetic of the perpetrators? Did the police not receive orders from above, or did they receive them late, perhaps because of the loosening of the command structure, or overstretched responsibilities, or logistical problems?

Any of these is possible. But informants say another reason could be that some security officials simply don't know how to respond to certain violent incidents in an acceptable way. They say they could also have lost the motivation to take action, for fear of relapsing to the dark old days of massive detention and elimination.

There are however exceptions to these cases of police inaction. Security officials have in some circumstances been accused of taking excessive action against suspected trouble makers. OLF leaders have repeatedly accused the government of taking advantage of the OLF and youth anti-government activities, to perpetrate atrocities in Wollega.[111] They have reported numerous properties being destroyed, people being gruesomely killed and massive and indiscriminate detention.

For some Oromo nationalists, the early 1990s-style extensive harassment of the Oromo in the name of being OLF sympathisers is returning in full force. If it is so,[112] there could again be many reasons for this disproportionate state action. But the lack of a clear, principled framework for police to guide their actions could be one. The absence of such a framework could be a cause for both too much or too little action by security enforcement agencies.

Local-level state fragility: security dilemma in context

The monograph has so far demonstrated the problems associated with the party and state in terms of preventing and containing violence. But apart from failing to stop violence (or actively inflaming it), these problems have micro-level consequences as well. A perceived weak state shapes individual and group behaviour in significant ways.

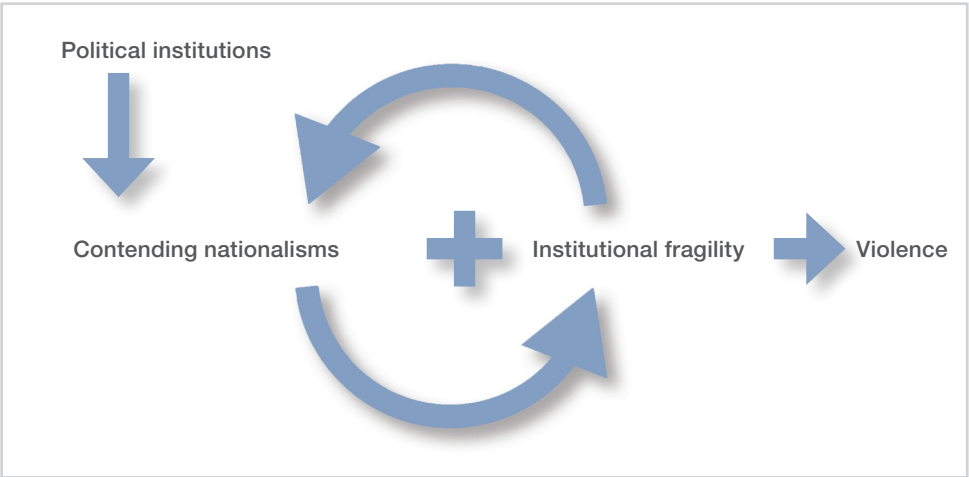
A weak or incoherent state sometimes turns domestic politics into something that resembles Realist international politics. According to Realist international relations, the basic features of international relations include the absence of a world government, a state of affairs that confers upon states the sole responsibility of protecting and promoting their own interests.[113] States vie with one another to pursue their interests, maintain or restore their security or ensure their domination in an atmosphere of perpetual uncertainty and even fear.

State competition at times leads to conflicts and war, and at times could be resolved amicably through negotiation. However, this can never induce a permanent solution and security. The attempt by one state to ensure its security becomes a source of insecurity for another. In short, it is precisely the absence of a world government that perpetuates a security dilemma.

The condition of domestic politics in the absence of a strong but liberalising state coming out of centralised ethno-federal rule has some[114] degree of similarity with this kind of international politics. Ethnic groups, tribes, clans and groups claiming to represent them immediately assume a central position in the looming political contestation and they compete for security, power and hegemony. It is not that they don't want order, but they want order under their dominion.

The effort by some groups to enhance their security creates insecurity in other groups. Intense competition sometimes results in violent conflicts, and even those resolved peacefully have no guarantee of holding for long. Individuals are pulled to their co-ethnics and consider it essential to show solidarity and loyalty to their 'brothers and sisters' in times of uncertainty and volatility. The Ethiopian political landscape presently features some of these qualities. The major reason for this is the perceived lack of a strong state able or willing to enforce law and order.

Figure 1: Interaction between nationalism and institutions producing ethnic violence in Ethiopia



Chapter 4

Conclusion and recommendations

In Ethiopia, political arrangements have contributed to the emergence and intensification of nationalist mobilisation. During the imperial and Dergue periods, a classical form of nation building promoted by an authoritarian unitary state engendered, along with other factors, a host of ethnic nationalist movements against the regimes or the state itself.

In 1991 the new ruling party, the EPRDF, remapped the Ethiopian state along ethnic lines, without shedding the centralist and authoritarian tendencies of the past. The outcome was the further proliferation and intensification of not only ethnic mobilisation but contending nationalisms within a tightly controlled state through a hierarchically organised party structure. The long-simmering ethnic dissatisfactions and mobilisations increasingly shook the foundations of the regime and proved unstoppable. They finally triggered a major shift in the institutional arrangements of the federal state and party system of the EPRDF (which had unknowingly long maintained a brittle party organisation).

Ethnic mobilisation has reached unprecedented levels, with all sides mutually antagonistic and on a more or less open playing field. This is bound to lead to major violent conflicts. That is what is happening in Ethiopia. At a micro level, concerns for group worth beget intense devotion to one's group, and that translates into concerns for group security, leading to the proliferation of weaponisation and counter-militarisation.

Recommendations

A major entry point to restoring sustainable order is to try to alter the institutional context that triggers the security dilemma at the local level. This requires ensuring internal party unity and reactivating state resilience. To do this, nationalist forces must down their confrontational tendencies by resetting their priorities. The institutional and ideological transformations should go hand in hand in order to

achieve stability. Specifically, the stakeholders mentioned below should urgently consider taking the following measures:

For the EPRDF and its member organisations

Each constituent party of the EPRDF, even if in the process of termination in favour of party merger, should still work towards forging a more solid, multi-level internal coherence on issues of philosophy and vision. The major route towards that should be impactful internal negotiations whose outcomes should then be used to enrich and influence ongoing inter-party negotiations.

Such internally unified parties should then come to the negotiating table to achieve clarity and unity of purpose as either a coalitional front, or as a national party. Although the latter (party merger) seems to have by now become a fait accompli the progression of full merger should not be rushed; it should involve more intense negotiations that include as many voices as possible, even those who voted against the idea of merger itself.

The parties should negotiate candidly—unlike their practice so far—each taking the other's concerns seriously and on the basis of the principle of reciprocity. This could entail, among other things, no longer insisting on prosecuting suspects for past crimes on the part of reformist elements; avoiding ethnic-centred condemnation of past political misgivings (i.e. that of the TPLF); and avoiding prioritising territorial claims and counter-claims by the sister parties.

> Party merger should involve intensive negotiations that include as many diverse voices as possible

Every party should be made comfortable enough to join the pro-transition camp and work together to make progress. The parties should design detailed plans on how to secure their respective regions with an eye on the entire country. The aim should be to achieve regional (killil) security that cascades into a nationwide stability, and not the type that rests on triggering insecurity in other regions or in the different zones or woredas of that specific region.

The discussions leading to that plan should encompass such issues as status and the roles of special forces and other armed groups in the regions, inter-governmental relations, positions on and relations with regional opposition groups and movements, illegal arms movement in and across regional states, reactivating and professionalising regional and federal security forces, and other pertinent matters.[115]

Most important is a new, integrated, well-defined democratic vision for the country as a whole. The new book by Prime Minister Abiy – *Medemer* – can serve as one attempt to forge that kind of vision. The contents of the book, or some of its derivatives, which are reportedly attracting both profuse praise and severe criticism,[116] are being discussed by sister parties and other stakeholders.

The extent to which the book can serve as a source of convergence is yet to be seen. Its success in that regard is largely dependent as much on the level of mutual trust among EPRDF parties as it is on the quality of the book's arguments. Regardless, the discussions should aim to bring about negotiated, rather than imposed, visions, strategies and action plans.

If divorce within the EPRDF becomes inevitable, it should at least be done amicably. Negotiations, whatever the outcome, should be based on the understanding that the smooth transition of the country into a stable democracy can work for all, not necessarily just for one party against the other. A slide into chaos would destabilise the whole region, where no party can remain secure. Political competition should be geared towards the legal and peaceful realm of democratic politics.

For other political groups in the country

To avoid fear, on the part of EPRDF parties, of ethnic outbidding from below,[117] EPRDF inter-party negotiations should take place at the same time as inclusive national dialogue among groups outside the ruling party. The opposition groups, too, should focus on the bigger picture of smooth transition into a stable democracy, without necessarily undermining their specific nationalist or ethnic interests.

Nationalist forces will continue to maintain their contentious agendas, but they should learn to prioritise what they pursue according to the urgent needs of and dangers faced by the entire country. Attempts to drive controversial agendas in a violent way at this time could backfire and negatively affect even the 'national' interests of those who promote them.

Constitutional amendments should be widely debated in conferences, seminars and other informal settings before they reach the official and legal realm. National dialogue should focus on in-depth discussions on concrete policy recommendations on how best to re-constitute the state so that all national and ethnic interests can be accommodated.

There should be a rough idea that it is possible to design a political arrangement for the future that could fulfil the reasonable demands of all nationalist forces. The hope that goes along with that idea could provide some motivation to jointly work towards the achievement of a stable order that can make such an inclusive arrangement possible.

If the demands by organised groups for recarving boundaries (e.g. boundaries adjoining Amhara and Tigray; Amhara and Benishangul; Benishangul and Oromia; Somali and Oromia and so on) or for ensuring the political empowerment of minorities (e.g., Amhara and Oromo minorities in different regions) can't be toned down at present, they should then be directed to a holistic inter-group political negotiations as part of the national dialogue on reconstituting the state itself.

The same applies to demands over the status and 'ownership' of some cities and towns (such as Addis Ababa). Existing special woredas and zones should remain intact pending discussions during the negotiations, if need be. No party should expect a quick or forceful fix of the perceived problems. In addition, in principle, displaced people should continue being returned to their homes (as the government has been doing), but before that, their safety and security concerns should be adequately addressed. This includes for example ensuring that state structures, most importantly security forces, function well, impartially and professionally.

For state agents and government

Stability and order cannot solely depend on the goodwill of societal groups. While all these negotiations are under way, the government should reactivate its power to impose peace and contain violence in the country. It should reclaim all state structures down to kebele level; train the security forces on the need for decisiveness in taking action to stop violence, respecting human rights in the process, and maintaining loyalty to the state, and not to any particular political group.

A professional, able security force should be in charge of securing peace in Ethiopia. Frameworks laying out the principles and modalities of all these measures and guiding their implementation should be developed.

The ongoing efforts by the Ministry of Peace at developing the Police Act and Police Doctrine[118] are steps in the right direction. In addition, security enforcement should be put under strict and tight control by state-sanctioned bodies. The proliferation of informal and unrecognised (by regional or federal administration) armed groups has been a recipe for inter-communal violence.

The state should work more towards exercising a reasonable monopoly over the means of violence (including a strict rule and practice of gun control) and unleash it in a coherent and organised manner. Success in all these areas would in turn create a positive political environment for the fruitful conduct of inter-party negotiations and national dialogue in general.

The government should continue working closely with traditional institutions and civil society organisations to prevent the eruption of conflicts or, when they erupt, to promote their peaceful resolution. The roles played by entities such as Oromo traditional leaders in mediating between the ODP and OLF is commendable.

Such institutions should be greatly empowered in their respective regions, and should be encouraged to engage in collaborative efforts across ethnic boundaries. Coordination of activities is of critical importance. The Ethiopian Reconciliation Commission should quickly clarify its objectives, sort out its scope of action and get down to work in the most professional and politically impartial manner.

> National dialogue should focus on policy recommendations on how to re-configure a more inclusive state

The government should continue to work actively towards reviving the ailing economy in order for the other recommendations to bear fruit. Job creation for the huge number of unemployed or underemployed youth in the country should be prioritised. International support is needed here, both in terms of financing local initiatives and in transferring skills and best practice. Fighting corruption at a local level is also key. Actions in this respect are important not only to prevent resource wastage but also to stop corrupt members of the elite from fuelling conflicts later on.

For civil society organisations

Civil society organisations should inject into society constructive non-ethnic and cross-cutting agendas and bring together diverse people to work towards realising their goals. The best method for resolving conflicts is not always mediating warring parties on the contentious issues, but getting them to work together on entirely different issues of common interest.

For the international community

Donor countries and international organisations could help financially by reducing the economic burden on ordinary people, and technically by enhancing government capacity to prevent and resolve conflict. Technical support in the form of consultation and training in the areas of establishing law and order, and preventing and resolving conflicts, should be escalated and diversified.

Contributions by Pact and the United Nations Development Programme in helping government agencies launch an early warning system and map conflict, respectively, are especially noteworthy. Knowledge transfer and skills enhancement in relevant areas should encompass all killils and should be stepped up, especially before the planned 2020 national elections and immediately after.

Notes

1 ‘Ethnic’ or ‘ethnic-based’ conflicts are those in which ethnicity is invoked to mobilise people, where the ‘we’ versus ‘they’ dichotomy is established or perpetuated along ethnic lines.

2 Hence, in this monograph, the focus will only be on the most important underlying factors that can explain most conflicts in the country. Acknowledging that each conflict could have its own peculiar features, the analysis aims for generalisations across cases rather than their peculiarities.

3 Ethnic-based conflicts are explained in the literature in many ways. Quite broadly, some scholars attach significance to structural variables such as economic foundations (B Berberoglu, Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Class Struggle: a Critical Analysis of Mainstream and Marxist Theories of Nationalism and National Movements, *Critical Sociology*, 26: 3, 2000), while others stress institutional factors including political arrangements and party systems (J Bertrand, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; A Varshney, Ethnic Conflict and Civil Society: India and Beyond, *World Politics*, 53:3, 2001). Others emphasise the role of elites in fuelling conflicts (R Bates, Modernization, Ethnic Competition and the Rationality of Politics in Contemporary Africa, in D Rothchild and V Olorunsola (eds.), *State Versus Ethnic Claims: African Policy Dilemmas*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1983; P Brass, *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). Still others stress ideology and social psychology, most importantly, nationalism (e.g. D Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985; R Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Each one has its drawbacks. Structural factors fail to explain variations in rates and intensity of conflict across spatial and temporal cases where structural variables are held constant. Institutional and elitist accounts don’t go into the heart of violence in conflicts. Moreover, they don’t explain the logic of followership in conflict mobilisation (see D Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985; R Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Ideological accounts on the other hand, focusing too much on the internal logic of ethnic mobilization, don’t explain the general institutional context that makes conflict possible. Finally, all the theories are also static; they don’t capture the dynamic and multiple interactions among variables to produce collective violence. This monograph develops a fresh, integrated, parsimonious and dynamic model taking insights from the institutionalist and ideological (at the macro level), and socio-psychological and Realist (at the micro level) theories of conflict and collective violence. A figure illustrating the macro-level variables used and their interactions can be seen on page 34.

4 In this monoraph, by ethno-nationalism, ethnic nationalism or sub-nationalism I refer to nationalism based on an ethnic identity that is subsumed within a specific state (in our case, Ethiopia). For theoretical reflections on the term, see W Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

5 Ibid.; K Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading Mass: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979.

6 Ibid.

7 At the time of writing, the security situation in the country appears better overall. The Amhara, Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz, for instance, are less restive now than some months ago. Oromia had been returning back to normalcy until the latest round of unrest in late October. The efforts by the government and other actors such as traditional leaders may have contributed to the calming of the country, as will be indicated below. Whether the relative peace will hold for long is open to question, however, as the volatile situation in Oromia indicates.

8 Norwegian Refugee Council, Global Report on Internal Displacement, www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/2019-IDMC-GRID-spotlight-ethiopia.pdf, 2019. It should be noted that the Abiy administration inherited around a million internally displaced people when he took office in April 2018, mostly as a result of the Somali-Oromo conflict that peaked in intensity immediately before the change of government.

9 Interview with senior government official, October 2019, Addis Ababa. According to the official, the number of displaced people is below that noted by international organisations.

10 The conflict mapping is from the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia, 2019.

11 An 'ethnically divided society' is one where ethnocultural differences are 'persistent markers of political identity and bases for political mobilization'. S Choudhry, Bridging Comparative Politics and Comparative *Constitutional Law: Constitutional Design for Divided Societies*, in S Choudhry (ed.), Constitutional Design for Divided Societies: Integration or Accommodation?, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 5.

12 J Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; J Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, Oxford: James Currey, 2011.

13 J Abbink and T Hagmann (eds.), *Reconfiguring Ethiopia: The Politics of Authoritarian Reform*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

14 G Cohen, Language and Ethnic Boundaries: Perceptions of Identity Expressed through Attitudes towards the Use of Language Education in Southern Ethiopia, *Northeast African Studies*, 7:3, 2000. This contentment was especially visible in some parts of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region.

15 L Aalen, Ethnic federalism in a dominant party state: The Ethiopian experience 1991–2000, Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute Development Studies and Human Rights, 2002. Many members of the ethnic groups (Oromo, Amhara and Somali) have long harboured a strong sense of TPLF domination not only over the federal government but also over their respective regions.

16 A Kefale, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia: A Comparative Regional Study*, London: Routledge, 2013. The 'native vs settler' antagonism was glaring especially in the Benishangul, Gambella and Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region.

17 Although Ethiopianism, Ethiopian nationalism and Pan-Ethiopian nationalism may have different meanings, they are used interchangeably in this monograph.

18 J Abbink and T Hagmann (eds.), *Reconfiguring Ethiopia: The Politics of Authoritarian Reform*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

19 D Sarbo, Contested Legitimacy: Coercion and the State in Ethiopia, PhD thesis, University of Tennessee, 2009.

20 A Matsuoka and J Sorenson, *Ghosts and Shadows: Construction of Identity and Community in an African Diaspora*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.

21 A Kefale, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia: A Comparative Regional Study*, London: Routledge, 2013; D Feyisa, The experience of Gambella Regional State, in D Turton (ed.), *Ethnic federalism: the Ethiopian experience in comparative perspective*, Oxford: James Currey, 2006; J Abbink, Ethnicity and Conflict Generation in Ethiopia: Some Problems and Prospects of Ethno-Regional Federalism, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 24:3, 2006.

22 C Clapham, The Ethiopian state's long struggle for reform, in *Ethiopia in the Wake of Political Reforms, forthcoming*.

23 More on this below.

24 The analysis provided here about the rise of social movements is very much in line with what social movement theory (the resource mobilisation version to be specific) affirmed a long time ago. See JD McCarthy and M Zald, Resource mobilization and social movements: a partial theory, *American Journal of Sociology*, 82:6, 1977.

25 I will come back to this later in the monograph.

26 The decision to start liberalising politics (most notably to release political prisoners) came at the height of the protests, some months before Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali came to power.

27 S Yusuf, Ethiopia's power, security and democracy dilemma, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/ethiopias-power-security-and-democracy-dilemma, July 2019.

28 Aided significantly by the increasing use of social media and text messaging by the youth in different parts of the country.

29 M Michael, Who is Amhara?, *African Identities* 6:4, 2007.

30 C Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary* Ethiopia, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

31 Amhara-based political organisations were established from the early 1990s, but their ability to receive widespread traction from the Amhara people had arguably remained questionable until a few years ago. However these organisations and their efforts have certainly contributed to the success gained in effecting present-day Amhara mobilisation.

32 See TM Borago, What is the point in Amhara nationalism?, www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/12/10/what-is-the-point-in-amhara-nationalism/, December 2018.

33 As previously mentioned, other organisations before the NAMA have played a cumulative role in this respect.

34 Interview with attendees of the meeting, June 2019, Amhara Regional State.

35 Interview with a NAMA leader, June 2019, Addis Ababa.

36 Interview with an ADP official, June 2019, Amhara Regional State.

37 Interview with a senior commander in the Amhara Regional State, June 2019.

38 Ibid.

39 From Abiy's rise to power to the return of the OLF leadership from exile, jubilant Oromo were seen across the country carrying the resistance flag and painting it almost everywhere – in the streets, on houses, clothes and even guns. The euphoria was visible during interviews with protest leaders and participants.

40 That acknowledged, among other things, the tortures of the past, calling them state terrorism, and on one occasion, the prime minister apologised to Ethiopians on behalf of the EPRDF. See Abiy's speech in the Ethiopian Parliament and during his first visit to the US: www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxMiBgUsl4Q , www.africanews.com/2018/06/19/ethiopia-pm-says-era-of-state-sanctioned-torture-is-over//, 27 July 2018.

41 Interview with Tigrayan individuals, July and August 2019, Addis Ababa.

42 Interview with Tigrayan intellectual, July 2019, Addis Ababa.

43 These stem from several discussions the researcher had with both nationalists over the years.

44 Several Amhara and Oromo elites have long held differences of opinion on such critical questions as how old Ethiopia is, whether it has consistently remained independent, whether Emperor Menelik's conquests were a unification of the country or invasion and colonisation of other nations, whether attempts by successive regimes at spreading Amharic and northern culture in general across conquered lands should be seen as forced Amharisation or cultural genocide, or simply nation building, and so on.

45 Both areas are contested, Addis more vociferously that Raya, claimed by the Amhara and Oromo alike.

46 Interview with Amhara political and religious elites in Oromo Zone of Amhara Regional State, June 2019.

47 Interviews with Oromo and Amhara elites and elders in Oromo Zone of Amhara Regional State, June 2019.

48 Although popularly dubbed the 'Liyu Police', according to informants in the Oromo Special Zone and in the Amhara Regional Administration (June 2019), the dispatched force is not actually the official Special Force of the Amhara Region, but one of the newly established armed groups under Brigadier General Asaminew Tsige.

49 Ibid; Violence was particularly intense in neighbouring Ataye woreda of North Shewa, where inhabitants participated in the inter-ethnic fighting.

50 Other factors, institutional dynamics, will be discussed later.

51 Because at least in the Kemise woreda, two OLFs have had influence, the Dawud Ibsa-led and the Kemal Gelchu-led ones. Interview with locals, June 2019.

52 Interview with zonal administrators, Oromo Zone, Amhara Regional State, June 2019.

53 Security official, Oromo Zone, Amhara Regional State, June 2019.

54 There are also other reasons, such as state weakness and party fracture (as instances of institutional fragility), which I will return to later.

55 Interview with a leader of the Qemant movement, July 2019, Addis Ababa.

56 Interview with NAMA and ADP leaders, June 2019, Addis Ababa and Amhara Regional State.

57 T Tibebu, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia: 1896–1974*, Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press Inc., 1995.

58 Interview with Tigrayan intellectual, July 2019, Addis Ababa.

59 Eritrea's gravitation to the Ethiopian centre aggravated the siege mentality.

60 Most important was the Ethiopian People's Patriotic Front, later merged with another rebel group, Ginbot 7.

61 For instance, interview with a NAMA leader, July 2019, Addis Ababa.

62 A Kefale, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia: A Comparative Regional Study*, London: Routledge, 2013

63 M Labzaé, Benishangul conflict spurred by investment, land titling, rumors, www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/03/08/benishangul-conflict-spurred-by-investment-land-titling-rumors/, 8 March 2019.

64 Interview with an OLF leader, July 2019, Addis Ababa.

65 Metekel, now a zone in the Benishagul Region, was under Gojjam (now part of Amhara) before 1991.

66 There are institutional and instrumentalist factors involved as well. More on this later.

67 Interview with a prominent Gedeo political elite, July 2019, Addis Ababa.

68 Interview with an Oromo activist, July 2019, Addis Ababa.

69 Ibid.; Interview with a Gedeo political leader, July 2019, Addis Ababa.

70 The conflicts discussed so far are by no means exhaustive. They are just meant to illustrate part of the general argument put forward in the introduction. Many other conflicts such as the Somali-Oromo one (that erupted on a massive scale before Abiy's administration took over) basically follow similar patterns as those discussed here. That conflict was a result of antagonistic ethnic mobilisations with roots in the recent past, compounded by state fragility and infighting in the ruling party, creating fertile ground for elite promotion of violent conflicts.

71 Interview with an OLF leader, July 2019, Addis Ababa.; Another major Oromo activist confirms, August 2019, Addis Ababa.

72 Interview with senior intelligence officer, August 2019, Addis Ababa.

73 Debretsion Gebremichael said this addressing a congregation of Tigrayan diaspora in Mekele on 6 August 2018 (broadcast on Tigray TV).

74 Interview with a local elder, June 2019, Kemise, Oromo Zone, Amhara Regional State. That is how the locals viewed the force, which was not the Liyu Force, but another paramilitary force under the security branch of the Amhara Regional State.

75 Ibid.

76 D Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

77 Interview with a former NAMA activist, June 2019, Amhara Regional State.

78 Ibid.

79 A Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia: State formation and ethnonational conflict 1868–2004*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press and The Red Sea Press, 2005.

80 Interview with a major leader in the qerro movement, Toronto, 2017.

81 Interview, June 2019, Kemise.

82 Interview, Gedeo political elite, July 2019, Addis Ababa.

83 International Crisis Group, Managing Ethiopia's Unsettled Transition, February 2019, https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/269%20Managing%20Ethiopia%20-%20Print.pdf, February 2019.

84 Interview with ADP member and ODP-affiliated activist, July and August 2019, Amhara Regional State and Addis Ababa; E Gebreselassie, Ethiopia's ruling coalition used to be known for its unity. Not anymore, *African Arguments*, https://africanarguments.org/2018/10/23/ethiopia-ruling-coalition-eprdf-unity-competition/, October 2018.

85 The ODP emphasised that Addis Ababa belongs to the Oromo, and that it won't negotiate over the ethnic federal arrangement, claims that some ADP officials disagreed with. These are just examples of an ongoing set of differences between (officials in) the two parties. The latest round of disagreements centred on Shimelis Abdissa's (Acting President of Oromia) public remark on 'overpowering the neftegna (lit. armed men)'. See Endalk, How Ethiopia's ruling coalition created a playbook for disinformation, https://advox.globalvoices. org/2019/10/18/how-ethiopias-ruling-coalition-created-a-playbookfor-disinformation/, October 2019.

86 Interview with an ADP member and a senior commander in Amhara Regional State, July 2019, Amhara Regional State.

87 The SEPDM's internal and relational dispositions have been divergent. It has gone through tense conditions internally, while largely refraining from contributing to the inter-party bickerings within EPRDF. 'The SEPDM has remained solidly independent from the clashes [that engulfed other sister parties],' one senior SEPDM member said in an interview (September 2019, Addis Ababa).

88 A Woldemariam, quoted in W Davison and K Kursha, As Southern Nations break free, pressure mounts on EPRDF, www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/11/28/as-southern-nations-break-free-pressure-mounts-on-eprdf/, 28 November 2018. The party became highly divided since statehood (i.e. regional autonomy) quests went rampant in the SNNPR, most vociferously by Sidama activists. The internal disagreements finally led to the suspension of senior members of the party leadership from the Sidama and Hadiya zones, and the issuance of warning to some others. The imminent danger of 'demise' and 'split' might since have been averted for the time being, but the danger of such divisions recurring cannot totally be ruled out, given the fact that pro-autonomy agitations from below in the region could revive anytime soon, probably with dire repercussions for the internal unity of the party.

89 Interview with ODP-affiliated activist and intellectual, August 2019, Addis Ababa. Another major Oromo activist with close ties to the ODP leadership stresses, however, that those divisions in the ODP are visible more in the rank and file than in the leadership, which is more or less unified in its support for Abiy's reforms (interview, August 2019, Addis Ababa). Since the coming to power of Shimelis Abdisa as the regional leader of Oromia, the leadership presided over a series of training of several party members aimed at, among other things, instilling party discipline and stabilising the region (discussion with senior government official, August 2019, Addis Ababa). The regional president himself confirmed this in a recent press conference to local journalists, aired on state TV.

90 Ibid.

91 Interview with a senior intelligence officer, August 2019, Addis Ababa.

92 M Labzaé, Benishangul conflict spurred by investment, land titling, rumors, www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/03/08/benishangul-conflict-spurred-by-investment-land-titling-rumors/, March 2019.

93 Senior intelligence officer, August 2019, Addis Ababa.

94 Ibid.

95 The OLF and TPLF looked like mortal enemies for a long time. Some top-level government sources (discussions with a senior ODP official and an Oromo intellectual close to the ODP, Addis Ababa, 2018) however doubt whether the two fronts were indeed at loggerheads with each other since 'recent years' before Abiy came to power. They assume that the two fronts were having confidential ties of some sort when the OLF was based in Eritrea.

96 OLF members received warmly in Mekelle, Tigrai state, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ornlslqvo3c&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3-TeA54oSupmLdRYzSk-CzQmBYza_rFAbOTrm-YYmGFzSq6WOJ6U5YXEg, 15 September 2018.

97 Interview with a senior OLF leader, July 2019, Addis Ababa. Sources also indicate that the so-called splinter group within the OLF that chose to continue with the armed struggle might not necessarily have split from the front. If this is the case, it means the TPLF-OLF relationship may go up to the higher echelons of the OLF leadership. Interviews with a senior Oromo activist with close ties to the OLF and with a major Oromo activist close to the ODP, June and July 2019, Addis Ababa.

98 SY Teshale, Insurgency in Ethnically Divided Authoritarian-led Societies: A Comparative Study of Rebel Movements in Ethiopia, 1974–2014, PhD thesis, University of Toronto, https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/92088/3/Teshale_Semir_Y_201811_PhD_thesis.pdf, 2018.

99 T Vestal, *Ethiopia: A Post-Cold War African State*, London: Praeger, 1999, 125-6.

100 International Crisis Group, Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents, Nairobi: International Crisis Group, 16, 4 September 2009.

101 Although the major shift in the internal power distribution of the EPRDF could be traced back to the era of popular protests, internal sources indicate that the TPLF's hegemony had been repeatedly but discreetly challenged by the other 'sister' parties even before that. The death of prime minister Meles Zenawi in 2011 emboldened the OPDO and the ANDM regarding the TPLF, who conceded more privilege to them in the allocation of power (such as positions of higher influence), without necessarily rupturing the hierarchy of power that brought the TPLF to the top.

102 Interviews with a Gedeo political leader and an Oromo activist, July 2019, Addis Ababa.

103 Interview with a senior OLF leader, July 2019, Addis Ababa.

104 Interview with a major Oromo activist with close ties with the ODP and the OLF, August 2019, Addis Ababa.

105 Vestal, among others, maintains that 'not a single important political or organizational question is decided by government officials or mass organizations without guiding direction from the party. The Front [TPLF] stands above all, and the leaders do not test their policies in a forum of free speech and fair elections. Instead they mobilize and enforce consent'. T Vestal, *Ethiopia: A Post-Cold War African State*, London: Praeger, 125-6, 1999.

106 Interview with a senior police office, June, 2019, Amhara Regional State.

107 Interview, October 2019, Addis Ababa.

108 Interview, May 2019, Addis Ababa.

109 Ibid.

110 Interview with residents in Harar, February 2019, Harar Regional State.

111 Interview with two senior OLF leaders, July 2019, Addis Ababa.

112 The government denies taking excessive action against OLF or Oromo activists.

113 K Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading Mass: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979.

114 This should be underlined because the Ethiopian state currently has not collapsed. It is still alive and somehow functioning. The analogy with international politics is just meant to shed light on some aspects of current Ethiopian politics, not to equalise the two.

115 We will come back to some of these issues under state responsibilities as well. The repetition is unavoidable because of the intractable blending of state and party functionaries in contemporary Ethiopia.

116 Interview with one of the organisers of the discussions, September 2019, Bishoftu.

117 This refers to the fear members of the ruling party could have that their co-ethnics organised into opposition parties in their own regions would steal their popularity if the EPRDF members toned down their nationalist rhetoric.

118 Interview with an expert in the Ministry of Peace, September 2019, Addis Ababa.

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About this monograph

Violent ethnic conflicts have rocked Ethiopia since 2018. A major reason for the fighting is the sharp rise in contending militant ethno-nationalisms. State and party fragility have also created an environment conducive to the proliferation of violent conflicts. Ethnic nationalisms are partly by-products of political systems that have been put in place by successive governments to manage ethnic division. Top-level and nationwide political negotiations, and activating state resilience, should be established to secure stability in this Horn of Africa country.

About the author

Semir Yusuf is a senior researcher in the Horn of Africa programme at the Institute for Security Studies, Addis Ababa. His research focuses on conflict and peace studies, transition politics, authoritarian politics and Ethiopian studies. Yusuf obtained his PhD from the University of Toronto in Comparative Politics and Development Studies. His MA and BA were in Political Science and International Relations.

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