NATION-BUILDING PREDICAMENT, TRANSITION FATIGUE, AND FEAR OF STATE COLLAPSE:

AN EMERGING PHENOMENON IN POST-2015 ETHIOPIA

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Abstract

Ethiopia, evolved from Tigray, is known by its history of having been an empire (e.g., the Axumite kingdom) and having been independent. The fundamental weakness of the Ethiopian state has been the lack of inclusive national consensus, hampered by national oppression and the dilemma of democratizing a feudal state. The post-1991 TPLF-EPRDF-led Ethiopia has been experimenting with federalist nation-building to address Ethiopia's historical contradictions: national and class oppression. The 1995 FDRE Constitution established a federal system and subsequently recognized the right of nations to self-determination including secession, self-administration, and local development. The constitution also declared that the Ethiopian nations were the "sovereign owners" of the constitution. However, the coming of Abiy Ahmed to power and his policy reforms based on 'neo-pan-Ethiopianism' opened the box of Pandora of secessionist, irredentist, and federalist forces opposing his plan to recentralize the ethnic federation, as it happened similarly in the case of former Yugoslavia. PM Abiy's reforms have been branded as those of the 'Mikael Gorbachev of Ethiopia' for his sweeping campaign against the 27 years of federalist control. The article investigates the nation-building aspirations, transition fatigue, the predicaments of secessionist, federalist, and assimilationist narratives, and the subsequent fear of 'state collapse' in the post-2018 crisis in Ethiopia.

1. Background and Introduction

Ethiopia's federal nation-building is still in the making and is full of controversies about its philosophical and political foundations, institutional arrangements, and aspirations. Scholars focusing on Ethiopian federalism define it as a "unique phenomenon" (Abbink, 2006) in Africa as it recognizes the right of nations to self-determination up to secession. This introduction thus aims at highlighting the historical contradictions of the Ethiopian state and the process of nation-building as well as the emerging political forces to challenge the federalism experiment since the coming of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power in April 2018. He champions a centralist 'neo-Ethiopianist' narrative as opposed to the approach of the ethnic nationalist federation, so it is not surprising that the question of the self-determination of nationalities has been a pervasive concern in Ethiopia. As a result, the federalist-assimilationist polarization peaks at an unprecedented level as in the case of former Yugoslavia (International Crisis Group, 2019). The International Crisis Group's report of December 2019 put the situation in Ethiopia on the list of the "ten conflicts to watch in 2020" and warned that if the attempt to reform the federation was not properly managed, state collapse or disintegration would be the worst-case scenario (International Crisis Group, 2019).

Ethiopia, evolved from the north, from Tigray[1], has been known for being an empire-state (e.g., the Axumite kingdom and many other sultanates in the lowlands and the southern part of Ethiopia) and for territorial independence (the only African country that escaped European colonialism though it lost Eritrea, the kingdom's gateway to the international market and Italian colonialism). Ethiopia also faced protracted peasant protests (the Woyane[2] peasant protest of 1943 in Tigray later evolved into a rebellion with the legendary slogan of "Land to the Tiller," see Gebru, 1991, and was continued by the Ethiopian Student Movement of the 1960s and 70s), the social revolution of 1974 that heralded the end of the Solomonic dynasty and the beginning of the Marxist-Leninist Derg regime (1974-1991), and protracted armed struggles for "national self-determination" in the geographically peripheral part of the country (e.g., Eritrea, Tigray, Ogaden, and Oromia) that led to the downfall of the 'unitarist' or 'Ethiopiawinet'[3] Derg regime in May 1991, and since 1991, Ethiopia has been experimenting with a federalist nation-building project (Gebru, 2009).

In the 16th century, the empire of Ethiopia degenerated into the *Zemene Mesafint* (the Era of Princes) that introduced the political culture of regionalism and ethnonationalism, opposing centralized statehood (Andargachew, 1993). Since then, ethnonationalism, regionalism, and pan-Ethiopianism remain the general theme of the discourse on the Ethiopian political anomalies.

Furthermore, the internal struggles and the expansion from the northern Abyssinian kingdom (dominantly Semitic families: Tigray and Amhara) to the southern part (dominantly Cushitic: Oromo, Somali, Sidama, Wolayta, and Omotic and Nilotic people) of the country have contributed to the state of affairs of contemporary Ethiopia. However, the Ethiopian state has not fully prevented the negative impacts of colonialism (the main features of post-colonial African states). For instance, it lacks

democratic institutional foundations (though it claims a long history of statehood) due to an age-old absolute monarchy that lasted for a millennia and culminated in the 1974 revolution against Emperor Haile Selassie; the 17 years of the Marxist-Leninist military regime of the Derg and its notorious Red Terror and protracted civil wars; and the single dominant party regime of the EPRDF[4] since 1991 (Teshale, 2008). Moreover, the Ethiopian state lacks legitimacy as its boundaries, institutions, and regimes have been contested by secessionist, irredentist, federalist, and assimilationist forces since its formative years.

Religious and cultural diversities further undermine the quest for societal cohesiveness and national consensus as the multinational polity still faces irreconcilable contradictions between the idea of Ethiopianism and ethnic nationalism. The country's borders are also fragile and contested as they divide similar ethnic groups, and consequently, this continues to cause trans-border conflicts, which all together compromise the prospects for the social and political legitimacy of the Ethiopian state (Azar and Moon, 1988; Merera, 2007).

Furthermore, Ethiopia in its historical evolution also defied the nation-state model of the 19th- and 20th-century Europe and hence evolved into a multiethnic and multination state. The successive Ethiopian regimes have followed the policy of nation-building from above under the slogan of "Ethiopia First" (Andargachew, 1993) (like the postcolonial African governments' slogans saying "United We Stand" and "One People One Heart") and have been relying on territorial nationalism, or "absolute Ethiopianism," that has led to controversies by denying the multinational feature of the non-colonial empire-state of Ethiopia. Ethiopia, therefore, has uniquely produced three "irreconcilable" political narratives, including the assimilationist/neo-pan-Ethiopianist, the national oppression-based accommodationist, and the secessionist/irredentist one, which define today's national dilemmas (Alemseged, 2004).

The narrative of absolute Ethiopianism has demanded different cultures and languages to be melted into one national identity, language, and culture; which means the Amharanization of the state (Merera, 2007). The absolute Ethiopianist ('Ethiopia First' narrative) nation-building policy has been, therefore, a structural reason for the proliferation of secessionist armed struggles in Eritrea, which started in 1961 and led to the independence of Eritrea promoted by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in 1991. The secessionist Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) have also been continuing their struggle for independence from Ethiopia since 1975 though they have not been successful to date. Furthermore, pan-Ethiopian groups are dominantly perceived as "chauvinists" or "neftegna" by the federalist and secessionist forces who consider Ethiopia an empire-state which should foster remodeling or deconstruction (the opinion of federalist forces) or even decolonization (a view supported by irredentist and secessionist forces). Moreover, pan-Ethiopianists have been criticized for their territorial expansionist approach and have been branded, by those who claim that indigenous people are the settlers, as the remnants/sympathizers of the *Neftegna* system who

waged war on different ethnic groups that were forced to drop their national pride and identity to become Ethiopians (Merera, 2007). Merera Gudina (2007) further argued that the *Neftegna* system had been led dominantly by Emperor Menelik who had shaped the topography of Ethiopia by incorporating different kingdoms and sultanates from the south, southeastern, and western parts of Ethiopia. Emperor Menelik was determined to create the empire of Ethiopia under the motto of "one people and one Ethiopia" through these assimilation instruments: the Solomonic dynasty as the royal family, Orthodox Christianity as the state religion, and Amharic language as the only official language. The creation of "one Ethiopian nation" continued under what was then termed 'makinat' (Amharic for pacification

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or civilization) through unification, reunification, pacification and/or colonization, and 'masgeber' (Amharic for exact tribute) that later led to class oppression and the movement of "Land to the Tiller."

Since 1960, Ethiopia also faced several armed and non-armed liberation movements including those of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (a.k.a. MEISON), and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Three of them agreed on the two major contradictions of the state: national and class oppression (Gebru, 2009) that served as the historical and political basis for the post-1995 federalization experiment (Merera, 2003). However, unlike the EPRP and MEISON, the TPLF gave priority to national oppression over class or land question (TPLF, 1976). After 17 years of civil wars (1975-1991), the Derg regime and its assimilationist policy based on the 'Ethiopia First' narrative were defeated by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the EPLF jointly on May 28, 1991.

After the fall of the Derg regime in May 1991, the TPLF-EPRDF-led government introduced the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia of 1995 that legally and politically made a formal acknowledgment of the three contradictions: Article 39 on the equality of nationalities, Article 40 on land ownership, and chapter three recognized that individual and group rights were mutually compatible rights. More importantly, the new constitution made Article 39, on self-determination of nations and nationalities up to secession, and Article 40, on joint land ownership by the state and nationalities to balance the interests of secessionist, federalist, and assimilationist forces, pillar articles to address historically long-lasting contradictions (Aalen, 2002; 2006). The "secession clause" has made the FDRE Constitution

the most contested fundamental law of Ethiopia ever and a "unique phenomenon" in Ethiopia's political history and constitutional reengineering (Abbink, 2006; Asafa, 2018; Kymlicka, 2006; Turton, 2006). The constitution uniquely empowers the Second Chamber (locally known as the House of Federation) to interpret the constitution, set federal budget frameworks for the regional states, resolve emerging conflicts between regions, and organize self-determination rights up to secession or referendum; and it aspires to create a federal, multinational state and build a federalist society out of the oldest unitary and feudal empire.

Moreover, the federalist experiment, which could ultimately transform the country into an inclusive multinational federation, has been thought to be the only remaining option to maintain the territorial integrity of the Ethiopian state, to heal the historical "wounds," and to solve the contradictions among nations. Indeed, the federal system has also been considered the only remaining option to contain the potential threats from radical secessionists–irredentists as well as assimilationists, i.e., 'absolute Ethiopianists' (Markakis, 2011). Finally, it has been widely expected to justify the mutual destiny of a shared rule, a bigger market, a larger population, secured sovereignty instead of constitutionally entrenched self-rule and development, the containment of ethnic nationalist and territorialist polarization, and transforming center–periphery, minority–majority, pastoralist–agriculturalist, and highland–lowland dichotomies (Alemseged, 2004).

2. Resurrected nation-building predicaments and transition fatigue:
a post-2015 phenomenon

Following the death of the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, the strong man who effectively managed security and politics in the federalized Ethiopian state winning legitimacy, and indeed building a personal cult, within the EPRDF and its affiliated members and getting undeniable support from international actors, Ethiopia has slowly, but sometimes unpredictably fast, moved to a new and not yet established political platform.

In the first three years (from August 2012 to December 2015), since the death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, the EPRDF leadership under Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, the first prime minister from southern Ethiopia in the modern history of the country, tried to neutralize Meles Zenawi's strong "big man" leadership and reinstall a "loose" collective leadership of the four core EPRDF member parties both at federal and regional levels. Also the affiliated parties and regional leaders outside the EPRDF government supported the policies designed by the federal government.

Therefore, the outcomes of the first period of transition (August 2012-December 2015) were continued stability and growth, and, more importantly, the beginning of the quest for establishing a new system both within and outside of the EPRDF. The inevitable demands of political power reconfiguration have gradually been reinforced mainly by the Oromos, claiming supremacy as the most populous nation, at all levels of the government. New demands of the emerging young generation,

born and grown after the fall down of the Derg regime, including the employment of the graduated youth and a democratic opening have begun to challenge the 25 years (1991-2015) of the political establishment led by the TPLF-EPRDF.

These have not only been accelerated by the demographic change of the youth and technological revolution (i.e., social media and activism have emerged as an alternative platform for discourses), but also agenda-setting, interest articulation, aggregation, and mobilization have outbalanced the state's offer and hence aggravated the state's vulnerability to challenges within the country and the Ethiopian diaspora. In addition, the expansion of education, the increasing enrolment in colleges and universities, and the tendency of more and more college graduates further uproot the youth (in search of economic and political self-definition potentially in urban centers) from their rural and urban family-based life, while the industrial and urban establishments cannot adapt to the demographic changes. Still, the bureaucratic apparatus of the state is shouldering the burden of employment, which in turn forces the government to redirect its investable capital to salaries and, in the long run, it results in unseen consequences affecting the state's "renaissance vision" of structural transformation.

The young generation has thus been waiting for a class-based identity, i.e., the creation of the working and the middle class and the bourgeoisie from the Ethiopian "classless" society. The country has been struggling to break free from an agrarian subsistence economy into an industrial and urban-based political economy (with projects like the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, railway development plans, and by establishing industrial parks). The expansion of education and health services negated the strategy of agricultural development-led industrialization (ADLI) as the two sectors accelerated youth mobility and, finally, the abandonment of rural life, which created a big "shock" to 80% of the demographic regime; and the government faced the "separation, from rural, and integration, into urban" dilemma. In general, the fast-growing demands of the youth, scarce capital, the "resurrected" mobilization of the populists and ultranationalists, and rampant corruption have put the legitimacy of the EPRDF leadership and the optimism of the citizens in an unprecedented dilemma (Lefort, 2016).

3. Militant youth movements and mass protests: from December 2015 to February 2018

Following the 2015 federal- and regional-level election (all of the seats were won by the EPRDF and its affiliated parties), the attention of the Ethiopians was directed to the 12th TPLF and 10th EPRDF congresses held in September 2015, in Mekelle, Tigray. The 100% control of the seats of the federal and regional parliaments by the EPRDF and its affiliated parties undermined the instrumental values of elections in electoral democracy in a country where polarized political interests existed.

For those closely observing the political history of the EPRDF, congresses and renewals (like, in 2001, the TPLF rift, or the 'deep renewal' in 2018) are much more critical junctures in the analysis of continuities and changes in Ethiopian politics,

leadership, strategies, and policies as well as a way of mapping out potential opportunities and challenges ahead that have been affecting national and regional politics (Tsehaye, 2015).

The 12th TPLF congress that was held in Mekelle in September 2015 sparked a new era of leadership reconfiguration within the post-2001 TPLF ('post-Bonapartist'[5]) leadership and critical influences via social media activism and the discourses of the emerging young generation (the 'post-armed struggle generation'), who openly forward their critique against the TPLF, even by criticizing it (from within the congress and outside) on issues related to leadership secession and the integration of the new generation into political platforms, the development of Tigray, and the "no war, no peace" dilemma with Eritrea that lasted for two decades (1998-2018) (Meressa, 2015). The process of leadership reconfiguration has been continuing since the death of Meles Zenawi and passed through two major "transition" congresses (the 11th in March 2013 and the 12th in September 2015).

In September 2017, the TPLF gathered to announce the process of 'deep renewal' to deal with the flaring political and security crisis started in Oromia and Amhara regions in December 2015. The TPLF's long-awaited 'deep renewal' (lasted for 35 days) came up with the replacement of the party chairman and the region's president, Abay Woldu, for Dr. Debretsion Gebremichael (current chairman of the TPLF and president of Tigray) and purged Azeb Mesfin, widow of Meles Zenawi, from the TPLF Executive Committee and from the position of an EFFORT manager (Berhane, 2017).

Like the 12th TPLF congress, the 10th EPRDF congress that was held after the 12th TPLF congress in Mekelle signaled a new political process. After the death of Meles Zenawi, Hailemariam Desalegn served as a prime minister without bringing noticeable changes, he was the "legacy maintainer" of the 'Great Leader' (Lefort, 2016). He also followed a cluster-based "collective leadership" style, unlike Meles Zenawi's uncontested control of the party and the state, in order to contain the inevitable power struggles within the core member parties and secure legitimacy from the EPRDF member parties. Furthermore, Hailemariam Desalegn, outsmarted by the Chief of Staff General Samora Yenus and Getachew Assefa, Chief of the Ethiopian National Intelligence and Security Service, both from Tigray (TPLF), was also viewed as a "loose" commander in chief not common in Ethiopian political culture, in which leaders have always been expected to be "strong and commanding" with the mixed use of both fear and love. But one inevitable scenario was in the pipeline as, after the slow motion of neutralizing "the strong man's, Meles Zenawi's, cult," there emerged new "competitions among equals" within the ERPRDF, mainly from the Oromos and the Amharas, to control state power and replace the 27-year TPLF-EPRDF leadership. In order to achieve this, leaders of the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) established an alliance locally known as Oromara from which Abiy Ahmed emerged as the chairman of the EPRDF and, subsequently, as the prime minister of Ethiopia in April 2018.

4. The secessionist–irredentist–assimilationist resurrection: a post-2018 phenomenon

After 27 years (1991-2018) of a relatively stable federal system, the Ethiopian state again faces protracted violent protests across the country, which threatens the territorial integrity of Ethiopia. The resurrection of radical ethnic nationalist and absolutist, pan-Ethiopianist forces are continuing to challenge the prospects for multinational federalism.

The protests, after December 2015 in Oromia Regional State, were against the Addis Ababa "master-plan saga," as a pretext, and claimed the control of federal power because of fundamental and historical causes as the Oromos have been the largest ethnic group in the country but had been politically marginalized and oppressed by Abyssinian ruling elites since they were incorporated into the Abyssinian Empire by Emperor Menelik II. Following the protests, the OPDO established an alliance with the ANDM under the umbrella name of Oromara[6] (Oromo and Amhara alliance, 'neo-pan-Ethiopianism') to challenge the post-1989 EPRDF system that was dominantly led by the TPLF.

The Oromara alliance was defined as an alliance of the two relatively largest ethnic groups to counter the TPLF-EPRDF regime's multinational federation. It is a majoritarian narrative that transforms the historically evolved nations' 'inequality narrative' into a 'majority–minority' and a 'center–periphery' contradiction (the Amhara and the Oromo people are geographically located at the center but most of the minority regional states including Afar, Ethiopian Somali, Tigray, Gambella, and Benishangul-Gumuz are located in the periphery). However, the Team Lemma-led Oromara alliance has been challenged by the ethnic nationalist/secessionist OLF as the latter has been progressively controlling the larger portion of Oromia after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed became the premier. Abiy Ahmed is the first Oromo prime minister in the modern history of Ethiopia who unexpectedly champions neo-pan-Ethiopianism[7] (Fisher and Meressa, 2018), a counter-narrative to the 27 years of ethnic nationalist-based federalism. Furthermore, Abiy Ahmed began his reforms by delegitimizing the 27 years of federal nation-building, labeling the developmental democratic state as a "dark era,"[8] and crimi-

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nalizing the former EPRDF government as "state terrorists" who had aggravated the national security crisis and had brought political instability.

4.1. The Oromo dilemma: balancing 'Orommumaa' and 'neo-pan-Ethiopianism'

In the last quarter of the 20th century, the Ethiopian state faced secessionist and irredentist armed liberation struggles for territorial independence, based on the colonial thesis (EPLF, 1971), in Eritrea (ELF and EPLF), Oromia (OLF), and the Ethiopian Somali (ONLF) regions. Inspired by the Eritrean liberation movements, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) have also continued their struggle for independence from Ethiopia since 1973, though they are not successful in achieving their stated objective till now. Since then, the secessionist forces from Oromia and Somali[9] regions have been continuing to shape and influence Ethiopian politics, nation-building, and security.

Secessionist and irredentist forces claimed that "Abyssinia (central and northern Ethiopia, the historic core of Ethiopian polity) colonized roughly half of the territories and peoples of today's Ethiopia to form a colonial empire-state in the last quarter of the 19th century" (Mesle, 2016). Asafa Jalata discussed the Oromo view of the Abyssinian colonization of Oromia as follows: "Conquered by and absorbed into Ethiopia in the nineteenth century, the Oromos were removed from the global community by the Abyssinian system of political slavery. Oromia was denied status as a nation among the community of nations. The Ethiopians established a settler-colonial structure in Oromia, erased the cultural identity and the language of the Oromo from public life and the historical record, and isolated Oromos from one another" (Asafa, 2002: 136).

From the colonialist thesis' vantage point, Ethiopia is, therefore, a colonial empire that needs to undergo decolonization, and ethnonational colonies should be independent states (Alem, 2003: 9). Thus, Ethiopia continues to be viewed as an African colonial state and its existential contradiction should be resolved through decolonization or unconditional independence like in other colonized African states of the 20th century (Merera, 2007). Even though the Federal Constitution of 1995 basically incorporated the rights of nations and nationalities to self-determination up to secession (see Article 39) to recognize the legitimate concerns of the secessionist and irredentist forces, they continue their military and non-military struggle for independence. Secessionist and irredentist groups define Ethiopia as a "prison house of nationalities" (Gebru, 2009: 32).

In general, secessionists (ultranationalists) from Oromia and the Somali diaspora indeed define Ethiopia as a symbol of the marginalization of the Oromos and Somalis by the Abyssinians (Amharas and Tigriyans) as "Ethiopia is a symbol of racial/ethnonational oppression and exploitation, and Oromos never assumed an Ethiopian identity for themselves" (Thompson, 2017: 7). Moreover, Oromo secessionists (led by the OLF) living in the diaspora, who have supported the Oromo struggle for independence from Ethiopia, also argue that leaving the Ethiopian state for Europe and America is considered a journey escaping from political slavery in Ethiopia

and enjoying freedom in western states. For example, Asafa Jalata (2002: 133) argued that the Oromos felt freer and more secure in America than in Ethiopia: "… the Oromo diaspora who, under 'Ethiopian political slavery,' lived without freedom of expression and association, came to exercise these rights in the United States. Members of this Oromo group created communities, political organizations, and scholarly associations. In foreign lands, they became able freely to define and defend their individual and collective national interests and to link the Oromo people to the global community."

Asafa also stated that the Oromo diaspora were instrumental in voicing the Oromo people's oppression and colonization in Ethiopia to the world. And indeed, the Oromo diaspora has been supporting the people's struggle for decolonization at home: "Isolated from the world for more than a century by Ethiopian colonialism, the Oromo people became scattered around the world. Oromo diaspora communities nowadays are building close linkages among themselves and with the Oromo movement at home, thanks to globalization and modern communication technology… The diaspora Oromo nationalists […] can be inspired to contribute their part to the Oromo movement's struggle for survival, self-determination, and multicultural democracy" (Asafa, 2002: 134).

The Oromo community enjoying freedom and security in western nations continues the struggle for decolonization and engages in building organizations that reflect 'Oromummaa,' Oromoness, and promotes the Oromo struggle for self-determination, self-expression, and self-sufficiency both in Oromia and abroad (Asafa, 2002). By the 1995 FDRE Constitution and its Article 39 on the rights of nations to self-determination, the Oromo people, among other nations, are granted their own regional administration and cultural autonomy.

However, after 27 years (1991-2018) of relatively stable federal nation-building, Ethiopia has been facing the protracted violent protests of assimilationist (neo-pan-Ethiopianist) and secessionist forces against the federation. Following the 2015 protests, the Oromara alliance began to challenge the post-1995 federalism. The Oromara alliance, also popularly named as 'Team Lemma' (after the name of Oromia Regional State's president), champions pan-Ethiopianism, i.e., a majoritarian narrative of the Oromo and Amhara alliance, which claims that the Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups have the largest population in the country and should control federal power. Indeed, Team Lemma demonstrates its commitment to neo-pan-Ethiopianism by stating that Ethiopianism is "addiction like opium." The OLF-led Oromo nationalism has been dominantly secessionist and defines Ethiopia as an "Abyssinian colonizer" (Asafa, 2002) that should undergo decolonization through armed and unarmed means. However, following the 2015 protests in Oromia region, the Lemma Megersa-Abiy Ahmed-led Oromara alliance tactically (as a means of controlling federal power) began to champion neo-pan-Ethiopianism relegating Oromummaa/ Oromoness into second place. Such shift in the Oromo outlook of the Ethiopian state, in turn, created a dilemma of "secessionists turned into pan-Ethiopianists" as the majority of Oromo nationalists (including the Oromo Liberation Front and the

Oromo Federalist Congress) opposed the Abiy Ahmed-led Ethiopianism fearing that neo-pan-Ethiopianism would reverse Oromo aspirations for self-determination and administration.

In April 2018 PM Abiy Ahmed became the first Oromo prime minister in the modern history of Ethiopia and at his inauguration he announced to reform the "ethnic-based federation" and subsequently established an Administrative Boundaries and Identity Issues Commission (House of Peoples' Representatives, 2018) to redraw the regions' boundaries to fit his (re)centralization policy. He changed all borders, except for those of the region of Tigray, replaced the leaders of regional states unconstitutionally and, in some cases, via military intervention (like in the case of Somali region), and put most of the regions under federal leadership. Abiy's recentralization policy posed existential threats to the minorities' self-rule and self-determination rights that had been in place since 1995.

Moreover, the Abiy-led Oromara alliance is also contested by the secessionist OLF (in Oromia) that is increasingly controlling the larger part of Oromia region. However, the OLF is calling for Orommumaa, the Oromization of Ethiopia under the current federal arrangement, at least, if not opting for plan B, i.e., establishing an independent "Oromia state," which further complicates the Oromo dilemma between controlling government power in a federal Ethiopia and establishing an independent Oromo state if neo-pan-Ethiopianism resurrects. Oromo Regional State is located at the center of landlocked Ethiopia with limited access to neighboring states and international markets and is surrounded by minority ethnic groups, which geopolitically and demographically complicate the feasibility of an independent Oromia state. Therefore, the Oromos face the legitimacy dilemma of the "secessionist turned into a pan-Ethiopianist," i.e., whether Abiy Ahmed will try to establish an independent state of Oromia hampered by historical, geopolitical, and demographic problems or not. As a result, the fear of state collapse becomes an existential threat in the emerging political crisis of post-2018 Ethiopia.

4.2. Tigray: the quest for renaissance and reclaiming the glorious past

Both in the ancient and modern political history of Ethiopia, Tigriyans have been claiming that Tigray has been the political and cultural soul of the Ethiopian state. However, following the death of Emperor Yohannes IV and the ascendance of Emperor Menelik of Shoa as king of Ethiopia in the second half of 19th century, Tigray was relegated into a secondary place; it lost its sea power as Emperor Menelik handed Eritrea over to Italian colonizers and faced political, economic, and cultural oppression under the unitary political system of Shoa (Amhara elites) (Alemseged, 2004). Elites in Tigray also claim that Tigray has paid innumerable sacrifices in the fight against "oppressive assimilation" and militarism by supporting other nations in their struggle for freedom and during the successful transition, from the civil war against the Derg regime (1975-1991) under the leadership of the TPLF to federal multination-building since 1995. Federalist forces dominantly led by the TPLF since 1995 call for full-fledged federal and democratic nation-building, where Ethiopian

nations and nationalities would have effective self-administration in their respective regions and equal representation at the federal level. Hence, federalist Ethiopia continues to be their priority (plan A) but they threaten to opt for unconditional independence (plan B) if the federation fails to ensure the aspirations of the constitution and if absolutist Ethiopians control federal power. For instance, Tigriyan elites insist that the status of Tigray should be recognized at least as "one among equals" with the many nations and nationalities and, at best, this region should be given a greater role in (re)shaping the political magnitude of Ethiopia. They object to the resurrection of absolute Ethiopianist movements: their desire for centralization and Amharanization[10] in the name of pan-Ethiopianism. Tigriyans define Ethiopia as a non-colonial empire that should be federalized and democratized in order to recognize the rights of nations and nationalities (Alemseged, 2004; Assefa, 2018). Moreover, they also claim that the post-1991 federal multinational nation-building project was basically derived out of the 17 years armed struggle of Tigray and, hence, they continue to defend it. This federalist Tigriyan narrative has also been supported by many other nations and nationalities except for the Amhara unionist elites, secessionist Eritreans and Oromos, and irredentist Ethiopian Somalis.

Generally, Tigriyans have struggled for the elimination of Shoa domination and the radical restructuring of the Ethiopian state, which is the only remaining option to maintain the integrity of the state and its nationalities. Tigriyan elites agree with Amhara elites on the long history of Ethiopia (more than 3000 years of statehood), continued independence, and shared culture (Abyssinian cultural ethos), but disagree on the interpretation of the history, politics, and ownership of the state in the 19th and the 20th century.

After Abiy Ahmed's coming to power and the subsequent weakening of the TPLF at the federal level, federalist Tigriyan nationalists also opted for ethno-nationalist mobilization in response to the assimilationist neo-pan-Ethiopianism narrative by the Abiy-led leadership. The newly emerged Tigriyan ethnic-nationalist forces are of three variants, i.e., (a) *federalist* nationalists, struggling to defend the current federal system and the core rights of nations including the right to self-determination and self-administration (regional autonomy); (b) the *Republic Movement*, calling for establishing an 'Independent Republic;' and (c) the *Agazian Movement*, a nationalist movement calling for a new relationship of the Tigrigna-speaking peoples in Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Furthermore, Tigray, thanks to its ruling party, the TPLF, and its federalist manifesto where the FDRE Constitution was framed, has been the home of federalist nation-building in Ethiopia since 1995. Since Abiy Ahmed came to power in April 2018, the people of Tigray and their ruling party have been targets of the Abiy-led ethnic marginalization. Thus, they are continuing their struggle for self-determination and self-defense against Abiy Ahmed's government. Following the dissolution of the ruling party (the EPRDF, where the TPLF was the mother party and a member of the coalition since 1989) and its transformation into the Ethiopian Prosperity Party (PP) in November 2019, Tigriyan people and their ruling party defiantly rejected Abiy

Ahmed's neo-pan-Ethiopianist recentralization: unanimously both in the regional parliament and the federal parliament, via mass demonstrations, and at the TPLF's first-ever emergency congress held on January 4-5, 2020, in Mekelle. Therefore, Tigray remains the only region administered by the federalist TPLF and the ruling party declared it a *de facto* state. Tigray also warns that if the federal government changes the federal constitution, they will declare the full self-determination of the region of Tigray. Dr. Debretsion Gebremichael, leader of the Tigray National Regional State, cautioned Abiy Ahmed's federal government: "From now on, violating the Ethiopian constitution will not continue. Either the voice of the people needs to be heard, or it will be heard!" (Arif7 News Network, 2018)

4.3. Amhara restorationists: the dilemma of pan-Ethiopianism and pan-Amharanism

The pan-Ethiopianist or absolute Ethiopianist narrative has dominantly been the perspective of the Amhara elite that has argued for citizenship-based pan-Ethiopianist nation-building (Alemseged, 2004). It contends for an absolutist Ethiopia, "Greater Ethiopia first" (Andargachew, 1993), which is fundamentally defined by territorial nationalism, the tri-color flag, and even pan-Africanism. This group, as part of its neo-pan-Ethiopian irredentism (Teshale, 2008), further asserts that Ethiopia's territorial boundary has been "up to the Red Sea" (claiming that Eritrea has been a part of Ethiopia). Pan-Ethiopianists defended the critique of the secessionist and federalist diaspora on their undemocratic assimilation attempts: the "assimilation of periphery cultures into the Amhara or the Amhara/Tigray core culture made the creation of the Ethiopian nation possible" (Mesle, 2016). Ethiopia's existential threats emanate from Islamic Arab states that have been determined to undermine Ethiopia's territorial integrity through supporting secessionist forces in Eritrea, Oromia, and Ogaden. The assimilationist forces argue that internal diversity has never been a problem. And hence, they are determined to reverse the ethnic federalism-based nation-building project and call for the redrawing of the boundaries of the current regional states and the neutralizing of the negative effects of ethnic federalism. From this perspective, Ethiopiawinet is indivisible.

However, following the coming of PM Abiy Ahmed to power in April 2018, in Amhara Regional State, a new ultra-pan-Amhara nationalist movement, called the National Movement of Amhara (NAMA), emerged in 2018 as opposed to the pan-Ethiopian movements of Amhara cultural elites. The NAMA comes up with new territorial claims (Welkait and Raya from Tigray, Addis Ababa and Shoa from Oromia, Metekel from Benishangul, and Afar Regional State), rejects the current federal arrangement, and uses its flag as a mobilizing instrument of ultra-Amhara nationalism. As a result, such rejection of the federal flag, a territorial claim from the mentioned regional state, and the NAMA's determination to dissolve the multinational federation and its attempt of restoring the pre-1991 unitary Ethiopia further pose an existential threat to the multinational state and the minorities' self-determination/self-administration.

4.4. The threat of irredentism in Somali Regional State and the Balkanization in the Southern Nations and Nationalities, and Peoples' Region

Since the 1960s, an irredentist armed liberation movement spearheaded by the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) has grown steadily in the Ethiopian Somali Regional State. However, since 2006, the region, under the leadership of former President Abdi Illey's Somali Democratic Party (SDP), has also been a relatively strong supporter of the post-1995 federal arrangement. But, with the coming of Abiy Ahmed to power and the subsequent change of leadership in the region, the leaders of Ethiopia's Somali region changed its flag, which was historically linked to the 'Greater Somalia' irredentist ideology, and its hyphenated name (Ethiopia-Somali) to 'Somali' (Shaban, 2018).

Finally, the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' regional state (SNNPR) that was made of 56 ethnic groups has also been Balkanized into "self-declaring autonomous regions" since Abiy Ahmed was elected president. The Sidama nation, one of the nations of the SNNPR, secured its regional statehood via a referendum held in November 2019. Wolayta, Hadiya, Kembata, and many other nations in the SNNP region are already calling for a referendum and exacerbating the Balkanization of the region though Abiy Ahmed is determined to recentralize them in the hands of the federal government claiming to contain the proliferation of powerful regional states (International Crisis Group, 2019).

In the light of the above arguments, Ethiopia's federal nation-building experiment again failed to address the fundamental and historical contradictions and to neutralize the radical intents of the assimilationist, secessionist, and irredentist groups. As a result, the legitimacy of the Ethiopian state continues to be challenged and national integration remains an unattainable goal. As in the former USSR and Yugoslavia or like in the case of Somalia and Libya, there is no region which can effectively claim statehood and get recognized by the international community, i.e., all regions except for Tigray are under the control of militant youth groups, so the fear of 'state collapse' is becoming a dominant (and the normal) agenda among Ethiopian citizens, and the media report that the contradictions among the dominant narratives are getting irreconcilable.

Ethnic polarization reaches an unprecedented level due to the protracted social conflicts among regions and ethnic groups. The regional states of the federation are continuing to act as *de facto* states by challenging the federal government's power and engaging in social conflicts with neighboring regional states (e.g., the Oromo-Somali conflict of 2018, the Tigray-Amhara conflict, the Gedeo-Guji conflicts between Oromia and the Southern region, and so on). Furthermore, regional states are continuing to use "border and flag claims" as mobilizing factors and proxy causes for trans-border and ethnic conflicts. The emerging ethnic conflicts since 2015, in turn, are challenging the prospects of federal multinational projects and the aspiration of national integration, i.e., the 'new Ethiopian renaissance.'

Since April 2018, Ethiopia's internal contradictions have reached an "irreconcilable" level with no single narrative emerging victorious even after Abiy Ahmed

called for "medemer, love, and reconciliation." Abiy Ahmed's popular support has sharply declined even in its core constituency (Oromia); it is a process branded as the "neo-Neftegna" hijacking of the Oromo historical causes to undermine nationalist forces (like the OLF) who have been struggling for more than half a century to "decolonize the Ethiopian empire-state." Abiy Ahmed's legitimacy crisis also comes from non-Oromo political forces criticizing him that he failed to deliver practical reform initiatives to address the fundamental causes of the crisis like youth unemployment, security crisis, internal displacement, ultranationalism, youth militarism, the proliferation of small and light weapons (the privatization of security and militarization), and religious and ethnic conflicts. More fundamentally, Ethiopia is recently defined as a 'failed state' characterized by the "lack of control over armed forces, militias, etc. within the country; lack of free participation in politics; lack of control over territory within national borders; massive displacements; failure to provide public services food, health, shelter, etc.; high level of corruption; high numbers of refugees seeking to leave; and no or poorly functioning economy" (Woldegiorgis, 2019: 2-3). As a result, the hope for sustainable peace and reconciliation becomes increasingly fragile, the fear of Ethiopia's disintegration is looming, and recently Abiy Ahmed was named the 'Ethiopian Mikael Gorbachev' for his failure to save the age-old empire-state from crumbling.

5. Conclusion

Ethiopia is a country with several contradictions. It was one of the early civilization states (empires) with sea and land power, the only country to escape European colonialism in Africa though continuously facing serious challenges of both unitary and federal nation-building projects; however, the quest for federalism, democracy, development, and multiculturalism remained the fundamental question for centuries. In the 16th century, the empire-state degenerated into the era of *Zemene Mesafint* that introduced the political culture of regionalism (ethnic nationalism) opposing a larger and centralized statehood. Ethiopia's nation-building project is, thus, neither European (nation-state model) nor African (territorial state or state without nation) but rather its own "unique phenomenon." As a result, Ethiopia has uniquely produced three narratives or political theses that define today's political dilemmas.

Following the completion of state formation in the 1900s, Ethiopian nation-builders established the Solomonic ethos (that of the royal family of the empire), Orthodox Christianity as the state religion, and the Amharic language as the official and national language of the feudal empire embracing Abyssinian and non-Abyssinian nationalities with the aspiration of building a nation-state. The empire of Ethiopia, however, failed to build a nation-based Ethiopianism and faced three major challenges that still hampers its imagined nation-building: pan-Ethiopianism versus ethnic nationalism, addressing nationalities' and class (and land) inequalities as well as the quest for democratization. Because of the three major contradictions, Ethiopia experienced many revolutionary social movements (both peasant and student movements), protracted rural and urban armed struggles from the 1970s to 1991, and the

post-1991 struggle for the institutionalization of federalism's shared rule, self-rule, and the democratization of the feudal Ethiopian state on equal terms.

The 1995 FDRE Constitution legally and politically recognized the three contradictions (Article 39 on the equality of nationalities, Article 40 on land ownership, and chapter three viewing individual and group rights as mutually compatible) and aspired to achieve federal-multinational nation-building. Federalism was thought to be the only remaining option to maintain the territorial integrity of the Ethiopian state, to heal the historical "wounds," and to resolve contradictions among nations, while it contained potential threats from radical secessionists-irredentists as well as assimilationists (absolute Ethiopianism).

Since December 2015, following the protest in Oromia, Ethiopia has been in a "new (dis)order in the making." Leadership crisis and power struggle within the EPRDF have further uncovered Ethiopia's irreconcilable nation-building and territorial integrity crisis. The polarized narratives of Amhara assimilationists or restorationists, Oromo secessionists, Somali irredentists, and Tigriyan federalists have once again resurrected to shape and reshape the Ethiopian politics and security dilemma. Furthermore, new fault lines have emerged, in addition to the traditional contradictions (nationality and class questions), including "center–periphery," "census majority–minority," "Cushitic–Semitic," and "Abyssinians/Northerners–Southerners." The privatization of security or the decentralized monopoly of violence and the proliferation of militant youth movements (Qeerroo, Fano, Ejjeetto, Hagoo) to replace elected governments through organized violence, the crisis of internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the economic and constitutional crisis are the structural and fundamental problems that undermine the prospect for conflict transformation and sustainable peace. ☀

Notes

1　Historically named the 'Abyssinian state' that encompassed Tigray, highland Eritrea, and northern Amhara as its political, religious, and cultural heartland.

2　Tigrigna word for revolt, popular resistance against national oppression and intervention. It started to be used in 1943 by the Tigriyan peasant protests fighting against Emperor Haile Selassie's land policy and centralization. They called for self-rule and cultural and language autonomy for Tigray. The peasant protest of 1943 is also known as the 'first Woyane,' while the 'second Woyane' was started in 1975 by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) against the military Derg regime's national oppression via armed struggle, and succeeded in toppling the regime in May 1991.

3　Amharic word for pan-Ethiopianism.

4　Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, the Ethiopian ruling party since 1991. It is an offshoot of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), first established in 1989 as a coalition of the TPLF (mother party) and the EPDM (Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement), and the latter evolved into the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM). After the election of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the OPDO changed its name to Oromo Democratic Party (ODP), and the ANDM to Amhara Democratic Party (ADP). After a year of Abiy Ahmed's leadership (since the 11th EPRDF congress), the EPRDF

dissolved itself into the Ethiopian Prosperity Party (Prosperity party, PP) in November 2019. However, the mother party of the EPRDF, the TPLF rejected the dissolution of the EPRDF and still maintains its historical name and program.

5 In 2001, the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi introduced the concept of 'Bonapartist Decay' to define the political leadership crisis within the TPLF and the EPRDF after they had taken state power in 1991. It was a call to evaluate the 10 years' leadership and evolved decadence or political factionalism. The TPLF leadership split into two groups and the majority of the polit-buro and central committee members were purged. Meles Zenawi emerged as an uncontested leader of the party and the government, which contradicted the established norm of collective leadership within the TPLF after the 2001 rift. After 2001, Meles began to champion the developmental democratic state model of East Asian Tigers and a "renaissance vision" to achieve structural transformation in Ethiopia. The post-2001 TPLF-EPRDF leadership is called a 'post-Bonapartist' leadership.

6 Dubbed as Team Lemma and named after the former president of Oromia Regional State, Lemma Megersa, who was instrumental in the making of the Oromara alliance.

7 Abiy Ahmed publicly presented his pan-Ethiopianist project in his inaugural speech in the Ethiopian parliament in April 2018: "When we live, we are Ethiopians, when we die, we become Ethiopia" (Addis Standard, 2018).

8 When asked by a Tigrayan audience member in a July 2018 visit to the US why he did not appreciate the developments of the last 27 years, Abiy responded: "In the last 27 years there was a lot of garbage made by the ruling party in Ethiopia. There are people who think that development is about building asphalt pavements and condominiums. Infrastructure without freedom is good for nothing…I request your forgiveness and reconciliation" (Addis Tribune, 2018).

9 Both Oromos and Ethiopian Somalis are Cushitic people from the southern and eastern part of Ethiopia that have been struggling against the state of Ethiopia culturally and politically dominated by Abyssinians, i.e., Amhara and Tigriyan people.

10 Amharic language, Amhara culture, and Amharic historiography dominating Ethiopia.

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