Violent ethnic extremism in Ethiopia: Implications for the stability of the Horn of Africa

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Abstract

Scholarship on the challenges of ethno-linguistic federalism in contemporary Ethiopia is copious; yet a critical analysis of violent ethnic extremism in the country and its implications for the sub-region is rare. This article argues that violent ethnic extremism is a threat to the existence of Ethiopia and a destabilising factor for its neighbours. Based on qualitative empirical data, it attempts to address the knowledge gap and contribute to the literature by examining why violent ethnic extremism has persisted in the post-1991 Ethiopia and how it would impact on the stability of the Horn of Africa. Analysis of the findings indicates that systemic limitations of ethno-linguistic federalism; unhealthy ethnic competition; resistance of ethno-nationalist elites to the current reform; unemployed youths; the ubiquity of small arms and light weapons; and cross-border interactions of violent extremists are the major dynamics propelling violent ethnic extremism in Ethiopia. Thus, Ethiopia and the sub-region could potentially face cataclysmic instabilities unless collective, inclusive, transformative and visionary leadership is entrenched.

Keywords: Ethiopia, ethnic extremism, Horn of Africa, instabilities, leadership, violent extremism

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1. Introduction[1]

Violent ethnic extremism is a threat to the existence of a contemporary Ethiopian state and a destabilising factor for the Horn of Africa. Literature indicates that the greatest risks of starting future wars will likely be *ethnicism* and the new nationalism that seems to be on the rise in many parts of the world in the 21st century (cf. Barton and Carter 1993:555–556; Mishra 2017:270; Binik 2020:91). While violent extremists[2] kill fewer people than traffic accidents[3] or diabetes,[4] they often target civilians, and pose grave challenges to human rights and dignities, and the security and well-being of individuals. As a strategy, extremism is invariantly adopted by intolerant actors who do not believe in dialogue, negotiation or discussion as ways of dealing with differences of ideas in a civilised manner (Berman, Eyoh and Kymlicka 2004:6; Appiah 2018:50). The only way for them to succeed is by terrifying innocent civilians (Rogers 2016:5; Harari 2018:161; Diamond 2019:390). In this way the potent perception is created that *violent extremism* (which takes different forms in different contexts, e.g. religious, ethnic, right wing) is a subversion of established political processes, and that a violent action can induce a change in the political situation by spreading fear (Mishra 2017; Binik 2020:13). The severe dangers of *violent extremism,* rendered as *ethnic extremism* in the contemporary Ethiopia, are ripping the society apart, with far-reaching consequences to the stability of its neighbours (Lyons 2019:123).

Studies on the challenges of ethno-linguistic federalism in Ethiopia abound; however, little has been done to translate this understanding of the systemic challenges and implications into a comprehensive analysis of the violent ethnic extremism in the country and the sub-region.

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2   Since 11 September 2001, every year terrorists/violent extremists have killed only about ten people in the United States, about seven people in China, and up to 25 000 people globally (mostly in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria, Somalia and Syria).

3   Each year traffic accidents kill about 80 000 Europeans, 40 000 Americans, 270 000 Chinese, and 1.25 million people in total (Harari 2018:159). About 5 118 people died in traffic accidents in Ethiopia during the 2017/18 fiscal year (News Africa).

4   It was estimated that the number of diabetic cases in Ethiopia was 800 000 in 2000, and that it may be expected to increase to 1.8 million by 2030 (Feleke and Enquselassie 2005:203).
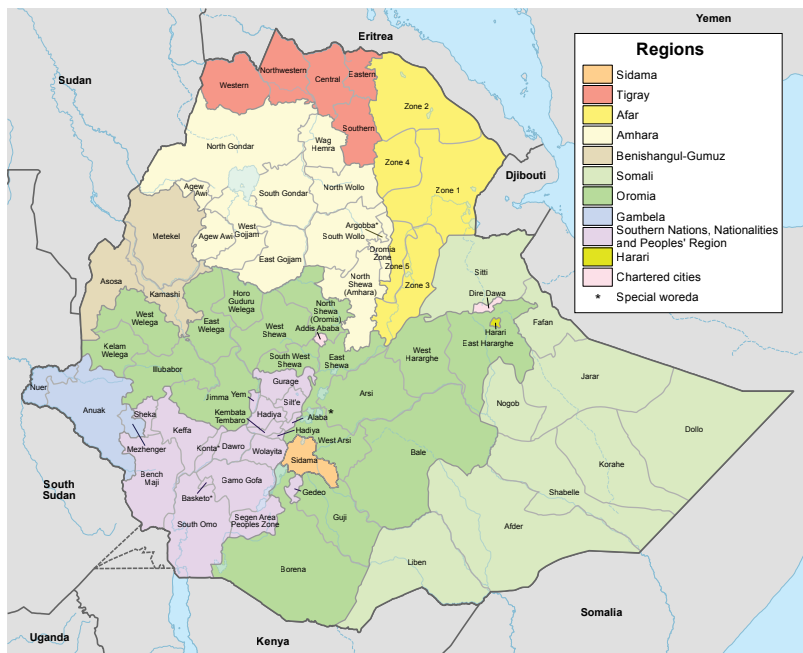
Map 1: Political map of Ethiopia

Source: Created from File:Ethiopia adm location map.svg by User:NordNordWest (July 2017).

The present study, therefore, aims to address the existing empirical research gap and contribute to the academic literature. To this end, it first sets out the scene of the research context; second, it provides a conceptual framework of violent ethnic extremism, which is followed by an outline of the research findings; it then identifies and critically analyses the drivers and enablers of ethnic extremism in post-1991 Ethiopia with its implications for the stability of the Horn of Africa; and lastly, it presents a conclusion and some policy recommendations.

2. Research context

Contemporary Ethiopia (see the map above) is located at the centre of the Horn of Africa and is home to well over 115 million people. Its area of 1.2 million km² is divided into nine regional states: Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Gambella, Benishangul Gumuz, Ethiopia-Somali,

Harari, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional (SNNPR) States, and two city administrations, viz. Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa (Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia 2010). The names of all regions bear *ethno-linguistic identity,* except for Gambella and Southern Regional State, to symbolise the post-1991 politics of ethnicity.

The current *ethnic extremism* probably has its roots in the pre-1991 nation-state building processes in Ethiopia. It is argued that the failure of the Abyssinian[5] elites to share socio-political and economic power with and engage the non-Abyssinians in the nation-state building processes has contributed to the post-1991 unhealthy ethnic relations (Asafa 2004:70; Markakis 2011:35). The pre-1991 nation-state building projects, except for that of the military government (1974–1991), were founded on the legend of *Fetha Nagast* (the Law of the Kings) that interwove faith, nation and throne with a mythical past and a prophetic future. Hence, the King was 'the Elect of God; by virtue of His Imperial Blood… and the anointing He has received, his power was unlimited, unaccountable and unchallengeable' (see Markakis 2011:33-34). Among them, Menelik II (1889–1913) whose throne continued until 1930 through Empress Zewditu, Lij Eyasu, and Regent Tefferi, remains a milestone in Ethiopian history. His reign marks the full restoration of imperial authority, its vast territorial expansion and incorporation (Abbink 2011).

During Emperor Haile-Selassie's regime (1930–1974), Ethiopia acquired in 1931 its first constitution, the gist of which was contained in Article 4 of the revised version of 1955: 'In the Ethiopian Empire supreme power rests in the hands of the Emperor': his person was 'sacred', his dignity 'inviolable', and his power 'indisputable'. However, the constitution did not properly recognise the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of Ethiopian society (Bahru 2002), which was the major factor that led to the emperor's overthrow by military coup in 1974 (Bahru 2002).

The military government (*Derg*)[6] (1974–1991) further consolidated the nation-state building process by moving peasants from northern to southern Ethiopia, according to an idea that had been the dream of

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5 Another name of Ethiopia, referring predominantly to Amhara and Tigrai/Eritrean highlanders in the past.

6 *Derg*, in Amharic.

Ethiopian leaders since Emperor Menelik II. Resettlement had been considered by the Haile Selassie regime, during which a pilot project was started in the 1950s and some 20 000 families were moved by 1974. Important departures from the Abyssinian model were the *Derg's* pronouncements on ethnic equality, cultural emancipation – including gender equality, the use of vernacular languages in schools and public places, and the 'abolition of religious discrimination …' (Bahru 2002:239, 247). However, the underlying political structure of the *Derg* remained similar to its predecessors (Bahru 2002:239, 247). The ethnic composition of top-ranking military leaders during its regime evidently reflected the imperial era (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Approximate ethnic composition of military leadership in pre-1991 Ethiopia (1889–1991)

Amhara[7]	Oromo	Tigre and others	Total
65%	20%	15%	100%

Source: Adapted from Markakis 2011:186–187.

For those who argue in favour of the pre-1991 nation-state building project (e.g. Levine 2000:xxi), it was the finale in the struggle for the 'reunification' of Ethiopia, a process began by Emperor Tewodros II, who ended the civil wars of *zemene mesafint*, or 'era of princes' (1769–1855). It is further contended that the Horn of Africa had been under the control of the Emperors of Abyssinia since the advent of the Christian era until the revolt of Gragn Mohammed, a Muslim leader from eastern Ethiopia, in the sixteenth century (Marcus 1994:104). Levine aptly described Emperor Menelik's project as 'an in-gathering of peoples with deep historical affinities rather than a subjugation of alien peoples' (Levine 2000:xxii).

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7   It is to be noted that most personnel in the military speak Amharic and identify themselves as Amhara. While they could be members of other ethnic groups; their identity was their profession and they were influenced by the whole political structure and peer group. Therefore, the percentage given may not be representative and it should be read with caution. In spite of the security governance in post-1991 Ethiopia, there was no ethnic quota for recruitment or promotion in the military. It was solely merit-based (In-depth interview with former army Colonel, Addis Ababa, September 2020).

For those who argue against the project, it was an internal colonial invasion which resulted in mass killings, destruction and expropriation of property, enslavement, and genocide. 'At the time', according to the counter-argument, 'Ethiopia was a slave-owning medieval state and… slavery in the Oromo states of the Gibe River region was downplayed as a minor derivative of the Abyssinian trade' (Leenco 1999:156). 'In Oromo oral history', as Asafa (2004:163) argues, 'Ethiopian leaders are seen as criminals, bandits and slavers; in Ethiopian history they are depicted as heroes and builders of the "nation"'.

On balance, it is acknowledged that the expansion cum incorporation processes, common in nation-state-building endeavours worldwide (see Tilly 1990:67), incurred heavy human and material cost when entrenching structural factors in ethnic relations. That does not mean, however, that ethnic groups in Ethiopia have always been violently antagonistic to each other. There have been times of cooperation, such as when a unified front faced the Italian invasion to protect Ethiopia from colonialism in 1896. Nevertheless, the failure to manage diversity during the time of Emperors Menelik and Haile Selassie, as well as the military governments led to resistance culminating in the creation of ethnic political organisations. These include the first Weyane Movement in Tigray in 1943; the Oromo Bale revolt in the 1960s; the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in 1960; the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in 1960; the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in 1970; and the Tigrian Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) 1974–75 – all of which led to the downfall of the *Derg* in 1991 (Abbink 2011; Yonas 2014).

Following the demise of the *Derg*, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (1991–2018) emerged out of the TPLF, a Marxist-Leninist ethno-nationalist liberation movement. The TPLF labelled the historical Ethiopian state as a 'prison of nationalities' whereby the country's diverse ethnic communities had long been exploited by the Amhara group of the imperial family (Markakis 2011; Fisher and Meressa 2018). Consequently, a politico-military power shift occurred (observe Table 1 above and Table 2 below and compare the pre-1991 with post-1991 ethnic composition of top military leadership in the Ethiopian polity).

Table 2: Ethnic composition of top military leadership in post-1991 Ethiopia during the EPRDF regime

Military ranks/ Ethnic group	Tigre	Amhara	Oromo	Agew	SNNPR[8]	Mixed	Total
Population size in Ethiopia (%)[9]	**6.1%**	**26.9%**	**34.5%**	**NA**	**15%**	**NA**	**83%**
Highest rank command chiefs	**9**	1	0	0	0	0	**10**
Heads of army commands	**4**	0	1	0	0	0	**5**
Heads of army command divisions	**13**	3	4	1	0	1	**22**
Headquarters combat service and combat support staff commanders	**13**	0	1	0	0	0	**14**
Military training centre commanders	**10**	0	2	1	0	0	**13**
Total number of generals or commanders	**49**	**4**	**8**	**2**	**0**	**1**	**64**

Adapted from Yonas 2014:172.

The shift was meant to resolve the age-old inequality in ethnic relations and to prevent violent conflicts. The irony, however, is that it fuelled more violence-creating tensions among ethnic identity groups, although it did make some positive contributions towards exercising cultural rights and celebrating diversity – making unheard voices heard. What is more, ethnic federalism has generated competition between ethnic groups, mainly their aspiring elites, over 'resources' such as land, water, minerals, federal funds, and communal or religious identity. 'It was due

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8   SNNPR – Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region of Ethiopia.

9   Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia 2010.

to political interests that they took position against each other' (see Abbink 2011:612).

Consequently, Ethiopia has recently seen fresh protests by different ethnic groups, e.g. the Oromo and Amhara (Lyons 2019), the country's two largest ethnic groups representing 70% of the population (see Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia 2010). To quell the protests, a state of emergency was instituted in 2016, but protests continued and large numbers of arrests were made. In February 2018, Haile-Mariam Dessalegn, then Prime Minister and Chairman of the EPRDF, stepped down saying his resignation would be 'vital in the bid to carry out reforms that would lead to sustainable peace and democracy' (Al Jazeera 2018). The EPRDF commenced a process of self-reflection on who to nominate as the new party chair and Prime Minister, and the process concluded in the election of Dr Abiy Ahmed as the new Prime Minister on 2 April 2018 (Reuters 2018). The new Prime Minister took bold measures: (a) releasing political prisoners and prisoners of conscience (Cable Network News [CNN] 2018);[10] (b) reviewing and replacing various laws that contradict basic human rights; (c) involving women in the highest leadership positions (Washington Post 2018); (d) drawing citizens from the peripheries to be core members of the new ruling Ethiopian Prosperity Party (EPP),[11] which replaced the EPRDF (even though TPLF opposed the replacement); (e) engaging opposition parties in the political processes; and (f) reforming the military (All Africa 2019). Moreover, the new government improved its relations with Eritrea, for which the international community awarded Dr Abiy Ahmed the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize. That might be a vital moral boost towards addressing the issues of *violent extremism* in the Horn of Africa and *ethnic extremism* in Ethiopia. However, the precise meaning of both *violent extremism* and *ethnicism* remains elusive. The following section attempts to operationalise them in the study context.

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10   The state of emergency was not lifted until 5 June 2018. See Cable Network News 2018.

11   These were not in the decision-making positions in the ethnic federal arrangement of the EPRDF: Afar, Benishangul Gumuz, Gambella, Harari, and Ethiopia-Somali Regional States.

3. Conceptual framework of violent extremism and ethnic extremism

3.1 Violent extremism[12]

Violent extremism is a radical ideology, which occurs when the actors express their beliefs through violence or call for violence (cf. Southers 2013:6). Southers has identified some major *cognitive* features of this condition:

- *Intolerance and superiority*: Violent extremists assume the moral high ground ascribed to their ideology.
- '*Otherism*': In the present context this can be rendered as '*mette*',[13] loosely translated as 'outsiders' 'settlers' or 'non-indigenes'. It refers to those who do not belong to the mainstream ethnic group of a region/territory.
- *Generalisation*: Extremists put anyone who disagrees or opposes their views into one category.
- *Doomsday scenarios and conspiracy theories*: Violent extremists believe that an apocalyptic outcome will follow from a failure to heed to their mission.
- *Code speak*: Violent extremists use particular codes to frame and dehumanise their opponents.

Similarly, Sezgin (2007:19) offers some major *behavioural* features of violent extremists:
- Using violence against human beings and threatening to use more violence.
- Inducing terror/fear in a target group who usually are innocent civilians and non-combatants.

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12   The terms 'violent extremism' and 'terrorism' are used interchangeably by many authors. See for example, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2017, *Preventing Violent Extremism through Education: A Guide for Policy-Makers*; Yuval Noah Harari 2018, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*; Steven Pinker (2018) *Enlightenment now: The case for reason, science, humanism and progress*.

13   '*Mette*' is an Amharic term, which denotes people who were characterised as 'Others', who 'came' from a different location (region or territory) to settle in another area within the same country, Ethiopia. They were targeted by violent ethnic extremists and evicted from their abode for their ethnic identity, e.g. Amhara ethnic group was evicted from Oromoia region, Oromo from Somali, Tigray from Amhara, Woliata from Sidama. It started in 1991 and reached a peak in 2018.

- Intimidating target groups for publicity.
- Communicating the act(s) of violence to larger audiences displaying barbaric images.
- Insisting that all acts are political in character.

The concept of violent extremism becomes clearer when it is contextualised in relation to *ethnic extremism* to which we now turn.

3.2 Ethnic extremism

Ethnicism and new nationalism are on the rise in some countries and are feared to become the starting points of wars between and within countries (Barton and Carter 1993; Binik 2020). According to Scruton (2007:236) *ethnicism* is the desire to conserve or recapture a political identity based upon race, region, or an ethnic group membership.[14] *Extremism,* on the other hand, is a radical ideology of taking a political idea to its limits: its intention being to confront and eliminate opposition. It refers to *intolerance* towards all views except one's own, and the adoption of means to political ends which disregard accepted standards of conduct, including the life, liberty and human rights of others (see Robertson 2002:392). It follows that *ethnic extremism* is a belief in and an expression of a political identity based on race, region, blood and language affinity: the aim being to confront and eliminate opposing views, persons, groups or institutions. Nevertheless, it needs to be understood and underlined that being loyal to one's ethnic group is a key human characteristic, which should be accepted, acknowledged, appreciated and respected. However, when ethnic loyalty inclines to *violence* with the aim of getting rid of other fellow human beings, then it is metamorphosing into *violent ethnic extremism.*

The very concept '*ethnicity*' ought to be operationally defined to critically analyse *violent ethnic extremism.* Horowitz (2000:211) perceives *ethnicity* as an end by itself; for Williams (2011:113–126) it is a means to an end; and for Coleman and others (2007:56) *ethnicity* is a social construction in a conflict situation. Among the characteristics of *ethnicity* are the following. Firstly, it refers to a social unit, with a common language, territory and belief system. Secondly, it is a coordinating vehicle for group mobilisation in an ethnic conflict, whose boundary is defined by the elite's will to recruit followers (Coleman 2004; Williams 2011). Thirdly, *ethnicity* is constructed by and

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14   The ethnic group members are identified not primarily in terms of political institutions, but in terms of blood relations, language and regional attachment (Scruton 2007:236).

emanates from socio-political and historical contexts (see Yonas 2014:41). Put together, *ethnicity* is a relational concept; it is a tool that is used instrumentally to pursue strategies, a means a social group employs to reduce uncertainties of life chances, and a conceptual mechanism that provides a basis from which strategies are created (see Hale 2008:88; Tamir 2019:120).

Some scholars (e.g. Isaac 1975:120; Huntington 1996:90; Carbone 2018:69) argue that the key reason why some people identify so strongly with ethnic groups – even to the point of being willing to kill or die for their groups – is that they are inherently linked with people's deepest feelings, the things that stir the blood: core needs for dignity, self-esteem, and/or belonging. When one's group is threatened, cheated, or denigrated, one's own self is threatened, cheated, or denigrated (Isaac 1975:120). *Ethnicity* thus tends to generate intergroup violence, separatism, nationalist mobilisation, ethnic voting, and other forms of divisive behaviour, with variation mainly arising when different groups are 'balanced' or constrained in some way from asserting or resisting dominance (see Connor 1989:200; Apter 1997:91; Kimmel 2018:123).

However, a large body of literature rejects the above claims. Fukuyama (2018:26) and Nderitu (2018:315, 461) counter-argue that both ethnicity and ethnic politics can be alternatively perceived as a function of *other* pursuits: e.g. power, material resources, security, or status (see also Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Many of these theorists stress the role of Machiavellian elites, said to manipulate otherwise peaceful, cooperative populations into 'ethnic frenzies'. Mueller (2000:60) and Pinker (2011:330), for example, rule out inherently ethnic passions as causes of the Rwandan genocide and the Yugoslav civil war, blaming 'thugs' who ran rampant, fomenting conflict in order to enrich or empower themselves. 'The roots of the Rwandan genocide', Meredith (2011:487) states, 'was caused not by ancient ethnic antagonism but by a fanatical elite engaged in a modern struggle for power and wealth using ethnic antagonisms as their principal weapon'. He concludes: 'Politicians, demagogues, and the media used *ethnicity* as a play for popular support and as a means of eliminating political opponents' (Meredith 2011:487). Politics, more than anything else, are at the centre of the issue in *ethnic extremism.* Brass (1997:50) argues that ethnicity does not really serve as a coordinating device, but almost *entirely as a discourse that guilty elites invoke to obscure the real, venal causes of violence that they incite* (my emphasis). The real causes are

usually political power, natural resource or socio-economic injustice and inequality, with some variations in the context.

This has been demonstrated by life experiences of the 27 years' rule of EPRDF in Ethiopia. When a strong ethnic mentality is supported by the country's constitution and is combined with political manipulation, the end result is *violent ethnic extremism*, a variant of violent extremism in the Ethiopian context. Empirical data analysis demonstrates this in the following section.

4. Research findings

Following from the above discussions this study raises one major question with its derivative: *Why has violent ethnic extremism persisted in post-1991 Ethiopia? And what are its implications for the stability of the Horn of Africa?* To respond to these questions, qualitative data were collected using Convenient Sampling criteria (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña 2014:115) from federal and regional states of Ethiopia focusing on Addis Ababa, Assossa, Oromia, Ethiopia-Somali, Tigray, Amhara, and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) Regions. In 12 to 18 months, 50 in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 20 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted as summarised in the following table (see annex A for guiding questions of IDIs and FGDs):

Table 3: Summary of research design

Research focus	Methods of data collection	No. of IDIs and FGDs	Background of participants
Drivers and enablers of violent ethnic extremism in post-1991 Ethiopia *Implications of violent ethnic extremism in Ethiopia for stability of the Horn of Africa*	*Field data from IDIs and FGDs with key informants; text analysis of the media outlet, official documents as well as online materials; and a review of related literature*	*50 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with selected individuals and* *20 Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) with key informants in 12 to 18 months*	*Political/policy analysts, academia, civil society leaders, political leaders of the Federal as well as Regional Governments; opposition party leaders; human rights activists, former EPRDF members; traditional community leaders; and international community in Addis Ababa*

Tabulated by the author.

The data generated were triangulated by document analysis, e.g. government proclamations, news reports, press releases, and reliable online sources. These were thematically analysed and the initial findings were presented in validation workshops in Addis Ababa and in Mekele, Tigray, before they were written as a working paper and finally as an academic article.[15] Three major drivers cum enablers of *violent ethnic extremism* have been identified: *the flaws of Ethiopia's ethno-linguistic federalism*; *resistance to the new political dispensation*; and, *youth unemployment and porous borders.*

4.1 The flaws of Ethiopia's ethno-linguistic federalism

The major drivers and enablers of violent ethnic extremism emanate from the ethno-linguistic federalism the EPRDF pursued to rectify the flaws of pre-1991 state building processes in Ethiopia. It encapsulated all the pre-1991 exclusions, injustices and marginalisation of non-Abyssinians in terms of only one variable: *ethno-linguistic identity questions.* It enshrined its political philosophy in the constitution, Article 39 (3), and (5), which reads: 'Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to a full measure of self-government which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits…' (Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia). Under Article 39 (1) and (4), the constitution conferred the right to self-determination, including secession, to ethno-cultural communities. Not only did it recognise ethno-linguistic identity, but it also created identity-based regional states and made them the constituent units of the Ethiopian federation (Mehari 2010; Lyons 2019).[16] This created antagonistic ethnic nationalism, which gives 80 recognised ethnic groups significant sovereign power.

In a closer examination, at least three flaws of EPRDF's mono-causal approach are conspicuous:

- The defects of pre-1991 Ethiopian nation-state building processes were more than ethnic-*identity* questions (see Yonas 2014:49; Getachew 2018:15).

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15 Workshops, 23 January 2019, Addis Ababa and 4 March 2019, Mekele, Tigray, northern Ethiopia.

16 Ethno-cultural communities are groups of people who share culture/customs, language, beliefs, identities, and inhabit an identifiable contiguous territory. Cf. Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 1995:art. 39 (5).

- There is no single *identity* as such for a person or a community (Sen 2006:24–25) – an individual can have more than 70 identities which holds true to communities as well.
- In pre-1991 Ethiopian polity, it was not exclusively Abyssinians who ran state building processes (cf. Levine 2000; Getachew 2018).

Hence, the measures EPRDF took to right the wrong were based on wrong assumptions and led to more violence and injustices rather than curing them.

Consequently, all nine ethnic-based[17] regions have expanded their Special Forces, and the federal army could now be outnumbered by the combined regional Special Forces (The International Institute for Strategic Studies 2020). Large segments of people growing up during this period were 'brainwashed' and taught, by school curricula, about 'territorialising identity' and 'ethnically identifying with territory'.[18] So, they have found thinking about other regions of Ethiopia 'nearly impossible'.[19] The underlying point, one of the key informants states, is that:

> Ethnic federalism made people think in terms of their ethnic identity only: not as Ethiopian, but as Amhara or Bertha, Gumuz or Oromo, Sidama or Somali, Tigre or Wolaita…In short, ethnic federalism which facilitated conditions for violent ethnic extremism, is an existential threat to Ethiopia as a state and society with negative implications for the stability of the Horn of Africa.[20]

It underpinned the notion that certain ethnic groups belong primordially to certain parts of the country (*killil*) – and not to others – and in turn, that specific parts of the country belong to specific ethnic groups only – and not to others – who are ready to kill or die for their ethnic identity, a phenomenon termed as '***Otherism***' or '***mette***' (Southers 2013:6). The

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17 The creation of special forces was before the creation of the new region – Sidama National Regional State.

18 Focus group discussion with in-service teachers from Oromia, South, Amhara and Afar regional states, August 2019, Addis Ababa.

19 Focus group discussion with in-service teachers from Oromia, South, Amhara and Afar regional states, August 2019, Addis Ababa.

20 '*Killil*' is an Amharic word to indicate an administrative region or regional state in the 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

consequence of ethnic federalism was exhibited all across the country, but I will mention only a few incidents gleaning from the 50 in-depth interviews and 20 focus group discussions:

First, mass rallies had been taking place in Ethiopia for several months since 2 April 2018, signalling strong support for Dr Abiy's reform agenda. On 23 June 2018, however, a grenade was thrown during one of these rallies in Addis Ababa, in an abortive attempt to assassinate the Prime Minister. The attack killed two and wounded about a hundred unarmed innocent civilians, who were rallying in support of the Prime Minister's 'inclusive politics' as opposed to the 'divisive ethno-nationalistic rules' as described by most of my informants in IDIs and FGDs. Initially, suspicion fell on the 'old guards' of the regime, and many allegations were made that the attack had been due to Dr Abiy's ethnic background. Eventually, alleged Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) operatives were charged by the Federal Attorney General (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC] 2018b). Second, there was widespread havoc and terror induced in September 2018 in Ashewa Meda, and in Burayu suburb of Addis Ababa, where scores of civilians were killed and 'a five-year old girl was raped and later died', which epitomises violent extremism (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC] 2018a).

In addition, across the country, between 2017 and 2019, there was a sharp escalation in community tensions and local clashes that led to a spike in internally displaced persons (IDPs). There was ethnic violence in the Oromia and the Somali regional states along the administrative border (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA] 2018). 'Oromos were expelled from Ethiopia-Somali region, and Somalis were evicted from Oromia. Tigrayans were forced out of Amhara region; Amharas were expelled from Oromia and Benishangul regions' (The New Humanitarian 2019). Violent conflicts between the Oromo and Gedeo ethnic groups displaced approximately 970 000 people in the western Guji and Gedeo zones of neighbouring Oromia and the SNNPR (The New Humanitarian 2019). By February 2020, 1 735 481 people had been internally displaced.[21]

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21 Official sources list the figure of 2.33 million, but in the workshop at Addis Ababa in January 2019, figures as high as 3 million people were repeatedly mentioned as most accurately reflecting the rate of internal displacement. By February 2020, it was 1.7 million. See International Organization for Migration 2019.

In short, these acts showcased what Robertson (2002:392), Schmid (2004:375), Scruton (2007:237) and Sezgin (2007:19–20) outlined as ways in which violent ethnic extremism is operationalised and used against fellow human beings on the basis of the victims' ethnic origin – in order to induce terror/fear in a target group and eliminate them; to wreak havoc under innocent civilians and non-combatants, and to mobilise their own ethnic group against others. These are by no means the only examples of violent ethnic extremism in Ethiopia over the last 27 years; but they illustrate what violent ethnic extremism is and what it does as an emerging trend in Ethiopia with negative implications for the Horn of Africa (see Table 5). In fact, when asked, during a workshop on violent ethnic extremism, the majority of participants (82.5%) saw its risk as considerable, with 45% rating it is as 'high' and 37.5% as 'very high' (see Table 4).

Table 4: Validation workshop participants' views on ethnic extremism as an existential threat to Ethiopia

Ratings	Very low	Low	Medium	High	Very high	Total
How serious an existential threat is violent ethnic extremism in contemporary Ethiopia?	0%	5%	12.5%	45%	37.5%	100%
Number of participants	0	2	5	18	15	40

Tabulated by the author.

In the same vein, participants in the validation workshop were also asked how ethnic extremism in Ethiopia impacts on the stability of the Horn of Africa. Their responses have been succinctly summarised in the following table.

Table 5: Validation workshop participants' views on the impact of ethnic extremism in Ethiopia on the stability of the Horn of Africa

How does ethnic extremism in Ethiopia impact on the stability of the Horn of Africa?		
Major descriptors of the impact	**Out of 40 people**	**%**
1. Attracting and involving the same ethnic groups from neighbourhoods in the violent conflicts in Ethiopia (e.g. Afar of Djibouti, Oromo of Kenya, Somali of Somalia, Nuer of South Sudan)	39	97.5
2. Flow of refugees and displaced people across the borders	40	100
3. Flows of small arms, light as well as heavy weapons across the borders illegally	36	90
4. Facilitating the flow of extremist groups and ammunitions from neighbours (mainly al Shabaab from Somalia)	37	92.5
5. Sponsoring demonstrations, roadblocks and dissemination of fake news via social media in clandestine in Ethiopia to terrorise civilians and make them flee to their kin and kith in the neighbourhood	37	92.5
6. Trans-border organised crimes: money laundering and human trafficking – mainly involving young women and boys displaced by ethnic violence	39	97.5

Tabulated by the author

This is consistent with the media report: 'Ethnic tensions are the biggest problem for Ethiopia [and its neighbours] now' (The New Humanitarian 2019). Although Abiy's aggressive reform agenda has won praise by many, if not all, the impact of inter-communal tensions and ethnic violence presents a serious challenge for his leadership and the Horn of

Africa. The tension has not emerged by chance; it is a political strategy, as some of the IDI and FGD members stated. Outraged by the actions of some of the former EPRDF leaders, one of the key informants compared violent ethnic extremists with the corona virus:

> The World Health Organisation (WHO) advises us to wash hands, keep social distance, wear masks, stop shaking hands, and be safe from the coronavirus. Unless you 'cleanse' your heart and mind from ethnic extremism, restrain from spreading poisonous 'hate speeches', stop intimidating the innocent, and respect human values, violent ethnic extremism endangers all human race including the actors. Coronavirus, like small pox, will disappear once we discover vaccines; violent ethnic extremism, however, is harder to eradicate since it is engrained in the hearts and minds of the thinkers and actors.[22]

In sum, even though the roots of post-1991 conflicts are to be found in the pre-1991 Ethiopian exclusionary political culture, field data and document analysis reveal that the major factors for the spread of violent ethnic extremism in contemporary Ethiopia is the very political philosophy pursued by the defunct EPRDF regime, which is stymying the present political dispensation with a view to diverting the route of the reform.

4.2 Resistance to the reform

Resistance to the reform emanates from various sources. For some analysts, the greatest challenge to the reform remains reconciling ethno-regional interests with the Pan-Ethiopian cause to arrive at a durable bargain that has not been achieved with the system of ethnic federalism (Fisher and Meressa 2018:8; Khisa 2019:12). For others, past EPRDF's authoritarianism is unlikely to sit comfortably with a reform agenda focussed on balancing civic and ethnic politics (Brown and Fisher 2019; Tsega 2019; Alemayehu 2020). For some of the key informants an emerging 'dangerous political culture' is the peril for the reform:

> A mob hanged a man upside down in Shashemene (south Oromia Region); burned churches in Jigjiga (Ethiopia-Somali region), mosques in Mota (Amhara Region), and people to death in Hawassa (SNNPR) and Dire Dawa City Administration. University students are being killed

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22 Telephone interview, Addis Ababa, 6 April 2020.

by fellow students from other ethnic groups on campus in various parts of the country. No one was held accountable and responsible for these atrocities. The issue is that unless the vigilante groups are kept in check, unless law and order as well as the rule of law are upheld, the reform will face serious challenges.[23]

The empirical data further evidences that the resistance stems from individuals and groups that label themselves ethno-nationalists. According to my key informants, TPLF-friendly actors are looking currently for potential allies in Oromia and elsewhere in Ethiopia to bring ethnic politics back by displacing the new dispensation.[24] This is part of a strategy to bolster support for Ethiopia's system of ethnic federalism against 'demands from those calling for a more united and diverse federalism'.[25] Ethnicity and ethnic politics serve as a 'discourse that guilty elites invoke to obscure the real causes of violence that the few elites incite' (see Brass 1997:55). Hence, ethnic competition in Ethiopia is utilised by elites (Tsega 2019:70; Alemayehu 2020:3) intent on devising mechanisms of subverting the rule of law, which they sense is placing themselves at risk of being held accountable for past abuses.[26]

Following the current reform, violent ethnic extremism, causing deaths and destruction, has been widespread in Southern Ethiopia, as an eye-witness account reported.[27] One of the nine Ethiopian regions with its 56 ethnic groups has recently seen a large drive for increased autonomy.[28] In fact, the Sidama ethnic group gained autonomous status by a referendum in November 2019; and others have pursued similar objectives, spurred on by centrifugal forces. One interviewee observed:

> The questions of autonomous status by all zones of SNNPR is a challenge for the new leadership. There are activists in all zones related to or supported by [a] few former EPRDF leaders. On the eve of the Sidama

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23   Telephone interview, Addis Ababa, 6 May 2020.

24   In depth interviews, Adama and Bahr Dar, November 2019.

25   In-depth interviews, Addis Ababa, January 2020.

26   Focus group discussion with journalists, lawyers and policy analysts, January 2019, Addis Ababa.

27   Telephone interview with an eye witness from Hawassa, 26 July 2019.

28   The other three multi-ethnic regional states are Gambella, Benishangul Gumuz, and Harari.

referendum, [a] few activists in Hawassa would go around and mark 'red' (Code Speak) the gates/doors of non-Sidama ethnic groups' to be demolished; hence, the '**Others'** or '**mette'** should be terrorised and live in fear – or leave the area.[29]

4.3 Youth unemployment and porous borders

Ethiopia's population is growing fast. The fertility rate is 3.9 children per woman (United Nations Population Fund 2020). In 2017, 63% of Ethiopia's 105 million people were in the youth bracket (below 24 years of age) (United Nations Population Fund 2020). The country's population is expected to grow to 190 million by 2050, and 250 million by 2100 (United Nations 2017).

Moreover, each year, the 49 universities in Ethiopia produce an army of youth for the job market. With the youth bulge combined with the structural ethnic competition embedded in Ethiopia's ethno-political system, and the high levels of internal displacement, there is a serious risk of violent conflict. Furthermore, some unemployed youth are made to disseminate ethnic-based hate speeches over social media to spread fear and suspicion among the public. As one of IDI participants reiterated:

> The new leadership stands for Oromo ethnic group excluding other nationalities … it is anti-Tigrigna and TPLF; it securitises the TPLF and the Tigrayan people; it does not respect the constitution and ethnic federal system; it is a neoliberal and western satellite government … there is no rule of law in the country … therefore, the previous leaders and system should be back in power ….[30]

While unemployment creates the opportunities for recruitment into violent extremist groups, hate-speech acts as a motivating factor. Certain youth are easily persuaded by fake-news and some actors who are against the reform. In Assossa (Benishangul Gumuz), for example, it was reported that young men were hired as 'hit squads', many of whom had

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29 In-depth interview with a member of the Council of Regional State, Hawassa, October 2019.

30 In-depth interview with one of the former leaders of the EPRDF, Addis Ababa, December, 2019.

received higher education but were unable to find employment.[31] A large number were said to have been involved in 'criminal acts'[32] sometimes having links across the border since most borders in the Horn of Africa are porous.

Finally, flows of unemployed youth as refugees from Ethiopia to Djibouti, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia or Sudan/South Sudan further complicate the already fragile situation. Such population movement can offer opportunities for the extremists to exploit the ethnic tensions that are prevalent in the sub-region. Most unemployed youth activists obtain small arms and light weapons through illegal trade with various countries in the Horn of Africa, and use them for criminal acts. Major routes across the porous borders are those from Somalia into Ethiopia-Somali; from Sudan to Amhara, South Sudan into Gambella and Asosa regions; and through Moyale on the Kenyan border to some parts of Oromia and SNNPR in Ethiopia.[33] Hence, the easy access to and availability of these weapons serve as reinforcing factors for violence. Most recent killings along ethnic lines in Hawassa, Guji, and Gedo in southern Ethiopia, and Wellega, western Ethiopia, have been linked to the wider availability of these weapons and unemployed youth[34] that serve as enablers and drivers of violent ethnic extremism.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined why violent ethnic extremism has been perpetuated in post-1991 Ethiopia, and how this phenomenon impacts on the stability of the Horn of Africa. From the critical analyses and discussions of qualitative empirical data, it can be concluded that, in the Horn of Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular, the following combination of several factors poses calamitous risks of violent ethnic extremism:

- the systemic limitations of ethno-linguistic federalism whose genesis goes back to pre-1991 Ethiopian nation-state building processes

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31   In-depth interview with former head of Security and Administrative Affairs of Benihsangul Gumuz, December 2019.

32   In-depth interview with former head of Security and Administrative Affairs of Benihsangul Gumuz, December 2019.

33   Focus group discussion, Hawassa, February 2019.

34   Focus group discussion, Hawassa, February 2019.

- unhealthy ethnic competition
- the ethno-nationalist elites' resistance to the current reform
- unemployed youth susceptible to propaganda and cross-border interactions with violent extremist groups such as al Shabaab, and
- easy access to small arms and light weapons.

For a viable future, therefore, collective, coordinated, proactive and visionary actions should be taken pre-emptively. Once violent ethnic extremism is unleashed, its spirit is more difficult to contain than the coronavirus pandemic, as witnessed in Rwanda and Yugoslavia in 1990s.

Thus, there is an urgent need for strategies that address violent ethnic extremism in Ethiopia and build durable peace in the sub-region.

First, institutional reform, including revision of the post-1991 constitution of the country and that of the regional states, is one of the key measures by which the Government can address the current surge in ethnic violence. The constitution insufficiently sets out the divisions of power between the federal and regional levels, leaving excessive openings for rights to self-determination, including secession or breakaway from Ethiopia. Any reform of the constitution would be expected to address these questions. It would furthermore be expected to answer the questions around 'Ethiopian-ness': what are the building blocks of the Ethiopian federation, and what place will there be for the different ethnic groups within it? It should be emphasised, however, that any type of constitutional reform will need to be very carefully crafted, in order not to embolden centrifugal forces or increase the ethnic competition it aims to alleviate.

Second, to deal with the structural causes and dynamics of ethnic extremism, it is vital that dialogue should be promoted and peace education provided. Civil society and academia should play significant roles in facilitating dialogue and interactions. Academia needs to engage in peace research, peacebuilding and provision of peace education to deal with the underlying causes of ethnic extremism and its impacts – both immediate and long-term. Such courses can be provided from kindergarten through to the university levels in order to entrench a culture of peace in Ethiopia. Its contents need to pinpoint sources of conflict, peaceful ways of handling conflicts, communication strategies and skills, the meaning and ways of preventing violent extremism and other pertinent components of peace and conflict studies. It would

contribute to transforming Ethiopia's political culture from clan- and ethnic-based to civic- and citizen-based politics.

Nevertheless, it is worth underlining at this juncture that pledging allegiance to one's own ethnic identity group is a universal practice in human communities and needs to be accepted and respected. The problem only arises when ethnicity becomes an organising principle of politics, economy, security, foreign policy and the entire polity of a nation. This can lead to ethnic extremism, as has been the case in Ethiopia for the last twenty-seven years (1991–2018). Therefore, it is imperative to strike a balance between ethnic identity and citizenship politics. That said, the collective as well as individual ethnic identity of every Ethiopian should be respected, while at the same time Ethiopian national identity need to be stressed.

Third, the state machinery, including the Federal Government-regional states relationship, is in need of profound reform. However, in doing so, it may be counter-productive to pour 'new wine into old bottles'.

Fourth, deeper reform in the security sector is needed to ensure that the complex configuration of security forces – military, federal police, regional police, regional special police, and militia – will effectively cooperate in addressing violent ethnic extremism. Moreover, strengthening sub-regional organisations, such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), for collective action against violent extremists, such as al Shabaab in the Horn of Africa, is of paramount significance.

Furthermore, the current reform in Ethiopia, which aims at building sustainable peace and development in the country and the sub-region, needs to be given stronger internal institutional tools and support at sub-regional/regional and global levels to flourish, since failure thereof will have negative implications for the stability of the Horn of Africa.

Finally, reflecting on and drawing lessons from the past failures and successes, the way forward calls for engaging all the conflict parties in a nation-state building process – conducted in a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation. That may contribute to transforming unhealthy ethnic relations into a cohesive, diverse, peaceful, prosperous and resilient multi-ethnic Ethiopia with positive spill-overs for the Horn of Africa.

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