

# Ethnic Division in Ethiopia: Fostering Grievance, Repression and Hatred

An analysis of the profound ethnic divisions within Ethiopia, and how historical marginalisation, and a succession of repressive governments has created an environment of inter-ethnic hatred and violence.

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**REVITALISING MULTILATERAL PERSPECTIVE AND POLICY SERIES –  
ANALYSIS**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the launch of formal hostilities between the Ethiopia federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in November 2020, there has been widespread accounts of atrocities towards civilians. Researchers at Ghent University<sup>1</sup> have estimated that about 500,000 people, including both civilians and combatants, have died due to the war in Tigray with the majority of deaths due to a rampant humanitarian crisis that has led to between 150,000 and 200,000 deaths due to starvation.

One of the more worrying aspects of the crimes against civilians has been the ethnic targeting of specific groups. While there has indeed been reports of Tigray fighters

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<sup>1</sup> <https://martinplaut.com/2022/03/13/breaking-tigray-war-mortality-half-a-million-people-ghent-university/>

targetting civilians of mostly Amharan ethnic origin, the vast majority of documented abuses have been recorded of civilian authorities, Amharan regional militias, Eritrean troops and federal government forces targetting Tigrayan civilians. Human Rights Watch<sup>2</sup> has reported that the widespread and systemic nature of such abuses, including murder, rape, enforced disappearance, torture, sexual slavery, and unlawful imprisonment, amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes. The accepted term for such crimes is “ethnic cleansing”<sup>3</sup>; an intentional policy by an ethnic group to remove another ethnic group from a region by forceful means such as violence, intimidation and forced displacement. The Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church<sup>4</sup>, himself an ethnic Tigrayan, went further in May 2021 and called the atrocities in Tigray a “genocide”.

While the war in Tigray has been the obvious centre of most of the atrocities affecting civilians in Ethiopia, inter-ethnic violence is not limited just to Tigray. In June of this year<sup>5</sup> in central Oromia region, over 200 people of mostly Amharan ethnic origin were massacred in an attack officially blamed on the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), another active militia, though the OLA themselves have blamed federal government forces for the attack. In response to this, and other ethnic massacres, protests erupted<sup>6</sup> in late June in Amharan towns as well as the national capital Addis Ababa, against ethnic violence and the lack of a sufficient government response. This paper considers some of the exacerbating factors that are creating such ethnic division and violence in Ethiopia, and looks at the structural faultlines within Ethiopia’s very-federal composition that have been weaponised by those seeking to persecute other ethnic groups.

## **2. ETHIOPIA’S ETHNIC PLURALITY**

Ethiopia is a country with several distinctive ethnic groups cohabiting the shared political space. Although the figures have likely changed since, for the 2007 census<sup>7</sup> the majority of Ethiopians were Oromo (34.4%), followed by Amharan (27%), Somali (6.2%), Tigray (6.1%), Sidamo (4%), Gurage (2.5%), Welayta (2.3%), Hadiya (1.7%), Afar

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/04/06/we-will-erase-you-land/crimes-against-humanity-and-ethnic-cleansing-ethiopias>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/16/ethiopias-invisible-ethnic-cleansing>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57226551>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/19/world/africa/ethiopia-attack-amhara-people.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://addisstandard.com/news-amhara-state-capital-imposes-curfew-on-three-wheeled-transport-after-city-sees-a-week-of-four-grenade-explosions-student-protests/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://minorityrights.org/country/ethiopia/>

(1.7%), and the rest shared by several other ethnicities. Within this multiplicity of ethnicity, there have been deep grievances over how power within the country should be shared.

From 1855 until 1991, under successive Emperors including Haile Selassie, power was concentrated among the Amharan people<sup>8</sup>, that coincided with a promotion of Amharan culture and the establishment of Amharic as the State language. During this period, some groups, notably Oromo and Tigray, opposed<sup>9</sup> the domination of Amharan culture and language and accused the Amharan establishment of active persecution. Some of this rhetoric was extremely direct; for example, the TPLF's original manifesto of 1976<sup>10</sup> called Amharans colonisers and the number one enemy needing to be eliminated.

### **3. ETHNIC FEDERALISM**

By 1991, the complexion of Ethiopian society had changed radically. A military junta called the Derg overthrew Emperor Selassie in a coup d'état in 1974, establishing a Marxist-Lennist State. Several opposition groups from different political backgrounds, including other communists like the TPLF, and often ethnically composed, rallied against the Derg and joined already-active Eritrean rebels in fighting the junta<sup>11</sup>. By 1991 the rebels had won, installing a transitional government led by the TPLF, and gaining Eritrea de facto independence that was officially recognised by referendum in 1993. Eventually the TPLF would become the main party within a coalition of four that would govern Ethiopia for the next three decades; the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). And with the governance of the EPRDF, a new constitution was established for Ethiopia.

The constitution codified a system of ethnic federalism; that is a federal system for regions divided along ethnic lines. The initial constitution created nine regions for what it termed 'Nations', and was particularly stringent in codifying each "Nation's" specific rights. A telling example is the constitution's mention of self-determination:

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<sup>8</sup> <https://newafricanmagazine.com/23746/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://gja.georgetown.edu/2021/01/28/a-very-ethiopian-tragedy-tigray-the-tplf-and-cyclical-history/>

<sup>10</sup> Yideg, B. & Premananam, P. (2019) 'The 1976 TPLF Manifesto and Political instability in Amhara Region, Ethiopia'. *RESEARCH REVIEW International Journal of Multidisciplinary*. 4(1). 300-303.

<sup>11</sup> For a summary see: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ethiopia/Federal-Democratic-Republic-of-Ethiopia>

Article 39(1) states<sup>12</sup> *"Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession"*. This codified right to not only pursue a separate destiny based on ethnic lines, but to secede if they so choose, is extremely strong and finds few parallels compared to other countries.

The secession article has been a subject of debate among scholars, though one opinion<sup>13</sup> states the following highly-controversial take:

*"The TPLF-dominated EPRDF intentionally included Article 39 in Ethiopia's 1994 Constitution so that the Tigray region could loot Ethiopia of its resources, use the Ethiopian military to expand the borders of Tigray, and then secede from Ethiopia. Underlying this theory is the widely held opinion that the TPLF and EPRDF are not independent organisations, but symbiotic."*

The evidence<sup>14</sup> for this has been the several actions taken by the EPRDF to expand Tigray region, such as the annexation of Wollo and Gondar, and disproportionate economic growth in Tigray compared to other regions, developed in part by governmental programs such as EFFORT (the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray) using significant federal money. Another notable action was the fallout between the former allies of the TPLF and Eritrea, who went to war in 1998 over a border dispute leaving tens of thousands dead.

#### 4. EXPLOITATION DURING THE EPRDF YEARS

Domestically, the decades of the EPRDF also saw differing types of domestic political repression. For instance, efforts for the Oromo to gain more political power were undermined<sup>15</sup> by the EPRDF's creation of the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO), a unity and EPRDF loyal group, in order to split the support for the OLF. The OLF claimed that the EPRDF supplied federal money to the OPDO in Oromia's regional elections, and were thus undermining democracy, and consequently withdrew from the regional elections in protest. This in turn led to

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<sup>12</sup> <https://ethiopianembassy.be/wp-content/uploads/Constitution-of-the-FDRE.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Mckracken, M. (2004) 'Abusing Self-Determination and Democracy: How the TPLF is Looting Ethiopia'. *Case W. Res. J. Int'l L.* 36(1). 183-222.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

more OPDO candidates in the Oromia regional government, and thus more support for the agenda of the EPRDF.

In the Ogaden region, on the border with Somalia, the interests of the ethnic Ogadeni people were politically represented by the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). In 1992, the ONLF accused<sup>16</sup> the EPRDF of assassinating some of their members, and while the ONLF gained regional power due to a lack of EPRDF opposition candidates, the regional government soon claimed that they were being deprived of its share of the federal budget as well as international aid. The ONLF for their part then continued their insurgency against the central government, which was only interrupted by a peace agreement signed between the EPRDF and ONLF in 2010<sup>17</sup>.

The EPRDF also suppressed political protest throughout Ethiopia, such as in April 2001<sup>18</sup> when student protestors at Addis Ababa University were violently dispersed after voicing their concerns at the limiting of their academic freedoms. After violence and riots that saw at least 31 people dead, with thousands arrested and detained, Mesfin Wolde Mariam, former Secretary General of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council was arrested<sup>19</sup> on the charge of “organising under an underground political party”.

Another telling consequence of the EPRDF years was the effect on the country’s media. The ethnic federalism change was integrated<sup>20</sup> into media content, and provided a space for programs and content featuring regional languages such as Tigrayan and Oromo, and aimed at residents of those regions. Prior to 1991, most media was centralised around the state broadcasters (namely, Ethiopian Television and Ethiopian Radio), with content in Amharic. During the EPRDF years, while the accumulated expertise meant that Amharic still had a platform, it also expanded mostly to the benefit of Tigrayan. A 2009 restructuring process<sup>21</sup>, for example, saw media interests for Tigrayan and Oromo broadcasting relocated to regional hubs.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> See: Opalo, K. (2010) ‘The Ogaden Region: Fragile Path to Peace’. *Africa Portal*. Backgrounder 2. December 2010.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2001/04/ethi-a27.html>

<sup>19</sup> Mcracken, M. (2004) ‘Abusing Self-Determination and Democracy: How the TPLF is Looting Ethiopia’. *Case W. Res. J. Int’l L.* 36(1). 183-222; For more information on Mesfin Wolde Mariam, see: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/10/ethiopia-honouring-human-rights-pioneer-professor-mesfin-woldemariam/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.mediasupport.org/publication/the-ethnification-of-ethiopian-media/>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

While this was seen as a benefit to Tigrayan media, some Oromo saw this as a weakening of their own media interests. Importantly, ethnicity was used as a metric to measure the interests of journalists and media employees, creating an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust<sup>22</sup>. Along with limited regional expansion saw a continued censorship towards any criticisms of the EPRDF and its policy of ethnic federalism. Internal conflicts within the country were systematically downplayed, and some topics were outright banned by the government-led national broadcasters.

## **5. ABIY AHMED'S PREMIERSHIP**

By 2018, there were some notable changes to Ethiopia's political leadership. The EPRDF internally voted for a new leader on 27 March 2018, Abiy Ahmed. Prime Minister Abiy represented a significant change<sup>23</sup>. For starters, he was an ethnic Oromo; the first from Ethiopia's largest ethnic group to hold such a position of power within the state. He also headed a new cabinet that was markedly more inclusive, including the appointments of many women. A striking change was his release of political prisoners and journalists, notably the closing of the infamous Maeklawi prison<sup>24</sup>. Abiy also cooled tensions with Eritrea by compromising on the border issue in Tigray, which led to an opening of embassies within the neighbouring countries; his actions here earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019<sup>25</sup>.

He, initially at least, appealed to the Ethiopian people on a platform of unity, with the slogan 'medemer'<sup>26</sup>. Appearing to favour a united Ethiopia rather than a regionally divided one, and eventually replaced the EPRDF coalition with a new unity political party, the Prosperity Party. Only the TPLF refused to join the new coalition.

However, it is important to consider that Mr Abiy was not a political newcomer. On the contrary, he had been an important figure in the TPLF-led EPRDF<sup>27</sup>; a former military member, eventually founding Ethiopia's Information Network and Security Agency responsible for cyber security in a country where internet freedoms were tightly controlled, and then becoming Minister of Science and Technology.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43567007>

<sup>24</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/31/africa/abiy-ahmed-ethiopia-2018-analysis-intl/index.html>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50014318>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50690548>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43567007>

Despite these rhetorical calls for unity, inter-ethnic violence continued and in some cases increased. 3.04 million people were internally displaced within Ethiopia in 2019<sup>28</sup>. In 2020, for instance, the killing of a prominent Oromo singer, Hachalu Hundessa, led to violence in Oromia that killed many people, with others including prominent Oromo politicians arrested<sup>29</sup>. The Ethiopian media became even more fragmented as attempts to liberalise and free journalists from their self-censorship and fear of reprisals led to an explosion of ethnically based media outlets (such as the Oromia Media Network and Amhara Satellite Radio and Television) that were increasingly reporting on controversial matters in highly biased ways<sup>30</sup>. This also led to a surge in the use of hate speech, specifically speech that spurs ethnic division.

In Tigray, the relationship between the TPLF and the central government completely deteriorated. TPLF leaders, who had lost their nearly-three decades of central power, voiced their suspicions<sup>31</sup> of Mr Abiy, particularly on issues such as the détente with Eritrea that had led to a loss of border claims in Tigray region. The TPLF eventually held their own regional elections in September 2019 without the consent of the central government, and amidst an escalation of rhetoric the TPLF officially cut ties with the central government. By 4 November 2020, Prime Minister Abiy ordered military action against Tigray which was the beginning of the war in Tigray, a conflict that has left nearly 500,000 dead, with well documented<sup>32</sup> abuses and human rights violations such as ethnic cleansing, rape as a weapon of war, extrajudicial killings and forced displacement amongst others. It was not just federal forces that were fighting the TPLF, but regional militias mainly from neighbouring Amhara region as well as Eritrean forces across the border.

## **6. EXPLOITING ETHNIC DIVISION FOR POLITICAL GAIN**

It is clear that the inter-ethnic violence in Ethiopia does not have one simple explanation, given the vast history of complex grievances and sequentially different series of governance. However, we can draw some conclusions. Firstly, the elite political classes on Ethiopia have retained power, from the Emperors and the junta,

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/08/30/internally-displaced-people-and-humanitarian-crisis-in-ethiopia/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53238206>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.mediasupport.org/publication/the-ethnification-of-ethiopian-media/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-unity-analysis-idUSKBN2870PU>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/04/06/we-will-erase-you-land/crimes-against-humanity-and-ethnic-cleansing-ethiopias>

to the TPLF and now Mr Abiy's Prosperity Party. The latter having been a government insider, whilst the formers did much to restrict political participation from their various opponents. In this way some of the rhetoric around ethnicity can be seen as a means to suppress political opposition. Abiy's own slogans of 'medemer' appear on this reading to mean little given the suppression of political dissidence, and the now clear targetting of ethnically Tigrayan Ethiopians in an operation of ethnic cleansing.

The constitutional provision for ethnic federalism appears to have reinforced division rather than fostered unity, given the apparent ease with which ethnic groups could activate secession protocols. Having said this, another argument could be made that the main problem here is that the political elites in charge continue to exploit the provisions of ethnic federalism for their own interests, rather than allowing true equality between Ethiopia's diverse groups. Regardless, the constitution itself still provides a suitable excuse for actors to foster division premised on their constitutional rights as members of a particular 'Nation'.

This division has played out in other levels of society too, as shown in the brief discussion of Ethiopia's media. Hate speech between ethnic groups is not a completely new phenomenon, as we can see from the rhetoric of the years of insurgency against perceived Amharan oppression, but the deregulation of the media has seemingly encouraged more publicly violent speech towards other ethnic groups.

It thus seems prudent that an evaluation of the mechanisms for fair and equitable political participation in Ethiopia may indeed become necessary for the country to survive as a united entity. Of course such an aspiration seems entirely unlikely given the current situation of such hatred and mutual distrust among ethnic groups, and the need to establish a consensus and compromise among all actors. For now, at a minimum the abject violence needs to end, and here the federal government can do much more to limit the use of force in solving disputes. Discussions about how to proceed with reconciling the deeply held grievances could then proceed after that.



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