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The role of political elites in nation-building in contemporary Ethiopia, 1960-2020

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CHAPTER SEVEN

THE ELITE AND NATION-BUILDING UNDER *EPRDF'S* RULE (1991-2018)

7.1 State and Nation Rebuilding Based on Ethnic Identity

With the overthrow of the military rule (the *Derg* regime) in 1991, ethnicity became the dominant political philosophy of Ethiopia's ruling political class. According to Abbink (2012), ethnic-based federalism, inspired by a neo-Leninist political paradigm known as 'revolutionary democracy', was one of Ethiopia's central tenets implemented by the post-1991 government. Ethnic identity was considered the cornerstone of politics under this dispensation, developed by the ruling Tigray People's Liberation Front (which was dominant in the ruling coalition EPRDF). The concept of a pan-Ethiopian identity was de-emphasized, while the constitutional recognition of identities that were thought to be previously marginalized communities was prioritized. The new political order granted ethnic and cultural rights to various ethnic groups and allowed them to play a role in the country's mainstream politics. Identity-based politics made ethnic divides eventually flare up, and political liberties, respect for human rights, and economic equality became problematic as the regime unfolded. The foundation of the Ethiopian state in 1991 was built upon the concept of 'unity in diversity'. At its core, the state's formation was centered on recognizing the rights of the 'nations, nationalities and peoples' (NNP) of Ethiopia to have autonomy and on enabling them to exercise self-determination. Before analyzing the state/nation-building initiatives undertaken by EPRDF, it is important to briefly describe how ethnic-based ideology and politics in Ethiopia first took root and then progressively became the dominant elements in the political order in post-1991.

The term "ethnic politics" describes a situation in which politicians frequently use ethnic identity as a rallying point for support and where constituents frequently back politicians who belong to the same ethnic group (Posner, 2005; Chandra, 2006). When members of various groups start to view one another as rivals for control, and when they think they will not receive official protection and help if "one of their own" is not in power, ethnic politics is frequently seen as an

issue. Many contend that ethnic politics ought to be contained, eliminated, or handled through specific institutional arrangements since it frequently encourages inter-ethnic friction and bloodshed (Lynch, 2015). There is a growing academic consensus that (aspiring) elites play a crucial role in political mobilization, which is necessary for contending ethnic nationalisms. In other words, elites are instrumental in orchestrating the (ethno-) nationalist movements, shaping the agenda, and providing the necessary leadership to achieve predetermined objectives (cf. Merera 2004). Ethiopia saw the emergence of an organized ethno-nationalist political movement in the latter half of the 20th century, mainly due to its unsuccessful modernization efforts. Many scholars attribute the roots of ethnic politics in Ethiopia to Haile Selassie's flawed approach to nation-building, which marginalized certain ethnic groups from the core of the nation's political and economic decision-making. Interestingly, the anti-state resistance initially arose in Eritrea, the former Italian colony (1890-1941), because they were not explicitly ethnic. The annexation of the federated region of Eritrea by the imperial government in 1962, along with exclusionary policies, sparked organized nationalist political opposition, which later served as an inspiration and focal point for ethno-regional movements across Ethiopia. According to Messay (1999), Emperor Haile Selassie's autocratic rule post-annexation led to isolation and stagnation in Eritrea, further fueling Eritrean nationalist protests, which were fragmented. Erlich (also cited by Messay, *ibid.*), claimed the following on Eritrean nationalism:

The province was annexed not because Addis Ababa had the power to force it but essentially because the strong elements in Eritrean society of the time wanted it. They did so mainly because they wanted to participate, spiritually and materially, not in the life of a provincial Eritrea but in the life of great Ethiopia, which promised them better possibilities in various fields (Erlich 1986: 208).

As Messay (1999) further noted, the Eritrean elite became frustrated when the government did not keep its promises, leading to a rise in Eritrean nationalism. During the British military rule (1941-1952), ill-advised policy and tight centralization considerably broadened the base of dissident nationalism. In addition to the growing Eritrean dissent, the Eritrean nationalist movement also sparked ethnic-based liberation movements in other parts of Ethiopia: it inspired the emergence of the Somali, Tigrayan, Oromo, Afar, and other ethnic-nationalist groups in Ethiopia. The Eritrean liberation movement's nationalist approach and military triumphs were a template for other ethno-nationalist political opposition movements (cf. Messay 2009). Above all, the military accomplishments of the Eritrean resistance persuaded other movements to use

separatist language and tactics to succeed. Other forms of contestation and conflict were either dropped altogether or relegated to second place. Similarly, Gebru (2009) asserted that the Tigrayan ethnic-nationalist movement emerged within the Ethiopian student movement in the early 1970s and further strengthened ties with the Eritrean nationalist movement. He explains his points as follows:

Tigrayan self-awareness became more pronounced after the Eritrean insurgency and the rise of a radical student movement and solidified during the civil war. This does not mean that Tigrayan social identity was a made-up concept only popularized and legitimized by armed conflict. Instead, it emphasizes that the emergence of a creative and manipulative social movement was more rooted in the material foundation of a unified state than in a fundamental ethnic identification with ideas of exclusion from state power and its resources. The success of the insurgent leadership was due to its ability to bridge the gap between its own political goals and the material needs of the population. The ethno-nationalist movement was driven to victory by combining the insurgent leaders' unmet political and educational aspirations and the widespread desire to abolish socially oppressive conditions (Gebru, 2009, p. 82).

As Gebru pointed out, the Eritrean independence war served as a significant inspiration for the Tigrayan nationalist movement, which then gained momentum in different parts of the Tigray Region. The rise of insurgencies in both Eritrea and Tigray (refer to Aregawi 2009) also reinforced the role of ethno-nationalists in the Ethiopian political discourse. According to one of the top former *Derg* officials:

The pan-Ethiopianist and Leftist groups ultimately destroyed one another in their power struggle. Several national politicians of Ethiopia lost their lives as a result of the red and white terrors. The ethno-nationalist groups solidified their position and became the dominant political forces in mainstream Ethiopian politics as the pan-Ethiopian political camp grew weaker and more vulnerable. Ethno-nationalist discourses and narratives subsumed the pan-Ethiopian group's thoughts and ideas. The TPLF's ascent to power using the EPRDF as a tool signaled the end of the role played by the pan-Ethiopian camp in Ethiopian politics (Respondent no. 1, 2022).

The position and survival of the pan-Ethiopian political camp were significantly impacted by the politics of destruction within the camp, as highlighted by the high ex-official of the *Derg*. This made it easier for the ethno-nationalists to dominate and control state politics and for ethno-nationalism to take root. According to Messay (1999), ethno-nationalism is an ideology contrived to further the economic interests of the ruling ethno-regional elites. Dissident nationalism grows whenever solidarity and integrative nationalisms fail or are hindered by historical circumstances. He further argued that there is no better way of corroborating the theory of ethno-nationalism than

by a concrete study of the instances favoring its growth, usually the result of exclusionary policy and loss of power. In Ethiopia, centralization in the name of modernization is the ultimate cause of all exclusions. The first victims of Emperor Haile Selassie's exclusion policy were the traditional nobility and the pre-war intellectuals:

The stagnation of economic growth, the increasing needs of modern life, both in terms of individual consumption and the running of the state machinery, population growth, the spread of modern education, etc., tend to accentuate scarcity and competition. Consequently, exclusion and appropriation for power appear as the only way to control resources... ethnicity, both as a policy of exclusion and as a reaction to exclusion, could not have found a better justification and function (Messay, 1999, p. 313).

Ethno-nationalism in Ethiopia is a political ideology cultivated and propagated by rural 'educated' elites to obtain political power and fulfill their economic aspirations. For instance, Gebru (2009) asserted that TPLF used 'Tegaru' identity⁵ as an anchor to mobilize Tigrayan nationalism. According to Gebru, Tigrayan nationalism was spearheaded by TPLF (after it neutralized its predecessor, the TLF or Tigray Liberation Front), and he pointed at three characteristics of the TPLF as follows:

First, the TPLF was a by-product of the Ethiopian student movement, and many of its leaders were inspired by the same idealistic and egalitarian ideas of social change. Second, the TPLF tapped into a powerful feeling of alienation among many of the modern sectors of society—the urbanites—from the central authority, which they saw as distant and unconcerned yet exploitative. Third, the above analysis does not devalue the centrality of language and culture as independent driving or motivating forces for such social movements; as the histories of Basque and Catalan nationalism in Spain attest, for instance, poverty or economic marginalization is not the only reason for the rise of autonomist or separatist nationalisms. Economic prosperity can be not only an antidote to nationalism but its springboard. That said, if political power and material entitlement were the Tigrayan and Eritrean insurgents' goals, it was the war by which they attained them (2009: 82).

According to Markakis (2011:163, 189), the explanation of the differences among student movement activists in their struggle against military rule in Ethiopia (after 1974) was that one side held the view that popular mobilization must transcend nationality divisions and rely on class solidarity, while the opposing side argued that in certain instances nationality contradictions ought to be resolved first through a struggle of national liberation, as a prerequisite to winning the class struggle. The latter was the view of those who formed the TPLF.

⁵ Name given to Tigrean ethno-nationalism.

7.2 The Rise of Ethno-Nationalist Elites

7.2.1 The Radicalization of Ethiopian Politics

As noted by Messay Kebede (1999), the Eritrean uprising, the Tigrayan revolt, and the Oromo ethnic-nationalist movements were led and propagated by elite elements from rural areas that were associated with or led by urban-based (aspiring) elites in terms of leadership and their ideological texture. The leading activists of the movements are, by and large, a result of the frustration of not having power or representation or fearing impending loss of power, and they perceived themselves as victims of exclusion by Emperor Haile Selassie's centralization policy.

The Tigrayan nationalist movement, which emerged in 1975, was a direct consequence of the social tensions provoked by an authoritarian regime striving for modernization. This movement was a reaction to Haile Selassie's early and discriminatory imperial rule, which was characterized by economic inequality, oppression, lack of democratic representation, and cultural marginalization. Ethnicity was exploited to advance the political and economic interests of a marginalized social class that felt excluded from imperial Ethiopia's modernization efforts. Gebru Tareke succinctly described the Tigray-based ethnic movement as follows:

In the 1970s, Tigray did not experience a revolutionary upheaval despite the presence of common catalysts for revolt, such as poverty, oppression, and alienation. Although the population grew, the amount of land available per person decreased steadily, leading to a decline in cultivated land. Widespread poverty, high unemployment, and pervasive corruption were longstanding issues, but there was no indication of a collective awareness of these problems among the people of Tigray. Instead, a small group of radical urban intellectuals were responsible for initiating the revolutionary war, and it required considerable effort to rally the rural population. Ultimately, the revolution's success was due to the determined leadership, the active support of the mobilized population, the dedication of the fighters, and the leadership's ability to appeal to ethnic and territorial loyalties over class allegiance. By transforming provincialism into peasant ethno-nationalism, the insurgents could lead their movement to victory (2009: 83).

By the mid-1960s, Haile Selassie I University had become the focal point of a student movement that was evolving into a significant force for political activism, aiming at bringing about meaningful socio-political change. Messay (2008) attributes the movement's origins to the imperial regime's failure to address the urgent socio-political issues affecting Ethiopians and the specific concerns voiced by the educated elite.

The university provided a relatively open platform for discussing political issues, especially compared to other sections of society. Thanks to a strong advocacy effort, students secured the right to form their groups, hold meetings on campus, and publish their articles. These freedoms facilitated the spread of radical ideas and fostered collaboration between educated elites and students. In addition to the relative freedom of speech and the right to association, the government's lenient treatment of students and avoidance of harsh coercion further contributed to the rise of radicalism.

According to Messay (2008), if the government had been more receptive to the reformist students' proposals, it could have helped the moderate leaders demonstrate the effectiveness of reformism. However, resisting even minimal reforms, the government inadvertently pushed most students to embrace radical viewpoints. Messay (*ibid.*) added that on top of rejecting reforms, the government applied a policy of systematic repression, which made the moderate student movement leadership lose ground. The repressive measures undertaken by the regime enabled the radicals to claim that the situation was hopeless and that all forms of moderation were utterly inappropriate and inefficient. He elaborated as follows:

In addition to blocking reforms and creating despair, a repressive state actually works toward the promotion of radical leaders. When frightened by repression, moderate leaders leave the scene, radical students step in both to air demands specific to the student population and to spread their ideological beliefs. The withdrawal of moderate leaders confirms the extent to which repression cripples moderation. In the face of sacrifices and risks, the radicals have an incontestable edge, given their initial commitment to the cause of revolution. The more dangerous the situation becomes, the greater the prospect for radical students to come to the forefront of the struggle (Messay, 2008: 28).

The success of radical groups in converting many students to radicalism can only be fully explained by considering the passionate influence of Marxist-Leninist philosophy. Enthusiasm, combined with socio-political circumstances, plays a crucial role in radical groups' success, as it is closely linked with their exceptional determination, dedication to the cause, and strong organizational skills. Lack of inclusivity among the various elite factions led to contradictions that were the root of the radicalization of recent Ethiopian politics. According to Merera (2003b), the contradictions within and between the old/traditional and the modern educated elites contributed to the radicalization of Ethiopia's politics. He further addressed this point as follows:

Paradoxically, Ethiopia's ruling class, which survived the Italians, did not move by the shock waves and once again preoccupied itself with the consolidation of power rather than facing the challenges of the 20th century. The outcome was, on the one hand, a growing

contradiction between the traditional elite, which was refusing to give way to the rising modern elite, and the latter was caught in a contradiction of its own, on the other. The traditional political elite felt threatened by the modern elite, and instead of giving way to the latter, it was drawn into an endless competition/conflict. The modern elite, on its part, entered the struggle with a more severe contradiction within itself, i.e., the multi-national goal, which was aimed at the need to change the country as a whole, and an ethnic/regional agenda, which was aimed at the need to end the marginalization of the hitherto subjected peoples. Thus, the new phenomenon of inter- and intra-elite struggles began, culminating in the demise of the country's ancient regime in 1974 (Merera, 2003b: 146).

Andargachew (1993) suggests that by 1960, Ethiopian politics had become increasingly radicalized, leading to a shift in power from the old aristocracy to a new elite. Although the monarchy existed, it struggled to remain relevant to these new elites, which had taken over military and administrative functions. This power shift led to the emergence of a Marxist-Leninist intellectual approach among students, particularly within the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM). The ESM was heavily influenced by external ideologies and the ongoing internal dynamics of Ethiopia, making it difficult to fit within a Marxist framework. Additionally, opposition forces and uprisings in peripheral areas further contributed to the radicalization of the student movements. These movements also significantly impacted radical civil movements, the military, and members of the government structure, including government employees, university students, and military personnel both within and outside the country. Andargachew (1993) further explained how radical ideas created fertile ground for ethno-nationalist movements:

Popularization by the Addis Ababa University students of the thorny question of the right of national self-determination as an appropriate solution in the Ethiopian context gave secession a cloak of respectability that had not been there previously. One of the spin-offs of this was the departure of the Eritrean students and graduates from Addis Ababa and Asmara en masse to the ELF, culminating finally in the emergence of the EPLF led by leftist elites (Andargachew, 1993: 30).

The ESM, he continued, adopted Marxism-Leninism as the right ideology to pursue in order to overthrow the imperial government. It further served as the foundation for the formation of Leninist-Maoist parties. The ESM advocated radical reforms regarding land redistribution and democratic rights. According to Bahru:

The radicalization of Ethiopian students [.....] is both the cumulative nature of the process and the manifold influences that brought it about. It cannot be subsumed under one convenient rubric of cultural dislocation or the undue influence of a small minority, as

Messay attempts to do. Least of all, one can speak of the entire process as a manufactured movement'. The role of the Crocodiles⁶ and their followers in agitating the student population to come out in protest is an indisputable fact. But that was one of a number of factors that contributed to the adoption of ever more radical positions. These other factors were both internal and external. They included...the 1960 coup-even though it was abortive, and maybe because of that African scholarship students, global influences, and the heavy-handed reactions of the government and the university administration to student initiatives (Bahru, 2014: 151).

While the Ethiopian student movement played a crucial role in shaping Ethiopian politics and achieving significant political change, it also contributed to the polarization and violence that characterized Ethiopian politics in the latter half of the 20th century. In the early 1970s, the student movement aligned itself with leftist political groups such as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (*MEISON*), advocating for radical social and political change, including the restructuring of the state and self-autonomy for various ethnic groups. However, the subsequent rise of ethnic-based liberation movements led to a departure from the student movement's initial ideals, marking the emergence of ethno-elites, which will be discussed in the following section.

7.2.2 The Evolution of Ethno-Nationalists

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the 'national question' issue began to take center stage in the political discussions within the Ethiopian student movement. Since 1991, it has become a significant factor in Ethiopia's political ideology and power structure. The initial *Woyyane* rebellion in Tigray from 1941 to 1943, the *Mecha-Tulema* Oromo Self-Help Association, and the Bale uprising from 1964 to 1970 (as documented in Østebø 2020) stand out as examples of popular movements rooted in ethno-nationalist sentiments since 1941. The nationalities/national question made its way into student politics in the late 1960s and has continued to gain prominence since it was not the primary focus of the student movement (Bahru, 2014).

Bahru (2014) posits that the emergence of ethno-nationalism can be traced back to the alienation and isolation of the ruling elite, which began with the emperor's centralization of power in 1941. This centralization resulted in the loss of hereditary rights and internal autonomy for regions, leading to assimilation under imperial rule and dissatisfaction with the regional governors chosen by the emperor. The Italian forces, during their brief occupation from 1936-1941, also

⁶ The 'Crocodiles' were a radical student group within the ESM.

played a role in undermining Ethiopian nationhood by fostering ethnic conflict. They propagated a narrative that portrayed Ethiopia as a collection of disparate ethnic groups oppressed by Amhara colonial rule, which led to the division of the Ethiopian people into 'oppressors' and 'oppressed'.

Missionaries from Europe, mainly from Scandinavia, further contributed to the erosion of Ethiopian unity and nationalism by fostering ethnic identity in various regions of Ethiopia and Eritrea (Fantahun, 2014). According to one of the interviewees:

The missionaries wanted to undermine the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's societal supremacy and influence on political life. Using the local language and culture, they offered evangelism to win souls and win over many followers. In some areas, they also preached the Orthodox faith as belonging to the ruling class and the Amhara ethnic group, which later created the groundwork for the rise of ethno-elites in numerous areas (Respondent no. 30, 2022).

The above argument makes sense since most of the ethno-nationalist movements originated in areas where missionaries widely operated, such as former provinces like Wollega, where the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was dominantly based for many decades; Eritrea, the homeland of ELF and EPLF, and Tigray, similarly the home base of TPLF, can also be cited here as examples.

The political transition after the end of the Italian occupation in 1941 faced numerous challenges. Certain political factions supported by the Italian government posed a significant threat to the emperor, prompting him to restructure provincial boundaries and centralize power in regional administrations. This led to a reconfiguration of provinces and a more effective mixing of cultures, but paradoxically, it also fueled the rise of ethno-nationalist movements in different regions.

The initial *Woyyane* revolt, rooted in ethno-nationalist sentiments, arose from the marginalization of Tigrayans and their traditional leader. Meanwhile, the Gojjam and the Bale peasant movements were driven by the pressing need for land and tax reforms, each with regional and ethno-nationalist underpinnings. Even the *Mecha-Tulema* Association, a precursor to Oromo nationalism, began as a self-help organization focused on improving education, communication, and health. In Eritrea, the centralization effort led to a loss of autonomy and direct imperial rule, sparking armed resistance that eventually grew into a full-fledged uprising (cf. Messay, 2008; Bahru, 2014; Gebru T., 2009).

The first group of Ethiopians to address the national question was the reformist-educated elite of the early 20th century. In that period, two categories of works and issues raised by Ethiopian

intellectuals could be distinguished, with the influential early 20th-century intellectual Gebre-Heywet Baykedagn(1886–1919) being a prominent figure. However, there was little evidence that Ethiopian students were considering the kind of drastic answer that would become the norm after 1969 before the national question erupted onto the national stage in that year. Ethno-nationalism evolved into a political ideology in response to the piece that Walleign Mekonnen, a second-year political science student at Haile Selassie I University⁷, published in the periodical *Struggle* of 1969 with the heading "On the question of nationalities in Ethiopia". He contended that Ethiopia was made up of a dozen different ethnicities, each of which had its language, manner of clothing, history, and social norms, but that ‘Amharisation’ was imposed upon them.

Since its inception, the student movement, which was disharmonious of several groups and tendencies, was burdened with intractable and ultimately fatal problems, as Gebru suggested:

The diverse social and ethnic backgrounds of the students, their divergent experiences and views, and their pursuit of clashing and often incompatible goals, strategies, and tactics led to factionalism and sectarianism. Basically, there were two contradictory but interlocking tendencies-unities in opposition to royal absolutism and diversity in thought and organizations reflections of generational and experiential differences, social atomization, and a culture of mistrust and deviousness deeply ingrained in the popular psyche. Sincere idealism, inadequate or mistaken historical analysis, lack of political experience and skill, and costly dogmatism were the main reasons for the intensifying disagreements and factionalism. Sectarianism also reflected the social divisions and fragmented identities of society and the geographical dispersion of the movement itself. The existing social system affected Ethiopians differently, and their perceptions of social reality differed (Gebru T. 2009: 29).

The seeds of the political articulation of the national question grew and further increased polarization, and the debate on whether class or nation was the primary cleavage in the country heated up. Gebru stated it in the following way:

One view maintained that national oppression was more blatant and explosive than social oppression; consequently, its resolution superseded all other contradictions. This stance would lead to the emergence of ethno-nationalist movements. The other view emphasized the oppressed class affinity, refusing to consider national particularism an enduring problem. Ethno-nationalism is viewed as a dangerous distraction from the primary class cleavages, class loyalty, and the ensuing struggles. It foresaw an end to national antagonisms soon after eradicating unequal social relations. The multinational parties born just before the revolution would remain steadfast upholders of this perspective, although ultimately losing to the ethno- nationalists, who convinced their supporters that

⁷ He and other activists were shot and killed in December 1972 while attempting to hijack an Ethiopian Airlines flight.

culturally based forms of solidarity must supplant nationwide class interests (Gebru T. 2009: 33).

As previously mentioned by Gebru, the national question in Ethiopia has become a highly contentious political issue, centering on the Ethiopian state's nature and the dynamics between its diverse ethnic groups. This issue has played a pivotal role in the deconstruction and reconstruction of the Ethiopian state, as discussed in the works of Abbink (1995, 2015). The emergence of ethno-elites, who advocate for the interests of specific ethnic groups, has been a significant outcome of the national question and has dramatically influenced Ethiopian politics. The following section provides a more detailed explanation of the rise of ethno-elites and their impact on Ethiopian politics.

7.2.3 The Rise of Ethno-Nationalist Elites

After 1991, Ethiopian politics saw the emergence of ethno-nationalist elites taking control, ushering in a significant power shift and introducing new political dynamics in the country. Ethnic-based liberation movements such as the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and, to a lesser extent, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) played a dominant role in shaping the post-1991 politics in Ethiopia.

Since the 1980s, some student movement members have established various ethnic liberation fronts to fulfill the agenda of "equality of ethnic groups in Ethiopia". The essay, written by Walleign Mekonnen, was influential despite being historically simplified and relatively shallow. It claimed that Ethiopia's governing elite had hidden the fact that Ethiopia was not a nation but rather made up of diverse ethnic groups "with their languages, modes of dressing, histories, social organizations, and territorial existence."⁸ Instead, he claimed, there was only a "pseudo-Ethiopian nationalism" founded on the linguistic and the cultural supremacy of mainly Amharas and to some extent Tigrayans. This domination was said to have led to unequal relations among the "nations" of Ethiopia. The trinity of language (Amharic), culture (Amhara-Tigray), and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (religion) was seen by Walleign to make up the 'Ethiopian nation.'

⁸ Read more at: <https://www.theelephant.info/features/2020/11/27/pan-ethiopianists-vs-ethnonationalists-the-narrative-elite-war-in-ethiopia/>.

The ideas championed by Walleign and activists like him were ultimately translated into ideology and action, sparking political and violent conflict driven by ethnic elite-led movements seeking the "liberation" of ethnic groups. The Eritrean Liberation Front emerged in 1962, giving way to the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF) in 1972, which successfully secured Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia in 1991. While the ELF and EPLF were not ethno-nationalist movements, they preceded other ethno-regionally based liberation movements, such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in 1973 and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in 1975, followed by movements in the Somali and Sidama regions. These movements emerged from radicalizing intellectual-elite discourses on "liberation" and "oppressor-oppressed" binary opposition narratives. Foreign powers with geopolitical interests in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa supported them. The rivalry between the USSR and the USA during the Cold War played a crucial role in fostering these liberation groups, which later became breeding grounds for ethno-nationalist elites.

In the aftermath of the overthrow of the *Derg*'s military rule in Ethiopia by EPRDF and EPLF in 1991, the Council of Representatives (COR) was established at the Conference in July 1991 to serve as an interim legislative assembly. It approved the formation of a 'Transitional Government of Ethiopia' (TGE), marking the emergence of federalism, a more liberal economic approach, and recognition of the right of ethnic groups to self-determination. One of the veterans of the OLF movement recalled the July 1991 conference as follows:

The 1991 conference was the first attempt at elite bargaining in the history of Ethiopia. Various elites who represented different ethnic groups in Ethiopia sat together and were able to discuss the future fate of the country. The conference was remarkable because, for the first time, elites agreed on power division and the country's political transition. The event was not all-inclusive but created a space for most political forces. It was also considered remarkable because it thwarted the possible threat of state disintegration, which was looming after the fall of the military regime (Respondent no. 18, 2022).

Another senior figure from an opposition party refuted the above claim and argued that:

The 1991 July conference was a showcase to ethno-elites, who created the People's Democratic Organization (the so-called PDOs) under TPLF mentorship and control. Most of the PDOs were overnight products or private properties of a few ethno-elite members who created a partnership with TPLF. EPRDF used them to legitimize its rule and consolidate power. The July conference could not be considered an elite bargain but should be seen as a platform for legitimizing ethno-elite rule in Ethiopia. An excellent example is the power division agreement shared among EPRDF, OLF, and newly established PDOs (Respondent No. 4, 2022).

As the prominent opposition politicians noted, the July 1991 conference sealed the rise of ethno-elites as the governing power elite of post-1991 Ethiopia—the winner EPRDF coalition consolidated control of the government. The four-member EPRDF was able to establish a coalition with other ethnic-based parties and led the transition allegedly by sharing power based on ethnic quotas. After the transition period, the 1995 constitution abrogated the idea of Ethiopia as a nation-state by introducing ethnic federalism and reinventing Ethiopia as a 'nation of nations'⁹⁹, dividing the nation into nine regional states based on the majority ethnic identities of those regions' populations. Since then, the power hierarchy has been owned and controlled by elites from different ethnic groups. Through several clauses that ensured self-rule based on ethnic identity, the 1995 constitution also set a landmark for legitimizing the rise of ethno-nationalist elites to power and their domination of national politics.

Thus, numerous ethnic-based political parties were established in response to the post-1991 political dynamics, and the political bloc led by ethno-nationalists came out on top. The influence of the pan-Ethiopian political block was gradually reduced. Since 1992, Ethiopia has had five consecutive elections over five years under the new political system. In each of these elections, the ethno-elites maintained control over the state and thus are still the main political force in Ethiopian politics today (2023). Additionally, the ethno-elites created a variety of 'narratives' to support their dominance in national politics. A synopsis of such narratives of ethno-elites from major ethnic groups is given in the next section.

7.2.4 The Discourses of Major Ethno-Nationalist Groups

Various factors, including historical experiences, political ideologies, and cultural realities, have shaped the discourses of ethno-elites in Ethiopia. These discourses are often grounded in narratives of identity, nationalism, and historical injustice, and they can unite and divide different ethnic groups. One central discourse of ethno-elites in Ethiopia is ethno-nationalism, which emphasizes that each ethnic group is entitled to its territory, rights, and resources. This discourse often emphasizes historical and cultural differences between ethnic groups and asserts the need for self-determination and autonomy.

⁹ As it was termed by Fasil Nahum (1995), a pro EPRDF-lawyer who had a great role in the drafting of the 1995 federal constitution.

This ethno-elite discourse evolved from the ESM in the 1960s and 1970s and was later fragmented into several narratives. The ethno-elites used elitism as a mechanism to claim and obtain exclusive rights to political power. Messay Kebede (2008) suggested that the educated elites who familiarized themselves with the tenets of Western culture and ideologies tended to claim entitlement to such authority; no other segment of the society could contest their leadership or their interpretation of ‘modernity’. Messay (*ibid*) further showed these claims of these aspiring educated elites, using the enormous prestige of modern education and creating ‘entitlements’ to power, which are evidenced in the student publications of the time, whereby they assume their role as the ‘vanguard’ of society.

In the absence of a clear national direction for the country’s education system, polarizing tendencies considerably increased among the educated elites, together with alienation from the old, established elites. It was difficult for such uprooted elites to take on the responsibility of working towards integrating the nation; they were vulnerable to many conflicting internal and foreign pressures that undermined national norms. According to Messay (2008), due to losing their sense of national purpose, educated Ethiopians could not reach a consensus regarding Ethiopia and its future and instead turned to their ethnic and regional ties. After the illusory and transient unity around Marxism-Leninism (a reflection of alienation from national Ethiopian heritage), there was no option except for the (even more divisive) ideology of ethno-nationalism. The educated elite’s obsession with ethnicity came to serve no purpose other than maintaining the divisive tendencies inherited from the Marxist-Leninist idea of class struggle. Unfortunately for the nation, this ultimately unleashed the forces of hostility and retaliation, stoked by the Haile Selassie regime’s economic failures and social exclusion. The forces they unleashed quickly upended Ethiopian society in the name of Socialism and its offspring, ethnic nationalism (Messay, 2008). Ethno-nationalist groups constructed new narratives and used different political discourses to assert their legitimacy. This study selects the political discourses of TPLF, OLF, and EPRDF.

7.2.4.1 The TPLF Political Discourse

The TPLF, a political movement founded in 1975 by ethnic Tigrayan students, was founded in the Tigray University Student Association (TUSA), established in 1971. According to Bahru (2014), Gebru T. (2009), and Gebru A. (2014), the TPLF emerged as a result of the Ethiopian student movement, with many of its leaders being influenced by idealistic and egalitarian ideas of social change. The TPLF also capitalized on the widespread sense of alienation among urban

sectors of society towards central authority, which was perceived as distant, unconcerned and exploitative (see Gebru, 2009). Additionally, the marginalization of the Tigray language and culture served as independent driving forces behind these social movements.

John Markakis (2011:189) explained that the TPLF political discourses were rooted in the belief that Tigray is a nation with its own unique identity and that Tigrayans are direct descendants of the Axumites, who had a rich African civilization. They also believed that Tigray was a subjugated nation within the Ethiopian empire. Markakis emphasized the TPLF's political objective, stating that Tigray, an "oppressed nation," has the right to self-determination. This could include options such as autonomy, federation, or even establishing an independent state as a last resort if peaceful coexistence becomes impossible. The TPLF's analysis of the socio-economic and political situation led them to believe that the Shoan Amhara ruling elite was responsible for Tigray's poverty, underdevelopment, and marginalization. This led Tigrayan students to launch a national and social revolution based on armed struggle against feudalism, imperialism, and capitalism to establish their independent republic (Aregawi 2009: 21, Fesseha 2014: 395, Yinebeb 2020: 75–76).

In addition to facing opposition from feudalism, capitalism, and imperialism, the TPLF also had to contend with other adversaries. The Shoan Amhara elite, the *Derg* military regime, and various political parties, including the EPRP, *MEISON*, EDU, TLF, and OLF, were considered enemies and engaged in conflict with the TPLF at different times. Ultimately, the TPLF emerged victorious and gained political dominance in Ethiopia in 1991. Initially focused on Tigray's ethno-nationalist interests, the TPLF shifted its focus to liberating all of Ethiopia through armed conflict, eventually forming the EPRDF coalition with other political forces.

7.2.4.2 The OLF Political Discourse

Since the student movement of the 1960s, the OLF has actively worked to develop a rhetoric opposing Ethiopia as a nation. Several uprisings and rebellions occurred in Oromia, and the Oromo political struggle began to take shape during the growing opposition to the Haile Selassie I administration's rule, as Yinebeb (2020) noted. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was founded in 1973 by a group of elite Oromo-educated individuals, many of whom were high school and Addis Ababa University students. According to John Markakis (2011), the OLF defined and articulated the Oromo struggle as the "liberation of the people from Ethiopia's colonial power"

advocating for the right to self-determination and promoting armed struggle as the primary means to achieve independence.

However, the call for Oromo nationalism did not resonate with most Oromo people living in rural areas. This was due to measures implemented by the *Derg* government, such as the 1975 land reform, which allowed peasants to own land and be free from tenancy, and the establishment of self-administration at the local kebele level. Additionally, the unclear nature of Oromo national identity and a lack of political consciousness were contributing factors. As Markakis (2011:197) explains, "Oromo traditional society was closely integrated within the tribal framework but lacked unifying structures beyond that level. The institutions that had been providing unity and strength to Abyssinian society were absent among the Oromo. Throughout their historic migration, the Oromo did not establish unity beyond the tribal level or coordinate their efforts for a common purpose. Each tribe pursued its destiny independently, and inter-tribal warfare was common."

The development of Oromo nationalism required deliberate effort and did not gain significant momentum until the later years of the *Derg* regime. The OLF's prospects improved in the 1980s as the *Derg* regime grew weak, with its forces occupied on the northern front and the peasantry worn down by the regime's policies, which included continuous conscription of peasant sons, forced war contributions, collectivization of farms, enforced villagization, and resettlement. These grievances led the youth in the western Oromo areas to align with the OLF. At the same time, the call for Oromo nationalism began to resonate more strongly among educated urban elites, especially the younger generation who had experienced the regime's arbitrary violence. As the *Derg's* grip on power weakened, the OLF's persistent efforts started to yield results (Markakis, 2011).

7.2.4.3. The Discourse of the EPRDF

As discussed above, the political discourse of EPRDF after controlling power in 1991 differs from the discourses during the armed struggle before 1991. The core ideological thoughts of its founders, such as TPLF and EPDM (the latter were the leftists from the EPRP who abandoned their Marxist-Leninist political ideologies), gradually changed when the EPRDF member organizations grew to four, including the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO, established in 1990) and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM), established as a multi-ethnic political force after 1991.

The EPRDF contended that the absence of ‘democratization’ was a problem for Ethiopia’s survival. It even claimed that the absence of democracy was one of the root causes of the instability of the country, as manifested in the insurgent wars in various parts of the country, particularly in the North. This has also led to the perpetuation of poverty, regional inequalities, and backwardness. In its narratives, EPRDF emphasized the democratization of multi-ethnic Ethiopia as “the only solution to survive as a state.” Otherwise, Ethiopia’s destiny as a state would be disintegrated, like Yugoslavia after the end of the Cold War (Meles Zenawi, 2017; Bach, 2014). The EPRDF even asserted that without democratization in the country, there could not possibly be peace, coexistence, or amicable separation (Policy Document, 2010)¹⁰. EPRDF not only underlined the need for ‘democracy’, but also underscored the *type* of democracy they thought would fit in the Ethiopian context- *in contrast to liberal democracy*. In its internal documents, the EPRDF compared liberal democracy with that of its own ‘revolutionary democracy’: this was a Leninist concept, and they held that the ‘social base’ of liberal democracy for them was an advanced private (modern, industrialized) sector and its fundamental elements were hegemonic beliefs of the society regarding democratic values such as the rule-of-law, equal rights of all citizens before the law, advanced political culture via an entrenched division of power and checks-and-balances to ensure accountability. The EPRDF further argued that in Ethiopia, “objective reality” *disallowed* liberal democracy from prevailing. The main reason was that the absence of a social base (including a well-developed middle class) and conditions for a democratic culture would make it impossible to implement it. The EPRDF program asserted that if there would be an effort to apply a liberal democracy model ‘without a proper social base’, the result could be the emergence and dominance of ‘parasitic rent-seeker classes’ serving the interests of the few. According to the EPRDF’s assertions (2000), liberal democracy would thus be based on such a ‘rent seeker group’ in the Ethiopian context, and this could not ensure ‘development’ and real democracy but only create a state captured by corrupt networks. Such a kind of state could neither realize democracy nor development benefitting the masses. Liberalism would only serve as a cover, an instrument rather than consolidating an actual democratic system.

¹⁰ See: ‘The fundamental questions of democracy in Ethiopia’(August 2000); ‘The democratization affair in Ethiopia’(May 2002), and ‘Revolutionary democracy, its historical evolution and future direction’(May 2017): EPRDF policy documents, all in Amharic.

In addition to these contentious arguments, they further stated this is their major difference in ideology-the application of liberalism in Ethiopia would face another problem related to the ‘national question’: a liberal approach would, due to its ideological foundations and emphasis on individual rights, give less attention to (ethnic) group rights, and this would limit the ethno-nationalists’ agenda and appeal (and they were themselves one of these movements). The ‘national question’ being declared a burning democratic question’ in the Ethiopian political landscape meant that any political solution that would not respond to this question would never have a chance to establish a ‘sustainable democratic system.’ Based on such expedient ‘arguments,’ the EPRDF ideology presented its ‘revolutionary democracy’ as an alternative principle. The party ideologues pointed out the reasons why revolutionary democracy was the only viable model for realizing the democratization agenda of Ethiopia. The long-standing ‘national oppression’, interwoven with other kinds of grievances that triggered opposition and supported by armed struggle, was diagnosed as the main cause of the overthrow of the military *Derg* regime. Unless the national question was resolved democratically, it could create chaos in the country as a whole. Individual rights alone could not fully resolve the national question. Of course, they claimed that group rights should be respected in line with individual rights, which is the other side of the same coin. Without individual liberty, the rights of nations, nationalities, and peoples would not be practical, but group rights should be realized simultaneously. This position would guarantee ‘revolutionary democracy,’ a social base in Ethiopia, and the security of its hegemony. Group and individual rights would be respected to benefit the mass of the (predominantly rural) population: the peasantry, constituting 80-85% of the population similarly; urban dwellers and intellectuals will benefit from revolutionary democracy (although this was less plausibly elaborated).

The EPRDF also identified the possible obstacles to revolutionary democracy. Rent seekers who cannot produce competitive goods and services in the market but aspire to be rich through patronage networks with state authority and the remnants of the previous ruling class could be categorized as an anti-revolutionary democracy. Incidentally, none of its ideas or discourse, as outlined above, prevented the EPRDF from developing its rent-seeking elite and its systematic sacrificing of individual rights in favor of ethnic group rights under the auspices of its own political and economic hegemony.

7.3 EPRDF's Elite Recruitment, Placement and Empowerment

Any political system has mechanisms to recruit and place elites in favorable positions of power, and this recruitment process is instrumental to sustaining the system's survival (cf. Seligman 1964). It distributes, represents, and quantifies political influence among competing political forces. Recruitment encompasses two stages, including the transition from non-political positions to those that qualify for powerful political positions and the assignment and selection of individuals for particular political positions.

The elite recruitment pattern, as outlined by Le Vine (1968), both reflects and affects society and the whole political system. Elite recruitment depicts society's value system and its level of consistency, and it indicates contradictions, the degree and kinds of representativeness of the system, the basis of social stratification, its articulation with the political system, and the structure and change in political roles.

Elite recruitment patterns determine avenues for political participation and status; influence the kind of policies that will be formulated and enacted; accelerate or retard changes; affect the distribution of status and prestige; and influence the stability of the system. Le Vine stated that modern elites include those who participate in the political structure that they occupy via formal and informal positions of authority in government executives, legislatures, judiciaries, and bureaucracies as a ruling elite or working in top level positions in political parties, and leaders of functional civic associations or economic interest groups.

EPRDF's elite recruitment and placement since 1991 passed through different trajectories depending on the roles of its member organizations in the participation of the armed struggle and their intimacy with the constituency of each party. The TPLF's recruitment process used very stringent criteria for cadres at all levels, including the highest. Gebru Tareke, as cited in an internal document (2009:99-100), outlined that the TPLF had stringent standards for selecting its political and military leaders during its armed struggle. These leaders were chosen based on their steadfast loyalty and dedication to the organization. They were described as confident, resolute, and prepared to make sacrifices, embodying a clear vision and determination in their cause. They had to eschew intellectualism, elitism, and militarism, prioritizing the people's interests above all else. They should adhere to party discipline, welcoming constructive criticism and self-reflection. Anti-organizational behaviour and detrimental social practices were firmly rejected, with a skillful

handling of social conflicts. They valued comradeship over personal interests, showing a deep understanding of the enemy's tactics while remaining committed to serving the people and taking principled stances on crucial matters. Their willingness to endure hardship and make sacrifices would serve as exemplary displays of their 'unwavering' commitment (*ibid*).

The brightest minds in society were allegedly screened using these criteria since they had the ideal attributes, yet only a select few met these demanding standards. During the armed conflict phase, participatory evaluation was already used as a supplementary screening tool to identify these individuals, allowing the TPLF to develop a unified and devoted leadership at all levels. However, other EPRDF member organizations did not follow such strict elite recruiting guidelines, especially after assuming state power in 1991. Regarding elite recruitment, placement, and empowerment, most of the interviewees shared the following common opinion:

The EPRDF recruited elites in various ways depending on the member groups. The capacity and dedication to serving the interests of the Tigrayan people served as major recruitment criteria. Elite members were placed and promoted based on their performance being evaluated inside the party structure. In the sister organization, particularly in the South and the Oromo regions, the focus of recruiting and promotion was on those who were not the best mind of the society, economically underprivileged, and lacking in self-confidence with the goal of remaining vertically devoted to the TPLF in order to dominate the entire society up to the grass-roots level. Therefore, being loyal to TPLF and its revolutionary democracy and disloyalty to the people they come from were the criteria for recruitment and promotion (Respondent No. 27, 2022).

One prominent former leader of OLF argued similarly to the above interviewees, saying that EPRDF had two aspects:

On the one hand, TPLF was purposely established by the Tigray elite, who had full freedom to produce ideas and organizational freedom to implement what it had planned. On the other hand, the organizations created by TPLF were responsible for implementing what was planned by the TPLF to control the nations and nationalities through those yes-men in every region. They compared the three regimes in terms of elite recruitment and placement. Given loyalty to the monarchy system, the attention to the quality and competence of elites was better during Haile Selassie's reign. Even though educated aristocracy and nobility families controlled vital positions, there was room for those competent intellectuals to be assigned to high-ranking government positions based on their professional competency. The Derg was using competent intellectuals like its predecessor, at the back of the military officers. However, the EPRDF was reluctant to recruit and place competent intellectuals in key government positions. It recruited yes men to manipulate power as it wanted. The main criterion for assigning elites to political positions was political loyalty (Respondent no. 9, 2022).

In the EPRDF era, elite recruitment was heavily influenced by a commitment to ethnic politics and given less emphasis on pan-Ethiopianism. This meant that individuals had to align with ethno-nationalist ideologies and demonstrate allegiance to their ethnic group to be considered for recruitment. As a result, professional qualifications and competence were often overshadowed by ideological loyalty when selecting, placing, and elevating elites within the political system. Those who held independent opinions on national issues were viewed as a threat to the nation's reconstruction, further diminishing the importance of their expertise. Another opposition leader and House of Peoples Representatives member echoed this sentiment:

Political loyalty was a factor in EPRDF recruitment and placement at all levels, including woreda and kebele levels. Competence was irrelevant from an EPRDF standpoint. In addition to political allegiance, radical ethno-nationalist political beliefs were considered when applying for positions at high levels of authority. The country's nation-building effort was pushed into political, economic, and social structural issues during the EPRDF era, which rendered the system inoperable and drove the institutions' general inefficiency (Respondent no. 26, 2022).

Another young academician added the following regarding EPRDF elite recruitment, placement, and empowerment in comparison with its previous regimes, complementing the above view:

... The application of merit-based competency had worsened from the monarchy period to the EPRDF period. Recruitment and placement were given the proper consideration for professional competency and quality during the emperor's reign. In the Derg era, where ideological devotion was prioritized over professional competence, merit declined. Yes, the political elite under the Derg military rule included highly qualified professionals, but the majority of them were chosen for high ranking positions based on their political devotion. The most significant omission from EPRDF's elite recruitment and placement initiatives for political jobs at all levels was disregard for professional competency. Even though EPRDF failed to recruit elites who were both of the highest caliber and were accepted by their respective communities, it must be commended for its inclusiveness in including all of Ethiopia's nations, nationalities, and peoples in positions of decision-making and significant political participation (Respondent no. 24, 2022).

One of the prominent diplomats described the situation as follows:

To be part of the political elite in the period, the recruitment criteria were political loyalty and the candidates' stand against 'patriotism' that were considered a manifestation of a 'pan-Ethiopian' political orientation. EPRDF was hostile to intellectuals and basically against the educated elite. So, this attitude made the relationship between EPRDF and the intellectuals antagonistic, and consequently, the party encountered staunch opposition from intellectuals throughout its tenure. Hence, EPRDF was forced to rely on less qualified rural elites to fill the party and the key political positions of government institutions,

including the parliament. The political scene during the 1974 revolution was dominated by the urban elite members who were primarily supporters of the EPRP and the AESM, respectively. In contrast, during the EPRDF's reign, elites were mostly from the rural areas and had anti-urban elite sentiments. You do not run political and economic institutions with unqualified liberation fighters based on ideological loyalty. This caused a mess in the running of government institutions and the delivery of proper services during EPRDF's time (Respondent no. 16, 2022).

As noted by the above interviewees, elite recruitment unveiled rupture and discontinuity, and it was precluded from positively contributing to the country's nation-building process. The power elites during the EPRDF era were recruited, hired, placed, and promoted based on political loyalty. By ethnicizing national politics and disenfranchising the mainstream elite from taking part in national objectives, the EPRDF compounded the outstanding nation-building issues already visible under its predecessor and offered no real way forward. As one respondent said: “The EPRDF fostered the diversity of its elites based on their capacity to advance party doctrine rather than their devotion to the people” (Respondent no. 14, 2022).

According to another interviewee, elites under the previous regimes were replaced by cadres of the new ruling party, and unqualified members were assigned to high-ranking political positions in the EPRDF period. However, some said that one new and good thing during EPRDF was the attempt to integrate elites from pastoralist groups (Respondent no. 27, 2022).

One of the intellectuals from Addis Ababa University expressed his view regarding how EPRDF distorted the merit system in elite recruitment and placement as follows:

There was no transparent recruitment or promotion process in the civil service, let alone political positions that required political allegiance. Despite their grades or academic accomplishments, even recent graduates from schools and universities could occasionally be assigned based on their political allegiance. Convinced that political affiliations are a good way to maximize individual interests, educated young people joined parties to take advantage of the opportunity and advance their educational levels (Respondent no. 37, 2022).

In summary, this research found that during the EPRDF era, the primary criteria for selecting elite candidates were not their competency and dedication to the Ethiopian state but their loyalty and commitment to the party. It was essential for candidates to be dedicated to upholding ethnic-based politics and to demonstrate a strong attitude and commitment to ethnic ('nationalities') self-determination. This devotion to ethno-nationalism was fundamental for elite recruitment, placement, and advancement within the political sphere. Candidates who adhered to pan-Ethiopian

political views were often labeled as 'chauvinistic' and 'anti-EPRDF', risking being excluded from any political role within the EPRDF establishment. Particularly those who considered as they do not support the rights of NNP self-determination.

The EPRDF instituted a complete overhaul of the former government's elite leadership, placing its experienced veterans and dedicated political cadres in positions of power at every level, including the military. This decision resulted in the expulsion of the former elites from all state institutions and their replacement with ethno-elite members known as cadres, who often needed to be more competent and experienced. This shift had a significant impact on the overall competency and performance of the elite leadership. One EPRDF official recalled a moment when the party prioritized grooming less educated individuals for positions of power.

The EPRDF aimed to transform the political landscape by grooming its elite members. To this end, the party established the Civil Service College (later: University) to provide specialized education for its political leaders. Graduates of this institution came to hold influential positions of authority at the national, regional, and local levels. This strategy ultimately included less experienced ethno-elite members in prominent positions within the top power elite (Respondent no. 20, 2022).

The recruitment and treatment of elites based on their ethnicity resulted in deep-seated hostility and distrust among the elite class, which ultimately spread throughout the society. These issues often became intricate, making it difficult to reach national-level consensus. Consequently, these differences plunged the country into a profound crisis, hindering any nation-building efforts and pushing the nation to the brink. The fragmentation of the elite class led to the emergence of unintended, disgruntled factions within the elite, causing Tigrayan political elites and senior veterans from ANDM to become more wary of other moderate groups and further exacerbating elite polarization. This polarization extended beyond the elite class and became a serious societal issue.

Due to conflicting political beliefs among subsequent political elites in Ethiopia, the succession led to a complete overhaul of the prior elites, with little consideration given to the need for continuity in nation-building policies and ideals from the previous administration. Consequently, nation-building efforts needed more continuity and had to be restarted after the expulsion of the previous elite. The following section briefly overviews the characteristics and nature of the new post-1991 elite.

7.4 The Nature and Character of the Elite during the EPRDF Regime

The character of a political system is significantly shaped by political elites, and the nature of elites, in turn, is influenced by the political system itself. This intersection becomes particularly important during periods of transformative change in a political system, where elites assume a vital role, e.g., in forging new institutions (see Kaminski & Kurczewska, 2011). The behavior and interpersonal connections of the ruling elite members influence politics, among other things. These connections have a significant role in determining whether a political system is democratic, developmental, non-democratic, or non-developmental. The leadership's political outlook, commitment, and vision play a significant role in determining the political climate and the character of the state (Sebudubudu & Molutsi, 2011). One of the prominent historians from Addis Ababa University interviewed for this study succinctly described the nature and character of the elite during the EPRDF reign as follows:

The elite that emerged in Ethiopia after 1991 is the newly created elite. Some families and individuals may have moved to the EPRDF era elites from the Derg era. But most of the political elite came forward following the system the EPRDF put in place. The primary feature of this elite group that differentiates them from the elites in the past is that they were not national elites. Truly speaking, they were not elites with a national view. They had the power, resources, and influence in their respective ethnic groups. Hence, they fulfilled the characteristics of power elites. However, a significant characteristic that they lacked was not being national elites. Each of them remained a 'nationality elite' that had its boundaries. Hence, we didn't see any nationality mixed with any other one; intermarriage was not that observable. They didn't have a common social platform, either – no joint clubs, societies, etc. But this did not mean that they were antagonists. They worked together; they interacted in various ways. After all, they were ideologically ethno-nationalist elites (Respondent no. 30, 2022).

Each ethnic group in the post-1991 period claimed to be represented by its ethno-nationalist elites. Therefore, the various elites needed a platform that united them. A representative of one ethnic group cannot support the causes of another ethnic group. As a result, they needed to build links and were biased against one another. They had competing interests beyond all else. The elites of the Oromo and the Amhara pushed for their respective groups, resulting in confrontations. This was because the political struggle was centered on ethnicity rather than party ideology. The ethnic rivalry was almost comparable to conflict between two independent nations. Due to this

fragmentation, there was little chance they would develop into unified national elites. Another interviewee further described the character of the post-1991 elite as follows:

All elites of the regime had intrinsic dictatorial traits and believed themselves to be experts on all aspects of national affairs, whereas the rest of society- including intellectuals regarded by the ruling class as ignorant of these matters. To observe distinctive characteristics of the political elites under the EPRDF regime, it is important to note that they did not develop through mainstream institutions; rather, the majority of them are a result of the politics of ethno-nationalism. The EPRDF is an inherently anti-elite political party, which in turn, replaced the remaining elites of the former regime with its own, low-profile, ideologically devoted cadres and new economic elites through political networks. Professionalism and the merit system were supplanted by incompetent ethno-nationalist opportunist elites and low-profile party members (Respondent no. 4, 2022).

The ruling class during the EPRDF period was marked by ideological divisions over the political stance of the regime. The EPRDF presented the Ethiopian state as an empire needing rebuilding with the support of the country's nations, nationalities, and peoples when it first came to power. This core political idea led to conflicting and polarizing opinions among pan-Ethiopian political groups, mainstream academic communities, and ethnic nationalist political forces, including the power elites of the EPRDF. The exclusion of the country's intellectuals from participating in important national political, economic, and social affairs intensified adversarial relationships between intellectuals and the ethno-elites. The EPRDF aimed to exert as much control over the economy as possible, replacing the former state-owned economy with party-led corporate organizations and handing the remaining resources to newly emerging business elites. Opposing political forces and intellectuals viewed the EPRDF, particularly TPLF, negatively, believing that the regime's philosophy was divisive and harmful to national cohesion. On the other hand, some elites supported ethnically oriented politics, believing that the devolution of authority and the distribution of resources to the regions would give them advantages to benefit from the nation's wealth (Respondent no. 8, 2022).

One of the prominent politicians from the ethno-nationalist camp underlines the unfolding dynamics of economic affairs as follows:

In EPRDF's time, the situation was different from the previous regime in the sense that the business elites were empowered based on ethnic lines and political affiliations, particularly since the 2005 elections. The fusion of business elites with the political elites created significant numbers of new and influential business entrepreneurs. Some of these business elites emerged as key actors in the country's politics, supporting the EPRDF rule. However, when the power elite members lost their position, the business activities of these new entrepreneurs faced significant upsets. Some of them became bankrupt and others fled

the country. I think one of the unique characteristics of the Ethiopian economic elites is that they build linkages with every regime that comes, and as a result, they fall together when the regime changes (Respondent no. 9, 2022).

Several respondents in this study described the nature of the post-1991 Ethiopian elites as rigid, exclusive, anti-democratic, self-centered, divisive, not so competent, ethno-nationalist, and radical in their political stand. We witnessed a continuation of a similar nature as seen under the previous regime, and this was an obstacle to nation-building efforts. In the next section, the discussion deals with the trends of elite integration and disintegration.

7.5 The Power Structure and Trends of Elite Integration/Disintegration, post-1991

The nation-building efforts during the EPRDF rule were closely linked to the influence of ethno-elites in post-1991 Ethiopia. The EPRDF aimed to establish a new federal system that granted autonomy to various ethnic groups to address historical grievances and promote ethnic rights. However, this also allowed elites from different ethnic groups to assert their authority and negatively impact the direction of the state-building project. The EPRDF's approach to nation-building was highly centralized, with crucial decisions made by a small group of elites, primarily from the TPLF within the ruling EPRDF coalition. These elites controlled significant resources, such as state-owned enterprises, and often utilized this power to further their interests and solidify their control over other regions.

The TPLF introduced a new concept of Ethiopian statehood, as noted by Gebru (2009), who highlighted the TPLF's establishment of an ethno-nationalist discourse rooted in the notion of "national oppression" instead of nation-building. This ideology was enshrined in the Transitional Period Charter and the 1995 Constitution, granting significant political influence on ethno-elites. The EPRDF adopted an ethnic-based federal system, with regions predominantly named after and controlled by specific ethnic groups. This framework empowered ethno-nationalist elites to organize and mobilize politically based on their ethnic identity, granting them access to resources and state subsidies while legitimizing their political ambitions. Although influential in shaping regional policies and establishing de facto autonomy, their power often led to conflicts with each other and the central government.

The central focus of ethnic politics was the principle of 'self-determination' for ethnic groups. While most members of the transitional parliament in 1991 supported the NNPs' call for

self-determination, it is essential to note that they had been selected and approved by the EPRDF leadership. Four minority political groups in the Council were more hesitant and were ultimately removed in 1993. Many argued that due to the EPRDF's exclusive nature, 32 of the 87 seats in the transitional parliament were allocated to EPRDF member parties, 12 to the OLF, and the remainder to other parties and civic associations. Ethno-nationalist-oriented parties were in the majority from the beginning. (For further information, see Vaughan (2003).

The conflicting political ideologies between successful ethno-nationalist groups and the 'pan-Ethiopians' have initially led to polarization. In addition to the alienation and exclusion of the pan-Ethiopian elites, the educated elite have gradually distanced themselves from the political and socioeconomic debates, with their contributions often being ignored. The political and academic elites have increasingly opposed the EPRDF's revolutionary democratic philosophy, leading to further division and hindering cooperation or integration and consensus building among the elites. This has made it difficult to find common ground in efforts to (re)construct the country and has also impacted the cohesion within the EPRDF member parties over time.

As Vaughan (2015) noted, given the theoretical perspectives on ethno-nationalism and power decentralization, on 'democratic unity' based on diversity and the planned liberalization that the EPRDF promised, the party was never deeply committed to these things or pluralism and was resistant to the emergence of alternatives or competing political views:

A dominant view within the EPRDF is that disagreements over policy and perspective should generate competition rather than dialogue. This has contributed to a polarized political landscape, in which the ruling party has benefited little from the constructive criticism of outsiders. A further corollary is that elections have evolved as per formative plebiscites designed to reinforce the national consensus behind the ruling party (Vaughan 2015: 309).

Even though decentralization, democratization, and liberalization were advocated by the EPRDF, it polarized the country's political spectrum due to a concentration of state power in the hands of the ruling ethno-elites and the alienation and exclusion of all other (social, occupational, religious, a.o.) elites from any nation-building agenda. One of Ethiopia's top military officials made the following observations regarding the effects of the country's split political views:

Those ethnic-based treatments of the power elites who have different ethnic and political backgrounds triggered mutual suspicion and mutual mistrust among elite members and this descended to the society. The problems became complicated from time to time and it was difficult to establish common ground on national issues. The kind of disagreements among elites led the country to a deep crisis, which not only affected the nation-building

process but also pushed the whole nation to a cliff. The problem of political polarization is not limited to the elite level but has also become the major political attitude across society everywhere (Respondent no. 13, 2022).

Another leading academic and politician argued that elite disagreement on key national political problems undermined the country's political and economic transformation. The issues were made worse by the ruling elite's contradictory actions and self-interest that excluded and eventually replaced the educated and experienced elites with new, incompetent political ethn-elites from within the EPRDF itself. As one respondent said:

The effects of discontinuity in all facets of nation-building did not produce elites capable of guiding the nation toward modernization. The inability to change our polarized politics, our inability to change our political culture to one that values civility, the obsession with power that the ruling elites have, their attempts to lead in an uncivil manner, and our general inability to change our politics all work against the development of a successful elite (Respondent no. 43, 2022).

As mentioned earlier, excluding certain elite groups intensified the overall division along ethnic lines. This created a significant barrier to forming a shared national identity and political community in nation-building. The elite were deeply divided and needed help to find common ground on the trajectory of the country's development. As a sense of political and economic marginalization among ethnic groups in Ethiopia grew, the disintegration of the elite became a more pressing issue. Additionally, a growing number of Ethiopia's ethnic-nationalist leaders, who had initially supported the introduction of federalism in 1991, began to express dissatisfaction with the limited concessions in practice, as power remained tightly centralized in the hands of the EPRDF core. Aregawi Berhe, a former founder of the TPLF in the 1970s who later parted ways with it in the late 1980s, has argued (2001:2009) that the nature of the TPLF and its allies was never democratic and could not transform the Ethiopian state beyond their narrow group power interests.

From day one in power, the EPRDF [...] has been unpopular basically because it came to power by military force and remained in power using the same instruments of force that brought it to power. This partially explains why the EPRDF is engaged in gross violation of human and democratic rights. The democracy talked about by the EPRDF and its allies is nothing more than a fashionable paper formality that camouflages the true nature of the EPRDF leadership. In brief, the nature of EPRDF's eclectic ideology and the application of the policies that emanated thereby generated immeasurable uncertainty in the country's bureaucratic apparatus, deterring the functioning of the state. The so-called constitution,

crafted by the EPRDF and its advisors was neither legitimate nor could regulate the role of the state as it was a programmatic constitution of the ruling party (Aregawi 2001: 7).

Aregawi's point is quite apt in explaining the mistrust among elites within EPRDF who have controlled state power since 1991 and the perceived TPLF's hegemonic role in the country's post-1991 politics. In the next section, the study briefly addresses the nation-building project carried out by the EPRDF power elites in the post-1991 period.

7.6 The Elite and Nation-Building during the EPRDF rule

Ethiopia underwent a significant political transformation during the EPRDF's rule. This transformation involved establishing a new political system based on democratic pluralism and decentralizing power along ethnic-linguistic lines. The primary goal of this new structure was to transform Ethiopian statehood from one characterized by perceived ethnic dominance to a more egalitarian democratic nation-state that embraced all ethnic groups.

The EPRDF and its allies played a crucial role in this nation-building effort, with the OLF assuming a secondary position. The objective was to dismantle the previous Ethiopian state founded on a pan-Ethiopian framework and replace it with a new state structure based on ethno-national principles. The EPRDF centered its narrative on the "national oppression thesis", drawing from Stalinist theories of nationalities within this new nation-building project. This approach contrasted with other competing interpretations of Ethiopia's imperial history, such as the 'colonial thesis' advocated by groups like the Oromo Liberation Front or the 'multinational Marxist thesis' supported by other factions of the ESM, like the EPRP.

The role of ethno-elites in the post-1991 nation-building project was substantial but also generated controversy. The success of the ethno-elites in creating a nation has been questioned. In retrospect and in view of the multiple armed conflicts to date (2023) it is very doubtful whether they have done it successfully. More evident are heightened ethnic tensions and conflicts.

In 1991, there were initial hopes for positive change as the ethno-elites engaged in a renewed nation-building process through the new federal dispensation. This system allowed for political representation and self-governance for different ethnic groups, enabling them to preserve their language, culture, and traditions. While this arrangement empowered ethno-elites to participate in decision-making at regional and federal levels, it also led to competition for resources

and political power among regions. This competition often resulted in the prioritization of individual interests over national interests, contributing to the marginalization of certain ethnic groups and the escalation of ethnic conflicts.

After 1991, the EPRDF dismantled the *Derg* time political, economic, and security institutions to advance an ethno-nationalist agenda without meaningful agreement with other political forces. Ethnicity and multi-party democracy were critical factors in this deconstruction of the Ethiopian state. However, efforts to democratize under the politics of ethnicity faced significant challenges in transitioning to democracy and accommodating ethnic diversity (Aalen, 2006). The EPRDF emphasized the positive aspects of ethnic identity, and the ethnic-based federal arrangement was intended to diffuse the conflict that had plagued Ethiopia in the second half of the twentieth century. However, this structure also led to competition and conflict among ethnic groups over state resources, adding a new dimension to existing local disputes over land, water, government budgets, and other resources (Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003).

Despite criticisms of ethnic federalism's implementation in nation-building, the EPRDF ethno-nationalist elites continued to advocate for it and garnered the support of emerging ethno-nationalist elites. This was in opposition to pan-Ethiopian political forces that resisted the ethnicization of Ethiopia. They also pushed for state decentralization, political "democratization" and the liberalization of the economy to benefit the various ethnic groups (Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003: 27).

The EPRDF's nation-building project focused on promoting Ethiopians' sense of belonging to one of the "Nation, Nationalities and Peoples" as the basis of their political identity. This was to be reinforced through economic and socio-political changes. The EPRDF implemented ethnic-based criteria for public goods provision, introduced new education and language policies, established a multi-ethnic party system, allowed for the development of civil society, and altered national symbols and history to support this project. Whether this process can still be considered as 'nation-building' is a matter of debate. However, the study examined the critical aspects of this process in the next section, including ideology, public goods provision, education and language policy, voluntary associations, and national symbols.

7.6.1 'Revolutionary Democracy' and Developmental State as Organizing Principles of Nation-Building

Even after coming to power, the EPRDF leadership opposed the idea of 'Ethiopianness' and saw it as the underlying cause of Ethiopia's political problems. Instead, they advocated for a new Ethiopian nationalism based on the 'nations, nationalities and peoples' (NNP) paradigm. The EPRDF's 'revolutionary democracy' replaced the Socialist ideology of the *Derg* government but still emphasized its role as the vanguard of farmers, urban workers/ residents with lower and intermediate incomes, and other new 'developmental actors'. This demonstrates the enduring impact of Socialist ideology on their beliefs. According to Lenin's doctrine, forming social alliances between workers and peasants was crucial for a successful revolution and for the working class to lead. The EPRDF consistently prioritized farmers as the foundation of its political support rather than the urban middle class. One of the interviewees noted that:

Revolutionary democracy was the guiding ideology of the EPRDF, which played a significant role in nation-building efforts in Ethiopia. It served as a nucleus in the new nation-building initiative. The EPRDF pursued a policy of decentralization and devolution of power to regional governments, which led to a more participatory and inclusive approach to nation-building. One of the key features of revolutionary democracy is the emphasis on the importance of democracy and development in a single process. The EPRDF has incorporated this principle into its approach to nation-building, with a focus on participatory democracy and economic growth as essential components. Additionally, the EPRDF has prioritized social inclusion and equality in its nation-building efforts (Respondent no. 45, 2022).

According to the interviewee, EPRDF focused on implementing policies to reduce poverty, enhance access to education and healthcare, and advance gender equality. These efforts resulted in increased social mobility, lower poverty rates, improved economic growth, and improved quality of life for many individuals. In addition, EPRDF acknowledged the significance of cultural diversity, or 'multiculturalism' in nation-building endeavors. The government authorized ethnic groups to govern themselves and preserve their languages, cultures, and traditions. EPRDF officials believe this approach has contributed to a sense of national unity and pride among the diverse ethnic groups. Since assuming control of the state in 1991, the EPRDF not only implemented policies to establish ethnic federalism through the 'revolutionary democratic' state but also introduced the party-led 'developmental state' model to legitimize further consolidation of power in the central party state. However, the contradictory nature of ethno-federalism and the developmental state in the power dynamics of the new central and regional power structures

gradually became apparent. While federalism called for the decentralization of power, political practices revealed highly centralized power by the central government, seen as necessary for national development. This paradox was one of the leading causes of the crisis during the EPRDF's rule, leading to internal party conflicts and widespread public protests from 2015 to 2017, ultimately resulting in the decline and ousting of the TPLF-led EPRDF from power in early 2018.

The implementation of ethnic federalism, along with economic liberalization and the introduction of multiparty politics, was a response to the demands of the international donor community in the early 1990s. This positioned Ethiopia as an essential ally of the West. However, there were criticisms of the government's approach to nation-building, with some arguing that the revolutionary democracy ideology was used to limit political pluralism and freedom of the press and civil society. Additionally, concerns about corruption and human rights abuses arose. The conflict in the North in 2020-2022 further highlighted the deep systemic crisis caused by the contradiction between ethno-nationalist and pan-Ethiopian political forces in the country. The idea of an emerging systemic contradiction alluded to above is shared by many Ethiopian analysts. One of my interviewees described the contradiction as follows:

There are two competing national questions being advocated by political elites in Ethiopia. There is nationalism associated with the state which some call civic nationalism. There is also nationalism associated with religion or ethnic groups. These nationalisms are sometimes complementing but often competing with each other. The former can also be called pan-Ethiopianism. Pan-Ethiopianists firmly argue against the institutionalization of ethnicity which, in their view, diminishes the pre-existing shared culture and values. According to pan- pan-Ethiopianists, Ethiopia comes first; all other issues like ethnic identity, religion, and language are secondary. They even consider the adoption of ethnic federalism in 1991 as a TPLF's strategy of divide-and-rule. On the other hand, ethno-nationalists perceive pan-Ethiopianism as a political force that desires to reinstitute ethnic marginalization, suppression, cultural domination, and assimilation which were historically done against their group rights in the name of national unity (Respondent no. 45, 2022).

The EPRDF's approach to nation-building emphasized the importance of unity among Ethiopia's diverse ethnic groups, not just through territorial integration but also through shared goals and values. The FDRE constitution also highlighted the common desire for peace and democracy among all Ethiopians. The EPRDF believed fostering a robust national community would lead to social and economic progress, benefiting all citizens. However, the practical implementation of these ideals in politics sometimes aligns with these aspirations (cf. Meles 2017).

However, most individuals who were interviewed contended that the EPRDF's rule had some positive aspects. They compared the EPRDF to the imperial and *Derg* regimes and argued that the EPRDF successfully achieved economic growth and poverty reduction. A 2020 World Bank report supports this, stating that sustained economic growth in the 2000s lifted millions of Ethiopians out of poverty. The EPRDF also tried to address ethnic inequality, known as the 'nationalities issue' which is considered a central issue in Ethiopian politics. This promoted multiculturalism and 'identity politics,' bringing marginalized groups into the center of Ethiopian politics. The following pledge had been made by EPRDF in its training manual that has articulated based on its program, updated in 2017:

Democratic order is not limited to respecting the human and democratic rights of the individual. Based on these rights and parallel to them, rights should extend to the right to self-determination and equality of nations and nationalities. The people of Ethiopia must become beneficiaries of these entitlements in full and on equal footing. In this regard, their capability to exercise these rights must be augmented and enhanced. To create a single, vibrant, and coordinated economic community, all regions must have equal rights and support to develop. A concerted struggle must be waged to create unity among the Ethiopian people based on mutual interest and fraternity. To overcome sentiments that are hostile to the democratic unity of our people requires a relentless struggle based on democratic principles (EPRDF 2017, updated program paper: 10).

However, the ideological ambiguity of this model of 'revolutionary democracy' and rights recognition drew sustained criticism for its lack of ability to foster durable integration and cohesion among the various Ethiopian population groups. For instance, one of the arguments made by the speakers at the symposium 'Nation-building in Ethiopia: the quest for an enduring direction', held in 2018, reviewed the state of nation-building in Ethiopia in the following manner, noticing persistent problems.¹¹

The Ethiopian social and political system has long suffered from a mix of inadequacies resulting from the failure of a plethora of social and political actors to strike the golden middle ground. The Ethiopian federal political system that is currently at work lent a lot of focus to ethno-nationalism that proved detrimental to efforts aimed at forging a sense of common belonging of citizenship and nationhood in shared values and historical legacies. It is now widely believed that the workings of the present Ethiopian political system are characterized by several inadequacies and flaws that should be addressed in good time. Those who assert that the prevailing situation is inimical to successful nation-building claim that several social groups are not adequately represented in federal government

¹¹ Symposium (2018), Nation-building in Ethiopia: In quest of an enduring direction. Key messages and policy recommendations, November 2018, Addis Ababa.

institutions and that citizens' rights to live work and own property in places of their choice in the country have been repeatedly violated. (Symposium 2018: 4)

According to the speaker's statement, the revolutionary democratic doctrine failed to reach a compromise that could address the conflicting interests of different political groups and societal segments. The ambiguity of the EPRDF ideology also hindered the nation's reconstruction. After 2005, the party replaced the revolutionary democracy doctrine with the developmental state ideology, neglecting the potential role of other social and civil organizations. This perpetuated the ideological shortcomings of previous regimes. In the following section, I examine the involvement of voluntary organizations in EPRDF's nation-building efforts.

7.6.2 The Voluntary Associations

Voluntary associations, in general, can play a crucial role in nation-building processes (cf. Watt 2005; Wimmer 2018: 29, 196). EPRDF recognized the importance of these associations in fostering social cohesion, promoting community development, and advancing democratization efforts in Ethiopia. It supported the establishment of various types of voluntary associations, such as political parties, cooperatives, community-based organizations (CBOs), youth organizations, farmers' associations, women's associations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). These associations had often been provided with the resources and support necessary to contribute actively to the country's economic and social development. By initially encouraging the creation of voluntary associations, the EPRDF created a platform to contribute to policymaking and nation-building efforts. While they were more often than not co-opted by the party, these associations played a significant role in creating opportunities for marginalized sections of society, such as women, youth, and rural communities.

One of the initial significant successes of EPRDF was its commitment to opening up political space and establishing a multi-party system. This transition to party and electoral politics was a new phenomenon that marked the country's move toward a democratic system. The multi-party system in Ethiopia under EPRDF's rule included various political parties operating at national and regional levels. EPRDF, a coalition of four ethnically based parties representing the country's major ethnic groups, faced challenges such as the long-standing dominance of the ruling party since 1991. Accusations of using state control to limit opposition activities and manipulate electoral processes were also leveled against the EPRDF. Additionally, the ethnic-based nature of

the political parties led to a fragmented political landscape along ethnic lines, fueling tensions and conflicts in regions with perceived competing interests among different ethnic groups.

Furthermore, voluntary associations, known as parties, were also divided based on urban, regional, or socio-economic agendas as individuals felt their interests were not adequately addressed. The Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP) gained prominence in 2000, and the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) emerged in 2004 and experienced significant success in the 2005 election. *Medrek*, or the Ethiopia Federal Democratic Unity Forum, a broad coalition of opposition parties founded in 2008, brought together several of these parties, all representing dissatisfied constituencies. The EPRDF initially claimed to prioritize the interests of rural communities in its policy-making. However, over time, it shifted its focus to gaining the support of urban, educated, and intellectual groups. Despite this shift, political opposition to the EPRDF remained strong, albeit somewhat subdued. The ethno-elite of the EPRDF did not respect open political space and rights for very long. The political space became much more challenging for opposition parties and civic organizations since the momentous national general elections in 2005 (cf. Abbink 2006). Many observers and other political analysts regarded these elections as the most accessible and the fairest ever. For the first time in Ethiopian history, debates between opposition parties were broadcast on TV and radio, allowing opposition groups to advance their agendas. This event symbolized the opening of political space for all opposition groups. However, this promising beginning and hope for Ethiopia's future was a big deception. Between June and November 2005, security forces killed many civilians protesting the alleged manipulation of the voting results in Addis Ababa and other major Ethiopian cities while also detaining thousands of opposition members, journalists, and human rights activists, accusing them of terrorism (cf. Bach 2014; Abbink, 2006). This backlash also affected other non-political civil society organizations.

Next to political parties, other voluntary organizations exist as autonomous institutions in civil society, not run by the state, either. They act as agents reflecting the political, social, and economic interests of the people. In Ethiopia, civil society has played a complex and sometimes contradictory role in nation-building processes; although they, as a rule, were not founded with that aim in mind.¹² The EPRDF recognized the importance of civil society organizations (CSOs)

¹² The country had its own historical 'civil society' institutions, such as the funeral associations (*iddir*), the saving clubs (*iqub*), collective work groups (*debo*), religious associations (*mehabir*), etc. They were always non-political.

in contributing to development and advancing democratic ideals. On the other hand, the government was often accused of co-opting or suppressing civil society groups and creating a restrictive legal framework that limited their scope and activities. One of the EPRDF's main concepts (especially after 2005) is the 'developmental state', emphasizing the role of the state in directing and driving development. This has led to a focus on having state and party-led institutions deliver the social services and take charge of economic development, and not civil society organizations.

However, EPRDF initially encouraged civil society engagement as a means of promoting participatory democracy and gathering broad support for its development agenda. CSOs in Ethiopia were given formal recognition and offered tax breaks and other institutional support. CSOs have, therefore, played some role in advancing development initiatives in areas such as health, education, and poverty alleviation. Nonetheless, the EPRDF's restrictions on CSO activities over time, including through new legislative measures such as the repressive Charities and Societies Proclamation of 2009 brought this phase to an end. It led to ca. 1000 CSOs effectively suspending their activities, and many observers concluded this approach was an attempt to suppress critical voices and limit anti-government activism (cf. Sisay 2012). In the same year-2009-the government also established the 'Charities and Societies Agency', to allegedly regulate the activities of the NGOs, CSOs, and charity organizations. While the official aim was to ensure that they operate in compliance with the country's laws, policies, and regulations and that they "contribute meaningfully to the development of the country" the Agency did not alter the repressive framework enacted in the CSO law of that year.

Although there was a positive narrative and the legalization of the right to form voluntary organizations, the EPRDF did not support independent civic associations as a contribution to nation-building. In reality, the EPRDF was intolerant of independent associations and sought to control their activities, including their daily operations. Any association that held fundamental principles differing from the EPRDF ideology was viewed as an agent of foreign countries or the opposition political camp.

CSOs and voluntary associations in Ethiopia thus largely remained fragile compared to other African countries, like Kenya, South Africa, or Nigeria. Nevertheless, CSOs de-emphasizing any political messages made significant contributions to humanitarian services, saving the lives of hundreds of thousands of rural Ethiopians in food-insecure situations by providing food, health

care, education, and other support. The government left them to it- if they would not be involved in political matters, but even here, the line was thin (cf. Tewodros 2018).

Still, CSOs kept doing their best, including professional associations that were seen by their members as crucial to promoting not only their interests but also as catalysts for the shared interests of society at large, as one of the CSO's leaders stated:

Civic associations created by citizens have the power to bridge cultural barriers to organize their members in support of common national agendas. In this regard, both the Ethiopian Teachers Association and the Ethiopian Workers Association (labor union) have traditionally played an important role in mobilizing both their members and the general public for social change (Respondent no. 39, 2022).

In Ethiopia, CSOs have a long history of assisting those in need, with their efforts evolving from the 1970s and 1980s to encompass a wide range of projects in the 1990s and a focus on promoting human rights in the 2000s. The implementation of the 2009 CSO law, however, hindered the progress of CSOs and impeded their involvement in human rights issues. Despite these challenges, civic society organizations have played a vital role in advancing Ethiopia's national development priorities. They have mobilized foreign resources, introduced new ideas and technologies to improve the productivity of beneficiaries, provided training and capacity building, and supplied materials to enhance living conditions and production capacity. Additionally, they have promoted business opportunities and increased community participation, contributing to nation-building and social cohesion. Unfortunately, the government has not viewed CSOs as genuine partners in the country's development; instead, it has expressed suspicion and accused them of spreading "neoliberal ideology" (cf. Gebre 2016).

One of the leaders of a community self-help organization emphasized Ethiopians' rich history of establishing and running cultural self-help groups. These organizations have played a crucial role in addressing a wide range of community social, political and economic issues. However, due to the suppression of the ruling elite, their constructive role and societal value were unable to mature and evolve into a nation-building instrument, and he further emphasized that:

Civic associations should never be subject to the influence of the ruling class and could not effectively bridge the gap between the state and the people. He expressed Ethiopia's unfortunate lack of active civic organizations that could support democratic relationships and facilitate nation-building as a shared social goal. Additionally, he noted that non-governmental organizations have a weaker connection to the general public, relying heavily on their funding sources and often advocating for the interests of foreign donors

without providing truly altruistic services to support Ethiopian efforts for national improvement (Respondent no. 3, 2022).

Tekeste (2006) supports the CSO leader's point by stating that the political system under the EPRDF did not support CSO involvement in nation-building. At the time, society was deeply divided, making it challenging to create a unified political community. The use of ethnicity for political mobilization worsened this fragmentation, hindering civil society's role in nation-building and potentially leading to identity-based conflicts and instability.

7.6.3 Public Goods Provision as an Instrument of Nation-Building

The success of nation-building relies heavily on improving the social and economic state. Economic factors are crucial in uniting and integrating diverse communities into a cohesive political and economic entity. Under the EPRDF government, infrastructure development was prioritized as a critical element of nation-building. The government understood the importance of infrastructure in driving economic growth, creating employment opportunities, and reducing poverty. Providing public goods is a vital strategy in nation building. These goods are accessible to all and can be utilized repeatedly without diminishing their benefits for others. Public goods can be provided at local, national, or international levels and include essential services such as health-care, education, and national defense, as they benefit the entire state.

Regarding the provision of public goods, the EPRDF made outstanding progress due to its ideology that strongly emphasized the rural masses as beneficiaries. Compared to previous governments, the EPRDF significantly improved public goods provision. It attempted to combat poverty and connect people through the expansion of infrastructure that fostered the creation of market and labor mobility, which were considered drivers for creating a single economic and political community. EPRDF has implemented a series of five-year national economic plans since 1995 under the names of Agriculture Development-Lead Industrialization (ADLI), Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to End Poverty (PASDEP), Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Program (SDPRP), and Growth and Transformation Plans (GTP I and GTP II), running up to 2022. The result of these often donor-country and World Bank-supported plans was a reduction of the number of people living in poverty¹³ and brought about double-digit economic

¹³ The share of the population living below the national poverty line decreased from 30% in 2011 to 24% in 2016, and human development indicators improved as well.

(GDP) growth for more than fifteen years in a row since the early 2000s (cf. Planning and Development Commission 2020),¹⁴ and specifically accelerating since-2004/2005.¹⁵

One of the interviewees explained the success of the expansion of infrastructure under EPRDF along the official party lines:

The EPRDF strongly emphasized infrastructure development, particularly in vital sectors such as education, health, transportation, energy, water, and communication. The government has allocated significant funding to various infrastructure projects in recent years, including constructing new highways, railways, airports, hydroelectric power dams, and mobile networks. Of particular focus was the improvement of transportation infrastructure to enhance access to markets, services, and employment opportunities for both rural and urban communities. Efforts have also been made to expand and enhance the road network through the construction of expressways and bridges and investments in the railway system to facilitate the movement of goods and people within the country and to neighboring nations. In the energy sector, Ethiopia has made substantial investments in hydroelectric power stations, aiming to meet the country's growing electricity demands and modernize its economy. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Africa's largest dam, is a symbol of these efforts and is expected to significantly increase electricity generation while benefiting rural households and boosting export earnings (Respondent no. 10, 2022).

Government economic policies have also bolstered the state's ability to reach remote, previously isolated rural areas. The expansion of road infrastructure is a prime example. Unlike previous administrations, the EPRDF's road network has consistently grown since then. For instance, it increased from 19,017 km in 1991/1992 to 85,966 km in 2019/2020 (FDRE 2021).¹⁶

Another way that the EPRDF sought to achieve nation-building was through the expansion of *education*, traditionally a prime venue for socio-cultural nation-building. The government invested heavily in expanding access to education and improving its quality (however, the opposite happened practically in education quality), particularly in rural areas. The literacy rate has significantly increased, from approximately 20% in the 1990s to about 50% in 2020. The government has also promoted local languages in education, allowing students to learn in their mother tongues. Additionally, the EPRDF policy has emphasized the importance of respecting

¹⁴ Growth was driven, among other things, by capital accumulation, particularly through investments in public infrastructure. Due to massive social protests and COVID-19, Ethiopia's real gross domestic product (GDP) growth slowed down in the years 2018, 2019, and 2020, and growth in the industrial and service sectors dropped to single digits. However, the COVID-19 pandemic had little impact on agriculture (where more than 70% of people work), and its contribution to growth slightly increased in FY2020/21 compared to the prior year (World Bank, 2020).

¹⁵ The World Bank's overview of Ethiopia's economy, 2020.

¹⁶ See also Appendix 3.

different ethnic and religious groups, advocating for the teaching of Ethiopia's diverse cultural heritage, and promoting gender equality, including improved access to education for girls (See Appendix 4.). In line with this, the government has recognized the economic significance of communications infrastructure for the country. It has invested in expanding the mobile network, fiber-optic cable, and broadcasting infrastructure. Despite the progress made, Ethiopia still needs to work on infrastructure development, including the need for private sector involvement, efficient systems, and attracting foreign investments.

In addition, the EPRDF government recognized that *health* is a crucial component in the nation-building process. It implemented policies and allocated significant resources towards achieving better health facilities and outcomes for the population. One of the key initiatives of EPRDF's healthcare policy was the Health Extension Program (HEP), which aimed to improve *access* to essential healthcare services, especially in rural areas. Under this program, a health extension worker is assigned to each village to provide basic health services, such as maternal and child health, disease prevention, and health education. The HEP was instrumental in reducing child and maternal mortality rates and increasing the uptake of family planning services. The EPRDF government also invested in building new hospitals and upgrading primary health centers, as well as implementing a community-based health insurance system (See Appendix 5).

In conclusion, despite significant advancements in economic and infrastructure development and the expansion of educational and healthcare services from 2000 to 2020, various socio-political issues continued to hinder the nation-building efforts. These issues were particularly prevalent in politics, the judiciary, societal peace, and relations between ethnic groups. The lack of fair distribution of economic gains, governance issues, mismanagement of public resources, and corruption were constantly debated, making it challenging to measure the true impact of public goods expansion on nation-building. While the EPRDF's prioritization of infrastructure development, healthcare, and education was intended to be a crucial strategy for nation-building, it faced obstacles in achieving its goals.

7.6.4 Education and Linguistic Policy as Integrative Elements of Nation-Building

In this section, the researcher delved into Ethiopia's education and language policy sector during the EPRDF era. The EPRDF elite placed great ideological significance on the latter aspect. In many countries, education was viewed as a significant tool for fostering national unity. It was

also seen as a means of modernization, facilitating the harmonization of social and ethnic groups by creating shared values (Bell & Stevenson 2006). Education policy was a top priority for governments worldwide, aiming to cultivate citizens with a shared sense of identity and collective destiny. In recent decades, there has been increasing global pressure in this area, with education policies expected to have implications for economic prosperity and social citizenship.

The primary goal of education in Ethiopia during the EPRDF era was to develop citizens who actively contribute to the country's social, political, and economic progress. This included equipping the younger generation with the knowledge and skills necessary to improve production and productivity for the benefit of society. However, the education system also served as a tool for instilling specific beliefs and values in the youth, mainly through civic and ethical education focused on ethnic identity rather than a broader Ethiopian identity. This was evident in a study analyzing civic and history textbooks by Dawit and Haftu (2012).

.... the dominant influence of civic and ethical education textbooks is to shape ethnic identity over Ethiopian identity. As revealed in much of the transcribed data, civic and ethical education textbooks have contributed to deepening students' ethnic identity over their Ethiopian identity, though some did say, "it made me recognize other ethnic identities." The textbooks encouraged students to have strong feelings about ethnic values and behaviors and underscored ethnic identity as the core value for human beings. The textbooks also reinforced the idea that ethnic groups should administer themselves and be governed by people coming from the same ethnic group. The 'we' essence from a nationalist perspective appears to have been marginalized (Dawit and Haftu 2012: 144-145).

The EPRDF ruling elite implemented a unique approach to language policy as an integrative element, differing from previous administrations. The National Education and Training Policy (NETP) of Ethiopia, established in April 1994 under the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE), outlined the policy objectives for education. One objective was to acknowledge the rights of nations and nationalities to be educated in their language while also providing a national and international language for communication. The language policies were formalized and institutionalized in the FDRE 1995 Constitution, where Article 5 stated that:

All Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state recognition. Amharic shall be the working language of the federal government. Members of the federation may, by law, determine their

respective working language (FDRE Constitution 1995)¹⁷. One of the former senior EPRDF members interviewed for this study described the language policy of EPRDF as follows:

The EPRDF acknowledged the rich diversity of Ethiopia, with its multitude of ethnic groups, each with its own unique language and cultural heritage. To preserve and promote linguistic diversity and protect the rights of linguistic minorities, the language policy aimed to ensure the use of the national language, Amharic, in government administration and schools while also recognizing and supporting federal, regional, and community languages. Federal languages, such as Amharic, Tigrinya, Oromo, and Somali, were designated for national administration, while regional languages were utilized for local administration and education. The EPRDF also prioritized education as a critical aspect of its language policy, implementing new programs and policies to improve the quality of education and incorporate regional languages into the education system, thereby enabling children to receive quality education in their mother tongue. Additionally, efforts were made to develop regional language textbooks and train teachers to instruct in these languages. The initiative aimed to address the issue of high dropout rates among children who could not understand the language of instruction in schools (Respondent no. 47, 2022).

Thus, the education policy in general and the language policy in particular emanated from the EPRDF political ideology, formulated on the narrative of national oppression and ethnic nationalism. As stated by Lahra Smith (2008: 223), "... language policy for EPRDF was an opportunity to assert its legitimacy in the eyes of the nations and nationalities of Ethiopia". But Tekeste Negash, in his seminal work (2006), argued that the EPRDF language policy did not in any way contribute to the task of creating a sense of common citizenship. Rather, it did quite the contrary:

The current language policy appears to produce citizens who will find it hard to communicate with each other. The fact that Amharic is taught in non-Amhara areas only as a subject is not sufficient to make Amharic a trans-ethnic media of communication. The unifying language is supposed to be English since it is the media of instruction all over the country from (officially) grade 7. The discussion on the state of English above has hopefully shown that English would not and could not function as a unifying language in Ethiopia (Tekeste, 2006: 50).

Also, according to Teshome Wagaw (1999), the language policies governing education in Ethiopia emanated from the larger EPRDF national language and ethnic policies, related to its politics and power consolidation. He further contended that the education and language policies were weak in facilitating national identification:

¹⁷ Article 5 of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE).

The language policies related to education and training will not lead to nation-building or serve the educational and training needs of the children and youth of any segment. Rather, the policies are designed to promote artificial divisions among Ethiopians, even at risk of creating hatred and divisiveness which might lead eventually to deep rancor and fighting. It is tragically ironic to see that Africans reinvent for themselves the policy of apartheid, notions that colonial powers have been forced to abandon everywhere in the world (Teshome, 1999: 11).

In contrast to Teshome's perspective, Getachew and Derib (2006) argued that the EPRDF's language policy represented a departure from the language policies of previous regimes. They contended that the language policies of emperors Tewodros II, Yohannis IV, Menelik II (although these emperors did not have a specific 'language policy'), Haile Sellasie I, and the *Derg* regime were similar in practice, as they all enforced a one-language policy with Amharic as the established *lingua franca*. On the other hand, the language use policy of the EPRDF government was significantly different, based on a multilingual model, which the authors believed had both positive and negative aspects. Seidel and Moritz (2009) also supported the multi-language strategy in Ethiopia's elementary education, aligning with the nation's multi-ethnic composition. They saw the teaching of children in their mother tongue while incorporating ethnic languages as an effective educational strategy and a forward-thinking cultural and economic policy. They emphasized the importance of incorporating local socio-cultural themes into education to properly integrate the nation's multi-ethnic context and maintain its diversity. However, they did not address the political context of the policy. While EPRDF's language policy, thus, recognized existing linguistic diversity and made efforts to promote the use of regional languages in education and government administration and whatever pedagogical and representational advantages there may be in the initial phase, in lower rungs of the education system, the policy cannot be said to have fostered nation building. Politics and inequality along ethno-regional lines have come to overshadow the social, economic, and regional linkages established via historical connections and the recent infrastructure expansion, state economic investment, and progress in health and educational provisions. The latter was proven insufficient to contain division and national contestation, as evident from the protests and armed conflicts after 2017. The debate on language policy and its role in creating a shared common identity is still unresolved.

7.6.5 National Symbols and Nation-Building

Raymond Firth's classic study in 1973 revealed that national symbols significantly represent a nation's values. While these symbols are universally recognized and accepted by citizens, their interpretation and identification with the official meaning can vary. National symbols are meant to embody a nation's core beliefs and values as perceived by the dominant groups within the country. However, some people within the nation may not align with these values, leading to conflicting interpretations of the symbols due to their ambiguity and multiple meanings. For instance, the flag, nomenclature, and national anthem are tangible symbols in people's daily lives and in projecting the state's image externally. In a diverse society like Ethiopia, these symbols should reflect the allegiance of diverse cultural groups to the state. However, the dominant cultural group monopolizes these symbols. In that case, it can lead to resentment and discontent among other cultural groups who feel excluded or believe the symbols do not accurately represent their history and beliefs. These symbols may be seen as emblems of oppression rather than fostering national identification and personal devotion to the nation.

Ethiopia's national symbols have sparked controversy due to the nation's intricate and varied history. Many citizens believe certain symbols fail to accurately reflect their ethnic or cultural heritage, resulting in discord and debate. For example, the national flag and anthem have been sources of contention. The anthem composed during Emperor Haile Selassie's rule has been criticized for its exclusivity, as it emphasizes God and the emperor, seemingly neglecting the cultural traditions of other Ethiopian ethnic groups. On the other hand, the anthem adopted in 1992 does not contain any ethnic or religious references.¹⁸

In post-1991 Ethiopia, national symbols sparked debates and controversies among political leaders and the public. The ruling EPRDF elite rejected the pan-Ethiopian identity promoted by previous regimes, instead conceptualizing Ethiopia differently. They downplayed the significance of imperial heroes and symbols while elevating new ones to a foundational status. For example, Emperor Menilek II, once celebrated as a national hero for resisting European colonization, was now criticized for alleged 'genocidal campaigns' within the Ethiopian empire. The EPRDF narrowed the origins of the contemporary Ethiopian state to Emperor Menilek II's late nineteenth-century conquests, effectively deconstructing the Ethiopian identity represented by the national flag, anthem, shared history, values, and destiny. This deconstruction of symbols did not yield the

¹⁸ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethiopia,_Be_Happy.

intended result. It further fragmented competing ethnic groups and fueled a sense of animosity among elites and even among the ethno-cultural groups themselves. According to one prominent academician from AAU:

The long-term endeavor to forge an Ethiopian nation and create common ground for the country's multicultural and multi-ethnic population has been severely damaged by the EPRDF's decision to belittle historical events like the Adwa victory, national heroes, the national flag, and the long Ethiopian history. This bold decision was taken without any study. For the EPRDF, the deconstruction had caused collateral damage. It could not establish a unified nation. The Ethiopian polity was split rather than being brought together under the new nation-building project. The reason behind this damage was the recasting of the national symbols that were not supported by evidence (Respondent no. 37, 2022).

According to Dawit and Haftu (2012), more than attempts were needed to recreate tangible references to shared national symbols, values, and history. This finding is consistent with the interviewee's perspective. Their study's conclusions suggested that Ethiopia's history be rewritten and subjected to fresh scrutiny. They claimed that little effort had been put into creating everyday national heroes and symbols to help the younger generation form an Ethiopian identity and be inspired by a shared 'destiny'. On the other hand, one of the key respondents who support the idea of ethno-nationalism put his view as follows:

The traditional national symbols, such as the flag, official holidays, and historical events, continue to reinforce the legacy of past imperial rule. They stand as a reminder of oppression and the perpetuation of the old elite's power. These symbols do not accurately reflect Ethiopian society nor contribute to developing a unified identity among the nation's diverse ethnic groups. Therefore, it is necessary to re-examine the significance of these symbols and consider replacing them with new emblems that better represent Ethiopian society's aspirations, values, and unity. While there may be concerns about altering the national flag, which is viewed as a symbol of pan-Africanism and freedom for many African nations, it is essential to have an open and honest dialogue about the meaning of these symbols (Respondent no. 14, 2022).

The abovementioned conversation highlights the divisive political issue of national symbols under EPRDF control. Through this study, it has become clear that there are distinct and opposing viewpoints. The pan-Ethiopians strongly support the current symbols. They argue that Ethiopia's rich history and patriotic culture have established common symbols that unite its diverse communities through shared historical events, such as the Adwa victory of 1896. They also emphasize that all Ethiopians have sacrificed for the nation's sovereignty and geographical integrity across multiple generations. The national flag is seen as a representation of Ethiopia's

long-standing domestic and international independence, symbolizing liberty, freedom and nationalism in countries across Africa and the Caribbean. However, parallel national symbols in EPRDF Ethiopia, including regional national anthems, flags, and heroes, have significantly undermined the national symbols. The debate around national symbols in Ethiopia reflects deeper issues of identity and representation, which are essential to the success of any nation-building. Some policymakers and commentators argue that greater efforts need to be made to ensure that national symbols, anthems, and other cultural artifacts are inclusive and reflect the broad diversity of Ethiopian society, while others say that this should be left to individual ethnic regions and that the country should celebrate its diversity rather than impose a one-size-fits-all identity.

Summary

Following the removal of the military rule in 1991, Ethiopia underwent a significant shift towards ethnic-based politics. The ruling EPRDF implemented ethnic-based federalism to acknowledge previously marginalized communities and grant ethnic and cultural rights. While this approach resulted in material-economic successes, it also contributed to ethnic divisions, challenges to political liberties, human rights issues, and regional economic inequalities. Ethno-nationalist parties/movements further strengthened ethnic politics in Ethiopia, with various groups adopting separatist language and tactics. This dominance of ethnic politics marginalized the pan-Ethiopian political camp and (re)shaped the country's political order. The roots of ethnic politics in Ethiopia can be traced back to exclusionary policies during Haile Selassie I's rule and the success of the Eritrean nationalist movement in resisting the central state and ultimately realizing Eritrea's independence in 1991— thus inspiring other autonomy movements. The rise of ethno-nationalist groups in Ethiopia was largely fueled by the aspirations of educated rural elites seeking political power and economic gains. While ethnic-based federalism aimed to address historical exclusion, it created divisions and challenges. Balancing ethnic rights with broader political liberties, human rights, and economic equality is essential for Ethiopia's more inclusive and stable political environment.

The recruitment and empowerment of elites within the EPRDF followed specific patterns and criteria, leading to a decline in their competency and performance. The replacement of previous elites and the lack of continuity in leadership hindered the nation-building process in Ethiopia. The treatment of elites based on ethnicity fostered hostility and mistrust, exacerbating

divisions within society. The inability to find common ground among elites posed challenges to the nation-building process in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia's nation-building efforts have encountered obstacles due to the influence of ethno-elites, ethnic tensions, conflicting ideologies, and inadequate governance. Struggles for power and resources have hindered the emphasis on ethnic identity and autonomy in the nation-building project. Civil society organizations have played important roles, but their potential has been limited by government co-optation and ethnic rivalries. While infrastructure expansion, state economic investment, and progress in health and education have been critical in the country's social and political transformation, it is worth considering whether they have also contributed to 'nation-building' in the broader social and cultural sense. The overall record is mixed and leans towards the negative, with politics and inequality along ethno-regional lines overshadowing the established social, economic, and regional linkages, as evidenced by the protests and armed conflicts after 2017. Education and language policies have also contributed to ethnic divisions rather than primarily fostering a sense of national unity or national political community. The debate over national symbols has also reflected broader issues of identity and representation in Ethiopia.

