

Time for Unraveling Ethiopia's Ethnic Federalism

What lessons do Ethiopians draw from the TPLF initiated war?

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"They gave the land, and we took it. This is green gold." Karuturi on land grab in Gambella

"The government is killing our people through starvation and hunger...We are dying here with our children. Government workers get their salary, but we are just waiting to for death. "An Annuak Elder to Human Rights Watch

"I decided to tell the pain I am going through to the public. Disclosure of defilement of a female is uncommon in Afar," an Afar 16-year-old girl gangraped by members of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). <https://fb.watch/alqvWcvmrA/>

Imagine as we "celebrate" Ethiopia's Christmas we each must reflect on the social and psychological pain and agony from which girls, married and unmarried woman and even a nun suffer because of rape. Authorities and victims confirm that in one location alone TPLF combatants raped and **defiled 73 Amhara girls** and women in front of a parent or a spouse at gun point. Their plights are especially gruesome and unimaginable. Informal reports indicate that girls and women commit suicide rather than live with the scars.

<https://youtu.be/D7KcspluOcc>

I urge you to open, watch the above video and listen to the agonizing voices of women who are in distress. You do not have to think if the degraded is your sister, mother, spouse or other. It makes no difference. The TPLF defiled the person's humanity and degraded the dignity of the entire family. This planned and deliberate defilement degrades each and everyone of us. It degrades Ethiopia as a country too.

Government and societal neglect have consequences. Ethiopia has effectively normalized ethnicity-based massacres. Preliminary estimate puts the number of Amhara targeted and killed by the TPLF since **November 2020 at 7, 012**. These most recent targeted murders by the TPLF took place in the towns of Agamsa, Nefas Mewechea, Dessie, Kombolcha, Debre Tabor, Kemmisie and other towns in Northern Shoa, Wuchale, Wurgessa, Wegel Tena, Mai Kadra, all in the Amhara region. Do not forget that the Government of the United States had advised its citizens to leave Ethiopia. It assumed that the TPLF was on the verge or a come-back to power.

I find it hard to reconcile American Government commitment to diversity, justice, the rule of law, democracy, peace, and stability on the one hand; and its affinity to the TPLF on the other.

The Tigray war alone informs us that the cost of not **unraveling ethnic federalism** head on is huge. The least we can do is to learn from the enormous costs to human life, to human livelihoods, the national economy; and more importantly the lasting psychological pains that ordinary people---youth, girls, women, the elderly will experience over the coming years.

For those with patience and perseverance, I urge you to access the following videos and media clips. You can then decide if TPLF engineered ethnic federalism that other ethnic elites embrace supports the Ethiopian state; and is worth the price the society is paying.

My conclusion is ethnic federalism is not worth the price. It is neither participatory nor democratic at all. Ethiopian political elites do not have anyone else to blame for the current human atrocities and economic destruction but themselves. Therefore, political, and social elites would ignore the **core institutional and structural problems** that persist at their country's and their own peril.

<https://theworldnews.net/et-news/genocide-and-crime-against-humanity-being-committed-by-tplf-terrorist-group-in-amhara-region>

<https://www.fanabc.com/english/terrorist-tplf-brutally-massacred-hundreds-of-innocent-civilians-in-amhara-region/>

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/11/ethiopia-survivors-of-tplf-attack-in-amhara-describe-gang-rape-looting-and-physical-assaults/>

<https://www.nationofchange.org/2021/09/18/ethiopia-tplf-terrorism-expands-civilians-massacred/>, Graham Peebles provides a graphic depiction of ethnic-based terrorism.

<https://www.fanabc.com/english/terrorist-tplf-damages-loots-7-7-bln-birr-worth-of-social-devt-facilities-in-afar-region/>

The TPLF crushed the Afar region.

<https://allafrica.com/stories/202110260290.html>

The deliberate massacre of one hundred Amhara youth in the city of Kombolcha targets the future by reducing youth.

<https://www.africa-press.net/ethiopia/all-news/terrorist-tplf-massacres-over-100-civilian-youth-in-kombolcha>

<https://www.fanabc.com/english/terrorist-tplf-massacred-over-120-civilians-in-aya-kobo-town-of-amhara-region-residents/>,

Wollo is among the most devastated parts of the Amhara region, December 21, 2021.

<https://www.ena.et/en/?p=29614>

Imagine the use of heavy artillery against civilians in North Wollo and the Afar regions.

<https://www.press.et/english/?p=43801>

Imagine burning civilians to their death.

<https://www.viralnigeria.com.ng/chena-massacre-tplf-massacred-at-least-100-mass-grave-uncovered>

<https://www.fanabc.com/english/terrorist-tplf-brutally-massacred-five-innocent-civilians-in-wolida-town/>

<https://nomore-ethiopia.org/the-tplf-terrorist-group-has-massacred-innocent-people-in-wegel-tena>

<https://www.ena.et/en/?p=30454>

Looting and destruction of property, social and economic infrastructure is a core competency of ethnicity-based assaults.

<https://news.sky.com/story/ethiopia-222-killed-in-village-massacre-as-ethnic-tensions-flare-red-cross->

Report by UK Red Cross, December 25, 2020

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/ethiopia-attacks-displace-97-000-people/2092841>

<https://hrwf.eu/ethiopia-massacre-of-about-300-amhara-civilians-in-east-wellega/>

Unfortunately, the above is a beginning. The point I would like to make is this. Ethnic politics and ethnic polarization in Ethiopia are destroying lives and reducing our very humanity as people. You cannot build and prosper if adversaries destroy the investment.

The TPLF planned and executed Amhara ethnicity and faith-based rape, killing, maiming, displacement, and disempowerment deliberately and systematically under the pretext of defending the rights and privileges of the Tigrayan nationality group. This **zero-sum game justifies barbaric and inhumane** approach amounts to the political game of the “end justifies the means.” In this zero-sum game, eliminating human and animal life, degrading persons with the deliberate intent to damage them irreparably are part of the game. Uprooting the pillars that sustain peoples’ livelihoods is part of the assault. The TPLF justifies this assault by

propagating **across the globe that only Tigrayans** are the victims. For this to have international traction, the TPLF needed and established friends in important places. It bought allies.

The TPLF has masterfully cultivated and planted opinion, policy, and decision-makers in countries with leverage. The USA is in the forefront of this strategy. It continues to support the TPLF because there are persons within the US Administration with a personal stake in the durability of the TPLF. This is the reason the burden of accountability for human atrocities are, to this day, squarely placed on the Federal Government of Ethiopia, Ethiopian and Eritrean Defense and Amhara Special Forces. This is the reason we do not hear Western outrage concerning massacres and rapes of the Afar, Amhara and Eritrean population. This is the reason the Government of the United States has not yet condemned the TPLF for terrorism and genocide. Sending US Special Envoy Jeff Feltman to Ethiopia on Ethiopia's Christmas Day will not make any difference unless the Government of the United States is ready and willing to **demand accountability** from the TPLF and OLA/Shine. By this I mean, the Government of the United States can leverage its enormous influence and demand that: a) the TPLF stop its insurgency immediately and unconditionally; b) that the TPLF withdraw permanently from all Afar and Amhara lands; and c) the TPLF agree to turn in its leaders to Ethiopian authorities to **facilitate peace, reconciliation and national consensus**, with Ethiopian **official assurance of due process of law**.

I do not know the policy rationale behind Ethiopia's release of political prisoners on Christmas day. The Government of Ethiopia should have avoided imprisoning Eskinder Nega and his team in the first place. I say this because Eskinder is one of the most spiritual and peaceful activists in Ethiopia. I do not know all the facts and circumstances surrounding the jailing of Jawar Mohamed and Bekele Gerba. In any case, releasing them for the sake of peace, reconciliation and national consensus may help on the public relations and diplomacy side.

I pose a question to high officials though. How does the Government of Ethiopia justify releasing Sebat Nega, a hateful and corrupt man and an insurgent captured while fighting with the TPLF? If there is a main plan behind this action, the Ethiopian public deserves to know what it might be. Releasing treasonous actors and murderers in tandem with innocent prisoners raises more questions than answers.

The Government of Ethiopia has not provided an answer to the bigger picture ahead. Would the TPLF agree to Ethiopia's timely demand for peace, reconciliation, and national consensus? I do not believe so. Nor do I believe that the Government of the United States would agree to demand accountability from the TPLF. The Government of Ethiopia must therefore stay the course by **liberating all Afar and Amhara lands** speedily and quickly and by holding the TPLF accountable for human atrocities and economic destruction.

In principle at least, the Federal Government of Ethiopia has an obligation to demand that the TPLF pays compensation to victims. Authorities must be prepared to liquidate TPLF member and core supporter financial and physical assets and use the proceeds for compensation and relief and rehabilitation efforts.

While I subscribe to the wisdom of “**forgiving and moving on,**” I do not believe that **foregoing** justice in a court of law and abandoning accountability for rapes, genocide, killings, and the destruction of immense property would remedy Ethiopia’s broken and polarized system.

I subscribe to Bishop Desmond Tutu’s guide on forgiving others to heal society. “Forgiving and being reconciled to our enemies or our loved ones are **not about pretending** that things are other than they are. It is not about **patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye** to the wrong. **True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the hurt, the truth.** It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but, in the end, it is worthwhile because, in the end, only an **honest confrontation** with reality can bring real healing. Superficial reconciliation can bring only superficial healing.”

Are Ethiopia’s political and social elites ready for “honest confrontation” of accepting painful wrongs inflicted on innocent civilians, especially girls, women, children, and the elderly that were not involved as combatants?

The future, including forgiving and moving on must include all victims, Tigrayans who do not support the TPLF. It is hard for me to accept the notion that the TPLF leadership to whom legions of persons: spiritual leaders, the elderly, women, and artists who pleaded with and begged for peaceful settlement would find it in their hearts to confront their demons; accept responsibility for war crimes and genocide. “Patting” them on “their back” and “turning a blind eye” to the wrongs they committed is unwise and dangerous. If we accept the notion that the “TPLF is a cancer,” the cure is not appeasement. It is surgically removing the cancer. For this to occur, the Federal Government of Ethiopia must end the war quickly by liberating occupied lands; and encourage and embolden Tigrayan Ethiopians to participate in the peace, reconciliation, and national consensus process and in nation building. The Federal Government of Ethiopia must also hold accountable those persons and groups that committed rape and killings in Tigray.

Embolden and empower Tigrayan Ethiopians to do the right thing.

It is time for ordinary Tigrayan Ethiopians to fight back and dismantle the TPLF. The TPLF is not an Afar or Amhara problem. It is an Ethiopian problem. It is a Tigrayan problem. There is a large pocket of Tigrayan Ethiopians who can offer an alternative party that will represent their interests in a post-war and post ethnicity-based Ethiopia.

I commend Graham Pebbles for his contrarian viewpoint and for his principled and bold statement. “The **TPLF is not a group of freedom fighters** standing up for the downtrodden; they are a terrorist insurgent force waging a war against a sovereign state. Murdering, raping, destroying property and the lives of Ethiopians. The TPLF is a cancer that for decades has thrown a suffocating shadow of fear and division over the country, **a cancer that must be cut out totally if Ethiopia is to flourish.**”

The TPLF is a cancer with deep roots and multiple antenna

Ethnic political polarization in Ethiopia is deeply rooted. During the height of “land grab” in Ethiopia and the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, I wrote critical commentaries on the marriage of **ethnic parties, government, and state** and showed its adverse consequences. My commentary after I retired from the World Bank, “The Unraveling of Ethnic Federalism: why ethnic elites undermine national social and economic cohesion” is worth accessing on the Web.

On January 5, 2002, one day before the US anniversary of the state of siege at the US capital, I read an important piece in Iowa City Press Citizen by former American Ambassador to Eritrea, Ron McMullen. I share his assessment that **“It will be a weary Christmas in Ethiopia this year, and why Americans should care.”** I especially subscribe to his conclusion that “The lesson we should learn from the **Tigray war is that ethnic federalism does not work.**” It never did and it never will. The question then is: what is the alternative that will sustain Ethiopia? Is this among the core **institutional and structural** hurdles that the newly established Commission shall address? I do hope so.

Long before the Tigray war, I forewarned of the poisonous and conflict prone effects of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia. Federalism as a form of state and government is important for Ethiopia as much as it is for the United States of America. At the time, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn demonstrated courage and stated publicly that **ethnic bigotry, arrogance and exclusion** emanating from ethnic federalism have become huge deterrents to Ethiopia’s sustainable and equitable growth. I argued then that ethnic federalism also posed an existential threat to Ethiopia. It still does.

What type of federalism does Ethiopia deserve?

In Summary:

- I support a federal system of government for Ethiopia. This system must, however, be different from the current ethnicity and language-based system. It must be democratic. It must be participatory. It must possess a checks and balances institutional structure to mitigate risks.

- The United States federal system is not perfect. But it works. The American federal system organized constituent States based **on geography**. State governments serve citizens and not ethnic or religious groups.
- In contrast, Ethiopia's Constitution organizes States called Kilil based solely on language and ethnic differentiation. Afar for Afars; Oromo for Oromo; Somali for Somali. It is inevitable that under this model that non-ethnics suffer because there is no legal provision and or sanction for minorities to enjoy the same political, cultural, or economic rights as equals as the indigenous population. The "us versus them" syndrome emanates from this model. It is "us versus them" that led to TPLF insurgency and that led to atrocities and economic destruction.
- In the United States, no state imagines or contemplates to secede. The Civil War dealt with secession at an enormous cost to life and property. A United States of America emerged as one and prospered after the Civil war. Today, there is no reason for any state to secede. Secession is both unrealistic and costly. Each state accommodates a diverse population. Each eligible person enjoys the right to vote, to hold offices, to own property, to move from one state to another, and to express views and preferences. In the USA, the Constitution affirms individual based citizen rights in the constitution and enforced through the legal system. It is "We the people" and not "We nations, nationalities and peoples" that differentiates the American Federal system from Ethiopia's. My hope for Ethiopia is to embrace citizenship rights.
- The Ethiopian linguistic and ethnic Constitution allows secession. It is the only Constitution that permits Balkanization as a right. My hope for Ethiopia is to outlaw secession.
- Finally, Ethiopian political and social elites ought to learn from the American Civil war and from the collapse of the Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia. The former was a collection of **15 Socialist Republics**. Socialism was the ideological basis for the Union. The later consisted of **six constituent republics**: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia." Both collapsed into separate and independent countries.

In any case, for Ethiopia to prevail and avoid another TPLF-like war, ethnic politics must go.

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