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Chapter Six: Ethno-nationalist Political Discourses

6.1. Introduction

Following on from on the political discourse of the Pan-Ethiopianist opposition political forces in Chapter 5, this chapter examines four cases of ethno-nationalist political discourses with the aim of presenting varieties of opposition discourses that have dominated the Ethiopian political space for decades. The ethno-nationalist political discourses (the Oromo; the Somalis of the Ogaden region; the Sidama; and the Afar), presented in this chapter are, in most cases, diametrically opposed to the Pan-Ethiopianist assertions. Some of these groups have long demanded the right to self-determination and fought wars of liberation to fulfill their desire for statehood. Some, such as the Sidama, have been in the news during the writing of this chapter, demanding their right to statehood within Ethiopia. The ethno-nationalist political forces contest most of the claims of the Pan-Ethiopianist discourses and their interpretation of Ethiopia's political history, which they dismiss as colonial/occupation. They also question the viability of a unitary centralized Ethiopian state. To be sure, these two contending political discourses allow us to understand the depth of ethno-political cleavages and their implications for Ethiopia's politics and society.

The four ethnic groups represented by the political forces under discussion constitute 46.34 per cent of the total population but, according to the 2007 census report (CSA 2007), they clearly occupy more than a half of the country's landmass. Individually, the Oromo is the single largest ethnic group, constituting 34.4 per cent of Ethiopia's population; the Somalis are the third-largest ethnic group, accounting for 6.2 per cent; the Sidama constitute 4 per cent; and the Afar occupy eighth place with 1.7 per cent of the total population (CSA 2007). Additionally, all of these ethnic groups have 'their own' region in the reconfigured post-1991 New Ethiopia, with the exception of the Sidama, who are part of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region. In fact, the Sidama have long demanded their own region, a constitutionally acceptable demand yet to be entertained but seem to be on its way to becoming the 10th regional state in view of the political process taking place in the SNNPR region at a time of writing this thesis.

Taking into account the above considerations, this chapter will examine the political discourse of the opposition forces of the Oromo, the Somali (Ogaden), the Sidama and the Afar, including how they conceptualize their politics, their struggle and their methods.

6.2. The Discourses of the Oromo Opposition Political Forces

The Oromo political forces are among the leading ethno-nationalist forces that have spearheaded the deconstruction of Ethiopia's mainstream political discourse. Since the early 1960s, they have attempted to form their own opposition discourse, capitalizing on a series of revolts and rebellions that occurred in Oromia. The discourse of the Oromo political struggle, however, only began to take shape with the emergence of a radical intelligentsia in the course of the mushrooming opposition movements against the *ancien régime* of the Haile Selassie I government. Of particular significance during this period was the establishment of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in 1973 by Oromo elites, many of whom were Addis Ababa University and high school students (Asafa 1995; Mekuria 1997). Since the launch of the OLF struggle, Oromo issues have been at the epicentre of Ethiopian politics, despite their 'marginal' position as far as the political power dynamic of the country is concerned. Its weight and relevance, either as a support base or as opposition, is obviously associated with its numerical majority and the land-mass it occupies, both of which have ensured that the Oromo were a key factor in Ethiopian politics. Indeed, as an indispensable feature of the country's political landscape, the OLF have played an increasingly influential role in the successive regimes that have ruled Ethiopia, from the imperial era to the current TPLF/EPRDF regime. The Oromo's political influence vis-à-vis the successive Ethiopian regimes has largely been manifested in the discourses of the different Oromo opposition political forces. These can generally be summed up as follows: (1) The OLF's discourse; (2) the Oromo Democratic Front's (ODF) discourse; (3) the Oromo Federalist Congress's (OFC) discourse; and (4) the newly emergent Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDOs) discourse, or the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP) as it was renamed in 2018. Despite the differences between these political organizations, it is noteworthy that they all uphold the Oromo's right to self-determination as a prime goal of their political struggle. Consequently, their support for identity-/ethnic-based federalism has remained a common goal of their respective

political struggles. The extent to which their discourses converge and diverge and, most importantly, their conceptualization of politics and characterization of their struggle need to be discussed further.

One of the key political discourses, which essentially problematizes the mainstream Ethiopianist discourses, is that posited by the OLF. In this regard, the main OLF contestation begins by questioning Ethiopia's political history as advanced by the pro-unionists. According to the OLF, Ethiopia is an empire built on the foundations of Emperor Menelik II's colonial conquests, which occurred at about the same time as the European scramble for Africa. The OLF claims Emperor Menelik II shaped modern Ethiopia through his successive colonial wars, which culminated in 1900 with bringing the Oromo and other peoples under expansionist Abyssinian rule. By the Abyssinians, the OLF meant,

“[T]he Habeshas (Tigreans and Amharas), different from the Cushitic speaking groups, viz. the Oromos and Somalis, in culture, language and history, but there is very little difference in physical features. They are culturally the descendants of the Semites who came from Arabia and colonized this area between 500 B.C. and 100 A.D.”(Gadaa 1980:6).

The ethno-nationalist OLF believes the Pan-Ethiopianists' claim that the country has existed for over three millennia is a myth. The OLF asserts that modern Ethiopia is the result of the colonial conquest by Menelik II and is thus a colonial empire that emerged only at the beginning of the twentieth century. The OLF further contends that the name Ethiopia comes from the Abyssinians, and that they “appropriated and gave (Ethiopia) to their empire to claim legitimacy based on antiquity/ancient divine authority of biblical proportions” (OLF 2017: 13). According to the OLF, from the establishment of the current Ethiopia in 1900 to the present rule of the TPLF/EPRDF regime, the Oromo and other non-Abyssinian people have been under a colonial and alien occupation. To this end, it believes, that:

“In all spheres of life, discrimination, subjugation, repression and exploitation of all forms were applied to the Oromo population. Everything possible was done to destroy Oromo identity – culture, language, custom, tradition, name and origin” (Ibid. 2017:13).

To the OLF, Menelik II was a colonial conqueror, whose empire was further strengthened under the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie I (1913-1974). Haile Selassie I used the modern state machinery to consolidate the empire by, among other things, expanding modern education. He also used the state machinery as an alleged tool of cultural genocide against subjugated peoples by promoting the culture and history of the Abyssinian people through the so-called Amharanization project. This further affirms that while Selassie abolished slavery and personal servitude, he also maintained and compensated the *Neftegnas* (colonial settlers) through the installation of feudal rights and privileges, legally. Meanwhile, in parallel, the Ethiopian student movements vociferously opposed the *ancien régime*. The Derg regime was not spared criticism and was regarded as an extension of the Amhara colonial regime. For example, the OLF regarded the Derg military regime as a regime controlled by an Amhara military clique, which quickly turned into a repressive totalitarian military dictatorship, whose support base was described as the Amahara elite. The Derg regime was also accused of characterizing the nationality question as one of narrow nationalism. In this later claim, it appears the OLF rejected the Derg's treatment of the nationality question as an issue deserving regional autonomy. Moreover, it labelled the resettlement and villagization policy of the Derg as politically motivated and designed to alter the demographic composition of the non-Abyssinian Oppressed Peoples of the South. In a nutshell, the OLF regarded the *ancien régime* and Derg military rule as an empire of the Ethiopian state dominated by an Abyssinian regime that imposes its Amhara colonial rule on the Oromo and other subjugated peoples. Therefore, the OLF is determined to 'emancipate' the Oromo nation and their 'country, Oromia' (OLF 1974, 1976, Gadaa 1980).

Founded as part of the radical Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) of the 1960s and 1970s, the OLF espoused a Marxist ideology, as reflected in its conceptualization of political struggle. Accordingly, it identified what it called the enemies of the people and the real friends of the struggle, in Marxist parlance. Its list of enemies included, 'the successive Amhara colonial regimes', the colonial bureaucracy, the armed *neftegnas* (colonial settlers), the Oromo feudal class, which colluded with the Amhara colonizers, the neo-Gobanists (the term used to describe those Oromos who collaborated with the Ethiopian state, and those members of other organizations that the OLF refer to as chauvinistic political organizations (i.e., any other organization outside the OLF) and, of course, the 'international Imperialism 'they claim lends support to 'enemies 'of the Oromo people. On the other hand, the OLF has compiled a list of supporters of its envisaged revolution (OLF 1976: 5-6). This list comprises the workers and peasantry, who are mentioned as the backbone of the revolution, the *petit bourgeoisie* (mentioned as including small merchants, craftsmen, teachers, students and low-level government employees), patriotic elements, revolutionary intelligentsia (who are mentioned as providing ideological and technical guidance to the liberation struggle) and members of the armed forces (Ibid. 1976). The objective of the OLF struggle is to achieve national self-determination and the liberation of the Oromo people from oppression and exploitation. This is to be realized through a 'new democratic revolution 'that would lead to the ultimate goal of establishing The People's Republic of Oromia. The OLF published a map of the proposed Oromia Republic or Oromo Land, which incorporates the Wollo part of Amhara (see Map 6.1 below).

In pursuit of this goal, the OLF waged an anti-feudal, anti-colonial and 'anti-imperialist ' struggle, and established the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) (Ibid. 1976:7). Over the years, the OLF appears to have dropped the political goal of secession. Accordingly, its new political objective is to exercise their inalienable right to national self-determination, while the colonial thesis discourse remains in place. The struggle is also characterized as one against Ethiopian colonialism led by the Abyssinian ruling class, albeit without referring to any other entities, while elsewhere, the Tigreans are perceived as the new Amhara (OLF 2017). However, whether the self-determination rights the OLF advances include the right to secession or not remains unclear. Added to this is the fact that, over

time, the OLF itself has split into different factions, some of which still appear to champion the establishment of an independent People's Republic of Oromia. As both emperor Haile Selassie I and the Derg military regime have been dismantled and replaced with the TPLF/EPRDF regime, so the OLF's discourse seems to have changed accordingly.

The OLF perceives post-1991 Ethiopia as a continuation of an Abyssinian controlled empire, so it has not changed its stance (OLF 2016, 2017). What has changed in its discourse, however, is its belief that the empire has now shifted from an Amhara colonial regime to a Tigrean colonial regime. It accuses the TPLF/EPRDF regime of creating an Oromo surrogate party, the OPDO, to rule Oromia. It further sees the TPLF/EPRDF regime as a minority Tigrean regime in which the ethnic Tigreans dominate the economy and completely control the state security apparatus. The OLF also accuses the TPLF/EPRDF of promoting divide-and-rule policies with a view to causing inter-communal conflicts that will sustain its minority rule. Although the OLF partnered with the TPLF just before and during the transitional period, thereby collaborating with the TPLF to co-author the current EPRDF constitution, which recognizes the right to self-determination including secession, it claims the TPLF was acting strategically to consolidate power at the time by coopting the Oromo elites and pitting them against the Amhara elites. Leenco Lata, deputy chair of OLF at the time of the transition period, clearly expresses this view:

“Oromo commentators consider the constitution's reference to self-determination merely as paying it lip service without meaning to uphold it, and to turn it into a ploy for substituting Amhara domination with a Tigrean one” (Leenco Lata, 1999: 44).

Specifically, he expressed disappointment about members of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (including the OLF) feeling:

“[...] cheated and used at a critical moment merely to lend a facade of plurality to a set up that was, in reality, intended to culminate in the ascendancy of a basically Tigrean dominated regime”. (Ibid. 1999: xiii).

Thus, the OLF perceived the TPLF/APRDF's recognition of the right to self-determination including secession in the FDRE constitution not as a genuine move, but rather another tactic of colonial rule. Moreover, the federal arrangement as practiced is not seen as an authentic governance model reflecting the exercise of self-determination and as illustrating a lack of democracy under the TPLF's 'alien' minority dictatorship rule.

Other views of the Oromo political forces are represented by the ODF and OFC parties. The ODF party was established by veterans of the OLF leadership, and is one of five factions of the OLF created in the past few decades.⁴⁶ With its roots in the OLF, the ODF shares the colonial thesis of the OLF discourse discussed above. That said, it believes the OLF's discourse, set four decades ago, needs to be re-articulated. Thus, its discourse is offered as a new re-articulation of the Oromo quest for freedom and emancipation (ODF 2013). At least two things can be deduced from the ODF's discourse. The first is that it perceives Ethiopia's problem to be one of interlocking questions of democratization and decolonization. Consequently, it calls for the establishment of a genuinely democratic multinational federation. It is convinced the Oromo people's quest for self-determination can be settled within this framework. Accordingly, it clearly distances itself from the OLF's long-held political objective of creating an independent Oromia republic. Secondly, the ODF seeks to widen the scope of the struggle of the Oromo people in order to address the 'yearnings' of other oppressed nationalities. In this way, it recognizes the interdependence of the struggle to conclusively settling the interlocking questions of democratization and decolonization of the Ethiopian state as a whole (Leenco 1999:238; ODF 2016). Consequently, the ODF seeks to transform its struggle beyond the Oromo

⁴⁶ The other factions are: the Oromo Liberation Front (Daud's faction); the Oromo Democratic Front (ODF); the Oromo Liberation Front (of Gen. Hailu Gonfa and Abba biyya – ABO Tokkome); the United Front for Independent Oromia (Gen. Kamal's OLF faction); and the Oromo Liberation Front (Galasa's faction).

cause. In addition to this reorientation in its discourse, the ODF subscribes to the OLF's discourse against the current TPLF/EPRDF. By contrast, the OFC does not believe in the colonial thesis, but rather in the national oppression thesis, i.e., that the Oromo nation has been oppressed, mainly by the Amharas and now by the Tigreans, under successive Ethiopian regimes. The OFC calls for the establishment of a real multiparty democracy with a federal system based on ethnic identity in which the states (ethnic groups) are fairly and equitably represented (OFC 2012). The OFC is one of the parties established legally in post-1991 Ethiopia, and hence its discourse focuses mainly on the political process under the TPLF/EPRDF. Like other Oromo opposition forces, it concludes that the current federalism is not genuine and undemocratic. It believes the TPLF is using it as a tool to divide and rule the country. It sees the country as being taken over by a Tigrean minority dictatorship. It further perceives the establishment of the transitional government and the elections as a drama and the FDRE constitution as an imposition of the TPLF's programme on the rest of the country (Merara 2013, 2016). Finally, if one closely examines the current political development in the ruling camp and the country in general, it appears the TPLF's own creation in Oromia, the OPDO, emerged as an opposition voice from within. It is interesting to note, too, that the OPDO/ODP also questions the authenticity of the current federal arrangement, thus concurring with other Oromo opposition forces in this regard.

Clearly, for the Oromo opposition political forces, ethnic/identity-based federalism is the minimum demand⁴⁷. Their struggle is for the right to self-determination. Some political

⁴⁷ As far as Oromo politics is concerned, two issues are noteworthy. The first is with regard to Oromo politics during the Ethiopian Student Movement. While the founders of the Oromo political organization, such as the OLF, took the path of ethno-nationalism, a significant number of Oromo students subscribed to Pan-Ethiopianism. A good example is the founders of MEISON, including its first chairman, Haile Fida, an ethnic Oromo who regarded the Oromo/nationalist issue as 'regionalism' or secondary to the class struggle. However, with the gradual demise of MEISON and the heightened politicisation of ethnicity and the victory of the ethno-nationalist forces and their occupation of the central power post-1991, it appears ethno-national forces (Oromo movements) remained the dominant representatives of Oromo politics. Those who were part of pan-Ethiopian politics re-emerged as Oromo ethno-nationalists. Examples include Merera Gudina, who was a member of MEISON and later established an Oromo political force, and Bulcha Demeksa, a veteran politician (finance minister of the imperial regime), who established an Oromo party post-1991. Oromo individuals (including those who identify themselves as an Oromo and those who refuse to identify themselves as such) have been participating in the country's

forces elevate this self-determination exercise to include the right to secession. Like the Pan-Ethiopianist forces, almost all are opposed to the current federal system, albeit for totally different reasons. This reveals another dynamic in the opposition politics discourse, i.e., that the 'struggle' is not just a vertical one with the regime in power, but, as we shall see in the next chapter, it is also a horizontal struggle among the opposition parties themselves, which indicates the horizontal dimension aspects of the discourses. The Oromo opposition political force's struggle is framed in terms of either the colonizer vis-à-vis the colonized (the colonial thesis) or the oppressor vis-à-vis the oppressed (the national oppression thesis), indicating the high levels of tension and animosity involved.

6.3. The Somali Opposition Political Forces Discourse

“ONLF believes that all nations in Ethiopia have shed their blood for more than a century and have paid a heavy price to achieve self-rule and self-determination, which was recognized legally in 1995 in the present constitution. That right is a key factor in keeping the peace, and ONLF supports and protects that right... The Somali people cherish that principle of federalism and self-rule.... the federal arrangement is still incomplete and needs to be improved, and the rights [enshrined] in the constitution for self-administration need to be implemented.” (Abdirahman Mahdi Madey (Chairman, the ONLF)⁴⁸.

political life. As the focus of this study is on ethno-nationalist forces, those issues remain outside the scope of the study. Another important development in Oromo politics is a dynamism that emerged after 2015, particularly following the change of leadership within the EPRDF, including the current prime minister. It seems a new development that requires a thorough investigation is emerging. ODP leaders seem to be presenting a new Oromo discourse about Ethiopia that emphasises the unity and inviolability of the sovereignty of the country, as manifested by PM Abiy's 'Medemer' doctrine and Lemma's description of *Ethiopyawinet* as an addiction. As important as it is, one can only fully investigate how this discourse evolves, impacts and shapes the Oromo, and by extension, Ethiopia's politics.

⁴⁸ The excerpt is from the interview the chairman gave on current affairs in Addis Ababa on August 21, 2019. Available at <http://addisstandard.com/news-onlf-wants-election-2020-on-time-says-if-postponed-there-should-be-a-mechanism-to-integrate-opposition-liberation-forces-into-the-federal-structure/>. (22 August 2019).

The Somali opposition's political discourse is different to the other opposition politics discourses discussed so far. Its peculiarities lie in the fact that its discourse thesis is rooted in what it sees as colonial issues, but it sees these issues as being intertwined with the irredentist claims of Ethiopia's neighbour, the Federal Republic of Somalia.⁴⁹ In that sense, the opposition discourses it has presented, starting in the mid-1970s, have ranged from discussions strongly rooted in separatist claims to those seeking to achieve the goal of self-determination, if the latter is assumed to have emerged as a new development as a result of recent political changes in the country⁵⁰. The general assertions that have dominated the Somali opposition political discourse reject anything that has to do with Ethiopia and, as such, this discourse underpins a need for either a separate existence in the form of an independent republic, or steps towards the realization of a 'Greater Somalia',

⁴⁹ For more on this subject see, Lewis, I. M. (1989). 'The Ogaden and the Fragility of Somali Segmentary Nationalism', *African Affairs*, 88(353), 573-579; idem (2003). *A Modern History of the Somali: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press; Hagmann, T. and Korf, B. (2012). 'Agamben in the Ogaden: Violence and Sovereignty in the Ethiopian-Somali frontier', *Political Geography*, 31(4), 205-214; idem (2014). *Talking Peace in the Ogaden: The Search for an End to Conflict in the Somali Regional State in Ethiopia*, London: Rift Valley Institute; Abdullahi, A. M. (2007). 'The Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF): The Dilemma of its Struggle in Ethiopia', *Review of African Political Economy*, 34(113), 556-562; Markakis, J. (1996). 'The Somali in Ethiopia', *Review of African Political Economy*, 23(70), 567-570; Samatar, A. I. (2004). 'Ethiopian Federalism: Autonomy Versus Control in the Somali Region', *Third World Quarterly*, 25(6), 1131-1154; Eshete, T. (1994). 'Towards the History of the Incorporation of the Ogaden: 1887-1935', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 27(2), 69-87; Tareke, G. (2000). 'The Ethiopia-Somalia War of 1977 Revisited', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 33(3), 635-667; Abbink. (2003). 'Dervishes, 'Moryaan' and Freedom Fighters: Cycles of Rebellion and the Fragmentation of Somali Society, 1900-2000'. *African Dynamics*, Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 38, and Clapham (2017). *The Horn of Africa: State formation and decay*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵⁰ The Somali region has been undergoing major changes following political developments in the country since 2015. At the time of writing this thesis, a long-time president of the region, Abdi Mohamoud Oumer, also known as Abdille, was deposed and arrested by the federal government. The military intervention is said to have been caused by Abdille's move to declare independence of the region. Following his removal, a new team of educated Somalis reformed the regional government by also making a peace agreement with the ONLF, as a result of which the latter moved to Ethiopia to undertake a peaceful political struggle. Similar to Oromo politics, this new development in Somali politics vis-a-vis post-2015 political dynamism in Ethiopia needs a thorough investigation.

thereby lending itself to an irredentist claim that historically has engaged both Ethiopia and Somalia in border wars. A brief discussion of the roots of these two dominant discourses requires a sketch of their trajectories and warrants highlighting how these discourses emerged from vital political events that help explain the roots of these discourses.

As far as the Somali opposition discourses are concerned, the irredentist claim initially made itself visible after the Federal Republic of Somalia achieved independence in 1960. Somali nationalists wanted to realize the dream of forming a 'Greater Somalia' by uniting all Somali-speaking peoples (ethnic Somalis) in the Horn of Africa, including the Somali-speaking part of Ethiopia. The objective of this ambitious goal was popularized during the reign of Mohamed Siyad Barre, who seized power following a successful coup d'état in 1969. It was under his reign that two Somali opposition forces with irredentist claims entered the stage in the mid-1970s, each of them with a separatist cause rejecting Ethiopia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The organizations were: 1) The Somali Abo Liberation Front (SALF); and 2) The Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF). Both had strong support and backing from Siyad Barre's regime and both aimed to annex parts of the Ethiopian territory they claimed belonged to the Somali-speaking people under the 'alien' occupation, and to reunite them with Somalia. The SALF claimed those areas in the southeastern part of Ethiopia, including Ethiopia's Balle, Arsi and Sidamo Administrative Zones, while the WSLF claimed areas in the eastern part of Ethiopia, including the Ogaden (Somali-speaking region), by then, part of Hararghe province, and the larger parts of Hararghe province itself, including the two main cities of Harar and Dire Dawa. These two fronts were initially able to control major parts of the territories they had claimed, given the major political upheavals happening in Ethiopia at the time, which resulted in the downfall of the imperial regime in 1974. The Somalian military later invaded Ethiopia in 1977 on the back of these irredentist claims and in tandem with the two liberation fronts (Hesse 2010, Gebru 2000). It overran the Ethiopian military, occupied the whole Ogaden area and was advancing to capture Dire Dawa city until its advance was halted. This incident, which has come to be known as the Ogaden War of 1977-78, saw a major superpower of the time, the USSR, together with its socialist allies, participate militarily on the Ethiopian side. The Ogaden War concluded in a major defeat for

the invading Somalian army.⁵¹ The two liberation fronts were also driven out of the country. This defeat changed the course of internal politics in Somalia for Siyad Barre, who sought a different approach of engagement with Ethiopia. Consequently, the two sides signed a pact that, among other things, impacted the former's support for the two liberation fronts and imposed a reciprocal duty on Ethiopia too. The post-war internal political developments in Somalia, including the civil war that resulted in the fall of the Siyad Barre regime and the subsequent disintegration of the country, weakened the irredentist claims and the liberation fronts. In what appears to be a phenomenon of post-Siyad Barre Somalia, different Somali clans/territories began to declare their own autonomous regions and, in some cases, claims of independent statehood emerged. It was in this context that a new liberation front, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) was founded in 1984 by individuals who were part of the leadership of the WSLF, this time with a cause of the right to self-determination for the colonized people of Ogaden and the goal of forming an independent country, the Ogadenia (ONLF 1984, n.d.).

The ONLF's discourse evidently differs from the previously discussed opposition discourses in a number of ways. First, it presents the 'cause' of the Ogaden people (ethnic Somalis) in Ethiopia as primarily a struggle for self-determination rights against the colonial Abyssinian/Ethiopian rule. According to the ONLF's conception of the political history of the Ogaden land and people, part of the Ogaden land was occupied by Abyssinian expansionists towards the end of the 19th century through a series of wars of colonial conquest, and the remaining areas became a British colony but transferred to Ethiopian colonial power in the mid-1950s. As such, the ONLF sees the history of the Ogaden people as a history of colonial possession, to which the Ogaden people had never consented. Since the incorporation of Ogaden land, the ONLF believes the people of the region, which is now recognized as a Somali regional state in Ethiopia, are being occupied by Ethiopian colonialism which later morphed into settler colonialism. Accordingly, the ONLF maintains the region's population has been subjugated and exploited for the past century. Thus, it disassociates from anything that has to do with the colonizer, Ethiopia.

⁵¹ In addition to the USSR, Cuba and South Yemen sent troops to fight alongside Ethiopia. This inevitably contributed to the defeat of the Somalis.

In this regard, it rejects the political history of Ethiopia (the formation of its statehood, etc.) as advanced by pro-unionist opposition groups. Furthermore, it categorically labels the Ethiopian state as an artificial system founded on colonial doctrine. It adds that,

“For almost one century, the Abyssinians have been abusing the concept of sovereignty and statehood to deprive the rights of other peoples' living under the oppressive rule of Ethiopia [...] that [it] has never relinquished its colonial possessions” (Abdirahman n.d., p.2).

Clearly, The ONLF does not see itself as an Ethiopian opposition force, let alone associate itself with one. Secondly, it also insists on distinguishing its struggle and cause from irredentist claims and movements. In this regard, while acknowledging its sympathy for, and commitment to, the pre-1960 Pan-Somali movements that wanted to establish a ‘Greater Somalia’, it argues that its struggle is different and should not be seen as part of a border conflict between Ethiopia and the republic of Somalia in that context. To this end, it promotes itself as a vanguard party born out of the corrective measures targeted at transforming the WSLF into an entity that ‘truly represents the interests of the people of Ogadenia in their justified quest for self-determination ’(ONLF n.d., p.3). Thus, it presents its struggle as a separatist one in its own right that should not be taken as an extension of irredentist claims or as an instrument of any other entity. Like other liberation fronts, it has espoused a protracted armed war as a means to achieve its ends, a move that it describes as an act of self-defense by colonized people.

Following its inception in 1984, the ONLF remained largely inactive until 1991, after which it became a major player in Somali regional politics due to the political changes that unfolded in the country. Post-1991 politics focused on the ethnic-based movements that enabled the ONLF to participate in the political process during the transitional government of Ethiopia. It was allotted a ‘quota seat ’in the Transitional Government Council. In 1992, it participated in the first regional council election and won over 80 per cent

of the seats in the regional parliament of what was then 'Region 5', and is now the Somali regional state government. However, its stay in politics was short-lived – it ended its formal participation in the political process of Ethiopia in 1994. Within those two years, however, it attempted to obtain what it was struggling for – an independent *Ogadenia*. After controlling the majority of seats in the regional parliament, it activated a formal procedure to exercise the right to self-determination for the Ogaden people. The regional parliament unanimously approved the demand to hold a referendum on the issue of self-determination and independence for the Ogaden people, a move which ultimately would lead to the secession of the region. This move triggered an immediate response from the Transitional Government in Addis Ababa, which reacted by making arrests and removing the ONLF from public offices. On its part, the ONLF boycotted the elections and withdrew from the constitution adoption process. Unlike the discourses of others opposed to the constitution, it rejected the constitution from the outset and regarded participation in the process as tantamount to 'endorsing' Ethiopian colonialism. Since 1994, it has been an active, armed separatist group in the Somali regional state, engaging militarily with the Ethiopian government in opposition to its colonial legacy and continuing its struggle for the liberation of the Ogaden people.

We can conclude that the Somali opposition discourse constitutes an exception in the terrain of opposition discourses in the country. In that sense, it is a discourse not only about the 'colonial thesis', but also about irredentism and a strong disassociation from Ethiopia as a country. In view of this, the ONLF's stance on a genuine ethnic-/identity-based federalism can only be a minimum request/goal, if it is at all ready to compromise on its ultimate objective of the struggle.

6.4. The Afar Opposition Forces Discourse

A call for self-determination rights is at the core of the Afar oppositional politics discourse. A number of factors explain this rationale. Firstly, Afar-speaking people are scattered and live under three jurisdictions in the Horn of Africa. They inhabit an eastern, lowland periphery of Ethiopia (currently the Afar regional state), the lowlands and coastal areas of Eritrea and the Djibouti republic. Until the late 1980s in Ethiopia, under the Haile

Selassie I and Mengistu regimes, the Afar people were distributed in five different provinces: Hararghe, Showa, Wollo, Tigray and Eritrea. Following the political changes in 1991, the Ethiopian Afars were further divided into two jurisdictions of Ethiopia and Eritrea. These arrangements meant that, despite speaking the same language and leading similar pastoral lifestyles, the Afar people found themselves disunited under different jurisdictions. This 'disunity' has remained a central theme of the Afar's opposition politics since the 1970s, and almost a decade earlier (in 1961) even concerned Afar chieftains who, at a meeting in Ti'o, called upon the imperial government to put all Afar people under a single administrative province (Lewis 2017, Yasin 2008:39-65, Shehim 1985:331-348, Said 1998). Another factor is the marginalization discourse. By the government's own admission, the Afar region is among the least developed regions in Ethiopia. This marginalization, which has manifested itself in a lack of economic development in the region, features widely in the discourse of Afar opposition political forces. It is thus these two fundamental issues that formed the basis of the Afar opposition discourses as advanced by different opposition political forces since the beginning of the 1970s.

Amongst the first Afar opposition political organizations to appear on the Ethiopian political scene was the Afar Liberation Front (ALF), which was founded by Sultan Ali Mira and leftist Afar students in 1975. Sultan Ali Mira was a traditional ruler of the Afar people, who was recognized as such in 'cordial' relations with the imperial regime of Haile Selassie I. Belonging to the landed gentry, the sultan was a beneficiary of the land tenure system and, as such, a 'feudal' leader in his own locality. Unsurprisingly, he was opposed to the Derg's land reform policy, and established himself as an opponent in exile. Indeed, he regarded the Derg's land reform policy as 'land confiscation', and his son launched the political struggle against the Derg. The ALF promoted the stance that the Afar were among the 'oppressed nations and nationalities', and referred to Ethiopia as a 'prison house', thereby subscribing to the 'national oppression thesis' (ALF 2000). The ALF further accused successive Ethiopian governments of deliberately misguided political and economic policies that have kept the Afar in 'backwardness'. The ALF has clearly stated that its aim is to ensure the unification of all Afar in Ethiopia by exercising the right to self-determination under a democratic federal system: 'to realise the long sought political

settlement in which nations and nationalities of Ethiopia be guaranteed under a constitution the right to self-determination under a democratic federal system '(ALF 2000:2).

Despite its initial military engagements with the Derg, the ALF was largely inactive for a long period, with its leaders exiled in Saudi Arabia. It then reappeared as a key player in post-1991 Ethiopia. Finding the new political reconfiguration (the regional autonomous federal structure) palatable to its cause, it joined the process of transitional government formation. After winning the regional election in 1992, it ruled the region until 1995, after which it withdrew on the grounds that the 'minority TPLF government 'kept interfering in the internal affairs of the region by undermining the ALF, the Afar people and their traditional leaders (Ibid. 2000:2). Essentially, the ALF questioned the authenticity of the federal system by pinpointing the case of the TPLF's regional ally in the Afar regional state, the Afar People's Democratic Organization (APDO), which it describes as the TPLF's puppet, after the latter took over the regional administration with the support of the TPLF in 1995. The APDO has remained in power ever since.

The other major Afar opposition parties that emerged on the regional political scene are the Afar National Liberation Movement (ANLM), the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Union Front (ARDUF) and The Afar Peoples Party (APP). The ANLM was founded in 1976 by leftist students who initially collaborated with Sultan Ali Mira and formed the ALF. The ANLM founders were adherents of the 'national oppression thesis 'and, consequently, their aim was to create an autonomous Afar state within the borders of a Free Union of Ethiopian nations (ANLM Guidelines, p.6, cited in Shehim and Searing 1980: 224). As such, when the Derg declared the National Democratic Revolutionary programme in 1976, in which it announced its recognition of the 'nationality question', and promised to address it, the ANLM decided to work with the Derg in order to achieve an autonomous region for the Afar.⁵² To this end, in 1977, it organized a conference in

⁵² The Derg declared "The program of National Democratic Revolution in 1976", in which it announced its position on the perennial question of the 'nationality question'. In the proclamation it states, "The right of self-determination of all nationalities will be recognized and fully respected so no nationality will dominate another one since the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism." (PMAC 1976)

Gewane, calling on the government to create a separate region that would incorporate all Afar-speaking people in Ethiopia (Shehim 1985). The ARDUF was founded at the beginning of the 1990s following the secession of Eritrea, a move that further divided the Afar-speaking people of Ethiopia and brought them under two different jurisdictions. It was against this background that the ARDUF was established with the aim of 'unit[ing] all the territories inhabited by the Afar people in Ethiopia proper, and to attain a federal or confederate political status for this administrative unity of the Afar people' (*Ethiopian Review*, September 1993:15). In what can be seen as a common political agenda driving Afar opposition politics, the APP was founded. This relatively new and active political party was founded in exile in the 2010s and also called for the right of self-determination for the Afar people. Its stand is clear: '[to] ensure the rights of the Afar people without direct and indirect interference of the federal government, and protect the right to self-determination within the federal and democratic Ethiopia' (APP n.d., p.1). The APP appears to elevate the issue of self-determination, expressed in the form of a federal or confederal arrangement, by vowing not only to establish it but also to protect it. Moreover, the APP maintains that the people of Afar have been continuously oppressed and subjugated since the beginning of the 19th century by successive repressive Ethiopian regimes against which they continued to resist oppression and intensified the struggle to determine their right to self-determination, thereby alluding to the 'national oppression thesis' (Ibid. n.d.).

With regard to the Afar opposition discourse, the issue of exercising self-determination rights in the form of ethnic-/identity-based federalism is a dominant topic. Indeed, it appears to be a *raison d'être* for all Afar political parties. However, the exercise of self-determination rights is sought through the adoption of a genuinely multinational, democratic federal set up. All Afar opposition political forces regard the current federal arrangement as being dominated by a Tigrean minority regime, in which the Afar people are not 'genuinely' represented at either the federal or regional government levels. The current party that controls the Afar region, the APDO, is regarded as a TPLF creation – a 'surrogate' that administers on the latter's behalf. Thus, to the Afar opposition the current ethnic federal configuration is palatable with their goal, as long as it can become democratic and authentic/genuine.

6.5. The Sidama Opposition Political Forces 'Discourse

The Sidama-speaking people of Ethiopia inhabit the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) regional state in Ethiopia. It is one of the largest ethnic groups inhabiting Ethiopia's most diverse region, with over 56 ethnic groups. One of these groups, the Sidama, constitutes about 20 per cent of the total population of the region. The SNNP regional state has the fifth largest population in the country (almost three million) (CSA 2007). It also has the most fertile arable land, notable for producing cash crops, including coffee and khat, the major foreign currency earner crops for the country. Despite being a key player in the politics of the SNNP region, the Sidama elites appear dissatisfied with the current administrative arrangement in which the Sidama is just a part of the SNNP regional state. Instead, the Sidama elites seek self-determination and an autonomous Sidama regional state, a position that has been the major political rallying call for the Sidama opposition political forces since the end of the 1970s. The main Sidama opposition movement, which claimed to represent the cause of self-determination for the Sidama people was the Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM), which was founded in 1977 by Wolde Amanuel Dubale, a previous founder of the SALF. The SLM waged an armed struggle against the Derg, and later joined the Transitional Government of Ethiopia in 1991 when the regime fell. However, its participation in the transitional political process was short-lived as it withdrew and left for exile like the OLF, the ONLF and others. This was due to problems associated with the post-1991 political process under the auspices of the TPLF/EPRDF regime. It continued its struggle from exile, where it became a 'Front', and subsequently, in 1999 and later, the SLF merged with other Sidama forces and finally, as the Sidama National Liberation Front in 2014. Regardless of its historical ups and downs, the SLM discourse that emerged in the 1970s has endured two successive regimes and has grown to the level of mobilizing a significant proportion of the Sidama elites both in the ruling and opposition entities. It has also had a significant impact on post-1991 politics by heightening ethnic nationalism.⁵³ Thus, the discourses of the SLM/SNLF warrant unpacking.

⁵³ To the testament of the heightened status of the demand for an autonomous region, the Sidama Zone Council (which is entirely under the control of the Sidama wing of the ruling party) has unanimously

The SLM/SNLF adheres to the colonial thesis discussed above. It believes the Sidama people were occupied by the Abyssinian power and by Menelik II's war of 'conquests' and 'forceful annexation'. The latter's rule was labelled 'worse' than the Italian occupation, which the SLM/SNLF believe allowed the Sidama to at least get 'land rights and a control over their own labour' (SNLF 2010a; Betena 2015; SNLF 2014). The Haile Selassie I reign was described as a continuation of the occupation of 'personal rule and tyranny', but with some attempts to 'modernize' it. The Derg regime was the immediate cause of its armed struggle. The SLM/SNLF asserts that the Derg was "a military/communist dictatorial rule that, among other things, pursued 'scorched earth policies brutally and ruthlessly'". The current TPLF/EPRDF regime is described as a minority regime with deceptive appearances. It is also alleged to have committed the worst 'atrocities' and accused of being a continuation of the repressive Ethiopian empire (SNLF 2010a, 2010b). Moreover, it is opposed to the current reconfiguration under which the Sidama people have been made part of the SNNP:

[...] [the SNLF had] [h]igh hopes that their age-old demand for regional self-determination would be addressed in 1991. But that was not to be. Instead, the Sidama people, for the first time since 1891, lost their nominal

passed a resolution approving a request for a referendum on the subject in the month of October 2018, for the second time during the reign of the incumbent TPLF/EPRDF regime. Further to formal initiation of the procedure to form a Sidama regional state, at the time of writing this thesis, a political crisis has occurred in the Sidama zone as the Federal military intervened following the mass unrest in support of an urgent call for holding a referendum vis-a-vis the ambivalence of the regional and federal government political handling/endorsement of the matter. Lately, however, both the EPRDF and the regional ruling party, the SEPDM have announced their endorsement. The National Electoral Board has also announced its plan to organize the referendum in five months' time, reversing its earlier hesitation about the feasibility of organizing such a referendum. For details see, Yinebeb, N. (2010). 'The Right to Form One's Own State Under FDRE Constitution: The Case of the Sidama People' (Hawassa University, unpublished LLB Thesis). Available at Law School Library, Hawassa University, Kinkino, K(2014). 'Ethiopia's Ethnic Federalism and The Right to Self-Determination: the Experience of Sidama People' (Riga: Lambert Academic Publishing).

regional identity and were once more forcefully subsumed under the Southern Region” (SNLF April 4, 2014).

Thus, the SLM/SNLF have stated that the objective of their political struggle was national self-determination for the Sidama People (SNLF 1999). This self-determination is sought, however, in the form of an autonomous region for the Sidama people within the current federal set up. In that sense, it supports an ethnic-/identity-based federalism. The SLF/SNLF adopts armed struggle as an alternative means to achieving its goal (Ibid. 1999). Apparently, the Sidama opposition discourse, anchored on the right to self-determination, falls squarely within the ethno-nationalist discourses discussed above.

In short, while the Ethiopianist discourses present Ethiopia as one of the world’s oldest civilizations, one that has preserved its independence in Africa for more than 3,000 years, they see it as a country for which successive generations (‘the forefathers’) have paid a sacrifice to maintain Ethiopia’s sovereignty and, in turn, its territorial integrity, both of which are seen as inviolable. By contrast, the ethno-nationalist political discourse perceives Ethiopia as an ‘empire’ state that has incorporated its respective ethnic communities (nations) through colonial conquest in successive wars that culminated in the formation of the current Ethiopian state in 1900, contrary to the 3,000 years claim. As a result of this conquest, they claim, their people/nations are under an oppressive occupation that has catalyzed their long-standing struggle for liberation. Thus, ethno-nationalists generally frame the objective of their struggle as a realization of their nation’s inalienable right to exercise self-determination. As discussed, for some ethno-nationalists, the exercise of self-determination also includes secession from the colonial Ethiopian empire state. It is this tendency to disassociate from the centre and to contest the Pan-Ethiopianist notion of territorial inviolability that has led to ethno-nationalist forces being described as centrifugal forces.

Generally, the ethno-nationalist discourses are centred on the goal of the right to self-determination. It is a discourse that conceptualizes the politics of the country differently vis-a-vis the mainstream opposition discourse. It has its own conceptualization of how

the Ethiopian state emerged and is sustained. For ethno-nationalists, the Ethiopian state is either a colonial polity or an oppressive entity that allows certain groups to oppress or colonize others. In this context, it seems to promote an emancipatory type of politics in which the oppressed or colonized people attempt to (re)gain a space, which it envisions being achieved through the right to self-determination. This space will allow for a new state to be established or for an autonomous regional state to be secured for the oppressed or colonized people of Ethiopia. This, by extension, means that Ethiopian politics is inherently framed as we/us vs. them – the oppressed/colonized vs. the oppressor/colonizer, ours vs. theirs. Moreover, it is characterized as an emancipatory politics to be achieved by involving the use of force (armed struggle). It is also a securitized politics. What this particular politics means and how it interacts with other political discourses and their implication is discussed in the next chapter.