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

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## Chapter Four: The EPRDF's Political Discourse

“Development is an existential question/issue. Democracy is an existential issue. This has nothing to do with a political party but is an existential issue for the country. Any strategy or policy that does not take the issues of democracy and development as existential issues/questions for the country is irrelevant.” (Meles 2002) (own translation)

### 4.1. Introduction

The discourse on democratization of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) is rooted in the political discourse of the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), a victorious ethno-nationalist movement that played a critical role in establishing the EPRDF. As will be discussed, the formation of the EPRDF was part of the TPLF's strategic plan, which was systematically implemented in the course of the armed struggle against the previous military regime. The TPLF's political discourse must therefore be the focus of any discussion of the ruling front's political discourse. Accordingly, one must shed light on the TPLF's conceptualization of political issues, and how that carried over to the EPRDF. Furthermore, we must examine the institutionalization of those discourses via the instrumentality of government policies, strategies, laws and state institutions. Consequently, this chapter aims to present the ruling EPRDF party's political discourse by tracing its origin, development and institutionalization based on TPLF/EPRDF party documents and key government policy documents, including the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution. Accordingly, this chapter is a synoptic presentation of the party's political discourse and its 'democratization' project, and includes an analysis of how these discourses interact with the general political processes in the country since 1991.

The chapter explores two major discourses: The first illuminates the debate around the TPLF-cum-EPRDF's political discourse, highlighting how it evolved over time both before and after 1991. The second analysis considers the dominance of the EPRDF's democratization discourse, its institutionalization and how this was carefully crafted to stifle the opposition's efforts to propel a pluralist political discourse. The chapter concludes with a commentary on the preceding discussions highlighting the congruency of the TPLF-cum-EPRDF political discourses, which ushered in the securitization of its democratization doctrine vis-à-vis its opponents.

#### 4.2. The TPLF and the Making of the EPRDF Political Discourse

The ruling EPRDF party is a four-party coalition established mainly by the TPLF towards the end of the 1980s. In 1986, the TPLF formed an alliance with the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), a regrouped faction that left the EPRP. The EPDM subsequently forged a close alliance with the TPLF and began operating in parts of Wello and Gondar with the latter's support (Amhara Nation Democratic Movement (ANDM 2015). The first of the TPLF's creations, the EPDM, transformed into an ethnic Amhara Party, rebranding itself as the Amhara National Democratic Movement (Amhara Democratic Party as of 2018). It thus became one of the three political parties that established the EPRDF in 1989, along with the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization Party (OPDO) (which became the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP) in 2018) and the Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement (EDORM), which later renamed itself the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM). The founders of both the OPDO and EDORM/SEPDM were all selected from among prisoners of war or defectors from the Ethiopian army. The TPLF's strategic move to establish a wider coalition revealed a recognition of the multi-ethnic realities of Ethiopia and the need to transform itself into a national entity that appealed to most of the ethnic groups in the country. Thus, the EPRDF is seen as having links to the Oromo, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, via the OPDO, and to the Amhara, the second largest ethnic group, via the ANDM. Moreover,

it appeals to most ethnic groups in the southern region via the SEPDM<sup>25</sup> and, of course, the TPLF's 'natural' base is the Tigray. The EPRDF entered the Ethiopian political scene ostensibly as a grand, multinational coalition. The TPLF viewed these parties as 'democratic' national movements with which it chose to align itself during a period of struggle. Beyond these major parties, the TPLF has also established a number of other parties, such as the People's Democratic Organizations (PDOs) and other movements, some of which are regarded as EPRDF affiliate parties,<sup>26</sup> which administer those regions not covered by the TPLF-led EPRDF coalition.

These affiliate parties subscribe to the TPLF's/EPRDF's political programme. Despite being separate legal entities with their own constituencies, these affiliates regard themselves as belonging to one party.<sup>27</sup> Because of the way the EPRDF operates, it is often confusingly described as a party; in fact, it is a coalition of four different parties. While essentially having adopted the discourse of the ruling camp's political programme, the way the affiliate liberation movements/parties present their respective discourses differs in terms of the context, messages and meanings of the EPRDF's political discourse, supposedly in congruence with the politics of their locale. For instance, the discourses of the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) and the Tigray People's Liberation

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<sup>25</sup> The Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Regional State Government is one of the nine regions/constituencies of the Ethiopian Federation established by the FDRE constitution. This region hosts more than 56 ethnic groups. Five of these regions (regions 7-11), established during the four years of the transitional period (1991-1994), merged to form the current set-up. For more, see Vaughan, S. (1994). *The Addis Ababa Transitional Conference of July 1991: Its Origins, History, and Significance* (p. 45). Edinburgh: Centre of African Studies, Edinburgh University.

<sup>26</sup> According to the EPRDF, the term affiliate parties includes those parties that administer the Somali region (Ethiopian Somali Democratic Party, ESDP), the Afar region (Afar People's Democratic Organization, APDO), the Gambella region (Gambella People's Democratic Movement, GPDM) and the Benishangul-Gumuz region (Benishangul-Gumuz People's Democratic Unity Front, BGPDUF). There is a desk at the EPRDF secretariat that coordinates and follows up on these parties.

<sup>27</sup> For more on the EPRDF coalition's programme and the four coalition members, including their own narratives of their struggles and achievements, see: 'Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) Programme', as adopted by the 4th Congress of the EPRDF in September 2001; 'History of EPDM-ANDOM: 1973 (EC)-2008 (EC)', published in Amharic by the Secretariat of the ANDM (2015); Bahirdar, 'The History of OPDO's Struggle and its Success: From its Birth to 2010', published in Oromia and Amharic by the Secretariat of the OPDO (2010), Addis Ababa.

Front (TPLF) on the conceptualization of political issues and the construction of “enemies”, might differ depending on how the discourses resonate in their respective contexts. Nevertheless, the political discourses of the ruling party essentially remain the same, with the TPLF’s political discourse at the epicentre. It is therefore crucial to begin by examining the TPLF’s political discourse in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the political discourse of the government and the ruling elite.

The TPLF is an ethno-nationalist political movement established in 1975 by ethnic Tigrayan students. Many of the founders were active participants in the Ethiopian Student Movement (EST) that catalyzed the revolution that contributed to the demise of the imperial regime of Haile Selassie I in 1974 (Medhane 1992, Young 1996, Aregawi 2004, 2008). Inspired by global leftist movements, Ethiopian university students played a leading role in the struggle against feudalism and imperialism. The establishment of ‘scientific socialism’ was seen as the only solution to the backwardness and extreme poverty in the country at that time. Marxism-Leninism was the prevailing political ideology in terms of explaining and understanding the contradictions in Ethiopian society. Despite the students’ belief that a ‘socialist utopia’ was the only solution to Ethiopia’s problems and that a revolution was necessary to achieve it, the students’ interpretations of societal contradictions differed. On the one hand, some student groups expressed their discontent at what they perceived as national oppression as part of, or in addition to, class oppression. They called for a struggle against ‘national oppression’ and pushed for secession from what they regarded as a dominant oppressive regime that exploited citizens. Other students acknowledged this exploitation but insisted it was part of class oppression. This group called for a nationwide struggle against the oppressive classes. Those students who defined their grievances in terms of national oppression subsequently formed their respective nations’ ethnic liberation movements, while Pan-Ethiopian movements emerged from the latter groups. The TPLF founders adhered to the national oppression thesis.

In its analysis of the socio-economic situation and political conditions of the Tigray region at that time, the TPLF concluded that the abject poverty, underdevelopment of Tigray and the cultural and political marginalization was a deliberate act of oppression and neglect by the ruling Amhara elite, specifically the ‘*Shoan* Amhara’ elite. The TPLF’s first

political manifesto, issued in 1976, briefly details the problems of the Tigray and their calls for revolution to 'liberate 'Tigray through armed struggle (TPLF 1976). Tigray, the once glorious host of the Axumite civilization, one of the oldest civilizations in the ancient world, and the base of Emperor Yohannes IV, the ruler of Ethiopia from 1872-1889, became a land of "misery and agony" which forced the Tigrayans to flee as 'leaderless bees 'to other parties in the country in search of a better life. This exodus continued when the region fell under the rule of Emperor Menelik II, King of *Shoa*, in 1889 as a result of the deliberate acts and economic neglect by the *Shoan* rulers. Indeed, under the *Shoa* regime, Tigray was ravaged by multiple famines, an exploitive land tenure system and a succession of devastating wars, including the battles of Adwa and the subsequent war with Mussolini's fascist Italy. Politically, the Tigrayan elite felt "marginalized" from the centre by the *Shoa* Amhara elite, as the region was initially ruled by *Shoan* elites appointed from the centre. Moreover, the TPLF manifesto states that the *Shoan* Amhara elite tried everything in their power to "destroy" Tigrayan cultural identity ("Amharanization"), to the extent of "stealing" the history of the Tigray people. The consequence of this "dominance", "subjugation", "marginalization" and underdevelopment, was the "dehumanization", "backwardness" and "restlessness" of the Tigrayans, according to the TPLF's founders (Ibid. 1976: V-VII). These founders concluded that Tigray suffered from both "class exploitation" and "national oppression" by the *Shoan* Amhara elite.

In response to class exploitation and the oppression of their region by the state, the TPLF was convinced a national and social revolution was necessary to liberate the oppressed and exploited classes in Tigray. The TPLF believed an armed struggle guided by a Marxist-Leninist organization like the TPLF could achieve the objectives of the struggle – to establish an anti-feudalist anti-imperialist democratic republic and government of the "oppressed people". The new government would include representatives of the oppressed classes (the peasants, working class and others oppressed groups). It must be noted here that the idea of liberating Tigray and establishing an Independent Tigray Republic was later dropped. Instead, the idea of the self-determination of nations (nationalities) was adopted. It was further stated that the democratic republic would protect the interests of the oppressed and suppress their class enemies. Generally speaking, the revolutionary

struggle was waged against national oppression (anti-national oppression), feudalism (anti-feudalism), imperialism, “reactionaries”, “anti-revolutionaries”, “chauvinists” and “narrow nationalists” (Ibid. 1976: V-VII). Specifically, the list of enemies included the Shoan Amhara elites, the ruling military regime (described as “the worst fascist regime in the world”) and those Amhara elites who disagreed with the TPLF’s conceptualization of political issues and its struggle. This list also included groups such as the EPRP and the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON), which had collaborated with the military junta, and hence was regarded as reactionary. The ‘enemies’ were also the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU), which was perceived as pro-monarchy and feudal, but lost power and privilege under the military regime, the Tigray Liberation Front (TLF) and other nationalist liberation fronts such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). The TPLF had engaged in battles with most of its listed enemies for a period of 17 years (1975-1991) and defeated them. Their conquests included the military junta, which then had to relinquish its power (Aregawi 2008).

The TPLF’s discourse on the armed struggle phase (1974 to 1991) was fairly straightforward – it was a discourse that concerned the need to pursue liberation from national oppression. The Tigray nation, and later the whole of Ethiopia, were to be liberated through armed struggle. Liberation was to be followed by the exercise of self-determination rights aimed at establishing the democratic republic. The socio-economic conditions of Tigray and the governance issues of that time were perceived as acts of oppression by the “enemy” classes, which could be countered only by armed struggle. Politics then was about ensuring the liberation of Tigray by force. It was not about deliberation or negotiation; rather it was about bloodshed and a civil war that lasted 17 years. War was the politics of the day, and the TPLF, the Ethiopian military and other enemies of the TPLF were fully engaged in the conflict. Therefore, it is not difficult to argue that the militarization of politics resulted in winners and losers in Ethiopian politics. The consequential outcome and practice of such politics came to haunt Ethiopia’s political culture and its political elites in political developments after 1991. As mentioned earlier, subsequently, the TPLF created three other parties (the ANDM, OPDO and SEPDM) to form the EPRDF and, in 1991, it established a transitional government in accordance with its revolutionary ideals.

The core of the TPLF's revolutionary doctrine that would later be so consequential in the country's politics involved recognizing the rights of the oppressed nations (nationalities) to self-determination. These rights included the right to secede from the Ethiopian state. The discourse emanated from the premise that Ethiopia was essentially dominated by one ethnic group – the ruling Amhara elite. The TPLF narrative was that the Amhara had “dominated”, “subjugated” and “marginalized” other ethnic groups to the extent that necessitated an armed struggle to be waged by the national liberation movements/fronts of the oppressed. The discourse justifying the recognition of the right to self-determination for the oppressed nations was none other than the Marxist-Leninist conception that once the nationality question had been fully addressed, class solidarity would prevail over nationalism. Furthermore, the TPLF believed that the struggle of the Eritrean Liberation Movement was based on the presumption that it was a struggle against Ethiopian imperial state ‘colonialism’. By doing so, it endorsed the view that the Ethiopian state was not only a state in which the Amhara ruling elite oppressed other nationalities but also that it was also a “colonial power” as far as Eritrea was concerned. To this end, the TPLF fully supported and worked closely with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, which had fought for Eritrea's independence for 30 years, and whose struggle resulted in the secession of Eritrea at the same time as the TPLF took control of the Ethiopian state in 1991.

According to the TPLF/EPRDF, a revolutionary democracy would come when the armed struggle achieved its aims of victory for the “oppressed masses”. The democratic government would be based on the TPLF's core belief that it should address the issue of nationality by recognizing the right to self-determination, including secession for ethnic communities (the nations/nationalities of Ethiopia). Economically, the TPLF's original preference for socialism was put on hold, but land was to be owned by the state and redistributed to the peasants. As far as rural land distribution was concerned, the TPLF was adamant the feudal land tenure system from which the “enemy” class had benefited should be replaced with a system that favoured those who worked the land, the tillers. In other words, the aim of overhauling the land tenure system was to “liberate” the tillers from exploitation by the feudal class and to ensure free use of their produce. It is interesting to note here that the tillers did not have ownership rights, but only land-use rights. To this

end, the TPLF had already exercised this policy of redistributing the rural land in areas it had freed from government forces. As victory neared, the TPLF established the EPRDF, and the inaugural congress of the EPRDF, held a few months before the end of the war in 1991, endorsed the TPLF's discourse as the EPRDF's political programme. Thus, the post-1991 EPRDF's discourse is an extension and 'new 'version of the TPLF's discourse.

#### 4.3. EPRDF's Political Discourse Between 1991 and 2015

The political discourse of the EPRDF after 1991 was not just a continuation of the TPLF's discourse. First, the TPLF's discourse evolved due to various developments that shaped the organization in the armed struggle phase. Several instances can be mentioned here. One good example is the TPLF's proclivity towards the different conceptualizations and approaches within the leftist camp, and its attempt to position itself as a unique leftist force with a viable alternative in the Ethiopian context. It is interesting to note how, during this positioning process, the TPLF's conceptualization of politics, tactics and strategies changed over time, and the party constantly explored the Marxist-Leninist conceptualizations of politics. It also investigated Maoist and Soviet revisions and the Albanian model while developing its own ideological doctrine of revolutionary democracy (*abiyotawi* democracy in Amharic). This discourse construction was a continuous exercise accompanied by the formation of a party within a party – the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT) in 1985 within the TPLF and the formation of a similar Marxist-Leninist group within other EPRDF member parties (ANDM and OPDO) shortly after the first congress of the EPRDF in 1991. These Marxist-Leninist groups within the EPRDF went as far as establishing a workers 'party that would lead the country towards socialism. However, this option was disbanded in just a few months as the party shifted its commitment towards building a free market economy (EPRDF 2010). This search for an ideological doctrine entailed restructuring the party and constructing dynamic political discourses, which some regarded as innovative (Bach 2011). The search clearly shows the pragmatist approach that underlay the EPRDF's political discourse. I prefer to use the term pragmatism, rather than innovation, when describing this aspect of the party, as innovation does not necessarily capture the realities that forced the party to undergo such readjustments. For instance, changing global circumstances forced the EPRDF to adopt a

free market economy model in the 1990s. The party admitted this, and therefore it is fair to conclude that the party made choices driven by the need to remain relevant with the realities on ground, rather than by its 'innovative' capabilities. Put differently, the issue of survival was more pressing than the party's 'creativity' in adapting itself to the political and economic realities of the country and the global dynamics.

Secondly, there have been some discernible changes in the EPRDF's political discourse in the past 25 years (1991-2015) since it assumed state power. In the period that preceded the first 'renewal' (*yemejemeriya tewadiso*), i.e. pre-2001, the EPRDF's political discourse was mainly about establishing and institutionalizing its core doctrine of revolutionary democracy. Developmental (economic) issues were not discussed in the same way as political issues at this time. Similarly, the content of this discourse (of revolutionary democracy) was limited to its depiction of enemies, targeted only at the non-EPRDFites. By contrast, the EPRDF's political discourse in the post-2001 period changed following the so-called first renewal, which was triggered by a split in the TPLF, its core and driving member, in 2001. During this period, the political discourse was about the political process and economic issues. An allied concept of the "Democratic Developmental State (DDS)" was introduced and constituted the main tenet of the EPRDF's discourse. In this post-renewal period, the discourse about the Democratic Developmental State appears to have replaced that of revolutionary democracy. As will be discussed, it is not clear whether this new discourse about the Democratic Developmental State is a continuation of a revolutionary democracy or a concept in which the 'revolutionary' aspect is embedded. In addition to these differences, the post-2001 EPRDF's discourse about the 'enemy' had also been expanded, this time to include the EPRDF's own comrades who allegedly turned "chauvinist" or "narrow nationalist" or became "rent seekers".

Concurrently, the discussion below examines the EPRDF's construction of its enemy's "chauvinism and narrow nationalism". To conclude these preliminary remarks, it should be noted that the political developments that occurred in the country from the end of 2014 forced the ruling EPRDF party to undergo a second 'renewal'. Since 2015, the party has been undergoing major changes through its radical reforms, and is now entering a new

phase of political discourse that has yet to emerge in a concretized way. Thus, the discussion of the EPRDF's discourse will be limited to the period 1991 to 2015. Accordingly, the following sections present the EPRDF's two main political discourses – revolutionary democracy and the developmental democratic state and their salient features.

#### 4.4. Revolutionary Democracy as the Cardinal Principle of the EPRDF's Political Discourse

As far as the EPRDF's discourse on democracy is concerned, the party has championed the idea that 'democracy' is the only way forward in Ethiopia. The need for democracy is described as an existential issue for the country, and its absence as chaos, disintegration and Armageddon.<sup>28</sup> Going beyond this initial assertion, a number of questions arise regarding the content of the EPRDF's discourse on democracy; questions such as what it means and what kind of democracy the party advocates. The theoretical gist of the

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<sup>28</sup> The primary party and policy documents of the EPRDF (all of which are published in Amharic) reviewed for this study frame the issue of democracy/democratization in terms of security. See: EPRDF (2000a). 'The Fundamental Questions about Democracy in Ethiopia' (Addis Ababa); EPRDF (2000b). 'Revolutionary Democracy: Strategies and Thoughts on Development' (Addis Ababa); EPRDF (2000c). 'Revolutionary Democracy: Leadership and Practices' (Addis Ababa); EPRDF (2001). 'Political Program' (Addis Ababa); EPRDF (2006a). 'Revolutionary Democracy Strategies, Tactics and the Question of Leadership' (Addis Ababa); EPRDF (2006b). 'Development, Democracy and Revolutionary Democracy' (Addis Ababa); EPRDF (2006c). 'The Question of Revolutionary Democracy Leadership'. (Addis Ababa); EPRDF (2010a). 'EPRDF from its Establishment up to 2009' (Addis Ababa); EPRDF (2010b). 'Renewal and Ethiopia's Renaissance' (Addis Ababa); EPRDF (2017). 'The Features of the Ethiopian Federal System, Democratization Building Processes, Achievements and the Way Forward', 1st ed. (Addis Ababa); Ministry of Information, Federal Government of Ethiopia (2002a). 'The Issues of Building a Democratic System in Ethiopia' (Addis Ababa); Ministry of Information, Federal Government of Ethiopia (2002b). 'The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy'. (Addis Ababa); FDRE (1995). 'The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia' (Addis Ababa); TPLF (1987). 'wexa wexana indeshenbeqo tenkebalele indemuqecha: ye ihapa tragedy', (published in Amharic), Meles, Z. (2007). 'African Development. Dead Ends and New Beginnings'. In unpublished note, [http://cgt.columbia.edu/files/conferences/Zenawi\\_Dead\\_Ends\\_and\\_New\\_Beginnings.pdf](http://cgt.columbia.edu/files/conferences/Zenawi_Dead_Ends_and_New_Beginnings.pdf), Bereket, S. (2017). Tinsaé Ze Ethiyophiya Ke menita mengedi ketemetsewachinet wede afrikawi kurati yetederege shigigir metsai fetenawochi ina melkam idilochi', India:Angkor Publishers (Published in Amharic). Bereket, S. (2011). 'yehulet Mirchawoch weg: Nadan vegeta ha gerawi rucha' (Addis Ababa).

EPRDF's understanding of democracy and its application of the concept essentially require a recapturing of the EPDRF's discourse as it is. This approach helps facilitate an understanding of the EPRDF's thought processes that underpin its discourse on democracy in general and its vision of democratization for the country in particular. This will, in turn, aid our analysis of its discourse in relation to a general discussion of the concept of democracy as it is widely understood, at least in terms of Western liberal perceptions and practices, and vis-a-vis other alternative visions for the democratization of the country. With this in mind, we shall unpack the EPRDF's discourse of its revolutionary democracy as explained by relevant party and government policy documents.<sup>29</sup>

It is often difficult to find an EPRDF party document that provides a comprehensive explanation of what revolutionary democracy is. However, the party document entitled 'ye-democracy meseretawi xiyaqewoch be Ethiyoipiya', which can be translated as 'The Fundamental Questions about Democracy in Ethiopia', published in August 2000, can be regarded as the first comprehensive elaboration of the doctrine of revolutionary democracy. The document juxtaposes the concept with liberal democracy, stating:

“To better understand our *abiyotaw* (revolutionary) democracy, it is important to compare and contrast it with a liberal democracy. Thus, a brief discussion on a liberal democracy is crucial” (EPRDF 2000:1). ( Own translation)

The document begins by outlining the EPRDF's understanding of liberal democracy and its relevance to the Ethiopian context. Accordingly, liberal democracy is generally understood to be 'the system of democratic governance that exists in the industrialized developed world '(Ibid. 2000:1). The system is founded on social bases that include a strong private sector-led capitalist economy with hegemonic liberal values and principles (the rule of law, respect for human and democratic rights, separation of powers etc.). Besides

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<sup>29</sup> See the notes in footnote 24 above.

the issue of social bases and other differences to be discussed, the EPRDF believes its revolutionary democracy generally aligns with the values of liberal democracy, including its economic goals: “Both democracies, regardless of their differences, believe in pursuing a free market economy in which the private sector plays a key role to ensure the development of a capitalist economy” (Ibid. 2000: 47). Despite these general shared beliefs and a similar vision for building a capitalist economy, the EPRDF firmly contends that liberal democracy has serious deficiencies in contrast to its doctrine of revolutionary democracy.

For revolutionary democrats, a key deficiency in liberal democracy is the argument about the social basis of liberal democracy in Ethiopia. The EPRDF argues that during the 1990s there was no developed private sector in Ethiopia. The imperial regime was clearly a backward feudalist regime followed by 17 years of Marxist-Leninist military dictatorship, which officially declared socialism as the government’s policy under which a set of restrictive ownership policies were practiced.

However, to date, Ethiopia’s economy remains dominated by the agricultural sector, which occupies 85 per cent of the population, the majority of whom are struggling to achieve food security at a household level. The absence of the necessary social class/base under this regime left no possibility for liberal democracy to operate. Moreover, liberal democracy’s priority of individual rights and freedoms is seen as another deficiency of serious concern with consequences in the Ethiopian context. For the EPRDF, the fundamental question of democracy in the context of Ethiopia is about addressing the ‘nationality question’. Addressing this issue entails ensuring self-determination rights for ethnic communities, i.e., it is essentially about dealing with a ‘group rights’ issue. The EPRDF believes liberal democracy’s ideological commitment to, and emphasis on, individual rights and freedoms, rather than ‘group rights’, makes it incompatible with the Ethiopian context. In addition, the EPRDF believes liberal democracy is elitist and lacks revolutionary ferment compared to revolutionary democracy, which characterizes itself as a mass-based popular revolutionary movement committed to the transformation of all aspects of society (social, economic, political and cultural). Interestingly, the EPRDF contends that its revolutionary democracy addresses these deficiencies of liberal democracy

while simultaneously embracing its core democratic values and principles. In doing so, it claims to expand the 'democratic content' of liberal democracy to incorporate 'revolutionary' and 'popular' characteristics.

“In short, it can be said that revolutionary (abiyotawi) democracy goes beyond the limit of what a liberal democracy cannot achieve by itself, by endowing it with revolutionary and popular characteristics.” (EPRDF 2000:47).  
(Own translation).

Revolutionary democracy in EPRDF parlance is about radically changing Ethiopia into a 'new Ethiopia' in which the old institutions of 'oppression' are entirely dismantled. It promoted political governance that enables self-determination rights for ethnic communities, including secession and building 'democracy'. The EPRDF's stand is that its revolutionary democracy, unlike liberal democracy, has a strong social base in Ethiopia. It claims that about the 85 per cent of the population, the peasantry, is its strong base, with which it toppled the military regime. The working class and low-income city dwellers, petty bourgeois and 'revolutionary' elites (the intelligentsia) are perceived to be a 'potential base' for revolutionary democracy in Ethiopia. The EPRDF believes that revolutionary democracy better represents the interests of these classes. Revolutionary democracy, then, is about envisioning radical measures to address the country's political questions (the nationality question, land issues and the need for democracy in general) in a radical way, in which the revolutionary democracy elites through the instrument of a revolutionary democracy party (vanguard party) mobilizing revolutionary forces (the masses) bring about radical changes (EPRDF 2000). The EPRDF portrays revolutionary democracy as being different from the Marxist-Leninist notion in which it was understood to be a transitory phase of socialism. Whilst it is generally acknowledged that the EPRDF itself is inspired by Marxist-Leninist understandings of politics and has leftist roots, Bereket (Bereket

2017:26-67), a prominent 'old guard' figure in the EPRDF, argues that the party's conceptualization of revolutionary democracy is misunderstood as a transition to socialism. He asserts the opposite and notes that revolutionary democracy, which he describes as a 'wave', is about building a capitalist market economy and democracy, albeit in the EPRDF way, as discussed above.

Since 2002, the EPRDF's discourse seems to have shifted towards emphasizing economic development issues. Following the aforementioned 'first renewal', it appeared that the party emerged with a clear economic development path it wanted to pursue. At the start of its reign in the early 1990s, the EPRDF was forced to adopt a free market economy policy, albeit with strong reservations and ambivalence towards fully embracing what it calls a neo-liberal prescription of the Bretton Woods institutions (the IMF and World Bank). While implementing market reform measures, it retained control over key economic and financial institutions (such as state-owned banks, telecommunications, etc.), which the party calls 'the commanding heights of the economy'. This was clear state intervention in the economy and contrary to the tenets of a free market system. Later, inspired by the rapid economic growth of the South East Asian countries, the EPRDF endorsed a 'developmental state model' of economic growth in which the state plays a key role in the transition to a capitalist market economy. While it adopted this model, the EPRDF nevertheless argued that the South East Asian countries' economic model was not accompanied by democratic governance; therefore, for it to be tenable in the context of Ethiopia, it had to be packaged with democratic governance. Hence, the party adopted a new discourse, the Democratic Developmental State, to distinguish its model as democratic and developmental. This discourse emerged as a 'motto' of the party and the government in the post-2002 period. In terms of the content of this discourse, while the economic aspect appears somehow prorogated having state-led, rapid economic growth leading to the establishment of a capitalist market economy, the 'democratic' aspect refers to the implementation of the constitution. The FDRE constitution, discussed below, is largely an institutionalized document of the EPRDF's political discourse. Interestingly, post-2002, there was almost no direct reference to revolutionary democracy. Instead, new terms, such as dominant-party discourse, a situation in which the EPRDF remains the

dominant player in a multi-party set-up that also allows for the participation of opposition parties, was at times advocated. However, in practice, the EPRDF remained not just dominant but exclusively in charge. Despite the addition of new terminologies and an emphasis on development issues, the above-discussed fundamentals underpinning the EPRDF's discourse appear to have remained intact in the post-2002 period.

Whether the EPRDF's political discourse is democratic and shares any similarities with liberal democracy as invoked requires further interrogation and is beyond this discussion,<sup>30</sup> but certainly its 'political package – 'the 'democratization discourse – 'needs examining before any discussion can take place on how the party has gone about institutionalizing it as a government policy and, most importantly, as the 'basic principles 'guiding the political process in post-1991 Ethiopia, by enshrining it in the country's constitution and through the instrumentality of other legislations.

#### 4.5. The EPRDF's Democratization Discourse

The EPRDF presents the need for democratization as a sine qua non for the country's survival. It believes the absence of democracy was an underlying cause of the civil war, poverty and the country's backwardness. Thus, its democratization discourse was presented as a binary choice: democratizing the country, and hence a path to stability and

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<sup>30</sup> For various understandings and critiques of the EPRDF's doctrine of revolutionary democracy, see Koper, M. (2018). *Does Democracy Help Africa? An enquiry into multiparty democracy, political settlement, and economic development in Africa* (Enschede: Ipskamp Printing); Abbink, J. (2011). 'Ethnic-based Federalism and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Reassessing the experiment after 20 years', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5(4), 596-618; Idem, (2009). 'The Ethiopian Second Republic and the Fragile "Social Contract"', *Africa Spectrum*, 44(2), 3-28; Bach, J. N. (2011). 'Abyotawi Democracy: Neither revolutionary nor democratic, a critical review of EPRDF's conception of revolutionary democracy in post-1991 Ethiopia', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5(4), 641-663; Gudina, M. (2011). 'Elections and Democratization in Ethiopia, 1991-2010', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5(4), 664-680; Vaughan, S. (2011). 'Revolutionary Democratic State-building: Party, state and people in the EPRDF's Ethiopia', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5(4), 619-640; Paulos, M. (2009). 'Authoritarianism and the Ethiopian Body Politic. Dissonance between Democratization and Elite Political subculture', in Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, vol. 2, 673-690.

equality, or the opposite, which would mean a continuation of the civil war and the possible disintegration of the country. This latter worst-case scenario has been compared to the Battle of Armageddon, the fate of the Yugoslavian federation or the situation in the Republic of Somalia. These cases illustrate the destruction that can follow should a country fail to democratize by dealing with its perennial political issues (Ministry of Information, FDRE 2002). The EPRDF's democratization discourse makes a case for a reorientation of the country's political process based on this strongly dichotomized approach:

1. a path of democracy that leads to stability, and thereby the survival of the country as a political entity, or
2. a continuation of the past and a lack of democracy that could resume a civil war, which might lead to the disintegration of the country.

The EPRDF believes the only path to democracy that can deliver stability and ensure the country's survival as a political entity is its own revolutionary democracy, which constitutes its democratization discourse: 'Democracy in Ethiopia is not about the issue of choosing a better administration but an existential matter (for the country). The country needs to adopt democracy. If it doesn't, it will certainly lead to the country's disintegration (EPRDF 2000: 36). "Such [sic] type of democracy that could save the country is revolutionary democracy. It is because of this that revolutionary democracy in Ethiopia becomes not just a matter of choice but an existential/survival issue" (Ibid. 2000: 37).

It is this vision of a revolutionary democracy that the EPRDF has promoted as a democratization agenda for Ethiopia since it took political power. For the EPRDF, it is this cause for which the oppressed people of Ethiopia struggled and paid the ultimate sacrifice. The EPRDF's struggle is equated with the people's struggle, and thus its victory over the military regime is regarded as the people's victory. Basically, the EPRDF's discourse on democratization envisions a 'New Ethiopia' through the adoption and application of its own political strategy to save the country. This is what the EPRDF as a party and government means by democratization of the country.

The EPRDF's democratization doctrine or ideological discursive narrative entails reading the country's politics through its party's lens only, and understanding that the contradictions of the past were embodied in national oppression ('the national oppression thesis' of TPLF/EPRDF) by the Amhara elites, who dominated, marginalized and oppressed other ethnicities in the country. The EPRDF's response to such oppression was to try to reconfigure the country's politics in such a way that allowed for the self-determination rights of ethnic communities, including the right to secede from the Ethiopian state. This means, among other things, reading politics in terms of ethnicity, a radical measure meant to empower the "oppressed nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia" upon which the "New Ethiopia" was meant to be built. In other words, it is all about what the TPLF/EPRDF's understanding of the causes of Ethiopia's societal problems were and what it could offer as a solution to 'fix' those problems to the exclusion of any other understandings and alternative solutions/visions. Any alternative understandings of the country's past and the different visions for the present and future of the politics of the country that do not conform to the EPRDF's discourse are not only presented as a wrong recipe, but are described as being a destructive path that will result in the country's disintegration (Ministry of Information, FDRE 2002).

Furthermore, the EPRDF believes consideration of those alternatives allows continuity of past oppressive regimes that were backward, anti-democracy and oppressed and subjugated the people, practices that would inevitably lead to the resumption of civil war (EPRDF 2015, EPRDF 2000, FDRE 2002). According to the logic of the EPRDF democratization discourse, such alternatives presented by opposition political forces in the country are a recipe for destruction, are undemocratic and a return to the past. The EPRDF firmly believes its own political discourse, the democratization option, should be adopted and applied and that the party and government should not concede any defeat (Ibid. 2002:13). Clearly, the EPRDF's democratization discourse is not only underpinned by this singular approach to the country's complex political context, but is an approach that equates its political discourse with the democratization agenda of the country to the exclusion of any alternative visions. It also makes the survival of the country conditional

upon the adoption/application of its democratization vision and thereby dependent on the existence of the regime itself. To that end, it has a firm conviction that the application of its vision (the democratization of the country) should not be compromised. Somehow, this is a rigid approach to building a new political process that requires at least average support from the different political actors engaged in the process. Accordingly, it is interesting to examine how the opposition political forces are being portrayed within this EPRDF discourse on democratization.

The opposition political groups should be considered when discussing Ethiopia's democratization agenda, whatever this democratization means. It is particularly important in the context of building a political process with a multi-party set-up, as the EPRDF often claims it is doing. A multi-party democracy is premised on the existence of a plurality of actors (the key players being the different political groups, including the opposition political parties and the ruling party) and choices in the political terrain of the country. In this regard, the EPRDF seems to have two contrasting positions. On the one hand, it is clear the EPRDF explicitly sees no constructive or relevant role for the opposition political forces in its democratization agenda. In fact, it categorically labels them as a force of destruction, violence, and chaos: 'From the very beginning, we have concluded in our evaluation that the opposition political organizations are forces for violence and destruction '(EPRDF 2006a: 48) (Own translation). Furthermore, 'as these parties (opposition) are of the rent-seeking type, it is clearly set out during the 'renewal period 'that they cannot be an alternative force for democracy '(EPRDF 2006b: 94). And 'As it stands now, [...] these opposition parties do not have a character and any relevant role to take the country forward. The only role they can play is either to try to dismantle revolutionary democracy unconstitutionally by the use of force and rebellion or legally by trying to be an obstacle and unsettle the rooting of revolutionary democracy '(EPRDF 2000: 64).

Moreover, the EPRDF portrays the opposition political forces as antagonistic forces whose main task is to reverse its efforts to build a democracy in Ethiopia. Accordingly, their role is presented in terms of a binary opposition, generally using the prefix 'anti 'as a signifier of the agency of opposition politics. While the EPRDF describes itself as a revolutionary party building a 'New Ethiopia', the opposition forces are presented as anti-

revolutionary and nostalgic for the undemocratic past as remnants of the past regime. While the EPRDF is an agent of 'peace' and a force for 'democracy', the opposition political forces are presented as 'anti-peace, undemocratic and anti-democracy' forces. The opposition political forces are further depicted as 'anti-development', 'chauvinists', 'narrow nationalists' and 'rent-seekers', whereas the EPRDF self-promotes as pro-development/developmental and a democratic nationalist force. At its extreme, these labelling practices can extend to accusing the opposition of being interlocutors of foreign interests, enemy agents and terrorists.<sup>31</sup> The only instance where the opposition political forces are mentioned positively in the EPRDF discourse is when they are allowed to operate within the 'legal boundary' so that as they advance their wrong and backward alternatives to the public, they are exposed, and hence can be alienated from the political realm (EPRDF 2000a). On the other hand, the EPRDF expresses a desire to have a 'loyal opposition partner' that can be trusted as a responsible stakeholder whose aim is not to challenge the institutionalization of the EPRDF's democratization vision, but will challenge it on other, less significant issues. It probably has in mind a party that accepts the ideals of the EPRDF, although this is not explicitly communicated. Indeed, the EPRDF believes such an opposition partner does not exist in the current political arena, and is unlikely to emerge anytime soon, as the socio-economic conditions of the country are yet to change (Ibid. 2000a). The core of this latter argument is that changes in the socio-economic conditions could result in the emergence of a middle class, a phenomenon that might create favourable conditions for competitive political party politics. In the absence of these loyal opposition parties, the EPRDF even suggests 'filling the gap' by attempting to directly mobilize citizens through different mechanisms, including increasing its membership to over four million, organizing a 'developmental army' (in Amharic '*yelimat serawit*') and other methods, all in the name of ensuring the direct participation of the people in exercising their sovereign rights. According to the EPRDF, this is what makes its (and, by extension, the country's) 'democracy' unique (EPRDF 2000a, 2000b, 2006b, 2006d,

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<sup>31</sup> The EPRDF often accuses the opposition political forces (Oromo Liberation Fronts, Ogaden Liberation Front, Patriotic Ginbot 7, etc.), based in neighbouring Eritrea, as agents of the latter given the hostile relations between the two countries.

2010a). The EPRDF argues that this is an example of direct democracy. In addition to these two approaches, after the 2010 and 2015 national elections, specifically following its '100% win' in the last parliamentary election, the EPRDF began discussing a new narrative of a 'dominant-party system'. This new development might have been induced by the need to create legitimacy for the EPRDF's continued rule by allowing the opposition to get some seats so that the political system 'resembles' a multi-party democracy. Subsequent to the introduction of this new narrative, there has been an ongoing discussion between the EPRDF and other political parties to explore the modalities that may improve the chance of the opposition political parties' representation, a call that the opposition shunned, as will be explained in the following chapters.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4.6. Institutionalization of the EPRDF's Democratization Discourse

Following the fall of the Derg military Marxist-Leninist regime in 1991, the EPRDF established a transitional government with a transitional charter, and later the FDRE government with the promulgation of the FDRE constitution, which superseded the transitional charter. The EPRDF has remained in power since then and is undertaking the formalization of its democratization discourse, which it calls a political reform agenda and a democratization process. A key document at the core of this process is the FDRE constitution. For the EPRDF, the institutionalization of democracy means the application of this constitution, strengthening the democratic institutions it has established and nurturing 'democratic culture/thoughts'; the latter means adhering to the norms upheld by the constitution. Furthermore, the EPRDF has declared that all institutions of government, including educational establishments and the public media, should ensure the ideas and ideals underpinning the FDRE constitution are inculcated so that its vision of democracy becomes the normal political life of the country. In particular, it strongly underscores the importance of creating consensus on the basic principles. Thus, it believes, that the institutionalization of democratization/democracy will be achieved. This totalitarian approach

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<sup>32</sup> Major opposition parties, such as the Blue Party and MEDREK (in English: 'Forum' – a coalition of a number of important opposition political parties) are not taking part in the negotiations due to their reservations about the process. Consequently, the initiative is far from inclusive.

to indoctrinate the whole society with the EPRDF's political programme is in line with the party's hegemonic aspirations and efforts to effectively solidify the foundation of the 'New Ethiopia', as discussed extensively in various party documents. While the fundamental human and democratic rights enshrined in the FDRE constitution are the espoused acceptable standards, norms and liberal values, there are a number of basic principles of the 'New Ethiopia' state that are deeply contested. For instance, the FDRE constitution has reconfigured the country's political system by adopting an ethnic-based federalism as part of recognizing the rights of ethnic groups to self-determination, including the right to secede and the disputed rights to land ownership. In view of the fact that these have been made part of the country's constitution, a supposedly supreme law of the land which should mark a fresh beginning for the country, it is no surprise that it has become a bone of contention. Indeed, the constitution itself remains a contentious subject in the country's democratization discourse. The content and application of the constitution and the manner in which it was drafted and adopted have been severely criticized and rejected by the opposition political forces, who believe any constitution should first be negotiated and 'owned' by all political forces before it can be endorsed as the supreme law of the land. Consequently, the institutions the EPRDF constitution has established might suffer from this extended legitimacy issue. By contrast, the EPRDF sees the FDRE constitution as a continuation of its struggle (as well as that of 'the people') to achieve its goal of 'democratizing' the country. It is seen as not only as a democratization issue but the realization of the ideas and fundamental beliefs for which the party stands. Moreover, the FDRE constitution, which the EPRDF rightly calls its constitution, is regarded as a highly sacred document, the violation of which is presented as a 'red line' which, if crossed, could trigger drastic measures. The impact of this institutionalized document of the EPRDF's political discourse requires further discussion, including how it interacts with the post-1991 political process of the country.

One area in which such interaction is clearly visible is in opposition politics. Needless to say, in multi-party politics, opposition political parties are the main stakeholders. A political space in which multiple political parties across the political spectrum are able to contest and engage with the ongoing political process needs to be realized. A prerequisite for achieving this is establishing a political space, both legally and through other political mechanisms, that enhances the meaningful participation of these political players, particularly that of opposition political parties. In other words, there has to be a space for normal politics, in which political actors' debate, negotiate, compete and freely present their views and alternatives on all relevant issues in the public realm, even if doing so is contrary to the interests of the ruling party. The EPRDF's democratization discourse and practices seem to be restrictive and problematic as far as opposition politics is concerned. The main factor contributing to this problem is the status and role of the constitution in the country's politics. For the EPRDF, it is the supreme law of the land and a realization of the people's struggle for democracy. As such, it is instrumental in serving as a foundation of the New Ethiopia's endeavour to build. Thus, the party presents the constitution, particularly the core beliefs that underpin it, as non-negotiable and a 'red line'. This position emanates from the EPRDF's strong beliefs about the opposition political parties' views of the constitution. The architects of the EPRDF democratization discourse believe the opposition forces' aim was to reverse the constitutional order, either legally (by winning elections and changing the constitution through the amendment process), or by using extra-constitutional measures, by way of violence or rebellion. The EPRDF seems to be adamant about any of these 'reversal' attempts or plans – particularly the latter option of reversing the constitutional order that falls squarely within its red-line category, which automatically activates the EPRDF's use of force. In this sense, it is clear opposition politics (including any dissenting voices) fundamentally challenges the EPRDF and its political discourse, and therefore opposition to the constitution is perceived as a 'threat' to the country's constitutional order. To this end, the EPRDF has enacted various laws, including anti-terrorism laws (Anti-Terrorism Proclamation no. 652) to further criminalize any serious political opposition to its regime – all in the name of national security and ensuring constitutional order as mentioned in the preamble of the proclamation. As it

moved to implement these laws, it has jailed a number of opposition party leaders, journalists and human rights activists. It has also outlawed and banned some opposition political forces as terrorist organizations since it assumed power in 1991. These measures intensified following the May 2005 election, which was conducted in a relatively freer political space and saw the opposition parties challenging the regime and winning several seats for the first time. The people and organizations the state targeted have at least one thing in common: they all crossed the EPRDF's red line. Recently the EPRDF has been forced to declare a state of emergency a number of times to contain the political crisis in the country. Evidently, beyond curtailing the political space, the EPRDF's democratization discourse is inextricably intertwined with a particular type of politics that links threat construction (security) and democracy.

The characteristics of this particular type of politics arising from the EPRDF's democratization discourse and practices include creating an environment in which the securitization of politics/political activities occurs. This securitization of politics/political activities involves presenting political issues in the country as an existential threat to the survival of either the regime (constitutional order) or the country, and therefore putting them beyond debate/discussion. Thus, they exit the realm of normal politics and become a security issue that requires security measures (use of force). This raises the question of whether the logic of democratization dictates that the more 'normal' politics is, the more democracy there is, or whether the more securitized politics becomes, the less democracy there will be. Simply put, one may wonder whether democratization can occur and become successful in this type of highly securitized politics. In this regard, the EPRDF's own 'democratization' journey suggests otherwise. The EPRDF declared that its doctrine of democracy is an existential issue for the survival of the country. It has securitized all other alternative visions of democratization and presented them as a 'threat' that will lead the country on a path of destruction. It presents its own vision as the only alternative for saving the country. The failure to implement its doctrine is equated with a likelihood of state collapse. It has institutionalized its political discourse as an official democratization project and, therefore, any opposition to the official discourse is considered a threat to the constitutional order of the country, and is invariably followed by the use of force. This securitization of politics has resulted in a particular type of politics that not only restricts

opposition politics, but also impacts the country's 'democratization' agenda. Consequently, Ethiopia's political process appears to rest on shaky foundations, and a legitimacy crisis seems inevitable. In the next chapter, oppositions' responses will be discussed to show the legitimacy problem the EPRDF's democratization project has faced.

In sum, the EPRDF's democratization discourse is rooted in the political discourse of the TPLF, crafted by the victorious ethno-nationalist movement that played a critical role in establishing the EPRDF doctrine. The TPLF's discourse of the armed struggle phase (1974 to 1991) was fairly straightforward – it was a discourse of liberation from national oppression (both from the exploitative land tenure system of the feudal system and from the oppressive rule of the *Shoan* Amhara elites). Liberation was to be crowned by establishing a democratic republic based on the core discourse of the TPLF (i.e., revolutionary democracy), which had been in place since the beginning of the 1990s. Revolutionary democracy remained largely intact in the EPRDF's reign after 1991. Built on an exclusively EPRDF vision of a New Ethiopia, any opposition is to be crushed and any alternative vision subdued.

As a securitized doctrine, it is surmised that for the survival of the regime, the success of the state is contingent on the dominance of its vision of democracy. In this discourse, the role of the opposition political forces is null and void, insofar as they are labelled terrorists who are a source of destruction, violence and chaos. Concomitantly, the EPRDF's conceptualization of its discourse on democracy and practices has resulted in a particular type of politics in which security and democracy are linked. This securitization of politics, in turn, appears to set Ethiopia's political process on shaky foundations, which makes a legitimacy crisis seem inevitable.