The Political and Institutional Determinants of the Development of Amhara Nationalism in Ethiopia

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Abstract

This article engages with the discursive narratives, ideological othering, and institutional flaws that reinforce the development of Amhara nationalism. The findings show how Ethiopia's ethnolinguistic-based federal arrangement, founded on a political discourse about national oppression, leads to Amhara nationalism. The article examines the political and institutional determinants of Amhara identity formation and mobilisation in post-1991 Ethiopia. Using a qualitative research methodology, it gathers data from sources such as documents, broadcast and social media, and key informant interviews to argue that the origins of the Amhara's sense of victimisation lie in good part in the replacement of centralised one-nation nationalism with a non-representative devolved system; having been left out during the institutionalisation of the current political system, the Amhara now demand to be integrated into that system. This could be an entry-point to the development of constitutional and institutional designs that address the limitations of the multinational federal system and its propensity for conflict.

Keywords: *Amhara nationalism, discursive narratives, political determinants, institutional designs, Ethiopia*

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1. Introduction

In most African states, nationalism is associated with colonialism and anti-colonialism. Ethiopian nationalists, by contrast, trace their origin to a remote past and emphasise their historical rootedness in ancient times. Yet, while this is so, in Ethiopia's contemporary political and scholarly discourse ethnicity and nationalism are largely framed in two competing models that could be described as Pan-Ethiopian nationalism, on the one hand, and ethnonationalism, on the other. These models became polarised after the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) institutionalised the latter as an organising principle of the polity. Pan-Ethiopian nationalism envisages an idealised national identity or supra-ethnic identity into which ethnic groups subsume themselves; ethnonationalism, in contrast, sees "Ethiopianness" as the aggregate output, or sum total, of a range of ethnic groups that otherwise remain distinct.

Competing ethnonationalisms are to an extent the outcomes of the institutional legacy of modern Ethiopian nationalism. Ethnonational movements such as the Eritrean, Tigrean, Oromo and Somali movements emerged in the 1960s in the context of a highly diverse polity. The Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) of the 1960s and 70s articulated ethnonational claims in Marxist terms; at the same time, state aggrandisement presented Ethiopia as a unified nation under the imperial crown of Haile Selassie I – a vision that was not uncontested. The ESM rejected the idea of Ethiopia as a nation, seeing it instead as made up of diverse cultures and semi-autonomous elements. Ethiopia, it was held, was as a multinational state restrictively defined through the prism of Amhara cultural hegemony. This line of thinking came to shape Ethiopia's political discourse and the way the state is viewed, and over the past four decades it has led to the rise of increasingly vociferous ethnoregional movements (Semahagn, 2014).

Beginning in 1991, Ethiopia shifted from a centralist state into a constitutionally entrenched ethnic-based organisation (Dereje, 2013). The then-ruling EPRDF claimed to be the successor of the ESM and adopted a unique federal arrangement. "New frontiers in Ethiopian politics" appeared in which ethnic groups became building blocks in the Ethiopian polity (Andreas, 2003). The year

1991 marked not a mere regime change; it was a turning point at which the Ethiopian state was fundamentally restructured (Dereje, 2013). In particular, it marked the institutionalisation of a state system premised on the narrative of "Amhara domination".

As this article will be arguing, the constitutional and federalisation project was designed by ethnonationalist movements that raised arms for self-determination – and since that historical moment, the Amhara people, who otherwise subscribe peaceably to the notion of an Ethiopian national identity, have become the objects of ongoing ethnic target practice.

In this regard, "Amhara identity" has been a centre of political and academic debate, especially among the "Amhara elites" and Ethiopianists abroad – a political debate initiated following the non-representation of the Amhara in the 1991 transitional process. Studies on Amhara identity, such as those by Tegegne (1998), Pausewang (2005), Michael (2008), Admasu (2010), and Birhanu (2015), describe "Amhara" both as an ethnic identity and a supra-ethnic category. Some scholars, such as Tegegne and Admasu, have considered the circumstances and political developments that could galvanise an Amhara ethnic consciousness in the future. However, these studies assumed a situation in which most Amhara people subscribe to pan-Ethiopian nationalism. Circumstances have changed, however, and heated political mobilisation along the Amhara ethnic line has prevailed.

This in turn raises the need for a systematic understanding of the formation of Amhara ethnicity and what it means for the current political system. While studies and commentaries have been written on the protests and instability Ethiopia has witnessed in recent years, little has been said about the rising potency of Amhara nationalism and its implications for the country's political system. This article seeks to contribute to bridge the gap and provide an outline of the role that the post-1991 political system has played in the rise of Amhara nationalism and how this nationalism could indeed impact productively on the working of the federal system.

The argument is that, since 1991, ethnicity has been the predominant vehicle for articulating political conflict in Ethiopia.

In the process, Amharas have come increasingly to feel that they can better protect their interests by identifying themselves as a single ethnicity rather than by subscribing to a pan-Ethiopian national identity – all of which has important implications for the current discontent and the future of Ethiopia. The discourse of Amhara nationalism appears to differ from that of the two competing nationalisms, pan-Ethiopianism and ethnonationalism. While the latter is the antithesis of the former, Amhara nationalism is a reaction to ethnonationalism; however, except for its opposition to the thesis of national oppression, Amhara nationalism accepts the existing political organisation and federal order, albeit on the basis that significant revision is needed.

As such, the underlying questions this article seeks to answer are these:

- *In what ways do the post-1991 political discourse and its institutions contribute to the development of Amhara ethnicity?*
- *What are the political and institutional implications of Amhara ethnicity under the existing political system?*

The discussion is organised as follows. The next section sets out the article's theoretical and methodological approaches. Section three reviews the limits of the nation-state as a nation-building design in the context of diverse societies and in view of the fragile nature of multinational federal systems in post-conflict states. Section four considers the ethnonational reaction to the one-nation nation-building project and transition to a new political order. Section five discusses the narratives, ideological othering, and institutional flaws that led to the rise of reactive Amhara nationalism. The sixth section explores the implications of Amhara political mobilisation for the current political system. The final section provides a conclusion.

2. Theoretical and methodological approaches

This study is informed by a constructivist approach to ethnicity, especially that formulated by Fredrick Barth. According to Barth (1998), ethnicity is fluid, and ethnic boundaries are not stable but change in response to political and historical contexts. In Ethiopian political discourse, the fluidity and variability of Amhara ethnic identity is indeed coming to the fore.

Barth's other constructivist proposition is that the characteristics of ethnicity are both ascribed by others as well as self-ascribed – in the latter case, this is determined by members of the group. The varying nature of the arguments and opinions regarding the Amhara identity relate to the in-group conception of Amhara identity, which appears to vary greatly. This is partly the result of the fact that the Amharas are not politically mobilised along ethnic lines, barring the exception of the short-lived All Amhara People's Organisation (AAPO). Conversely, the out-group conception of Amhara identity presumes the presence of a cohesive Amharic-speaking group. In this regard, movements among other ethnic groups have centred on a discourse, rooted in the student movement of the 1960s and 70s, about "Amhara domination".

Barth's conception of ethnic identity as fluid and relational is central to understanding Amhara nationalism[33] because Amhara ethnic sentiment becomes more and more visible as other ethnic groups set about mobilising themselves. The rise of Amhara ethnic mobilisation is the result of problems to do with the replacement of centralised state structures with non-representative devolved structures, problems which are compounded by a dominant discourse espousing the "national oppression" thesis.

Qualitative research for this study is based on the paradigm of interpretivism, which considers the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live. Data were gathered from a variety of sources, among them documents such as magazines and party programmes; broadcast and social media, including audio recordings of speeches by and debates among, inter alia, political officials and Amhara activists; and key informant interviews. Thirteen interviews were conducted with key informants such as officials of the National Movement of Amhara (NaMA) and Amhara Prosperity Party (APP); Amhara activists; academics; and displaced individuals from Oromia who are defined as Amhara.

3. From nation-state to fragile federation

During the decolonisation and post-colonial period, the emphasis

33 In this article, the phrases "Amhara ethnicity" and "Amhara nationalism" are used interchangeably.

of African countries was on securing the territorial integrity of the state along the lines of Western models of nation-state-building. The first generation of African leaders were engaged with nation-building, their aim having been to realise the ideal of "one-nation" in multilingual, multireligious, multicultural, and multi-ethnic contexts (Olukoshi & Laakso, 1996). Ethiopian state formation has its own unique features, as it drew on a combination of precolonial, colonial, and post-colonial factors (Clapham, 2002). Ethiopia is the only African state (except for Liberia) that escaped direct colonialisation. While the wider region was under the siege of the tripartite European colonial powers in the first decades of 20th century, Ethiopia was the only country that took part in the territorial demarcation (Bahru, 2010). As a result, it has been said that despite the fact that Ethiopia is not the creation of Europeans, the state as everyone knows it today is no older than other African states (Markakis, 1999).

Ethiopia's long-established and politically dominant state system (ideologically compounded of ingredients from orthodox Christianity, historical mythologies, and written language, notably Amharic) claimed that its members (that is, those who associate themselves with the state) were destined to govern the surrounding territories and peoples (Clapham, 2002). The state was not exclusively owned by a particular group, and individuals who originated from various identity groups could join the royal court. This was possible only if those individuals associated themselves with the state through the adoption of orthodox Christianity, the Amharic language, and Geez (Amharic) names (Chernetsov, 1993; Clapham, 2002). However, owing to the nature of the state itself, the cultures and communities of these individuals had no chance of recognition and equal treatment (Clapham, 2002).

Liberals and socialists were for a long time certain in their expectation that ethnic, racial, and national identifications would wither away as the unification of the world was achieved through international trade and mass communication (Hutchinson & Smith, 1996). However, as Connor (1999) puts it, ethnonational forces have been a political reality in most states of the world irrespective of geographic location, level of economic development, democratic culture, religion, or ideology (Connor, 1999). Ethnonational

mobilisation is a universal phenomenon in ethnic groups' struggles with the state to claim autonomy, representation, or a fair socio-economic share (Kymlicka, 2006). Despite the presence of a few homogeneous states, the notion that the borders of political authority can be equated with national identity in the name of the nation-state has consequently remained rather more of a chimera than a reality (McGarry & Keating, 2006). Notably, in post-colonial Africa, nation-state-building faced challenges from ethnonationalist assertion and mobilisation. Davidson (1993) ascribes the causes of the crisis of post-colonial African states to the pursuit of the "nation-building" project in ways that give primacy to the European nation-state model and side-line Africa's socio-political structures and other realities.

Emulating the ideologies of the long-established and politically dominant state system, the Ethiopian state promoted its own version of Ethiopian nationalism in its nation-building process (Markakis, 1999). The notion of nation-state-building was not convenient in the light of the reality of Africa's diverse states. The Ethiopian reality is no exception, given that various linguistic, religious, and cultural groups became part of the state after the late 19th century. Markakis (2021) maintains that the policy Ethiopia and Sudan adopted in order to promote national integration – namely, the assimilation of diverse groups – is what led to the rise of ethnonational movements. The desire for unity and territorial integrity through centralisation of power at the expense of distinct groups led in the 1960s to reaction by ethnocultural groups and mobilisation against the nation-building project (Assefa & Zemelak, 2018).

By the end of the 1970s, the idea of Ethiopia as a nation was being challenged by the radical student movement with its Leninist-Stalinist leanings. The country was instead thought of as a multinational state which had been defined narrowly under Amhara-Tigre hegemony (Bahru, 2014). The issue was first raised in an article by Wallelign (1969), entitled "On the question of nationalities in Ethiopia", which has influenced the country's political discourse ever since. The argument Wallelign makes is that Ethiopia is not a nation; rather, it is a nation of nations, which he characterises as a collection of nationalities. He also asserts that the country was in the grip of national oppression

due to the imposition of Amhara cultural and political hegemony on other nationalities. Borrowing Fanon's terms, Mekonnen argues that Ethiopian nationalism is a fake nationalism wearing an Amhara mask. As he remarks controversially, "What is this fake nationalism? Is it not simply Amhara and to a certain extent Amhara-Tigre supremacy?" (Wallelign, 1969). The ethnicity of other ethnonational movements is thus centred on this speculative notion of "Amhara domination", one which is rooted in the varying interpretations of the formation of the modern Ethiopian state. In other words, the "national question" was the articulation of ethnonationalisms by the ESM in a Leninist-Stalinist manner.

The ESM was successful as the gravedigger of the imperial regime; however, there was controversy within the student body politic on the national question – disagreement which manifested itself in the organisations that broke out from the ESM. While the EPRP and All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (known by its Amharic acronym, MEISON) pursued class struggle under the banner of pan-Ethiopianism, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) adopted the national liberation struggle as their core mission (Merera, 2006). After the class-based parties were wiped out by the military group the Derg, ethnonationalist movements gained momentum that saw them come to dominate the political field and seize power in an overthrow of the Derg.

The new political system established in 1991 was thus antithetical to the regimes of the past, with the government encouraging ethnic mobilisation and ethnic-based self-government based on the Soviet federal model. Many states embrace federal arrangements to maintain territorial integrity and manage intra-state conflict through the accommodation of diversity. This was the main rationale for the adoption of post-Cold War federal arrangements (McGarry & O'Leary, 2009; Choudhry & Hume, 2011). In this vein, some African states adopted federalism and devolution in their post-conflict dispensations, among them South Africa (1995), Ethiopia (1995), Sudan (2005), Kenya (2010), South Sudan (2011), and Somalia (2012).

The hallmark of post-conflict federations is drawing internal borders that ensure the territorial autonomy of those ethnic

minorities that constitute a majority in a region. The division of powers between different levels of government is designed to ensure that no national group is left out and has sufficient powers to protect itself from economic and political disadvantage. However, this is not always the case in practice. In some federations, such as Ethiopia, the design served merely as a fragile experiment (Kymlicka, 2006). Steytler & De Visser (2015) describe African federations as "fragile", thereby signifying that federal arrangements designed to address the fragility of the state are themselves fragile.

The TPLF, the ethnonationalist group which prevailed in the armed struggle against the Derg, established a coalition, the EPRDF, and seized central power in 1991. As mentioned, the EPRDF claimed to be the main successor of the ESM, accordingly advocating for the rights of nationalities to self-determination up to and including secession, as well as developing a form of federalism in which ethnicity is an organising principle of the polity. The primary reason for adopting federalism was the need to respond to the "national question" surrounding the demands of ethnonationalist groups for self-determination (Assefa & Zemelak, 2018). However, after three decades of experimentation with ethnic politics, the "national question" endures, given that numerous groups still seek recognition, self-government, and political participation. Indeed, the number of ethnonationalists to wage armed struggles against the EPRDF regime has been not much less than the number that did so against the Derg regime.[34]

4. Reaction to the one-nation nationalism project

It is a sociological reality that, with few exceptions, countries in the world are inhabited by at least more than two distinct groups. This results in tensions between them. Throughout history, countries have used a variety of mechanisms to overcome the challenges of diversity, ranging from methods for eliminating differences to methods of managing differences (McGarry & O'Leary, 1993). In Ethiopia, long-standing institutional arrangements aimed at

34 Throughout the past three decades, there have been continuing armed struggles in Afar, Amhara, Somali, Oromia, Gambella, and Benishangul-Gumuz. Rebel groups during the Dergue were more violent and encompassed the Eritrean and Tigray liberation struggles, the EPDM forces in the regions of Amhara, the OLF in Oromo territories, and the Afar and Ogaden liberation struggles.

regulating ethnic diversity have, paradoxically, contributed to a series of nationalist mobilisations. Nourished by the autocratic nature of successive regimes, these groups have finally managed to push Ethiopia into political crisis (Semir, 2019).

The roots of ethnonational reaction can be discerned in Ethiopia's recent half-century history between its liberation from Italian occupation in 1941 and the overthrow of the military regime in 1991 (Andreas, 2003). Absolute power and state aggrandisement were the hallmarks of the long reign of Emperor Haile Selassie. The forging of Amharic as a national language, the placement of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church under the authority of the emperor, the erosion of the federal pact with Eritrea, and the establishment of modern bureaucratic institutions such as the military and ministry of interior – all of these were designed to serve the centralised state. The socialist military regime thereafter was but a replica of its predecessors in terms of centralisation and its conception of the state.

Institutional arrangements designed to manage ethnic diversity in imperial Ethiopia caused the rise and proliferation of ethnoregional movements. From the perspective of these movement, the nation-building project that aspires to one-nation nationalism – that is, "Ethiopianness" – was seen as a tool of national oppression and a "mask of Amhara domination" (Mekonnen, 1969). Nationalist movements took up arms for greater autonomy and self-determination, developments which culminated in 1991 when the EPRDF seized central power. At the Peace and Democracy Conference in Addis Ababa in July 1991, the vast majority of participants were precisely these nationalist liberation organisations (Andreas, 2003).

The transitional process (1991–1994) may be described as a revolution in that it was a full-scale reversal of the centrist political system which had been developed over decades. A conference endorsed Eritrea's independence, while the transitional constitution, known as the Transitional Charter, recognised self-determination and secession as rights of territorially based cultural communities (Andreas, 2003). It also established a Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) to facilitate adoption of a new constitution. The TGE was committed to restructuring

the country on the basis of ethnolinguistic criteria. An ever-influential proclamation of the TGE, "the national self-government proclamation" (Proclamation No. 7/1992), created 14 ethnic-based regions and identified 64 ethnic groups. The Amhara were included in the listed ethnic groups and provided with a territorially demarcated region. It follows that the Transitional Charter was the foundation for the Constitution as well as for the federal design and the constituent units the latter established.

Given the provisions of the Transitional Charter, the EPRDF envisioned a new kind of state structure founded ethnicity. This was derived largely from a sense of ethnocultural injustice and marginalisation by the centrists of the past regime. Meles Zenawi, the then president of the TGE and chairman of the EPRDF, argued that "[we] cannot ignore that Ethiopia is a diverse country. Previous attempts to do that have led to wars, to fuelling nationalistic tendencies ..." (Lyons, 1996: 124). Hence, the new political system seemed to be designed in alignment with the interests of groups that favoured a weak centre, as they wanted to exercise the right to self-determination, and groups that felt oppressed by the central regimes that, as they believed, had been dominated by the Amhara (Lyons, 1996).

Although the Peace and Democracy Conference was remarkably inclusive with regard to mobilised ethnonational groups, pan-Ethiopian groups and parties were excluded by the EPRDF (Young, 2021). The EPRDF and its tactical ally, the OLF, were overwhelmingly represented both at the conference and in the TGE council (Lyons, 1996). The fact is that those ethnonationalists – particularly the TPLF-dominated EPRDF and OLF, all ardent supporters of the doctrine of self-determination – played a crucial role in drafting the Transitional Charter, the foundation of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) and the roadmap of the transitional period (Berhe & Geberesilassie, 2021).

At the same time, there was no group representing the interests of the Amhara. This contradicts ethnonationalists' designation of Amhara ethnic identity while affirming the non-appearance of Amhara political identity. As Meles (1991) himself said, "[W]e came across through the Amhara people and understand its problems.

Hence, hereafter the Amhara oppressed people will be represented by EPRDF." To manage this gap, the pan-Ethiopian member party of the EPRDF, the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), changed its name to the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM). Despite opposition, notably from the Amhara and most of the urban elites, the TGE rushed to complete the demarcation of ethnic-based regions before the adoption of the Constitution and before a national election (Admasu, 2010). Herein lies the fragility of the federal design that is the go-to effect with significant left-outs. As the account above seeks to suggest, the transitional period was a critical historical juncture that gave rise to Amhara nationalism both in its official and forms.

5. Political and institutional determinants of Amhara nationalism

5.1. Constitution-making: A victors' peace

The Constitution itself is a source of resentment for many Amhara elites. One of the major issues that arose during, and in the aftermath of, the Amhara protests that broke out in 2016 is a sense of victimisation due to exclusion from the making and implementation of the federal political order. The AAPO's nascent Amhara nationalism and pan-Ethiopian nationalism were sidelined in the constitution-making process because the EPRDF portrayed these as reactionary nationalisms aimed at restoring the old regime (Tsinat, 2006). The EDPM became a de facto Amhara organisation sharing power in the transitional government as well as participating in constitution-making.

This does not mean to say that people from the newly established Amhara region were not represented in the constitutional assembly. The fact, however, is that these representatives were hand-picked by the regional party, the EPDM. Information from senior members of the EPDM (ANDM) confirms this. A senior official of the EPDM (ANDM) summarised how individuals were selected to represent the Amhara in the constitutional assembly: "[T]here was a top-down assignment of individuals [whereby] a short-list was prepared by the party and the people were asked to [endorse] the names in the list" (KIIP04, Bahir Dar, 5 December 2019). Hence, the people did not have the opportunity to propose persons to represent them.

The members of the constitutional assembly selected by the party "elected" by the people to represent the Amhara supported the right of ethnic groups to secession. In contrast, in popular discussion of the draft constitution, there was strong opposition to that particular constitutional clause (among others).

Another senior official of the EPDM (ANDM), whose role was to coordinate public discussion of the draft constitution, recalls as follows:

> On the issue of the secession clause, almost all discussions … ended with objections presuming that it will disintegrate the country. From my practical experience in facilitating the discussion, attending plenary sessions and the discussions with my colleague before constitutional making, there is no single discussion that ended in accepting the secession clause (KIIP06, 20 November 2020, Addis Ababa).

A senior official of the EPDM (ANDM) was asked whether discussants had any ethnic consciousness while addressing their opinions in a way that benefits or hurts them as a group. The answer indicates that Amhara ethnic consciousness was not developed at the time:

> When the discussants accepted the right to self-determination of nations, nationalities, and peoples, it was not [from] considering [themselves] as part of those ethnic groups; rather, it was from the impression that the right deserves [to apply to] other nationalities (KIIP06, 20 November 2020, Addis Ababa).

This was the case perhaps because they did not consider themselves a distinct ethnic group claiming collective political rights. The lack of ethnic consciousness among the people was the result of the "Amhara people" rallying in support of pan-Ethiopian sentiment. Generally, the spirit of the Bolsheviks' assertion that "progressives [who] came out from the oppressive nation must support the right to the secession of oppressed nationalities" was the driving force that shaped the mind-set of participants in the constitution-making process.

The Amhara's sense of exclusion from the political life of the current system has in effect delegitimised the constitutional and federal order. An inclusive constitution-making process is a necessary condition for holding together divided societies. Consent is a crucial element for meaningful and legitimate constitutions, and is secured by providing the polity with a sense of authorship and ownership of the constitution and inclusion within it (Lerner, 2010). In this regard, the South African Constitution represents a rare achievement in overcoming the difficulties of creating a legitimate constitution in deeply divided societies. The Ethiopian Constitution, however, does not enjoy such legitimacy. The main opposition has come from the Amhara. The NaMA and APP claim that the Amhara were not consulted and properly represented during the constitution- making process and the redrawing of constituent units that followed. Even though the APP is a wing of the ruling Prosperity Party (PP), there are dissenting voices among its officials about the necessity of amending the Constitution. An official of the APP said:

> Neither the Constitution nor the federal arrangement are designed in a way that understands the historic relations of nations, nationalities and peoples or the history of the country. We believe that the Amhara people were not represented as a distinct and conscious ethnic group (KIIP 03, October 2020, Bahir Dar).

Both parties raise the criticism that the Constitution is not authentic enough to protect Amhara interests – a theme reiterated in Amhara activism and mobilisation, especially post-2018.

5.2. Amhara victimisation and the limits of the ethnic-territoriality approach

The institutional legacy of the FDRE Constitution and federal arrangement partly established the causes for the rise of Amhara ethnicity. The Constitution emphasised empowering the titular ethnic groups by providing for their territorial self-government and for them to turn themselves into the majority within these territories, thereby enabling them to gain territorial autonomy. Article 39(5) of the Constitution – in particular the phrase "an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory" – may be

seen as reflecting as an "ethnic territorial approach" (Van der Beken, 2014). Such an approach creates a new kind of minority vulnerable to discrimination and attacks by the titular groups. Regional constitutions have conferred special status to regionally empowered "indigenous" groups in order to develop a sense of "the son of the soil", while other groups are considered newcomers and treated as "second-class citizens" (Van der Beken, 2007).

The paradox of multinational federalism is thus that while it explicitly recognises diversity and guarantees territorial autonomy at the national level, it fails to do so at the subnational level (Kössler, 2018). The tendency to build replica nation-states has been seen clearly in relatively homogenous regional states such as Oromia, Tigray, and Somali.[35] Their constitutions give sovereign power only to dominant ethnic groups named by the regional state. By contrast, the Amhara state constitution has provisions that recognise territorially concentrated intra-state minorities. For such minority groups, it has created "nationality administrations" under articles 45(2) and 74, in particular the Awi, Himra and Oromo ethnic groups; similarly, a "nationality woreda" was established under ordinary law (Proc. No. 130/2006) for the Argoba ethnic group.

The Canadian federation offers good examples of creative mechanisms for accommodating differences. The differentiated rights of groups include self-government rights for what Kymlicka (1996) terms "national minorities" (Quebecois and Aboriginals) and polyethnic rights for "ethnic minorities" (immigrants). According to Kymlicka (1996), national groups in Canada are historic communities with homeland rights, whereas ethnic minorities are not "nations" and do not occupy homelands – they are, however, are free to maintain aspects of their ethnic heritages and practise old customs and traditions. There appears to be a similarity between the Ethiopian and Canadian mechanism inasmuch as "indigenous" groups with territorial concentration are guaranteed self-government. The case in point in the Amhara region is similar to the "self-government rights" in

35 The Oromia region fails to recognise not only dispersed minorities, but so too the Argoba (resident in the western and eastern Hararghe zones), the Zay (resident within and around Lake Ziway), the Gedeo, and the Yem. Tigray does not guarantee self-government rights for the Kunama, Erob, and Amhara minorities. The Somali Regional State refuses to recognise the Bantus and Shiekash despite the Somali people's cultural similarities with them.

Canada. However, there are indigenous minorities who relegated their self-government rights in regional states, as noted above. Moreover, unlike the case with Canadian group-differentiated and special-preservation rights, virtually no regional states in Ethiopia provide proportionate, guaranteed representation for dispersed and marginalised groups.

Given the absence of federal institutions in such contentious areas, intra-unit minorities are left at the mercy of local autocrats, as a result of which they continue to face various kinds of discrimination and marginalisation (Fiseha, 2017). This also encourages subnational elites to form homogeneous units of their own. Paradoxically, the ethnonationalists, who fought against one-nation nationalism ("Ethiopianness"), have now been building a replica of that nation-state model in their "home regions". This has violated the rights of minorities located within homogenising subnational units like these, ultimately forcing them into either assimilation or displacement; as a result, in recent years Ethiopia has come to have one of the world's largest populations of internally displaced people. For instance, the "Wolkayit Amhara identity question" has arisen partly due to reaction to the dominance of the Tigray language and culture. The Amhara in Wolkayit, the western part of the Tigray region, have faced the requirement of assimilating into the Tigray language and culture or facing discrimination, arrest and persecution (John, 2021). More widely, given the large number of Amhara living in various parts of the country for reasons related to historical and personal factors as well as government policies, these Amharas have been victims of attacks, such as ethnically motivated killings, and internal displacement, a situation that has endured for nearly three decades. Such deep-seated insecurity is one of the triggering factors for the emergence of Amhara nationalism.

In this regard, Amhara nationalists contend that the Amhara were not properly represented in the process of regional demarcation and that the government consulted with the neither local elites nor the general population. Indeed, delineating boundaries in the transitional period and its aftermath was politicised (Young, 2021). Teshome (2018) describes events as follows: "To be blunt, the harsh reality is, the ethnic 'Scramble for Ethiopia' was supervised by TPLF, OLF, and other like-minded organisations in

the early 1990s to determine who gets which pieces of the pie." Boundaries were typically delimited on the basis of language, a more observable marker than disputable history. To complete its tasks as quickly as possible, the boundary commission relied extensively on the work of the Derg's Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities as well as on Bender's 1976 language map (Vaughan, 2003).

The legacy of regional state demarcation in areas formerly part of the principal Amhara domains – Shewa, Gojjam, Wollo, and Gondar (Begemidir) – extended to other regions, notably Tigray, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Oromia, leading to the Amhara's claims of dispossession. Areas taken from Gondar and Wollo and incorporated into the Tigray region, such as Wolkayit and Raya, remain bones of contention and sites of identity mobilisation that attract international attention. Such claims are not unique to the Amhara: although they do not admit it officially, Tigray and Oromia lost large chunks of land to the Afar and Assosa Zone of the Benishangul-Gumuz region, respectively. Nonetheless, it is understandable if the Amhara now retrospectively reinterpret the politics of allocation in this fashion, given the country's power imbalance and their sense of exclusion from the political process. New, heightened territorial claims and disputes between the Amhara state and its neighbouring states, notably Tigray, are among the main fault lines giving rise to Amhara nationalism.

6. Discursive narratives directed against "the Amhara"

Accusations have been made that, for decades, the EPRDF and its core TPLF regime used revolutionary democracy as an ideological weapon to target Amharas. Since the 1980s, "revolutionary democracy", known in Amharic as "abiyotawi democracy", has been the central ideology of the TPLF. Bach (2011) describes revolutionary democracy as a doctrine which is neither revolutionary nor democratic but that "remains powerful as a fighting tool to exclude internal and external 'enemies'". Exclusion is inherent to this ideology, which the TPLF-led EPRDF used as a discursive weapon to weaken its opponents.

Notoriously, since 1991 the term Neftegna ("Amhara") has been used interchangeably with imkihtegna ("chauvinist") so as to

demonise political rivals. The spectre of an ethnonationalism that criminalises the Amhara as an oppressor is haunting Ethiopia. In the early years of the 1990s, when ethnic tension was its highest, the Amhara became the fitting choice for ethnic target practice. The people of "Amhara" were subjected to "a clearly orchestrated ethnic cleansing from the civil service, the military, key economic activities, and longstanding settlements outside of [their] ancestral lands" (Birhanu, 2015). People designated as Amhara were massacred in or evicted from the newly established ethnic-territorial regions; they were executed or displaced in areas of the Oromia region such as Bedeno, Arba Gugu, Garra Muleta, and Eastern Wollega; and large numbers were evicted from the south-west to the Amhara region (Tronvoll, 2002; Tesfaye, 2002). Such ethnically motivated tension and atrocities visited on "the Amhara" since 1991 and into the present have given momentum to the rise to reactive Amhara nationalism. As Teshome (2018) puts it, "the rise of Amhara nationalism was … a reaction to EPRDF-propagated discourse against the 'Neftegna' – often meaning Amhara".

Many ethnonationalists act as if the "Neftegna system" (the old imperial regime) were never removed and the 1974 revolution never happened. The EPRDF, for its part, believed that, although this system collapsed, it survived vestigially and that elite groups, bereft of power but loyal to its ideology, would aspire to regain long-standing interests (Mekonnen, 2017). As this notion spread to the territorial units, people defined as "Amhara" by titular groups were targeted and displaced, a situation that continues to this day. People's religious or ideological beliefs do not matter: once designated as ethnic Amhara, ordinary Christian and Muslim people are regarded as "Neftegna", as recent atrocities in Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz confirm.

Information from survivors of violence that claimed hundreds of lives among the Amhara community in the Oromia region on 1 November 2020 (Addis Standard, 2020) indicates that attackers and local administrators repeatedly said, "'Neftegna Amhara' do not deserve to be buried, let alone to live in this Oromo land." Most of the survivors to whom the author spoke were vulnerable Muslim women and children. One such woman said, "All the Muslims and Christians were targeted in the region, and they call

us 'Neftegna Amhara'; they told us as we have no place in that region." An elderly Muslim, also one of the survivors, said:

> We made the mistake of not paying attention to them. Before four years, the local governors instructed us to vacate the area because it is not our property. They will compel us to leave and confiscate our property for the Oromo, unless they forewarn us. They have completed the task now (interview, November 2020).

This testimony is but a sample of the suffering of Amhara residents "outside their home state". Amhara nationalists style their movement largely in response to the victimisation engendered by "anti-Amhara" narratives. Discursive attacks against the Amhara that equate "Neftegna" and timkihtegna have forced individuals to decide on their identity (re)configuration – and, most probably, to embrace the Amhara identity and join the mobilisation.

Amhara nationalists also make the wider criticism that the Constitution itself is based on the narrative of Amhara domination, arguing that it implicitly endorses the idea of "Amhara oppression and oppressed nationalities". Notably, the preamble recognises unjust historical relationships between people, especially in the phraseology, "[f]ully cognisant that our common destiny can best be served by rectifying historically unjust relationships and by further promoting our shared interests".[36] This, they argue, reiterates the "national oppression thesis" which blames the Amhara for the country's ills – and is something that needs to be revised.

The Amhara, under pressure and suffering oppression and expulsion in parts of the country, have the option of developing a reactive, defensive Amhara ethnic nationalism on the model of those who claim to have been oppressed by the Amhara in Ethiopia's earlier history. Amhara nationalists, who are critical of the federal design and have felt discriminated against from its inception, now demand to align themselves with it and address its fragility and lack of legitimacy.

36 Emphasis added.

7. Towards constitutional amendment and institutional design?

A closer look at Amhara activism seems to suggest that it would be a dilemma for it to support a multinational federalism strengthened with remedies or to pursue a Pan-Ethiopian agenda. However, for leading Amhara activists, Amhara nationalism is an antidote to deficits in the federal design rather than an instrument for restructuring the state to suit the actors' interests or exploiting the situation through identity-specific elements such as language, culture and ethnicity; it (Amhara nationalism) is an approach in which ethnic Amharas redefine their interests collectively around a sense of victimisation and the need to secure their survival (Mesganaw, 2018). On the basis of issues raised during the Amhara protests, political parties, notably the NaMA and APP, have adopted similar goals – the former put them in its programme, and the latter endorsed them at the 12th ANDM congress.

These major actors in Amhara political mobilisations do not reject the existing constitution in its entirety, nor do they reject the ethnic-based federal system. Rather, both the APP and NaMA demand constitutional amendments and action to remedy the current federal arrangement. The APP has advocated a multinational-brotherhood approach in which all regional states ensure both the group and individual rights of all citizens that were endorsed by the PP in the 2021 election campaign. According to the former president of NaMA, Desalegn Chanie,

> We need a democratic country in which [the] Amhara as an ethnic group are respected equally vis-à-vis other ethnic groups of the country, and an Ethiopian state that represents all ethnic groups, including [the] Amhara, which … [necessitates] inclusive dialogue and negotiation followed by constitutional amendment and some concessions on the federal design (interview, October 2020).

Nonetheless, the solutions are easier said than done, as they depend on a political reality in which almost all titular ethnic groups seek to maintain the status quo and fear that changes to it would harm their interests. Moreover, most of the claims of Amhara

nationalism call for a "thinking-out-of-the-box" approach that utilises extra-constitutional amendment mechanisms. This is so because the issues, or aspects of the constitutional text, requiring amendment relate, inter alia, to the spirit of the Constitution as premised on the national oppression thesis, that is to say, the preamble, as well as to the definition of "nations, nationalities and peoples" and the secession clause – none of which are amendable under the current amendment procedures.

Furthermore, the issue of territorial claims is highly sensitive, particularly when it comes to Wolkayit. Claims concerning the latter were raised by Amharas in the area in the hopes that they could be resolved within the regional state, Tigray. However, when the Tigray region and federal government tried to suppress the matter by detaining leaders of the Wolkayit Amhara Identity Question Committee, the Amhara region reacted and the issue took on strongly irredentist overtones. The "son of the soil" feelings that titular ethnic groups have for the territorial units that were established to enable them to exercise autonomy – along with the rigid positions taken in regard to this status quo – are very likely to create resistance to reform.

8. Conclusion

Informed by Barth's social-constructivist theory of identity formation and drawing on the literature of post-colonial nation-building, federalism, and constitutional design in divided societies, this article examines the political and institutional determinants of Amhara nationalism and its implication for the current political system. Competing nationalisms are to an extent the outcome of institutional arrangements put in place during the imperial Ethiopia-produced reactive ethnonationalist movements. Attempts at building a nation-state through educational, political and military institutions were perceived as national oppression by some non-Amharic-speaking elites.

After the overthrow of the imperial system in the revolution of 1974, the installation of a Marxist military regime, and its subsequent ousting in 1991, Ethiopia's new regime sought to redress the nationality question by introducing a federal system, modelled on the USSR, in which federal units were defined by

ethnolinguistic criteria. Each of the major language groups thus acquired an autonomous state within the federation. The area within which Amharic was widely spoken as a native language hence became the Amhara state. The etic conception that the presence of a unified Amharic speaking people who have dominated the political system since imperial times became a foundation for the new political system since 1991 and the main cause for the rise of new identity formation, Amhara nationalism.

Post-1991 political discourse shifted from the notion of "Amhara ruling-class oppression" to that of "the Amhara oppressor vs. other oppressed nationalities". The state structure facilitated ethnic animosity in which other ethnonational elites inflicted violence on people deemed to be Amhara. Amhara activism became particularly acute with the expulsion (and even murder) of Amharic speakers living in other regional states – people who regarded themselves simply as Ethiopians. In recent years, Amharas have increasingly come to feel that they can protect their interests better by identifying themselves as a single ethnicity than by clinging to pan-Ethiopian nationalism. Amhara nationalism is a political force that was side-lined in the post-1991 political reforms in Ethiopia and remained left out.

The irony is that its origins of this nationalism lie, first, in the narrative in which "Amhara" is a marker of oppressive assimilation in the pre-1991 period and, secondly, in the replica nation-states developed at the regional-state level. This study reveals that Amhara nationalists do not entirely reject the existing constitution or the ethnic-based federal system: what they demand is constitutional amendment, territorial restoration, and other remedial interventions in the current system. Hence, it is safe to argue that the Amhara, who are part of the core of the Ethiopian state-nation system, were pushed back from involvement in making the federal system and then participating in it politically, and are now demanding to be integrated within it. Amhara nationalism – through the agency of political parties (the APP and NaMA) and civic associations – has exerted pressure to foreground the need for constitutional amendments as well as additional mechanisms in order to obtain non-territorial autonomy for Amharas living in other regional states. Securing territorial claims, especially in the Wolkayit region, seems to

depend on how successful Amhara organisations are as guardians of Amhara living in other regions. Hence, what is envisaged for the future is the development of constitutional and institutional designs that redress the limits of multinational federalism in general and territorial autonomy in particular.

In sum, the entire issue calls for a political solution based on honest, intensive national dialogue. Indeed, the possibility of an inclusive political system with a robust rather than fragile federal design hinges on the ability of the government and concerned political actors to engage in dialogue and negotiation on the pressing issues raised by the Amhara nationalists and reach a compromise acceptable to all. A more open, accommodating political system would enable Amhara interests and Amhara nationalism to be entry-point factors taking that system to a new height of legitimacy and catalysing a genuine democratic process.

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