

Trajectories of State Building and Peace Building  
in Ethiopia: The Role of Political Settlement

A Baseline Study

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Medhane Tadesse and Alagaw Ababu

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# **Trajectories of State Building and Peace Building in Ethiopia: The Role of Political Settlement,**

## **Introduction**

This baseline introduces a research agenda that aims to assess the effect of political settlement on the subsequent trajectories of peace building and state reconstitution in Ethiopia. To this end, it aims to trace the trajectories of state building conversations, analyze the causes of armed conflict, examine the nature of the political transition, and assess the effects of the post-1991 political order on the causes of armed conflict in the country. The questions it poses are: what was the nature of state building conversations before the outbreak of war and what were the causes of the conflict in the country? How did the settlement come about and what were its distinct features? Has the settlement addressed the causes of the conflict? Has identity issues that were part of the conflict been given due considerations

The baseline is structured into seven parts. The first part introduces the objectives and guiding questions of the baseline followed by a discussion of the historical trajectories of state building conversations that led to the armed conflict in the second part. The causes, ideologies, organizational structures and mobilization strategies of the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) are presented in the subsequent two sections. The fifth section is an exposition of the process leading to, and the nature of, the political settlement achieved with the victory of the TPLF. After assessing the extent the settlement addressed the major causes of the conflict in the sixth part, the paper identifies lessons to be learned and propositions to be drawn from the baseline report in the final section. Generally, what emerges from the report is that while the post-1991 political actors and processes might be the result of contradictions inherent in the historical process of state building conversations, they cannot be taken as a solution for it.

## **State Formation, Consolidation and Civil War**

Being heir to an ancient state, Ethiopia has a long and uninterrupted political history with its own unique literary system, nationalist ideology, and social organization. Its territory had been expanding and contracting throughout its long history of statehood. And it is the sole African state that was able to defeat European colonialists and retain its independence during the 19<sup>th</sup> century scramble for Africa. Its independent political survival was ensured through the imposition of imperial power over peoples to the South and West of historic Ethiopia which resulted in a deeply unequal political structure in which power was derived from the Christians of the historic state (especially Amharas, but also Tigrayans and others).

Because of these historical trajectories the formation of the modern Ethiopian state was unique from the rest of Africa. The builders of modern Ethiopia inherited a centralized, highly extractive state that presided over a sufficiently integrated society akin to the modern nation-state. Though the existence of a long tradition of statehood enabled the successive rulers to further entrench their apparatus of control, it also generated its own contradictions that had affected the subsequent process of state making and remaking. The emergence of the modern Ethiopian state at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the successive emperors was accomplished through the expansion of the Abyssinian Christian kingdom. The process was started by Emperor Tewdros II Gondar and Yohannes IV of Tigray and was accomplished by Menilik II of Shoa during which the country acquired its present shape. The process of incorporation doubled the size of the Abyssinian polity as it conquered dozens of ethnic groups. Consequently, the Ethiopian society became highly heterogeneous society unlike the Abyssinian proper that had an integrated society adhering to similar social organizations and normative orders. The process of conquest and state formation also involved the superimposition of the socio-economic order of the Northern society on the newly incorporated people the result of which was 'a politically explosive conjunction of ethnic and class divisions' (Markakis, 1989:119). And while most African colonial territories had at least a brief period of democratic politics during the run-

up to independence in the 1950s and 1960s, Ethiopia remained until 1974 under the anachronistic rule of emperor Haile Selassie.

Emperor Haile Selassie launched the process of modernization, bureaucratization and consolidation of the military without essentially changing the centralized and ethnocentric nature of the state. As part of the emperor's modernization drive, modern education was introduced, government and mission schools were opened, and a handful of students, usually from a poor background, were sent abroad for education. These early educated students began to fill the state bureaucracy and enthusiastically advocated reform of the imperial order to realize the emperor's modernizing ambition. Their reformist orientation served as a precursor to the more radical student movements of the 1960 and 70s. The power of the traditional class began to be supplanted by this emerging powerful class of educated state bureaucrats and students. The establishment and subsequent consolidation of a powerful army further strengthened the power of the monarchy vis-à-vis the nobility who used to be the source of military power. However, the cost of maintaining these civilian and military bureaucracies was too prohibitive for the peasantry from which resources were extracted to pay for the servants of the state. The regime introduced a series of reforms in the tax system applied over land to increase the state's revenue. A uniform taxation system to be paid in the new currency was issued in 1939 which also abolished provision of labor services, firewood and grasses for landlords by *gabbars/Tributaries* (Markakis, 2011). While a new taxation system introduced taxation in lieu of tithe and land tax in 1944, education tax and health tax on land were introduced in 1947 and 1959 respectively (ibid.). However, all of these measures failed to increase the amount of revenue the regime collected from agriculture in general and land in particular. During its reign, the emperor's effort was restricted to increasing the extractive capacity of the state rather than advancing the overall development of the people and that any effort at improving the tax system that shifts the burden from the peasantry to the landlords was fiercely resisted by the parliament dominated by the latter (Keller, 1981). The pace of economic growth was not on par with the modest increase in education and hence finding employment after graduation began to be hard in the later period of the emperor.

These bureaucratization and modernization initiatives ushered in social contradictions that were overlaid on the existing ones. These contradictions include the center-periphery disjuncture, the contradictory vision of the aristocracy and the petit bourgeoisie, and discontents related to ethno-cultural suppression and religious domination. Andargachew (1993) demonstrated how these contradictions played out in the 1960s to weaken the Haile Selassie regime, and precipitate its eventual collapse.

First, the new state bureaucrats, both civilian and military, that had replaced the traditional aristocracy were not satisfied with the working of the imperial order. This section of the society together with white collar works, teachers and students avowedly advocated Marxism-Leninism as a solution to Ethiopia's woe. They attributed the backwardness and impoverishment of the Ethiopian people to the anachronistic imperial regime and agitated to dismantle it. The 1960 failed coup d'état was one manifestation of this discontent. Though a failed attempt, the coup further increased the discontent against the regime by challenging the sacred foundation of the emperor's power. The army that quelled the coup began to demand a salary increase and improvement in the conditions of their life cognizant of the key role it was playing to maintain the imperial order. As the modern sector and the nascent industries expanded civil servants and industrial works began to be politically organized forming their own labor union, teachers association and student unions.

The regimes failure to address the prevailing contradiction combined with the alienating nature of the educational system further radicalized the student body (Messay, 2003). Their initial demand for improvements of conditions in the campus was transformed into a call for fundamental reconstitution of the Ethiopian state. Two issues were given greater emphasis in the student body: the question of nationalities and the class contradiction. The emphasis on these issues was determined by the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the students and the prevalent social conditions of the country. The prevalence of widespread tenancy in the south generated a call for land reform that entitles land to the peasants. In a radical turn the students argued that Ethiopia was not a united multi-ethnic nation but a 'prison house of nations and nationalities'. The emperor's defunct policy of unmediated

assimilation in which the culture and language of the ruling class is forcefully imposed on the subordinated nationalities brought this radical stance. In line with these Marxist-Leninist ideology, they argued for the rights of nations and nationalities for self-determination including and up to secession. Their demand was not just to improve the conditions of the various nationalities constituting Ethiopia, but a radical restructuring of the Ethiopia state. Recognizing the determination of the imperial regime to silence the students' political demand, dedicated members of the student body fled abroad to plan guerilla war against the imperial order.

Second, the emperor's centralization of power and the consequent process of 'shoanization of the state' marginalized the peripheries. This marginalization generated violent resistance even in areas that constituted the heart of the historic Ethiopian state. Some of the groups in the periphery, notably, the Oromos of Bale, the Eritreans and the Somali's of Ogaden had already started armed struggle against the regime. These groups were armed by neighboring states and the states of the Middle East for ideological and strategic reasons of their own (Adargachew, 1993).

Amidst of these contradictions and radicalization, the final challenge for the imperial order came from discontents at the center triggered by the emperor's negligence of the 1973/74 famine in Wollo. Throughout January to June 1974 various groups began to wage strikes and demonstrations demanding salary increase, improvement in working conditions, right to form trade unions and related demands. The main actors of this popular uprising were teachers, students, civil servants, trade unions and the armed force. The final push against the regime came from the army. Soldiers below the rank of major established a committee/council known in Amharic as Derg to present their demand to the emperor. It is this committee known as the Derg that deposed the emperor and seized power. The Derg renamed itself the Provisional Military Administration Council (PMAC) and adopted the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the civilian left in its bid to legitimize its power (Messay, 2008). Accordingly, it nationalized financial institutions, large scale manufacturing firms, and land. The Derg's answer to Ethiopia's age-old problems was socialist centralization.

The possession of land was restricted to a maximum of ten hectare and the sale or rent of it was prohibited. Peasant associations were established to distribute land among the peasantry. This initiative got wider popularity in the south where the majority of the peasants were reduced to tenancy. However, this euphoria soon dissipated in the face of deeply unpopular measures the Derg undertook in its agricultural policy. The peasant associations, which were initially established to distribute land for the peasantry, were eventually captured by the regime to serve the political functions of “collecting taxes, maintaining law and order, channeling directives to the peasantry, enforcing the government's grain requisition programmes ... and later recruiting young men for the military ” (Desalegn, 1993:39). Other policy measures such as collectivization, grain requisitioning, resettlement, and villagisation were not only unpopular but also proved failure. According to Desalegn (1993), these programmes were implemented without even a semblance of discussion with the peasant population. They were destined to fail due to shortage of trained human power, and the ambitious nature of the programmes. To make way for the implementation of these policies, extension agents evicted a number of farmers from their original land. Under the grain requisition scheme peasants were required to sell a certain quota of their produce to the agricultural marketing Corporation at a price cheaper than the market price. The agents of the Agricultural marketing board (AMC) set an arbitrarily quotas to the detriment of the interests of the peasant in the process of implementing this policy (ibid.). The resettlement programme, which was implemented hastily, coercively and with little planning, also proved a failure (Baker, 1990). The Derg also dismantled or co-opted organizations that could potentially challenge the regime`s grip on power.

The Derg instituted a strong but exclusionary state to the end of which the aforementioned policy measures and institutions were employed. The Kebele administration and peasant associations were transformed from instruments of local self-governance to instruments of central control and resource extraction. Though the chairmen of these institutions were nominally elected, they were almost always appointed by higher level party officials. The party apparatus infiltrated these institutions and mass organizations with the goal of

controlling every sphere of social life. To this end, the Derg increased the number of military and civilian bureaucracy. In the economic sphere, though its socialist policies failed to improve the economy of the country, the Derg increased its extractive capacity and the amount of resources it extracted from the largely peasant population (Clapham, 1989). Thus, the Derg had created a strong state in terms of its capacity for control, extraction and mobilization (ibid.). The regime's Achilles heel, however, was its exclusion of the various groups or claimants for power. It was ready neither to accommodate the centrist forces that had played an active role in the overthrow of the imperial order nor the ethno-nationalists demanding greater autonomy. The Derg's usual response for the problems posed by these force was the unbridled use of force to subdue any actual and potential challenge to its power. Most of these forces were the outgrowth of the Ethiopian Student Movement and that the leadership of the organizations formed by these groups was dominated by individuals that had actively engaged in the student movement. To better understand the causes and dynamics of insurgencies in the country, a brief digression on the student movement is in order.

Two major categories of political groups emerged from the student movement during the overthrow of the imperial regime. One category consisted of those groups that were organized on multinational basis convinced that the primary contradiction of the period was class rather than ethnicity and hence the response needs to be a nationwide class struggle. The two major groups in this camp were the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (MEISON in Amharic) and the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Party (EPRP). In the wake of the revolution, while the former decided to give critical support for the Derg, the latter called for the immediate establishment of provisional People's government. Though, difference between the two groups had deeper root beyond their approach to the Derg, it became open only when they revealed their orientation towards the Derg. The most important difference between the two was centered on the party that would be a vanguard party in the country (Andargachew, 1993). Realizing EPRP's popular support base and the difficulty of outbidding it, the AESM claimed that there were radical elements within the Derg that could be directed to pursue socialist policies. It also argued that military rule is



the only realistic option for Ethiopia by then and hence the need to give critical support for the Derg. The EPRP opposed military rule on the ground that it was against genuine social revolution and that socialist revolution cannot be brought in a top down manner. The Derg's escalation of the war in Eritrea, the banning of voluntary associations and attack on trade unions, and the Derg's reluctance to acknowledge class struggle were considered as indicative of the Derg's counter revolutionary nature. The EPRP launched urban guerilla against the Derg selectively targeting individuals that provided key support for the Derg. The PMAC swiftly responded by indiscriminately killing individuals and groups, mainly the youth, presumed to be either member or sympathizers of the EPRP. Later the Derg turned its wrath against the AESM when it realized that the latter's intention was no more sanguine than the EPRP.

With the total annihilation of the major multinational forces, the only resistance against the regime remained to be the ethnic based movements. These ethnic based movements prioritizing national contradiction over the class one, called for the resolution of national contradictions before multinational class struggle was to be undertaken. These movements originated from those ethnic groups that felt to be a victim of Shoan political domination, economic expropriation and/or marginalization, and cultural discrimination (Shahim, 1985). A number of ethno-nationalist forces such as the Tigray People Liberation Front, the Oromo Liberation Front and the Afar Liberation Front were all organized along ethno-nationalist lines. These political groupings opted to wage guerilla struggle from their remote ethnic base. The Derg's stance towards these movements was not accommodative either. Resolving these conflicts through negotiation was against the survival of the military regime. One of the *raison d'être* for the continuation of the PMAC was its self-declared mission of maintaining the territorial integrity of the Ethiopian state. Hence the peaceful resolution of the conflict with these ethno-nationalist forces was against this *raison d'être*. The way the Derg viewed the national contradiction was also not in line with the demands of the ethno-nationalists. The Derg reduced the national contradiction to the mere accommodation of cultural rights thereby ignoring the fact that it had strong political undercurrents. However, these groups were not fighting only to secure the right to equal

recognition of their culture; it also included demand for regional autonomy if not outright secession. The Derg believed that national oppression was ended when the imperial state is dismantled and hence the ethno-nationalists were relegated as narrow nationalist and secessionist that are against Ethiopian unity. It offered them little compromise as the motto was 'Ethiopia or death'. Hence, the national contradiction that had been unfolding since the formation of the modern Ethiopian state was further radicalized and that military solution became the only option as a result of which the armed conflict continued until the overthrow of the military regime in 1991.

The genesis of a good part of the post-1974 opposition groups goes back to the Ethiopian Student Movement/ESM/ of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In their attempt to integrate the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism with the Ethiopian situation Ethiopian students touched the most sensitive issue; the question of nationalities. As was feared the issue of nationalities turned out to be the most controversial political issue and threatened the unity of the students. So in the late 1960s and early 1970s less as well as more serious advocates of the question of nationalities emerged from the last hours of the Ethiopian Student Movement. This, among others, was the main factor behind the progressive polarization of the Student Movement and later the violent conflict among anti-Derg opposition groups in Tigray particularly the war between the TPLF and several insurgent groups in the North of the country.

To further illuminate the causes and dynamics of insurgencies in Ethiopia an examination of the insurgent force-turned-government is undertaken in the next section. An assessment of the causes, dynamics, ideologies and mobilization strategies of the TPLF insurgency and the subsequent process leading to military victory and state restructuring is undertaken in the next three sections.

### **Insurgency in Tigray and the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF)**

The origin of the Tigray People Liberation Front is explained in terms of historical grievances and symbolism, conditions in Tigray during the period of emperor Haile Selassie, and the Derg's approach to the manifold problems of the region. An extensive

discussion of these issues is provided by Medhane (1992), Young (1996) and Aregawi (2008). Hence, the following discussion largely draws from these works.

Historically, Tigray was at the core of the Ethiopian empire. One of the world's most powerful civilization, the Axumites, were based in Tigray. This perception of being at the core of the Ethiopian empire had generated a sense of deprivation when the Tigryan elite compared their past glory with their status of political obscurity, and widespread famine and poverty. Moreover, Tigray had been the gateway for foreign incursion and hence numerous battles between the Ethiopians and foreigners were waged on Tigray's soil. This had not only devastated the region but also eased the availability of firearms as a result of which struggle among local lords became too destructive. The peasants were forced to side with one or the other lord compromising their devotion on their farm. Famine was not an infrequent occurrence in this part of Ethiopia. By one reckoning at least seventeen famines had been observed in Tigray since the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Young, 1996).

Tigray's marginalization continued during the period of Emperor Haile Selassie. Young (1996) indicated that before the outbreak of the 1974 revolution, Tigray possessed almost no industry, no commercial agriculture, no mines, and only few secondary schools. Most of the existing industries were concentrated around Addis Ababa and Asmara, and the commercial farms were concentrated in the south and the Awash valley. The Tigrayans had to move to relatively better areas such as Addis Ababa and Asmara in search of work. This gave them derogatory names that wounded their pride of being the center of the Ethiopian empire. This period of Tigray's marginalization was also accompanied with the political and economic dominance of Shoan rulers. In his bid to centralize power, Emperor Haile Selassie imposed Amharic as the national language, banned Tigragna from court, school, and administrative use, and replaced most of the local lords of Tigray by his own nominees of Shoan origin. Tigray's petit bourgeoisie felt marginalized in terms of access to education and employment opportunities. They compared their situation with the number of schools opened during the period of Italian occupation and the preference given to Shoan Amhara. These cultural suppression, political domination and economic marginalization were beginning to stir nationalist sentiments among teachers of Tigray origin. Schools in Tigray

became center of resistance and dissidence in which discontents were expressed through protests and strikes. Their demand at the time was expansion of projects such as roads, electricity, schools, health facilities and industries. These emerging elites associated the problems in Tigray with the dominance of the Shoan Amhara. The Tigrayan elites' grievance against the Shaon emperors was centered on the latter's neglect of the region. They felt that the Shoan emperors do not care about the condition in Tigray except their power. Many Tigray elites believed that the neglect and marginalization of Tigray was a systematic and deliberate action by the Amhara to demonize and demoralize the Tigrayan.

While such problems were brewing in Tigray, a parallel process of resistance against the imperial order was taking place in the Ethiopian student movement. The student body adopted Marxism-Leninism and the associated notion of national self-determination for the nations and nationalities of Ethiopia. Ethiopia was depicted as a backward empire that was a prison house of nations and nationalities. Tigrayan students were an active participant of the student body during which they used the opportunity afforded by University life to raise regional and national issues of concern. Issues raised include '[l]and degradation, recurring famine, mass unemployment, political marginalization, cultural domination and different social problems' (Aregaw, 2008:59). The students compared the situation in Tigray with the situation in other parts of Ethiopia which they found it worse in Tigray. This increased their grievance especially when it is seen in light of the historic role of Tigray as the core of the Ethiopian Empire. In 1972, Tigrayan students established the Tigray University Students Union (TUSU). The Union was to promote Tigrayan culture and historical pride, to identify the problems of Tigray and to deal with issues such as the formation of a Tigray Nationalist Organisation/TNO/ and later the Tigray Nation Progressive Union/TNPU/. With the demise of the Haileselasie regime in September 1974, the TNPU was already recruiting members to leave for rural Tigray in order to start the armed struggle against the *Derg*. Tigrayan students were already pointedly determined to create their own political organisation and decided on a Tigrayan nationalist movement separate from multinationally-oriented formations. The uncertainty generated by the overthrow of the emperor and the coming to power of the Derg triggered the formation of

many armed movements among which one was the Tigrayan National Organization which was later transformed into Tigray People Liberation Front. The TNO started its task of mobilizing the people of Tigray in earnest to embark an armed struggle from rural part of the country. The TPLF formally announced its formation in 1975. The timing of the transformation of the TNO into an insurgent force is presumed to have been affected by factors related to the weakening of the regime, the danger of being pre-empted by other organizations, the Derg's red terror campaign (Young, 1996).

### **Ideology, Organization and Mobilization**

The ideology of the TPLF as an offshoot of the Ethiopian Student Movement was rooted in Marxism-Leninism. Three central issues informed its ideology, mobilization strategies and operational modalities: the national question, democratic centralism and revolutionary democracy. The national question was introduced to the discourse on Ethiopian politics during the 1960s by the Ethiopian Student Movement. As noted earlier, the students argued that Ethiopia was a prison house of nations and nationalities and that these nations and nationalities should be granted the right to self-determination including and up to secession. The TPLF also subscribed to this ideological current and claimed that the Tigrayan nation should be granted the right to self-determination. Although the TPLF advocated independence as the only way of self-determination in manifesto-68, it later modified its position that it would be satisfied by political and cultural autonomy within a multi-ethnic Ethiopia (Aalan, 2002). Affirming the idea that secession was not the only option, the TPLF stated that '[b]eing part of a democratic multi-ethnic Ethiopia based on equality, where there are no oppressor and oppressed nations; where the rights of every nations without distinction is constitutionally and in practice safeguarded, where democracy and social justice prevail, and where the fundamental human rights of the peoples are not violated, is also acceptable to the people of Tigray' (quoted in Vaughan, 1994:9).

The other guiding ideology embedded in its Leninist orientation was democratic centralism. The party considered itself a vanguard party that represents and liberates the people of Tigray. According to this Leninist principle, once the top leadership makes

democratic decisions the lower level cadres need to implement it without any form of question. In this model idea always flows downward from the Central committee to the lower level structures (Aregawi, 2008). Aregawi (2008) recounted the power monopolized by the Central Committee stating that the central committee can make any type of decisions concerning the life of the masses. At the core of this ideology was the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray, a highly secretive party within a party, which aims to ideologically guide the TPLF struggle to the achievement of socialism (Tronvol and Vaughan, 2003). Aregawi indicated that those members of the MLLT that showed even slight deviation from the party's line were considered class enemies, and those comrades that posed even tough questions were accused of revisionism. Likewise, those who failed to comply were accused of empiricism or opportunism.

The third ideological pillar of the TPLF was revolutionary democracy which was derived from the Marxist-Leninist ideology. The percept of revolutionary democracy, as formulated by the TPLF, is that after some leveling measures the peasantry would constitute a homogenous mass with similar interests and political orientations (Tronvoll and Vaughan, 2003). Under such circumstance, pluralism and its institutional underpinnings are irrelevant except for arriving at consensus. Decisions are made based on consensus to the end of which concerted effort would be exerted. Aregawi (2008) contented that the centralizing, hierarchical and order obedient nature of the organization had exceeded its participatory and democratic aspects like all other Marxist-Leninist forces.

In line with its ideological orientations and with the goal of militarily overthrowing the Derg, the TPLF employed a range of mobilization techniques and a tightly hierarchical organizational structure. Organizationally, at the top of the organizational ladder was the fighters' congress that elects the executive committee. The Executive committees in turn developed the organizational structure necessary to execute the armed struggle. The TPLF had three major committees that comprised members of the central committee: military committee, political, and socio-economic committees. These committees were structured to institute a vanguard party that aimed to control and transform the society from above. The TPLF used this organizational structure to effectively execute mobilization strategies

required for the war effort. The organizational structure enabled the TPLF to reach deep into the smallest unit of social existence and enabled it to overthrow the military regime and restructure the Ethiopian state accordingly. The various sections of the society of Tigray were organized to have their own mass organization which operates under the oversight of the TPLF in one way or the other. Operating from isolated areas in the largely marginalized northern territory of Tigray, the student-led TPLF was avowedly Marxist and committed to Maoist like notions of protracted people's war based on the peasants. It must be stressed that unlike most African governing groups the TPLF, profoundly ideological of a Stalinist variant, came to power by a lengthy armed struggle, on the basis of peasant support, and committed to a revolutionary transformation of society. Notwithstanding this fact, the specific political character of the TPLF heavily impacted on its relations with other political/armed groups.

The people of Tigray were mobilized to associate their deprivation with Amhara dominance and to think that the removal of Amhara dominated government would alleviate their suffering. Moreover, mobilization was accompanied by promising a bright future in which the manifold problems of Tigray would be alleviated. These promises were rendered credible by opening clinics and schools in remote villages during the period of insurgency. Moreover, the TPLF avoided lawlessness and eliminated banditry that was rampant in the region. All these indicate the level of organizational effectiveness of the TPLF. It not only waged guerilla and conventional war against the Derg but also undertook development initiatives to secure the support of the peasant population.

### **Path to power and Paradigm shift in State Building**

Since the mid-1980s the military balance began to shift towards rebels operating in the Northern part of the country. Bedeviled by numerous crises including an impending loss of global ally, the military regime was forced to entertain defeat. Consequently, the Derg opened itself for negotiation with the rebels and a number of negotiations that were facilitated by external powers were attempted. One of the negotiation efforts in this regard was the 1989 negotiation attempt between the Derg and the Eritrean People Liberation Front. The main negotiator, Carter, was later replaced by Herman Cohen and the

negotiation was extended to the TPLF because of the latter's success in controlling the whole of Tigray and beyond. However, none of these efforts bore fruit as they were not entered into with a good faith. Parallel to these negotiation efforts with the Derg, the TPLF was forging alliance with existing movements and organizing new ones. The TPLF forged alliance only with forces that would not fundamentally jeopardize its strategic and ideological goal of remaining a hegemonic actor in the politics of the country. Consequently, the alliance was essentially achieved through the replication of the ideology, organizational structure, and operational modalities of the TPLF (Aregawi, 2008).

The TPLF facilitated the formation of the Ethiopian People Democratic Movement (EPDM) by providing it all the necessary material, political and diplomatic supports (Aregawi, 2008). The EPDM, in return, promoted the propaganda and ideology of the TPLF, and copied the organizational structure and operational modalities of the former. It established its own Ethiopian People Marxist-Leninists Force that aimed to achieve objectives similar to the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray. The two fronts formed the Ethiopian people revolutionary democratic front, the EPDM being a junior partner and being largely dependent on the TPLF to administer occupied territories. In 1990 the EPRDF widened its coalition by organizing the Oromo People (OPDO) Democratic Organization from the prisoners of war. Thus, with the nominal participation of the EPDM (later transformed into the Amhara National Democratic Movement), and OPDO the TPLF triumphantly concluded the war with the Derg in may 28, 1991.

Before the EPRDF/TPLF controlled Addis Ababa a conference was held in London in 1991 that participated the government's representatives and various nationalist forces. The government's negotiator withdrew from the process as the government was losing power. The liberation forces that participated in the conference were the EPRDF, EPLF and the OLF. The OLF was invited though it did not take part in the discussion over substantive issues. With the facilitation of the US, the fronts agreed that the EPRDF would establish two months provisional government and would prepare an inclusive transitional conference that would lead to the organization of the transitional government of Ethiopia. Though the OLF participated in the conference willingly, the leadership later claimed that it was hard-



pressed to participate in the transition process. It was assured by the United States that it would exert pressure on EPRDF to democratize the Ethiopian state (Markakis, 2011). Following the conference, the OLF and EPRDF prepared the draft transitional charter, which, it was claimed, was not radically different from what the EPRDF had prepared earlier (Vaughan, 1994). Once the draft was finalized, the EPRDF discussed the document with organizations that were willing to participate in the conference. Discussion was undertaken with most organizations though those who represent the university claimed that they had no idea of even the existence of a charter (ibid.).

The transitional conference was undertaken in July 1991 within which 27 organizations participated. Nineteen of these organizations were ethnic based political groupings, five were pan-Ethiopia, and three were from trade unions and the university. The conference debated the right to secession, and approved the right for self-determination with minimal reflection (Markakis, 2011). Those individuals who present serious objection on these issues were depicted to have objected to the core of the transition and hence threatened to be expelled from the transition process. The conference adopted a transitional charter and instituted a transitional government that would guide the transition process. In a stark break with the past and in line with the TPLF's ideology, the charter emphasized the rights of nations and nationalities for self-determination including and up to secession. This was to be realized under a federal system structured along ethno-linguistic lines. The authoritarian and centralized political order was envisioned to be substituted by a decentralized, democratic ethnic federation.

The transitional government constituted the council of representatives and the council of ministers. The former, which acts as the legislative organ of the government, had 87 members out of which 32 was held by the EPRDF, 12 by the OLF, and the remaining divided among other groups that participated in the transitional conference. Likewise, the top ministerial positions in the transitional government were given for EPRDF followed by the OLF. The council of representative established a constitutional commission mandated to prepare a draft constitution for the country. The commission's draft document was later

adopted by an elected body known as the constituent assembly. The constitution extended and further elaborated the basic provisions of the transitional charter.

The extent the conference ushered in a genuine pact inclusive of all parties that opposed the military regime is contested. Some scholars and the government are of the view that the conference was fairly representative of various shades of opinion and organizations notwithstanding the dominance of ethnic based parties: there were some from the university, some organizations outside the country and many others within the country. The dominance of ethnic based parties was taken to be indicative of the seriousness of the national oppression of various groups. However, the mushrooming of nationality based parties could also be seen in terms of the incentive structure the EPRDF instituted in its recognition of national self-determination. Its agenda of dismantling the ideological and institutional basis of the Ethiopian state and its historical legacy of centralization reduced distrust among these forces. Hence, they enthusiastically engage in the common agenda of rebuilding a democratic Ethiopian state that grants the rights of nations, nationalities and peoples for self-determination including secession (Aklilu, 2006). De Waal (1992) also argued that the transition processes was broadly representative and that it was somehow democratic.

The initial process of the transition and the charter underpinning the process is considered to have constituted a compact in some quarter. One of the leaders of the OLF claimed that “the charter is the first time Ethiopia has had a ‘compact for government’. In adopting it we were saying ‘although we differ we agree to abide by this sketchy document which shall govern the transition period.’ Instead of a constitution, which has always been a grant of a government, this was a basis for joining together and working together” (Lata quoted in Vaughan, 1994:59). In the subsequent period, EPRDF’s desire to control the transition in its favor led to a subtle manipulation of the pact building and democratizing aspects of the transition. The result is that ‘[w]hat had begun with a noisy diversity of views among a broad array of political organizations ended quietly with the clear hegemony of the EPRDF’ (Lyons 1995:121).

This assertion of an initially inclusive and democratic process ending with a one party dominance has to be seen in the context of each party's interest and agenda in the process of transition. According to Aklilu (2006), the EPRDF and other ethno-nationalist forces had a common objective of deconstructing the centralized and authoritarian Ethiopian state. In addition to this, the EPRDF seek the contradictory goal of charting the transition process without diminishing its dominance and without encumbering the participation of other groups. To this end, the EPRDF encouraged the participation of political forces and elites that have the common strategic agenda of deconstructing the state. One of such actors was the OLF that sought to deconstruct what it called the colonial empire of Ethiopia through the principle of self-determination. The long term strategy of the OLF oscillates between securing an independent Oromia or a democratic transition where it would play a dominant role (Ottaway, 1995). Other smaller groups' desire to gain strategic advantage in the bargaining process drew them into the transition process. However, this apparently consensual process driven by the willing participation of ethnic forces soon began to dissipate. In its bid to control political power unchallenged by opposition forces, the EPRDF subtly and steadily de-emphasized its democracy building agenda. A subtle process of recentralization and de-democratization soon set into motion. The constitutional base of division of power, the exclusionary governance practice, and the intimidation, harassment, and arrest of opposition members are all indicative of these trends. The result is that there has so far been no election that satisfied international standards (Lyons, 2010). While the government continually limits the possibility for open competition, the opposition boycotted many of the elections with the goal of delegitimizing the government. The process resulted in the steady consolidation of the government and the persistent exclusion of the opposition. In the June 1992 election, the opposition boycotted the election alleging that their members are being harassed, intimidated and their office closed. The OLF, the major opposition party, faced stiff competition from the OPDO, EPRDF's affiliate, that benefited from the support provided by the EPRDF. Alleging that the election would not be free and fair under the intimidating pre-election situation, the OLF withdrew from the transitional government and decamped its army. After brief fighting, the OLF was easily neutralized by the much sophisticated EPRDF force. At the core of the

contention was OLF`s objection against the operation of OPDO in Oromia and its political strategy. The OLF sought either independence or significant role in the post-1991 political order. To the dismay of the OLF, the EPRDF with the backing of a strong army also aims to control and dominate the subsequent process of socio-political restructuring. Hence, the OLF`s so far unsuccessful and gradually dissipating guerrilla warfare.

Other scholars argued that the transitional process was exclusionary at the outset. The EPRDF selectively invited groups it deemed to have little political effects and deliberately excluded those established political parties that would challenge its hegemony on pretext that they were ‘warmongers and chauvinists’ (Kassahun, 2003). These parties include the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Party, the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (*Meison* in Amharic) and the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (Kassahun, 1994). It is also argued that the terms and provisions of the transitional charter were firmly controlled by the EPRDF with the fact that nothing that appears to be threatening its hold on power passes unexamined (Tuso, 1997). Moreover, the transitional charter was already prepared before the conference by the EPRDF and to a lesser extent by the OLF and that serious discussion on some issues was not held due to the fact that EPRDF discouraged such a move. Challenging the right to self-determination of the various nationalities was tantamount to challenging the core of the transition and hence parties were warned either to leave the conference or accept such a provisions (Vaughan, 1994). The constitution drafting process was systematically structured in such a way that opposition parties were forced to withdraw from the process or were made to do so by themselves. Thus, the transitional charter and the subsequent transitional process was not the result of ‘a genuine pact among all relevant entities’ (Mengisteab, 2007).

What emerges from the discussion so far is that the transition process was dominated by ethnic based parties and ethno-nationalist forces. The ‘centrist’ constituency that wanted to maintain the unitary Ethiopian state intact, that opposed the secession of Eritrea and the subsequent landlockedness of the country, and that opposed the replacement of the army with ethnic based guerilla forces had been excluded from the transition process (Kassahun, 1995). The emphasis given for nations and nationalities in the transitional

charter and the sovereignty they are granted in the subsequent constitution signify the salience of ethnic issues. Not only the nations and nationalities of Ethiopia are vested with sovereign power but also they are granted the right to secede if they wish so. Those that do not yet have their own regional state are granted the right to form their own region. They are granted a full measure of self administration, cultural and historical preservation, and determination of their own language of administration.

### **The Causes of the Insurgency and the post-1991 Political Order**

The extent the post-1991 political arrangement addressed the causes of the insurgency is contested in the literature. As noted earlier, the major issues of contention were ethnic domination, political centralization and economic marginalization. The regime argues that it has addressed the national question by restructuring the Ethiopian state and granting sovereign power for the nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia. National groups have the unconditional right for self-determination that included a full measure of self-administration, cultural protection, historical preservation, and the ultimate right for secession. The federal arrangement is structured along ethno-linguistic lines and that smaller ethnic groups are granted the right to self-administration in their respective locality; they have the right to establish their own regional state. Thus, the government argues that it has resolved the national question and is engaging in the process of economic development which is the pressing issues of the country. The regime also claims that it has instituted democratic system which, in the Ethiopian case, is essentially about addressing the rights of nations and nationalities. The government's approach to state reconstitution is taken as a viable option in the absence of credible alternatives in some quarter (Young, 1996).

There are two diverging views regarding the measures the regime undertook to address the national question. On the one hand, there are many who warned that the arrangement has gone too far and that it could lead to ethnic conflicts and disintegration of the state. These groups argue that the country is held together by the centralizing operational principle of the ruling party which otherwise will disintegrate under the force of ethno-nationalism. This is mainly advocated by Amhara and Amharized elites that prioritized

their Ethiopian identity above and beyond their ethnic identity. On the other hand, others argue that while the autonomy granted to Ethnic groups is sufficient, it is not implemented unflinchingly. Hence, they argued that the change of regime is not accompanied with change in the ethnocentric nature of the state. This position is held by elites that have been victims of historical marginalization and who aspire to get significant political leverage in the post-1991 political order. Whichever position holds true, ethnicity is still the dominant discourse in the country after twenty years of governance by revolutionary democrats which is presumed to be the result of the aspirations generated by the federal arrangement and its subsequent frustration due to the failure in its implementation (Hagmann and Abbink, 2011; International Crisis Group, 2010).

Studies that examined the practice of power decentralization argued that the arrangement does not bring the intended outcome of creating accountable, effective and autonomous regional and local governments that are able to match the available resources with the diverse needs (Paulos, 2007; Abbink, 2009, 2011, Fissaha, 2012, Markakis, 2011, Keller, 2005 ). Though these authors seem to agree that decentralization has allowed a modicum of self-administration at the regional and local level, key decision making power is still centralized. According to Abbink (2011), the arrangement promoted ethnic self-expression, uprooted old denigrating ethnic labeling, and enabled ethnic groups to control their respective bureaucracy and conduct day-to-day administration in their own language. However, the decision making process is still dominated by the elites at the center. Markakis (2011:282) captured this dynamics when he argued that '[t]he elite in the centre continue to rule; the elite in the periphery continue to administer.'

Regarding the democratization process, there appears to be a consensus in the literature that governance in Ethiopia is characterized by authoritarian practices and exclusionary currents that exhibits no sign of abatement (Lyons, 1995, 2010; Ottaway, 1995; Aalan and Tronvoll, 2009; Abbink, 2011; Bach, 2011; International Crisis Group, 2009; Pausewang, 2009; Hagmann and Abbink, 2011; Paulos, 2009; Tronvoll, 2009; Aklog, 2010). One strand of these literature argue about the ideological root of authoritarianism. The regime adheres to the ideology of revolutionary democracy that is reliant on building direct

coalition with the masses and hence does not need to institutionalize pluralism (Tronvoll and Vaughan, 2003). The ideology advocates a vanguard party that direct and preside over the political, economic and social transformation of the country, and emphasizes on self-determination of ethnic groups under a tightly controlled space for civil society and the civil service (Hagmann and Abbink, 2011). The result is top-down decision making, marginalization of civil society, fusion of party, state and government, and entrenchment of structure of control and repression (Tronvoll, 2008; Abbink, 2009; ICG, 2010). A related literature argues that the EPRDF is using the ideology of revolutionary democracy as a discursive weapon to decimate internal challengers and external enemies (Batch, 2011). Another strand considers the irreconcilable nature of ethnic nationalism and multi-ethnic democracy (Solomon, 2009). In some quarter, the influence of authoritarian political culture, fragmentation of the opposition, and ethnicization of politics are identified to militate against democratizing the Ethiopian state (Kasshun, 2003; Asnake, 2011, Ottaway, 1995). Finally, Ottaway (1995) take the argument further in asserting that the condition for democracy in Ethiopia does not exist. She argued that in the absence of countervailing forces against the EPRDF, the fragmentation of political parties to their ethnic component, and the weakness of civil society, democratization of the Ethiopian polity will be a remote possibility.

The EPRDF started restructuring the Ethiopian economy in the backdrop of an utterly failed socialist policy. Though the EPRDF had been espousing Marxism-Leninism before it overthrew the regime, the international circumstance following the fall of Soviet Union necessitated ideological reorientation and restructuring the economy along the capitalist lines. Accordingly, the EPRDF accepted the World Bank's structural adjustment programme of economic liberalization and privatized state owned companies, reduced tariff, liberalized the exchange rate and devaluated the *Birr*. However, the economy has not been totally left for the market force; the state is still the most important actors in the economy. Banking and Insurance sectors, telecommunication, and electricity generation and distribution are dominated by the state. Generally, the economy has been dominated

by state owned enterprises, party owned endowments and party affiliated private sectors (Aklog, 2010).

The government pursued a heterodox economic policy. The state acts as an agent of development by channeling resources to sectors and actors presumed to have high productivity. Until 2003, the policy yielded fluctuating growth rate which was not on par with the rate of population growth. Since then, the regime pursued a set of inter-related macro-economic policy measures that include maintaining low nominal interest rate, appreciating real exchange rate, and channeling banking system credit and foreign exchange to public enterprises, limiting recurrent public expenditure, and maintaining low external foreign exchange reserve. This strategy enabled the country to register a robust and broad based growth (WB, 2012, 2013; ADB, 2010; IMF, 2010). The government report indicated that poverty has dropped from 38.7% in 2004/2005 to 29.6% in 2010/2011 enabling Ethiopia to halve poverty by 2015 (Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, 2012). This reduction in poverty level is argued to be achieved in all regions of the country. The government's pursuit of pro-poor policy by expanding infrastructure, boosting agriculture and food security programmes, increasing urban development effort, and facilitating private sector expansion is singled out as the main reason for this. There has been an increase in the amount of pro-poor spending from 57% in 2004/2005 to 67% in 2010/2011. However, this growth is not accompanied with structural transformation of the economy. The service sector accounts for more than half of the GDP followed by agriculture. The industrial sector contribution is stagnant throughout the period of growth episode (since 2003/2004).



## **Key Lessons and Emerging Propositions**

### **Key Lessons**

One of the perennial and often violent conversations about state building in Ethiopia has been centered on ethnicity dubbed as the 'nationality issue' or simply 'the national question'. The fair representation of all ethno-linguistic groups in national politics and the deconstruction of ethnic hierarchy have been at the core of state building conversation throughout the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopia. To the dismay of many, it has also been one of the central issues determining the future trajectories of state building endeavors in the country. Superimposed over it, is the democratization of the state and decentralization of the decision making power. Both the imperial order and the military regime had a rigidly centralized state in which decision making power was concentrated in the hand of the emperor or Mengistu Hailemariam. Though these regimes used different legitimatizing ideologies and pursued different policy measures, the nature of the state was essentially the same. Centralization of power and arbitrary rule were the defining feature of the time. The overthrow of the military regime yet brought another paradigm of state building that aim to lay Ethiopian unity on the willing acceptance of its ethnic component. Notwithstanding some of the achievements related to linguistic and cultural rights, marginalized groups control over their regions, the decision making processes is still centralized. A number of continuities can be identified with the previous regimes in this regard. The state still is much reliant on the instrumentalities of control and repression and that the cry for deconstruction of ethnic hierarchy is still prevalent in some quarter. Hence, the prevailing modicum of peace and stability is the result of the regime`s entrenched and pervasive mechanism of control than the legitimacy it garners. The economic growth the regime has been recording since 2003/2004, which partly is the result of an inflow of donor`s money, underpinned these instruments of control and repression. The regime considers economic growth as the only way out from this unsustainable mode of governance that is much reliant on control and repression. It is hoped that sustained and broad based economic growth will increase the legitimacy of the

regime thereby laying ground for the liberalization of the political space and the democratization of state-society interactions.

Thus, building sustainable state and peace in Ethiopia need to address three core issues without which a secure foundation for peace and durable state will not materialize. First, it essentially entails generating the consent of competing ethnonationalists to channel their national and political demand within the framework of the Ethiopian state. This might necessitate national reconciliation over historical injustices. Second, the first requirement necessitates the democratization of the state and the decentralization of decision making processes without which the possibility of resolving the first issue is foreclosed. Finally, the above two measures neither succeed nor results in a sustainable peace and state without a modicum of economic growth. Economic growth increases the infrastructural power of the state and reduces violent contestation over the spoils associated with controlling the state and hence eases the state building endeavor.

Sustainable peace and durable state in Ethiopia are dependent on the extent these fundamental issues have been addressed. The trajectories so far indicate that there has been a steady consolidation and institutionalization of the apparatus of control. In comparison to the imperial order, the Derg was unmatched in its mobilization capacity and structure of control while it pales when compared with the current regime that commands even more pervasive and entrenched architecture of control and governance. However, this architecture of control and regulation has not been complemented with popular acceptance of the governance practices. Hence, while the Ethiopian state has been strong in its capacity for control, it has so far been weak in its capacity to command popular legitimacy. Its institutional strength and organizational effectiveness enabled it to preside over the process of economic transformation and to ensure political and social stability. However, the state's reliance on control and at times repression rendered this strength fragile.

## **Emerging propositions**

Based on the report provided so far the following key propositions are suggested for further investigation.

1. Ethiopia's central strengths, and also weaknesses, in peace and state building derive from its peculiar past.
2. The conflicts in 20th century Ethiopia were caused by the exclusionary nature of the state. More specifically, they were about ethnic domination, political centralization and economic marginalization.
3. The nature of the protracted war, the type of insurgency and organization determined the course of the political settlement and subsequent processes of state and peace building.
4. The political settlement was not only exclusionary at the outset but also continues to be even more so in the subsequent period.
5. The post-1991 political order partially addressed the major causes of conflict in the country and that this is followed by a modicum of peace and stability.
6. The major issues of consideration in the settlement were ethnic and/or national issues, economic conditions and democratization and that the major actors were ethno-nationalists.

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