

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF THE OROMO PROTESTS IN ETHIOPIA

Resilience and Political Change

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ABSTRACT

This article explores why the Oromo protests have transformed the Ethiopian political landscape since demonstrators took the streets in November 2015. It also examines the relationship between the two pillars of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), ethnic federalism and developmentalism, and the Oromo protests. The study aims to illustrate the connection between the Ethiopian state's fundamental strategies and the capacity of popular movements to bring about political change. The study has used a qualitative research approach with both primary and secondary data. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted and recorded with a voice recorder, and data was analysed through thematic analysis. The findings of the research show, first, that the securitisation of development strategy performed by the EPRDF triggered the protests. And second, that the primordial understanding of ethnicity, as defined in the Constitution, contributed to the articulation of the Oromo protests as a movement. The study concludes that the Oromo protests will pave the way for reform because they reflect the regime's failures and also represent the demands of the larger part of Ethiopian society.

Keywords: EPRDF, Ethiopia, Oromo, protest, securitisation, TPLF

INTRODUCTION

November 2015 witnessed a wave of popular protests beginning in Oromia region in the centre of Ethiopia. The demonstrations spread rapidly around the region, enjoying enormous support from the Oromo population, and were articulated

under the banner of Oromo identity. The size and strength of the protests grew rapidly, with issues of land grabbing, state oppression, and marginalisation among the main claims. Protestors were brutally repressed by the state, resulting in hundreds of deaths. After months of popular protests, the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which had been in power since 1991, started to recognise the protestors' demands and began a reformist agenda. This study investigates the political conditions that have driven this situation in an attempt to explain the massive popular expressions of rejection against the Ethiopian government and the transformative power of the Oromo protests (OP). It also considers the outcomes of these changes and how these relate to the current situation in Ethiopia.

This study uses a method of triangulation combining literature, theory, and qualitative data made up of interviews, diary notes, and participatory observations. The Oromo protests were a crucial element for political change, materialising the contradictions and problems of the EPRDF era. In sum, the Oromo protests paved the way for political reform in Ethiopia, bringing at the same time unexpected consequences.

TWO CONTRADICTORY PROJECTS ETHNIC FEDERALISM AND THE DEVELOPMENTAL STATE

According to Fiseha (2006), two projects coexist in a contradictory situation Ethiopia. On the one hand is the country's governmental structure, an ethnic federation based on the recognition of historical inequalities. This political model aims to address this issue through the devolution of power and guaranteed self-determination (up to the point of secession) of the different ethnic groups (Clapham 2017). In theory, the model has its foundations in two core principles, the decentralisation of decision-making, and ethnicity, as the primary identification for politics (Vaughan 2013). Conversely, the EPRDF began full implementation of a developmental plan after the 2005 elections, using all the state machinery available (Gebresenbet 2014). This project demanded hegemony, a national discourse assumed by the society, and a powerful central administration. The consequences of this developmental plan were a massive concentration of power in the hands of the central government (thus contradicting the devolution of powers to the regions enshrined in the Constitution) and the extremely authoritarian and anti-democratic behaviour of the state.

Ethnic Federalism

The historical reasons that explain the emergence of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia are crucial in order to understand the choice of this political model and

the revolutionary adoption of ethnicity as its organising principle. Two main points are central to providing adequate context: first, the anti-Derg struggle characteristics, and second, the national question.

Ethiopian historian Bahru Zewde described this political movement with a reference to three major points: first, Marxist ideology was the dominant framework for the analysis; second, there was an emphasis on land reform, idealised in the motto 'land to the tiller'; third, there was an emphasis on the national question (Zewde 2001). This ideological basis was crucial in the formation of the different liberation movements that fought the military regime, known as the Derg ('committee' in Geez and Amharic), from the peripheries of the country. Once in power, the Derg regime annihilated any political resistance at the centre of the state, installing a period known as the 'red terror'. Ethnic-based resistance movements began to fight the central government from peripheral positions. Among these liberation movements were the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF); the former was a Marxist-Leninist peasant-based group from the Northern region of Tigray whose agenda '[spoke] in the first place to a legacy of national self-consciousness built on the widely held perception of Tigray's destitution and underdevelopment within an Ethiopia dominated by Shoan Amharas' (John 1997, pp. 90–91). The latter was also a liberation movement that included independence for the Oromo in its agenda (Gudina 2007).

Furthermore, the former prime minister – an ideologue of the post-1991 regime – argued that 'ethnic-federalism was the only way of democratically restructuring the country, enhancing the political participation of the Ethiopian population and giving ethno-regional rights to the previously oppressed peoples or nationalities' (Lovise 2006, p. 245). On 8 December 1994, Ethiopia adopted its new Constitution and was no longer a unitary state. Nine regional states and two federal cities compose the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE): Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples, Gambela, Harari, and two cities under federal jurisdiction – Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa.

The Process of Making a Federation

Federalism refers to a broad range of issues, including state structures, constitutional design, territory organisation, identity markers (nationalities), and more. Daniel Elazar characterised federalism as a democratic unity organised 'upon a matrix of constituent institutions that together share power, not through a single centre but a multi-centred or non-centralised structure' (Elazar 1996, p. 2).

Several scholars have noted that the TPLF imposed this type of federal arrangement following their own strategic position and to ensure control of state

power. Throughout the transformation of Ethiopia into federal states organised by ethnicity, and by putting political parties under their control in those regions, the Tigrayan elite was capable of managing the central government. In such a vast and extremely diverse country, this was the only way for the TPLF leadership, taking in account the location and population of Tigray (Clapham 2017). In order to implement this, the TPLF leadership first created the EPRDF, a coalition led by the TPLF and composed of three other parties, the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM) (which subsequently changed its name to the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) in 1994) the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) (Abbink 2011), and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) (Mengisteab 2001). Secondly, when the EPRDF came to power, the Addis Ababa Transitional Conference (July 1991) was called and they invited a wide range of political formations (Vaughan 2013). However, their opinions were ignored and the EPRDF agenda was imposed almost in its entirety (Lovise 2006). A Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) was created to manage the country while the Constitution was written. This was eventually approved in December 1994, and finally, in 1995, national elections took place. The transitional period was totally controlled by the EPRDF; the party sought legitimacy in the new Constitution and institutions, which it also controlled. During this period, only the OLF stood against the EPRDF's views:

[in 1992] The thin rope that tied the OLF to the TPLF-dominated TGE broke off as distrust and suspicion reached their climax. Consequently, the OLF, which was the major contender of power, was forced to withdraw from contesting the elections and subsequently from the TGE itself. This made the elections totally an EPRDF affair.

(Gudina 2007, p. 94)

This example demonstrates the lack of a federal bargain, a crucial element in the building of a federal system because, in theory, it must be a voluntary and negotiated agreement among the different sub-units of the federal state. Moreover, the lack of bargain made for weak foundations for the new federal state and undermined the legitimacy of the whole project from the outset (Lovise 2006). In addition, a real and socially perceived notion of Tigrayan domination spread throughout the country, thus substituting Amhara for Tigray domination and arguably leaving the notorious national question unresolved (Abbink 2011, p. 597).

The objectives stated during the transitional period were: to facilitate ethno-regional self-determination, to minimise ethnic conflicts, to contribute to the development of the cultural rights of the different groups, to build a democratic society, to address social and economic problems, and to guarantee a non-partisan,

non-biased way of politics at a federal level. In addition, the main aim of the ethnic federation is 'decentralisation and devolution of power and decision-making to the ethno-regions' (Abbink 2011, p. 598). The Constitution states that the regional states have the power and capacity to develop their own policies and plans. However, the reality is an all-powerful central government and a lack of funds and capacity for the regional administrations to manoeuvre (Lovise 2006). The federation adopted a hybrid system of revenue sharing, whereby the central government shares tax and other revenues with regional states and much of the sharing takes the form of block grants from the federal to the regional state governments (Keller & Smith 2005, p. 272). This creates a total budgetary dependence of the regional states on the federal government's grants and undermines the autonomy of the sub-units (Chole 1994, pp. 7-30).

To sum up, the process of the reconfiguration of Ethiopia after 1991 reveals two crucial points: one, the historical and sociological reasons that made a federation the best political model to keep the country together; and two, how the transitional process already indicates a tension between theory and practice.

The Genie of Ethnicity

The current Ethiopian Constitution is based on the concept of ethnicity, or Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (NNP) as it is officially termed in Ethiopia (FDRE 1994). Many have argued that the Ethiopian federal system is based on a primordial and static understanding of ethnicity (Habtu 2004). The Constitution defines NNPs (article 39.5):

A 'Nation, Nationality or People' for the purpose of this Constitution, is a group of people who have or share large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable predominantly contiguous territory.

This definition assumes ethnicity to be a fixed identity attached to a particular territory, even though ethnic groups are usually fluid and complex entities. This is a problematic approach because it does not reflect the social network of the country, particularly in urban areas that tend to be plural in their composition. It also makes territories mono-ethnic even if this does not correspond to historical developments. Several scholarly works argue that this vision of ethnicity does not match the Ethiopian reality and also that it has a difficult partnership with democracy (Gudina 2007). Ethnicity has become the main rhetorical factor in Ethiopian politics and society; it appeared as the first principle for state policy,

articulation of citizenship, and political organisation. In this sense, it has penetrated the self-consciousness of groups and individuals, emerging as the primary identification layer 'every citizen must belong to an ethnic group and define themselves along ethnic lines' (Lovisa 2006, p. 247). According to Abbink (2011, p. 612):

Ethnicity is the prime basis of people's identity: for voting in elections, for party membership, and for identifying yourself when you come to a police station to report a stolen object. Ethnic federalism as an institutional set-up privileges ethnicity as one marker of identity over many others (economic, citizenship, occupation, religion, class, or gender) and, in a sense, freezes this one marker of identity, or rather encourages people to identify in ethnic terms.

This idea has its foundations in the Constitution in which article 8 states: 'All sovereign power resides in the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia' (Abbink 2011). Therefore, sovereignty resides in the NNPs and not in the members of the Federation, as usually occurs. Furthermore, article 39 states: 'Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession'. Beyond its practical application, this has a symbolic meaning: it emphasises the importance of ethnicity, situating the NNPs above Ethiopian national unity (FDRE 1994).

Securitisation of Development

In the aftermath of the contested 2005 elections, the EPRDF accelerated its developmental strategy. The 2005 elections were relatively free and fair and posed a serious challenge to the EPRDF (René 2007). The ruling party faced defeat in Addis Ababa and other major cities, and performed under its expectations in rural areas (Abbink 2005). The reaction of the EPRDF machinery was brutal:

The regime responded to this totally unexpected setback by increasing the level of repression, as evidenced by a series of draconian laws, arrests on a massive scale, and parodies of elections in 2008 and 2010.

(René 2007)

On a more strategic level, the focus of the EPRDF turned towards development. Former Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, an ideologue of the Ethiopian developmental state, defined it in the following manner:

Development is a political process first and an economic and social process second. It is the creation of a political set-up that is conducive to accelerated development that sets the ball of development rolling.
(Zenawi 2012)

The implementation of developmentalism seems to contradict the promises and basis of ethnic federalism as enshrined in the Constitution. The securitisation of development and its consequences seem to threaten the self-determination of the NNPs, the crucial point in the post-1991 recasting of the Ethiopian state (Gebresenbet 2014). The developmental plan needs long-term certainties; therefore, an authoritarian and uncontested rule becomes a *sine qua non* to guarantee the state's loyalty to the plan. Developmentalism as the state's ideology has to be hegemonic, meaning that its discourse must be internalised and shared by the majority of the population (Zenawi 2012). To achieve this hegemonic position within Ethiopian society, the EPRDF began a process of securitising development.

Security is about survival. [Securitisation] is when an issue is presented as posing an existential threat to a designated referent object (traditionally, but not necessarily the state). The special nature of security threats justifies the use of extraordinary measures to handle them. The invocation of security has been the key to legitimising the use of force, but more generally it has opened the way for the state to mobilise, or to take special powers, to handle existential threats.

(Buzan 1998, p. 21)

Thus, the Ethiopian regime's strategy was to frame poverty as an existential threat to the survival of the Ethiopian state. The EPRDF, as the securitising actor, aimed to convert the public to the creed of developmentalism.

Securitisation also meant the institutionalisation of the instruments of repression, and a series of draconian laws was approved to facilitate the government's actions against opposition movements or voices. These laws were: the Charities and Societies Proclamation, which basically banned any NGO that could monitor issues such as human rights violations; the Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation, which imposed serious restrictions on the practice of journalism and harsh sanctions for violations; and the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, which used a broad definition of terrorism, leaving its interpretation open to criminalise almost any dissent (Jon 2017). The government tried to crush the OP with all the machinery at hand; the use of lethal force was the general rule, as well as incarcerating Oromo leaders, journalists, and activists through these draconian laws. Williams (2003) makes two important points regarding securitisation theory. The first is that:

as a speech-act, securitization is located with the realm of political argument and discursive legitimation, and security practices are thus susceptible to criticism and transformation. This means that because the securitization strategy must be hegemonic, it is always at risk of being contested.

(Williams 2003, p. 512)

In specific terms, development in the EPRDF meant any action directed at fighting poverty and improving the economic situation of Ethiopia. In this sense, crucial sectors such as infrastructure, education, industrialisation, business, banking and communications were under strict government control. Moreover, key examples of the developmental state were: large-scale farming looking for efficient and exportable products such as flowers (usually managed by foreign companies under leasing licenses); huge infrastructure projects like dams (Gibe III in the Omo Valley or the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam in Benishangul-Gumuz region); a multiplication of schools and universities across the country; and urban expansion such as the Addis Ababa Master Plan.

The OP is closely related to the securitisation move because it is a social movement that could create a counter-narrative. Their activism could question the developmental project and dispute or subvert its national ideological hegemony. It showed the authoritarianism and brutality of the state apparatus, de-legitimising the EPRDF party and policies. Furthermore, the OP illustrated the second point made by Williams (2003, p. 512) – that political communication is nowadays a complex issue, as there are several channels to produce and transmit information; therefore, ‘the processes of securitization take on forms, dynamics, and institutional linkages that cannot be fully assessed by focusing on the speech-act alone’.

To conclude this section, it is important to underscore once again the contradiction between the securitisation of development and the federal model. On the one hand, the federal architecture was based on the devolution of powers to the regional states, a decentralisation model that guarantees self-determination. On the other hand, the securitisation of development implies a centralisation of power and a series of instruments meant to enforce the central authority, favouring authoritarianism. This contradiction is crucial to understanding the Oromo Protests.

THE OROMO PROTESTS

In November 2015, the Oromo began to protest against the government (Chala 2016). These demonstrations took place across Ethiopia and were violently

repressed by the state's security apparatus; the use of lethal force resulted in over 1 000 deaths, innumerable injured people, and according to Human Rights Watch (2018), 21 000 were imprisoned. The Federal government declared two States of Emergency (SOE), the first in October 2016 for ten months, and the second at the beginning of 2018, which is still in place at the time of writing. The state crackdown on protests was accompanied by massive restrictions on access to communications, in particular the internet and social media, which were blocked on a regular basis (Human Rights Watch 2018). In addition, Ethiopia's economy was seriously affected. Once the fastest-growing economy among developing countries, it is now witnessing a slow path, experiencing serious inflation. The government was even forced to devalue the Birr in order to balance the drop in exports.

The EPRDF found in the securitisation of development the perfect excuse to quash opposition voices and to neglect democratic and constitutional rights (Hussein 2017). The adoption of a developmental model prioritised speedy economic growth, with active state intervention and a centralising strategy. To legitimise the developmental project, a hegemonic discourse was put in place; the aim was to enlist most of the population in the plan, using either persuasion or coercion. Sooner rather than later, the resort to coercive means began to be the norm. The proclamation laws illustrate the institutionalisation of the instruments of repression under the securitisation strategy.

However, the resilience and strength of the OP against the brutality of the security forces inspired other groups to join the protests; demonstrations also spread across Amhara and the Southern region. Eventually, this forced the ruling party to accept the social rupture and pledge to undertake reforms to open the political space and promote a national consensus. Because of this reform, thousands of political prisoners were released (among them were key opposition political figures such as Merera Gudina and Bekele Gerba) and Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigned from office. A few weeks later, the OPDO chairman, Dr. Abiy Ahmed, was elected by the EPRDF to succeed Hailemariam and on 2 April 2018 he was sworn in as prime minister. Abiy Ahmed's election has a powerful meaning. Although he himself is a devoted Protestant, being Oromo and from a Muslim family through his father, his nomination is seen as a product of OP demands.

The new prime minister brought hope and a reformist spirit; during the first months of his tenure he released political prisoners, opened the doors for exiled political opponents to return, sponsored the Ethio-Eritrea rapprochement (earning him the Nobel Peace Prize), and brought issues of corruption and human rights violations to justice in order to address the public interest (Jima 2021). In one of his first visits as prime minister, he visited Ambo, a town in Oromia that was the epicentre of the OP. He performed a highly symbolic minute of silence in

memory of those who had died in the protests and said: 'You have expressed your grievances and have made demands. We give you our unwavering commitment to resolving them' (BBC Africa 2018).

This analysis aims to understand the power of the OP, how a popular and transversal revolution, determined and fearless, was able to transform an authoritarian government deploying largely non-violent methods (Allow 2016). The contention is that the OP can be explained by two different facets – ethnic identity and the securitisation of development – and that these two aspects were also crucial in building the EPRDF regime, as we have seen in the previous section. Therefore, the OP are a product of the system and its failures, and here resides the transformative power of the popular movement.

The Oromo Protests and Ethnic Identity

A crucial point in the success of the OP was its inclusive and transversal articulation. The study argues that this was largely possible thanks to the ethnic narrative of the Oromo as a cohesive group operating against the oppression of the government. And here resides the key feature – this was facilitated by the ethnic federation system.

In parallel, ethnic federalism has Balkanised the country and produced a territorialisation of ethnicity. That is, it has drawn borders where before there were none and has encapsulated ethnic groups within the borders of these regions. As Abbink (2011, p. 600) notes: 'ethnicity was territory, with exclusivist tendencies, and forms of mixture did not fit the scheme'. He also underscores the fact that under this system, territories are of 'one "original" ethnic group, and of one only'. The ethnic federation, through primordialism and the territorialisation of ethnicity, contributed decisively to unifying the Oromos in Ethiopia. If Oromo nationalism and identity were previously diverse and, arguably, fragmented, now Oromia had clear borders for the first time. It had ID cards, an Oromo (regional) government, the language Afaan Oromo was used in schools and regional administration and the political articulation of Oromo identity was also more evident (Abbink 2011).

When the OP began in November 2015, the expansion of the protests throughout Oromia was very fast, solidarity was expressed, and local grievances were framed as an attack on the whole Oromo people (Allo 2016). The Oromos believed that the Addis Ababa Master Plan (referred to in more detail below) was opposed to the territorial integrity and identity of the Oromo and their constitutional right to self-determination. The protestors rapidly articulated their demonstrations as the Oromo Protests; the key factor in facilitating this organisation was ethnicity. The OP was able to capitalise on this identity framework, ironically derived from the political system designed by the EPRDF.

Political affiliation became framed in ethnic terms. After 2005, the EPRDF launched a campaign to massively extend its base, increasing membership from 760 000 in 2005 to 4 million in 2008 (Aalen 2009). However, this strategy brought unexpected consequences. Many joined the party seeking opportunities, as Etana Habte (2016) summarises:

In Oromia region, access to state services, employment, promotion in civil service, opportunities of further education, prospects of graduate and postgraduate studies, chances to secure urban land and any form of business licenses have long become highly dependent on party membership. Non-OPDO/EPRDF members in rural towns and urban centres have scant chance of benefitting from any advantages related to these opportunities.

When the OP first started, a considerable portion of the OPDO membership was sympathetic to the protests and able to influence the party's own perspective towards national politics (Habte 2016). The pressure on the EPRDF's authoritarian rule was now in the streets and within the coalition and the OPDO leadership began to rebel against EPRDF's central power. In 2017, Lemma Megersa, the Oromia regional state president, declared:

Why persist with costly street protests when we have made your demands our own? If we fail to deliver using existing legal and institutional mechanisms, I and all of us here will join you in the protests.

(Gardner 2018)

It is important to remember that the OPDO was designed by the EPRDF-TPLF as a device to legitimise their ethnic-based coalition. In other words, the OPDO was seen as a puppet organisation, a Trojan horse sent by the TPLF to control Oromia (Ademo 2017). That is why the transformation of the OPDO from puppet to 'opposition party' is so relevant. On the one hand, the politicisation of ethnicity forced the OPDO to listen to their own constituency's demands, usually framed in ethnic terms. On the other hand, for previously explained reasons, the membership expansion brought thousands of new recruits. The vast majority of these recruits were new college graduates, including those who had been active in the protest movement centred around university and college campuses. Therefore, the OP resorted to using their ethnic identity to articulate their movement; but their political affiliation was also framed in ethnic terms, and in this case the OPDO was transformed by the protests. A few months later, in 2018, the OPDO

began to transform the EPRDF and the Ethiopian government, finally leading to the nomination of Abiy Ahmed (OPDO member) as the first Oromo Prime Minister (*Addis Standard* 2018).

The Oromo Protests and the Securitisation of Development

The protests began on 12 November 2015 in Ginchi, a small town in the West Shewa Zone of Oromia Region, located 80km west of the capital. The trigger was the Addis Ababa Master Plan, a government-designed strategy to expand the capital Addis Ababa's administrative control of the capital, Addis Ababa, into Oromo territorial border (Jon 2017). For a regime that based its hegemonic position, discursively and practically, in the securitisation of development, this expansion was strategic. When the Oromo people started to take to the streets against the master plan, they were protesting against a broader oppressive situation (Jason 2017). The government's developmental plan was not improving the life conditions for large portions of the society. When the Oromos seized the streets and began the protests, they articulated their concerns, first, in constitutional terms, and subsequently, in human rights terminology.

When the OP were directed against the master plan, the demonstrators' chants were 'Oromia is not for sale!', 'the matter of land is the matter of life!' and 'we want self-rule!' (Jon 2017, p. 211). These actions clearly pointed to article 39 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to self-determination, up to secession, of every NNP, and to article 49(4) (Jason 2017), which defines Oromia's preferential relationship with Addis Ababa. According to this researcher's fieldwork diary, several informants from Ginchi, Ambo and Nekemte linked the protests with these issues. They also felt that the master plan was aimed to displace Oromos from their ancestral lands in order to wipe out Oromo culture from the area around the capital city.

Moreover, land grabbing had been one of the key strategies within the developmental plan; an important point here is that as land is state-owned in Ethiopia, the master plan was technically legal. As we have been examining above, the Federal government was responsible for land grabbing large areas surrounding Addis Ababa that were considered sacred by the Oromo community. This strategy was also implemented in other parts of the country with the purpose of developing large-scale farms (mostly in the south of Ethiopia) or state-sponsored infrastructure such as dams (Gibe III, Renaissance Dam), in all cases disregarding the communities' concerns but aiming overall at (securitised) development. However, the implementation was done in an authoritarian way that surpassed any limit (Jon 2017). This is one example of how the securitisation of development fuelled the OP and, eventually, had negative implications for the EPRDF regime.

Economic plans were prioritised without consulting the affected communities and without any kind of inclusive measures or appropriate compensations for farmers (Chala 2016). The OP confronted the political core of the securitisation of development, and their motivations went beyond the master plan. Once the expansion of Addis Ababa was cancelled, the OP not only continued but also spread across Oromia state. Some of the grievances were localised, but the main problem was the distance between constitutional rights – self-determination, decentralisation, democracy – and the reality of an authoritarian regime governing with an iron fist (Chala 2016).

The level and number of protests around Oromia escalated rapidly in 2016, as did the state's violent repression. Land grabbing continued to be a major issue in the OP; some protesters began to attack foreign firms with perceived links to the government, and torched several farms (Al Jazeera 2016). These attacks, however sporadic, demonstrate the lack of congruency between the developmental plan and the protesters' concerns. They localised the problem clearly; the regime's discourse on fast economic growth and development was translated into land grabbing and leasing those lands to foreign companies. The impact on local communities was devastating: not only were they not directly involved in the industrialisation processes, for instance with jobs and opportunities, but they were also penalised and stripped of their farms (Jason 2017).

EPRDF's securitisation of development, the crucial point of the securitisation process, was to construct a hegemonic discourse: 'Securitization only succeeds when the society accepts the message and internalises the threat' (Buzan 1998, p. 25). However, for many years the grievances accumulated. Despite the country's economic success in the decade 2005–2015 when the economy grew at an average of 10.3% a year, the lack of welfare and the curtailing of freedoms by the government ended up delegitimising the EPRDF's narrative. The disproportionate use of violence by governmental forces was a crucial element that contributed to the erosion of EPRDF's legitimacy. Following the securitisation textbook, the government tried to frame the protesters as enemies of the nation; the Minister of Communication Affairs defined protesters as: 'an organised and armed terrorist force aiming to create havoc and chaos have begun murdering model farmers, public leaders and other ethnic groups residing in the region' (Human Rights Watch 2015). That same day, the Prime Minister said: '[the government] will take merciless legitimate action against any force bent on destabilising the area'. The response against the demonstrators was brutal, resulting in a death toll of hundreds. Violence was confronted with popular protests, the gesture of crossing the arms above the head became a symbol of the OP and was internationalised by runner Feyisa Lilesa, an Oromo, who made the gesture while crossing the line in second place in the 2016 Olympics marathon in Rio (Human Rights Watch

2018). Protestors were fearless and determined; their initial concerns about land grabbing had escalated, issues such as Oromo marginalisation, lack of freedom, economic opportunities, and demands for the release of political prisoners were the norm. Now the OP aimed for regime change.

The point of no return was the Irrecha Massacre on 2 October 2016. Irrecha is the most important annual festival for the Oromo; it takes place in Bishoftu (50km southeast of Addis Ababa) and celebrates Oromo culture. In 2016, the atmosphere was pessimistic, the military presence at the festival was more than evident, and when anti-government chants started, a catastrophe was precipitated. As well documented by Human Rights Watch (2017), in previous protests, the government forces' *modus operandi* was first to use teargas, followed by live ammunition. When teargas was used the crowd panicked. The stampede generated by the chaos killed tens of hundreds of people (*Addis Standard* 2016). Different informants confirmed this outrage in personal conversations with these researchers; a witness named Gemechu Merara stated:

I used to think, until that very day, that the government could fix things and make them right if it is willing to do so; but not after Sunday. The people were fleeing from the police, the entity they know that will take their lives from experience since November 2015. I am still in shock and trauma, and at the same time raged. I would like to see someone be held responsible for it and be hanged for what he/she did to the people, literally.

(*Addis Standard* 2016)

In reaction to the outrage, and expecting general unrest around the country, the EPRDF declared a State of Emergency (SOE) on 8 October 2016. As Awol Allo (2017, p. 133) argues: 'Ethiopia's de jure emergency is merely the latest manifestation of the de facto state of emergency in operation since the new Constitutional order was set in motion'. In other words, the SOE had just made official the normal behaviour of the federal government, trying to legitimise in law the very same practices that had been previously employed.

The OP was able to produce a counter-narrative that dismantled the securitisation move. Their resilience has revealed the prevailing injustice and their power has contested the hegemony of development as a national discourse. These events demonstrate the failure of the securitisation of development. First, the whole strategy of development generated considerable grievances among the Oromo population. Second, it triggered protest-specific measures, namely the Addis Ababa Master Plan. And third, the level of violent repression and use of lethal force employed by the government, based on the supremacy of

developmental discourses, fuelled the OP to the point of demanding profound changes in the political system. EPRDF's securitisation of development not only failed in becoming a hegemonic ideology, but also ended up delegitimising the very same regime.

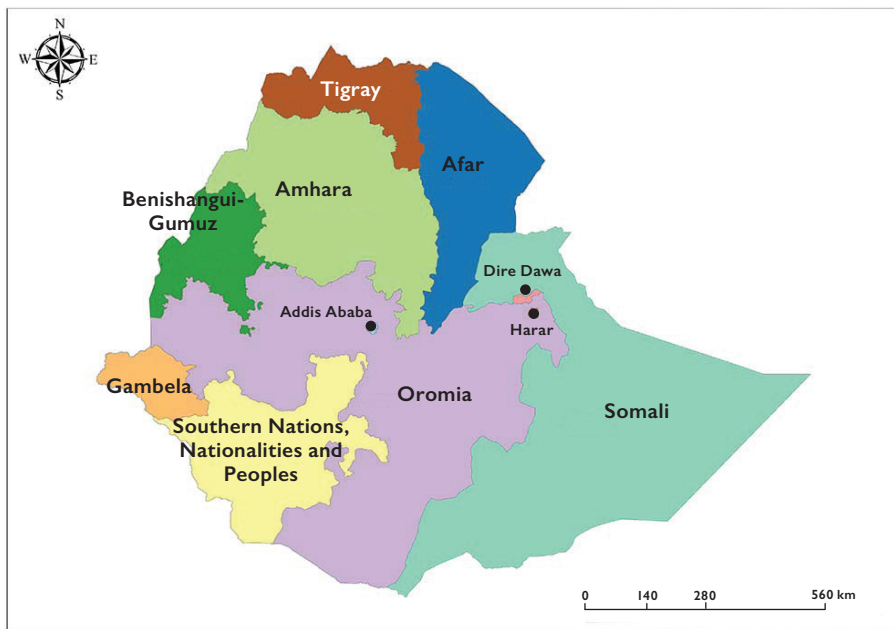


Figure 1: Political map of Ethiopia, 2022

CURRENT SITUATION AND FACTORS FOR CIVIL CONFLICT IN ETHIOPIA

The armed conflict between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian government has cost thousands of lives, the humanitarian situation in Tigray, Amhara and Afar regional states is dire, and the end of the war still does not seem clear. Some of the reasons that fuelled the escalation of the conflict into civil war relate to the factors analysed in this paper, namely the controversy around the ethno-federation and the strong grip of state power by the TPLF clique. It seems important to offer a brief highlight of some important political developments after the election of the current Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2022). The first disagreement took place in TPLF's refusal to aid justice by hiding suspected criminals in Tigray region (Ylönen 2021). According to Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali, he had informed the House of People's Representatives that the TPLF was also the

master mind for 114 inter-ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia in 2018 and 2019 (Dugo & Eisen 2018a). Moreover, the Prime Minister added that the TPLF has sponsored, trained, and equipped ethnic extremist forces such as Shena, Kemant and Gumuz. All are armed groups accused of massacring innocent people (Simie 2019).

Secondly, in 1995 Ethiopia adopted multinational federalism, but in a way that raised boundary and identity-based conflicts (Allaro 2019). Hence, most of the regional governments have disagreements with one another concerning administrative boundaries; in line with this the Tigray regional administrative boundaries are in conflict with the Amhara and Afar regions, and also have a long-standing feud with Eritrea.

Thirdly, the Prosperity Party was formed and formally recognised by the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) in December 2019 through the merging of three former EPRDF member parties, the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP), the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP) and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM). The Afar National Democratic Party (ANDP), the Benishangul-Gumuz People's Democratic Unity Front (BGPDUF), the Ethiopian Somali People's Democratic Party (ESPDP), the Gambela People's Democratic Movement (GPDM) and the Hareri National League (HNL) were also included in the merger (Prosperity Party by Laws 2020). Upon its formation the TPLF, the only one not to join the new party, was critical of it. According to TPLF, the PP embraced a pan-Ethiopian political agenda as opposed to a multinational federation conception. In this context, the TPLF decided to retain their autonomy and stand independent of the new party and government. Importantly, this ideological change came allegedly in contradiction to the main pillar of the former regime, which, as we have seen in this paper, is an ethnic-based federation. The alleged threat to the ethnically-based federal system could be considered the main reason for the war, according to TPLF views.

In the fourth place, Article 54 of the FDRE Constitution of 199, states that the term of office of the House of People's Representatives shall be five years. National elections were scheduled by date; however due to the COVID-19 pandemic these elections were postponed by the central government. Nonetheless, the TPLF leadership unilaterally decided to keep the election date in Tigray regional state, challenging the new Ethiopian government and increasing tensions with the PP leadership. In these elections the TPLF won 98% of all the seats in the Regional Council. Moreover, the Tigray government accused the federal government of postponing the election schedule. Following this, the House of the Federation (Ethiopia's upper house) decided that the Tigray region election board, laws, and regional election was counter to articles 9 and 102 of the FDRE constitution; therefore, such elections were declared null and rejected by the Federal government (Legesse 2021; Jima 2021).

Finally, on top of all the previously-mentioned factors for civil conflict in Ethiopia, the so-called Tigray war started on 4 November 2020. According to the Federal government, TPLF militia forces attacked the base of the North Command of the Ethiopian National Defence Force: 'Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) junta has officially admitted that it attacked the Northern Command of Ethiopian National Defence Force in the Tigray Region' (ENA 2020). According to TPLF sources this attack was of a preventive nature. Aljazeera reported that 'a top official of the TPLF, Sekutire Getachew, has confirmed the federal government's claim that TPLF forces sparked the conflict by attacking a military base', adding:

Should we be waiting for them to take the first strike? Or take preemptive action to avert the looming war? ... No, it was imperative to take a thunder-like strike. If these attacks were not taken, Tigray now would not be in its present situation. We would not be talking like this now. There would be huge number of casualties.

(ENA 2020)

OLF Shena (Oromo Liberation Army) as Internal Challenge

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) is a nationalist organisation formed in 1973 to promote self-determination for the Oromo people. In 2018 the OLF signed a peace agreement with the Ethiopian government, and several OLF members have joined government camps as per the initial agreement to integrate with the regional security forces. The OLF has no relation with the ODP (a member of the ruling coalition EPRDF), as the ODP was originally intended to strengthen the new ethno-federation by supporting the TPLF leadership. Moreover, after the official return of OLF to Ethiopian politics in 2018, a splinter wing of OLF (*Shena* – also known as the Oromo Liberation Army [OLA]) refused to give up the armed struggle. They formally separated from the OLF, and have been identified as perpetrators of several violent attacks, mostly in rural areas, including killing civilians in Oromia and Amhara regional states (Abebe 2020). The OLA joined efforts with the TPLF, at least on paper, as officially announced by both groups, and they have been working jointly against the federal government of Ethiopia (EHRC 2021). As indicated in this paper, ethnicity has been the key organising principle for Ethiopian politics, economy, security, foreign policy, and the entire polity of Ethiopia since 1991. This process gave birth to a number of ethnic political parties and even armed movements with the purpose of protecting their own ethnic group, self-administration, and administrative territorial border demarcation (Demiessie 2020).

Human Rights Violations

In November 2021, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the EHRC published the report of their joint investigation into human rights violations and abuses committed by all parties in the context of the Tigray conflict between 3 November 2020 and 28 June 2021 (Human Rights Watch 2021). According to Human Rights Watch (2021), the conflict spread into the Amhara and Afar regions resulting in large-scale population displacement. Tigrayan forces were also implicated in serious abuses against Amhara civilians.

CONCLUSION

Ethiopia has been immersed in a crisis that has threatened stability, security, and governance in the country. Tireless anti-authoritarian demonstrations demanding freedom, respect for the Constitution, and the end of inequality has shown the failures of the EPRDF regime. The government has followed a path of violence and repression; however, these coercive methods have proven futile against the will and resilience of protestors. The first quarter of 2018 witnessed a transformation in the political landscape of Ethiopia; the EPRDF ceased to exist as such, the TPLF retained its autonomy and separated from the coalition, and the Prosperity Party took central place in government, a change that finds its origin in the Oromo Protests.

In this paper, we have shown the relationship between ethnic federalism and the securitisation of development, the two main pillars of the EPRDF regime for more than 25 years, and the OP. Ethnic federalism was meant to address historical inequalities among the NNP, recognise the rights of different groups, and guarantee self-determination; therefore, it was based on decentralisation and the devolution of powers. However, we have demonstrated that the EPRDF-TPLF had their own motivations in imposing this type of model and they were able to control the entire process of state-building in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, the core organising principle, ethnicity, was miscalculated by the ruling party. Eventually it provided the backbone for articulating a powerful popular movement capable of contesting state authority. The second pillar, developmental strategy, was intrinsically opposed to the principles of the federation. This fact generated important grievances and institutionalised the instruments of repression. The securitisation of development backfired and brought the EPRDF to a dead end.

Acting as a trigger for the OP, it unchained the demands of the Ethiopian society. Securitisation relies on its capacity to convince the public, either using persuasion or coercion, and becomes a hegemonic ideology. As demonstrated in this paper, the OP dismantled the EPRDF's narrative, transforming the public's

imagination and delegitimising the government, thereby forcing those in power to change their approach and to bring deep structural transformations to the political realm.

The OP is explained as being at the heart of the regime (ethnic-federalism and developmentalism); at the same time the OP has acted as a mirror to the government, showing them the broken parts of Ethiopian governance and society. Repressive methods have risked the fragile balance of the federation and have also damaged the economy. The OP brought change at a high price; too many have unnecessarily perished in the struggle and a bloody civil war keeps draining Ethiopian youth and resources. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed addressed the protestors and promised to bring reform, greater democracy, and national reconciliation to Ethiopia. He should respect the Constitution and understand the complexity of a vast and diverse country, allowing decentralisation but also promoting unity and peace in Ethiopia. The OP has shown that Ethiopian society is ready to demand accountability from their leaders and to leave authoritarian rule in the past. In this sense, Ethiopia must find a peaceful resolution to the war in Tigray and a way to establish durable peace and reconciliation through national dialogue in order to guarantee security for all its citizens.

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