

ETHIOPIA: ETHNIC FEDERALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Africa Report N°153 – 4 September 2009

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ETHIOPIA: ETHNIC FEDERALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), led by its chairman and prime minister, Meles Zenawi, has radically reformed Ethiopia's political system. The regime transformed the hitherto centralised state into the Federal Democratic Republic and also redefined citizenship, politics and identity on ethnic grounds. The intent was to create a more prosperous, just and representative state for all its people. Yet, despite continued economic growth and promised democratisation, there is growing discontent with the EPRDF's ethnically defined state and rigid grip on power and fears of continued inter-ethnic conflict. The international community should take Ethiopia's governance problems much more seriously and adopt a more principled position towards the government. Without genuine multi-party democracy, the tensions and pressures in Ethiopia's politics will only grow, greatly increasing the possibility of a violent eruption that would destabilise the country and region.

The endeavour to transform Ethiopia into a federal state is led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which has dominated the coalition of ethno-nationalist parties that is the EPRDF since the removal in 1991 of the Derg, the security services committee that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. The EPRDF quickly institutionalised the TPLF's policy of people's rights to self-determination and self-rule. The federal constitution ratified in 1994 defined the country's structure as a multi-cultural federation based on ethno-national representation.

The government has created nine ethnic-based regional states and two federally administered city-states. The result is an asymmetrical federation that combines populous regional states like Oromiya and Amhara in the central highlands with sparsely populated and under-developed ones like Gambella and Somali. Although the constitution vests all powers not attributed to the federal government in them, the regional states are in fact weak.

The constitution was applauded for its commitment to liberal democracy and respect for political freedoms and human rights. But while the EPRDF promises democracy, it has not accepted that the opposition is qualified to take power via the ballot box and tends to regard the expres-

sion of differing views and interests as a form of betrayal. Before 2005, its electoral superiority was ensured by the limited national appeal and outreach of the predominantly ethnically based opposition parties. Divided and disorganised, the reach of those parties rarely went beyond Addis Ababa. When the opposition was able to challenge at local, regional or federal levels, it faced threats, harassment and arrest. With the opportunity in 2005 to take over the Addis Ababa city council in what would have been the first democratic change of a major administration in the country's history, the opposition withdrew from the political process to protest flaws in the overall election.

The EPRDF did not feel threatened until the 2005 federal and regional elections. The crackdown that year on the opposition demonstrated the extent to which the regime is willing to ignore popular protest and foreign criticism to hold on to power. The 2008 local and by-elections went much more smoothly, in large part because the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) was absorbed with internal and legal squabbles, and several other parties withdrew after their candidates experienced severe registration problems. The next federal and regional elections, scheduled for June 2010, most probably will be much more contentious, as numerous opposition parties are preparing to challenge the EPRDF, which is likely to continue to use its political machine to retain its position.

Despite the EPRDF's authoritarianism and reluctance to accept genuine multi-party competition, political positions and parties have proliferated in recent years. This process, however, is not driven by democratisation or the inclusion of opposition parties in representative institutions. Rather it is the result of a continuous polarisation of national politics that has sharpened tensions between and within parties and ethnic groups since the mid-1990s. The EPRDF's ethnic federalism has not dampened conflict, but rather increased competition among groups that vie over land and natural resources, as well as administrative boundaries and government budgets.

Furthermore, ethnic federalism has failed to resolve the “national question”. The EPRDF’s ethnic policy has empowered some groups but has not been accompanied by dialogue and reconciliation. For Amhara and national elites, ethnic federalism impedes a strong, unitary nation-state. For ethno-national rebel groups like the ONLF (Ogaden National Liberation Front; Somalis in the Ogaden) and OLF (Oromo Liberation Front; the Oromo), ethnic federalism remains artificial. While the concept has failed to accommodate grievances, it has powerfully

promoted ethnic self-awareness among all groups. The international community has ignored or downplayed all these problems. Some donors appear to consider food security more important than democracy in Ethiopia, but they neglect the increased ethnic awareness and tensions created by the regionalisation policy and their potentially explosive consequences.

Nairobi/Brussels, 4 September 2009

ETHIOPIA: ETHNIC FEDERALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

After ousting Mengistu Haile Mariam's dictatorship in 1991, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), led by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, embarked on a project to radically transform the country's political system. The regime not only restructured the state into the current Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, but also vigorously redefined citizenship, politics and identity on ethnic grounds. The remake over the past eighteen years has been accompanied by tremendous hopes for a more prosperous and peaceful future, after decades of poverty, hunger and oppression. Despite continued economic growth, however, these aspirations have given way to wariness about the ethnically defined state centralism advocated by the EPRDF. Following the 2005 elections, broad frustration has emerged with the government's relapse into authoritarianism.

The absence of consensus regarding ethnic federalism results from contradictions that date back to the formation of the modern state in the nineteenth century and have become virulent since 1991: ethnically defined politics that decentralise rather than mitigate inter-ethnic relations; government-propagated democratisation inhibited by the ruling party's unwillingness to share power; and rapid economic growth and increasing urbanisation accompanied by growing inequality and social tensions. While these contradictions have been present since the beginning of EPRDF rule, they exploded in the 2005 elections.

Politics are intensely contested. At stake are fundamentally opposing visions of Ethiopia's history, problems and the way forward as conceived by different ethno-political constituencies and a diaspora dominated by Amhara and Amharised urbanites. While Meles Zenawi's regime has managed to stay in power, its support among the population at large, former sympathisers and even members of the powerful Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has continually eroded over the past decade. An increasingly bitter confrontation between the EPRDF and major opposition parties, the growing insurgency by the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in the east, recurrent localised inter-ethnic tensions and rapidly mounting economic challenges are all serious factors.

An explosive mix of international, national and local tensions has emerged that adds pressure on a government that has secured high levels of donor support and economic investment but faces increasing internal discontent. Many Ethiopians have benefited from the economic modernisation of the past eighteen years. Yet, many in the rapidly growing population also feel that they are excluded from the opportunities and resources the EPRDF continues to control. Segments of the urban, educated middle class in particular demand greater decision-making power.

This report provides a synopsis of politics since 1991. It takes stock of the EPRDF's major institutional policies and practices, as well as the political dynamics unleashed by "ethnic federalism",¹ the contested centrepiece of the system, whose achievements and shortcomings require a holistic assessment that takes into account the formal and informal rules, decision-making and practices that shape political life. Particular attention is paid to how well ethnic federalism has satisfied its promises to enable popular participation, balance strong urban-rural and highland-lowland disparities, enhance delivery of services and maintain stability.

¹ Ethnic federalism includes ethnically defined national citizenship, self-determination on an ethno-linguistic basis as enshrined in the constitution, ethnically defined political representation and decision-making at all administrative levels and related policies.

II. FEDERALISING THE POLITY

A. THE IMPERIAL PERIOD (-1974)

Ethiopia is the only African state never colonised by a foreign power. It traces its origin to the kingdoms that emerged in the northern highlands in the fourth century CE.² Centuries of history were marked by competition between Amhara and Tigray aristocratic dynasties and conflict with Muslim emirates of the surrounding lowlands, as well as the Oromo migrations into the highlands. The modern nation-state emerged in the nineteenth century.³ Emperor Tewodros initiated the first efforts to unify and modernise the Abyssinian empire during his reign from 1855 to 1868.⁴ He established the first national army, initiated a land reform and propagated the use of Amharic instead of Ge'ez (the old South Semetic court and church language). His modernisation agenda sparked opposition from the land-holding clergy as well as rival lords, and his army was eventually defeated by an alliance of domestic rivals and British forces in 1868.

Emperor Yohannes IV from Tigray, who succeeded Tewodros in 1872, adopted a much less confrontational stance towards the church and powerful principalities, devolving power to the regional aristocrats who recognised his status as the *negus negast* (king of kings). Yohannes's rule was marked by increasing international interference, notably by European powers and Egypt, whose military advance was stopped by Ethiopian troops in 1875.⁵ Yohannes was killed in 1889 in an attack by the Sudanese Mahdists. The next emperor, Menelik II, embarked on an aggressive, at times brutal, westward and southward expansion, subjugating and incorporating Oromo, Sidama, Gurage, Wolayta and other groups.⁶ This

was coupled with advances in road construction, electricity and education, development of a central taxation system and foundation of the new capital, Addis Ababa.

Despite an 1889 treaty in which Italy recognised Menelik's sovereignty in return for control over Eritrea, tensions and conflict between the two states culminated in the battle of Adwa on 1 March 1896, in which Ethiopian forces decisively defeated the colonial army. After Menelik's death in 1913, the centralisation drive continued under his grandson, Iyasu (1913-1916), and Haile Selassie I (1930-1974),⁷ halted only by the Italian occupation between 1936 and 1941. The government's military and repressive capacities grew considerably during Haile Selassie's reign. Though the emperor was widely admired internationally, his domestic policies were less successful, as famine and political protest increasingly challenged his rule.⁸ A coup d'état by the commander of the imperial bodyguard was averted in 1960, but growing popular dissatisfaction with his feudal politics prepared the way for his downfall.

The imperial period and the formation of the modern state are interpreted in starkly different terms. The legacy is a source of considerable pride for Ethiopian nationalists, particularly Christian highlanders, but is viewed as internal colonialism by those the empire subjugated. Some historians consider Ethiopia a truly "multi-ethnic national society" that emerged from centuries of interaction and acculturation between ethnic groups.⁹ Others characterise the state formation as a colonial process by which an Abyssinian settler class, in alliance with foreign powers, colonised a large part of the current country.¹⁰

²Ethiopian historiography emphasises continuity between the Christian kingdom of Axum (fourth to seventh century CE), the Zagwe kingdom (c. 1150-1270), the "Solomonic" state (1270-1529), the Gonderine state (seventeenth century) and imperial Ethiopia (nineteenth century). See Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians: A History* (Oxford, 1998); and Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia* (London, 2000). For a contending view, see Christopher Clapham, "Rewriting Ethiopian History", *Annales d'Ethiopie*, vol. 18, no. 18 (2002), pp. 37-54.

³Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991* (Addis Ababa, 2002).

⁴A former *shifita* (bandit), Tewodros's capital was in Maqdels, south of Lallibella.

⁵This was the period of the scramble for the Horn of Africa by colonial France, Britain and Italy. The latter had established a presence in Massawa in today's Eritrea.

⁶*Neftegna* (Amharic for riflemen) conquered the new territories in the name of the emperor, settled the lands (*gebbar* in Amharic) and levied tribute from farmers. They tried to impose Amharic and the Christian Orthodoxy they considered superior to local non-Christian and pagan traditions. Some areas

retained a certain political and cultural autonomy as semi-independent enclaves. The peripheries, mostly inhabited by pastoralists, were the least affected by imperial expansion at the turn of the century. Donald L. Donham and Wendy James (eds.), *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology* (Oxford, 2002).

⁷Christopher Clapham, *Haile-Selassie's Government* (London, 1969).

⁸Until the beginning of the 1950s, Haile Selassie was perceived as a modernist by educated Ethiopians. By the end of the 1960s, they blamed him for the country's backwardness. Donald L. Donham, *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Berkeley, 1999), p. 123. On the peasant rebellions, see Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia: power and protest. Peasant revolts in the twentieth century* (Lawrenceville, 1996).

⁹This is typically the highland nationalist account of Ethiopian history as presented in Donald N. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (Chicago, 2000).

¹⁰This is typically the Oromo nationalist view as elaborated in Bonnie K. Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia: The making of a dependent colonial state in Northeast Africa* (Trenton, 1990).

B. THE DERG (1974-1991)

Starting in the mid-1960s, student protest paved the way for the downfall of the imperial regime. The student movement was radicalised by widespread rural poverty, feudal land practices and government repression. Highly idealistic and influenced by Ethiopian students abroad, it couched demands for political reform and the right of nationalities to self-determination in Marxist-Leninist and anti-imperialist terms.¹¹ By 1974, labour unions had joined the protests against the regime.¹² The decisive blow to Haile Selassie was dealt not by the popular uprising, however, but by mutinous military officers, who in June 1974 established the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, the Police and the Territorial Army known as Derg (Amharic for committee).¹³ Following bloody internal power struggles, Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged as the strongman within the Derg, which deposed the emperor on 12 September, abruptly ending the legendary dynasty.¹⁴ What had begun as a popular revolution against an autocratic ruler derailed into a brutal military dictatorship.¹⁵

In what became one of the most radical land reforms worldwide, the Derg abolished all feudal tenure and nationalised all land in March 1975, administering and redistributing it by newly established *kebelles* (peasant associations). These were initially welcomed by students as a means of genuine peasant emancipation¹⁶ but turned into instruments of central government control.¹⁷ The Derg also nationalised all financial institutions and private enterprises and subjugated agricultural production and markets to state control. While Haile Selassie had close ties with the U.S. and other Western powers, Mengistu in 1977 sought and received patronage from the Soviet Union and communist bloc. Soviet and Cuban

military aid was particularly instrumental in winning the 1977-1978 Ogaden War with Somalia.¹⁸

While the leftist student movement had a strong ideological program, it lacked organisation. Conversely, the Derg was well organised but initially lacked a political program apart from the vague patriotic slogan of "Ethiopia first". It adopted the Marxist-Leninist vocabulary from the students, who opposed the military coup and demanded an elected government. Political competition and differences over how to deal with the Derg divided the two foremost student organisations, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party and Meison (All Ethiopian Socialist Movement). The Derg first sided with Meison and then successively eliminated all contending political groups. In the process, it imposed itself as the vanguard party of the Ethiopian people, propagating socialism as the state doctrine.¹⁹ In what came to be known as the Red Terror, its security forces arrested, tortured and killed tens of thousands of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party members and other enemies in 1976.²⁰ Ruthless political violence became the trademark of the Mengistu dictatorship.

The Derg's repression, failed economic policy and forced resettlement and "villagisation" programs after the 1984-1985 famine created great resentment.²¹ Mengistu adopted an uncompromising position from the outset towards ethno-nationalists of the Eritrean Liberation Front and Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), who had already taken up arms against Haile Selassie in their quest for regional autonomy and later independence.²² Despite massive counter-insurgency campaigns throughout the 1980s, the Derg was unable to defeat the Eritrean rebels. While the EPLF pursued a more conventional warfare strategy, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) relied on mobilising the peasantry.²³ On a lesser scale,

¹¹ Randi Rønning Balsvik, *Haile Selassie's Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution, 1952-1977* (Addis Ababa, 1985).

¹² Bahru Zewde, *History*, op. cit., pp. 220-232.

¹³ John Markakis and Nega Ayele, *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, 2006).

¹⁴ Abyssinian emperors claimed descent from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

¹⁵ The Derg transformed into the Provisional Military Administrative Council in September 1974. Mengistu Haile Mariam, the Council's first vice-chairman, became head of state in 1977.

¹⁶ After the 1974 land proclamation, students were sent to teach in several rural education campaigns.

¹⁷ Christopher Clapham, "Controlling Space in Ethiopia" in W. James, D. I. Donham, Eisei Kurimoto and A. Triulzi (eds.), *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism and after* (Oxford, 2002), p. 15.

¹⁸ In 1977 Somalia invaded Ethiopia in an effort to conquer and annex Somali-inhabited regions.

¹⁹ The Provisional Military Administrative Council declared the National Democratic Revolution in April 1976, followed by the creation of the Provisional Office for Mass Organisational Affairs, which mobilised and indoctrinated the population. In 1984 the Worker's Party of Ethiopia, chaired by Mengistu, was established as the ruling party.

²⁰ Some of those persons responsible for the Red Terror campaign were brought to trial after the fall of the Derg. See Kjetil Tronvoll, Charles Schaefer and Girmachew Alemu Aneme (eds.), *The Ethiopian Red Terror Trials: Transitional Justice Challenged* (Oxford, 2009).

²¹ Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge, 1988).

²² Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism 1941-1993* (Cambridge, 1995).

²³ The EPLF considered Eritrea a victim of Ethiopian colonialism; the TPLF sought self-determination for Tigray and

and aided by the EPLF, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) waged hit-and-run attacks in the east and south east and from across the Sudanese border.²⁴ In 1989-1990 the EPLF and TPLF made important military gains, and on 21 May 1991 Mengistu fled to Zimbabwe. The victorious rebel forces reached Addis Ababa a week later.

C. FROM THE TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT TO THE FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC (1991-1994)

The TPLF had prepared for national leadership by establishing the EPRDF as an umbrella of ethno-national fronts in 1989. That coalition included the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM),²⁵ the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO)²⁶ and the Southern Ethiopia Peoples Democratic Front (SEPDF), but from the onset, the TPLF was its dominant political force. In a first major step to redefine the political landscape, the EPRDF invited all ethnic-based opposition parties to a transitional national conference in Addis Ababa in July 1991.²⁷ Almost 30 attended and adopted a provisional national charter, created an 87-member Council of Representatives and formed the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) led by the EPRDF.²⁸

Although the EPRDF encouraged the participation of a wide range of ethnic-based parties in the TGE, it excluded the pan-Ethiopian opposition, which had a strong base in Addis Ababa and drew support from the intellectual urban elite.²⁹ It had already decided on its general direction, and the national charter both institutionalised TPLF

policy and paved the way for Eritrea's independence in 1993, on the ground that the right to self-determination had been earned as a result of its colonisation by Italy.³⁰

The EPRDF's superior military and political authority and its determination to reshape Ethiopia on its own terms soon brought it into confrontation with its junior partners in the TGE. Particularly significant were the growing differences with the OLF between mid-1991 and the beginning of 1992 over whose forces should administer the Oromo-inhabited territories. Those differences, as well as competition between the OLF and the OPDO, escalated into clashes in which the TPLF routed the OLF.³¹ By the end of 1993 the Council of Representatives that ruled the TGE was largely reduced to the EPRDF and ethnic-based political parties of its making.³² While the TGE claimed multi-ethnic representation, it included no parties with differing views or policies on ethnically defined citizenship.

In December 1994, a constitutional assembly ratified the new constitution, which was lauded for its commitment to federalism, liberal democracy and respect of political freedoms and human rights.³³ It defined Ethiopia as a multicultural federation that operates on the basis of ethno-national representation. A bicameral parliament was created: the House of Peoples' Representatives, with 547 members directly elected for five years, and the House of Federation, with 108 representatives of the country's nationalities and tasked with constitutional interpretation and deciding issues related to national self-determination but without a legislative role.³⁴ A powerful prime minister and a ceremonial president make up the federal executive.³⁵

The constitution led to the creation of the nine ethnic-based regional states: Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromiya, Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz, Southern Nations,³⁶

other ethno-national groups within Ethiopia. This led to conflict between the two rebel fronts, who otherwise cooperated, in 1984-1985 and 1998-2000. Richard Reid, "Old Problems in New Conflicts: Some Observations on Eritrea and its Relations with Tigray, from Liberation Struggle to Inter-State War", *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 73, no. 3 (2003), pp. 369-401.

²⁴ Bahru Zewde, *History*, op. cit., p. 262.

²⁵ The EPDM, established in 1982 and subsequently renamed the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), represents the Amhara nationality within the EPRDF coalition.

²⁶ The TPLF established the OPDO as the vanguard Oromo party in 1990. Its members are mostly drawn from former Derg prisoners of war.

²⁷ Sarah Vaughan, *The Addis Ababa Transitional Conference of July 1991: its origins, history and significance* (Edinburgh, 1994).

²⁸ The EPRDF controlled 32 of the 87 seats in the Council of Representatives; the second party was the OLF, with twelve.

²⁹ This was the case of the EPRP and the newly established Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (COEDF), which opposed ethnic-based regionalisation. John Young, "Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia", *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 23, no. 70 (1996), p. 537.

³⁰ Kjetil Tronvoll, *Ethiopia: A New Start?* (London, 2000), p. 15.

³¹ A series of parties who opposed EPRDF policy left the TGE in 1992-1993. As in the case of the Sidama Liberation Front, they were replaced by ethnic-based parties friendly to the EPRDF, in the latter case, the Sidama People's Democratic Party.

³² Edmond J. Keller, "Making and Remaking State and Nation in Ethiopia", in Ricardo Rene Laremont, ed., *Borders, Nationalism, and the African State* (Boulder, 2005), p. 104.

³³ The constitution was ratified on 8 December 1994 and entered into force on 21 August 1995.

³⁴ Each member of the House of Peoples' Representatives represents approximately 100,000 persons. Twenty seats are reserved for minority groups. Each nation, nationality and people has one representative in the House of Federation, plus one additional member for every million of its people.

³⁵ Assefa Fiseha, *Federalism and the Accommodation of Diversity in Ethiopia: A Comparative Study* (Nijmegen, 2007), pp. 213-292.

³⁶ Five ethno-political entities were forcibly merged into the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR).

Gambella and Harar, while Addis Ababa and later Dire Dawa became federally administered city-states.³⁷ In restructuring Ethiopia into a multi-ethnic federation, the TPLF took its home region, Tigray, which it had administered since 1989, as the prototype for the new regional states. The resulting asymmetrical federation combines populous regional states like Oromiya and Amhara of the central highlands with sparsely populated, under-developed regional states like Gambella and Somali. Although the constitution vests all powers not attributed to the federal government in them, the regional states are relatively weak.³⁸ On 24 August 1995, the Federal Democratic Republic was formally proclaimed, with Meles Zenawi as prime minister and Negaso Gidado as president.

III. STATE-LED DEMOCRATISATION

The EPRDF firmly monopolises political representation, decision-making and public space. The contradiction between its de facto one-party state and its promises to deliver multi-party elections, human rights and self-determination has been the defining trait of politics since 1991. This has produced tensions between the government and the opposition, communal and inter-ethnic animosities and armed conflict between ethno-national rebels and the government, culminating in the 2005 election crisis.³⁹

Democratic centralism, the dominance of the party apparatus behind the façade of regional and local autonomy, an extensive patronage system and the use of force to silence opposition have severely hampered genuine democratisation. Although it has broadened its membership, the EPRDF's support base has continuously eroded since the disastrous war with Eritrea (1998-2000).⁴⁰ Once close to their rural Tigrayan constituency, the TPLF and the EPRDF top leaderships now largely operate in seclusion from the general public. This has led to a situation in which an increasingly smaller number of politicians – the TPLF executive committee and the prime minister's immediate advisers – decide the political fate of the country.

The 2005 crackdown on the opposition and irritated reactions to any criticism, domestic or foreign, indicate that the EPRDF feels itself under pressure.⁴¹ Although it has overseen sustained economic growth and advanced development, democratic rhetoric has not been matched by democratic practice. Dissent is provoked by the gap between promises and the political realities people experience in their everyday lives. There is a sentiment, particularly among the urban elite, that the EPRDF, like the Derg, betrayed democratic aspirations.⁴² But EPRDF authoritarianism is only part of the reason why democratic institutions are as weak today as when the federal republic was founded.⁴³ Federalism has allowed new

³⁷ The first five regional states (Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromiya, Somali) qualify as single ethnic states; the last four (Benishangul-Gumuz, Southern Nations, Gambella and Harar) are multi-ethnic regional states without a dominant ethnic group.

³⁸ Paul Brietzke, "Ethiopia's 'Leap in the Dark': Federalism and Self-Determination in the New Constitution", *Journal of African Law*, vol. 39, no. 1 (1995), p. 29.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, analyst, Addis Ababa, 24 July 2008.

⁴⁰ The war was triggered by a territorial dispute, but old political and economic disputes also divided TPLF and EPLF leaders. Tekeste Negash and Kjetil Tronvoll, *Brothers at War: Making Sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War* (Oxford, 2000).

⁴¹ The foreign ministry responds sharply to any criticism of the government in its "A week in the Horn of Africa" press release.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, Addis Ababa, July 2008.

⁴³ John Young, "Regionalism and Democracy in Ethiopia", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1998), p. 195.

ethnic elites to emerge but has not fundamentally altered the principle of elite-based paternalistic politics.⁴⁴

A. AUTHORITARIAN LEGACIES

The bitter ideological differences and violent infighting between the student movement and the Derg shaped many of Ethiopia's current intellectuals and leaders. Ideological and personal schisms within secretively organised parties and rebel groups have been trademarks of politics for four decades.

Political life in many ways reflects how the EPRDF and its constituent parties conceive policymaking. Both the TPLF and the EPRDF present themselves as legitimate representatives of rural citizens, who make up 84 per cent of the population.⁴⁵ Indeed, in the first decade of its rebellion against the Derg, the TPLF successfully mobilised peasants by skilfully fusing Tigrayan ethno-nationalism with Marxism-Leninism. Open discussion and evaluation sessions were encouraged to rally farmers to the revolutionary cause and optimise guerrilla tactics.⁴⁶ But though the EPRDF is formally committed to a "stable multi-party democratic system",⁴⁷ its decision-making, organisational principles and discourse reflect the Marxist-Leninist philosophy that has guided the TPLF since its foundation in 1975.

Experience of arbitrary government repression has frightened many Ethiopians away from politics. Involvement in government matters is considered dangerous and to be avoided at all costs,⁴⁸ though outside the realm of formal politics, there remain numerous examples of democracy from below that give citizens a stake in the management of their affairs. These more participatory mechanisms

exist at grassroots level among the peasantry and in the realm of traditional types of governance.⁴⁹

However, the key internal mechanism of the TPLF is the Leninist principle of democratic centralism; executive and central committee party members are in charge of all major policy decisions. These are transmitted to party officials and state administrators and must be adhered to; party members bear personal responsibility for their assignments. TPLF central committee members consider themselves not only the vanguard of the party, but also of the Tigrayan people, whose will is represented and interpreted by the party.⁵⁰ While debate is possible within the party, criticism by members once a decision has been made is considered factionalism. The nine-member executive committee takes decisions collegially, before they are approved by the central committee.

These organisational principles suited the exigencies of the armed rebellion and made the TPLF one of Africa's most disciplined and effective insurgent groups. But they also forged a "small, highly centralised, and secretive leadership"⁵¹ that occasionally bordered on paranoid. The creation of the clandestine Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (*Malalit*, MLLT) within the TPLF in the mid-1980s further reinforced this trend. This group, which admired Albanian communist leader Enver Hoxha, played a crucial role in shaping TPLF policy and internal rivalries alike.⁵² Although officially disbanded, the MLLT is shrouded in legend, and some of its protagonists dominate today's EPRDF, most prominently the former MLLT chairman and current prime minister, Meles Zenawi.

When faced with internal dissent in 2001 and popular opposition in 2005, TPLF leaders reverted to an authoritarian populism that echoed the party's Leninist origins. In recent years, critics within the party have been harshly sanctioned by Meles and his entourage. A number of senior government officials have sought asylum abroad. A case in point is the senior TPLF dissenters removed from their posts after accusing Meles in March 2001 of being too soft on Eritrea and undermining Tigrayan nationalism. Meles accused them of "Bonapartism", a Marxist term for a counter-revolutionary attitude.⁵³

⁴⁴The urban elites, who primarily make up government, opposition and civil society, tend to think they know best what uneducated peasants need and that they can speak on their behalf. Siegfried Pausewang, "Aborted or nascent democracy? Structural reasons for the failure of democratisation in Ethiopia", in G. M. Sørbrø and S. Pausewang (eds.), *Prospects for peace, security and human rights in Africa's Horn* (Bergen, 2004), p. 148; see also Messay Kebede, "From Marxism-Leninism to Ethnicity: The Sidelights of Ethiopian Elitism", *Northeast African Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2008), pp. 163-186.

⁴⁵"Summary and Statistical Report of the 2007 Population and Housing Census", Central Statistical Agency, 2008, at www.csa.gov.et.

⁴⁶John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975-1991* (Cambridge, 1997).

⁴⁷"EPRDF program", EPRDF, 2005, at www.eprdf.org.et/Eprdffiles/Basicdoc/Basicdocuments_files/EPRDF_Program.htm.

⁴⁸Sarah Vaughan and Kjetil Tronvoll, *The Culture of Power in Contemporary Ethiopian Political Life* (Stockholm, 2003).

⁴⁹Bahru Zewde and Siegfried Pausewang (eds.), *Ethiopia – The Challenge of Democracy from Below* (Addis Ababa, 2002).

⁵⁰Patrick Gilkes, *Ethiopia – Perspectives of Conflict 1991-1999* (Bern, 1999), p. 22.

⁵¹Gebru Tareke, *Power and Protest*, op. cit., p. 218.

⁵²Aregawi Berhe, "The origins of the Tigray People's Liberation Front", *African Affairs*, vol. 103, no. 413 (2004), pp. 569-592.

⁵³Paulos Milkias, "Ethiopia, the TPLF, and the Roots of the 2001 Political Tremor", *Northeast African Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2008), pp. 13-66.

The political elite reproduces a “culture of extremism”⁵⁴ that leaves little room for tolerance. The refusal to engage with political opponents was particularly observable during the 2005 elections.⁵⁵ The self-righteous and uncompromising attitudes of government and opposition leaders made dialogue impossible. At the same time, many political groupings, including the EPRDF and the opposition, cultivate a “cult of personality and party”.⁵⁶

The EPRDF inherited the organisational principle of democratic centralism and Maoist conceptions of mass political mobilisation from its TPLF founders.⁵⁷ It also took in not easily reconcilable ideological contradictions: the EPRDF advocates capitalism, yet retains a strong state role in the economy, including government land holding, and limits individual liberties. “Revolutionary democracy” is its attempt to reconcile the TPLF socialist legacy with global capitalism and market liberalism,⁵⁸ justifying the dominant position of its party-affiliated firms in the economy by arguing that prosperity requires the leadership of a strong party that can mobilise the people.⁵⁹

B. EVOLUTION OF MULTIPARTY POLITICS

While the EPRDF embraced multiparty politics half heartedly after 1991, it never considered that the opposition had a legitimate right to take power via the ballot box.⁶⁰ Due to its national dominance – ensured by the limited geographic appeal of the predominantly ethnically based opposition parties – it did not feel threatened until the 2005 federal and regional elections, but it has tended to regard expression of different political and economic interests as “like a betrayal, like treason”.⁶¹ When the divided and disorganised opposition parties did manage to extend their reach beyond Addis Ababa to

challenge incumbents at local, regional or federal levels, the security forces threatened, harassed and arrested their candidates.⁶² In 2005, when the opposition might have been able to control the city council in the federal capital, it withdrew from the political process to protest national electoral defects, thus forfeiting a chance to produce the first democratic change of a major administration in the country’s history.

Nevertheless, diversification of political positions and parties has occurred in recent years. The driving force behind this is not, however, democratisation or the inclusion of opposition parties in representative institutions. Rather a continuous polarisation of national politics has sharpened tensions between and within parties since the mid-1990s. As a result, almost all ethnic groups can now choose between candidates standing on different politico-ideological programs.

1. Elections without competition

Recent history illustrates the EPRDF’s overwhelming dominance at the ballot box. The first multiparty regional and district (*woreda*) elections, held on 21 June 1992, failed to offer an alternative. The OLF, the All Amhara Peoples’ Organisation Party and other ethno-national parties from the transitional government withdrew at the last minute, because their candidates faced intimidation, violence and fraud. The EPRDF received 96.6 per cent of the vote, and international observers qualified the election as “sterile, surreal and wholly formalistic”.⁶³

The next election occurred on 5 June 1994, when a 547-member assembly was chosen to revise and ratify the draft constitution, whose clauses on state land ownership and the right of ethnic groups to self-determination “up to and including secession” were particularly disputed. Although some public discussion of the draft took place, a climate of political polarisation and distrust prevailed, the major opposition parties continued their election boycott, and the EPRDF and its affiliate parties won 484 seats.⁶⁴

The first federal and regional parliamentary elections, on 7 May 1995, continued the pattern of non-participation by the main opposition parties. Rural residents were mostly apathetic, though their registration and voting

⁵⁴ Bahru Zewde, “What Did We Dream? What Did We Achieve? And Where Are We Heading?”, *Ethiopian Economic Association* (Addis Ababa, 2004), p. 7.

⁵⁵ Melakou Tegegn, “Power Politics: Kinijit in the 2005 Elections”, *Journal of Developing Societies*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2008), p. 279.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

⁵⁷ Sarah Vaughan and Kjetil Tronvoll, *Culture of Power*, op. cit., p. 15.

⁵⁸ Revolutionary democracy was also a response to critics within the TPLF who were unhappy with the increasingly liberal economic policies of the EPRDF government. Crisis Group interview, Ethiopian analyst, 13 March 2009.

⁵⁹ Jon Abbink, “Discomfiture of democracy? The 2005 election crisis in Ethiopia and its aftermath”, *African Affairs*, vol. 105, no. 419 (2006), p. 195.

⁶⁰ Christopher Clapham, “Comments on the Ethiopian Crisis”, *Ethiomediamedia.com*, 14 November 2005, at www.ethiomediamedia.com/fastpress/clapham_on_ethiopian_crisis.html.

⁶¹ Siegfried Pausewang, “Aborted or nascent democracy?”, op. cit., p. 135.

⁶² Sandra Fullerton Joireman, “Opposition Politics and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: We Will All Go down Together”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 35, no. 3 (1997), pp. 387-407.

⁶³ “An Evaluation of the June 21, 1992 Elections in Ethiopia”, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) and African American Institute (AAI), 1991, p. 6.

⁶⁴ Siegfried Pausewang, “The 1994 Election and Democracy in Ethiopia”, Norwegian Institute of Human Rights, 1994.

numbers were high, because many feared that displaying anti-government attitudes or sympathy for the opposition would provoke repercussions.⁶⁵ Harassment and intimidation of opposition supporters occurred throughout Amhara, Oromiya and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region (SNNPR).⁶⁶ In Tigray the TPLF recruited "independent" candidates to avoid the impression of a non-competitive election. The EPRDF claimed a sweeping victory in an election that became the "final act in a four-year process of political closure".⁶⁷

Opposition decisions to contest the 14 May 2000 federal and regional parliamentary elections resuscitated multi-party competition. Yet, candidates were mostly unable to challenge the EPRDF machine. Where they did, government officials manipulated the result by arrests and vote buying and rigging.⁶⁸ Serious irregularities required the National Election Board to reschedule voting in parts of SNNPR to 25 June, and the Somali region voted only on 31 August.⁶⁹ Elections in Addis Ababa and other cities were freer, and voters had options among candidates.⁷⁰

2. The 2005 elections

The federal and regional elections of 15 May and 21 August 2005 proved to be a historic watershed. The hitherto submissive population turned into an enthusiastic electorate in a moment of near revolutionary quality.⁷¹ For the first time, citizens could choose between candidates from a variety of competing camps. Unprecedented levels of freedom of political expression and popular excitement marked the campaign. State television and radio allowed opposition parties to air their views. Well-publicised debates, for example between Deputy Prime Minister Adissu Legesse and Birhanu Nega, a leader of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD),⁷² electrified

the public. Many believed a "new era of democracy" had dawned, and the EPRDF would leave office if it lost.⁷³

The EPRDF's decision to permit a more open process was grounded in a belief that more competitive elections would showcase democratic credentials for the donor community and the erroneous assumption that rural voters would cast their ballot for the ruling party, because they had benefited from its rural development policy or out of fear. However, two major opposition coalitions were able to capitalise on discontent with the regime. The CUD, established shortly before the election,⁷⁴ garnered support despite internal rivalries and organisational weaknesses. Chaired by Hailu Shawal, a former Derg bureaucrat, it united a number of parties under its umbrella.⁷⁵ It fielded candidates nationwide but drew its strength primarily from urban, educated and ethnic Amhara constituencies.⁷⁶

The opposition United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) pulled together five domestic⁷⁷ and nine exiled parties.⁷⁸ Led by Addis Ababa University professors Merera Gudina of the Oromo National Congress (ONC) and Beyene Petros of the Ethiopian Social Democratic Federal Party (ESDFP), it differed from the EPRDF in style more than substance, as its domestic parts (but not its more radical exile members, particularly the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party) endorsed ethnic federalism

⁶⁵ Kjetil Tronvoll and Øyvind Aadland, "The Process of Democratisation in Ethiopia – An Expression of Popular Participation or Political Resistance?", Norwegian Institute of Human Rights, 1995.

⁶⁶ Patrick Gilkes, *Ethiopia*, op. cit., p. 25.

⁶⁷ Terrence Lyons, "Closing the Transition: The May 1995 Elections in Ethiopia", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1 (1996), pp. 121-142.

⁶⁸ Kjetil Tronvoll, "Voting, Violence and Violations: Peasant Voices on the Flawed Elections in Hadiya, Southern Ethiopia", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2001), pp. 697-716.

⁶⁹ Siegfried Pausewang, Kjetil Tronvoll and Lovise Aalen (eds.), *Ethiopia since the Derg: a decade of democratic pretension and performance* (London, 2002).

⁷⁰ The political climate in Addis Ababa is freer due to its more cosmopolitan outlook and the presence of international organisations, NGOs and diplomats.

⁷¹ Melakou Tegegn, *Power Politics*, op. cit., p. 298.

⁷² The CUD was also known by its Amharic acronym, Kinijit.

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, Addis Ababa, July 2008.

⁷⁴ The CUD was formed about one year before the May 2005 elections. CUD was formed in October 2004 and recognised by the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) in November 2004.

⁷⁵ These were the All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP), led by Hailu Shawal; the United Ethiopia Democratic Party – Medhin (UEDP-Medhin), led by Admassu Gebeyehu; the Ethiopian Democratic League (EDL), led by Chekol Getahun and Rainbow Ethiopia: Movement for Democracy and Social Justice led respectively by AEUP, UEDP-Medhin, EDL; and Rainbow Ethiopia, led by Birhanu Nega. The AEUP and UEDP-Medhin were the strongest components.

⁷⁶ John Ishiyama, "Nominations and Party Development in Ethiopia: The Opposition and the 2005 Parliamentary Election", *African and Asian Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1-2 (2007), pp. 81-105.

⁷⁷ Oromo National Congress, Ethiopian Social Democratic Federal Party, Southern Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Coalition, All Amhara People's Organization and Ethiopian Democratic Unity Party. The UEDF's Amharic acronym was Hibret.

⁷⁸ Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front, All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement, Ethiopian Democratic Union-Tehadiso, Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, Ethiopian National United Front, Ethiopian People Federal Democratic Unity Party, Gambella People's United Democratic Front, Oromo People's Liberation Organization and Tigrayan Alliance for Democracy.

and state land ownership.⁷⁹ Started in the U.S., it included intellectuals and former Derg officials sympathetic to Meison. Its member parties had their stronghold in SNNPR and Oromiya. The Wollega-based Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) participated as an independent opposition party, financially dependent largely on its leader Bulcha Demeska, a former chairman of the Awash International Bank.

The heated campaign brought out most issues, particularly the land question, ethnic federalism and relations with Eritrea. While the EPRDF defended state land ownership, the CUD advocated private and communal holdings,⁸⁰ criticised the ruling party's conception of ethnic-based citizenship and demanded revocation of Article 39 of the constitution⁸¹ and return to a more unitary nation-state.⁸² The UEDF and OFDM supported ethnic federalism and state land ownership in principle but objected to their authoritarian implementation and repeatedly challenged Meles's Eritrea policy and endorsement of the Algiers peace agreement.⁸³

EPRDF officials portrayed CUD leaders as antiquated nationalists who sought to reestablish Amhara dominance over the country's multiple ethnic groups. They likened the CUD agenda to that of Rwanda's Hutu extremists (the Interahamwe) and described its candidates as *neftegna*, the soldier-settlers who expropriated land from the southern peasantry in imperial times. Nationalist politicians responded with the charge that the EPRDF was breaking the Ethiopian nation-state into ethnic groups as part of a Machiavellian divide-and-rule strategy.

To the surprise of all, the combined opposition won 172 seats in the House of Peoples' Representatives. While the EPRDF and its affiliated parties took 372,⁸⁴ the opposition's gains shocked the ruling party to the core. It had expected substantial losses in the cities but not the massive rural rejection. Farmers in Amhara region voted for the CUD due to the expected defeat of the EPRDF and

arrival of a new ruler.⁸⁵ The TPLF and its allies maintained their one-party rule only in Tigray and the peripheral regions. The larger regions and major towns were fiercely contested, mainly between the EPRDF and CUD in Amhara, while the UEDF was a third factor in SNNPR.⁸⁶ In Oromiya region, competition between OPDO (an EPRDF affiliate), the CUD, UEDF and OFDM offered a genuine alternative.⁸⁷

The CUD was particularly successful in more urban districts with bigger land holdings and relatively poor communities.⁸⁸ In Addis Ababa, it achieved a landslide, winning 137 of the city council's 138 seats. It received important financial backing from the diaspora, which subsequently lobbied for a tougher U.S. stance towards Ethiopia. Domestically, its backbone was the urban middle class, mostly Amharas and Gurages, who felt disenfranchised by the government's economic and ethnic policies.⁸⁹ Many educated Amhara urbanites are nostalgic for Ethiopia's past grandeur, and a significant part of the Gurage mercantile class lost shares in the fertiliser and agriculture sectors due to EPRDF empowerment of farmer cooperatives. Excluded from the EPRDF's patronage network, these two constituencies used the election to protest. With its nationalist and Christian image, the CUD gained few votes among Muslims and marginalised lowland groups, such as the Somalis and Afar, who voted for the EPRDF-affiliated SPDP and ANDP.

If the campaign suggested the dawn of a more democratic era, post-election events saw the return of winner-take-all politics.⁹⁰ Claiming large-scale rigging, the CUD rejected the National Election Board results although it had decisively won the Addis Ababa regional and federal seats.⁹¹ The European Union (EU) election observation mission criticised the government for irregularities during the ballot counting and tabulation.⁹² Convinced they

⁷⁹ Leonardo R. Arriola, "Ethnicity, Economic Conditions, and Opposition Support: Evidence from Ethiopia's 2005 Elections", *Northeast African Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2008), p. 136.

⁸⁰ "Kinijit Manifest", CUD, 2006 (unofficial translation).

⁸¹ Article 39 grants "every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia ... an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession".

⁸² Wolbert G. C. Smidt, "Parlamentswahlen in Äthiopien", *Africa Spectrum*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2005), p. 320.

⁸³ Crisis Group Africa Report N°141, *Beyond the Fragile Peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea: Averting New War*, 17 June 2008.

⁸⁴ Former Ethiopian president Negaso Gidado was the only independent candidate to win a mandate.

⁸⁵ René Lefort, "Powers – mengist – and peasants in rural Ethiopia: the May 2005 elections", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2007), pp. 253-273.

⁸⁶ Leonardo R. Arriola, "Ethnicity", op. cit., pp. 115-144.

⁸⁷ In Oromiya and Southern regions, the CUD won most seats in Gurage zone and Woleyta constituencies as well as those with a significant Amhara population. UEDF support concentrated in Oromiya and Hadiya and Kambatta areas of Southern region.

⁸⁸ Leonardo R. Arriola, "Ethnicity", op. cit., p. 134.

⁸⁹ "Ethiopia: No contest", *Africa Confidential*, vol. 36, no. 11 (1995), pp. 4-6; Axel Klein, *The Horn of Turbulence: The State of War and Peace in the Horn of Africa* (London, 1998), p. 61.

⁹⁰ For a detailed account see Jon Abbink, "Discomfiture of democracy?", op. cit., pp. 173-199.

⁹¹ The opposition contested results in 299 constituencies; the National Election Board organised reruns in 31.

⁹² "Ethiopia Legislative Elections 2005: European Union Election Observation Mission Final Report", 2006. European Parliament member Ana Gomez led the mission.

had been cheated, CUD leaders called upon its sympathisers to engage in civil disobedience.

Protests quickly degenerated into violence and a major government crackdown. In the first incidents sparked by student protests, special forces (*Ag'azi*) and federal police shot dead between 30 and 50 protestors and arrested about 350 in Addis Ababa on 8 June.⁹³ CUD candidates were split over whether to join parliament. While more than 90 elected CUD candidates took up their seats, the more hard-line faction tried to pressure the EPRDF by stay-home strikes, boycotts and demonstrations. In the beginning of November, security forces killed almost 200 civilians and arrested an estimated 30,000 opposition supporters in Addis Ababa and other major towns.⁹⁴ The next month more than 70 CUD leaders, human rights activists and journalists were imprisoned on treason charges.⁹⁵

The CUD's rejection of a more gradualist approach in the post-election period was grounded in the assumption that the election results were bogus and that large segments of the population expected regime change. Fearing a colour revolution, the EPRDF viewed the opposition's civil disobedience strategy as a threat to its survival.

After a trial, the Supreme Court on 11 June 2007 sentenced 38 senior opposition figures, including the CUD's leader, Hailu Shawal, its candidate for Addis Ababa mayor, Berhanu Nega, and vice chairman, Birtukan Mideksa, to life imprisonment for "outrage against the constitution and treason". They were freed a month later, after a self-appointed "council of elders" (*shimagele-wotch*) led by the retired, pro-government Harvard scholar Ephraim Isaac mediated a pardon.⁹⁶ In return, they had to sign a statement taking responsibility for the violence.⁹⁷ The release was timed so the EPRDF could project a benevolent image shortly before millennium celebrations began in which it portrayed itself as the motor of an "Ethiopian renaissance". It also deflected

pressure from the U.S. Congress, which threatened to adopt the "Ethiopia Democracy and Accountability Act of 2007" that would have imposed sanctions on officials involved in election violence, withheld assistance and funded democratisation.⁹⁸

3. Divisions within the opposition

The opposition's electoral gains were the result more of a protest against the government than active support for its candidates. To a degree, opposition politicians' popularity depended more on their anti-government stance than their policies.⁹⁹ Internal divisions soon emerged in all political groups about how to engage with political foes.

Torn between hawks and doves, diaspora and domestic supporters, and with most of its leaders in prison, the CUD gradually disintegrated. Lidetu Ayalew's decision to claim the parliamentary seats won by his Ethiopian Democratic Unity Party (EDUP)-Medhin bloc was a first blow that brought him criticism as a TPLF "mole".¹⁰⁰ In a sign of desperation, CUD diaspora representatives participated in the establishment of the loose Alliance for Freedom and Democracy (AFD) in May 2006, which included the OLF and the ONLF, both diametrically opposed to its nationalist agenda. Legal and personal wrangling between factions over the right to register and claim the Coalition for Unity and Democratic Party (CUDP) lasted throughout 2007.¹⁰¹ The release of the leaders from prison further accelerated the coalition's downfall. Hailu Shawal's All Ethiopian Democratic League (AEUP) supporters demanded uncompromising positions towards the EPRDF and were bitterly disappointed when their chiefs incriminated themselves in return for freedom. Splits within the parliamentary CUD aggravated the public rivalry between Hailu Shawal and Birtukan Mideksa.

Most supporters consider Birtukan, a 34-year-old lawyer, and the parliamentary group led by Temesken Zewdie ("Temesken group") as the inheritors of the CUD. As the CUDP name and symbol was claimed by a competing faction, Birtukan registered a new party under the name Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) in August

⁹³ Other protests occurred in Awassa, Ambo and Bahir Dar. Wolbert G. C. Smidt, "Parlamentswahlen", op. cit., p. 327.

⁹⁴ The number of casualties is contested. According to Wolde Michael Meshesha, its vice chairman, the government-appointed commission of inquiry established that 199 individuals, including six security force members, died in the June and November 2005 incidents. It also reported concluded that security forces had used excessive force. In a reversal of its initial findings, the final report published by the commission in October 2006 blamed the demonstrators for the use of force.

⁹⁵ Jon Abbink, "Discomfiture of democracy?", op. cit., pp. 173-199.

⁹⁶ Orly Halpern, "In Ethiopia, elders dissolve a crisis the traditional way", *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 August 2007 (online).

⁹⁷ "Ethiopia Opposition Members Freed", BBC News, 18 August 2007.

⁹⁸ HR 2003, 110th Congress 1st Session, 3 October 2007.

⁹⁹ Economic as well as ethnic considerations influenced Ethiopian voters. Leonardo R. Arriola, "The Ethiopian Voter: Assessing Economic and Ethnic Influences with Survey Data", *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2007), pp. 73-90.

¹⁰⁰ In parliament, the Lidetu group later moved closer to the EPRDF. Lidetu recently endorsed the EPRDF for the 2010 elections. "Ethiopia: Lidetu Says He Supports Meles Over the Opposition", *Jimma Times*, 12 July 2009.

¹⁰¹ "The Accidental Men!", *Addis Fortune*, vol. 8, no. 378 (2007).

2008.¹⁰² It represents a continuity of the CUD in its pan-Ethiopian agenda and has promised “a new spirit and greater determination”.¹⁰³ It is less Amhara dominated than Hailu Shawal’s AEUP and draws support from the EDL and Rainbow Ethiopia’s Gurage and Amharised Oromo base. It was joined by the former head of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO), Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam.

The UEDF of Beyene Petros and Merera Gudina also faced the dilemma whether to join parliament and legitimise a flawed election or to boycott and miss the chance of exerting influence from within the political system.¹⁰⁴ Its domestic parties were more inclined to compromise than its diaspora members.¹⁰⁵ Eventually, the domestic branch and the OFDM signed a cooperation agreement with the EPRDF in May 2006 and took up their seats.¹⁰⁶ Even though it had joined the EPRDF-dominated parliament, UEDF and the other “legal” opposition parties soon discovered that the ruling party was unwilling to compromise. Dialogue over a new law regulating the activities of the National Election Board ended in mid-2007.¹⁰⁷ Since then there has been no official consultation between the EPRDF and the parliamentary opposition caucus.¹⁰⁸

At first the EPRDF absorbed the 2005 election shock by detaining and intimidating opposition leaders and followers and exploiting rivalries inside the opposition parties. Worried at the prospect of being publicly challenged by its opponents, it revised the rules of the House of Peoples’ Representatives, introducing a 51 per cent requirement for any bill to be debated. This turned an already docile legislature into a moribund institution. It also attempted to broaden its base by recruiting new

members in advance of the 2010 federal and regional elections.

The EPRDF was by the mid-1990s already the only party with a nationwide presence, an identifiable program and consistent training of its officials.¹⁰⁹ Drawing on the TPLF’s organisational experience, it has a well-run and funded political machine. Before 2001, it was mostly perceived as a tool of the TPLF and had little grassroots support outside of Tigray, but in September 2008, it announced that it had 4.5 million members, compared to 600,000 three years earlier. Its strategists had finally understood that the party needed to widen its constituency in order to lure more educated and urban people from the opposition.¹¹⁰ The mass recruitment was aided by reminders that membership was a precondition for a career in the public sector and easily obtaining government services.¹¹¹

This membership expansion was also a belated response to dynamics within the TPLF. In recent years an increasing number of Tigrayans inside and outside that movement have distanced themselves from Meles’s progressively more personalised rule. The March 2001 split in the TPLF central committee produced a power shift from Tigray’s capital Mekelle to Addis Ababa and from the central committee to the prime minister.¹¹² Disagreements over a U.S.-Rwandan proposal to resolve the border hostilities with Eritrea had preceded the 2001 purges of senior TPLF politicians. Siye Abraha, defence minister, and Bitaw Belay, the head of regional affairs, were imprisoned on corruption charges, while Gebru Asrat, then Tigray regional president, and the TPLF vice chairman, Tewolde Wolde Mariam, were sacked.¹¹³

Nominations to the central committee in October 2003 caused further discontent among the older guard, which criticised the preference given to loyalists of Meles and his wife, Azeb Mesfin.¹¹⁴ In 2006, Sabhat Nega, the long-time grey eminence of the TPLF and one of Meles’s closest advisers, was demoted from the executive to the central committee, a move interpreted by some as a

¹⁰²The new party’s Amharic name is Andinet. The National Election Board on 11 January 2008 awarded the CUDP party registration to Ayele Chamisso, leader of the weaker CUD parliamentary faction.

¹⁰³UDJ press release, 25 September 2008, at www.andinetusa.org/unity-for-democracy-and-justice-press-release.

¹⁰⁴ONC head Merera Gudina was challenged by Tolossa Tesfaye, who appropriated the party name and leadership in a move recognised by the National Election Board in November 2005. For legal reasons Merera had to reregister his party under the name Oromo People’s Congress (OPC) in 2007.

¹⁰⁵John Ishiyama, “Nominations and Party Development in Ethiopia: The Opposition and the 2005 Parliamentary Election”, *African and Asian Studies*, vol. 6, nos. 1 & 2 (2007), pp. 102-103.

¹⁰⁶Lahra Smith, “Political Violence and Democratic Uncertainty in Ethiopia”, U.S. Institute of Peace, August 2007, p. 8.

¹⁰⁷The opposition demanded a permanent voters list and more transparent recruitment of local National Election Board officials.

¹⁰⁸Crisis Group interview, opposition leader, Addis Ababa, 1 August 2008.

¹⁰⁹Terrence Lyons, “Closing the Transition”, op. cit., p. 139.

¹¹⁰Tamrat G. Giorgis, “Status Quo Maintained!”, *Addis Fortune*, 21 September 2008.

¹¹¹Crisis Group interviews, Addis Ababa and Nazreth, July 2008.

¹¹²Medhane Tadesse and John Young, “TPLF: Reform or Decline?”, *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 30, no. 97 (2003), p. 389.

¹¹³A dozen TPLF central committee members opposed Meles in March 2001. The others were Abay Tsehaye, Alemseged Gebreamlak, Aregash Adane, Awelom Woldu, Gebremeskel Hailu, Hasen Shifa, Solomon Tesfay and Abreha Kahsay. Abay Tsehaye and Hasan Shifa later changed their allegiance to Meles.

¹¹⁴“Ethiopia: Unhappy TPLF members”, *Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 1 November 2003.

partial fallout between the two. Sabhat Nega had been Meles's mentor and the person who secured him a majority in the TPLF central committee in March 2001. By mid-2007, there were tensions between Meles and Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin and Sabhat Nega and Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) leaders Bereket Simon and Tefera Walwa.¹¹⁵ The first group supported a rapprochement with opposition parliamentarians;¹¹⁶ the second opposed the release from prison of the CUD leaders.

4. The 2008 local elections

Unlike 2005, the 13 and 20 April 2008 local and by-elections caused little stir in the public and media.¹¹⁷ More than three million seats in the country's *woreda* and *kebele* councils were at stake. While the CUD was absorbed by internal and legal squabbles, the UEDF and OFDO withdrew after their candidates faced severe registration problems.¹¹⁸ Opposition parties' lack of a broad organisational base put them at a disadvantage with the EPRDF in fielding candidates nationwide, and the EPRDF won all but one of the available House of Representatives seats and an overwhelming majority at lower levels.¹¹⁹

In view of the strong opposition showing in 2005, the results were puzzling. For instance, in a dramatic reversal of the previous CUD victory, the EPRDF won all but one seat in the Addis Ababa city council and all 2,970 seats at the capital's district and sub-city administrative level.¹²⁰ While the EPRDF attributed this to the success of its policies, analysts believe the elections were heavily manipulated.¹²¹ Voters' disappointment with the op-

position and fear of losing access to government services are other possible explanations.¹²²

No independent election observation was permitted, which a senior official explained as due to the fact that these were "only" local elections.¹²³ According to some observers, if people voted for the EPRDF, it was because they had understood the danger of openly rejecting the government.¹²⁴ Many had lost belief in the democratic process, considering elections merely a ritual.¹²⁵

5. Preparing for 2010

Parties are now preparing for the June 2010 federal and regional elections. While the opposition seeks a common front against the EPRDF, the latter wants to exploit divisions between the UDJ and Amhara nationalist bloc and the more federalist Oromo bloc.

Attempts to establish a more unified opposition began in earnest in June 2008, with creation of the Forum for Democratic Dialogue (FDD).¹²⁶ Its major objective is to elaborate joint positions ahead of 2010 in order to avoid renewed divisions.¹²⁷ It is supported by ex-President Negaso Gidado and veteran TPLF military commander and former Defence Minister Siye Abraha. After the UDJ joined, the FDD has become the most important multi-ethnic opposition platform.

The EPRDF, on the other hand, needs to avoid a repetition of the 2005 violence, as well as further negative public relations. While his TPLF power base remains intact, Meles's Tigrayan support is narrowing, and he increasingly relies on the ANDM, OPDO and SEPDF to govern.¹²⁸ Since 2001, the EPRDF has strengthened its national outlook and de-emphasised its regional and ethno-national identity. However, a small group of Meles loyalists decides all major policies, crucially includ-

¹¹⁵ Seyoum Mesfin and Abbay Tseheay are the only founding TPLF members still active in the central committee.

¹¹⁶ A move advocated by the then U.S. chargé d'affaires Vicky Huddleston. See, for example: "Ethiopian parliament votes to lift immunity from prosecution", Associated Press, 11 October 2005.

¹¹⁷ By-elections were held to fill the federal and regional parliamentary seats the opposition had refused to take up in 2005.

¹¹⁸ "Ethiopia: Holding Elections after Post-election Trauma", *Horn of Africa Bulletin*, vol. 20, no. 5 (2008), p. 1. The OPC claimed that 700 of its members were detained in the run-up to elections. "Ethiopia: Repression Sets Stage for Non-Competitive Elections", press release, Human Rights Watch, 9 April 2008.

¹¹⁹ Lovise Aalen and Kjetil Tronvoll, "The 2008 Ethiopian local elections: The return of electoral authoritarianism", *African Affairs*, vol. 108, no. 430 (2009), pp. 111-120.

¹²⁰ "Work report for the year 2008 presented to the House of Peoples' Representatives", National Election Board, 2008.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, Ethiopian analyst, Addis Ababa, 8 May 2008.

¹²² "Holding Elections after Post-election Trauma", op. cit., p. 3.

¹²³ Crisis Group interview, Ethiopian diplomat, Addis Ababa, 9 July 2008.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, Ethiopian intellectual, Addis Ababa, 29 July 2008.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, government official, Addis Ababa, 12 July 2008.

¹²⁶ Statement by the FDDE, Addis Ababa, 24 June 2008. The party's name is Medrek in Amharic.

¹²⁷ Founding members are the UEDF, the OFDM, the Somali Democratic Alliance Forces (SDAF) and the Arena Tigray for Democracy and Sovereignty (Arena), a regional party established by a former regional president, Gebru Asrat. It claimed 3,000 members in Tigray in June 2007. "Former TPLF members to establish new party", *Addis Fortune*, 25 June 2007.

¹²⁸ This is reflected in the management of the EPRDF office, run by TPLF cadres before 2001 and now by officials from all four coalition parties.

ing the degree of democratisation.¹²⁹ The prime minister has publicly and privately hinted that he has considered stepping down after 2010,¹³⁰ but EPRDF leaders fear a successor would be unable to hold the party together. At the seventh party congress, in September 2008 in Awassa, Meles was re-elected, and no official hint was given about a possible successor in 2010, as the vast majority of the 36-member executive committee was similarly re-elected.¹³¹

Important questions concerning the elections are open, relating not only to political strategy but also to larger issues, such as the economy and relations with Eritrea. It is uncertain to what degree the government will allow a freer and fairer electoral process. The EPRDF is aware that the 2010 vote will attract considerable international attention. It faces the tricky challenge of making the elections seem fair while ensuring that opposition gains are minimal. To do so, it probably will need to maintain its strong grip at the *kebele* level in order to prevent mass protests that could become uncontrollable.

Concomitantly, it is likely to continue making opposition members' lives difficult.¹³² As UDJ leader Birtukan Mideksa found out on 29 December 2008, the presidential pardon that released opposition leaders from prison in July 2007 can be revoked anytime. After telling UDJ members in Sweden that her prison release was part of a political deal, she was arrested upon her return to Ethiopia and her sentence was reinstated. This was a stark reminder to other opposition leaders and, if it remains in effect through the elections, will neutralise an important figure.¹³³ In end of April 2009, the authorities arrested 35 persons and charged them with conspiring to overthrow the government on behalf of Berhanu Nega's un-

registered party, Ginbot 7.¹³⁴ Among them were active and former army officers, including General Tefferra Mamo, as well as Melaku Tefera, a UDJ politician.¹³⁵ By June, 46 alleged Ginbot 7 supporters were charged with conspiracy to assassinate public officials and overthrow the government.¹³⁶

In July, the parliament adopted a draconian anti-terrorism bill with a broad definition of terrorist activity that gives security forces extensive powers. Opposition politicians and human rights observers fear the new legislation will intimidate opponents and the press in the run-up to the 2010 elections.¹³⁷

It is by no means certain that the FDD can overcome personal rivalries and policy differences¹³⁸. By August 2008, it had established a rotating chair and prepared a series of internal debates on its campaign strategy. On the agenda were policy toward the ruling party, individual versus group rights, democratisation, national security and land ownership. Although wary of the chauvinist tendencies of some within the CUD, the UEDF agreed to join with Birtukan Mideksa's UDJ.¹³⁹ Other parties might also join if the FDD can keep a middle ground between ethnic aspirations as well as forces desiring more and less centralisation. For the time being, however, the FDD is a consortium united more by antipathy to the EPRDF than joint positions.¹⁴⁰ Further reshuffling among

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Addis Ababa, 29 July 2008.

¹³⁰ "Stuck in Somalia", *Newsweek*, 10 April 2008.

¹³¹ Tamrat G. Giorgis, "Status Quo Maintained!", *Addis Fortune*, 21 September 2008.

¹³² OFDM Secretary General Bekele Jirata was arrested on 30 October 2008 for alleged OLF links. In February 2009, the UDJ complained that several of its members had been arrested and its regional branches closed. According to its chairman, Bulcha Demeska, the OFDM has had to close 33 of its 35 offices since 2005 due to government harassment. "Ethiopian opposition cries foul in election run-up", *Agence France-Presse*, 26 February 2009; "Bulcha: Government cut off and edited a rare opposition airtime on ETV", *Jimma Times*, 7 June 2009.

¹³³ Birtukan ignored a government ultimatum to state that she was released in response to her request for a pardon. Michael Chebsi, "Ethiopia: Political Space Narrowing", *Inter Press Service*, 12 January 2009. Although a relatively inexperienced politician, her rearrest has made her a symbol of resistance for supporters in Ethiopia and abroad.

¹³⁴ Ginbot 7 Movement for Justice, Freedom and Democracy, established in May 2008, has absorbed CUD's most radical diaspora members. Its leaders have called for armed struggle against the EPRDF. Ginbot 7 stands for 15 May, the 2005 election date.

¹³⁵ Two relatives of Ginbot 7 leaders Berhanu Nega and Amdargatachew Tsigie were among the arrested. "Kin of exiled opposition leaders charged in coup plot", *Voice of America (VOA)*, 27 April 2009.

¹³⁶ 32 are in custody, twelve in exile, including party leader Berhanu Nega. The whereabouts of two are unknown. "Ethiopia charges 46 in plot to topple government", *VOA*, 4 June 2009. Thirteen of them were convicted in absentia for plotting to overthrow the government. Cf. "Ethiopia convicts 13 in absentia over coup plot", *Reuters*, 7 August 2009.

¹³⁷ "An Analysis of Ethiopia's Draft Anti-Terrorism Law", *Human Rights Watch*, 30 June 2009.

¹³⁸ One of its components, the UDJ, is in turmoil over accusations of mismanagement by its senior leadership from 21 members of its standing committee. Cf. "Ethiopia's biggest opposition party in turmoil", *Sudan Tribune*, 22 July 2009.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group interview, opposition leader, Addis Ababa, 1 August 2008.

¹⁴⁰ The FDD manifesto will reportedly demand more autonomy for regions, removal of the constitution's Article 39, recognition of Oromiffa as an official language and an end to exclusively government-controlled land tenure. It reportedly will also call for regaining Assab port. "Historic Opposition

the opposition parties can also be expected. In January 2009, Merera Gudina's OPC left the UEDF and established the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), a coalition with Bulcha Demeska's OFDM.¹⁴¹

The 2005 elections were shaped by Amhara and nationalist discontent with the "loss" of Eritrea, ethnic federalism and EPRDF authoritarianism. Confronted by the CUD, the ANDM was particularly impotent in responding to these grievances. The EPRDF might reach out, therefore, to moderate Oromo nationalists, including elements of the OLF, to counter-balance demands for a more unitary nation-state. The nationalist fervour of some former CUD politicians also poses a problem for the non-Amhara opposition, including the Oromos. Irritated by the diaspora's overtly reactionary discourse, they concluded that the former CUD mistook dissatisfaction with the government for a desire to resurrect a highly centralised nation-state under Amhara rule.¹⁴² Strongly unitarian parties like Hailu Shawal's AEUP and Ginbot 7 are unlikely to win support from pro-federalist, anti-government voters.

Who succeeds Meles will be critical to the survival of the regime and the country's stability. He has tried to step down as prime minister for some time but has been pressured by his party to stay. He has said he is willing to remain the EPRDF chairman,¹⁴³ but it is unclear whether the party will agree to divide leadership of party and state.¹⁴⁴ Most probably the September 2009 EPRDF congress will ask Meles to stay on through the 2010 elections.

There is considerable speculation about who will eventually replace Meles, however. The ANDM chairman and deputy prime minister, Adissu Legesse, was thought to be a candidate until he was surprisingly removed as agriculture and rural development minister on 30 October 2008.¹⁴⁵ Other hopefuls are Girma Birru, OPDO

vice-chairman and trade and industry minister;¹⁴⁶ Arkebe Ugbay, TPLF executive committee member; and a range of senior EPRDF officials.¹⁴⁷ What remains uncertain is whether the torch will be passed to a member of the younger generation and whether a non-Tigrayan will be trusted with the position of prime minister.¹⁴⁸ The succession debate is closely linked to fears the coalition may split.¹⁴⁹ Aware of their increased importance within the EPRDF, the OPDO and SEPDF are resisting TPLF interference in their regional states.

alliance 'Medrek' to finalise manifesto in Ethiopia", *Jimma Times*, 28 June 2009.

¹⁴¹ "OPC and OFDM merge into the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC)", Gadaa.com, 17 January 2009. This was partly in reaction to accusations that OPC harbours OLF members and sympathisers.

¹⁴² Crisis Group interview, Oromo intellectual, Addis Ababa, 25 July 2008.

¹⁴³ "Ethiopian PM Plans to Quit in 2010," Pan African News Agency, 13 February 2009.

¹⁴⁴ This scenario has reminded analysts of the arrangement between Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. While there would be a new prime minister, Meles Zenawi would still wield considerable influence.

¹⁴⁵ "Ethiopia's Prime Minister reshuffles cabinet", *Sudan Tribune*, 1 November 2008.

¹⁴⁶ Document in possession of Crisis Group, 2 October 2008.

¹⁴⁷ "A Change is Going to Come", *Africa Confidential*, 15 May 2009. Meles's successor will likely have a less lenient attitude toward Eritrea. It was Meles who opposed the capture of Asmara in 2000, when other leading EPRDF and TPLF figures were ready to go all the way.

¹⁴⁸ Meles Zenawi has stated his preference for the old guard of TPLF leaders to step down.

¹⁴⁹ Crisis Group email correspondence, Ethiopia analyst, 8 May 2008.

IV. CONTROLLING STATE AND PEOPLE

While the elections attract international attention, everyday politics under the EPRDF are often ignored. They are marked by top-down policymaking. Popular participation is restricted, decisions are monopolised by the de facto one-party state, and there is little local room for deviating from federally fixed policy priorities.

However, the EPRDF's authority is neither complete nor uniform. There are three distinct political spaces, in the capital, rural areas and periphery. Addis Ababa enjoys the most political pluralism and individual liberty. Concentration of an educated middle class and foreign presence helps explain the city administration's greater accountability and scope for dissent. In rural areas in Amhara, Tigray, Oromiya and southern regions, interactions between farmers and government are strongly shaped by the kebelles and state-led rural development programs. Dependent on access to government land, peasants can rarely challenge decisions. Government control is weakest in peripheral regions, but so is service delivery, including security.¹⁵⁰

A. CENTRAL PARTY, DECENTRALISED STATE

Constitutionally, Ethiopia is a federal polity, but its federal entities are controlled by the strongly centralised EPRDF that predetermines decisions from the prime minister's palace in the capital to remote rural kebelles. A dual dynamic is at work: a more visible, formally decentralised state structure and a more discreet but effective capture of the state by the EPRDF and its affiliated regional parties.¹⁵¹ In spite of formal policy and rhetoric, Ethiopia has only nominally devolved decision-making

¹⁵⁰ Armed conflict is common in the western and south-eastern lowlands.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, Ethiopian academic, Addis Ababa, 15 July 2008. See also Lovise Aalen, "Ethnic Federalism and Self-Determination for Nationalities in a Semi-Authoritarian State: the Case of Ethiopia", *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, vol. 13, no. 2-3 (2006), pp. 243-261; Jon Abbink, "Breaking and making the state: The dynamics of ethnic democracy in Ethiopia", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1995), pp. 149-163; Alem Habtu, "Ethnic Pluralism as an Organizing Principle of the Ethiopian Federation", *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2004), pp. 91-123; Edmond J. Keller, "Ethnic Federalism, Fiscal Reform, Development and Democracy in Ethiopia", *African Journal of Political Science*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2002), pp. 21-50; Paulos Chanie, "Clientelism and Ethiopia's post-1991 decentralisation", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3 (2007), pp. 355-384; Sarah Vaughan and Kjetil Tronvoll, op. cit., pp. 134-139.

power to local levels. All important political decisions must be taken at the centre or be in line with central policies.¹⁵² The EPRDF relies on total control of the state bureaucracy, not only because it wants to cling to power, but because public resources are the main patronage it can provide to its followers. A well-organised party network extends from the federal to the regional, from the regional to the *woreda*, and from the *woreda* to the *kebelle* and sub-*kebelle* levels.¹⁵³

1. The national level

Given the strong link between the state and EPRDF parties, it is no surprise Meles is at once prime minister and chairman of both the TPLF and EPRDF. Power is concentrated and most strategic decisions are taken in the EPRDF executive committee and the prime minister's office.¹⁵⁴ Meles is surrounded by a small group of old TPLF confidantes.¹⁵⁵ This inner circle consists of companions from the armed struggle era, such as Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin and the adviser for security affairs and public organisation, Abay Tsehaye.¹⁵⁶ The advisers for national security affairs (Mulugeta Alem-seged), military affairs (Berhane Negash) and legal affairs (Fasil Nahum) are also members. Other influential TPLF leaders include Meles's wife, Azeb Mesfin; the ambassador to Belgium, Berhane Gebre Kristos; economic adviser Newaye Kristos Gebreab; and the Tigray regional president, Tsegay Berhe. While critics claim the TPLF

¹⁵² John Young, "Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia", *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 23, no. 70 (1996), p. 539. Keller asserts that Ethiopia "operates very much like a centralised, unitary state, with most power residing at the centre", in "Making and Remaking State and Nation in Ethiopia", op. cit., p. 129; also Jon Abbink, "Breaking and making the state", op. cit., p. 177; Lovise Aalen, "Ethnic Federalism in a Dominant Party State: The Ethiopian Experience 1991-2000", Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2002, p. 85.

¹⁵³ Relations between party officials are characterised by upward accountability and patron-client dynamics. Higher officials promote lower ones to government posts that offer regular income and privileges, eg. access to food aid, fertilizer and scholarships. Appointees owe allegiance to patrons. Employment in the public sector or selection for state-sponsored education requires being a member or close to the party. Crisis Group interview, researcher, Nazreth, 19 July 2008.

¹⁵⁴ The current EPRDF executive committee consists of the prime minister, the deputy prime minister, seven key federal ministers, two state ministers, two special advisers to the prime minister, the presidents and vice-presidents of Amhara, Oromiya, Southern and Tigray regions, the mayor and general secretary of the Addis Ababa city government and five regional bureau heads.

¹⁵⁵ Patrick Gilkes, *Ethiopia*, op. cit., p. 39; Medhane Tadesse and John Young, "TPLF", op. cit., p. 402.

¹⁵⁶ The pre-1991 guerrilla times cadres clearly dominate the other executive committee members in the TPLF politburo.

leadership is dominated by the “Adwa faction”, the birthplace of Meles and Sabhat Nega, this is not so,¹⁵⁷ although leading figures close to Meles are connected by family ties.¹⁵⁸

Despite the federal government’s multi-ethnic composition, TPLF officers occupy the highest levels of all ministries. The party’s dominance is particularly evident in the armed forces and the National Intelligence and Security Office.¹⁵⁹ Most senior military commanders were former TPLF fighters.¹⁶⁰ This remained so when, in September 2008, Meles promoted a dozen senior military officials to lieutenant, brigadier and major general. Eight of those promoted are Tigrayans, as is the chief of staff, General Samora Yunis.¹⁶¹ The troops stationed across the country are thus another means by which the TPLF exerts control over regional and local constituencies.¹⁶² The federal security agenda overrides local institutions, and in unstable and politically sensitive areas, military commanders, federal police and security organs operate largely independently of local authorities. For example, in Oromiya Tigrayan security and intelligence personnel are felt to operate like a “state within a state”.¹⁶³

2. The regional level

The EPRDF’s ability to influence local decisions stems from its involvement in the establishment of the regional parties. The core regions of Tigray, Amhara, Oromiya and SNNPR are firmly held by the TPLF-dominated coalition. ANDM, OPDO and SEPFD leaders have built their careers on personal links with TPLF/EPRDF men-

tors. The federal government influences regional governments through this channel, assuring broadly uniform policy and law.¹⁶⁴

Disloyal regional politicians are unable to stay in power.¹⁶⁵ Regional EPRDF officials are regularly removed or disciplined by federal politicians.¹⁶⁶ For example, following the TPLF split in March 2001, half of the OPDO central committee was expelled or defected to the OLF because of association with the weaker TPLF faction that Meles ousted.¹⁶⁷ The same happened in SNNRP, where the regional president, Abate Kisho, was replaced by Haile Mariam Desalegn, who the reformed TPLF leadership considered more trustworthy.¹⁶⁸ Scores of senior officials in Somali have been removed in the past decade after falling out of favour with powerful federal EPRDF officials.¹⁶⁹

The peripheral Afar, Somali, Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz regions are governed by parties with even stronger EPRDF links.¹⁷⁰ The Afar Peoples’ Democratic Organisation (APDO) includes fragments of other Afar parties but was initially created in Tigray as the Afar Democratic Union. EPRDF officials engineered creation of the Somali People’s Democratic Party (SPDP) in 1998.¹⁷¹ Several hundred members of the Gambella People’s Democratic Movement (GPDM) received TPLF military and political training in 1989.¹⁷² EPRDF officials also oversaw establishment of the Benshangul-Gumuz Democratic Unity Front (BGDUF) in 1996, schooled its leaders and encouraged them to copy ANDM’s political program.¹⁷³ The affiliated regional parties have little

¹⁵⁷ This reproach dates back to the TPLF’s 1977/1979 regional rivalries. Another criticism popular with Ethiopian nationalists is that leading TPLF figures such as Tewodros Hagos, TPLF head of propaganda, Meles and others are half-Eritrean.

¹⁵⁸ Meles’s wife, Azeb Mesfin, acts as an *eminence grise* in the TPLF/EPRDF and chairs the House of People’s Representatives’ Social Affairs Committee. Former Addis Ababa mayor and TPLF executive committee member Arkebe Uqbay is married to the sister of Berhane Gebre Kristos. Sabhat Nega’s sister, Kidusan, is the mayor of the Tigray regional capital, Mekelle, and the husband of the Tigray regional president, Tsegay Berhe. Intermarriages among TPLF leaders continue the feudal practice of Tigray marriage alliances and also reflect the limited choices available during the armed struggle. Medhane Tadesse and John Young, “TPLF”, op. cit., p. 397.

¹⁵⁹ “The Tigrayans still sew up the key posts”, *Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 7 July 2006.

¹⁶⁰ Patrick Gilkes, *Ethiopia*, op. cit., p. 39.

¹⁶¹ “Tigrayans at the army top”, *Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 3 September 2008.

¹⁶² Even after the post-war demobilisation of parts of the ground forces, the ENDF probably has around 220,000 to 250,000 soldiers, plus a reserve of some 350,000. Document from 2007 in possession of Crisis Group.

¹⁶³ Crisis Group interview, researcher, Shashemene, 21 July 2008.

¹⁶⁴ Assefa Fiseha, *Federalism*, op. cit., p. 391. Regional party members regularly attend training in EPRDF party schools. Since the creation of the Ethiopian Civil Service College in 1995, thousands of civil servants have been trained not only in public administration, but also in EPRDF principles of federalism, democracy and development, www.ecsc.edu.et.

¹⁶⁵ Paulos Chanie, “Clientelism”, op. cit., p. 366.

¹⁶⁶ Crisis Group electronic correspondence, Ethiopia analyst, January 2009.

¹⁶⁷ “Ethiopia: October evolution”, *Africa Confidential*, vol. 42, no. 3-4 (2001).

¹⁶⁸ Alemseged Abbay, “Diversity and state-building in Ethiopia”, *African Affairs*, vol. 103, no. 413 (2004), p. 610.

¹⁶⁹ Tobias Hagmann, “Beyond clannishness and colonialism: understanding political disorder in Ethiopia’s Somali Region, 1991-2004”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 43, no. 4 (2005), pp. 509-536.

¹⁷⁰ The same applies for the Harari National League.

¹⁷¹ Abdi Ismail Samatar, “Ethiopian federalism: autonomy versus control in the Somali region”, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 6 (2004), pp. 1131-1154.

¹⁷² John Young, “Along Ethiopia’s Western Frontier: Gambella and Benishangul in Transition”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2 (1999), p. 326.

¹⁷³ Paulos Chanie, “Clientelism”, op. cit., p. 364.

option other than working “hand-in-hand with EPRDF” on whose financial goodwill their region depends.¹⁷⁴ Given inferior organisational capacities and frequent internal problems, periphery ruling parties were never offered full membership in the EPRDF coalition.¹⁷⁵

The federal government uses various mechanisms to influence or manipulate policy in the regional states.¹⁷⁶ Policymaking descends from the TPLF and EPRDF executive committees via the EPRDF’s affiliated parties to local government. Executives and members of the regional councils are expected to conform to decisions taken at the federal level.¹⁷⁷ In many cases regional states simply copy federal policies, including, in the case of Somali, the constitution.¹⁷⁸ The federal five-year development programs are also replicated.¹⁷⁹ Government reforms such as the recent creation of super-ministries, the re-naming of certain bureaus and the reduction of the cabinet’s size are usually first implemented at federal and a little later at regional level.¹⁸⁰

The fiscal system further concentrates power in the federal government, which controlled over 80 per cent of revenue and more than 60 per cent of expenditure between fiscal years 1994/1995 and 1999/2000. The regions and districts thus depend heavily on federal budget transfers.¹⁸¹

In 2003, the parliament adopted a bill permitting the federal government to intervene militarily in the regions and temporarily suspend regional administrations in cases of insecurity, human rights violations or danger to the constitutional order.¹⁸² The bill mostly serves as a reminder to the regions and the Addis Ababa city administration to keep politics in line with federal priorities. Local bureaucrats have little room to deviate from regionally fixed agendas because they depend on the support of higher echelon party members.

Senior TPLF/EPRDF officials also intervene in the regions. Before 2001, the Regional Affairs Bureau in the

prime minister’s office dispatched “technical advisers” to the regional capitals, who exerted strong influence, at times assuming the role of kingmaker in nominations and dismissals. Prominent examples included Bitew Belay’s and Solomon Tesfaye’s interventions in SNNRP and Oromiya and Abay Tsehaye’s role in Somali.¹⁸³ In Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz, EPRDF advisers participated in regional council meetings.¹⁸⁴ With the adoption of the *tehadso* (renewal agenda) in the wake of the TPLF split in 2001 and protests by regional governments, the Regional Affairs Bureau temporarily withdrew its advisers.¹⁸⁵ However, senior TPLF members close to the prime minister still monitor and intervene in regional politics, particularly in the administratively weaker and politically more sensitive border regions. TPLF/EPRDF officials of the federal affairs ministry, successor of the Regional Affairs Bureau, are a second administrative layer on whose approval regional officials are strongly dependent.¹⁸⁶

The domination of the federal state by the EPRDF party network severely undermines democratic institutions. Both supporters and opponents of ethnic federalism recognise that centralised party rule and federal interventions in the regions undermine local self-government. State institutions and the party system are systematically intertwined. This builds upon a long tradition. The Amharic term *mengist* expresses the conflation between representatives of the local government, the political party and the state.¹⁸⁷ The EPRDF’s local government officials lack popular support precisely because they were selected by the party rather than elected by the people. Across the country and at all administrative levels representatives are designated by top-down nominations and then submitted to popular “confirmation” in the absence of a formal vote or in non-competitive elections.¹⁸⁸

Regional dignitaries at times act more like representatives of the federal government and the EPRDF than advocates

¹⁷⁴ “Political parties reaffirmed support for EPRDF, pledge to strengthen cooperation”, EPRDF, 16 September 2008.

¹⁷⁵ Alem Habtu, “Ethnic Pluralism”, op. cit., pp. 111-112.

¹⁷⁶ John Young, “Regionalism and Democracy in Ethiopia”, op. cit., pp. 196-197.

¹⁷⁷ Edmond J Keller, “Ethnic Federalism”, op. cit., pp. 21-50.

¹⁷⁸ Many regional constitutions, proclamations and party programs are broadly identical with the federal ones.

¹⁷⁹ Assefa Fiseha, *Federalism*, op. cit., p. 395.

¹⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, former government official, Addis Ababa, 23 July 2008.

¹⁸¹ Paulos Chanie, “Clientelism”, op. cit., p. 369.

¹⁸² “System for the Intervention of the Federal Government in the Regions Proclamation No. 359/2003”, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2003.

¹⁸³ Lovise Aalen, “Ethnic Federalism”, op. cit., p. 126.

¹⁸⁴ John Young, “Along Ethiopia’s Western Frontier”, op. cit., p. 343.

¹⁸⁵ Sarah Vaughan and Kjetil Tronvoll, *Culture of Power*, op. cit., p. 134.

¹⁸⁶ The federal affairs ministry is in charge of relations with regional states and plays an important role in the Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa city administrations. Besides decentralisation, pastoral policy, and conflict resolution, it hosts the federal police and oversees security in the peripheral states.

¹⁸⁷ René Lefort, “Powers”, op. cit., p. 256.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, pp. 257-258. Similar observations were made in Oromiya. Despite the election of a *kebele* legislative body in the April 2008, the seven-member *kebele* council was pre-selected by the district authorities. Crisis Group interviews, July 2008.

of local constituencies.¹⁸⁹ Opposition politicians charge that the regional states are “run by handpicked officials, many of them corrupt”.¹⁹⁰ While disciplined TPLF officials draw on strong popular support in their native Tigray, the EPRDF affiliate parties lack credibility and are unable to build a strong base.¹⁹¹ This holds true for OPDO, SEPDF and SPDP officials, who are described as uneducated, opportunistic TPLF clients.¹⁹² That bureaucrats are regularly deposed after internal party evaluations shows their dependence on the ruling party. In these *gim gema* (self-evaluation) sessions party loyalty and interests weigh stronger than a popular endorsement.¹⁹³

3. The local level

The EPRDF’s most effective instrument of local coercion is the *kebele* structure. It revitalised these peasant associations inherited from the Derg period for development and governance aims. Officially conceived to enhance local participation and decision-making, the *kebele* apparatus allows the ruling party to monitor and control local communities. For ordinary Ethiopians, *kebele* officials and party cadres personify the state in their everyday life. Rural inhabitants’ welfare depends considerably on good relations with *kebele* officials, who oversee services.¹⁹⁴ Higher-ups in the EPRDF select these officials before they are submitted to popular approval.¹⁹⁵ In daily operations, *kebele* administrators are aided by model farmers known as “cadres”, militia known as *ta-*

taqi (gunmen in Amharic) and party members.¹⁹⁶ At elections, these local officials form the backbone of the EPRDF machine.¹⁹⁷

Over the past eighteen years, ethnic federalism has dramatically enhanced service delivery as well as rural inhabitants’ access to the state, allowing the EPRDF to gradually extend its authority deep into the countryside. The absence of private landholding and land tenure security makes peasants vulnerable to government pressure. That farmers fear land expropriation and redistribution by the *kebele*¹⁹⁸ explains the relative ease with which the EPRDF keeps them subservient. *Kebele* administrators regularly repress critical peasants.¹⁹⁹ *Kebeles* have their own militias and prisons, and their leaders operate with impunity.²⁰⁰ Farmers who refuse to comply with *kebele* decisions have been threatened with imprisonment, as during the 1997 Amhara regional state land redistribution.²⁰¹

Kebele officials mobilise farmers for government programs, notably rural development and food security activity. This follows a top-down logic in which federal, regional and district bureaus define policy interventions and quotas that *kebele* staff then force upon farmers.²⁰² In the name of state-led development, the EPRDF requires peasants to “voluntarily” contribute cash or labour for construction, conservation and other communal works.²⁰³

Before the April 2008 elections, *kebeles* were headed by councils with a maximum fifteen members. This number was vastly increased, and today these councils consist of 100 to 300 officials, depending on the region. Although only the chairman, vice chairman and secretary are salaried, other members receive informal benefits, such as when food aid is distributed, new agricultural programs are tested or farmers are summoned to attend paid training sessions.²⁰⁴ In Tigray a considerable overlap exists between model farmers (“cadres”), TPLF membership

¹⁸⁹ John Young, “Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia”, op. cit., p. 539.

¹⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, opposition politician, Addis Ababa, 1 August 2008.

¹⁹¹ Patrick Gilkes, *Ethiopia*, op. cit., p. 38.

¹⁹² Crisis Group interviews, July 2008. In recent years the EPRDF has sought to improve the education of its cadres and local officials at *kebele* and *woreda* levels.

¹⁹³ Such sessions were first used by the TPLF to improve insurgency tactics and bring the peasantry and TPLF cadres in the liberated areas together. John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia*, op. cit., pp. 42, 143. The TPLF used *gim gema* as a management tool, which was adopted by EPRDF and affiliated parties at all administrative levels and in all public sectors, including the military. It is used to evaluate “collective entities, individuals and programmes through debate in open forums”. John Young, “Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia”, op. cit., p. 540. Over the years, these evaluation sessions have become politicised, often manipulated and pre-orchestrated and a means for disciplining party officials, who can be intimidated, dismissed or demoted on even unfounded allegations.

¹⁹⁴ They act as gatekeepers to a wide array of government services, as they are tasked with distributing land, food aid, agricultural inputs, registering residents, marriages, deaths and births, collecting taxes, upholding security, and arbitrating property disputes.

¹⁹⁵ Kjetil Tronvoll and Øyvind Aadland, “The Process of Democratisation”, op. cit., p. 30.

¹⁹⁶ Getie Gelaye, 2004, “Peasant Poetics and State Discourse in Ethiopia: Amharic Oral Poetry as a Response to the 1996-97 Land Redistribution Policy”, *Northeast African Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1-2 (2004), p. 178.

¹⁹⁷ Terrence Lyons, “Closing the Transition”, op. cit., p. 140.

¹⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, rural development specialist, Addis Ababa, 10 July 2008.

¹⁹⁹ Siegfried Pausewang, “Aborted or nascent democracy?”, op. cit., p. 135.

²⁰⁰ Sarah Vaughan and Kjetil Tronvoll, *Culture of Power*, op. cit., p. 2.

²⁰¹ Getie Gelaye, “Peasant Poetics”, op. cit., p. 177.

²⁰² Kaatje Segers et al., “Be like bees – the politics of mobilising farmers for development in Tigray, Ethiopia”, *African Affairs*, vol. 108, no. 430 (2009), pp. 91-109.

²⁰³ René Lefort, “Powers”, op. cit., p. 259.

²⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, researcher, Shashemene, 21 July 2008.

and *kebele* officials.²⁰⁵ In Amhara, each *kebele* is assisted by a number of “cadres”, who are close to the ruling ANDM, mobilise and monitor other farmers and report irregularities, including by the *kebele*, to higher levels.²⁰⁶

The EPRDF also created and in some cases reactivated so-called *gott* and *garee* institutions in Tigray, Amhara, Oromiya and Southern regions.²⁰⁷ Officially, these party entities are outside the state administration, but they mobilise households in government-led development programs and are an informal but highly effective mechanism by which the party hierarchy controls rural dwellers down to household level.²⁰⁸

In this system, local party officials and “cadres” are assigned to monitor the everyday activities of their immediate neighbours. *Kebeles* are divided into sectors, which are sub-divided into 25-household then again into five-household units. Each unit is overseen by a party member, loyalist or “cadre”, who reports relevant incidents to higher party officials and *kebele* administrators. Regular meetings are called by these sub-*kebele* party officials to lecture farmers on government policy and the need to support development projects.²⁰⁹ Those who refuse to attend or to make the contributions proposed by the government are branded as “anti-development”.²¹⁰ *Gott* and *garee* officials also closely monitor opposition supporters.

The EPRDF’s neighbourhood control system exists with variations across Ethiopia. It is fully effective in rural areas, more sporadic in the cities. In Oromiya, OPDO first initiated the sub-*kebele* structure during the 2001 local elections, but it only became completely active before the 2005 elections.²¹¹ OPDO pressures inhabi-

tants to pay monthly membership fees to join the party and in return facilitates access to government services through the sub-*kebele* structure.²¹² Similar arrangements operate in Amhara and Tigray.²¹³

Many Ethiopians perceive the EPRDF’s obsession with surveilling opposition activities as deeply intrusive. Neighbourhood-level “cadres” report minor occurrences to *kebele* officials, including residents’ whereabouts and visitors.²¹⁴ According to many, “their main task is to monitor the people, spy on people and report to the *kebele*”.²¹⁵ Barely visible to outsiders and foreigners, this party control discourages dissent and constantly reminds people who is in charge.²¹⁶ It allows the EPRDF to keep a tight grip on opposition supporters and reward its own. In situations of political unrest, sub-*kebele* party informants point *kebele* police and federal security forces to families and compounds where opposition is known or suspected.

The ruling party’s monitoring has contributed to a climate of mutual distrust in central parts of the country.²¹⁷ People have become extremely reluctant to discuss views in public. At the same time, the extension of control to the neighbourhood level allows the EPRDF to increase the number of those dependent on it for their livelihoods.²¹⁸

households. The heads of none of these are salaried, but party cadres’ activities are compensated informally by *kebele* and district officials. Crisis Group interview, researcher, Shashemene, 21 July 2008.

²¹² Crisis Group interview, teacher, Nazreth, 18 July 2008.

²¹³ In Tigray, the TPLF had already set up “government groups” responsible for mobilising 30 neighbouring households during its armed struggle against the Derg (Segers et al., “Be like bees”, op. cit., p. 113). In Amhara, members of the ANDM’s women and youth associations participate in such mobilising and monitoring. Crisis Group interview, university lecturer, Addis Ababa, 29 July 2008. In the southern region, sub-*kebeles* are known as *nius* and divided into government groups (*mengistawi budin*) of fifteen to 30 households. Document in possession of Crisis Group.

²¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, government official, Addis Ababa, 12 July 2008.

²¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, teacher, Nazreth, 18 July 2008.

²¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, government official, Addis Ababa, 12 July 2008; Ethiopian researcher, Addis Ababa, 13 July 2008.

²¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Addis Ababa and Oromiya region, July 2008.

²¹⁸ In 2001, tens of thousands of unemployed graduates reportedly were drafted into the intelligence services. “Ethiopia: October evolution”, *Africa Confidential*, vol. 42, no. 3-4 (2001), p. 4. See also Aalen and Tronvoll, “The 2008 Ethiopian local elections”. op. cit., p. 117.

²⁰⁵ Segers et al., “Be like bees”, op. cit., p. 105.

²⁰⁶ Harald Aspen, “Models of Democracy – Perceptions of Power. Government and Peasantry in Ethiopia”, in Bahru Zewde and S. Pausewang (eds.), *Ethiopia – The Challenge of Democracy from Below* (Uppsala, 2002), p. 67.

²⁰⁷ This sub-*kebele* structure was invented by the EPRDF, not the Derg. *Gott* is Tigray and designates a hamlet or closely-knit neighbourhood in which everybody knows everybody.

²⁰⁸ Lovise Aalen, “Institutionalising the Politics of Ethnicity: Actors, power and mobilisation in southern Ethiopia under ethnic federalism”, PhD thesis (Oslo, 2007), p. 81.

²⁰⁹ “Suppressing Dissent: Human Rights Abuses and Political Repression in Ethiopia’s Oromia Region”, Human Rights Watch, May 2005, p. 34.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²¹¹ Oromiya region’s *kebeles* are divided into teams or groups (*Garee*), then sub-divided. The sub-groups monitor 25 households each. The EPRDF’s sub-*kebele* structure has different names in various regions and languages. In Oromiya, *kebeles* are known as *ganda*, each divided into *Garee* (team or group), then into *birkii* (sub-group, literally “step”, 25 households), which include five *gooxi* (*gott* in Tigray), each with five

B. PUBLIC SPACE CURTAILED

Fierce enmity between government and opposition and the regime's growing authoritarianism bode ill for civil society. Little space exists for non-partisan involvement and debate. Freedom of expression and association has been severely undercut by the EPRDF, which categorically rejects criticism.²¹⁹ Few journalists, academics, human rights advocates and intellectuals dare to publicly criticise the government. While self-censorship existed before the 2005 elections, it has now become widespread.²²⁰

1. Civil society

This closing of public space is reflected in the contested relations between the government and civil society organisations. The EPRDF sees these entities primarily as service deliverers that it expects to stay aloof from politics, human rights work or policy advocacy. The government is suspicious of the motives of many such organisations, particularly international Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and prefers local and party-controlled alternatives.²²¹ While only two dozen NGOs operated in Ethiopia during the 1974-1975 famine, 4,700 organisations are currently registered with the federal justice ministry, and an estimated 7,000 NGOs are active across the country.²²² Despite this impressive number, very few dare to publicly challenge the state or pursue agendas that stray from official policy.

The EPRDF considers international NGOs under-regulated bodies that divert too many resources from its policy priorities.²²³ It resents donors, such as EU member states, that support democratisation and governance projects by international and local NGOs and blames them for fomenting anti-government sentiment before elections. In Somali, the government fears that aid distributed by NGOs ends up in the hands of the ONLF or "anti-peace elements".²²⁴ The World Bank and other donor decisions in 2006 to punish the government for its handling of the 2005 elections by redirecting aid from direct budget

support to service delivery programs implemented by local government and monitored by civil society angered the EPRDF and challenged its development policy.²²⁵

The House of Peoples' Representatives passed a law regulating civil society organisations on 6 January 2009.²²⁶ It gives the government broad powers to oversee, sanction and dismantle entities it considers troublesome.²²⁷ Indirectly and in the long run it seeks to channel donor aid through government rather than NGO channels.²²⁸ The bill generated strong criticism from local and international development actors, including Western donors who support the regime. Senior U.S. officials, including Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy and Human Rights David Kramer²²⁹ and four senators,²³⁰ expressed concern that the law treats a majority of Ethiopia's operational NGOs as political. Though donors criticised its particulars, they refrained from openly protesting it as infringing on political freedoms.²³¹ Civil society organisations are required to reregister in 2009. Time will tell whether the new charities and societies agency oversight board will use the draconian punitive measures the law offers.

Because of the belated urbanisation and development of the service sector, Ethiopia has comparatively few professional and membership associations.²³² Most are urban based, with few links outside Addis Ababa. Among the most prominent and vocal that have repeatedly attracted the government's wrath are the Ethiopian Eco-

²¹⁹ Lara Smith, "Political Violence", op. cit., p. 6.

²²⁰ Terrence Lyons, "Ethiopia's Convergence of Crisis", *Current History*, vol. 107, no. 708 (2008), p. 165.

²²¹ Dessalegn Rahmato, "Civil Society Organisations in Ethiopia", in Zewde and Pausewang (eds.), *Ethiopia*, op. cit., p. 116; Goran Hyden and Mahlet Hailemariam, "Voluntarism and civil society: Ethiopia in Comparative Perspective", *Afrika Spectrum*, vol. 38, no. 2 (2003), p. 220.

²²² Dessalegn Rahmato, "Civil Society", op. cit., p. 106; "Rights issue and development have become inseparable", *The Reporter*, 17 January 2009.

²²³ Jeffrey Clark, "Civil Society, NGOs, and Development in Ethiopia: A Snapshot View", World Bank, June 2000, p. 6.

²²⁴ Crisis Group interview, former government official, Addis Ababa, 23 July 2008.

²²⁵ The Ethiopian Protection of Basic Services Program ran from May 2006 to June 2009. <http://web.worldbank.org>.

²²⁶ "Proclamation for the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies, Proclamation No. 621/2009", Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2009. The bill was passed by the House of Peoples' Representatives on 6 January 2009.

²²⁷ The most controversial clauses stipulate that any civil society organisation receiving more than 10 per cent of its income from foreign sources must register as either a "foreign" or "Ethiopian" resident organisation, and is barred from conducting human rights work, promoting equality between people, sexes or religions, children and disability rights, conflict resolution and reconciliation and criminal justice projects. "Analysis of Ethiopia's Draft CSO Law", Human Rights Watch, September 2008.

²²⁸ Crisis Group interview, development consultant, Addis Ababa, 19 July 2008.

²²⁹ Peter Heinlein, "US Says Draft Ethiopian NGO Law Would 'Close Political Space'", VOA, 21 October 2008.

²³⁰ U.S. Senators Russell Feingold, Johnny Isakson, Patrick Leahy and Richard Durbin raised these concerns in a letter to the prime minister, 16 January 2009, www.eastafricaforum.net/wp-content/2009/01/ethiopiasesenate12.pdf.

²³¹ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Addis Ababa, 29 July 2008.

²³² Dessalegn Rahmato, "Civil Society Organisations in Ethiopia", op. cit., p. 112.

conomic Association, the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association and the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO).²³³ Trade union movements have struggled with government co-optation and repression since the Derg period. Leaders of the Ethiopian Teachers Association, one of the biggest trade unions, who criticised EPRDF language and education policy, faced imprisonment and had their offices ransacked in 2005.²³⁴

Universities also have been under close scrutiny.²³⁵ Addis Ababa University was the site of student unrest that was violently suppressed by security forces in 1993, 1997, 2001 and 2005. Since the dismissal of 40 faculty members in 1993 – mostly ethnic Amhara professors who opposed the EPRDF's ethnic federalism policy – its academic independence has slowly eroded. The appointment of teaching faculty and staff close to the ruling party and the pressure to accept government-defined student quotas has ossified the institution. The government recently established thirteen new state universities that are expected to admit 120,000 students.²³⁶ It hopes this bold initiative will not only expand education but also create a loyal academic elite.

2. Media constraints

The limited professionalism and outreach of the mass media compounds the narrowness of public space.²³⁷ Although there are about 200 newspapers and magazines, few are independent or trustworthy news outlets. Low standards and partisan agendas taint the credibility of the private press. Government- and party- affiliated media are subservient.²³⁸ Few papers have sought or been able to strike a balance between government and opposition.

Before 2004, private papers like *Menelik*, *Addis Zena* and *Ethiop* advocated opposition viewpoints close to those of the CUD, but courts regularly fine and imprison critical editors and publishers. In November 2005, fourteen, including the publishers of *Hadar* and *Lisane*

Hezeb,²³⁹ were arrested and charged with violation of the press law and “outrages against the constitution”.²⁴⁰ As a result, the critical private media has virtually disappeared.²⁴¹ After six years of deliberation, the parliament adopted a restrictive press law in July 2008.²⁴²

Thanks to Chinese electronic monitoring and control software, the government is able to block most opposition electronic communications when it desires. The state-run Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation blocked text messaging after the November 2005 clashes between opposition supporters and government forces in Addis Ababa and reactivated the capability two years later.²⁴³ Since May 2006, it has intermittently blocked opposition websites and blogs.²⁴⁴ Technology savvy Ethiopians now use anonymous proxy servers to circumvent online censorship.²⁴⁵ The Amharic programs of Voice of America and Deutsche Welle reported that their broadcasts were intermittently jammed in late 2007, and in June 2009, the government ordered the local Sheger FM radio station to stop re-broadcasting the former's content.²⁴⁶

Foreign correspondents based in Addis Ababa often avoid sensitive political coverage for fear their one-year residency and accreditation permits will not be renewed.²⁴⁷ In April 2008, Ethiopia broke diplomatic relations with

²³³ Their websites are: <http://eeaecon.org/>; www.etwla.org/; www.ehrco.org/.

²³⁴ “2007 Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights, Ethiopia”, International Trade Union Confederation, 2007.

²³⁵ During the EPRDF's seventh party congress, September 2008, Meles observed that universities were opposition friendly.

²³⁶ “13 new universities start operation: Ministry”, Ethiopian News Agency (ENA), 4 March 2007.

²³⁷ High illiteracy and unaffordable TV and radio prices also contribute to mass media's limited outreach. Newspaper circulation is limited to Addis Ababa and major urban centres.

²³⁸ Government papers published by the Ethiopian Press Agency (EPA) include the *Ethiopian Herald* (English), *Addis Zemen* (Amharic), *Al Alam* (Arabic) and *Barissa* (Oromiffa). The Ethiopian News Agency (ENA) is state-controlled; the Walta Information Centre (WIC) is run by the TPLF.

²³⁹ “2007 Annual Report”, Reporters Without Borders, 2008, p. 23.

²⁴⁰ “Q & A: An Ethiopian Speaks from Exile”, Committee to Protect Journalists Blog (<http://cpj.org/blog>), 26 August 2008.

²⁴¹ Pro-government private papers like *Iftin* and government-leaning papers like *Capital* and *Fortune* remain in print. The private weekly *The Reporter/Gete* publishes in Amharic and English. Its editor, Amare Aregawi, a former TPLF cadre, has vocally criticised the EPRDF and published investigative reports on mismanagement by people close to billionaire Al-Amoudi. He was assaulted by unknown perpetrators on 31 October 2008. “Editor in hospital after brutal assault”, *The Reporter*, 1 November 2008.

²⁴² In return, it gave concessions to two private radio stations at the end of 2008 in a bid to liberalise the broadcasting sector. “Ethiopia: Country Liberalises Radio and Television May Follow”, AllAfrica.com, 8 January 2009.

²⁴³ The Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation cited technical problems, but the government fears that text messages are used by the opposition to campaign and mobilise street protests.

²⁴⁴ “Critical Websites Inaccessible in Ethiopia”, Committee to Protect Journalists, 24 May 2006.

²⁴⁵ Ethio-Zagol, “The Hazards of Dissent”, *Index on Censorship*, vol. 36, no. 4 (2007), p. 63. The block on critical websites was lifted in March 2009 after the U.S. State Department's 2008 Human Rights Report on Ethiopia cited the practice.

²⁴⁶ Peter Heinlein, “Ethiopian rights lawyer, VOA reporter face prison in contraband case”, VOA, 16 June 2009.

²⁴⁷ “Attacks on the Press in 2008: Ethiopia”, Committee to Protect Journalists, February 2009.

Qatar after Al Jazeera carried a series of critical reports on the counter-insurgency campaign in the Ogaden.

V. CONTESTED MULTI-ETHNIC POLITICS

The EPRDF's ethnic federalism has decisively transformed politics, although not always with the hoped-for consequences. It has not resolved the "national question". Ethnic conflicts have not disappeared but have been either transferred from the national to the regional, district and *kebelle* levels or been contained by the security forces. Relations between ethnic groups have become increasingly competitive, as they vie for control of administrative boundaries and government budgets in addition to land and natural resources.²⁴⁸

It is not the principle of ethnic-based regionalisation per se that has proved problematic. Rather it is that Ethiopia's ethnic dispersion is seldom homogenous. More gravely, the idea of unconditional "self-determination" encourages local officials to establish an administrative unit on an exclusive basis in order to access state resources. Consequently, ethnic federalism has sharpened differences among groups since 1991, and ethno-nationalist grievances with the nation-state, which the TPLF set out to end, remain. Displeasure with the central government in broad segments of the Oromo and Somali population fuels the armed struggles of the OLF and ONLF respectively.

A. THE POLITICS OF SELF-DETERMINATION

Ethnic-based federalism is the most controversial EPRDF policy. Celebrated by some as the panacea for holding multi-ethnic Ethiopia together, it is decried by others as a dangerous concept that will eventually dismember the country. Behind the controversy are contested definitions of citizenship and of what it means to be Ethiopian.

For nationalists, the policy is a deliberate ploy to undermine national identity, pride and self-esteem flowing from the exceptional history and continuity of the Abyssinian empire and Ethiopian state. They see the constitutional granting of self-determination to ethnic groups as a deliberate step backward from the nation-building process.²⁴⁹ The preference for group over individual rights is criticised as counterproductive, especially when attempts are made to develop a more liberal political culture. Members of the urban, educated middle classes who identify as Ethiopian rather than with a

²⁴⁸ A succinct overview of Ethiopia's ethnic groups is in Kjetil Tronvoll, *Ethiopia: A New Start?*, op. cit., pp. 4-11.

²⁴⁹ The more nationalist, pan-Ethiopian opposition requests a redrawing of regional entities on the basis of socio-economic rather than strictly ethnic boundaries, citing Haile Selassie's administrative regions as an example.

particular ethno-nationality feel degraded at having to confess allegiance to a particular national group.²⁵⁰ Many describe ethnic federalism as a malicious TPLF tactic to plant divisions among ethnic groups so as to facilitate rule by the Tigrayan minority. The allegation that the TPLF manipulates ethnic identities and conflicts to stay in power is made by most opposition supporters.²⁵¹

Critics decry worsening ethnic relations as a result of ethnic-based competition. In their view, the political system divides rather than unites people, by creating mutual suspicion and rancour and instituting tribal dynamics that could easily spiral out of control.²⁵² The constitutional clause that gives nationalities the right to secede is touted as proof of the EPRDF's anti-Ethiopian stance. Eritrea's independence, which turned Ethiopia into a landlocked country, is viewed as further evidence of a desire to dismember it. A recurrent claim is that the EPRDF has unduly privileged its Tigray base and regional state to the national detriment.²⁵³

Proponents of ethnic regionalisation, however, acclaim the recognition of group rights, seeing creation of ethnic-based administrative entities as the only meaningful approach for defusing ethnic discontents. According to this view – actively propagated by the government – Ethiopia's ethnic and minority groups have suffered centuries of domination by a central state that forced Amharic language and culture upon them. Granting "nationalities" their cultural, ethnic, and political aspirations is necessary to redress historic injustices and decolonise the country. Equality among citizens cannot be realised by forcing a pre-defined national identity upon them but only by recognising existing differences and allowing the articulation of their interests at the central level.

The EPRDF's conception of ethnicity and its proposed solutions are grounded in the Marxist-Leninist tradition. As descendents of the student movement, TPLF leaders were inspired by Stalin's approach to the "national question", that informed the ethno-territorial makeup of the Soviet Union. Self-determination and the option for secession are the EPRDF's attempt to accommodate the nationalities. Political sovereignty is invested in ethnic groups or "nationalities" rather than individuals. The problem, however, lies in the definition as well as

in the distinction between "nations, nationalities and peoples". The EPRDF has oscillated between the idea that ethno-linguistic groups can be objectively and externally identified and its experience that they must be mobilised in their own language and culture to assert their collective rights.²⁵⁴

Defining ethno-linguistic groups and circumscribing ethno-territorial entities at regional and local level have been challenges for the government. The constitutional definition of nationality is imprecise.²⁵⁵ Initially, the EPRDF relied on institutional research to determine the number and location of almost 90 ethno-linguistic groups.²⁵⁶

The number and shape of regions, districts and *kebelles* have continuously evolved since 1991, as groups were awarded or denied self-administration. While the federal architecture is dynamic, its underlying principles are not. Ethnic federalism assumes that ethno-linguistic groups are homogeneous and occupy clearly delimited territories.²⁵⁷ Although groups relate to distinct locations, their settlement patterns are often complex. Pastoralists have different relations to territory in the semi-arid lowlands than farmers.²⁵⁸ Labour migration and mixed parenthood are old practices that defy simplistic delineation between ethnicity and territory.²⁵⁹ Differentiating ethnic groups' status has also been a challenge. The transitional government gave Tigrayans, Amharas, Oromos, Afars, Somalis and Hararis the status of nationality with their own regional state but denied that right to groups with similar claims like the Gurage, Sidama and Woleyta, which had to find self-determination in special zones or districts.

²⁵⁰ Identity cards issued by the *kebele* identify Ethiopians by ethnic group or nationality.

²⁵¹ Makau wa Mutua, "The regionalisation controversy", *Africa Report*, vol. 38, no. 5 (1993), p. 31.

²⁵² Critics refer to ethnic federalism as *ye gossa politika* (Amharic, tribalist politics).

²⁵³ While this is supported by data on expenditures and yearly subsidy transfers, TPLF-affiliated businesses have amassed considerable wealth that also benefits Tigray. Paulos Chanie, *op. cit.*, pp. 378-380.

²⁵⁴ Sarah Vaughan, "Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia", PhD thesis, College of Humanities and Social Science, School of Social and Political Studies, University of Edinburgh, 2003, pp. 169-170.

²⁵⁵ "A 'Nation, Nationality or People' for the purpose of this Constitution, is a group of people who have or share a large measure of common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological makeup, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory", Article 39, para 5.

²⁵⁶ The Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities was established in 1983 by the Derg to study options for restructuring the country in line with a Stalinist nationality policy. Sarah Vaughan, "Ethnicity and Power", *op. cit.*, p. 151.

²⁵⁷ The assumption of internally homogenous groups again reflects TPLF experience with Tigrayan ethno-nationalism.

²⁵⁸ Günther Schlee and Abdullahi A. Shongolo, "Local war and its impact on ethnic and religious identification in Southern Ethiopia", *GeoJournal*, vol. 36, no. 1 (1995), pp. 7-17.

²⁵⁹ Jon Abbink, "Ethnicity and Constitutionalism in Contemporary Ethiopia", *Journal of African Law*, vol. 41, no. 2 (1997), pp. 159-174.

At the same time, federalism brought important recognition of their culture and language to many marginalised groups. Pastoralists and shifting cultivators on the periphery rarely felt like equal citizens in the past. Excluded from education and major business opportunities, they were (and continue to be) despised by many highlanders. Their empowerment is to the credit of the EPRDF. Every ethnic group now has the right to be instructed in its own language.²⁶⁰ Two or three languages are taught in the schools; primary students learn in their mother tongue or Amharic; secondary and higher education institutions teach in English. This has required major investment in education, notably in SNNPR, where more than 23 large groups speak their own tongues.²⁶¹ The new policy allows people to be involved with and understand local government. Together with appointments of representatives of all major ethnic groups at local, regional and national level, ethnic federalism is a clear break with the past.

B. ETHNIC FEDERALISM AND CONFLICTS

The emergence of new regional elites is a major consequence of ethnic-based decentralisation. For the first time, political representation and bureaucratic appointments at all levels are reserved for educated members of the local ethnic group. Ethnic federalism thus quickly replaced the Amhara state with a multitude of ethno-ocratic regional and local states. Civil servants, previously sent from the centre, are now recruited in the locally dominant ethnic group, the focus of whose elites changed from a post in Addis Ababa to one in the regional or district administration. Competition over public sector representation and appointments shifted to the regional and district level.²⁶²

But the EPRDF's conception of ethnicity did not always match the multi-ethnic makeup of many cities and areas. The Southern region, Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz and Harar are inhabited by multiple ethnic groups. Tigray, Amhara, Oromo and Somali states are dominated by one ethnic group but host others.²⁶³ By some accounts,

30 to 45 per cent of the population in parts of Amhara is Oromo.²⁶⁴

Granting self-administration to dominant ethnic groups thus created new minorities. This has been particularly acute for Amharas and Gurages, who live in cities and larger settlements across the country. With the establishment of the ethnically defined regions, these populations became minorities that in some cases did not speak the language of the new administration. The principle was interpreted by some groups as an opportunity to claim exclusive rights over land by evicting settlers and other newcomers. These tensions have often been nurtured by politicians from local indigenous groups. Examples include the conflict between the Berta and Amhara and Oromo settlers in Asosa zone that exploded during the 2000 federal elections. Sometimes the conflicts take on the character of ethnic cleansing; "non-natives" have been chased away in Arussi, Harar and Bale.²⁶⁵ In Southern region, the ethnically defined administration played into the hands of the historically dominant Sidama and Wolayta clans that revived discriminatory practices against lower caste groups such as craftsmen and slave descendents.²⁶⁶

Ethnicity also has become the primary means of mobilisation. Since political representation is organised on ethnic grounds, groups are encouraged to claim "ethnic rights" at the expense of others. The constitutionally enshrined self-determination clause incites them to control *kebelles*, districts and regions in order to have a share of resources channelled from the federal to the local level. Local politicians and party officials from all ethnic groups – and from both government and opposition – have at times incited followers to engage in conflict with competing groups.²⁶⁷ Territorial gains translate into more administrative power, land, tax revenue and, potentially, food aid.²⁶⁸

Since ethnic mobilisation is a rewarding strategy, numerous conflicts, both political and violent, have been

²⁶⁰ In urban multi-ethnic areas pupils can choose between schools that instruct in either Amharic or their mother tongue.

²⁶¹ Lara Smith, "The Politics of Contemporary Language Policy in Ethiopia", *Journal of Developing Societies*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2008), pp. 207-243.

²⁶² Crisis Group interview, intellectual, Addis Ababa, 11 July 2008.

²⁶³ Alem Habtu. "Ethnic Pluralism", op. cit., pp. 110-111.

²⁶⁴ Sandra Fullerton Joireman, "Opposition Politics and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: We Will All Go down Together", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 35, no. 3 (1997), pp. 405-406.

²⁶⁵ Jon Abbink, "Breaking and making the state", op. cit., p. 153.

²⁶⁶ Lovise Aalen, "Institutionalising the Politics of Ethnicity", op. cit., p. 142.

²⁶⁷ For instance, land-related clashes between Gumuz and Oromos in eastern Wollega claimed over 130 lives in May 2008. An independent inquiry established that Oromo state police were involved in clearing settlers. Document in possession of Crisis Group. Oromos accused the Gumuz-Benishangul administration of arming and mobilising Gumuz militia. "Hundred killed during clashes between Gumuz and Oromos in Ethiopia", *Sudan Tribune*, 24 May 2008.

²⁶⁸ Document in possession of Crisis Group.

sparked by decentralisation. These are routinely described as “ethnic conflicts”, but they are more often the result of rivalry over state resources than of irreconcilable ethnic differences. Many are about administrative boundaries.²⁶⁹ In Southern region, playing the clan card has become politically rewarding among the Woleyta.²⁷⁰ Existing tribal divisions, for example among the Arsi Oromos, are exacerbated by decentralisation, as increasingly smaller kinship groups compete for influence and territorial control.²⁷¹ As a result, many conflicts have become more protracted as struggles over land, political power and administrative control become intertwined.

Beginning in the first half of the 1990s, a wave of local conflicts gripped the country, as groups were incited by the transitional charter to settle old disputes or claim territory they felt was rightfully theirs. Some of the most severe were between Amhara settlers and Anuak in December 2003 in Gambella, where the federal army apparently sided with the highlanders.²⁷² In Somali after 2000, several hundred were killed in repeated fighting between the Sheikash, a small clan that sought to establish its own district, and Ogaden sub-clans. A border dispute between the Guji and Gedeo exploded into large-scale fighting in 1998 over control of Hagere Mariam district.²⁷³ Land disputes triggered by administrative boundary changes incited a confrontation between the Guji and Boran in June 2006, causing at least 100 deaths and massive displacement.²⁷⁴ Some 70,000 fled the border area between Oromiya and Somali after conflict erupted between Boran and Garri over a borehole.²⁷⁵ By a very conservative estimate, several thousand people were killed in inter-ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia between 1991 and 2005.²⁷⁶

The redrawing of administrative boundaries was particularly painful for groups that had historically changing identities, such as Oromo-Somali pastoralists like the Garri, Gabra and Guji. Resource-sharing agreements with neighbouring pastoral groups became increasingly diffi-

cult, since territorial control is a prerequisite to claim a district. They were forced to settle for an Oromo or Somali ethnic identity and ally with the predominant ethnic group in those regional states. Oromiya and Somali claimed their territory, leading to disputes between the two states. Following a federal arbitration proposal in 1995 and a federally supervised referendum in 2004, the disputed *kebelles* and territory were allocated between them.

Existing constitutional mechanisms and the federal government’s conflict management have proven insufficient to resolve such competing ethnic self-determination.²⁷⁷ The House of Federation is formally mandated to deal with nationality issues and federal-regional relations, but it meets only twice a year and lacks the authority to effectively mitigate ethnic conflicts; it has been reluctant to approve referendums to decide the status of disputed localities.²⁷⁸ Exceptions include the 2001 referendum in which the Silte, until then largely considered part of the Gurage clan federation, established their own zone and thereby ethno-political identity.²⁷⁹ The 2004 referendum cited above allocated some 500 *kebelles* to Oromiya and 100 to Somali, but the border is not yet fully demarcated.²⁸⁰

Grants of special districts are another strategy to defuse ethnic tensions. Establishing special zones (*woredas*) is a regional state prerogative initiated by either the concerned ethnic group or the administration. Eight special districts existed in 2000, five in Southern region, two in Benishangul Gumuz and one in Afar, as well as three special zones in Amhara.²⁸¹ At the end of the 1990s, the EPRDF became less willing to grant self-administration to Southern region groups²⁸² after its attempts to engineer ethnic identities that matched its institutional proposals met limited success. The Welayta in Soddoin violently rejected an effort to construct the Wagagoda language out of Woleyta, Gamo, Gofa and Dawro dialects in 1999.²⁸³ Earlier, the forced merger of five ethno-national entities in today’s Southern region frustrated the Sidama, who settled for a separate zone instead of their own region.²⁸⁴ When the government tried to settle competing claims over Awassa by giving it a multi-ethnic

²⁶⁹ Jon Abbink, “Ethnicity and Conflict Generation in Ethiopia: Some Problems and Prospects of Ethno-Regional Federalism”, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2006), pp. 390-397.

²⁷⁰ Lovise Aalen, “Institutionalising the Politics of Ethnicity”, op. cit., p. 151-154.

²⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, researcher, Shashemene, 20 July 2008.

²⁷² “Targeting the Anuak: Human Rights Violations and Crimes against Humanity in Ethiopia’s Gambella Region”, Human Rights Watch, March 2005.

²⁷³ Kjetil Tronvoll, *Ethiopia*, op. cit., p. 22.

²⁷⁴ Lara Smith, “Political Violence”, op. cit., p. 10.

²⁷⁵ “Water pipe sparks Ethiopian conflict”, BBC, 13 March 2009.

²⁷⁶ Jon Abbink, “Ethnicity and conflict generation in Ethiopia: some problems and prospects of ethno-regional federalism”, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2006), p. 408.

²⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 391.

²⁷⁸ Lovise Aalen, “Ethnic Federalism”, op. cit., p. 249.

²⁷⁹ The referendum asked the question “Are the Siltie Gurage or not?”. Lara Smith, “Voting for an ethnic identity: procedural and institutional responses to ethnic conflict in Ethiopia”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 45, no. 4 (2007), p. 565.

²⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, former regional official, Addis Ababa, 23 July 2008.

²⁸¹ Kjetil Tronvoll, *Ethiopia*, op. cit., p. 20.

²⁸² Sarah Vaughan, “Ethnicity and Power”, op. cit. p. 249.

²⁸³ Lara Smith, “Political Violence”, op. cit., p. 208.

²⁸⁴ Lovise Aalen, “Institutionalising the Politics of Ethnicity”, op. cit., p. 123.

status similar to Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, a Sidama protest forced it to back down.²⁸⁵

C. ETHNO-NATIONAL CONTESTATION

Communal conflicts sparked by ethnic-based federalism have become common. While they often involve killings, displacement and property destruction, they are not directed against the federal government. Ethno-national rebellions against the EPRDF have not disappeared, however. With varying success, the ONLF, OLF, Ethiopian People's Patriotic Front (EPPF)²⁸⁶ and Tigray People's Democratic Movement (TPDM) are waging such armed struggles. Oromiya is of particular concern, since it contains 37 per cent of Ethiopia's population (roughly 27 million people).²⁸⁷ Its secession would entail disintegration of the Ethiopian state. The ONLF insurgency in Somali would not, but it has triggered a humanitarian crisis.

1. Oromiya region

With creation of the region, Oromo national identity was territorialised for the first time,²⁸⁸ but many Oromos are unhappy with their political and economic situation. Oromo nationalists argue that their ethnic group continues to be exploited, and they draw an unbroken line from oppressive Abyssinian rule under Emperor Menelik in the nineteenth century to the EPRDF.²⁸⁹ A frequent complaint is that the Tigrayan-led regime plunders the region. Oromiya's rich resources – coffee, agricultural produce, livestock and water – are said to be siphoned off by the federal government.²⁹⁰ Such views are shared by many politically aware Oromos, including members

of the ruling OPDO.²⁹¹ The temporary transfer of the regional capital from Addis Ababa to Nazreth in 2004 – widely seen as proof of EPRDF intent to strip the Oromo nation off its most valuable economic asset, the capital city – sparked immense protest. Peasant grievances also result from forced, state-led development projects that require farmers to provide unpaid labour.²⁹² State and party monitoring of peasant views and movements is widely resented.²⁹³

Hatred of the EPRDF, its OPDO subsidiary and the security forces²⁹⁴ is nourished by the government's harsh reaction to opposition and dissent. The EPRDF closed OLF's humanitarian wing, the Oromo Relief Association, in August 1995 and the Oromo nationalist Macha Tulema welfare association in July 2004.²⁹⁵ Harassment, intimidation and imprisonment of suspected OLF supporters remain widespread. Public and sometimes private criticism of OPDO and the regime are met by arrest. Detainees are regularly tortured and deprived of due process,²⁹⁶ and there are frequent but unsubstantiated allegations of targeted killings and disappearances of OLF members. A recurrent government method to silence critics is to accuse them of being OLF, OPC (formerly ONC) or OFDM members. Reporting OLF sympathisers buys favours from local administrators, including *kebele* court judgments in property disputes.²⁹⁷ Unsurprisingly, Oromiya has the country's highest level of reported human rights violations.²⁹⁸ An atmosphere of suspicion, intimidation and fear prevails.²⁹⁹

Oromo discontent is symptomatic of ethnic federalism's shortcomings. Ethnic-based decentralisation addresses some major historic concerns of the nationalists. Under the emperor and the Derg, Oromos were denied access to the education system and public sector, where Am-

²⁸⁵ Lovise Aalen, "Ethnic Federalism", op. cit., pp. 243-261.

²⁸⁶ The EPPF is a minor rebel group established by radical members of the Ethiopian Democratic Movement in 1998. Its troops operate in the lowlands of Amhara and Tigray region and are supported by Eritrea.

²⁸⁷ "Summary and Statistical Report of the 2007 Population and Housing Census", Central Statistical Agency, 2008. www.csa.gov.et.

²⁸⁸ A collective Oromo national consciousness emerged relatively recently and has been weakened by internal divisions. Five groups belong to the Oromo: Western Oromo in Wellega area – mostly Protestant farmers; strongly Amharised northern Oromos in Shoa; small pastoralists in the South, practicing animal husbandry; conservative Muslims of Hararghe region; and the agro-pastoral Boran on the Kenyan border. Tronvoll. *Ethiopia*, op. cit., p. 8; see also Alemseged Abbay, "Diversity", op. cit., p. 604.

²⁸⁹ Edmond J Keller, "The Ethnogenesis of the Oromo Nation and Its Implications for Politics in Ethiopia", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 33, no. 4 (1995), p. 625.

²⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Oromiya region, July 2008.

²⁹¹ Paulos Milkias, "Ethiopia, the TPLF, and the Roots of the 2001 Political Tremor", op. cit., p. 28.

²⁹² Crisis Group interview, teacher, Adama, 18 July 2008.

²⁹³ "Suppressing Dissent", Human Rights Watch, op. cit., p. 32.

²⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Oromo intellectuals, Addis Ababa, 12 July 2008.

²⁹⁵ The Macha Tulema welfare association, the first influential Oromo nationalist organisation, was banned by the Haile Selassie government in 1966 and readmitted after the EPRDF came to power.

²⁹⁶ "Suppressing Dissent", Human Rights Watch, op. cit.

²⁹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Oromiya region, July 2008.

²⁹⁸ Kjetil Tronvoll, "Human Rights Violations in Federal Ethiopia: When Ethnic Identity is a Political Stigma", *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2008), p. 65.

²⁹⁹ In recent years, Oromo students have often led efforts to reclaim ethno-national and democratic rights. Region-wide demonstrations by secondary and college students took place in major cities of Oromiya in 2002, 2004 and 2005.

haric was solely used.³⁰⁰ The EPRDF's language policy contributed significantly to restoring Oromo cultural rights. While parents acknowledge the advantage of having their children taught in Afaan Oromiffa, however, many credit this to the earlier OLF campaign for Oromo literacy rather than the EPRDF. And the EPRDF policy of self-determination further fuels nationalist aspirations, fostering, in combination with political repression, a sentiment among large parts of the Oromo elite that they have not yet received their full political rights.³⁰¹

Religion, economics, genealogy and geography divide Oromo loyalties, which are exploited by OPDO and OLF. The Wellega zone is widely considered an anti-government stronghold, where many relatively well-educated Lutheran Oromos of the Mekane Yesus Church sympathise with the OLF, which also commands strong support from the Boran in southern Oromiya region. Conversely, the OPDO has fared relatively better, working through the *gada* and clan system, generating a following among segments of the historically marginalised Arsi Oromos.³⁰²

Despite its organisational flaws and divisions, many ordinary Oromos retain an almost messianic belief in the OLF as the major nationalist organisation.³⁰³ The first modern party to articulate national self-awareness and self-determination, it shaped Oromo political consciousness and, in collaboration with diaspora intellectuals, created a nationalist narrative that influences the discourse of all Oromo opposition parties.³⁰⁴ Many consider the OPDO a TPLF puppet and portray its officials, including the regional president, Abadula Gemedo, as opportunists.³⁰⁵ To exert authority in regional politics, the OPDO relies on a mixture of patronage and intimidation.³⁰⁶ After the 2005 elections, it recruited massively, expanding its membership to one million. However, most new members joined to get public sector jobs or to avoid

allegations of OLF membership. In fact, many were OLF sympathisers.³⁰⁷

Oromo nationalism is increasing, as pervasive government repression increases both real and perceived grievances. The EPRDF uses a carrot and stick strategy, rewarding those who join the OPDO and punishing those who refuse. Negotiations with parts of the OLF are likelier to be an effort to co-opt some Oromo constituencies than an indicator of genuine reconciliation. The 2010 elections in Oromiya will most probably be a controlled process that produces a large OPDO majority and a limited number of seats for the legal opposition. In free and fair elections, votes would probably be divided more equally between OPDO and FDD.

2. Somali region

Ethnic Somalis' rebellion against the Ethiopian state dates to colonial times. It flared up again in 2007, when the army launched a ruthless counter-insurgency campaign against the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). The Ogaden territory was incorporated into the Abyssinian empire at the end of the nineteenth century, a move sanctioned by colonial treaties between Ethiopia, Italy and Great Britain. In the mid-1970s, the irredentist Western Somali Liberation Front (WSFL) began an armed insurgency against the Derg, with Somalia's support. This culminated in the 1977/1978 Ogaden War.³⁰⁸ Few attempts were made by past Ethiopian regimes to integrate Ogaden inhabitants, and a profound feeling of marginalisation has prevailed among the Somali population.

The region obtained self-administration when the Somali Regional State was created in 1993.³⁰⁹ But despite attempts to lure the inhabitants into the federal body politic, they are only nominally represented at national level. Few Christian highland Ethiopians would consider Ethiopian-Somalis citizens with equal rights. Over the years the EPRDF's heavy-handed military and political interventions alienated substantial parts of the Ogaden and other clan groups that had initially been sympathetic to the federal experiment.³¹⁰ Ridden by clan rivalries and destabilised by conflicts in neighbouring Somalia,

³⁰⁰ Mekuria Bulcha, "The Politics of Linguistic Homogenisation in Ethiopia and the Conflict over the Status of 'Afaan Oromoo'", *African Affairs*, vol. 96, no. 384 (1997), pp. 325-352.

³⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, Oromo intellectuals, Addis Ababa, 12 July 2008.

³⁰² Crisis group interview, researcher and intellectual, Shashemene, 20 July 2008. Some Arsi Oromo are suspicious of what they perceive as Wollega domination within the OLF.

³⁰³ For more on the OLF see Appendix C.

³⁰⁴ John Sorenson, "Learning to be Oromo: Nationalist Discourse in the Diaspora", *Social Identities*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1996), pp. 439-468.

³⁰⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Oromiya region, July 2008.

³⁰⁶ Terrence Lyons, "Ethiopia's Convergence of Crisis", op. cit., p. 156.

³⁰⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Shashemene, 20 July 2008.

³⁰⁸ Gebru Tareke, "The Ethiopia-Somalia War of 1977 Revisited", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 33, no. 3 (2000), pp. 635-67. As noted above, Ethiopia's victory owed much to Soviet and Cuban military support.

³⁰⁹ The Somali Regional State includes the former Ogaden province and former eastern Hararghe and Bale.

³¹⁰ Tobias Hagmann and Mohamud H. Khalif, "State and Politics in Ethiopia's Somali Region since 1991", *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, vol. 6 (2006), pp. 25-49.

the Ogaden is Ethiopia's most underdeveloped periphery. Its remoteness, harsh climate, lack of infrastructure and chronic instability contribute to its poverty.

The ONLF insurgency, which has fought the army since 1994, seeks an independent Ogadenia³¹¹ and controls much of the rural hinterlands of Fiq, Degehabur, Qorahe, Wardheer and Godey zones, which are predominantly inhabited by Ogaden clans of the Darood clan family. As the rebellion gained momentum, the army's response, which often involved collective punishment of entire communities, alienated most Ethiopian-Somalis. Mass arrests of suspected rebel supporters, indiscriminate killings, torture and rape have been characteristics of the counter-insurgency strategy since 2007, but the security forces have failed to weaken popular support for the ONLF.³¹²

The uprising is significantly influenced by international dynamics that contribute to the region's disorder. During its 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia and thereafter, Eritrea has sponsored the ONLF and other Ethiopian insurgencies to put pressure on the government.³¹³ With Addis Ababa's intervention in Somalia in December 2006, the Ogaden became a battlefield between Ethiopian forces and Somali insurgents on both sides of the border.³¹⁴ A wave of anti-Ethiopian sentiment swept the Somali territories, allowing the ONLF to present itself as leading resistance to aggression. Large oil and natural gas reserves in the Ogaden further complicate the issue. Western and Asian interests compete for exploration concessions.³¹⁵

Though hard pressed, Ethiopia has prevented creation of a front of insurgent groups, including ONLF, al-Shabaab and others, on its eastern and southern flanks. Withdrawal from Somalia has freed military resources for containing the ONLF rebellion. Somali attitudes toward Ethiopia are at an historic low, but there is little sign political dynamics in the Somali periphery will impact national politics. Local elections were not held in the region in 2008, and the 2010 elections are unlikely to offer voters a genuine political choice given the repression since 2007.

³¹¹ See www.onlf.org.

³¹² "Collective Punishment: War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in the Ogaden area of Ethiopia's Somali Regional State", Human Rights Watch, June 2008; "Ogaden Region: Ethiopia's Hidden Horrors", *Mail & Guardian*, 7 January 2009. Crisis Group interview, Ethiopia analyst, Addis Ababa, 15 July 2008. For further detail see Appendix D.

³¹³ During the war, Eritrea sought to create a second front. Thereafter, it has supported anti-EPRDF groups to force acceptance of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission ruling that granted it control of the disputed town of Badme. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°141, *Beyond the Fragile Peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea: Averting New War*, 17 June 2008.

³¹⁴ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°147, *Somalia: To Move Beyond the Failed State*, 23 December 2008.

³¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, former regional official, Addis Ababa, 23 July 2008. The mines and energy ministry has given concessions to Malaysian Petronas, the Ethiopian-owned South West Energy, Pexco and the Swedish Lundin Petroleum. All suspended work after the ONLF attacked the Obole oil-field in Dehegabor in April 2007, where the Chinese Zhoun-gyan Petroleum Exploration Bureau was doing seismic tests for South West Energy. "Ethiopia: Insecurity Threatens Oil",

VI. CONCLUSION

Ethiopia has experienced substantial political transformation since EPRDF forces captured Addis Ababa in 1991, but many things stay the same. Despite its democratic rhetoric, the regime is unwilling to share power or to accept criticism as normal. After 2005, its objective has been simply to stay in power. To do so, it has established a party-state system that perpetuates its rule but frustrates large parts of the population. Its obsession with controlling political processes from the federal to the local level reflects the former liberation fighters' paranoia and incites opposition groups to consider armed struggle their only remaining option.

Economic growth and the expansion of public services are to the regime's credit, but they increasingly fail to translate into popular support. The EPRDF's authoritarian rural development policies produce higher yields but not electoral approval. Initially greeted with enthusiasm, ethnic federalism has failed to resolve the "national

question". Instead it generates greater conflict at local level, as ethnic groups fight over political influence. That policy has empowered some groups but has not been accompanied by dialogue and reconciliation. For Amhara and national elites, it impedes a strong, unitary nation-state. For ethno-national rebel groups like the ONLF and OLF, it remains artificial. But overall it has powerfully promoted ethnic self-awareness among all groups. Although the current federal system may need to be modified, it is unlikely Ethiopia can return to the old unitary state system.

The international community has ignored or downplayed the problems. Some donors consider food security more important than democracy in Ethiopia. In view of the mounting ethnic awareness and political tensions created by the regionalisation policy, however, external actors would be well advised to take the governance problems more seriously and adopt a more principled position towards the Meles Zenawi government.

Nairobi/Brussels, 4 September 2009

APPENDIX A

MAP OF ETHIOPIA



APPENDIX B

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS AND TERMS

- AEUP:** All Ethiopian Democratic League
- AFD:** Alliance for Freedom and Democracy
- ANDM:** Amhara National Democratic Movement
- APDO:** Afar People's Democratic Organization
- BGDUF:** Benshangul-Gumuz Democratic Unity Front
- CUD:** Coalition for Unity and Democracy (Amharic acronym: Kinijit)
- CUDP:** Coalition for Unity and Democratic Party
- Derg** Literally "committee" in Amharic. The military junta that deposed Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, and imposed a socialist state doctrine. It was overthrown by the EPLF and TPLF in 1991.
- EDUP:** Ethiopian Democratic Unity Party
- EDU – Tehadiso:** Ethiopian Democratic Union – Tehadiso
- EHRCO:** Ethiopian Human Rights Council
- EPDM :** Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement
- EPLF:** Eritrean People's Liberation Front
- EPPF:** Ethiopian People's Patriotic Front
- EPRDF:** Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front
- EPRP:** Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
- ESDFP:** Ethiopian Social Democratic Federal Party
- ESDL:** Ethiopian Somali Democratic League
- FDD:** Forum for Democratic Dialogue in Ethiopia (Amharic acronym: *Medrek*)
- Gada:** An Oromo term used to refer to a system that groups persons (males) of the same generation into sets that are ordered hierarchically and assigned a range of social, military, political, and ritual rights and responsibilities. Generation-set systems are found in varying forms among the Oromo and other groups in the Horn of Africa.
- Garee** Each *gott* is divided into smaller groups of roughly 30 households (*garee*, "group" in Afan Oromo).
- Gebbar areas** Lands owned by northern settlers (often Neftegna) and farmed by tribute-paying peasants.
- Gott (Gooxi)** An organisation below the *kebele* level, of between 60 to 90 households, that can be further sub-divided into *garee* or *misoma*.
- GPDM:** Gambella People's Democratic Movement
- Kebelles** (Ganda in Oromiya region) Formal local governmental set-up of peasant associations with own council, executive council, tribunal and militia, initially set up by the Derg, further institutionalised by EPRDF.
- MEISON:** All Ethiopian Socialist Movement
- MLLT :** Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (*Malalit*)
- Neftegna** Amharic for riflemen, they conquered additional territory for the Abyssinian empire and were then given land farmed by tribute-paying peasants (*gabbar*).
- OFC:** Oromo Federalist Congress
- OFDM:** Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement
- OLF:** Oromo Liberation Front
- ONC:** Oromo National Congress
- ONLF:** Ogaden National Liberation Front
- OPC:** Oromo People's Congress
- OPDO:** Oromo People's Democratic Organization
- SDAF:** Somali Democratic Alliance Forces
- SEPDF:** Southern Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Front
- SNNPR:** Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region
- SPDP:** Somali People's Democratic Party
- TGE:** Transitional Government of Ethiopia
- TPDM:** Tigray People's Democratic Movement
- TPLF:** Tigray People's Liberation Front
- UDJ:** Unity for Democracy and Justice (Amharic acronym: Andinet)
- UEDF:** United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (Amharic acronym: Hibret)
- UEDP – Medhin:** United Ethiopian Democratic Party – Medhin
- WSLF:** Western Somali Liberation Front
- Woreda** An administrative division managed by a local government, equivalent to a district and composed of a number of *kebele*.

APPENDIX C

THE OROMO LIBERATION FRONT (OLF)

Founded in 1973 by former members of the Macha Tulema welfare association, the OLF fights for an independent Oromo state and Oromo self-determination. It claims a substantial part of Ethiopia – approximately 600,000 square kilometres, roughly half the country – as “Oromiyaa”.³¹⁶ Its insurgency began in eastern Ethiopia’s Chercher highlands, where it had set up a rudimentary administration by early 1977, and was active in Bale, Sidama and Arsi.³¹⁷ Following a major Derg counter-insurgency campaign in Hararghe, it had to abandon its “liberated areas” and revert to guerrilla tactics in 1979. Two years later it expanded its activities to Wellega in the east. Between 1979 and 1984 the Derg countered with a large village program, cutting Oromo, Sidama and Somali rebels off from their support base in Bale, Sidama and Hararghe.³¹⁸

The OLF recruited fighters through the *gada* system and traditional elders. It mostly relied on the local population for food, supplies and intelligence but was also aided by Sudan.³¹⁹ In western Ethiopia, it drove the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) from the northern and southern parts of western Wellega in 1990-1991.³²⁰

By the mid-1980s, the OLF and TPLF had established a tactical alliance in their armed struggle against Derg forces around Assosa, but relations were soon severed because of political rivalry and differences over how to run the rebellion.³²¹ The OLF joined the EPRDF-led Transitional Government of Ethiopia in 1991, but animosities between the dominant TPLF and the more junior OLF resurfaced in the run-up to the June 1992 election.³²² TPLF forces attacked OLF troops in Arsi and Bale regions killing several hundred fighters and supporters in November 1991. A U.S.-mediated ceasefire did

not hold for long.³²³ After OLF forces left their camps around Dembi Dolo, the two armies clashed again, and the EPRDF arrested large numbers of OLF.³²⁴ With their military personnel and hardware decimated, the remaining OLF leaders fled to Kenya and sought refuge in Europe and the U.S. A clandestine network remained in Ethiopia and partly infiltrated state organs.³²⁵

A prolonged period of disintegration and leadership division weakened the OLF after 1992. It lost support as its ability to challenge EPRDF troops dwindled significantly. From an estimated 14,000 men under arms in 1991, its armed force has dropped to several thousand.³²⁶ Nevertheless, its fighters repeatedly infiltrate from Kenya and Sudan, for example at the end of the 1990s in Borana territory and in 2002 from Sudan. Most such attempts are short-lived. The OLF has also been accused by the government of responsibility for a series of bombings throughout the country.³²⁷ The organisation rejoined an alliance with Eritrea following the 1998-2000 war.³²⁸ Kenya withdrew its support, fearing secessionist claims by its own Boran population. Khartoum ended support as it reconciled gradually with Ethiopia in the late 1990s.

The OLF’s leaders are seriously divided on personal, political and ideological grounds. While some favour national self-determination for Oromos within the EPRDF’s

³¹⁶ See www.oromoliberationfront.org/OromiaBriefs.htm.

³¹⁷ *Africa Confidential*, vol. 19, no. 11 (1978).

³¹⁸ “Evil Days: 30 years of war and famine in Ethiopia”, Human Rights Watch, September 1991, pp. 74-80.

³¹⁹ OLF trained its soldiers in south-western Sudan. In return, the Derg supported the rebel SPLA against Khartoum.

³²⁰ “Evil Days”, Human Rights Watch, op. cit., p. 276.

³²¹ Sarah Vaughan, “Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia”, op. cit., pp. 178-179.

³²² Tensions between the two fronts were the result of political competition, not ideological differences. Senior OLF cadres like former deputy secretary general Leencho Lata had played an important role in co-drafting the Transitional National Charter.

³²³ Siegfried Pausewang *et al*, 2002, op. cit., pp. 30-33.

³²⁴ Amnesty International estimates that over 20,000 suspected OLF members were detained in military camps without charge or trial. “Ethiopia: Accountability past and present: human rights in transition”, Amnesty International, April 1995.

³²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Ethiopia analyst, 27 October 2008.

³²⁶ Gérard Prunier, “Armed Movements in Sudan, Chad, CAR, Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia”, Center for International Peace Operations, April 2008, pp. 13-14.

³²⁷ Human Rights Watch, “Suppressing Dissent”, op. cit., p. 10. The OLF leadership denies targeting civilians and claims that its attacks are directed exclusively against military targets. “Interview with Dawud Ibsa Ayana, Chairman of the Oromo Liberation Front”, *Les Nouvelles d’Addis*, 29 March 2006.

³²⁸ OLF had received substantial assistance by EPLF after its foundation. The two fronts entered into dispute after OLF’s withdrawal from the TGE. At the time of the OLF-EPRDF fallout the forces of the latter were partly commanded by Eritrean officers, which some Oromo consider as an Eritrean treason to the Oromo cause.

framework of ethnic federalism, others refuse all attempts to negotiate a return of the movement into Ethiopian national politics.³²⁹ Three factions compete over the OLF leadership and legacy. The first is led by the elected chairman, Dawud Ibsa, a former military commander from Wollega, who has been based in Eritrea since 1998. In August 2008 he was joined in Asmara by Brigadier Kamal Gelchu, who had defected from the Ethiopian army, bringing 150 soldiers with him³³⁰ and now commands the Oromo Liberation Army, which receives Eritrean training.³³¹ Both are challenged by OLF members of the Gelassa group,³³² headed by Dhugasa Bakako, whose power base and fighters are mostly in northern Kenya. Dhugasa accuses the two Asmara-based factions of having sold out to the EPRDF and pan-Ethiopian nationalists.³³³

In a bid to further weaken the OLF and reclaim part of the armed Oromo opposition from Eritrea, the prime minister's office mandated mediators to hold pre-negotiation talks with the Dawud Ibsa faction.³³⁴ In October 2007 a delegation of Oromo intellectuals close to that faction met with officials in Addis Ababa.³³⁵ In a meeting in the Netherlands in January 2008, the OLF leader allegedly accepted the EPRDF's precondition for negotiations by endorsing the constitution.³³⁶ Subsequently, the government enlisted 125 Oromo elders, who publicly requested the OLF to immediately begin peace talks with the EPRDF.³³⁷ These failed and in November 2008, the

government arrested 200 alleged OLF "terrorists" in Addis Ababa and Oromiya, including senior regional officials and the secretary-general of the OFDM, Bekele Jirata.³³⁸ The arrests were widely interpreted as an attempt to pressure the OLF back to the negotiation table. A few days later, the then OLF military commander, Legesse Wegi, whom the government accused of responsibility for a series of attacks in the capital, was killed in western Wellega.³³⁹

³²⁹ Various attempts to mediate a rapprochement between the OLF and the EPRDF occurred over the years. Mediation attempts were made by the Carter Center (1994), the U.S. Congressmen Harry Johnston (1995), Germany (1996-1997), and most notably the Norwegian government (1999-2005). Norway has historic links to the OLF via the Norwegian Protestant Missions and the Mekane Yesus church.

³³⁰ Martin Plaut, "Ethiopia's Oromo Liberation Front", *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 33, no. 109 (2006), p. 588.

³³¹ He mostly draws on support from the Arsi, Bale and Boran Oromos.

³³² Named after the former OLF chairman Gelassa Dilbo who had been ousted from the leadership by Dawud Ibsa's supporters in 1999.

³³³ OLF's decision to join forces with former CUD politicians in the AFD alliance was particularly criticised.

³³⁴ The mediators, referred to as "elders", included Ambassador Berhanu Dinka, former UN envoy to the Great Lakes region, pastor Itefa Gobena, head of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and Alemayehu Ketema, a well-known businessman with close links to the OPDO.

³³⁵ "Meles Zenawi blows hot and cold", *Indian Ocean Newsletter*, no. 1224, 20 October 2007.

³³⁶ "Ethiopia elders urge OLF rebels to negotiate", Reuters, 15 November 2008.

³³⁷ "Ethiopia's Prime Minister says ready for talks with Oromo rebels", *Sudan Tribune*, 24 November 2008.

³³⁸ "Ethiopia arrests opposition leader, journalist hurt", Reuters, 3 November 2008. Bekele Jirata was released on bail on 4 February 2009. The EPRDF did, however, convince a senior OLF official, Abba Biya Abba Jobir, to return to Ethiopia. 'The reason why OLF went to Eritrea was because it has nowhere to go', *The Reporter*, 13 December 2008.

³³⁹ "Ethiopia says rebel leader killed in west", Reuters, 7 November 2008.

APPENDIX D

THE OGA DEN NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT (ONLF)

The ONLF's transformation from a political organisation to a military front during the 1990s was linked to the region's politics. It won the first local and regional elections in 1992 with a wide margin, and its inexperienced officers took over the Somali region's administration.³⁴⁰ Relations between the Ogaden nationalists and the EPRDF broke down in February 1994, after regional parliamentarians demanded an independence referendum. The EPRDF augmented its political control of the region and promoted a coalition of non-Ogaden clans by establishing the Ethiopian Somali Democratic League (ESDL), which took over the regional administration after the 1995 elections. Its successor, the ruling Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP), is the EPRDF's satellite party. Although it includes members from all local clans, its backing is very limited. Both the Ogaden and non-Ogaden groups claim a demographic majority in the region, which influences competition over government resources and appointments.³⁴¹

The federal government's strategy of co-opting non-Ogaden and moderate Ogaden groups, while suppressing the more radical ONLF, was successful for a long time. However, the regional government's failure to develop the region, the SPDP's weaknesses and undemocratic record and the Eritrean involvement strengthened the ONLF, whose fighters overpowered Ethiopian troops protecting the Chinese oil exploration in Obole on 24 April 2007, killing more than 60 soldiers and local Somali workers and nine Chinese.³⁴² The rebels had warned that they would "not tolerate" oil exploration by foreign companies in the Ogaden,³⁴³ and they exploited the security gap that resulted from Ethiopia's preoccupation with its intervention in southern Somalia.³⁴⁴

Government forces responded with a counter-insurgency campaign that continues in an effort to deprive the rebels of food, money and weapons.³⁴⁵ Already in April 2007, the prime minister's national security adviser, Abay Tsehay, General Yunis Samora and the commander of the Hararghe division met and decided to impose an economic blockade on the Ogaden population. Starting the next month, the military blocked all circulation of goods and persons from and to Degehabur, Qorahe, Wardheer, Fiq and Godey zones, making it difficult for the ONLF to resupply but also indiscriminately punishing civilians. Numerous settlements were forcibly relocated to areas controlled by the army. Observers contend the crackdown motivates civilians to join the ONLF.³⁴⁶

In collaboration with local officials, the army also has systematically coerced local communities to form militias to fight the ONLF. Clan leaders and civil servants who failed to recruit militias were arrested or dismissed.³⁴⁷ The militias receive food aid diverted from the World Food Programme (WFP).³⁴⁸ WFP's contact with beneficiaries in the region had always been minimal, as the aid is distributed through the regional Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Agency.³⁴⁹ Most of it is reportedly taken by the government for its counter-insurgency campaign.³⁵⁰

Federal authorities instructed regional officials to pressure the Ogaden sub-clans to abandon support for the ONLF. Waves of arrest targeting elders, businessmen and ordinary people occurred throughout 2008. Regional prosecutors and judges were dispatched from the regional capital, Jijiga, to the "insecure areas", to conduct trials of elders who did not support the counter-insurgency

³⁴⁰ John Markakis, "The Somali in Ethiopia", *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 23, no. 70 (1996), pp. 567-570.

³⁴¹ Tobias Hagmann, "Beyond clannishness and colonialism: understanding political disorder in Ethiopia's Somali Region, 1991-2004", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 43, no. 4 (2005), pp. 509-536.

³⁴² Human Rights Watch, *Collective Punishment: War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in the Ogaden area of Ethiopia's Somali Region*, New York, 12 June 12, 2008, p. 100.

³⁴³ "ONLF Statement on Malaysian Firm Petronas' Oil Exploration in Ogaden", press release, ONLF, July 2005.

³⁴⁴ "Ethiopia to press Ogaden campaign despite criticism", Reuters, 23 August 2007. It is widely assumed that Eritrean

military advisers helped prepare the Obole attack. Crisis Group interviews, Addis Ababa, July 2008.

³⁴⁵ The ONLF regularly taxed lorries passing through its territory.

³⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker, Addis Ababa, 15 July 2008.

³⁴⁷ "Civilians are forced to fight Ethiopian rebels", *International Herald Tribune*, 14 December 2007.

³⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker, Addis Ababa, 15 July 2008.

³⁴⁹ Document in possession of Crisis Group, 20 August 2007.

³⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, donor representative, Nairobi, 2 September 2008.

unconditionally.³⁵¹ Public executions, imprisonment, torture and threats intimidated much of the local population, including regional government officials. Many better-off urban residents fled to Kenya.³⁵² Indeed, both the rebels and the government coerce elders, businessmen and young males to help them and punish those who refuse.³⁵³

Food prices exploded,³⁵⁴ and in combination with poor rainfall in some parts of the region a humanitarian crisis developed by mid-2007. The few agencies that provided relief in the “insecure areas” prior to the escalation were forced out by the military. In July 2007, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had to close its Godey and Jijiga offices after the army accused it of supporting the ONLF. When international concern mounted, the government reluctantly agreed to a visit by an interagency UN mission in August 2007³⁵⁵ but allowed it to drive only on the main road from Jijiga to Qabrideher and after food aid was distributed in the area. Elders who described the plight of their community and government repression were subsequently imprisoned.³⁵⁶ In a confidential note, the mission concluded that “there are serious protection concerns relating to civilian populations and violations of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights in the Somali region”.³⁵⁷ It also observed a reduction of 80 to 90 percent in the flow of commercial goods as a result of the trade ban, which aggravated the crisis.³⁵⁸

The authorities allowed the UN to expand its presence in the region in November 2007 and a dozen NGOs to begin humanitarian work. Deeply suspicious of NGOs, however, security officials closely monitored and often restrained their operations.³⁵⁹ On several occasions NGO workers, including expatriate staff, were arrested, and

they were made to understand that they could continue to operate only if they kept silent about human rights violations.³⁶⁰

The increased conflict has diverted attention from the ONLF’s lack of a clear long-term agenda. Neither creation of a landlocked, arid Ogadenia state nor union with chaotic Somalia are realistic options. Although it claims to represent all Ethiopian-Somalis, the ONLF draws support exclusively from Ogaden clansmen, particularly the Rer Abdille, Bah Gerii, Abdalle and Rer Issak sub-clans. In late 2006, Eritrea built up its military capacity and helped it infiltrate hundreds of trained fighters back into the region.³⁶¹ It now has an estimated 8,000 fighters, equipped mostly with automatic firearms as well as some rocket-propelled grenades.³⁶² Most other material support comes from the local population and the Ogaden Diaspora.

The leadership and organisation are in disarray. With most leaders in exile in the UK and U.S., field commanders have great autonomy. This gives flexibility but hinders strategic decision-making. Since 1998, the central committee has been chaired by a former Somalia admiral, Mohamed Omar Osman.³⁶³ His deputies are Mohamed Ismail Omar, who shuttles between the Ogaden and the diaspora, and Abdulkadir Hassan Hiirmoge “Adani”. In 2006 the central committee split over Eritrea’s involvement. While Osman and his deputies favoured Asmara’s help, others, led by Dr Mohammed Siraad Dolaal, the former head of the UK-based Ogaden Action Group, were opposed.³⁶⁴ Dolaal returned to the Ogaden as a commander and was killed on 18 January 2009 in Denan.³⁶⁵

Apart from disagreements over collaboration with Eritrea, the ONLF has an ambiguous record in relations with Islamist groups in the region. Until 2001, it cooperated with the Ethio-Somali branch of al-Ittihad al-Islami, but it has distanced itself from Islamist groups after the advent of the US-led “war on terror” by emphasising the nationalist character of its struggle. Ethiopia routinely refers to the ONLF as a “terrorist organisation” and pressures its Western allies to do the

³⁵¹ The elders were imprisoned in military facilities in Somali region. Crisis Group interviews, Addis Ababa, 25 July 2008.

³⁵² Crisis Group interview, Ogadeen refugees, Nairobi, 30 August 2008.

³⁵³ “Ethiopians caught between army and rebels”, Reuters, 22 January 2008.

³⁵⁴ Sally Healy, *Conflict in the Ogaden and its Regional Dimensions* (London, 2007), p. 4.

³⁵⁵ Attention was stimulated by an article by a journalist who accompanied ONLF fighters in Degehabur before being arrested by Ethiopian troops. Jeffrey Gettleman, “In Ethiopia, Fear and Cries of Army Brutality”, *The New York Times*, 18 June 2007.

³⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Addis Ababa, 25 July 2008.

³⁵⁷ “Note on the Human Rights Claims in the Somali Region of Ethiopia”, United Nations, September 2007.

³⁵⁸ “Report on the Findings from the UN Humanitarian Assessment Mission to the Somali Region, Ethiopia, 30 August – 5 September 2007”, United Nations, September 2007.

³⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, former regional official, Addis Ababa, 23 July 2008.

³⁶⁰ “In Ethiopia, does staying silent save lives?”, *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 February 2008.

³⁶¹ “Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1676” (2006). S/2006/913.

³⁶² Gérard Prunier, “Armed Movements in Sudan, Chad, CAR, Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia”, op. cit., p. 14.

³⁶³ The historic leader of ONLF, Sheikh Ibrahim Abdalla, died in June 2008.

³⁶⁴ Abdi M. Abdulahi, “The Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF): The Dilemma of its Struggle in Ethiopia”, *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 34, no. 113 (2007), p. 558.

³⁶⁵ Press release, ONLF, 24 January 2009.

same.³⁶⁶ Afraid of being added to the U.S. list of such organisations, the ONLF has cooperated with U.S. security officials in the Ogaden.³⁶⁷

A number of skirmishes between the ONLF and the United Western Somali Liberation Front (UWSLF), the successor of *al-Ittihad al-Isaami* in the Ogaden, have been reported. At the same time, ONLF leaders in the diaspora and the region mobilise fighters by inviting them to join the jihad against Christian Ethiopian aggression. In a March 2008 interview with al-Jazeera, the deputy chairman, Abdulkadir Hassan Hirmoge, confirmed cooperation with Somalia's Islamists, though not with the more radical al-Shabaab.³⁶⁸ In December 2007, the ONLF lost some 40 troops in a clash in Aware with al-Shabaab, which accused it of being pro-American.³⁶⁹ Radical Islamists rather than the ONLF are believed to have been behind the assassination attempt on Abdullahi Hassan "Lugbuur", the former Somali region state president, in Jijiga on 29 May 2007, in which eleven persons died.

³⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, London, 27 July 2008.

³⁶⁷ U.S. troops affiliated to Camp Lemonnier Joint Task Force in the Horn of Africa have maintained outposts across Ethiopia's Somali region until mid-2007.

³⁶⁸ Mohammed Mealin Seid, "The Role Of Religion In The Ogaden Conflict", Social Science Research Council, (<http://hornofafrica.ssrc.org>), 26 January 2009.

³⁶⁹ Document in possession of Crisis Group, June 2008.

APPENDIX E

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

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