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## **Navigating Ethiopia's Revolutionary Democracy since 1991: A Tool for Political Control and Regime Stability**

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### **Abstract**

Ethiopia has had a revolutionary democracy from 1991 to 2018, a two-edged sword that has enabled both regime survival and change under the EPRDF. This article sheds light on how the EPRDF authoritarian regime used co-optation, legitimization, and repression as complementary survival toolkits to maintain power until 2018. The article is a qualitative case study that incorporates both primary and secondary sources through critical analysis, both conceptual and content-wise. The article contends that, under the pretext of revolutionary democratic ideology, the EPRDF has looked to construct a monopoly on power that would serve as the center of authoritative and coercive authority, employing ethnic federalism and development-state rhetoric. Both federalism and the developmental state model are employed as weapons of repression, coercion, and legitimacy to preserve hegemonic power control at the price of long-awaited democratization and self-government. However, these EPRDF strategies stayed a double-edged sword, enabling monopolistic political control while also generating resistance based on long-held dissatisfaction with the ambiguities and contradictions between revolutionary democratic ideas and deeds. Therefore, the repressive techniques used by the EPRDF sparked social mobilization, resulting in collective actions by marginalized groups from various sects, finally leading to the EPRDF regime's collapse in 2018. The downfall of the EPRDF demonstrates that a political ideology not only serves to obtain support and legitimacy by driving party members to fulfill specified political goals, but it can also serve as a primary framework that accelerates political prospects for regime transition.

**Keywords:** EPRDF, regime survival, revolutionary democracy, and political control

### **1. Introduction**

The year 1991 in Ethiopian politics was at the point of collapse while envisioning a new future. The fall of the Derg presented the possibility of a

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new political system, offering a fresh opportunity to strengthen democracy and keep the country from relapsing into authoritarianism. On the other hand, the post-1991 EPRDF political system was based on revolutionary democracy ideologies that used both ethnic federalism and the developmental state model, putting Ethiopia at risk of authoritarian one-party rule.

The persecution, marginalization, and repression of ideological opponents sparked the formation of resistance organizations headed by Marxist-Leninist nationalists, including the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) (Alemante, 1992; Aalen, 2002). To address Ethiopia's "nationality questions" that go back to the 1960s, these groups entered the civil war that raged from 1975 to 1991 and ended with the overthrow of the Derg. The 1960s national and class conflicts that sparked the 1974 revolution and resulted in the 1991 regime change continued as a battle for democracy and self-determination as part of Ethiopia's reconstruction.

The 1991 new political order brought to light two key issues: optimism and achievement. First, Derg's fall was viewed as the end of civil wars and an oppressive regime achieved because of the struggles for national self-determination (Meressa, 2019). Second, Derg's demise signaled a new beginning and renewed optimism for peace, democracy, and development that Ethiopians have fought for decades (Alemante 1992; Semahang, 2018). These hopes are all waiting to be realized with the rise to power of the TPLF-led Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (hereinafter EPRDF) in 1991. The EPRDF promised formally to be committed to a stable multiparty democratic system and to answer the national question through ethnic federalism. Thus, it was believed that the EPRDF would implement an alternative strategy to address Ethiopia's historical contradictions, experimenting with a multiparty democracy and federalism as nation-building projects and responding to Ethiopia's "nationality questions" since the 1960s.

In contrast to optimism, the EPRDF, however, continued to repress and marginalize political and ideological opponents. From the start-up, during the transition process, the EPRDF's political reengineering resulted in distinctive variations, raising doubts about its commitment to realizing multiparty democracy and multinational federalism (Abbink, 2010; Ezekiel, 2021). EPRDF took over Derg's control apparatus and expanded it further to ensure the predominance of a political minority over the bulk of the public (Vestal, 1999; Alemante, 1992). As Bach (2011) reiterates the point: "Ethiopia is not

an incomplete democracy; it is rather an authoritarian state draped in democratic window-dressing in which manipulated multi-party elections are a means to sustain power" (Bach, 2011, pp. 647-648). This transitional period and the following years revealed the linguistic democratic mask, proving a test of the EPRDF's declared commitment to a federal system and democracy, calling its legitimacy to rule into question.

Studies have identified the gap between the practices and theoretical constructs of the EPRDF's revolutionary ideology and its authoritarian nature, placing Ethiopia at general risk of authoritarian one-party rule (Lavers, 2016; Ezekiel, 2021; Yonas, 2024; and Mercy, 2024). However, there is a gap in constructing how the EPRDF used the ideology of revolutionary democracy and its two tiers of ethnic federalism and developmental state as formulae and strategies for repression, co-optation, and legitimization for political control and regime stability.

Therefore, this article constructs the EPRDF's autocratic survival using political control mechanisms to keep its hegemonic power through revolutionary democracy employing developmental authoritarianism and a phony federal setup, resulting in 27 years of rule. Under the guise of these revolutionary ideologies, the EPRDF has sought to set up a monopoly on power that would serve as the center of authoritative and coercive authority using technologies of repression, co-optation, and legitimacy. Ethiopia's federalism and development rhetoric were used by the ruling EPRDF to keep hegemonic power control at the expense of long-awaited democratization and self-administration. However, these EPRDF techniques stayed a double-edged sword, allowing for monopolistic political control and encouraging opposition based on long-standing frustrations about the ambiguities and inconsistencies between revolutionary democratic concepts and actions. All these factors precipitated multiple transformational events and weakened the EPRDF regime, finally making the EPRDF's hegemonic power politics obsolete in 2018.

The second part, which follows the introduction above, briefly explains the research methodology. The third section examines how secondary literature conceptualizes legitimacy, co-optation, and repression as survival tactics in authoritarian regimes. Within the context of revolutionary democratic ideology, the fourth section explains how the EPRDF employed repression, co-optation, and legitimization technologies in both the developmental state model and ethnic federalism. The last section then offers a conclusion.

## **2. Research Methods and Methodology**

The research used a qualitative case study approach, building knowledge claims based on constructivism. The paper describes how the EPRDF has maintained power since 1991 by employing the developmental state model and federalism as tools and survival mechanisms to keep hegemonic power at the expense of long-awaited democratization and self-governance. The study used both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were gathered through key informant interviews (KII), in which relevant stakeholders were purposefully selected from political parties such as former members of the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO), Prosperity Party (PP), Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA), former members of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), whose names were coded and used anonymously. In addition, researchers and academicians from universities and CSOs working on democracy, human rights, and peace-related issues were also contacted.

During data collection via in-depth interviews, key informants were informed of their voluntary involvement, anonymity, and confidentiality. The respondents were picked in a non-random manner depending on their knowledge of the issue under study, and the sample size was established using theoretical saturation. The research is additionally informed by secondary data on Ethiopia's political dynamics to back up and triangulate the primary data. The data were presented and analyzed using qualitative content analysis, merging viewpoints and perspectives to better grasp data meanings, themes, and patterns. To guarantee the research's validity and reliability, triangulation and cross-referencing were used using multiple data sources via KII, as well as cross-referencing of findings between interviews and secondary sources.

## **3. Political Control Strategies in the Authoritarian Contexts**

Authoritarian regimes use a variety of political control strategies to ensure widespread compliance with state policies and minimize resistance. These refined and nuanced strategies include repression, indoctrination, coercive distribution, infiltration, co-optation, and legitimacy (Ficek, 2022; Escribà-Folch, 2011). They are used as basic survival tools to repress members of the population while cultivating loyalty in others (Hassan *et al*, 2022; Puddington, 2017).

Modern authoritarians employ co-optation, legitimization, and repression as complementary tactics to maintain their control over the populace by imposing

obedience on them and weakening but not eliminating their opponents. The next section provides a conceptual discussion-based summary of these tactics.

**Repression in authoritarian contexts:** Repression is the use of negative punishments by authorities against people and/or any groups as part of a statehood political strategy to legitimize the use of force (Glasius, 2018; DeMeritt, 2016). It is used to exert control over people and keep a monopoly of power against dissidents and others who pose a political threat and influence decision-making (Romero, 2020; Ficek, 2022). The main target groups can be rogue elites, political opponents, or the public who pose dangers to the regime to keep power by suppressing dissent.

The varieties of these repression mechanisms could be divided into six major types based on their forms and manifestations. First, *reactive repression* is the regime's immediate response to any threat to the status quo, including demonstrations, protests, boycotts, strikes, and riots (Slantchev & Matush, 2019; Grasse et al., 2021). Second, *preventative repression* is a static aspect of autocracy that predicts disagreement, in which incumbents may take initiative-taking actions to suppress future opposition (Grasse et al., 2021). Persecution of genuine or suspected dissidents through due process and administrative procedures can be used in the form of speech restrictions, assembly prohibitions, travel restrictions, and selective law enforcement (Slantchev & Matush, 2019).

Third, *opportunistic repression* entails using global catastrophes to suppress opposition and dissent (Grasse et al., 2021). Crises such as terrorism, the COVID-19 epidemic, and climate change have been used to repress populations and consolidate control. For example, the emergence of terrorism has fueled anti-terrorism legislation to deter, suppress dissent, and criminalize groups and individuals perceived to be extremists or terrorists (Flesher & Wood, 2011; Ellefsen & Jämte, 2022). In these cases, conspiracies are used to justify false narratives against opponents, strengthen in-group support, and transfer blame and accountability. Fourth, *judicial repression* is the use of the criminal justice system as a tool for the political persecution of dissidents. The court system's legal and institutional red lines are established and used as a ruse to justify the arbitrary use of violence and detentions. Such legalized political repression equips the authoritarians with a menu of judicial manipulation to disable and insulate the court and justice system (Hassan et al., 2022). The tactics include making up criminal charges, threatening noncompliant judges and prosecutors, concealing, and invalidating exculpatory defense evidence, gross due process violations, illegal asset

seizure, media demonization, and years of unlawful incarceration under inhumane and unconstitutional conditions (Romero, 2020).

Fifth, *digital repression* refers to the use of contemporary technology, notably the Internet, social media, and artificial intelligence (AI) for censorship, suppressing criticism, filtering, monitoring, and influencing online conversations to reduce the likelihood of a protest (Michaelsen, 2018; Frantz *et al*, 2020). Autocracies control internet access and regulate digital media platforms using computational propaganda and digital monitoring to manipulate public opinion, suppress and demobilize opponents, and generate fake support to replace non-exclusive co-optation with targeted repression (Earl & Maves, 2022; Gitmez & Sonin, 2023). These measures include Internet shutdowns, the deployment of disinformation campaigns, and AI-powered surveillance to watch and even forecast potential dissidents' behavior. Finally, autocrats have recently adopted strategies such as *transnational repression* to influence their communities and dissidents abroad and to keep coercive control over their nations abroad, showing that authoritarian power transcends borders (Conduit, 2020). This indirectly penalizes diaspora activists by targeting family members at home and checking their activities through embassies in host countries.

***Co-optation in authoritarian contexts:*** Co-optation is a political control mechanism that uses official or informal measures to encourage compliance with the inclusion of strategic players to address public discontent, opposition groups, and future issues (Escribà-Folch, 2011; Romero, 2020). This is an intentional extension of benefits to potential regime challengers in exchange for their loyalty to gain compliance through the exchange of tangible goods, policy concessions, or economic rents (Frantz & Taylor, 2014; Hassan *et al*, 2022). The strategic repertoire of buying allegiance and compliance by cultivating loyalty, dispensing patronage, maintaining clientelistic networks, and sharing power can be used (Slantchev & Matush, 2019).

Co-optation strategically targets insiders (those who are part of the regime structure, notably commercial and military elites) or outsiders (political opponents or civilians who do not belong to the government structure).

For insiders, autocrats use formal institutions such as legislatures, parties, and militaries as a menu of manipulation and as sites of co-optation (Schedler, 2009; Brancati, 2014). This is to ensure subordination and cement long-term commitments to keep the stability and irrefutability of their power and authority by providing benefits to the co-opted group (Pepinsky, 2014; Ficek,

2022). For instance, patronage and policy concessions are shaped as a form of exchange, resulting in obligations as a kind of contract to buy the support of their core members. This is by opening new career opportunities and granting material and immaterial advantages for military commanders, government bureaucrats, individuals who control the ruling party's apparatuses, and frequent segments of the business community (Escribà-Folch, 2011; Backes & Kailitz, 2016). This gives the co-opted insiders control over crucial components of the national economy, allowing them to conduct the state's heavy-handed enforcement and share significant national resources.

As an outer co-optation strategy, authoritarians manage resistance by setting up democratic institutions to protect themselves against prospective challenges (Romero, 2020). Elections, for example, allow authoritarians to co-opt rivals, create legitimacy, deter the opposition, and learn about the regime's power and prestige among the public (Schedler, 2009; Hassan et al., 2022). This gives those co-opted outsiders and opponents a say in policymaking and refrains from criticizing the regime (Malesky & Schuler, 2010; Hassan et al., 2022). Therefore, elections in autocracies serve as a feeder for regime survival that eases other processes that bolster the repressive and co-optation abilities of the regimes that are relevant for their stability eventually. As an outers, people co-opted to access resources (e.g., public services, subsidized food, and financial resources) and political power (Romero, 2020). Populations overseas may also be co-opted into mutually helpful fortunes that are linked not only to the home country but also to the home regime (Glasius, 2018).

***Legitimacy in the authoritarian contexts:*** to endure, all governments—authoritarian or democratic—must explain their existence. While the democratic process itself gives incumbents political power in democracies, this is unachievable in autocracies since leaders are seldom elected in free and fair elections, even though they can use a variety of sources to justify their rule (Keremoglu et al., 2022).

Since contemporary autocrats rely solely on repression and co-optation for regime survival, legitimization is used as a complementary pillar that also supports autocratic rule. This legitimization means the efforts to be regarded as justly exerting rule, seeking to guarantee active consent, compliance with the rule, passive obedience, and/or, at least, some form of tolerance within the population with the intent to help stabilize the regime (Glasius, 2018; Josua, 2023). To create the impression that they have the power to rule, a complex and well-choreographed set of legitimization techniques and processes is needed

(Demmelhuber, 2023). This includes discursive reasons to lessen the risk of delegitimizing political power in addition to rhetorical strategies and policies (Edela & Josua, 2018). Both contribute to the creation of a coherent package of performance and speech that lowers the expenses of repression while influencing people's subjective opinions and defending the government.

For legitimacy claims and justification of rules, incumbents often depend on various conceptual bases. For example, the sources of legitimacy claimed by Max Weber (1992) and Alexander & Johannes (2017) are important in comparative authoritarianism research. Weber (1922) names three forms of legitimate rule: traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic authority. Alexander and Johannes (2017) offer four methods of autocratic legitimization: indoctrination, passivity, performance, and democratic procedural. Combining the two works, this sub-section outlines the career of autocratic legitimacy by distilling four main methods of how autocracies legitimize their rule: *traditional, charismatic, legal, and performance*.

First, *legitimacy in traditional authorities* is based on established systems of ideas and is transmitted by an appeal to a strong trust in the sanctity of long-standing traditions, which can be religious or political ideology (MacKay, 2005). This fosters voluntary allegiance or obedience through political promises and guarantees (Alexander & Johannes, 2017). Although this is an old brainwashing of authoritarian administrations in which an exclusive and pervasive political ideology is implanted in the hearts and minds of the controlled, it can currently only be seen in a lighter hue. Second, belief in a political leader's outstanding characteristics is the basis of *charismatic legitimization*. These qualities are linked to the ruler's attributes that are attributed to his or her exceptional holiness, courage, or excellent character (MacKay, 2005; Gitmez & Sonin, 2023). This is mostly done to preserve the leader's reputation as a powerful and capable person, indicating that the regime's existence is tied to the leader's (political) survival.

Third, the claim that laws are valid and that those responsible for executing them have the authority to make commands is the foundation of *legal-rational legitimization*. This implies adherence to mimicking democratic governance through elections, such as holding rigged elections and imitating democratic norms, while taking center stage by following the law (MacKay, 2005). Such semi-competitive multi-party elections play a larger role in legitimizing modern forms of authoritarian control and are used to show the public, both domestically and abroad, that the government reflects popular will (Alexander & Johannes, 2017). This indicates autocracies have found far more subtle new

ways to secure their legitimacy, including the employment of elections as a response to the demands of the people, in which they offer themselves the facade of democratic-procedural legitimacy.

With the emergence of socioeconomic issues and pledges to improve the country, a fourth legitimization mechanism appears: *performance-based legitimization*. This relates to incumbents' claims to promote economic progress and offer beneficial living conditions for the people, and how this performance led to population quiescence (Alexander & Johannes, 2017). Under such performance-based legitimization, it can lead to widespread acceptance of non-democratic rule, and less involvement is tolerated and given up for the sake of stability, order, and progress if the regime can deliver (Keremoglu *et al.* 2022). This covers the measuring of input and output legitimacy mechanisms in a dyadic fashion. Election as input legitimacy, for example, provides autocracies with a window of opportunity to co-opt elite groups, gain legitimacy to govern both at home and abroad, and stop any destabilizing momentum that could lead to pivotal moments (Haldenwang, 2016; Demmelhuber, 2023). Furthermore, autocrats prioritize economic development rates and modernization discourse over national unity and security, using output legitimization to make up for deficiencies in input legitimacy (Demmelhuber, 2023; Nathan, 2020). Without the benefits, however, performance shortcomings would cause the collapse of authoritarian legitimacy quickly and severely.

In general, authoritarians use political tools that include co-optation, repression, and legitimacy to either expand or contract their constituencies to compel compliance, elicit obedience, and/or impose penalties. These strategies are mutually inclusive for the authoritarians to get or regain support among strategic elites and acceptance from the governed or international players, and minimize political resistance. They are complementarily used as instruments for political control and pillars of regime stability serve as toolboxes for preserving power in modern autocracies.

#### **4. EPRDF's Revolutionary Democracy: *A Tool of Regime Survival and Stability***

The EPRDF's revolutionary democracy provided ideological guidance during its almost three-decade rule (Aalen, 2020; Yonas T, 2022). In the absence of a single formal definition of revolutionary democracy in Ethiopia's political ontology, several tried to define it based on the EPRDF's governance practices and what it purported to stand for in its political plans and policies.

Regarding its historical origins, most literature concur that the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist foundations of the liberation forces, which used revolutionary military socialism as their primary ideological paradigm against the Derg, are where revolutionary democracy originated (Abbink, 2011; Zegeye, 2022). It was originally intended to guide Ethiopia's transition to socialism and later became the EPRDF's ideology for accomplishing Ethiopian democratization (Bach, 2011; Abbink, 2011). This was mainly emphasized in the EPRDF's book *Building an Army in Revolutionary Democracy*, stating that without a revolutionary democracy, there would be no rapid and sustainable economic, social development, or democratic unity.<sup>3</sup>

This ideology built a state structure based on a federal system and the developmental state model (Merera, 2012). The federal system was considered as a response to nationality questions and a remedy for the historically pervasive mismanagement of ethnolinguistic and cultural diversity (Gebreluel, 2023; Zekarias, 2020). The developmental state model was chosen in opposition to the prevailing narrative of the non-interventionist neo-liberal approach as the correct path to conquer poverty and to reach middle-income status (Eyob, 2020; Mebratu, 2023). This provided the conditions for a resurgence of the national oppression discourse based on the main ideological pillars of the constitutional restructuring of Ethiopia from a unitary nation into a multinational federation and implementing state-led developmentalism.

However, the above claims are not conclusive, for those holding differing perspectives about EPRDF's lack of ideological purity. For instance, Louise Aalen (2020) characterized revolutionary democracy as "a wartime ideology both shaping and shaped by peacetime policy needs." According to John Abbink, revolutionary democracy was a hybrid ideology derived from Leninism, mixed with some democratic concepts, and applied to the country's ethnic diversity as a tactic to address the issue of nations. He argues that although the EPRDF's revolutionary democracy ideology had certain democratic principles, it was centralist and vanguardist, which is a direct result of Marxist-Leninist theory and rejects the notion of relinquishing power (Abbink, 2011). Nicholas Bach (2011) also argues that the history and applications of the concept reflect a synthesis of Leninism, Marxism, Maoism, and liberalism. Moreover, Aregawi Berhe, a former member of the TPLF central command committee, contends that the EPRDF's eclectic ideology,

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<sup>3</sup> Building an Army in Revolutionary Democracy, also known as the Red Book, was a secretly kept document authored by the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in 2001 that served as the doctrinal foundation for the ENDF (Ethiopian National Defence Forces) under the EPRDF.

ideational foundation, and ensuing policies created significant uncertainty within the nation's bureaucratic structure, hindering the state's ability to function (Aregawi, 2001).

These political ideologies of EPRDF's revolutionary democracy have inspired varied interpretations. For some, the EPRDF's ideology was pragmatic, aiming to satisfy national aspirations by transitioning from socialism to revolutionary democracy and finally to a democratic developmental state. The EPRDF's abandonment of its long-held Marxist-Leninist ideology in favor of market-friendly governance was considered by some to be a form of political pragmatism. For instance, Medhane Tadesse, cited in Labzaé and Planel (2021, p. 74), contends that "TPLF leaders who had venerated Enver Hoxha of Albania only months before triumphantly entering Addis Ababa had to show a great deal of pragmatism and adapt to the changing international context." Mehari and Abel (2015, p. 33) also confirmed it as a "Highly pragmatist in retaining and maintaining political power, the EPRDF has gone through a long metamorphosis from revolutionary democracy to democratic developmental state."

For others, in terms of ideological positions, originally the TPLF, which was driven by ethno-nationalist fervor, adopted "Albanian socialism" and later alluded to revolutionary democracy after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Tefera, 2019, p. 463). But, by the time the EPRDF took power, they rejected the Marxist-Leninist ideology in a "lightning shift to democratic ideals and free-market policies" (Alemante, 1992, p. 212). As the world's geopolitical balance shifted dramatically with the collapse of the Soviet Union and capitalism began to dominate the global system, the EPRDF found a way out of this contradiction by claiming that revolutionary democracy could lead to either socialism or capitalism (Zegeye, 2022). Regardless of the external influence at the time, the EPRDF's negotiation for market economy adaptation has helped it to establish itself as the country's leading party, with the premise that a vanguard party should rule by representing the people (Lie & Berouk, 2018; Labzaé & Planel, 2021).

However, the EPRDF's practices of revolutionary democracy experiment remain incompatible due to the two systems' opposing orientations. According to Lovise Aalen (2020), the EPRDF's revolutionary democracy's commitment to ethnic federalism and the developmental state appears to be incompatible and impossible to achieve concurrently. This is seconded by Zekarias (2020), who argues that the implementation of the developmental state compromised the purposes and ambitions of ethnic federalism, since the EPRDF's

centralized elite and authoritarian structure negated the benefits that ethnic federalism aimed to achieve. The revolutionary democracy bequeathed from the struggle of the 1970s tried to legitimate a political and economic framework that, by definition, entails the endurance of authoritarianism (Bach, 2011). At the expense of the democratization efforts, political repression, centralization of decision-making authority, and the deliberate blending of the party and the state under the EPRDF were used to preserve the party's hegemony and explain its authoritarian traits (Semahang, 2018; Mebratu, 2023).

The EPRDF's revolutionary democracy allowed the regime to maintain its hold on power, where the political logic for transforming Ethiopia remained contradictory and inconsistent. The first contradiction derives from the federal system, which has shown discrepancies between political reality and constitutional theory. On the one side, the EPRDF's federalism, guided by the revolutionary democracy that runs throughout the ethno-federal constitutional framework, is in line with its socialist traditions, which favor group rights above individual rights (Abbink, 2011; Zegeye, 2022). This was thought to solve Ethiopia's historically discriminatory and distinctive past, and as a result, ethnic identity and cultural rights are acknowledged as the national constitution's protection of language and cultural rights has resulted in ethnic contentment among historically marginalized groups (Abbink 2011; Mebratu, 2023).

On the other hand, the EPRDF's federalism led to a conflict, raising questions about the federal system's structure and goals (Osaghae, 2022). For instance, according to Mebratu (2023), the EPRDF's systematic political exploitation of ethnic federalism heightened tensions between Ethiopian nationalism and entrenched ethnic nationalism. Ideological polarization regarding the federal system created two opposed extreme epistemic perspectives on the continuum. The federalism system was seen by the *Counter Hegemonic* (ethno-nationalist) rhetoric to accept the nation's variety via the right to national unity, regional autonomy, and self-determination. They contend that the identities of hitherto marginalized people were constitutionally acknowledged under this arrangement (Abbink, 2011). However, for the *Great Tradition* (pan-Ethiopianists), the federal system was an incorrect political strategy that codified and politicized ethnicity. For them, prioritizing ethnic identification above national identity weakened the pan-Ethiopian identity, undermined national unity, and fostered ethnic conflicts (Zegeye, 2022; Abbink, 2011). This ideological polarization regarding EPRDF's federalism has not only promoted ethnic peaceful coexistence, but it has also spiraled out of control

due to the country's flawed federal structure, leading to endless ethnic conflicts and state dissolution (Wondwosen & Záhořík, 2008; Zegeye, 2022). Regardless of this ideological polarization, in practice, the federal system has established top-down, central control mechanisms that hinder local initiative and autonomy, even while it grants regional and local authorities nominally dispersed power (Abbink, 2011). EPRDF's centralization of power undermined regional autonomy (Aalen, 2002), disregarding democratic rights and economic equality (Wondwosen & Záhořík, 2008). The EPRDF's revolutionary democracy through derivative, satellite ethnic parties in regions to conduct Ethiopia's democratization (Abbink, 2011) revealed its use of democratic rhetoric to maintain its dominance and the growth of a non-democratic culture (Ibrahim, 2018). This resulted in rising ethnic disparities, as well as repression under the centralized party system, which fostered a keen sense of supremacy, demonstrating that centralized party rules and real federalism are incompatible.

The second is a disagreement between the *political practices* of the EPRDF, rooted in revolutionary democracy, and the ideas of the developmental state. Proponents of the developmental state contend that the ruling party seeks to establish a free market economy in which quick economic growth is assured, and the populace truly benefits from growth and development (Mehari, 2016). It was believed that through an export-led industrialization program, to reach middle-income status and structurally alter the Ethiopian economy, which would progressively establish Ethiopia as a regional power in the Horn of Africa (Gebreluel, 2023). However, the narratives of the developmental state remained problematic, with two contradictory features of poverty and economic prosperity that are geographically dispersed. On the one hand, poverty is more evident in rural hinterlands, while economic progress is more visible in central and metropolitan regions, and urban poverty and disparities are tangible, aggravated by increasing urbanization and unemployment rates (Lie & Berouk, 2018). The peasant economy has generally survived, while foreign investment has been pulled into the agricultural sector, but at a horrific cost to the lives of over a million people who have been or will be displaced (Medhane, 2012). On the other hand, while this strategy was effective in terms of GDP growth and infrastructure development, and it achieved some of the fastest growth rates in Africa for a non-oil producing country, it was accompanied by debt, the monetization of the fiscal deficit, inflation, a lack of foreign exchange, and a significant depreciation that created opportunities for cronyism (Medhane, 2012; Alemayew, 2023).

These contradictions underscore that, although the experiment of a developmental state has brought economic growth, conversely, it was largely implemented through an authoritarian, centralized political system and top-down approach, which caused discontent among the wider public (Clapham, 2017; Zekarias, 2020). For instance, the policy of leasing millions of hectares of land to foreign investors for several development schemes involved forced displacement and human rights violations and was used as a tool to control the rural masses, contributing to political repression under the pretense of development (Asebe, 2022; Mebratu, 2022). The regime's narratives promoted the developmental state as the only answer to economic and political difficulties, implying a "authoritarian bargain" in which citizens give up political rights for economic stability (Desai et al, 2007, p.2). Regardless of its economic gains, the developmental policies and practices resulted in inequality growing, unemployment increasing, and human rights protection deteriorating, demonstrating the EPRDF's failure to gain output legitimacy among the people.

This underscores EPRDF's developmental state, and the federal system remained incompatible, with little to no common ground between them as they ostensibly follow different paths—one as a centralizing process and the other as a decentralizing process (Zekarias, 2020). Claiming to be both democratic and revolutionary at the same time appears to be akin to claiming to be both democratic and developmental (Tefera, 2019). This not only endangered federalism, but it has also weakened effective decentralization and democratization that remained obstacles to Ethiopia's democratic transition and the smooth operation of the federal system (Arriola, 2013; Semahang, 2018). The EPRDF's hegemonic ambitions and authoritarian centralist political culture and practice were used as a tool to achieve regime stability through a mixture of repression, co-option, and top-down hierarchical party leadership (Alagawu, 2022) to secure political control through rhetoric, broad-based resource distribution, and coercion (Lavers, 2024). The merging of party and state allowed the EPRDF to employ state-controlled resources without restriction, eroding the separation of powers and checks and balances (Merera, 2012). The opaque boundaries between the party and the state system led to the centralized and patronage relationships between the TPLF/EPRDF, regional members, and affiliate parties that hampered a genuine democratic process in the country (Lie & Berouk, 2018; Semahang, 2018).

In short, Ethiopia's experience since 1991 indicates that the EPRDF developed a revolutionary discursive exclusionary weapon or strategy to obtain political

dominance via repression, coercion, and legitimacy to maintain power. From 1991 until 2018, the use of revolutionary democracy to assure developmental states and the construction of real multinational federalism generated an apparent conflict, which was used as an EPRDF regime-stabilizing tool through authoritarian actions.

#### **4.1. Ethnic Federalism as an Instrument of Repression, Co-optation, and Legitimacy**

The EPRDF employed ethnic federalism from 1991-2018 as a tool of political control and regime stability, using it as a technology of legitimacy, co-optation, and repression, as discussed below.

***Ethnic federalism as an instrument of legitimacy:*** The TPLF, which militarily took over state power in May 1991, was predominantly from a small ethnic group that was politically weak when it came to power (Habtu, 2005; Aalen, 2002) and had to earn political legitimacy to rule from both the Tigray people and other Ethiopians.

Within the TPLF internally, ethnic federalism was meant to free the Tigrayan people from the fear of previous political and economic dominations. Externally, the EPRDF offered the ethnic-based model of federalism as an answer to the "national question" as an ideological continuation of the Ethiopian Student Movement of the 1960s (Merera, 2012; Mehari & Abel, 2015). The EPRDF regarded nationality with ethnic persecution and inequality as the root cause of Ethiopia's political and economic problems, and the federal structure as the only way to grant ethno-regional rights (Lovise 2006; Arriola & Lyons, 2016). This aligns with what is remembered by the key informants: The EPRDF's then-governing structure earned legitimacy to rectify historical injustices, specifically to solve nationality questions that Ethiopia had been grappling with since the 1960s, when the ethnonationalism political struggle raised political consciousness among Ethiopia's socio-politically and economically underprivileged ethnic groups (KII#2<sup>4</sup> & KII#12)<sup>5</sup>. This indicates how the EPRDF used the political thought of the Ethiopian Student Movement for a sought of legitimacy, advocating for a united country and promoting voluntary commitment based on ethnic

<sup>4</sup> Personal Communication, with a senior researcher on Ethiopian politics based at the Addis Ababa University in February 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Personal Communication, with a senior politician of the former Oromo Liberation Front at Bishoftu and Adama in October 2024, respectively.

federalism. Through the introduction of the federal system, the EPRDF promised a new nation-building program that decentralizes power and gives ethnic groups decision-making authority to combat disintegrative tendencies. The introduced national celebrations, like *Hidar 29* (December 09), a celebration of Ethiopia's nations, nationalities, and peoples, and *Ginbot 20* (May 27), the yearly commemoration of regime change day, allowed the EPRDF to praise itself for reviving rhetorical legitimacy to rule (KII#10)<sup>6</sup>. These were used for earning legitimacy for the EPRDF with the promises to establish a nation-state of equals by putting an end to centuries of authoritarian rule as well as ethnic dominance; and to establish peace and stability, which, when combined, were supposed to hasten economic growth and prosperity for all citizens (KII# 07)<sup>7</sup>.

However, the federal system was adopted to earn legitimacy to rule and systematically control politics rather than genuinely respond to the political and social problems of the marginalized people in Ethiopia. The constitutional federal mechanism was established as a means of state organization and as an ideological tool of state legitimization to solidify EPRDF's dominant-party rule (Aalen, 2002; Lie & Berouk, 2018). The EPRDF systematically exploited the federal system as an instrument of legitimacy, thereby heightening tensions between contending nationalisms (Mebratu, 2023). This exacerbated already-existing tensions over historical grievances and divisions between regional and centralized power; the national oppression thesis of modern Ethiopian politics under the EPRDF regime allowed the political elite's discourse to produce narratives making ethnicity a defining trait of national and local politics at the expense of diversity (see Yonas, 2019; 2022).

Rather than guarantee multinational federalism, the EPRDF's federalism institutionalized a centralized state structure and bureaucracies, which harmed national unity and exacerbated ethnic polarization in the country. The federal system couldn't accommodate Ethiopia's ethnic diversity through political consensus and proper political means, but used it as a strategy of state legitimization for seizing and keeping power.

***Ethnic federalism as an instrument of co-optation:*** ethnic federalism was also used as an instrument of co-optation arrangement through power sharing and other socio-cultural benefits, both at the party and community levels.

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<sup>6</sup> Personal Communication, with a senior member of Prosperity Party (PP) at Addis Ababa in June 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Personal Communication, with a senior member of Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA) at Addis Ababa in June 2023.

At the party level, EPRDF used a co-optation tactic to consolidate and control political power through two political options made possible. Ensuring divide and rule is the first, while granting a limited self-rule is the second. First, the EPRDF, as a formula of power-sharing co-optation strategy, created an umbrella organization from the *de facto* alliance of the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM). The EPRDF was commonly considered as a euphemism for the TPLF, while the other three groups (the People's Democratic Organizations (PDOs) were ethnic satellite parties with little to no grassroots influence (Aregawi, 2001; Abbink, 2011) and remained to function as TPLF puppets under the guise of allied parties (Wondwosen & Záhořík, 2008; Mebratu, 2023). This provided a *limited self-rule* for these three PDOs as a co-optation agreement in which they accepted the EPRDF's political monopoly in exchange for limited self-rule, including the right to staff regional offices and exercise language rights. The PDOs joined the EPRDF's co-optation methods while simultaneously being monitored for possible removal once they started to work for the benefit of the local people. With this co-optation technique, the PDOs prioritize allegiance to the EPRDF over service to the people, demonstrating that the ruling party's objectives are opposed to those of the local populace.

Second, the instance of the country's biggest ethnic group- the Oromo- exemplifies the practice of *divide and rule*. Although OLF and TPLF worked together strategically to bring down the Derg dictatorship, the alliance between the victorious TPLF and the OLF could not last for long as the distrust and animosity between them reached a climax during the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) (Aalen 2002). The conflicting goals of the two groups—the OLF's desire to share power equal to that of the Oromo people and the TPLF's hegemonic goal of reshaping Ethiopia around the Tigrayan elite—were among the main causes of the severe tension between the two groups (Merera, 2012). When the TPLF brought together military captives of Oromo lineage from the war with the Derg, and together with defectors from the OLF, created the OPDO to claim legitimacy in Oromia, the Oromo political constituency saw the formation of two opposing parties, the OLF and the OPDO. The TPLF co-opted the OPDO to form the EPRDF as an umbrella party, and the OLF was finally compelled to withdraw from the TGE. In exchange for the allocation of largesse, this allowed the EPRDF to politically

suppress the OLF and use the OPDO to divide support for the OLF, weakening the political agency of the Oromo people (KII#02).<sup>8</sup>

The OLF leadership believed it could simply organize the enormous Oromo populace against the TPLF. Despite weakening OLF, the TPLF leaders were also unable to win over the Oromos with OPDO, but the Oromo elite's desired share of power has been frustrated as a political result of the conflict between the two<sup>9</sup>. This has caused the OLF to be given three different labels throughout the EPRDF regime: a strategic ally of the TPLF during the fall of the Derg (1974-1991), a political party that supported federation during the TGE (1991-1994), and a terrorist organization that endangered national integrity since 2011.

At the community level, using the federal system, the EPRDF co-opted the historically discriminated groups, as their ethnic identity and cultural rights, in the name of acknowledging the protection of their language and cultural rights that run through the ethno-federal constitutional framework (KII#10).<sup>10</sup> This was used as a part of imposing limited self-rule, the protection of language and cultural rights that have traditionally provided a sense of ethnic pleasure for several ethnic groups, but their democratic rights and regional autonomy are neglected in exchange under the EPRDF federal system.

***Ethnic federalism as an instrument of repression:*** ethnic federalism was also used by the EPRDF as an instrument of repression to divide and control the populace and suppress other ethnic-hardliner political organizations. The EPRDF championed the cause by including self-determination and secession as fundamental rights in the federal constitution. However, during its three decades in power, it only permitted Eritrea's independence; the OLF and Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) were not permitted (Yonas, T., 2024). Contrary to the EPRDF's expectations, when ethnic organizations began to seek their form of self-determination, including secession (Aregawi, 2001; Aalen, 2002), the EPRDF's de facto one-party state and its pledges to provide self-determination exposed how discontent develops in a multiethnic

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<sup>8</sup> Personal Communication, with a senior researcher on Ethiopian politics based at the Addis Ababa University in February 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Personal Communication, with senior members of the former Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO), and the current central committee member of Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), at Addis Ababa in October 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication with a senior member of Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA), in Addis Ababa in June 2023.

state run by its authoritarian government (Arriola, 2013). In pursuit of regime survival at the outset of revolutionary democracy, the EPRDF co-opted soft-liner ethnic nationalists, the PDOs, while suppressing hardliner ethnic nationalists, such as the OLF, the All-Amhara People's Organization (AAPO), and the ONLF were suppressed and excluded from the transition procedures since the 1990s, and some of them were labeled as terrorist groups.

The EPEDF party structure is another coercive method used by the regime. The ideology of democratic centralism allowed the EPRDF to interfere with the mandates of regional states and local governments (Asebe, 2021; Zekarias, 2020). The EPRDF appeared as the country's sole viable political party that controls not just the federal government but also all regional state administrations (Mercy, 2024). This was done either directly through its PDOs in the three states or indirectly through associated parties in the remaining five states.

In terms of decision-making, the five regional political parties, aside from the three PDOs, were granted the status of affiliate parties as coalition constituent members but were never promoted to full membership of the EPRDF Executive Committees, the organization's primary decision-making body. The EPRDF endorses the official party stance, which was unanimously supported by its 36 Executive Committee members drawn from four major parties (*aura parties*, TPLF plus PDOs), each of which contributed nine delegates. However, while having equal representation with the TPLF (nine representatives each), the three allied parties (PDOs) used to play minimal roles in this committee, while the five regional affiliates are completely unrepresented.

The single-party system controlled by the EPRDF made federalism a political tool and a mask for an authoritarian vanguard party undermining the idea of the separation of powers (Arriola, 2013; Ogbazghi, 2022). EPRDF's authoritarian nature and its political practice for implementing the federal system have resulted in three structural party layers: *the TPLF as the EPRDF's lynchpin, the three PDOs as EPRDF-affiliated parties, and the five other regional parties as EPRDF partners*. This EPRDF's authoritarian nature was enforced from the top down, oppressing society and undermining the core ideals of federalism. The party's structure demonstrated a clear contrast between theory and reality, with decentralization on paper but centralization in practice. The use of the democratic centralism system has harmed Ethiopia's functional federal system, decentralization, and democratization. The promised response to the nationality questions has been relapsed into a

centralized state structure, worsening political representation, power distribution, marginalization, and economic exploitation.

#### **4.2. Developmental State Model as an Instrument of Repression, Co-optation, and Legitimacy**

The EPRDF employed the developmental state model as an instrument of repression, co-optation, and legitimacy to keep political control and regime stability at the expense of both national development and democratization, as discussed below.

***Developmental state model as an instrument of legitimization:*** the EPRDF advocated for the developmental state model as an alternative policy for Ethiopia with a series of claims and justifications to rule the country based on the then circumstances and occurrences.

First, because the EPRDF was led by the Tigrayan ethnic minority, which accounts for less than 10% of the population, it sought to boost its legitimacy by providing rapid socioeconomic advances to both Tigrayans and Ethiopians. Internally, the TPLF aimed to alleviate poverty, a lack of investment, and the denigration of Tigrayans who felt economically excluded, while the TPLF's main base in Tigray benefited from preferential access to resources (Plaut, 2014). For Tigray people, developmentalism ideology was used with the assumption of social change, focusing on poverty eradication to gain support and control of the region in the guise of fostering economic progress and providing adequate living conditions for the Tigray people.

Second, the Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000) and the 2001 TPLF split provided the EPRDF to strengthen its realization of a developmental state model to legitimize its authority. The Ethio-Eritrean war revealed long-standing tensions and instability among the core TPLF (Brown & Fisher, 2020; Gebreluel, 2023). The war caused a schism within the TPLF central committee, which was sharply divided into two factions: the Siye Abraha team, which backed the war, and the Meles Zenawi team, which was moderately opposed to it. Meles' critics accused him of surrendering the revolutionary soul to imperialism and favoring Eritrea over Ethiopia (De Waal, 2012). This sparked bitter dissension within the EPRDF, prompting the party's performance appraisal (*tehadiso*, i.e., renewal) that occurred after 10 years in power in 2001. The internal party debate took an ideological turn that outsiders found replete with references to *Bonapartism*, allowing Meles to

seize the opportunity to consolidate his power, honing and implementing the democratic developmentalism ideology (De Waal, 2012).

When the EPRDF split in 2001, the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) were one of the institutions most badly impacted by the political upheaval. This sparked a debate over the political economy, with rent-seeking and cronyism inside the EPRDF, as well as corruption allegations used to convict Siye (Labzaé & Planel, 2021). These prompted the EPRDF to undertake a significant process of conceptualizing revolutionary democratic doctrines, with Meles' seminal works, *African Development: Dead Ends and New Beginnings*, serving as a template for the Democratic Developmental State (Demiessie, 2017). This was followed by the release of *Building an Army in Revolutionary Democracy*, also known as the *Red Book*, serving as the theoretical foundation for the ENDF under the EPRDF at the time (Yonas T, 2024). This prompted the EPRDF to postpone the democratization process to solidify the developmental state, claiming that rent seeking and patronage within the ruling party were the most serious threats to this goal and needed to be completely eradicated (Medhane, 2012). This justified a paradigm shift from neoliberalism to a democratic developmental state that favors government intervention in the economy and prioritization of rural development.

As a result, Meles was perceived as a revolutionary statesman who developed a developmental state model because of his works advocating for a more interventionist model as an alternative approach for Ethiopia (Plaut, 2014). He was seen as the philosopher-king of the EPRDF; these provided the basis for his support both inside and beyond the organization. This at least provided Meles a charismatic credibility to present himself to the world as a leader dedicated to development and economic prosperity and to oversee both the TPLF and the EPRDF parties until he died in 2012. Therefore, by extension, the EPRDF gained legitimacy to rule Ethiopia by emerging from both the Ethio-Eritrea war and the 2001 TPLF split crisis. This not only solidified the EPRDF's position but also gave it the ability to assert its ability to carry out a developmental state program as an appropriate economic policy to transform Ethiopia.

Third, following the catastrophic drought and food crises of 2002, the EPRDF issued the 2002 Foreign Policy, which identified "poverty and backwardness" as the primary threat to national security and emphasized the need for rapid growth as a necessary response (Lavers, 2016, p. 04). This allowed EPRDF to gain internal legitimacy from groups who prioritize poverty eradication

through a developmental state model, relying on performance-based legitimacy. Externally, the EPRDF was able to achieve a Western backing based on its pursued development goals and foreign policy, which were utilized to gain international credibility. A regional hegemonic narrative was developed to legitimize the development project and positioned Ethiopia as a natural partner in efforts to achieve regional stability and counterterrorism, becoming one of Africa's largest aid and investment recipients (ICG, 2012; Aden & Alvaro, 2022).

However, as remembered by key informants, the purpose was to build a collection of performance and discourse that would alter people's subjective opinions and defend the regime by presenting the state's image and using discursive reasons to explain to the public why the developmental state model is appropriate and essential for Ethiopia. Using performance-based legitimacy to support the regime's input legitimization approach, the EPRDF claimed that developmental policies and practices would increase the country's socio-economic transformations (KII# 08 & #05).<sup>11</sup> As part of a legitimization effort, the choice of a developmental state included both rhetorical and practical programs, as mentioned in the two main political documents, *Building an Army in Revolutionary Democracy and African Development: Dead Ends and New Beginnings*. These political documents advocated for a more interventionist developmental state model as an alternative policy for Ethiopia, as key components of the party's legitimacy claim. Although a new economic dynamic arose, the developmental state model, which aimed to legitimize the regime by proving its ability to offer services, fell short of its goals.

***Developmental state model as an instrument of co-optation:*** EPRDF emphasized that revolutionary democracy helps to achieve rapid economic and social development through a project of state-led development that would expand economic opportunities as a means of securing mass compliance (Lavers, 2024).

The party, the rural mass, the tiny urban bourgeoisie, and foreign investors are the primary co-opted groups in the state's developmental paradigm (Plaut, 2011; Alagaw, 2022). For the rural masses, the EPRDF asserts that developmental policies and practices generate economic advantages by raising the country's average income to co-opt sectors of the society for targeted distribution of land, jobs, and social security systems. Rural communities were

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<sup>11</sup> Personal Communication, with a senior member of Prosperity Party (PP) and Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA) at Addis Ababa in June 2023.

co-opted to get access to power, education, and road and rail infrastructure (Asnake, 2011; Mebratu, 2022). The one-to-five community networks were used to organize co-optation strategies for getting benefits from these development model projects. Besides, membership in the EPRDF facilitates employment for young graduates or the promotion of civil servants to better positions, which has been proven as a method for sustaining and enlarging the ruling party's popular base and for eroding the opposition (Aalen, 2014). Even expanding economic opportunities as a means of maintaining mass compliance was focused on raising smallholder agricultural productivity through state-controlled distribution of agricultural inputs (Lavers, 2024).

The EPRDF has also employed a developmental state model as a strategic co-optation strategy to establish a patronage structure that includes investment funds, state companies, and private corporations. For example, 10,000 hectares of land were allocated to Saudi Ethiopian billionaire Mohammed Hussein Al-Amoudi to grow rice and other crops in Gambella, while 54,000 hectares were allocated to the EPRDF's own Tendaho Sugar Factory in the Awash area of the Afar region to grow sugar cane (Plaut, 2014). Another major beneficiary was the TPLF-affiliated *Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT)*, whose subsequent fund presidents were all well-known TPLF supporters (Labzaé & Planel, 2021). Other business elites like the *Metal and Engineering Corporation (Metec)* were also co-opted to keep control over the country's economy, emerging as the principal commercial partner of both the state and the army (Labzaé & Planel, 2021). Additionally, under the pretense of a developmental state, the EPRDF focused its agricultural efforts, giving the Indian company Emami Biotech 40,000 hectares to produce biofuel in Oromia; the Indian company Shapooji Pallonji Group 54,000 hectares to produce biofuel in Benishangul Gumuz; the Indian company White Fields Cotton 10,000 hectares in the South Omo region; and the Indian company Karuturi Global 100,000 hectares for the production of roses and crops in Gambella (see Plaut, 2011). Through these cooptation strategies, the EPRDF controlled the financial sector, and the centralization of rent-using state and party-owned corporations shows how the EPRDF used co-optation to gain power to further its economic accumulation to secure political power.

***Developmental state model as an instrument of repression:*** The developmental state was also used as an instrument of repression of political forces and the wider public, using three targeted strategies: the politico-administrative system, legal proclamations, and external opportunities.

Firstly, EPRDF uses a *politico-administrative system* that systematically defines development as a political process that is emphasized as essential to national survival and must be followed by economic and social processes to set up a political climate that supports a faster development process. To achieve this highly state-directed economic growth by transforming state institutions, particularly the bureaucracy, and controlling state finance was justified (Gebreluel, 2023; Labzaé & Planel, 2021). For the EPRDF, the new economic structures and institutions required their own political organization, such as a hegemonic party, whereas human rights, free press, and strong parliament distract the agendas of the developmental state (Medhane, 2012).

Branding poverty as an existential threat to the survival of Ethiopia, the EPRDF securitized developmental state projects. To provide infrastructure, educational opportunities, and GDP growth that focused on resource distribution and how this ties the masses to the regime, the EPRDF controlled crucial sectors like agriculture, urbanization, industrialization, business, banking, and communications (KII #05 & KII#09).<sup>12</sup> This has caused a forcible eviction of local inhabitants from their properties, contributing to Ethiopia's problematic link between political instability, land grabbing, and economic progress (Mebratu, 2022). This securitization of development established and preserved the power of the regime, indicating its authoritarian political economy (Fisher & Anderson, 2015). The ideology served as a tool of strengthening authoritarian control without bringing about structural change or a notable decrease in poverty. Its harsh and oppressive use in the name of development has impacted the nation's federalization and democratic efforts.

Organizing the community into groups from top to bottom was another political-administrative strategy used to repress society. A one-to-five system was implemented starting in 2011, requiring every five homes to be encouraged to attend meetings and get familiar with the developmental discourse (Labzaé & Planel, 2021). These networks were utilized to repress non-members and organize peasants for community development initiatives. The peasants, civil servants, students, and even children at elementary schools are organized on this basis; this mobilization process has predictably blurred boundaries between the party and the state (Aalen, 2014). These networks allowed the EPRDF as surveillance and propaganda tools to closely monitor

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<sup>12</sup> Personal communication, with a senior member of Prosperity Party (PP) and Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA) at Addis Ababa in June 2023.

all sectors of society, using them as a communication channel for party affairs and for controlling dissent.

Second, the criticism of the developmental state rhetoric was how it has employed judicial repression. To mention some of them, the *Land Expropriation Proclamation* No. 455/2005, for instance, granted the federal and regional government institutions unfettered authority to expropriate land without the landholders' agreement under the pretense of the developing state. The government takes away landholders' ownership rights and gives them to private and corporate investors if the land is judged necessary for a public purpose (Mebratu, 2022). Public protests over concerns, including uneven access to resources and a lack of political representation, were sparked by the widespread land grabs, evictions, and human rights violations that followed (Asebe, 2021). The complaints of the communities that are displaced in the process from the peripheral territories were easily contained or ignored – particularly if they are pastoralists (Plaut, 2014).

Additionally, as part of a legal repressive strategy to stop or impede rival coalitions from disrupting the horizontal distribution of power, the EPRDF put into effect three legal frameworks after the 2005 elections: the *Anti-terrorism Proclamation* (Proclamation 652/2009), the *Civil Society and Charities Proclamation* (Proclamation 621/2009), and the *Freedom of Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation* (Proclamation 590/2008). Proclamations 590/2008 and 621/2009, with their restricted and restrictive terms, have stifled the formation of civil society groups and a concomitant democratic culture, as well as the opposition political parties and media's efforts to democratize (KII#04 & KII#06).<sup>13</sup> This restricted the involvement of both foreign and local CSOs in terms of theme engagement and financial resources. In addition, Proclamation No. 652/2009, the parliament designated the OLF and ONLF, among three others, as terrorist organizations in 2011. These legal frameworks gave the EPRDF an advantage in the horizontal distribution of power by institutionalizing them as repressive weapons for criminalizing, persecuting, intimidating, and silencing rival political and social groups (Abbink, 2011; Mercy, 2024). In addition to legal persecution, the EPRDF utilized force to stifle protests and eliminate opposition groups. Strengthened by new legislation and executive branches, followed by a military operation, the EPRDF continued to suppress the ONLF, Ginbot 7, and OLF. Yonas Tariku

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<sup>13</sup> Personal Communication with Civil Society organizations, Executive Managers based in Ethiopia, in November 2023 at Addis Ababa.

(2024) conducted a thorough analysis of the EPRDF's coercive response against these groups: direct military operations by the ENDF; using regional paramilitary forces (also known as *Liyu Hayil*); and using local militias. As a result, the police and security services gained previously unheard-of capabilities by utilizing these aggressive forces in conjunction with the three harsh laws. Furthermore, the EPRDF fabricated and employed tortured confessions as a repressive tactic to intimidate and limit political expression and freedom, which were then utilized to shift the burden of evidence onto the accused in court (Mebratu, 2022).

Thirdly, the EPRDF took advantage of the globalization of technology and the counterterrorism goal to suppress dissent and the general populace in the guise of the developmental model state. The rise of social media and technology, in tandem with the Arab Springs and other international social movements, began to reveal the authoritarian inclinations of the Ethiopian state through online activism. The 2011 Ethiopian Muslim Protests were Ethiopia's first instance of digital activism that started to expose the government's harsh reactions to concerns from Muslims and to condemn the Majlis's misbehavior (Eyob, 2020). Furthermore, a group of activists known as the "Zone 9 bloggers" launched a social and political commentary website in 2012 that was frequently critical of the EPRDF administration. This was followed by the design and enactment of the Information Network Security Agency's (INSA) Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation in 2012 to suppress any dissent from digital activism (Gagliardone & Goloooba-Mutebi, 2016). For instance, in April 2014, members of the "Zone 9 bloggers" were detained and accused under the broad anti-terrorism statute for their ties to foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and critical writings about the government. This became an integral component of the EPRDF's repressive growth route, and it was used to intimidate, attack, and suppress journalists and critical opposition, indicating the formal adoption of digital repression by the EPRDF dictatorship in Ethiopia.

Besides, the EPRDF used the global war on terrorism since 2001 as a form of opportunistic repression in response to the international pressure to combat terrorism to put pressure and condemnation on internal political actors. This led to the promulgation of the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation by which the EPRDF designated the ONLF and the OLF as terrorists in 2011, conflating counterinsurgency and counterterrorism (Yonas T, 2024). Then, the Telecom Fraud Offences Proclamation extended the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation's provisions to the online sphere as a form of technological repression. These

opportunistic and digital repressions allowed the INSA to review the profiles of those found guilty under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation to protect the national information space using cyber technology systems.

### 5. Conclusion

Ethiopia's EPRDF established a governmental structure based on revolutionary democracy, ethnic federalism, and the developmental state model following 1991. This EPRDF regime built a political control mechanism based on revolutionary democratic principles, contrary to the optimism through an autocratic centralist state authority from 1991 to 2018. The federalism system and the developmental state model were used as a means of co-opting, legitimizing, and repressing for political control and regime stability. Under the guise of these ideologies, the EPRDF has looked to set up a monopoly on power that would serve as the center of authoritative and coercive authority, thereby promoting unequal economic and social status and an uneven distribution of political resources.

These tactics stayed a double-edged sword, allowing for monopolistic political control while also igniting opposition based on long-standing frustrations about the ambiguities and inconsistencies between revolutionary democratic concepts and actions. Using both ethnic federalism and the developmental state model as technologies of repression, co-option, and legitimacy puts Ethiopia at risk of authoritarian one-party rule. The co-optation strategy of ethnic federalism as a response to the nationality question and the developmental state model as a response to addressing poverty, patronage distribution, and delivering socioeconomic transformation remain to be resolved political and economic equality and access to and control of economic resources. Besides, the procedural legitimacy of democratic centralism was insufficient to defend the EPRDF from regime change in 2018. The EPRDF's heavy-handed centralized authority has backfired and fueled popular resistance, sparking a series of protests and opposition, resulting in waves of social movements seeking regime change, allowing the people to promote collective claims against the EPRDF, sparking a democratic transition, and generating prospects for political transformation.

All strategies utilized by the EPRDF enabled recurring transformative events, political opportunities, and subsequent popular movements that challenged the EPRDF's hegemonic power politics. Social mobilization, which resulted in collective actions by disadvantaged groups from many sects, eventually contributed to the collapse of the EPRDF regime in 2018. The 27-year history

of the EPRDF, Ethiopia's political evolution, has seen periods of resistance against authoritarian leadership, which finally prompted regime change in 2018, bringing Abiy Ahmed to power. The failure of the EPRDF indicates that a political ideology may not only be used to gain support and legitimacy, but it can also serve as a fundamental foundation for accelerating political chances for regime transition.

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