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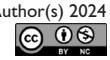

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Political Culture and Cyclical Conflict in Ethiopia: Exploring the Generative Dynamics of Political Crisis in the 2020s

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Abstract

Ethiopia is frequently facing serious political–communal conflict. Prevailing narratives attempting to identify causes often focus on presumed 'ethnic' groups and inequalities – a perspective crystallized especially in the past ca. 30 years. While Ethiopia as a socio-political domain existed for ages before the Emperor Menilik period (1889–1913) of incorporation of adjacent territories, the question emerges whether the 'roots' of recent armed conflicts are as much contemporary-political as historical, and related to an established political culture, based on resilient authoritarian values among both elites and the wider population. Ethiopia's current unresolved conflict dynamics need a renewed analysis of not only history and 'political economy' but also of recent constitutional features and group politics, which strongly impacted on its political culture. On the basis of document study and interviews, I examine crucial features of such recent processes so as to re-evaluate the specific articulations of ethno-regionally based governance in Ethiopia in recent years to find causal elements fuelling the repetitive cycles of conflict.

Keywords

Ethiopia, constitutional development, political culture, ethno-federalism, ethnic politics, conflict

Introduction

Ethiopia presently stands out as one of the most prominent realms of violent conflicts in Africa. New episodes of conflict emerged in 2020 and are ongoing. This would seem puzzling in view of the promising 'reform agenda' proclaimed in 2018 under the new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who initiated a progressive transformation of the autocratic regime of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF, 1991–2018). This reform agenda initially seemed to constitute a qualitative and discursive break with the past. But 'the past', it seems, has struck back. I here explore some aspects of the fundamental and recurring factors underlying the crises as

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experienced in recent years, as well as the historical–societal antecedents and some of the responses to the current instability. My thesis is that engrained political practices, constitutional problems and the nature of exclusivist elite rule have contributed to faltering 'normal politics' (see below) and to cyclical armed conflict. The analysis is based on data from (secondary) literature and documents, social media discourse, post-2018 interviews with political practitioners, human rights organizations and media people in Ethiopia, as well as well as fieldwork visits in several Ethiopian regions over the last years.

The question about the 'root causes' or fundaments of Ethiopia's persistent political crises and their cyclical nature is often asked. This expression (in Amharic *yeItiyop'iya meseretawi chiggir*, 'Ethiopia's basic problem') is used in the quest to locate relatively durable, causative elements in the country's political tradition and social structure, for example, those related to the production of historical or group/class antagonisms and clashes of material–economic interests ('resource-competition'), and perhaps to divergent bases of cultural identity and ideologies. Exploring such 'fundaments' of Ethiopia's politics and crises requires some reassessing of the history of the polity, and second, analysis of the country's 'political culture' in action – that is, the way of doing state politics in light of values and as shaped by laws and governance practices. I use this concept of political culture in a primarily descriptive-empirical manner, but one might more specifically define it as a historically grown praxis of 'doing politics' as based on and interacting with cultural notions, values and preference patterns about authority, social relations and governance that exist within the wider population.[1] According to Clapham (1988: 52, 96), some elements of Ethiopia's political culture (on the *state* level) were a sense of secrecy, suspicion and intrigue, ideas of absolute rule, 'sustained by an esoteric official ideology which the people are expected to accept, even if they cannot understand it, and which is sustained by a priesthood of the initiated'. This political culture was accompanied (Clapham, 1988) by a formal structure of 'divinely (or ideologically) sanctioned' authority, and where personal relations and connections are decisive. A full study of Ethiopian political culture remains to be made, and such a unitary concept can perhaps only be delineated for Ethiopia as a whole when focused on the country's *political* processes. But this ensemble of traits as indicated above can be traced and has proven resilient. In view of the multiple violent conflicts, even after 2018, the emergence of 'normal politics' (a concept derived from the controversial German political thinker Carl Schmitt) as opposed to politics in the 'state of exception' (Schmitt, 2007[1932]) was hindered. A definition of 'normal politics' would thus be politics in an arena of contestation between competing forces and vision on the political order but within more or less ordered structures of negotiation and compromise, and not based on the constant use of violence as politics (i.e. via threats, arrests, assaulting or killing of opponents) Ethiopia, as a broad, identifiable political community rooted in diversity, is not alone in having trouble in developing such 'normal politics' in the institutional sense. While 'normal politics' is always precarious and subject to erosion even in mature democracies, I follow Connelly (2016) and Roe (2012) who see it as a more or less predictable, law-governed procedural politics with some transparency and especially reduced arbitrariness (whereby the rules are not unilaterally changed by the incumbent so as to harm opposition forces). Ethiopia's recurring violent conflicts and unpredictable law-giving procedures are not a unique feature for the country alone, but at present the country lacks successful political *habitus* fostering such predictable, effective political communication or techniques of rule. Secondly, the (usually self-appointed) elites in Ethiopia have strongly determined politics in a horizontal and exclusivist fashion (see Alene, 2024), and hardly in a vertical and compromise-oriented manner. Constructive elite bargaining, as it is often called (Alemu, 2018), was always weak: 'replacement' or autocratic domination and hegemonism by one (political/military) elite were more the rule (Alene, 2024). Coalitions and alliances were window-dressing for elites, be they monarchical, military, ethno-federal or ethno-nationalist. In particular, the post-1991 EPRDF[2] regime was a

strongly exclusionary type of elite rule. Thirdly, in Ethiopia violent action often trumps institution-building and at decisive moments is still seen (and used) by important actors as a primary political tool, in the classic Clausewitzian sense of conflict/war as 'politics by other means'. This was evident in 2020 when the 2018 political changes were resented by a part of the political elite – the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) – which started war in the night of 3–4 November 2020.[3] It was also demonstrated in the multiple regional 'border conflicts', and in recent 'ethnic cleansing' campaigns in various regions. In addition, a new micro-politics of violence was discerned in the past years: in forced urban displacement – via short notice, coercive home demolitions[4] and entry restrictions[5] in Addis Ababa (e.g. in January–March 2023[6]), and a year later in the surprise renovation of the historic Piassa[7] neighbourhood in the capital with local shopkeepers and inhabitants forcibly removed. A fourth point is that Ethiopia's political culture was negatively reshaped by a post-1991 constitutional–legal framework and administrative politics based on ethnicity that influenced the values and preferences of the populace and hindered the institutional rooting of deliberative democracy (see below), instead producing more ethnic 'fragmentation'. The term deliberative democracy here is used in the sense of a politics '. . .where only those norms and practices can be deemed morally and politically legitimate which are the result of a free and fair process of public decision-making that includes all who will bear the consequences of their implementation' (Trifirò, 2005: 5). The irony is that in *local* societies in Ethiopia, such deliberative approaches were widespread. But the fundamental lack of the development of a mode of democracy on the *state* level in Ethiopia since the stirrings of socio-political modernity after the Italian episode (1935–1941) has led to cyclical, ethno–regional-based collective protests and to aspiring elites developing uncompromising mindsets and turning to violent means.

A brief literature review

In the past three decades sociological, political–scientific, legal and anthropological analyses were offered in great number on Ethiopia's power structure and political developments. This body of work is insightful but often also repetitive (see a list of such studies: Abbink, 2022b: 161–180, also: Aemro and Christopher, 2024; Nigussie, 2023; Zemelak et al., 2023). Several tendencies are visible: first, a discourse predominantly critical of the problems of the 'ethnic federalism' model instituted since 1991, notably regarding its conflict-generating aspects.[8] Second, a turn towards ethnic, or 'ethno-nationalist' if not sectarian thinking (see Ishiyama, 2021*)*. It has led to some valuable ethno-historical studies of neglected groups and regions, but also to contentious rewritings of history with the effect of fragmenting the discourse towards ethno-linguistic groups as the assumed 'natural constituents' of politics in Ethiopia. Probably the second tendency is a result of the first. Finally, a third strand of studies looks at longer-term economic and societal trends (see Prunier and Ficquet, 2015), analysing the slow structural changes in the Ethiopian economy, including rural transformation (Cheru et al., 2019), the demographic dynamics[9] (Hailemariam, 2019), educational–technological expansion (Berhanu et al., 2024) and urbanization[10] (Benti et al., 2020). Few if any of the insights from the scholarly literature have had an impact of the actual politics and administration of the country.

Evaluations on ethnic-based federalism (post-1991)

As noted, the overall scholarly evaluation of Ethiopia's model of 'ethnic-based federalism' over the past two decades was overall negative. Analysts have described the legal ambiguities over ethnic autonomy and citizens' rights, the repeated 'identity-based' communal conflicts, political and media repression and the 'border' conflicts between ethnic territories (see numerous titles in

Abbink, 2022b: 161–199). All this pointed to the political system's over-instrumentalization of ethnicity. Ethnic autonomy is not equivalent to democratization, although many Ethiopians were led to think so. In EPRDF times, significant economic growth, progress on several Millennium Development Goals and expansion of infrastructural/educational facilities were seen under a renewed 'developmental state' model – where the state (and not the private sector) plays a pro-active and strategic role '. . .as a principal driver of the economic growth, by taking direct intervention in and coordination of the national economic activities' (Yidnekachew and Cochrane 2024: 2). But the ethnicist tendencies tended undermine or 'defeat' this developmental model – as evident in regional disparities, internal party disarray, massive protests before 2018, and in the multiple 'ethnic clashes' since then.

Thus the post-1991 ethno-political model was ultimately not overall successful and unfolded as an engine of conflict production. Ethno-political self-definition and manoeuvring at the expense of national identification affected many groups, including the Tigray, Oromo and the Amhara (with their elite figures adopting a previously unknown ethnicist self-identification; see Chanie and Ishiyama, 2021; Tazebew, 2021). Despite the 2018 reforms, the systemic tensions culminated in 2020 in multiple violent clashes: in war in and around Ethiopia's Tigray Region, in western Oromia with armed campaigns by an Oromo-based ethno-nationalist movement, the 'Oromo Liberation Army'(split-off from the Oromo Liberation Front [OLF], which had been invited back to Ethiopia by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018 as part of the new political dispensation), in the Amhara Region since early 2023 (see below), and in numerous skirmishes around 'ethnic borders' in other regions.[11]

Historically, in Ethiopia's monarchical political culture, inclusive policies and the art of political dialogue and compromise were absent – except on the level of local communities Hierarchy and authority were defining characteristics from households up to the royal court. The multiple disputes and armed conflicts of today show that processes of politicizing and essentializing 'ethnic' or ethno-linguistic' identity of Ethiopians over the past 40 years have further prevented the rooting of 'normal politics' as defined above. Post-1991 ethnic federalism hence did not 'solve' issues of inequality, economic disparity and exploitation, or cultural discrimination but shifted the victimized groups. The latest evidence of this is the massive fighting in Amhara Region since April 2023.

Crisis and instability

Currently, Ethiopia is evincing instability, conflict, economic and livelihoods crises, and problems of social cohesion – reproduced by certain political–economic conditions and by voluntarist elite action. April 2018 seemed a turning point when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took the reins of federal government, after internal EPRDF party crisis and years of (youth) protests in Oromia and Amhara regions. He introduced wide-ranging reforms, political and economic liberalization, made peace with Eritrea, sought better relations with neighbouring countries and produced a new rhetoric of cooperation, openness, tolerance and even forgiveness. That program was a major breath of fresh air and a promising opening. But inherited political realities and a lingering political culture of zero-sum authoritarianism subverted the implementation of this 'reform agenda'. The dire economic situation, resentment and mistrust among certain political actors and aspiring ethno-elites, and attitudes of public scepticism towards politics hindered the general acceptance and implementation of the reform momentum. Within the state apparatus and EPRDF party structures, many economically based vested interests resisted it as well. The 2020–2022 war was the result of the old political elite's (the TPLF) resentment after 2018 of being 'side-lined', as they saw it. Demands from other ethno-regional elites also continued and led to ever more far-reaching claims to 'ethnic

autonomy' if not hegemony, and several clamoured for their own regional state (in principle allowed under the 1995 Constitution's Art. 39).[12] The policy reset of 2018, as embodied in the programme of the new ruling party (the Prosperity Party [PP]) since November 2019, was basically overtaken by the effects of 27 years of 'ethnic federalism' and 'revolutionary-democratic' politics under TPLF–EPRDF. These vested interests of the empowered and ethno-regional elites of the EPRDF era – rooted in patterns of rent-seeking – as well as the *internalization* of ethnicity as primary political identity, had led to sectarian politics subverting a nationally cohesive agenda focusing on shared issue politics.

It was also paradoxical that the Abiy government was accused by some ethno-regional elite members of 'returning to an imperial approach' to Ethiopia's politics, or to 'restoration of the imperial system'.[13] However, the pleading for more unity and cooperation between the constituent parts of a country is not 'imperial' per se. Indeed, the new government did not change any clause of the Constitution: the ethno-federal order was not in danger. Prime Minister Abiy's approach (as laid out in his 2019 book *Meddemer*) was to focus on maximizing the benefits of cooperation and 'unity in diversity' – so as to make the ethnic-federal order stronger, notably in the economic sense. The 'ethnicity-first' elite politicians, notably in Tigray and in Oromia (within the Oromo Democratic Party, later called Oromo PP), as well as opposition groups like Oromo Federalist Congress and the OLF and to some extent among Amhara (the National Movement of Amhara) thwarted this policy, contributed to the impasse by criticizing this reinvention of the unitary approach. The TPLF-generated war in the North (see Endnote 3 and T'énaw, 2022) and the growing 'ethnic cleansing' campaigns of Oromo insurgents[14] in west-central Ethiopia did the rest. In addition, in view of the unresolved aftermath of such violent conflicts the recent policies (late 2022–2024) of the federal government seem to indicate the quiet abandonment of the agenda of synergy, regional cooperation and better inter-governmental governance.[15] By continuing the EPRDF constitutional order, the post-2018 government has not succeeded to reconstitute Ethiopian statehood on a more stable and 'open access' basis, meaning a more level playing field for various contending social forces (including civil society and labour unions) beyond the elite in power. Indeed, conditions for an 'open access' political–economic order (Cox et al., 2019) were precarious under previous regimes and, despite an effort in 2018, not realized either under the new government.

As ideological and violent contestation continued to flare up, the move towards 'normal politics' (cf. Roe, 2012: 215; Tessema, 2020: 36), that is, the give-and-take of divergent parties/actors via debate, compromise and bargaining on public policy issues (Tessema, 2020: 42) was subverted. Fundaments of the political–legal order and even of social peace are still highly in dispute. As Roe indicated, 'Normal politics [. . . .] refers to the notion of routine procedures', that is predictable, legally entrenched ones (as in liberal democratic states), with policymaking operating '. . . .according to established mechanisms' and proposed measures '. . .marked by debate and deliberation' (Roe, 2012). Overall, the ethnic-based order installed in Ethiopia in 1991 has shown to be fragile and conflict-generating. Predictable, 'routine' procedures were often not followed or consolidated, and always new 'shocks' occurred, generated by arbitrary, ethnic-based politicking. It would, however, not be sufficient to interpret Ethiopia's current problems only in the 'ethnic mode', as this would be taking over the ethno-federal model-thinking of the past decades that produced much of the crisis. Ethnic identity is mostly an artefact, as a long tradition in political anthropological studies (see Munashinghe, 2018: 1–12) on the contingent and manufactured nature of ethnicity as politics has amply demonstrated. But artefacts still have real effects in practice. Below, I discus five elements of crisis production embedded in the country's ethnicized political culture: historiography, constitutional issues, governance/judiciary, demography and 'group psychology'.

Historiographical legacies and grievance discourse

Current socio-political problems are not solely a product of ethno-federalism. Despite high points, like having kept its independence, maintaining its cultural identity towards outsiders, warding off colonialism (as at the battle of Adwa in 1896 against the invading Italians) and the role of the Patriot resistance to Italian Fascist conquest, Ethiopia has that history of internal tensions and inequality that led to religious and ethno-regional strife – and even in the episodes of national self-defence there were actors that collaborated with enemies or went over to the side of invaders.[16]

Historiographical 'grievances', seen as a fundament of current crisis, exist among all groups. They are partly due to the much-discussed historical processes of subjection and expansion in the age of Ethiopia's reinvention as an imperial state since the mid-19th century. Limitations of space here preclude a discussion of the details. The issue of such historical, or currently historiographical, grievances is a recurring rhetoric feature in today's Ethiopian political discourse. Being partly based on facts, they reflect real concerns (cf. Dinka, 2022). Historical processes were painful, conflictuous, and had 'cultural' dimensions.[17] They were also discursively recast, 'reinvented' and used as a divide-and-rule tactic under the EPRDF regime and by contemporary ethnic elite actors, mixing fact and fiction. This issue of grievances also came up in debates on the new university History 101 curriculum (cf. Abbink, 2022a) and did not lead to a consensus approach. This is symptomatic: arguments about the contested past may not offer a good guide for contemporary policies because conditions now have enormously changed, and more than one or two groups have grievances. The discourse tends to be dominated by ethnic group referents. But just as important and cross-cutting them are issues of class, after-effects of slavery, economic inequality and exploitation, authoritarianism or anti-democratic politics, regional differences and non-functional justice systems. Incidentally, the state formation/expansion process that Ethiopia went through is similar to that of many other countries at the same period. For example, in Germany (cf. Hoyer, 2021) or Italy (Mariani, 2013), the 'unification' of these two disparate, decentralized domains was also contested and often violent. But today a backward-looking discourse of 'victim-thinking (i.e. claiming past conflicts as a motive for today's politics) is not visible any more in these countries. There is no clear-cut overall solution to address the 'grievances' except aiming for a new inclusive politics of economic and socio-cultural development, backed up by strong institutional frameworks. As noted, a questionable assumption in the grievance discourses is that there is a straight line from the perceived/real facts of violence, exploitation and neglect in the *past* to the politics of the *present* – for instance, a narrative of blaming that skips the intervening history up to today. 'Resource competition' (e.g. on land) was an important dimension of historical conflict and economic disparity (see Donham, 1986). But the strife was not always along strict ethnic-linguistic group lines and more along regional–economic lines – mostly highland vs. non-highland territories in the south, east and west.[18] Back in that period, most of the Ethiopian population, except the political and landed elite, was confronted with misery, and resistance against central rule was widespread in many regions.[19] Since at least the 17th century there had been a certain 'interpenetration' of elites of Amhara, Oromo, Tigray, Gurage and later (20th century) of Afar and others. Yates has argued that the ethnicity paradigm '. . .is not an effective lens to understand Ethiopia's complex history' (Yates, 2017: 102).

Thus, while contemporary grievance thinking has a historical base, it is 'mediated' by political aims and often amounts a politics of resentment not geared to current realities and political opportunities. Crafting politics today, over a century later, on perceptions of a contested past was not productive: it often led to collective guilt thinking and retrospective group victimization that further fragmented the national political arena. While issues of economic inequality and developmental disparities exist in contemporary Ethiopia, it is not likely that durable solutions are found in continued ethnic-based policies of competition and of preferential treatment. In the federal *education* system, recent reforms – for example, in textbooks and curricula – work towards shared end

terms for all pupils regardless of regional background or 'ethnicity'. But current ethnic identity politics on the level of various regional states, which de-emphasize cross-regional linkages, go against this trend.

Political fundaments: The 1995 constitution and the ethno-federal system

The Ethiopian Constitution,[20] in force since 1995, is one other crisis 'fundament'. It has many good clauses but has proven to be conceptually confusing on law, human rights, regional vs. federal authority and ethnic identity rights. The text partly used the work of the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities, a *Derg* regime office founded in 1983 that made a classification of Ethiopia's 'nationalities' based on Stalinist working premises. The EPRDF regime adopted this for designing its own ethnic mapping and federalist political structure. This constitution is invoked by most political actors today as problematic: as either 'going too far', or 'not going far enough', or as unclear in many essential details. A full analysis of this rather unusual constitution cannot be given here, but it is the formal fundament of much of the current unrest. Some key conflict-generating clauses are the following:

- The much-discussed Art. 39 on the right of secession of the 'Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' (as sovereignty-bearing units). No country has such a clause, and it has proven to be highly problematic due to its legal ambiguities. It was probably a political clause, imposed by the then ruling party. It has had a 'group-empowering' but also a questionable divisive psychological effect on political life in the country.[21]
- Articles 62 and 83.1 accord constitutional inquiry and review to the 'House of Federation' (HOF), a political institution made up of ethno-regional elites, and not to the courts, or the Supreme Court. This is unusual, and, as Mgbako et al. (2008: 292) say: '. . .the HOF lacks independence from the executive and thus cannot be trusted to adjudicate sensitive political matters involving the Constitution in an unbiased manner'. This has not changed and until this day can lead to politically styled rather than legal disputations. It is problematic also in that HOF decisions are binding, and according to Mgbako et al. (Mgbako et al., 2008) the majoritarian composition of the HOF can '. . .lead to the tyranny of the majority in sensitive constitutional disputes between ethnic groups'. So here again is an antagonistic element in the structure.
- Other articles stand out because of their constantly being ignored if not subverted, such as Article 32, 'Freedom of Movement', sub 1: 'Any Ethiopian or foreign national lawfully in Ethiopia has, within the national territory, the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose his residence, as well as the freedom to leave the country at any time he wishes to'. This is mostly honoured in the breach: 'non-titular' minorities were made to feel vulnerable and unwelcome in the new ethno-regions, and numerous 'ethnic border' conflicts (with thousands of deaths) have ensued since 1995. Hence the position of 'minorities' is precarious in practice. In the Constitution, minorities (being numerically small ethno-cultural groups) are only mentioned in Art. 54 sub 2 and 3, on their representation in the House of People's Representatives (HPR) (with 20 seats). The very definition of groups as 'minorities' is problematic and is due to the creation of titular ethnic-based regions (called in Amharic: *killil*s) after 1991. No group is a majority in Ethiopia except on the regional state level, and that implies usually secondary status for the smaller groups, especially when the for Ethiopia unhelpful concept of 'indigeneity' is brought in: they are declared as having no rights on the 'territory'.[22] This aspect cannot be discussed in detail here but the civic and even ethnic rights of minorities in majority ethno-regions are vulnerable (cf. Adeno, 2022) and conflict has been frequent.

Calls for constitutional revision[23] were repeatedly made in the past years, with some analysts and activists in favour of radical reform, and others opposing it because changing the basics would 'endanger the gains' of ethnic autonomy and group recognition. But the Constitution may need to be modified for the Ethiopian multi-ethnic nation to be maintained.[24] Additionally, the possibility for the Constitution text to be changed was already there since 1995 – evident in many clauses saying: 'Particulars shall be determined by law' or '. . . implementation shall be specified by law'. Although this was rarely done. At present, the facts on the ground – the dramatic fall-out of armed conflict and regional/zone 'border' turmoil – necessitate serious revision of the constitutional basics, beyond the 'particulars'. The basic idea of recognition of the relevance of ethno-cultural or ethno-linguistic diversity – as against coerced assimilation – is not likely to be infringed upon because it answers a need felt among citizens. But the politicization and territorialization of ethnic identity in a rigid sense has thwarted the aims of the federation and according to most observers need correction.

Governance: Judiciary, economics and policy implementation can do better

Problematic fundament no. 3 is non-transparent, faulty *governance practice*, not corrected by an efficient and independent judiciary (cf. Mgbako et al., 2008) or by resolute parliamentary oversight. Due to the authoritarian political tradition, the Executive branch in Ethiopia has always been much stronger than the Legislative. As to the Judiciary, while in individual cases the courts and the judges function well and show professionalism and reasonableness, in majority they are susceptible to government pressure, and are even forced to comply to this pressure. Numerous cases in the past thirty years failed to render justice on the merit of the facts. Also, after the 2018 change, only few suspected violent militants and political criminals were brought to court. The same we saw after the 'Cessation of Hostilities Agreement' (CoHA) or 'peace agreement' of 2 November 2022 between federal government and TPLF, the latter previously accused of war atrocities and put on the list of terrorist movements in May 2021 (Removed from it again on 22 March 2023) – and without arrests or criminal prosecution of its top commanding members initiated. Here, for political reasons, and to offer an opening to return to the restoration of stability in Tigray following the commitments in this CoHA, the judicial process was thwarted and over-ruled by the stipulations of the above CoHA. Its Articles 1.7 ('Objectives') and 10.3 ('Transitional measures') were not implemented in any visible way.[25] But 'peace without justice' is a recipe for continued grievances and instability. Recent interesting work by Vinck et al. (2023), based on a nation-wide survey, underlined the need and broadly shared desire among Ethiopians for a solid transitional justice process which would enhance rehabilitation and peace. But expectations that it will occur are slight, due to financial and political reasons.

While in recent decades economic growth in Ethiopia was significant and poverty rates declined, many problems of policy management, economic freedoms for producers, issues of proper compensation for lost (land) assets, federal imbalances, etc., were not solved. Deficient governance affected economic performance on the federal and regional levels, with corruption[26] again reported[27] to be increasing[28] in recent years. The institutional, economic and other problems of the ethno-federal structure were diagnosed many times,[29] but hardly faced. The post-2018 reform agenda promised to tackle them but has yet to deliver, hindered by the political-administrative structure and constitutional grid based on the EPRDF model in still place. Recent developments since the November 2022 CoHA have not been encouraging and in effect have shown backtracking on any 'reform agenda'. In addition, governance of the urban domain – for example, in Addis

Ababa and adjacent Sheger City – shows mounting problems as well, with violent displacement and destructive 'urban renewal',[30] that according to some (AAA, 2023) might victimize certain ethnic populations more than others.

Demographics and economy

An underlying long term dynamic is *demography*. It might also be called a 'fundament'. There is consistently high population growth in Ethiopia (ca. 2.7% annually), and this creates certain problems, with political effects. In 1960 there were 22 mln Ethiopians; in 2023 ca. 125 mln and in 2030 a projected 145 mln. This historically unprecedented growth produces over 2 mln. new job seekers annually and also tends to contribute to instability. The median age[31] of the Ethiopian population in 2022 was 17.9 years, creating a large, vulnerable youthful population. The 'youth dependency ratio' (youths per number of working population members) was comparatively high: 75.7% in 2022 (and the total: 70.2).[32] Political–demographic analyses suggests that such facts tend to stimulate social tensions and conflict, as the combination of relatively large numbers, low average schooling, constrained social mobility and high unemployment can lead the (especially male) youth seeking alternative activities, including insurgency and crime.[33] These notably emerge in conditions of a 'restricted access' political order such as in Ethiopia (now based on ethnic constraints and privileging), where institutionalization of governance services independent of regime-ideological politics has not succeeded. The ethnic–organizational principle also hindered the free movement of people across ethno-regional lines, including of job-seeking youths and newly educated/trained youngsters. A large youthful population *can* work towards positive change but also to continued conflict: many youths are readily absorbed in rebellious movements – as we saw in Ethiopia over the past decades. If the economy does not provide mobility and employment opportunities, and if the state is used as a rent control machine by/for certain elites restricting generational flow, youth instability will continue.

Result: Ethnic fragmentation and sub-nationalist stirrings under the guise of 'autonomy' and 'self-determination'

In 1994 the Constitution injected ethnic autonomy and competitive rivalry between ethnic collectivities into the political system, defined and fuelled by cultural, that is, deeply felt identity elements, which were appropriated by aspiring elites. While all large ethno-linguistic groups reached an unprecedented measure of autonomy in the current ethno-federation – thus meeting the major demands for 'self-determination' – the resulting dynamics did not stop there. Reciprocal imitation and the rhetoric of polarization in politics continued and were not beneficial, and there is a tendency of carrying this to the extreme, defeating the ideal of the Ethiopian federation as a whole. This spiral might only be stopped by reinforcing frameworks for joint, deliberative politics, backed up by a more robust independent judiciary that mediates strongly and effectively in disputes.[34] More economic cooperation across regions would also enhance their growth and wealth creation. The specific problem created in recent decades is, however, that the regionalization of ethnic populations in the *killil*s reduced the desire and need for political and economic ties across ethnic (i.e. ethno-regional) lines: these regional states built hierarchical patronage systems that are *vertically* oriented, and not horizontally towards similar socio-economic or administrative strata/groups across the nation.

Seeing the violence of the years 2018–2024, many observers noted that Ethiopian politics carries the danger of perpetuating cyclical or centrifugal 'identity politics' that then points up the contradictions in the Constitution and aggravates not only inter-governmental relations but also the

relation between the constituent units of the federation. Some observers diagnosed this already in the early 1990s, as did Ethiopian citizens.[35] 'Identity politics' is not a chimaera but a real and problematic feature of political life in many countries – but in Ethiopia is even officially sanctioned by the Constitution – despite it being philosophically problematic,[36] and it is not a formula relevant specifically to the Ethiopian context, as many seem to think. Combined with the 'imitative rivalry' that has emerged between ethnic group elites in Ethiopia, identity politics leads to a 'race to the bottom' in politics and entrenches violent action as part of political life. Indeed, the political model of Ethiopia since 1991 stimulated a political strategy of new ethnic elites to want what 'the others' seem to want (or already have): maximum ethnic autonomy, and thereby making ever more financial and other claims on the federal state – with a mixture of ideological–psychological and economic motives. The ethno-federal structure retains an ill-defined relationship between federal and regional–ethnic units as well as problematic constitutional conditions where 'sovereignty' does not lie with Ethiopia's citizens as such, but only with the 'nations', 'nationalities' and 'peoples'. Ethiopia here is unique in the world and also has unique problems because of this (cf. Adeno, 2022: 422). This lack of properly regulating the intergovernmental relations (IGR) in the federation has led to additional problems that hindered its efficacy. Assefa Fiseha diagnosed this and stated that IGR in Ethiopia – in the absence of proper constitutional–legal definition – relied '. . .heavily on party machinery and weakly on the government institutions' (Assefa, 2009: 131); that is, presumably on the ruling party patronage networks that emanated from it rather than on independent, institutionalized structures.

Also remarkable in the conflict dynamics of Ethiopia is that neither religious actors (such as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church[37]) nor the much-vaunted '*traditional conflict-mediation mechanisms*' – analysed in a large number of studies in Ethiopia over the past decades – figure prominently in national conflict mediation efforts. But such mechanisms, based on culturally sanctioned negotiations of local 'stakeholders' in a context-sensitive manner, were shown to be fairly effective, and some of its founding principles could be generalized and formalized.[38] Most of the customary mediation procedures indeed apply to 'in-group' peace-making and reconciliation. But there were also many procedures/rituals relevant to inter-group peace-making. Indeed, the traditional status and role of 'elders', religious leaders and women's groups are well-known in Ethiopia. When discussing local 'border conflicts' or even the general issues of ethnic group tensions on a *regional* or *federal* level, the procedures are, however, rarely used or not even accepted by conflict entrepreneurs or ethnic-activist youth groups. Here it seems that politicized ethnic elites do not much respect their own base: ordinary people that want normality and stability.

Concluding analysis: Reconstructing the fundaments?

Ethiopia's quest in search of 'normal politics' continues. An Ethiopian 'nation' in the unified cultural sense is unlikely to emerge, but a national (federal) state polity – a political community with shared, wider interests – is feasible, and has a history. Academic and political analysts' commentaries share many similarities in their diagnosis of the durable problems of the Ethiopian polity. Following on my observations above, they refer to: perceptions of real and fictitious collective (group) grievances based on history, or rather historicist thinking; disparities in regional and economic power; collective guilt thinking projected on certain groups for political purposes; lack of constitutional creativity and courage to repair the multi-nation state; disrespect for observing human-rights clauses in the Constitution and not addressing the structurally weak position of 'minorities' (especially those that without any fault of their own live in areas that were top-down designated as regions to be dominated by local ethnic groups 'excluding' others) (Harar and Benishangul-Gumuz Regions are examples). In addition, there is the problem of the existence/

expansion of 'regional militias' (outside the federal framework) while only regional *police* should be in place[39]; and of late: open and growing corruption and nepotism, harming national economic development.

Much of the quagmire since the 1990s is based on the idea that democratization equals 'ethnicizing' the political arena: decentralizing it into ethnic-based autonomous units in the hope that people (would-be elites) would be appeased. This ideological instead of broad institutional approach has proved to be misguided; instead, imitative group rivalry and zero-sum strategies came to dominate.

I summarize the 'fundaments' of contemporary crisis discussed above:

- Historiographical: contested national history, fuelled by opportunistic 'grievance discourse' and collective guilt thinking. Only solid historical research and teaching can counter their undue politicization.[40]
- Constitutional: the 1995 Constitution has produced, not contained, conflict. There were both intended and unintended design faults in the text.
- Governmental–juridical: centralist tradition, unresolved IGRs, lack of an independent judicial system, little accountability of mal-performing politicians and administrators. Part of this is the non-delivery of justice and rehabilitation to citizens after conflict or land dispossession; negligent observance of the human rights clauses; growing corruption[41] and nepotism at the cost of taxpayers and ordinary people.
- Demographic pressure and social instability relating to the large youth 'dependency ratio'.

We might add the 'psychological' result: internalized ethnicity as primary identity, distrust and 'group think'. This undermines the *civic* identities and rights of people – that is, their status as individual citizens. Ethnic referents virtually replace them. This is related to what we can refer to as 'elites in disarray': conflictuous, mimetic rivalry in shifting alliances, rarely representing their assumed constituencies in any accountable manner.

The current crisis in Ethiopia is political–constitutional and societal and has unfolded along general lines closely linked to the over-ethnicization of the political system, fuelled by primordialist ideas and zero-sum state elite politics. It hereby shows similarity with other cases of spiralling conflict in ethnically defined polities[42] and belies the 'exceptionalism' of the country. Research-based 'recommendations' to tackle crises could be given but cannot be elaborated here (but see PSI 2022). Suffice it to say that, as Mansfield (2000: 6) noted, in a country's political arena, political agreement on everything is *impossible* and that the point is not to *enforce* agreement on the basis of 'the facts' or otherwise, but to agree to disagree and make compromises via an ongoing political conversation about *the shared common good* as a regulative idea. In other words, as political 'philosophies' (ideologies) among actors will always differ, mutual accommodation and reasonable, pragmatic 'bargains' are inevitable. Elite bargaining seems an attractive road to go, but it can also be the illusory result of self-protective compromises concluded over the heads of people and beyond democratic and juridical oversight. In the aftermath of the November 2022 'peace agreement' between TPLF and federal government, many observers noted this resembled enforced elite bargaining: justice was not served (yet), war culprits were not prosecuted and the TPLF elite that had instigated the war was kept going, partly reinstated in the Tigray Region. This might be feasible 'compromise politics', but to many it was an elite bargain at high cost and with no guarantee to success. An elite bargain is not an aim in itself but should be positive in substance and not be an expedient means to survive. When ethnic-based rioting and violence, as recently seen in Ethiopia, are neither effectively prosecuted nor deterred by the regional state and federal law-and-order

forces this makes the public lose trust in the political system and in the ruling elite – reinforced by the latter's perpetual tendency to make secret deals behind the scenes.

One basic observation or 'recommendation' could be that Ethiopia's political–legal system needs further improvement on devising mechanisms to define 'the shared common good', and to strengthen balanced, transparent and 'inclusive' ways/institutions to implement policies to *realize* that common good – via negotiating and compromise in a non-zero-sum manner, and with an emphasis on overall economic development: enlarging the national cake. Whether this is likely is another issue.

Ethiopian *local* societies have a rich tradition of deliberative politics and dispute solving: trying to hear all and reach consensus on public matters/disputes. The state is too often detached from this and seen as the resource to be 'captured', and then used for benefit of the elite that captured it. Political deals are complex and will not deliver Utopia, but a future- instead of past-oriented trajectory of overall development seems desirable in Ethiopia, in view of the (economic) potential and the 'human resources' available. This is *not only* a question of 'building the right institutions and mechanisms', as often prescribed, but also to take into account the cultural fabric and foster a political culture of supportive values among political actors and the public. More political pluralism is needed and can also be built on other bases than assumed or territorialized *ethnic* identity. Major political engineering (see Semir, 2020, and the Policy Studies Institute report cited in endnote 24) seem needed to arrive at a workable model.

At present, Ethiopia is not guaranteed to move into a state of 'normal politics'. In Weingast's sense (2009: 37), it still has the traits of a 'natural state', that is, a weakly institutionalized, relatively unstable structure with personalized (elite) networks, marked by legal precariousness, a weak, underfunded justice system, and a lack of 'perpetuity' (Weingast, 2009) or predictability in times of crisis. Ethnic-based elite hegemonism and zero-sum strategies aggravated it.

Post-1991 politics demonstrated that the autocratic state 'political culture' of the country has dynamic aspects: features of administrative organization and people's perception of 'ethnicity' have markedly changed – although they did not erode the grass-roots Ethiopian idea of 'living together in diversity', be it religious or 'ethnic'. This idea, although de-emphasized by political elites who are led by autocratic values, might be resuscitated. A National Dialogue Commission, established by Proclamation No. 1265/202[43] in 2021, initiated[44] in May 2023 and which started work in June 2024, could be more empowered to serve as a major standing forum to deliberate on core questions of national importance (Semir, 2020), such as unresolved regional disparities, human rights abuses, dealing with the aftermath of past and current violent conflict, the political dispensation, improvement of the politico-legal institutions, and even with the nation's history narrative, for example, in the teaching of history and civic education. Solutions are challenging and 'the usual suspects' might again refuse participation,[45] but every small step towards a political culture of more deliberative democracy (cf. John, 2017) would be positive and enhance stability. It was hinted above that these deliberative practices exist(ed) in Ethiopia on the local level – and in fact in many societies (cf. Sass, 2018). It might work on a state level as well, but only when detached from elite-based rent-seeking strategies and on a less ethnicity-constrained basis. When inspired by Ethiopia's economic inter-connectedness, shared 'social capital' and cultural resources and its trans-ethnic traditions of customary conflict resolution, a path forward might be crafted, especially when reinforced by the institutionalization of national governance structures away from (ethnic-based) patronage politics and rent seeking. In view of the persistently autocratic and the top-down political culture of Ethiopia and its production of cyclical conflict due to the five problematic elements (p. 9) sketched above, the likelihood of all that is precarious, but as an ideal it sounds good.

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Notes

1. This second aspect is reflected in the widely used definition of L. Diamond (1994: 7): '. . .a people's predominant beliefs, attitudes, values, ideals, sentiments, and evaluations about the political system of its country, and the role of the self in that system'.
2. The EPRDF, the ruling 'coalition' led by the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front since their May 1991 military victory over the *Derg* regime.
3. As clearly stated by Mr. Sekoturé Getachew, then one of its leaders: www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfeX6d09o0o&feature=emb_logo
4. See: www.thereporterethiopia.com/32197/
5. See: https://borkena.com/2023/03/14/migration-addis-ababa-from-some-regions-into-addis/
6. See: www.amharaamerica.org/post/demolitions-of-houses-killings-and-bodily-injury-of-amharas-in-the-newly-established-sheger-city.
7. See: https://thereportermagazines.com/2667/
8. See Zegeye and Gebremichael Ganta (2022: 391–397); Juon and Rohrbach, (2022); Tadesse et al. (2021).
9. See: www.undp.org/ethiopia/blog/managing-demographic-transition-ethiopia-where-focus
10. See: https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/africacan/why-should-ethiopians-care-about-urbanization-jobs-infrastructure-and-formal-land-and-housing
11. See also (mid-2024): 'TPLF attacks in T'ellemt': https://x.com/AmharaWarUpdate/status/1822414785935217114
12. With a first successful case in 2019: the 'Sidama Regional State', followed in 2021 by 'South West Ethiopia Regional State' and by 'Central Ethiopia' in 2023.
13. Interviews, Addis Ababa, April 2023, with a former TPLF member and a member of the Oromo Federal Congress party. Also on various social media accounts such comments were aired.
14. See: https://newbusinessethiopia.com/politics/ethiopia-olf-shene-kills-392-civilians-displaces-128200
15. A new round of fighting started in April 2023, when federal troops started an armed campaign in Amhara Region to 'disarm' local regional militia and 'Fanno' (self-defence) forces – former allies of the federal army in repelling the TPLF offensives in the 2020–2022 war.
16. Examples in: Yates (2020: 92) and McClellan (1996: 57–86).
17. See for an interesting analysis: Yates (2020).
18. But also applying to marginalized Amharic-speaking people in areas like Quara, Wogera, Gaynt, Saynt or parts of Wollo.
19. See McCann (1985) for a later example in northern Ethiopia, describing the revolt against central rule by *Ras* Gugsa Wole (1875–1930), a member of the Begemdir-Yejju aristocracy.
20. Proclamation No. 1/1995, 'Proclamation of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia', *Federal Negarit Gazeta*, 221 August 1995, Year 1, No. 1, pp.1–38.
21. The questionable effects of ethnic politics and bias in the education system during the past decades were diagnosed in an interview with the Ethiopian Minister of Education (2023) Dr. Berhanu Nega (www.youtube.com/watch?v=er0hruRDYK8).
22. This is most clearly seen in the regional constitutions of Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambela states.
23. An additional issue to discuss might be Art. 49 sub 5, on the so-called 'special interest of the State of

Oromia in Addis Ababa', an article highly contested and destabilizing.

24. An inventory of problems and views was made in the unpublished 2022 PRI report, which is under discussion.
25. African Union (AU) 2022. See its Art. 1.7: 'Provide a framework to ensure accountability for matters arising out of the conflict', and Art. 10.3: 'The Government of Ethiopia shall implement a comprehensive national transitional justice policy aimed at accountability, ascertaining the truth, redress for victims, reconciliation, and healing, consistent with the Constitution of FDRE and the African Union Transitional Justice Policy Framework. The transitional justice policy shall be developed with inputs from all stakeholders, and civil society groups through public consultations and formal national policy-making processes'. Again: vagueness on prosecuting the perpetrators of the appalling war crimes committed.
26. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wfa2-UuFuF4
27. Compare: www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_mcgfS7d7k&t=13s
28. www.thereporterethiopia.com/28411/
29. For example, see the list in Assefa, 2019: 176
30. AFP (2024) Ethiopians mourn the destruction of historic Piassa district. *Agence France Presse*, 17 April.
31. See: https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/ethiopia-population
32. See: www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/ethiopia/. By comparison, in Germany it was 21.7 (!) and the total was 56.4. In the USA the respective figures were: 28 and 53.7.
33. Compare Cincotta and Smith (2022). Examples are found in Somalia and the Sahel.
34. Hence the call for removing judicial review from the HOF to the Federal Supreme Court.
35. Like the gentleman in this video of 1994: https://twitter.com/EA_DevCouncil/status/1636154292884344833
36. See Fukuyama (2018: 92): while he diagnoses the rise of 'identity politics' as a "master concept that explains much of what is going on in global affairs", he also points out (ibid. 100–101) how its focus on cultural issues has stymied efforts to reduce inequality and posed threats to free speech and rational discourse needed in a democracy.
37. This Church (claiming the adherence of ca. 43 % of the population), apparently became the target (https://x.com/OrthodoxyNews/status/1648961968785465345) of government harassment) (https://x.com/OrthodoxyNews/status/1660304380430516225?t=xvI0VmgQ8H-jicv0hGAg7Q&s=03) and interference in 2023–2024 and also came under pressure from ethnic 'identity politics'. This is problematic because it is a nation-wide organization that built cross-cutting alliances of believers from all kinds of backgrounds. Ethnic-based splits would reinforce conflict-generating hierarchical patronage networks.
38. Cf. Lijalem, 2014. For some ideas: Assefa, (2020).
39. The expansion of the 'Regional' militia/army in Tigray Region in 2018–2019 (to up to 240,000 members) contributed to getting the country into the Northern war, and in 2022 some other Regional State authorities, notably Oromia, walked along the same road.
40. As tried in the new 2020 History Model 101 text for higher education (cf. Abbink, 2022a). It was finally approved in December 2022.
41. See: https://tradingeconomics.com/ethiopia/corruption-rank
42. That is, where ethnicity became a political tool, as in Congo-Brazzaville in the 1990s, South Sudan, Myanmar, Côte d'Ivoire before A. Ouattara's presidency, or Kenya in the elections before that of 2022. Most of these countries have moved out of the ethnic politics model.
43. https://addisstandard.com/analysis-ethiopias-national-dialogue-views-of-hopes-aspirations-and-concerns-from-amhara-region/
44. www.facebook.com/EthioNDC
45. www.thereporterethiopia.com/32475/

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