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Political discourses and the securitization of democracy in post-1991 Ethiopia

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Chapter Three: Post-1991 Economics and Politics: An Overview of an Anomaly

3.1. Introduction¹⁰

The ruling Ethiopian Peoples 'Revolutionary Democratic Front (The EPRDF) came to power after defeating the Marxist-Leninist military junta in 1991, hence marking a new beginning in the contemporary political development of Ethiopia. The EPRDF has remained in power ever since and introduced several economic and political reforms, with varying levels of success and failure. Despite considerable challenges in the economic sector over the past two decades, Ethiopia has been hailed for registering spectacular economic growth, earning itself the designation of one of the fastest-growing economies worldwide (World Economy Forum 2018, World Bank 2015). Ethiopia's economic achievements have improved the socio-economic conditions, as evidenced in its attainment of most of the Millennium Development Goal targets (National Planning Commission and the United Nations office – Addis Ababa (NPC and UN) 2015: i-v).

However, the EPRDF's promised political freedoms and democracy have not matched up to the success of the economic reforms. After 27 years of EPRDF rule, Ethiopia is still in a precarious situation, with the period from 2016 to the present marked by political unrest of unprecedented magnitude. The EPRDF's monopoly on power and legitimacy has been contested, and the EPRDF's doctrines questioned, calling for fundamental rethinking of Ethiopia's prevailing economic and political orientation.

This chapter aims to provide a brief depiction of Ethiopia's economic and political landscape and the challenges faced by the EPRDF during its reign. Accordingly, the chapter serves as a background for the economic and political contexts within which the government and opposition wrestle for power, with the EPRDF government striving to maintain

¹⁰ This chapter is largely based on Tessema (2018b).

a monopoly of power and control the state and its resources and personnel. At the same time, the opposition forces have been vying to contest EPRDF rule.

3.2. An Overview of Post-1991 Economy

Despite its proud history, Ethiopia remains one of the poorest countries in the world. In 1992, immediately after assuming power, the new Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) adopted a free market economic model as the guiding principle for developing the economy of the country. This was a clear departure from the socialist economic model pursued under the previous regime for over a decade. Several reform measures were introduced to improve conditions in the war-ravaged economy. Among these, the Agricultural Led Development of Industrialization (ALDI) strategy was adopted to try to industrialize the country's predominantly agrarian economy. The rationale was that by improving the productivity of the agricultural sector, the transformation to an industrialized economy could be achieved. Agriculture plays a huge role in Ethiopia's economy. In 2013, it absorbed over 85 per cent of the country's manpower and was the largest contributor of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – between 50 and 90 percent of the country's export earnings (Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MOFED) 2013, OECD/AfDB, 2002). By increasing the agricultural sector's productivity, the country would move away from its subsistence culture, which would facilitate a structural change of the economy overall. The reasoning was that inducing a surplus in the agricultural sector would stimulate consumerism, thereby creating a foundational demand for industrial growth. Strategies aimed at alleviating the abject poverty of the country were also implemented. These strategies were launched as a series of specific time-bound plans (National Development Plans). Examples included the Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Programme (SDPRP) and the Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to End Poverty (PASDEP). Similarly, the Ethiopian Government adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) declared by the United Nations (UN 2000), which were meant to be implemented over a period of 15 years, from 2000-2015. These strategies became an integral part of the government's plan to bring about sustainable development. The government also implemented measures such as the privatization of

state properties, and increasingly encouraged domestic and foreign investments. The government has also recently adopted a series of new plans designed to build on the progress made under the SDPRP and PASDEP. These plans aim not only to further transform the structure of the economy, but also to achieve low middle-income country status by 2025. The government's defined vision, as set out in the Growth and Transformation Plans (GTP I and GTP II), is as follows:

“building an economy which has a modern and productive agricultural sector with enhanced technology and an industrial sector that plays a leading role in the economy, sustaining economic development and securing social justices and increasing per capita income of the citizens so as to reach the level of those in middle-income countries” (MOFED 2010: 21).

In spite of the criticism leveled at the efficacy and wisdom of the policies and strategies adopted, the Ethiopian economy has grown spectacularly since 1991. In recognition of this dramatic change, on March 13, 2014, *Time Magazine* devoted its topical coverage to examining the success of four pre-eminent global emerging markets, which included Ethiopia. In his detailed analysis, the author, Michael Schulman, stressed that there were success stories emerging from the developing world, which were different from those emanating from the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) countries. This difference was captured in Schulman's title: “Forget the BRICs; Meet the PINEs” (Philippines, Indonesia, Nigeria and Ethiopia). In explaining the success and potential of the PINEs, the author suggested that Ethiopia deserved inclusion for its achievements in overcoming the status of a country ‘once synonymous with poverty’ (Ibid. 2014). There is strong evidence to support this viewpoint. Ethiopia, once one of the poorest countries in the world, has now managed to change its economic outlook due to the reform measures initiated post-1991. The country's economy grew steadily from a baseline average growth of 0.5 percent between 1981 and 1991, to an average growth of 5.1 percent per annum (MOFED 2013) from 1992 to 2004. The country achieved impressive levels of sustained double-digit growth of around 10.9 percent between 2005 and 2015 (World Bank 2015, AfDB, OECD and UNDP 2016, MOFED 2013). These growth rates are some of the fastest in the world

for a non-oil-producing country (UNDP 2015). Also worth noting is the fact that economic growth was maintained, despite the occurrence of three major events that could have halted growth and had devastating consequences for the country's development. The first was the severe drought in 1997, which led to the economy contracting temporarily by 1.4 percent (OECD and AfDB 2002). The second event was the outbreak of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea from 1998-2000, which also slowed the pace of growth. The most serious incident was the drought of 2015, the worst the country had experienced in 30 years. The drought was caused by an *El Nino* weather system and resulted in Ethiopia's economic growth dropping to single digits (8 per cent) in 2016 (AfDB, OECD and UNDP 2017).

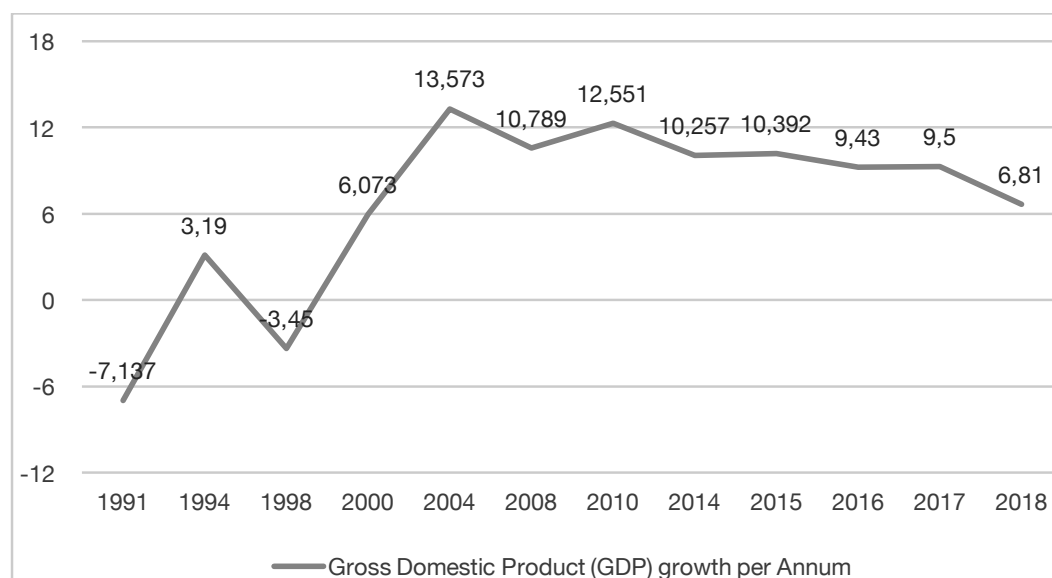
Overall, Ethiopia's economic growth has improved its socio-economic conditions, as evidenced by the country's remarkable progress towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals and other targets. A report jointly published by the United Nations office in Ethiopia and the National Planning Commission of Ethiopia (NPC) that investigated the progress made towards achieving the MDGs stated, "Ethiopia must be commended for making significant progress in the achievement of the MDGs" (NPC and UN 2015: i). The report outlined how Ethiopia had achieved six of the eight Millennium Development Goals and recorded significant progress in trying to meet the targets for the other two goals (MDGs, goal 3 – ensuring gender equality and empowering women; and MDGs goal 5 – improving maternal health).

The prevalence of extreme poverty and hunger in the country has dropped from 48 percent in 1990 to 23.4 percent in 2015 (NPC and UN 2015: xiii). Universal primary education targets have been achieved, despite some disparity in the male/female ratio. Ethiopia has been hailed for achieving many of its other goals, such as reducing child mortality, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability and developing a global partnership for development. All these goals are either ahead of schedule or on schedule (Ibid. 2015: i).

Ethiopia has also made significant improvements to its internal infrastructure and in its ability to attract foreign investment. In the area of infrastructure, the huge expansion of the nation's road network and the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

are two leading examples of the progress that has been made. The country’s road network has grown from 18,000 km in 1991 to over 120, 000 km at the time of writing – an increase of 70 percent over a period of 25 years (Workineh Gebeyehu 2016)¹¹. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, the construction of which began in 2011, will be the largest hydroelectric dam in Africa, once completed, with a power generation capacity of 6,450MW.

Figure 3.1 Ethiopia’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 1991-2018



Source: Adapted from The World Bank Annual GDP Growth for Ethiopia (from 1982-2018), available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=ET> (September 7, 2019)

¹¹ See Interview of Dr Workineh Gebeyehu, former Minister of Transport on Road Coverage network. Available at Fana Broadcast website <http://www.fanabc.com/english/index.php/component/k2/item/5913> (December 29, 2017).

A change in the country's economic outlook also triggered a tremendous increase in the inflow of foreign direct investment, while domestic investment has also grown. Although Ethiopia is still regarded as one of the most difficult countries in which to do business, this obstacle has been counteracted by the country's perceived investment potential. It is now recognized as one of the top ten investment destinations in Africa (African Investment Report 2015). Chinese, Turkish, Indian, British and Dutch investors are leading foreign investment in the country. However, despite the remarkable achievements made since 1991, some serious economic issues remain.

3.2.1. Rapid Economic Growth and Governance Deficit in Party-Affiliated Enterprises

Success in the economic sphere has not come without challenges. These include entrenched structural problems and problems associated with the content of the post-1991 reform measures or their implementation. In broad terms, the challenges facing Ethiopia's economy can be categorized into three different areas.

The structural problems associated with the Ethiopian economy and the low level at which the country still finds itself economically are much in evidence. Despite the steady economic growth in the 1990s, the subsequent rapid and sustained double-digit growth from 2004/5 to 2015, and a concurrent improvement in socio-economic conditions, the country still remains one of the world's poorest. About 25 million people, about a quarter of the population, still live in absolute poverty (less than USD1.25 a day) (NPC and UN 2015). Before and after the economic boom of 2005, between five and 18 million Ethiopians have had to depend on food aid every year. Levels of food insecurity massively increased in 2015 when the country's worst drought occurred. Drought continues to produce some of the most devastating famines in the history of Ethiopia (Abbink 2017, Kassa 2004, Block and Webb 2001). The agrarian sector still dominates the economy, despite efforts to promote a rapid process of industrialization. As the government has admitted, the performance of the sector has not met expectations (MOFED 2013: 6). It remains dominated by small scale, traditional farms that are highly vulnerable to climate change. As a result, the country's agricultural sector, rather disappointingly, is still not even able to produce enough to ensure the country's food security, let alone produce enough to lead

an envisioned structural change of the economy by supporting growth through a surplus of food supply. Added to these structural problems are demographic issues, which Abbink rightly described as the 'economic Woes' (Abbink 2017:47) of the country's progress. The country has a persistent annual population growth rate of 2.5 percent, which has not been matched even by its rapid economic gains. The country's population grew from around 48 million in 1991 to nearly 100 million in 2017, making it the second most populated country on the continent after Nigeria (Central Statistical Agency (CSA) of Ethiopia 2017, World Bank 2017). Population pressure is now widely believed to be the main factor causing escalating inter-communal conflict over grazing land or other similar resource-related disputes across the country.

Ethiopia has a very young population: around 60 percent of the population is below 30 years of age. In terms of job creation, this is far beyond the absorptive capacity of the economy (CSA 2007). Youth unemployment is already posing a big threat to the country's stability as evidenced by the recent unrest in Oromia regional state, which compelled the regional and federal governments to announce initiatives worth billions of Birr to create jobs for the youth in a scheme dubbed the 'Youth Revolving Fund'¹².

Financial risks can also arise as a result of some of the measures taken by the government. For instance, some observers have expressed concern over the country's ever-growing levels of external debt (Befekadu 2011, Desta 2005, Ramakrishna 2003). External debt increased fivefold between 2008/09 and 2014/15, from USD2.8 billion to USD19 billion, an increase from 12.1% of GDP to 26.2% (AfDB, OECD and UNDP 2016). Other issues, such as a foreign exchange shortage and the poor performance of export earnings, all fall within the first layer of economic challenges.

Moving beyond observations on structural economic issues, the subsistence farming sector is unable to produce sufficient food to ensure food security. This has prompted the

¹² The Ethiopian Federal Government announced a 10 billion Ethiopian Birr funding scheme called the Youth Revolving Fund in 2016 to create more jobs for young people in response to the prevalent youth unemployment problem. Unemployment is believed to be among the main causes of the protests that erupted in the Oromia and Amhara regions in 2015. The scheme was also endorsed by the Federal parliament.

Ethiopian Government to encourage the development of large commercial farming with the support of both domestic and foreign investors. The policy includes developing large-scale mechanized farms with minimum-cost lease contracts, financial loans, and other incentives (MOFED 2010:54-55). Domestic and foreign investors seized the opportunity to tap the benefits of the generous packages offered by government.

As an illustration of the influx of foreign investors, the Karuturi¹³ Global limited company, an Indian horticulture company, as well as hundreds of domestic investors, were among those that invested in the Gambella region, a lowland area with fertile soil in the western part of the country. Karuturi Global was given a substantial piece of land totaling around 300,000 hectares (some 120 kilometers wide) to grow wheat and other cereals on a lease contract of two million Birr per year for a period of 50 years (a very cheap deal of less than a dollar per hectare per year). In return, the company promised to create up to 60,000 jobs. While this scheme was meant to bolster economic growth, some serious setbacks emerged. Firstly, concern was raised regarding the 'Rural Resettlement Program or 'villagization – ' a program marketed as a means to relocate the scattered population to a centre at which they could more easily access social services. The government implemented the programme in areas where land was to be made available to investors. Human rights groups argued that the affected local populations were in fact being evicted against their best interests, a practice often labeled as 'land grabbing ' or a 'global rush for land ' (Makki, F., and Geisler, C. 2011; Tura 2018; Lavers 2012)¹⁴. Secondly, the hopes placed in these big commercial farming ventures remained unfulfilled, as their output did not live up to expectations. Karuturi Global's lease contract was terminated in 2015 after it

¹³ For more information on Karuturi and the issues it had with the Ethiopian authorities see on <http://hornaffairs.com/2015/01/20/karuturi-under-the-spotlight/> <http://hornaffairs.com/2015/12/31/karuturi-loses-farmland-ethiopia-cancels-contract/> and, <https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/faqs-indian-agriculture-investments-ethiopia>.

¹⁴ See also The Guardian's and the Oakland Institute's report on the 'land grabbing' issue in Ethiopia, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/14/ethiopia-villagisation-violence-land-grab>, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/21/ethiopia-centre-global-farmland-rush>, and <https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/miracle-mirage-manufacturing-hunger-poverty-ethiopia>. (30 December 2016).

failed to meet the government's expectations regarding wheat production. Furthermore, a government investigative report into the operations of domestic investors across the Gambella regional state revealed that of the 229,755 hectares of land leased to commercial farm developers, only half was being cultivated, despite the government giving out around 3.3 billion Birr in loans and other incentive schemes¹⁵. Furthermore, the report revealed the widespread mismanagement of government funds and corrupt practices. The report's findings were so incriminating they led to the removal of the President of the Development Bank of Ethiopia, Mr Esayas Bahre. The failures of the Karuturi Global company and those of domestic investors have clearly problematized the scheme's implementation.

More problematic is the involvement of the government and party-affiliated businesses in the economy. The change from a command economy to a market-led economy was expected to engender a growing role for the private sector after 1991, as the basic tenets of a market economy model dictate. Indeed, the post-1991 period has seen the private sector expanding, at least compared to its role under the previous socialist Derg regime. A push for greater privatization has been a key component of the reform packages introduced and implemented over the past two decades. However, the country's private sector is underdeveloped and weak. This is not the result of a lack of entrepreneurial effort from within the private sector, but partly because the state seems to be increasingly reinserting itself into the economy in ways that could prove to be unsustainable and burdensome in the long run. In this regard, the recently established Metals and Engineering Corporation (METEC¹⁶), which has a mandate to play a leading role in the industrialization of Ethiopia, provides a good illustration of the government's determination to continue playing a major role in the economy – a move that will have consequences for the development of the private sector. Since its foundation in 2010, the company, has been heavily involved

¹⁵ See Addis Fortune's issue of December 20, 2016 for more on the key findings of the report, available at <https://addisfortune.net/articles/results-from-gambella-commercial-farms-disappointing/>. (30 December 2016).

¹⁶ See more about METEC on its website, accessed on 25/12/2017, at <http://www.metec.gov.et/web/guest/metec-background> A report produced by the Oakland Institute in 2016 on METEC's involvement in mega sugar plantations can also be found at <https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/miracle-mirage-manufacturing-hunger-poverty-ethiopia>

in the country's Mega projects such as the Grand Renaissance Dam (GERD), new sugar plantations and other vast public manufacturing investments. It controls some 14 manufacturing enterprises – an unparalleled achievement, given that it has existed for just eight years (METEC 2017). Nevertheless, it is concerning that the military owns this huge business conglomerate. The decision to allow 'men in uniform' to hold such levels of economic power is in stark contrast to the notion of a market economy.

Performance-related issues of METEC have also recently emerged. METEC used to run 10 multibillion Birr projects involving sugar plantations and factories, but this has been reduced to just two projects because of the company's failure to execute its contractual obligations. This brings into question the government's vision in transforming the economy if it chooses to endorse such inefficient public enterprises (Tefera 2019).

The role played by the affiliates of the ruling EPRDF party further complicate matters. The four parties that form the EPRDF coalition each have a trading wing. The major one worth mentioning is the Tigray People's Liberation Front's Endowment Fund For the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT). The front is the dominant party in the coalition. EFFORT is a multi-billion Birr conglomerate of businesses that owns over two dozen enterprises operating in selected areas across all sectors of the economy (agriculture, manufacturing and service). In 2010, EFFORT companies reported a total of 2.7 billion Ethiopian Birr (ETB) of capital and six billion ETB in assets (Vaughan and Gebremichael 2011). The ruling EPRDF party is unquestionably doing big business. This clear merger of politics and the economy in Ethiopia is detrimental to the growth of the private sector. Whereas, generally, the role of the government can at least be understood within a developmental state model, which advocates an increased role of the state during phases of economic transition, it is hard to accept the role being played by party-affiliated businesses with the tenets of this model.

The final layer concerns efforts to ensure equitable growth. While the endeavours of the Ethiopian Government are generally perceived as being pro-poor, and hence widely supported, paradoxically, the question of 'marginalization', whether real or perceived, is also often put forward (Merara 2007). Indeed, the recent unrest in the Oromia and Amhara

regions' states is believed to have been triggered by the economic and political marginalization of ethnic Oromos and Amharas by the Tigrayan elites who were allegedly reaping the benefits of the country's economic growth through their associations with influential political figures (Fisher and Gebrewahd 2018, Yinebeb 2018). Feelings of economic and political marginalization among the Oromo elite remain a major issue that continues to destabilize the country. Since 2014, instability and unrest in the Oromia region (the largest in the country) has disrupted business (hundreds of commercial buildings have reportedly been burnt down across the region) and contributed towards a slowing of economic growth rates. Rampant corruption and illicit financial flows out of the country are prevalent and only serve to increase resentment against economic injustices within the country (Alemayehu and Addis 2016). While the issues discussed have left a dark shadow over the country's economy, political factors at the macro level remain the most pressing issues, and thus need to be analyzed.

3.3. Post-1991 Political Transitions: A Critical Overview

The demise of the Derg military dictatorship that had ruled from 1974 to 1991 resulted in the creation of what is referred to as a New Republic. The new ideas that underlay the New Republic are best captured by the current nomenclature of the Ethiopian state itself, 'The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia' as enshrined in the constitution of the country in 1994. The political reform package of the EPRDF Party, which has been in power since 1991, included provisions for the devolution of power in the form of a federal political dispensation and the introduction of a multiparty democracy, both hallmarks of the political era in post-1991 Ethiopia. Following a meeting sponsored by the United States of America between the victorious TPLF-led group and various other political forces in May 1991 in London, consensus was reached over a way forward that included adopting a Transitional Charter that would establish a Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGoE). Consequently, upon the invitation of the TPLF-led group, representatives of the various political groups, including the Oromo Liberation Front and the Sidama Liberation Front, met in Addis Ababa and adopted the Transitional Charter that would serve for the transitional period before being replaced by a new constitution in 1994. In accordance with the Transitional Charter, a transitional government composed of the various dominant political forces at the time, including the Oromo Liberation Front and other

political forces representing the southern nationalities (the Hadiya, the Sidama and the Gurage, among others), was established. The constituent parties formed a power-sharing agreement which will be discussed below. The Transitional Charter stated that the break away from military rule entailed not just a break from military dictatorship but the termination of all previous oppressive regimes. These steps represented a pivotal moment paving the way for rebuilding and restructuring the country (Transitional Charter of ToG 1991:1). In this regard, the Charter pledged that ‘a proclamation of a democratic order is a categorical imperative’ (Ibid. 1991). To contextualize the democratic order the Charter envisaged, a reference was made to the adoption of the 1948 United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In particular, the right of every individual to have freedom of conscience, expression, association and peaceful assembly was declared to be fully respected without any limitations. Similarly, the right to engage in, and exercise, unrestricted political activity and organize political parties was also fully recognized, as long as this did not violate the rights of others, as stated in the Charter. Moreover, a harbinger of the federal constitutional dispensation that would later be adopted – the problematic issue of the right of nations, nationalities and peoples to self-determination – was also incorporated into the Charter. The self-determination rights of the nations, nationalities and peoples, according to the Charter, included the right to preserve, promote and develop one’s own identity, language, culture and history, administer one’s own affairs and participate in the central government fairly and on an equal basis (Ibid. 1991 Article 1). In 1994, after four years of transitional administration, a new constitution was adopted, and a new constitutional arrangement came into effect a year later, in line with the terms stipulated in the Transitional Charter.

The 1995 Constitution further consolidated the political reform agenda initiated in 1991. The federal dispensation of power sharing was formally laid out, and the idea of a multi-party democracy was extensively enshrined in the constitution. The new constitution also established the FDRE state (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia) (FDRE Constitution 1995, Art. 1). The FDRE state comprises member states that are organized largely along ethno-linguistic lines, confirming the population’s right to form their own state under the ‘Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ (the NNPs) principle. Nations, Nationalities and Peoples are defined as:

“A ‘Nation, Nationality or People’ for the purpose of this Constitution, is a group of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in common or related identities, a common psychological make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory.” (Ibid. 1995, Article 39(5)).

The nine member states of the federation are: 1) The State of Oromia; 2) The State of Amhara; 3) The State of Tigray; 4) The State of Somalia; 5) The State of Afar; 6) The State of Benshangul Gumuz; 7) The State of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples; 8) The State of the Gambela Peoples; and 9) The State of the Harari People. The first five states are named after the numerically dominant ethnic groups found in their respective delimited territories. The ethnic Oromos in the state of Oromia, the ethnic Amhara group in the state of Amhara, the ethnic Tigre in the state of Tigray, the ethnic Afar, and ethnic Somalis in the states of Afar and Somalia are the predominant groups within each state. The remaining member states, except for the State of Harari, a small city state surrounded by Oromia State of which the ethnic Hararis constitute less than ten percent of the state’s population, are highly diversified with no single dominant ethnic group. A notable example of this diversity is the State of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples, which has more than 56 ethnic groups cohabiting in its territory. In terms of the size of the member states, Oromia State accounts for one-third of the country’s total land mass, whereas Harari State is by far the smallest, at only 340 square kilometers. While the State of Somalia, the State of Amhara and the State of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples are also large, the rest of the member states are smaller, signifying the asymmetric nature of the Ethiopian federation. Likewise, the ethnic composition of the federation reveals that, together, ethnic Oromos and Amharas constitute around 70 percent of the country’s total population. The Oromos are the single largest group at 34.4 percent (CSA 2007). In addition to the nine member states of the federation, there are two

city administrations: The Addis Ababa city administration and the Dire Dawa city administration, both of which are accountable to the federal government. The Addis Ababa city administration is in Oromia State, and is constitutionally recognized as the capital of the federation, whereas the status of the Dire Dawa city administration is contested constitutionally, as the arrangement arose from other subsidiary legislation¹⁷.

The 1995 Constitution established two tiers of government, both with legislative, executive and judicial functions and specific delimited powers (Ibid. 1995: Articles 50-55). The federal government was constitutionally assigned the powers that conventionally go to the central government in most federations. Hence, the federal government has the power to formulate and implement the country's national policies and strategies relating to economic, social and developmental issues, such as enacting national standards and policy criteria for education, health, science and technology. Defense, foreign policy, refugee and immigration matters, the power to control arms and defend the constitution, the national bank, monetary and financial issues, regulation of inter-state trade and foreign commerce, transport policy (railways, ports, airways and roads that link two or more states) and communications infrastructure (telecommunications and postal) also all fall under the remit of the federal government along with the power to levy taxes on federal tax matters, impose and lift a state of emergency, and govern political parties and elections. The states are granted the power to form a state government that best advances their interests and enacts and executes policies, strategies and plans that relate specifically to their state's social, economic and developmental matters. They can administer their land and natural resources, exercise power over the revenues allocated to them, establish a state police force, and run a state civil service with its own budget. In addition, any power not exclusively given to the federal level (residual power) forms part of the states' reserve (Ibid. 1995: Article 52).

¹⁷ Dire Dawa City Administration was established by Proclamation no. 416/2004 of the Federal parliament as a provisional legal entity. The ownership of the city was claimed by both the Oromia and Somali regions and the proclamation was issued as a temporary measure until the issue is resolved. Hence, the city status is autonomous only due to the ongoing failure to resolve this contestation.

Moreover, the Constitution created a bicameral house at the federal level: the House of Peoples Representatives (HPR), the lower house, and the House of Federation, the upper house. The HPR is the legislative body with the highest authority within the federal (central) government. It has 550 seats, of which 530 are directly filled by members elected by the people every five years from every constituency with a population of at least 100,000, while the other 20 seats are reserved for minority nationalities and peoples. The House of Federation is a non-legislative body tasked with interpreting the constitution and acting as an 'empire' of the federation. Unlike the HPR, which represents the voting preferences of the citizens and which is therefore directly accountable to them, the House of Federation is where the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples are represented. Each Nation, Nationality and People is represented by one member, plus an additional seat for every one million of its population (Ibid. 1995: Article 61(2)). At the state level, the legislative functions are entrusted to the State Council, which is the highest organ of state authority and is directly responsible to the people. The highest executive power at the federal level is held by the Council of Ministers headed by the Prime Minister, who is also head of government. The executive body comes from the party or coalition of parties that wins a majority of seats in the House of Peoples Representatives. The position of president at the federal level is largely a ceremonial one. The president of the republic is elected for a six-year term by a joint meeting of the two federal houses. At the state level, the highest executive power also rests with the State Administration, which is like a Federal Executive (Ibid. 1995: Article 50(6)).

The Constitution establishes parallel branches of the independent judiciary at both the federal and state level, each with judicial authority over their respective jurisdictions. The federal supreme judicial power is granted to the federal Supreme Court, which also has power of cassation over the state supreme courts – the only instance where an independent parallel existence of the judiciary of the two-tier government gives way to an intersection over which the federal judiciary reigns. The constitution further stipulates the non-interference of any governmental body at any level over judicial matters, stressing the principle of judicial independence (Ibid. 1995: Article 78).

The FDRE Constitution canonizes the human and democratic rights of individual citizens. It even puts this as a core objective of the pronouncement of the republic when it states:

“Firmly convinced that the fulfillment of this objective (of establishing the democratic order) requires full respect of individual and people’s fundamental freedoms and rights, to live together on the basis of equality and without any sexual, religious or cultural discrimination” (FDRE Constitution 1995, Preamble: 2)

The rights of the individual make up about one-third of the provisions of the constitution. The fundamental right to life and the security of the individual and liberty, to democratic rights such as the right to hold an opinion (freedom of thought), freedom of expression (including press freedom) and the right to association were all enshrined in the social contract of the new Ethiopian republic in a manner similar to the social contracts in modern liberal constitutions around the world. In the construction and application of these fundamental human and democratic rights, reference was also made to the international human rights the country has adopted as its guiding principles, including the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Covenant on Human Rights¹⁸. While recognition of these fundamental rights and freedoms under the Transitional Charter (1991), the FDRE Constitution (1995) and the general political reform agenda can be seen as a positive step, it is debatable whether the post-1991 government has lived up to its proclaimed reformist agenda.

A closer look at the nature of the country’s political reform since 1991 gives cause for both optimism and concern. On a positive note, there a democratic initiative was launched for the first time. The country’s modern political history attests to the fact that the concept of political democracy was hardly known both under the absolutist monarchy of Emperor Haile Selassie and Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam’s military dictatorship. The concept of multiparty democracy, as it is understood and practised under the new republic, entered the formal Ethiopian political sphere only after 1991. The number of opposition political

¹⁸ The principal international human rights covenants ratified by the country are the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

parties has grown from none to dozens within the past 25 years. Five periodic elections have taken place, in which the opposition has, on occasion, contested and won seats. Free press has mushroomed since 1991 despite the challenges it continues to face. Numerous civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations have come into existence over the past two decades. Though these steps may seem mundane, given the context of the country's chaotic past, they do reflect progress. Secondly, the measures taken to devolve power, later known as 'the federalism project', which was also a major component of the reform agenda, have arguably improved the system of governance. They have empowered previously marginalized groups – the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples. For a long time, the northern political elites (Amhara and Tigray) had controlled the core of the Ethiopian state's political power by marginalizing dozens of majorities. The post-1991 era saw a reversal of the century-long concerted centralization process through the recognition of the right to self-determination for the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia. This altered the relationship between the elite highland core and the elites of the marginalized periphery (Arriola and Lyons 2016, Clapham 2009). The regional states now attempt to assert their presence in their political interactions with the centre. What initially appeared to be a 'new phase' in the political history of the country has resulted in a political impasse owing to the governance conceptualizations and practices of the regime in power, as evidenced by a legitimacy crisis that has persisted since 1991. The next section highlights issues pertaining to the EPRDF political reforms.

3.3.1. The Promise and Peril of Political Reforms

This section begins by explaining the initial promises experienced during the maiden years of the EPRD reign and the perils that followed. It argues that the perils of the political reform agenda were inherent in the manner in which the agenda was launched in 1991. In hindsight, these perils have contributed cumulatively to the current political stalemate, engendering a series of states of emergency under the control of the security apparatus, better known as the Military Command Post.

I start with the initial EPRDF promise political reform and argue that the transitional period was initially viewed as inclusive, and that a democratic opening was in sight. After overthrowing the Derg military junta, the EPRDF took for itself 32 of the 87 seats in the Council of Representatives (CoR) established under the Transitional Charter. The remaining 55 seats were apportioned to over 32 other political organizations represented in the unelected council. The executive power of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) also retained the EPRDF.

Second, the promise of political transition to democracy started faltering during the initial period, a failure that haunted the political architects who crafted the political regime. While the EPRDF had assumed the role as 'guardian' of transition politics and the party responsible for dictating the rules, it excluded some politically significant political forces, such as the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All Ethiopian People Socialist Movement (MEISON), that had emerged out of the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s. It also ensured that they were alienated and excluded from participating in the process that led to the formation of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia and the enactment of post-1995 constitution politics. The EPRP and MEISON, together with a few other political groups (such as the EDU), tried to initiate another parallel transitional process, but these efforts proved futile as the EPRDF quickly shut them down. In the process, their representatives were arrested at the airport upon arrival and deported out of the country. Moreover, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the major opposition political force to the EPRDF at the time, withdrew from the Transitional Government. The withdrawal of the OLF, the second largest party after the EPRDF in terms of seats occupied in the Council of Representatives of the TGoE, and the AAPUO (All Amhara Peoples Union Organization) denounced the EPRDF's political tactics and policies. The withdrawal of these two political forces dealt a major blow to the precarious legitimacy of the transitional political process.

In essence, the opposition forces' attempts to launch a parallel political initiative should be seen as an effort to delegitimize the political process by questioning the composition and neutrality of the electoral governance institutions of the transitional government. They rejected the electoral commission's proclaimed election by boycotting the very first

election held under the new republic. Rights groups also noted that the Transitional Government of Ethiopia had used political imprisonment 'on a large scale' to silence its opponents and critics across its four-year rule, after it came to power in 1991¹⁹. The report further stated that over 100 journalists were imprisoned under the Transitional Government of Ethiopia's rule. The post-Transitional Government of the New Republic does not look any different as far as these political developments are concerned.

The Transitional Government was replaced by the constitutionally established government of the FDRE government in 1995 after the promulgation of the FDRE Constitution. The FDRE Constitution's process and content were contested because they were regarded more as instruments for the institutionalization of the EPRDF's political program (Merara 2003: 153) than as an expression of citizens' rights and sovereignty.

Unfortunately, the period from the promulgation of the constitution to the present has been marred by recurrent political upheavals, particularly post-election political crises and instability. The rejection of the EPRDF's political institutions and the delegitimization of the democratization process by the opposition have continued to the present.

Opposition to the EPRDF government assumed greater significance in 2014, with popular uprisings against the ruling party erupting in two major regional states, Oromia Region State and Amhara Regional State.

The trajectory of the five regional and national elections held in 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010 and 2015 reveal the country's bumpy political road to authentic democracy. The opposition largely boycotted the first two elections, thereby undermining the legitimacy of the political process and the EPRDF's claim to be the ruling party. An exception was Professor Beyene Petros's party, which competed and won some seats in the Southern part of the country (the Hadiya Zone) in the 2000 election. The EPRDF therefore won the first two elections without facing any serious challenges. In the third election (2005) the opposition forces regrouped and participated with real commitment. The initial optimism

¹⁹ See for instance, Amnesty International Country Report in 1995. Available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AFR25/006/1995/es/>. (15 March 2017).

surrounding the election, which most observers perceived as a genuine multiparty exercise (Harbeson 2005, Lyons 1996, 2006, 2010, Aalen and Tronvoll 2009, Asnake 2011), was soon replaced by disappointment as the ruling EPRDF and the major opposition alliances, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and the Union of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF), declared themselves winners of the election before all the votes had even been counted. However, the opposition did make significant gains in the urban areas and in some regions (Oromia, Amhara and the Southern Nations and Nationalities) constituency, winning up to 173 out of the 547 seats. In the capital, Addis Ababa, the opposition won all the federal parliamentary seats as well as those of the city administration council.

The controversy surrounding the election process sparked violent protests that claimed the lives of more than 200 protesters (Asnake 2011). Furthermore, members of the CUD coalition refused to take up their seats in parliament and, consequently, its leaders ended up in jail (Abbink 2006). Journalists and some civil society leaders were also imprisoned alongside the CUD leaders.

The two elections that followed (2010 and 2015) were almost exclusively contested by the EPRDF and its affiliate parties, with opposition parties only able to play a minimal part in the highly controlled political space, established through new restrictive laws. Just before the 2010 election, the Charities and Societies Law, which regulated and restricted funding sources to civil society organizations, was enacted. The media laws were also revised to further regulate the media landscape. Electoral laws were re-enacted, and a new anti-terrorism law was put in place. While the government and ruling party justified the enactment of these new laws on the grounds that they protected the security and sovereignty of the state, and clarified the regulatory framework, the opposition and other critics saw this as a move to restrict and narrow the political space (Aalen and Tronvoll 2009, Abbink 2006). In the end, the EPRDF and its affiliate parties won all but one of the seats, which went to an opposition candidate. In the 2015 election, the EPRDF and its affiliate parties won all the seats. The elections held to date under the FDRE state regrettably demonstrate a perennial problem with the democratization process of the new republic. After 20 years, instead of garnering some support from all sides of the political spectrum,

the democratization process remains deeply contested. None of the elections under the FDRE state can be described as having been successful democratic exercises.

Table 3.1 National election results (1995, 2000, 2005, 2010 and 2015)

Election year	% won by EPRDF and its affiliates	Remarks
1994/5	86%	Largely boycotted by major opposition actors
2000	88%	Largely boycotted by major opposition actors
2005	68%	Contested by major opposition forces
2010	99.6%	The EPRDF and its affiliates were declared winners after losing just two seats
2015	100%	

Source: National Electoral Board, available at <https://www.electionethiopia.org>.

A consolidation of the democratic governance principles will only become meaningful if both the ruling party and the opposition parties in Ethiopia accept them with a common understanding. To date, the EPRDF has molded its principles into tools to legitimize its political practices and governance, while for the opposition their clear superficiality discourages endorsement. There has been a tendency to express these political frustrations through armed resistance; the former CUD leadership is worth noting here, in addition to the dozens of other groups in exile in neighboring countries that have already rejected the EPRDF-led political process.

The human rights record of the FDRE state has become increasingly problematic too, although it cannot be disputed that there have been improvements compared to its predecessor, the Derg regime. In particular, the government's means of dealing with opposition politicians and dissident voices are worrying. International human rights groups and the US State Department all detail instances of abuse. A 2016 Amnesty International report describes how the EPRDF government has used legislation to 'stifle' dissent over the past 25 years, referring to three contentious pieces of legislation enacted by the HPR: The Press Law, the Charities and Societies Proclamation and the Anti-terrorism Proclamation. The report details how these new laws were used to justify the arrest of opposition party leaders, silence journalists and other critical voices, and generally squeeze the political space. The excessive use of lethal force by security forces in suppressing protests has also increased markedly in recent years. Within the past three years, over 1,000 protesters have been killed by government security forces in the Oromia and Amhara regional states alone²⁰.

²⁰ Moreover, see a statement made by the U.S. State Department in reference to the abuses perpetrated across the country as recent protests unfolded. Available at <https://www.state.gov/state-gov-website-modernization/>. (20 May 2017).

Furthermore, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and internet freedoms are all areas in which there is still much room for improvement. In view of this, the country was classed as 'not free' by the Freedom House Global Freedom Index (2016), scoring lower than neighboring Somaliland and Djibouti²¹.

The second component of the political reform project, the devolution of power via the federal political power arrangement that aimed to resolve the historical 'nationality question' has also begun to be questioned. In theory, the system, which aimed at empowering the historically marginalized and dominated groups – the Nations, Nationalities or Peoples – should have been embraced and defended. However, the federal political dispensation project instead generated a diverse and radical set of views from the outset. It has increasingly attracted fierce opposition from among ethnic groups that are often seen as the 'natural' supporters of the current political arrangement. The Oromos are a notable example in this regard. At present, the Oromo partners in the ruling EPRDF have become the latest ones to question the *modus operandi* of the federal system, joining the Oromo opposition groups that rejected the system long ago. What initially appeared to the regional government to be an ordinary local protest against the handover of communal land to private investors in the small town of Ghinch in the South West Shewa Zone of Oromia, has become a political phenomenon that has engulfed the whole of Oromia in popular uprisings against the government since November 2015²².

The protests continued, claiming the lives of thousands of Ethiopians. Although these protests were offset by the small protest in Ghinch, it was fueled by the federal government's plan to expand the territory of the capital city by incorporating surrounding Oromo towns and villages in a plan called 'The Addis Ababa and the Surrounding Oromia Special Zone Integrated Development Plan' or 'the Addis Ababa Master Plan'. Despite the

²¹ For more on the detailed report, see the Freedom House Country Report for 2016, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/ethiopia> (July 20, 2017).

²² For a detailed analysis of the phenomenon of the 'Oromo Protest', see Yinebeb, N. (2018). 'The root causes of the political crisis in Oromia regional state and its implications', in Assefa, F. (ed.). *Emerging Issues in Federalism and Governance in Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Printing.

federal government's decision to drop the Addis Ababa Master Plan, protests have continued to rage unabated across Oromia. It is now widely accepted that the protests are a product of greater and more fundamental issues; one Oromo scholar and activist, Awol Kassim, captured this well when he wrote,

“Although the protests were sparked by a government plan to expand the territorial and administrative limits of Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, into neighboring Oromo towns and villages, they were manifestations of long-simmering ethnic discontents buried beneath the surface.” (Awol 2016:2²³).

The Amhara region, home to the second largest ethnic group after the Oromo, became the second site of protests against the government. While the immediate cause of the protests in the Amhara region was a border dispute between the Amhara and Tigray regional authorities, it evolved into a solidarity movement in support of the Oromo protests. Regardless of the immediate causes or any ulterior motives that drove the two protests, by claiming that there was a discernible common belief in the current Tigrayan domination of Ethiopia. The Tigrayan elites 'were treated as an overly privileged minority that had disproportionate control of the economic and political positions under EPRDF rule. The so-called TPLF dominance was in violation of the federal arrangement. In essence, the Oromo opposition to EPRDF rule was informed by their call for a genuine federal arrangement that enacted proportionate representation at the central government level and ensured regional autonomy. On the other hand, the Amhara elites proposed that the whole federal arrangement be revised in favour of a non-ethnicized arrangement.

The EPRDF-led government declared a state of emergency in November 2016 after a year of protests. The party pledged to 'deeply renew itself 'and 'widen and deepen 'the democratization process. It also acknowledged that a crisis of good governance and corruption existed in the country. To this end, the federal cabinet was reshuffled and dialogue

²³ For more see the complete commentary on <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/06/ethiopia-rising-narrative-oromo-protests-160620140306460.html>. (15 July 2017).

with opposition parties was initiated. However, 10 months later, in August 2017, when the state of emergency was lifted, the protests in the Oromia region continued, and the country's security situation continues to deteriorate. Attempts at dialogue with opposition parties, the major component of the supposed government reform package to widen the political space in response to the protests, were marred by the withdrawal of the two major opposition parties, the Blue Party and the Medrek Coalition. A few months later, in November 2017, the government unveiled a new plan to create a 'National and Regional Joint Security Council', which basically amounted to a securitization of the political system, essentially imposing another 'state of emergency' in all but name. This new legislative body has been tasked with controlling Ethiopia's security situation and taking appropriate action accordingly (Siraj Firgessa, 2017). Additionally, the ongoing conflict on the border of the Oromia and Somali regions has become a massive and tragic humanitarian crisis²⁴ that now threatens the security and survival of the country. Clearly, the post-1991 political reform phase has proved to be a controversial political project that has resulted in an impasse requiring some penetrating analysis.

In conclusion, since 1991, Ethiopia has witnessed spectacular economic progress, which has been coupled with significant socio-economic improvements. The country has registered some of the fastest economic growth rates in the world, attributable largely to the policy changes introduced and implemented by the EPRDF-led government. However, despite its economic progress, Ethiopia remains one of the poorest countries in the world, partly because the economy's structural base remains rooted in the agrarian sector, which is vulnerable to the vagaries of nature. The role of the state, particularly the role of military-related institutions, supposedly seeking to achieve a rapid transition of the country's economy to industrialization, has proven to be problematic both in terms of its policy choices and performance. The huge involvement in the economy of companies affiliated with the ruling party and the issue of ensuring equitable growth are issues that need to be

²⁴ In addition to the protests that have engulfed a wider part of the country, over 700,000 civilians have fled their homes and have been living in IDP camps for several months as a result of a new conflict between the Oromia and Somali regional states that began in 2016. Militia and regional security forces on both sides have been accused of carrying out mass evictions and killing innocent civilians.

addressed to ensure the sustainability of economic progress going forward. The political reform agenda, comprising the introduction of a multiparty democracy and the devolution of political power in the form of federalism, has already faced major setbacks and resulted in a political impasse. The political reform project is being contested on several fronts and the levels of contestation have been increasing since the reform project began, despite some positive political developments in the aftermath of 1991. These contestations go beyond the expected differences over political issue(s) that define democratic systems. Rather, they reject and question the whole political system of post-1991 in Ethiopia. Elections are often boycotted, democratic institutions denied legitimacy, and recurrent violent protests occur. These actions are all manifestations of the deep levels of discontent with the current system, and an indication that there is a fundamental need to rethink the current political process in order to be able to address the political impasse. In the following chapters, this thesis attempts to explain and understand the political impasse by probing the political discourses of the major actors in the political arena of the country between 1991-2015.