

The Rise and Fall of Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF): Postcolonial Rethinking of Ethnic and Language-Based Federalism in Africa

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Abstract

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) emerged as an ethno-nationalist political movement on February 18, 1975, initiating an armed struggle primarily based in Dedebit, North-western Tigray. The movement's initial political program was rooted in pro-Albanian socialist theory and included the establishment of a Republic of Greater Tigray. However, shifts in the global geopolitical architecture, particularly the dissolution of the Cold War order, significantly altered the movement's objectives and provided a strategic avenue for the seizure of central state power. Following a seventeen-year insurgency against the socialist military government known as the Derg. The predecessor was also a socialist military junta that deposed Ethiopia's last Emperor, King Haile Selassie. The TPLF successfully overthrew the Derg junta in 1991. Subsequently, the TPLF founded the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition that established a system of ethnic and linguistic federalism structured around a multiparty framework organised along ethno-regional lines. For three decades, the TPLF served as the dominant force within the EPRDF coalition, consolidating control over the nation's political, military, and economic institutions. This sustained period of institutional capture and its attendant narrow political agenda precipitated widespread mass protests beginning in 2015. This grassroots mobilisation ultimately resulted in a significant internal political transition within the EPRDF coalition in 2018, leading to the TPLF's loss of control over the central executive authority. This study employs a rigorous qualitative, single-case study research design, framed within a critical postcolonial perspective. The primary objective is to undertake a systematic investigation into the confluence of postcolonial governance structures, tribal party politics, and ethnic-based federalism, examining their function as sources of conformity or contradiction and assessing their resultant impact on state stability and institutional resilience in Ethiopia. The article may be categorised as a historical trajectory and institutional analysis of ethno-federalism in Ethiopia.

Keywords: TPLF, Ethnic and Language Federalism, Tribal Politics, Ethiopia, Africa, and Ethnic Party Politics.

Introduction

For nearly three decades, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was internationally recognised as the ruling coalition of Ethiopia, presiding over what was often described as a unique political experiment in ethnic federalism. Emerging in the aftermath of the Derg's collapse in 1991, the EPRDF presented itself as a revolutionary coalition committed

to democracy, national reconstruction, and the accommodation of Ethiopia's diverse ethnic groups within a decentralised federal framework. To the international community, the coalition appeared to embody a model of post-conflict state-building and participatory governance in a deeply divided polity.

However, a critical examination of its formation, institutional structure, and operational logic reveals that the EPRDF was, at its core, a political construct and hegemonic vehicle of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Rather than representing a genuine coalition of equal partners, the EPRDF functioned as an instrument of political domination, a carefully engineered mechanism to secure and legitimise TPLF control over the Ethiopian state. This article argues that the coalition's outward image of multi-ethnic inclusivity masked a hierarchical and asymmetric power structure, in which the TPLF occupied the ideological and strategic nucleus. Through the deliberate creation and manipulation of satellite organisations such as the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO), and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM). The TPLF institutionalised a network of subordinate elites whose political survival was contingent upon loyalty to the Tigrayan core.

The Nature of TPLF and Major Setback

Epistemological inconsistencies and ideological incoherence in TPLF's ethnic based party politics. A critical examination of the TPLF's political philosophy, framed through the lens of **epistemological rationalism**, reveals profound **doctrinal inconsistencies** that have significantly perplexed both domestic and international observers for decades. The chasm between the organisation's political programs and the leadership's rhetorical assertions has been widely noted as a significant disconnect between theory and practice (Tadesse and Young, 2003).

The most irrational manifestation of this internal incoherence stems from the TPLF's adoption of a pseudo-Marxist-Leninist ideology and the claim of international proletarian **vanguardism** in the absence of a discernible industrial foundation or working class within the Tigray region. As Berhe (2009: 352) explains, the formation of the ultra-left Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT), absent a proletariat, and the subsequent emulation of socialist Albania demonstrate a clear disregard for the socio-structural realities of the Tigrayan populace. This flawed model was then aggressively replicated throughout Ethiopia under the guise of 'solidarity,' fostering nationwide Marxist-Leninist organisations such as the Ethiopian Marxist-Leninist Force (EMLF) and the Ethiopian Proletarian Organisations Unity (EPOU) (ibid. 2009: 238). The TPLF's paradoxical nature, marked by philosophical and ideological divergence, has consistently characterised both its internal organisational structure and its trajectory toward national political ascension.

One can raise a fundamental philosophical question of how the TPLF reconciled the contradictions between ethno-nationalism and international proletarianism. According to Jowitt (1974:1176), socialist system-building is based on proletarian dictatorship and democratic centralism, both of which used the explicit and direct structural relationship between organisation and society as pre-Leninist political and cultural dispositions. Nonetheless, TPLF ethnocentrism leads to proletarianism, exacerbating the contradiction, given that nearly 98 per cent of Ethiopia's total population is subsistence farmers. [Although mainstream Marxists' ethnicity was thought to 'wither away' with the emergence of a class-conscious, worldwide industrial proletariat, the TPLF, nevertheless, since its inception, attempted to homogenise both the ethnic and the class ideologies for the entire duration of its struggle (Berhe, 2009:6)].

I find it difficult to fully concur with Berhe's interpretation that, from a socio-economic and societal development perspective, private ownership and control over the means of production were virtually non-existent in Tigray during the 1970s, due to the absence of a bourgeois class and limited industrial development, thereby providing the basis for class struggle. While this argument captures certain structural realities of the region, it overlooks the deeper historical and socio-cultural dynamics that shaped political mobilisation in Tigray. As McCracken (2004:185) and Young (1996:112) reaffirm, Tigray was indeed economically underdeveloped and territorially constrained, conditions that undermined both the feasibility of establishing the envisaged republic and the practical realisation of a classless socialist order.

Ethiopia's socio-economic and governance decline over the past five decades partly stems from a doctrinal misinterpretation of Stalin's (1929) definition of nationhood centred on language, territory, economy, and psychology (Kidane, 2018). African elites replicated Soviet and European governance models instead of developing endogenous systems. The TPLF/EPRDF's ethno-federalism mirrored Stalin's framework, disregarding Ethiopia's historical unity and multi-ethnic coalescence. This imposed structure redefined Ethiopia not as a single nation-state but as an aggregation of "nations," undermining centuries of integration and cohesion. Consequently, the model institutionalised fragmentation rather than national solidarity misrepresenting Ethiopia's reality as one nation with diverse ethnic communities.

The TPLF presented a fundamental ideological paradox that transcends mere political strategy and enters the realm of political philosophy. In a deliberate philosophical divergence from orthodox Marxist-Leninist doctrine, the TPLF consistently rejected a liberation struggle framed as a universal class conflict against entities like MEISON and the EPRP (Kebede, 2003, p. 13). This position, as Kebede (2003) elucidates, stands in stark contrast to the core Marxist-Leninist tenet, which positions the vanguard party as the exclusive guardian and representative of the working masses. By subordinating the primacy of class struggle, the TPLF revealed its foundational commitment to a particularistic ethno-nationalist project over a universalist proletarian revolution was a flawed.

This philosophical orientation manifested in a tangible contradiction between the Front's historical narrative and its own praxis. While its ideological discourse strategically framed Emperor Menelik II as an expansionist figure to legitimise its struggle against the Shewan dynasty, the TPLF's own exercise of power replicated a logic of territorial acquisition. Scholarly analysis, notably by McCracken (2004, p. 185), documents how the Front engaged in premeditated land annexations, including the **Wolkait and Telemt from Gondar and Raya from Wollo**. This disjuncture between its anti-expansionist rhetoric and its expansionist actions demonstrates a fundamental instrumentalisation of history and a realpolitik that ultimately privileged the consolidation of power over ideological consistency. Consequently, a growing body of scholarship, including works by McCracken and Young, examines the TPLF's trajectory as one marked by the perpetual subordination of a unified Ethiopian national interest to its own particularistic and strategic ends.

Among the many distractions perpetrated by the TPLF is the decision to make Ethiopia, with a population of above a hundred thirty million people, a landlocked country without seaports. The political alliance was cemented by mutually endorsing the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF)'s historical narrative, which posited the Ethiopian state as an external colonial entity and designated the Amhara elite as the primary internal hegemonic and oppressive power, thereby structurally institutionalizing animosity among Ethiopian nationals. The TPLF demonstrated a strategic political and ideological accommodation of the EPLF's agenda. This alignment required the TPLF to adopt a zero-sum political framing that characterized the Ethiopian state and its

central institutions as historically oppressive, thereby instrumentalizing ethnic grievance and fostering political antagonism within the broader Ethiopian polity (McCracken, 2004:185; Kebede, 2003:11; Hagmann, and Abbink, 2011:587; Ottaway, 1995:68; Young, 1996:106; Engedayehu, 1993:50). The TPLF's toxic political ideology has been exposed over time by opposition parties, intellectuals, and its own cadres who have left due to various factions. It is unfathomable that an ethnically based liberation movement that fought for the liberation of its/ethnic nation would not treat other nationalities or citizens with equality and respect once in power. Instead, introduce a scourge, whatever an outstanding personality he/she might have, maybe. Ethnocentrism is an ethos based on discrimination and favouritism; this has been a great challenge. It will remain a daunting task and a fundamental threat to national development and reconciliation among different ethnic groups in Africa, particularly in Ethiopia.

The Rise of TPLF and Analytical Reasoning

For a variety of reasons, the TPLF dominated the ruling party from 1991 to 2018 (Alamineh, Geremew, and Temesgen, 2021). To name a few: 'the fatigue of the Ethiopian public as a result of a thirty-year war between the Derg and various rebellious groups.' Furthermore, the central government's economic failure, the undemocratic nature of the Ethiopian Workers' Party (EWP), the assassination of professional military officers, and the global change of political orders, specifically the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, ideological change (Ottaway, 1995; Keller, 1992; Berhe, 2009; Seife, 2020). From the 1970s and continuing until the early 1990s, war and conflict engulfed Ethiopia in all its facets.

The period was characterised by a confluence of multifaceted conflicts that challenged the Ethiopian state's sovereignty. These ranged from an interstate conflict with expansionist Somalia in the Ogaden to a protracted secessionist war in the north waged by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Concurrently, the TPLF pursued its own nationalist ambitions; while its public platform advocated for self-autonomy, its foundational objective remained the establishment of an independent Tigrayan republic, a secessionist agenda often veiled in strategic secrecy. This landscape of dissent was further populated by a fragmented array of insurgent groups, including the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM), and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), all of which contributed to the erosion of the central government's authority (Mesfin, 2017). While this fragmentation of armed resistance was a significant factor in the Derg's eventual collapse, the TPLF ultimately held a superior strategic position. Its advantage was derived from a larger, more disciplined guerrilla force, an extensive militia network, and a cohesive political organisation that enabled it to capitalise on the weakened state and outmanoeuvre other contenders for power.

In 1991, Ethiopia faced a total shambles of civilian government and military command, and the political situation was out of control (Mjaaland, 2013). The TPLF was the only rebel movement that was more malevolent and well-organised to control the entire country. Except for the TPLF, the international community had no choice but to transform the country into a civil and democratic state. Furthermore, it became clear that the liberation movements could not work as a collective for a variety of reasons, including a narrow focus on village structure and a failure to consider the big picture. The TPLF was founded in 1975 as a pro-independence Tigrayan armed rebellion force with the political goal of securing self-determination (Berhe, 2009:99). When it began, self-contradictory political strategies were common among TPLF leadership and combatants.

The confusion distracted the Tigrayan rebellion as a secessionist force and the TPLF when they assumed a government role in Ethiopia until they were deposed in 2018. The TPLF has never attempted to transform itself into an Ethiopian force; from 1991 to 2018, it served as a liberation

front while administering the entire country. Meles Zenawi and Sibhat Nega were the core group that planned the formation of the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT); they are regarded as a manipulator and inward-looking TPLF leader (Berhe) (2009:4). Meles provided a professional service to Ethiopia until his death while dreaming and working for an independent Tigray. George Orwell's 1984 expresses "war is peace, freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength." There is a lesson that can be drawn from ignorance: the inability of citizens to subvert their will and recognise and accept the contradictions of an authoritarian regime's power.

Berhe (2009:4) describes the EPRDF as "unquestionably an interface of the Tigrayan front" but does not equate the TPLF with the Tigrayan people. The TPLF is a narrow and self-serving ethno-nationalist movement (ibid). Similarly, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) had been covert and used as a cliché to confuse public opinion and the international community; otherwise, the TPLF was the driving force. Since there are no mechanisms to identify how far and deep the people of Tigray and political leadership are, the party systems harmonisation level remains subjective until such time makes a clear demarcation between party, citizens and government. The root cause of Ethiopian political leadership failure is the mistaken assumption that portraying the people is in sync with the leaders. Such attitudes have been entrenched since the overthrow of Ethiopia's last Emperor, King Haile Selassie.

The paradox of secessionist governance and doctrinal asymmetry needs to be examined through a different lens. The analysis of Ethiopia's governance structure must consider the philosophical challenge of political agency and destiny as articulated by Joseph de Maistre, who asserted the inherent futility of imposed constitutional engineering: "All these constitutions are vain attempts because it is a capital axiom... [that each nation has the government that it deserves]; thus, all that one can do for a nation... means nothing, has no effect, it only produces evil" (Upton, 2009: 154). This perspective highlights the epistemological chasm inherent in the TPLF's hegemonic projection, specifically the calculated effort by the ruling elite to collapse the distinction between the goals of the leadership and the collective identity of the Tigrayan populace.

A critical point of inquiry must address the doctrinal asymmetry that permitted a political faction primarily dedicated to secession to achieve and maintain control over the central authority of the state it fundamentally sought to dissolve. This scenario presents a profound paradox of political legitimacy, defying conventional theoretical uniformity in state-building and nationalism. Furthermore, the distortion of political ideals, once applied to the volatile reality of a multi-ethnic state, echoes the warning of Plato (2005: 231) concerning the corruption of the *Ideal State*. When the nurtured ideal becomes a delusion, the resulting political reversal can generate profound confusion, leading to widespread injustice, political cowardice, and systemic vice. This philosophical context suggests that the TPLF's failure to reconcile its foundational separatist ideology with its realised role as the central national government created an internally conflicted state apparatus, prone to systemic failure.

It remains a critical issue to evaluate the overall situation favouring the TPLF to control Ethiopian politics' upper ladder and sustain the ascendancy for twenty-eight years. It is illogical to suppose that the power source is merely a question of chance. Undeniably, the TPLF developed a critical political and military force capable of striding and confronting the central government over time. Though the TPLF was undeniably a formidable adversary that had developed capabilities over time, additional factors accelerated and favoured control of the central government in the shortest possible time. Keller (1992:624) and Ottaway (1995:73) analysed that the TPLF gains are prolonged war, non-existent or fragile opposition parity, disgruntlement of the Ethiopian population, and a weak economy unable to support the war. Furthermore, it was alluded that the

people were deeply dissatisfied with the military dictatorship and that the end of the Cold War and the subsequent effect of political relations with the Eastern Bloc had a devastating effect.

The Ethiopian student movement has contributed a great deal of political consciousness to the general public. However, there is a broader belief that the movement was hijacked from land to tailor advocacy to impose socialism on the Ethiopian people. Ottaway (1995:69) underlines that TPLF had its genesis in the student movement that served as a hotbed of Marxist-Leninist indoctrination and Stalinist tendency. Nonetheless, the TPLF took it a step further, became a pro-Albanian movement and self-determination architecture all the way to secession. External pressure, particularly from the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), ironically played a significant role in the TPLF's denial of secession as a programme.

Introduction of Revolutionary Democratic Centralism as an Institutional Mechanism

Democratic centralism is associated with socialism as a Leninist practice in which political decisions bind all party members coherently as the vanguard of a revolutionary approach. Berhe (2009:234) stated from the perspective of the TPLF elite leadership that the concept of 'revolutionary democracy' arose from Lenin's theses on 'Bourgeois Democracy and the Proletarian Dictatorship.' I agree that the importation of such an idea demonstrates the TPLF leadership's shenanigans and myopia, inability to understand the difference between the contexts of the Tigrayan peasantry population vs industrially developed Russian society. In the context of the TPLF/EPRDF, revolutionary democratic centralism is defined as a top-down ideology-driven policy-making process in which decisions were made at the politburo or federal officials' level and implemented at regions, zones, and woredas without questioning the decision's merit (Hagmann and Abbink, 2011:584). It is undeniably true that revolutionary-democratic centralism was a one-way ticket to fulfilling the TPLF/EPRDF's unchecked authoritarian decision-making process in Ethiopia.

Democratic centralism was a tool that interlocked mechanisms that forced ordinary cadres to be obedient without considering the consequences of implementing specific party decisions. Employing revolutionary-democratic centralism was the only way for the TPLF/EPRDF to succeed from anticipated stiff resistance from the old guard bureaucratic staff of the Derg regime and address existing institutional weaknesses (Berhe, 2018:178). To some extent, I am convinced that democratic centralism is required in a society like Ethiopia that has no experience in the industrial revolution to develop the conscientiousness that is adapted to contemporary approaches. The misguided strategy of the TPLF/EPRDF was to administer the public sector, academia, and security forces through revolutionary-democratic centralisation, which was challenging to unite them all under one command. The method was well-organised, and it was backed up by training and preparing core cadres to implement the strategy. The programme has played a critical role in national economic development and law enforcement by centralising coordination. The structural connection between government and society is essential to narrow the relationship gap between the elite and community levels as well as to develop political culture (Jowitz, 1974: 1174).

It is appropriate to use democratic centralism as a method for the reengineering of businesses and the education of the people to boost production and patriotism. Berhe (2018: 308) defines 'revolutionary democracy' in the following way: ideology embraces a form of 'popular' or 'revolutionary' rather than 'liberal' democracy. Unified mass participation is valued over individually oriented pluralism. The contradiction remains the same as what TPLF/EPRDF could not divorce: the mix of Marxist-Leninist vanguard party introduced into ethnic politics. Similarly, the TPLF/EPRDF employed a hybrid of a developmental state and a pseudo-democratic regime,

making the Ethiopian people and political space a testing ground for anything and everything that crosses the minds of TPLF elites.

Ethnic Based Federalism and Its Divisive Impact in Ethiopia

In a nutshell, the TPLF/EPRDF designed and implemented Ethiopian ethnic-based federalism, which is still in use as a governance system by the current “Prosperity Party.” The federal arrangement is particularly absurd because it has become a source of conflict, discomfort, and insecurity for many Ethiopians. As a matter of academic exercise, it is necessary to investigate the ethnic federal model de jure, the motivating factors, and conformity or encounter with the fundamental principles of federalism. Berhe (2009:375) contends that the introduction of ethnic federalism was a pretext for universalism rather than a unitary state that valued diversity, a minority survival strategy for the TPLF in political and population spheres. The assumption also included managing ethnic conflicts by establishing distinct administrative spaces and determining how to respond to the “Ethiopian student movement historical question” of nationalities, including self-determination up to secession. In reality, none of the presumptions came true, and ethnic federalism contradictions became more common. It is relevant to evaluate ethnic federalism as a governance model and the ethnic and language dynamics.

A critical evaluation of the advantages and limitations of Ethiopia’s ethnic-based federalism necessitates situating the discussion within the broader theoretical framework of decentralisation and its conceptual challenges. In principle, the devolution of power from the centre to regional and local authorities is not inherently problematic; rather, it aligns with the normative rationale of bringing governance closer to the people and enhancing participatory decision-making at the community level. However, as Tafese and Erk (2017:9) observe, Ethiopia’s ethnopolitical federal arrangement has produced exclusionary outcomes, whereby citizenship recognition and rights are often mediated through ethnic affiliation as defined in regional constitutions. Consequently, individuals or groups not belonging to the dominant ethnic category within a given region frequently face political marginalisation and limited access to democratic rights.

This structural configuration has fostered a dual conception of citizenship, federal and regional, which, in practice, entrenches an “*us versus them*” mentality across the federation. The resulting fragmentation undermines national cohesion and perpetuates inter-regional suspicion. Berhe (2009:381) further contends that the reorganisation of administrative boundaries along ethnic lines has intensified territorial disputes and contestations over demarcation, reflecting deeper tensions between ethnic identity and civic citizenship. Thus, contradictions embedded within both the federal and regional constitutional frameworks have rendered the notion of citizenship ambiguous, contested, and a persistent source of intercommunal conflict in Ethiopia’s post-1991 political landscape.

According to Elazar (1987:84), the concept of federalism is thought to have realised some form of political assimilation based on self-rule and shared rule patterns. This includes a mutual recognition of each partner’s integrity. Federalism is a broad and fluid concept with no specific guidelines or formula to explain it explicitly. Firstly, we must consider how and why concept-stretching is required in federal systems. Whether they are coming together or holding together, federal systems are a governance structure through which you can conduct democracy and justice or otherwise (Stepan, 2005). From an African perspective, I see federalism in a negative light because it is associated with a Eurocentric governance model. However, this does not imply that federalism is a lousy concept in general; nonetheless, it is regarded as a covenant between two or more parties to form a governance system perspective.

The fundamental principle of coming together is incompatible for African countries, given the continent's historical nation formation. On the other hand, Ethiopian federalism includes a '**Nativisation**' component in addition to language and ethnic/tribal formula. Aside from constitutional differences between the federal and regional assemblies, there is a conflict between the approaches of symmetrical representation for "indigenous" and asymmetrical isolationist for none natives. Stepan (2005) alluded to a governance structure, whether federal or unitary, with no attachments to multinational democracies, and while the United States was a federal structure, African Americans were marginalised. Similarly, the United States of America and the Soviet Union USSR were federal governments, but their democratic robustness was incomparable; this meant that federalism is not a guarantee of democratic dispensation and wealth distribution.

Federalism, structural collapse, and policy diffusion need to be examined cautiously. While federal political systems are theoretically underpinned by the structural capacity to enhance citizen rights and facilitate economic development through the formal decentralisation of political authority and the equitable distribution of resources (fiscal federalism), their viability in many developing polities frequently succumbs to institutional collapse precipitated by deficient mechanisms of fiscal management. Successful federal architecture necessitates a robust framework for managing intergovernmental tensions, predicated on proportional financial and human resource contributions from all constituent units. Historical precedents underscore this structural fragility. The failure of the East African Community (EAC) federative project, for instance, is attributed to a confluence of factors, including leadership competition among Jomo Kenyatta, Julius Nyerere, and Idi Amin, intra-unit ethnic conflict, and inadequate budgetary support (Elazar, 1987: 241).

The core paradox of ethnic federalism, the model intended to structurally accommodate inter-ethnic tensions, is that it frequently becomes a source of heightened conflict, as tragically demonstrated by the experiences of Yugoslavia, South Sudan, and Ethiopia. Ethiopia's constitutional framework, which enshrined the right to secession and was explicitly derived from the Stalinist Soviet nationality theory (Tafese and Erk 2017: 9), served as a source of doctrinal policy diffusion. The TPLF subsequently promoted this model in structurally distinct contexts, notably South Sudan and Somalia. This policy diffusion is particularly incongruous in the latter case, as Somalia is largely homogenous in language and religion, with internal political dynamics predominantly structured by clan-based societies. The fundamental problem is the persistent application of a governance model rooted in Stalinist theory to African multi-ethnic states, where its structural and contextual compatibility is severely compromised.

The Stalinist conception of nation and nationality, as adopted in Ethiopia, has served as a significant impediment to the country's socioeconomic cohesion and national integration over the past three decades. The Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s, in its quest for revolutionary transformation, imported a reductive and ahistorical interpretation of Marxist-Leninist theories of national self-determination, failing to contextualise them within Ethiopia's complex social fabric and historical experience. This uncritical transplantation of Stalinist theory, devoid of a nuanced understanding of consociationalism or indigenous pluralism, produced an ideological framework that privileged ethnicity as the primary axis of political mobilisation. Consequently, this approach fostered ethnic polarisation rather than national solidarity, entrenching divisions that continue to undermine intercommunal coexistence.

The revolutionary narrative that posited the existence of an "oppressor" and "oppressed" nationality within Ethiopia was theoretically inconsistent and empirically unfounded. Historically, no single ethnic group exercised monopolistic control over the means of production, nor did Ethiopia's agrarian and feudal structures align with classical Marxist categories of class exploitation along ethnic lines. The notion of ethnic dominance thus constitutes a mythologised

construct, unsupported by the socio-economic realities of the time. As agrarian practices across Ethiopia were uniformly subsistence-based, rooted in smallholder farming and ox-driven cultivation, the material conditions for capitalist class formation were largely absent. Therefore, the binary revolutionary discourse advanced by sections of the student movement and later institutionalised in post-1991 governance structures represents a misapplication of dialectical materialism, one that distorted Ethiopia's historical and social realities and perpetuated enduring ethnic antagonisms.

The application of the Soviet model of nationalities, while a strategic response to the specific geo-historical circumstances of the USSR, proved to be a fundamentally flawed paradigm for Ethiopia and, by extension, many African states. The Soviet federation was conceived as a pragmatic framework to manage the "nationality question" within an existing multi-ethnic empire (Elazar, 1987, p. 151). In contrast, Ethiopia's adoption of this model constituted a profound misalignment of political theory, imposing an exogenous governance structure onto a historically continuous, multi-ethnic nation-state with its own distinct social fabric. While the patriotic impetus of the Ethiopian student movement is undeniable, its intellectual trajectory, as noted by Berhe (2009, p. 63) and Kebede (2003, p. 8), was characterised by a political radicalism steeped in Marxism-Leninism, an ideology that often framed its struggle in abstract terms of 'imperialism' and 'feudalism.' Although the movement's radical critique was necessary to challenge the **ancien régime**, its fundamental error lay in the uncritical transplantation of a class-based analysis and a rigid governance model. This approach failed to account for the unique contours of Ethiopian society. Ethiopia is home to a variety of tribes that fall under the Negroid race classification. Including its complex inter-ethnic relationships and pre-capitalist economic formations, which could not be neatly mapped onto a European-derived theoretical framework.

The concepts of identity and language become unacceptable for federalism to provide complete self-rule to a specific ethnic group at the expense of other minorities and residents. Elazar (1987:99) contends that in ethnic or tribal federalism, minorities cannot be outvoted by majorities; territorial divides of power can protect minorities. Post-colonial African leaders abandoned any "tribalist" nature of party and governance structure that created divisions within African countries (Basedau, Bogaards, Hartmann, and Niesen, 2007:630). Some African leaders are '**Pan-Africanists in the morning, nationalists by day, and tribalists at night**'. This demonstrates the TPLF leaders who came to power to demonise the historical glory of the interconnectedness of 'Ethiopianism' and Pan Africanism. Without reengineering ethnic and language-based federalism, the TPLF's successors, the "Prosperity Party," are content to continue with the same Eurocentric patterns that have demonstrated a divisive impact on the economic, political, and socio-cultural context.

Many Ethiopian citizens anticipate that the Prosperity Party (PP) will advance an inclusive political agenda and initiate constitutional reforms aimed at promoting the broader public good, though such expectations remain uncertain. Nevertheless, there are growing concerns that the PP may continue to exploit the existing ethnoregional framework for political expediency, thereby preserving entrenched power dynamics rather than transforming them. This pattern reflects a broader tendency among certain African political elites, such as Ethiopia's late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who strategically instrumentalised ethnic divisions as a mechanism for political consolidation and regime longevity. Yet, from a socio-anthropological perspective, the ethnic and tribal distinctions often emphasised in African political discourse are historically and biologically porous and intertwined. As Roychoudhury (1982:20) notes, there exist notable genetic and cultural linkages among diverse African communities, including the Sara Majangay of Chad, Bedik of eastern Senegal, Shangan of Mozambique, Amhara of Ethiopia, Tswana and

Kung-Debe (Bushmen) of Botswana, Hottentots of Namibia, and Pedi of South Africa, reflecting deep historical interconnectedness rather than isolation.

Furthermore, while the African continent is often subsumed under the broader Negroid classification, paleoanthropological and genetic evidence indicate that Africa's human populations are highly diverse and regionally interlinked, as demonstrated by fossil and genetic findings spanning Morocco, Ethiopia, and South Africa (Excoffier et al., 1987:152). This analysis contends that the ethnic and tribal narratives underpinning Ethiopia's federal system are analytically problematic and historically reductive. They obscure the shared genealogical, cultural, and economic interdependencies that characterise African societies and, in doing so, perpetuate divisive political identities rather than fostering a pan-African or civic national consciousness.

The dominance of in All Sectors of the Economy, Political and Security Apparatuses

The TPLF established a comprehensive system of hegemonic control over the Ethiopian state, exercising direct and indirect authority across the political, economic, and security apparatus. This dominance extended beyond formal institutions to encompass what can be characterised as a "deep state" network, ensuring that key decisions and resource flows remained under its ultimate purview. This control was operationalised through a sophisticated strategy of multi-level manipulation. Internationally, the regime skillfully managed diplomatic missions and lobbied intergovernmental and multilateral organisations to cultivate legitimacy and insulate itself from external pressure. Domestically, it engaged in strategic manoeuvring of both state and private media to shape public perception and control the political narrative.

As scholars McCracken (2004, p. 193) and Kebede (2003, p. 16) contend, while ethnic-based politics are inherently partisan, the TPLF/EPRDF regime distinguished itself through the systematic exploitation of state machinery. The coalition's structure, which incorporated ethnically-based parties, created a façade of inclusion while simultaneously enabling a unique form of resource extraction. The TPLF, as the hegemonic core, uniquely manipulated federal institutions to redirect national resources, thereby consolidating an economic empire that served its partisan interests over national developmental goals. Furthermore, this scholarship argues that the regime deliberately fostered an atmosphere of public distrust and inter-ethnic suspicion. Under the guise of promoting democracy and ethnic self-rule, this strategy was designed to fractionalize civil society and prevent the emergence of a unified opposition, thereby creating fertile ground to "ripen the revolutionary fruits" of its long-term political and economic dominance.

The TPLF constructed a massive business empire with a strategic goal in mind; they believed that control of the economic space eventually reflected and manipulated the political space adequately. However, the blunder did not include the priority to win the hearts and minds of the masses. Regardless, the economic dynasty that benefited from a manipulative and grid perspective was not intended to trickle down to the critical mass other than the political elite. Woldesenbet (2020:78) articulates that the nature of the TPLF business empire began while fighting with the central government. After gaining control of the government, power was registered as an endowment. The business empires continued and operated legally throughout the country at the expense of Ethiopians to benefit the TPLF elite. After the TPLF era ended, no one knew who would run this massive conglomerate, how and who would repay the illegally obtained capital, or who would be the legal trustee.

The opaque ownership and legal status of party-affiliated conglomerates, particularly those under the Endowment Fund for the Relief and Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT), present a formidable challenge to Ethiopia's political and economic transition. Scholarly analysis indicates that

EFFORT's initial capital was sourced from international relief funds and loans from state-owned banks, establishing a problematic nexus between partisan interests, public finance, and private enterprise from its inception (McCracken, 2004, p. 206). This foundational ambiguity, coupled with allegations of systemic corruption and resource diversion, underscores what McCracken identified as a critical need for transparent investigations into these corporate practices.

The legacy of this structure raises profound questions of corporate governance and transitional justice. The unresolved nature of these entities' ownership, controlled by TPLF elites yet deeply integrated into the national economy, creates a legal and ethical quagmire. Core questions persist regarding the legitimate ownership and fiduciary responsibility for these vast corporate holdings, as well as the mechanisms for settling their substantial debts to public financial institutions. The dissolution of this party-affiliated economic model is a necessary step toward fostering a competitive private sector and eliminating the unfair advantages that stifled ordinary entrepreneurs. Furthermore, these concerns are substantiated by international audits; a Seife (2024) article documented extensive illicit financial flows, foreign currency manipulation, and embezzlement within megaprojects linked to individuals and EFFORT-affiliated firms, cementing the perception of an institutionalised kleptocratic network.

Political Space Obstructions and Restrictions

Ethiopia's modern political trajectory has been marked by a profound absence of democratic dispensation. The country's transition from a semi-feudal empire to a socialist republic was abruptly interrupted by the emergence of a military dictatorship, resulting in widespread repression and the tragic loss of thousands of lives. The subsequent overthrow of the Derg regime by the TPLF and its coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), in 1991 did not usher in the anticipated era of democracy. Rather, it replaced one form of authoritarianism with another, an ideologically rigid, highly centralised system that dominated Ethiopian politics until 2018.

The undemocratic character of the TPLF/EPRDF was embedded in its organisational formation and governance philosophy. As Berhe (2009:79) notes, the TPLF developed its political and military strategies around a Maoist-inspired guerrilla warfare doctrine, which emphasised hierarchical control, ideological discipline, and collective subordination under the guise of revolutionary democracy. This approach institutionalised "democratic centralism," a structure in which one cadre would supervise five subordinates, extending vertically across both the party and state apparatus. Such a system eliminated genuine internal debate and reinforced obedience rather than participation.

Moreover, the TPLF leadership's limited experience in state governance and overreliance on militarised socialist philosophy constrained its capacity to transition from insurgent movement to inclusive civilian administration. As Ottaway (1995:70) observes, in the absence of any real countervailing political power after 1991, the TPLF's command-style organisation evolved into a hegemonic political order that prioritised control over consensus. The enduring legacy of this guerrilla warfare mentality impeded the establishment of democratic institutions, weakened civic engagement, and perpetuated a culture of authoritarian governance under a revolutionary guise.

The TPLF clique never undermined any political rivalry and established a systematic exclusion mechanism, still effective today. McCracken (2004:202) stated that 'opposition parties' restrictions were numerous, rendering the right to freedom of expression unthinkable, as stated in the constitution, and those who revolted faced retaliatory actions. The Ethiopian government repression and mass killings, intimidation, including arbitrary arrests, and massive blockages

of opposition party operations were widespread. The doctrine of the TPLF/EPRDF was aimed at denying political space and narrowing an antagonistic movement, which worked until the opposition sparked within the party and advanced a change. Surprisingly, the TPLF survived repeated challenges by the Ethiopian people, including a decisive vote against the opposition parties, but it was skilfully manipulated and manoeuvred in its favour (Berhe, 2009:377). TPLF has implemented several elections and party politics-influenced mechanisms, including the formation of mushrooming replica political parties with no political agenda to confuse public opinion. The TPLF surprised the world by controlling 100 per cent of parliament seats in 2010 and 2015.

Critical Analysis of the TPLF Collapse

The paradox of organisational resilience and systemic decline. This new content provides a rigorous analysis of the TPLF's decline, connecting organisational culture, ideological rigidity, and systemic fragility. The failure of TPLF is predominantly associated with widespread economic embezzlement, political gridlock, and stagnant thinking. Among the many manifestations are leaders blamed for being bigots, disdain for other political partners, and an old guard mentality. On the contrary, the TPLF has a robust organisational culture that helped it survive for over four decades as a guerrilla fighter group and a ruling government. Kebede (2003:13) The TPLF unwaveringly rejected such relegation of national liberation struggle to ethnic struggle, and by doing so, succeeded in fending off these parties' infringement into Tigrayan society. There were symptoms of disconnected and disorganised party structures and government institutions; however, the party's secretive nature did not notice the fragility of the systems.

The nature of the TPLF can be understood through the lens of organisational pathology, characterised by opacity, doctrinal schism, malicious envy, and cognitive closure. The TPLF's internal culture was deeply entrenched in secrecy and ideological rigidity, which perpetuated a lack of transparency between the leadership and the rank-and-file members. As Berhe (2009:99) observes, this pervasive culture of secrecy obscured the internal conflicts between the leadership elite and ordinary fighters, fostering mistrust and internal fragmentation. During the guerrilla struggle against the central government, for instance, the TPLF maintained intermittent negotiations with a parallel group, the Tigray Liberation Front (TLF), with the ostensible aim of forming a unified front. However, the TPLF's insular and enigmatic organisational behaviour ultimately precipitated a doctrinal schism, revealing deep-seated divisions in political vision and leadership approach.

From a psychosocial perspective, the TPLF's trajectory and internal contradictions may also be examined through Adlerian psychology, particularly the dynamics of superiority and inferiority complexes. Fromm, E. (1959) contends that feelings of superiority often emerge as a defensive mechanism to counteract latent inferiority based on Adler prior study. As he notes, "we should not be astonished if, in cases where we observe an inferiority complex, we also find a hidden superiority complex and vice versa." This psychological framework is instructive in understanding the TPLF's collective disposition, in which a historical sense of marginalisation coexisted with an inflated perception of moral and political superiority. The resulting cognitive dissonance between perceived victimhood and self-ascribed exceptionalism contributed to the TPLF's internal misperceptions, strategic miscalculations, and eventual political decline.

Attempts to evaluate TPLF's three decades of dominance, the party ends up alienated through the internal dynamic and smooth process. The question remains unanswered. Among the various factors that contributed to a lack of organisational transformation, leadership inertia is of the utmost importance as it impedes the transformation agenda. The lack of gravitas

transformation that comes to the arrogance of political culture and ignorance of organisational dynamism, including impunity and unchecked political and economic dominance, encroached on the situation. The growth and widespread opposition to the TPLF/EPRDF is primarily related to the country's ethnic policy, which has resulted in inter-ethnic hostility and mass killings of members of ethnic and religious groups (Engedayehu, 1993:48). Seife (2021) indicated that the ethnic-based enclaves created a **“we versus them”** mentality that ‘allowed’ members of an ethnic group that does not belong because they speak a different language or have an ethnic identity of another group while being a citizen of the country to be distracted.

For three decades, the TPLF functioned as the hegemonic core and strategic command centre of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front coalition. A comprehensive understanding of the party's trajectory, encompassing its ascendancy and eventual political crisis, necessitates a multi-dimensional analysis that integrates historical, socio-political, economic, and security perspectives. Ultimately, the regime's failure can be attributed to its inability to adapt to internal resistance and navigate profound political turmoil, a symptom of deep-seated institutional stagnation. This rigidity was rooted in a monopolistic power structure that systematically conflated the state with the ruling party. As Gudina, (1994) and Dibaba asserted that notes, the chronic and unresolved problem in Ethiopian governance has been the lack of a clear institutional demarcation between the government and the dominant party, a condition that suffocated political competition and rendered the state apparatus a mere extension of partisan interests.

Why TPLF Pulled out of the Central Government?

The period marked by the dismantling of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) hegemony and the emergence of an internal counter-reformation is significant. The TPLF began to lose its legislative power and shifted towards the new reformist leadership within the EPRDF framework. Consequently, the reformist leadership became increasingly visible in its programs and activities, effectively alienating the TPLF from its previously established commanding position. The TPLF's historical role in providing political and economic guidance primarily benefited its affiliates rather than the broader nation. Recently, a pivotal moment occurred with a surprising fundamental shift in the struggle of Ethiopian students to establish an equitable society (Gudina, 1994).

Officially, the common reformist agenda of the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation and the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) aimed to mitigate the influence of the revolutionary-democratic party ideology. This decision effectively constituted a declaration of separation from the TPLF. The internal counter-reformation and erosion of TPLF hegemony strategically frame the power shift, the abandonment of “revolutionary-democratic” ideology, and the autonomous assertiveness of the former satellite parties. The subsequent step involved renaming both organisations to the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP) and the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP), reflecting a departure from revolutionary democratic principles and a transition towards liberal ideology. The satellite parties of the TPLF/EPRDF adopted a more assertive stance, making independent decisions without the approval of former commanders.

The 11th Congress of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was held in Hawassa on October 5, 2018. The re-election of Abiy Ahmed as EPRDF chairperson by a landslide was perceived as a consolidation of power and the conclusion of the TPLF era. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which did not join the Prosperity Party (PP) as a ruling party, operated as an opposition party. While being an opposition party is not inherently harmful or illegal, the TPLF began to engage in illegal activities within the Tigray Region, contributing to a state of ungovernability in the country. Several significant incidents exacerbated the growing divide

between the TPLF-led Tigray regional state and the federal government. The Prosperity Party was inaugurated in December 2019, effectively dissolving the EPRDF without a formal party procedure. Following the assassination of prominent singer Hachalu Hundessa in June 2020, Ethiopia experienced widespread ethnic clashes.

A critical escalation in the conflict between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the federal government commenced with the TPLF's recall of its representatives from federal institutions, signalling a formal withdrawal from the constitutional order. This was followed in September 2020 by the TPLF's administration of a regional election, an act the federal government deemed unconstitutional due to its contravention of a nationwide postponement prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation escalated into overt hostilities in November 2020, when TPLF forces launched a coordinated assault on the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defence Force. In response, the Prime Minister declared a state of emergency and initiated military action, characterising the conflict as a "law enforcement operation" against a "junta."

This descent into war is widely interpreted as the culmination of prolonged governance failures and the destabilising logic of ethnocentric politics. While both the TPLF and the ruling Prosperity Party (PP) maintain ethnic constituencies, the latter projects a comparatively liberal and centralised national vision. Forced from power, the TPLF retreated to its historic strongholds in the Dedebit and Kola Tembien highlands, re-adopting a guerrilla warfare strategy reminiscent of its insurgency origins in 1975, a move that framed the conflict as a zero-sum struggle for survival. While the TPLF's deep-rooted organisational structure and five-decade-long ideological socialisation within Tigray suggest a capacity for endurance, its nature has been fundamentally altered. The group has been transformed from a hegemonic national ruling party into a regional insurgency, indicating a profound and likely irreversible diminution of its political standing.

Conclusion

The conclusion underlines that from ethnic federalism to political fragmentation. The dismantling of hegemony and the quest for civic renewal in Ethiopia happened in distinctive problematic phases. The EPRDF was, in essence, the intellectual and political construct of the TPLF, a coalition whose formal inclusivity masked its deeply asymmetrical power dynamics. Structurally, the EPRDF functioned less as a federated coalition of equals and more as a centralised apparatus of TPLF domination. The party's ideological foundation institutionalised an ethnic-based federalism. An arrangement that, under the guise of self-determination, entrenched *chauvinism*, *ethnocentrism*, *parochialism*, and *tribal exclusivity*. These forces, systemically promoted by the political elite, fractured the moral and social fabric of Ethiopian society. The TPLF's period of ethno-authoritarian governance (1991–2018) presents an analytical paradox. It fostered deep-seated ethno-political antagonism and precipitated the secession of Eritrea (rendering Ethiopia landlocked), yet was concurrent with high rates of state-led economic development, necessitating critical inquiry into the equity and sustainability of this growth model.

The article attempted the crisis of ethnocratic governance in Ethiopia. The core of dilemma lies in the institutionalization of ethnic federalism and the resultant ethnocratic governance, which fundamentally replaced civic nationalism with a kinship-based political order. Philosophically, ethnocracy blurs the moral boundary between "civic" and "ethnic" identity, sharing a profound kinship with autocracy in its negation of individual freedom and ethical citizenship. The path toward renewal necessitates comprehensive constitutional and institutional reform, moving beyond flawed ideological binaries to cultivate a moral economy of coexistence that can repair the torn national sociocultural fabric. The philosophical task ahead is to cultivate a *new civic consciousness*, a political humanism that transcends tribalism and affirms the dignity of citizenship.

Ethiopia's future depends on transforming *ethnic federalism into an indigenous governance structure*, which is not Eurocentric, where diversity is celebrated not as a mechanism of division but as the foundation of unity. Only through such a reimagining can Ethiopia fulfil its historical vocation as *a moral polity and a spiritual civilisation*, not merely a state held together by force or fear.

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