# ETHIOPIA'S BURGEONING DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION: NEW GLAMOUR OR NEW STATESMANSHIP GIMMICKS?

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## Abstract

Following the amounting accusation of autocracy, the heritage of exclusionary rulership with an underlying ethnic undertone that confined the parameters of political power finally yielded nearly three years of unemployed youth-led street protests initially in Oromia region and later spread all over the country, demanding for political reform and socio-economic improvements. All these paved the way for PM Abiy Ahmed on April 2nd, 2018 in what seemed to be a transition in the form of a "play-within-a-play". In this article, I offer an account that explains the image of Ethiopia's democratic transition in 2018, undeniably using my own physical experience and observations as an academic and a humanitarian practitioner owing to my more than 15 years of stay in the country where I have often been close to the decision-making tables in Addis Ababa as well as in the Somali region. Of course, I will also use all other seminally relevant information helpful to draw an explanation to the interminable socio-political and economic transformation in Ethiopia.

## 1. Introduction

Ethiopia has impressive records in relation to nature and texture, in which it is molded, as well as considering the mystery and the bloody recipe associated with power transitions, in which it is cloaked. In the medieval period, the fundamental source of conflict in Abyssinia was one mainly within and between the monotheistic Abrahamic civilizations; Judaists vs Christians, Islam versus Christians, and Judaists vs Islam. As European intellectuals and philosophers reached the pinnacle of the Age of Enlightenment that would dominate the world of ideas for nearly four consecutive centuries, and as the Arab Renaissance, often regarded as a period of intellectual modernization and reform, was about to take off in Egypt, these ideas moved to other regions in the Middle East, such as Syria and Lebanon that were under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Abyssinian kings, though varied in their efforts, radically engaged in historical processes of creating a defined territory to install their political and institutional order that later would be named Ethiopia.

According to the Abyssinian northerners' romantic tales, to the exclusion of the other three cardinal directions embodying the compass of present-day Ethiopia, four remarkable emperors are accredited with territorial expansionism. These men, by a seriously well-thought-out effort, reconstructed the historical narratives symbolically representing the country's chronicle over the past 200 years. They shaped and reconstituted, to varying degrees, the recently much disputed cultural and political sphere and the geography of modern Ethiopia in accordance with that of northern Ethiopia. In almost all literature on Ethiopian history, the following men are constantly referenced as the architects of contemporary Ethiopia: Tewodros (Theodore) II (1855-65), Yohannes (John) IV (1872-1889), Menelik II (1889-1913), and Haile Selassie (1916-74) (Zewde, 2014). These four kings, who ruled modern Ethiopia for most of the last two centuries, sustained their bureaucratic power expansion through the formation of a hierarchical political body classically similar to that of a non-industrial society. The Solomonic and Aksumite Houses, founded typically on affinity, where self-anointed, senior members from selected families dominated formal leadership, took alternating turns through maximum coercion, thereby rendering the rest of Ethiopia's nations and nationalities mere spectators. Further to this, identity supremacy in Ethiopia has always been a critical factor, which has cascaded down from generation to generation throughout time, as Robert Gale Woolbert indicated as early as 1953 in his case study article that appeared in *Foreign Affairs*. Woolbert argues that

> *"In the case of Ethiopia there can be no question that a single people rules over various subject peoples. Probably not more than one-third of the inhabitants belong to the ancient Ethiopian stock. The rest neither profess Christianity nor speak the Amharic tongue and are consequently regarded by the ruling race as its inferiors. The true Ethiopian resides on the central plateau, while the subject races inhabit the peripheral lowlands" (Woolbert, 1935).*

No matter the title they used, king or emperor, ancient nobles in Ethiopia ruled until their death or they were forcefully deposed. Thoughtful and peaceful transitions were perceived as a sign of dimness; hence those who let power go in peaceful transitions were damned to hell. Similarly, in modern history, there were no peaceful political power transitions that are worth calling to mind. Solomonic and Aksumite houses never permitted the transition of rulership to anyone outside these houses. Thus, the age-old delinquency of ethnic-based marginalization is as old as the country's history. At the beginning of the third quarter of the twentieth century, Ethiopia entered the race of the shifting ideological winds across the world. Thus, ousting Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 put a full stop after the hundreds of years of monarchial regimes in Ethiopia. The scattered civilian-led revolution that battled for the end of the "supreme" system could not provide unitary leadership to sustain the unrest and establish a much-anticipated civilian rule. Subsequently, the military, having the advantage of the coercive hardware of the state, developed into a limited but tyrannical force, which estranged and separated the political powers of ordinary citizens from the nation's open political life. The ensuing battles that had surfaced between the Derg system and ordinary citizens brought about a stream of political viciousness that killed a huge number of Ethiopians in the second half of the 1970s. The fall of the Derg military regime in May 1991 and the coming to power of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), not only meant the military victory of the latter but also the imposition of a certain conception of Ethiopian statehood (Bach, 2014). This paved the way for the nascence of a new but sacred constitution that Abbink would later call the 'Second Republic' – ethno-federalism in Ethiopia (Abbink, 2009). Hopes were that the ongoing demonstration effect of transitions, during the early 1990s in the third wave's later phase in sub-Saharan Africa, would snowball in the newly-born EPRDF region in Ethiopia (Huntington, 1991a), which would lead to a new era of liberal democracy.

However, the wave dissipated fairly quickly, within a decade, as the procedures and functional policies regulating the context of the voting processes of free and fair elections, held for the first time in 2005, were considered impartial in the Ethiopian context. As soon as the results that justly favored the opposition party over the sitting EPRDF government were published, the ruling party struck back with the intent to cancel the results. Subsequently, new forms of illiberalized authoritarianism emerged. As the ruling party began to lose their grip on power, they tried to shrink the political and civil society space by passing two notorious laws in 2009, namely the Charities and Societies Proclamation and the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation. Together, these "ruined" the country's already feeble human rights record (Brechenmacher, 2017). Thus, the government effectively shut down public hopes for competitive democratization in Ethiopia for the following decade.

In the ensuing years, the EPRDF government became a security regime controlled by a selective party elite, whose political supremacy for the following twenty-seven years was gleaned from the rent-seeking of bureaucratic professionalism that would

accelerate the widening of the gap between societies. Consequently, inequalities in assets, education and land inequality among the diverse ethnic nationalities in Ethiopia became commonplace under the EPRDF regime. In 2015, disenfranchised youth from the region of Oromia, numerically Ethiopia's largest ethnic nation, led protests demanding more inclusive reforms, which triggered further dissension and discord and gave a greater incentive to the youth of other regions to undertake similar actions in their respective regions.

The topical issue is that Ethiopia's heterogeneous reality is shaped by the contextual certainty of its demographic diversity as well as its geography. The country's economic difficulties and the related effects include but are not limited to drought, famine, and poverty, which have become mainstream news dominating the global media. The fact that Ethiopia has significant natural and human resources gives rise to the view that it is the 'water tower' of Africa. Yet, paradoxically, the country is also categorized as one of the poorest countries on Earth. Such a critical reality of the state sits at the conjunction of two related and commonly fortifying formative difficulties – destitution and social imbalance, and the answers to these challenges lie at the heart of the policy choice of the government leadership (Olson, 1982). Despite the recent wave of economic growth, the country is still plagued by deeply ingrained poverty and alarmingly high and rising inequality (World Bank Group, 2015).

In spite of the much-discussed economic growth in the last decade, there is an ever-widening rift between Ethiopian classes; the gap between the rich and the poor is greater than that of any other country in the region. The EPRDF regime's endeavors in Ethiopia show a multifaceted style of development that is not arranged in a straight line, rather it is customized in a non-linear style, and bears no automatic relationship to the conception that economic development should "be managed for inclusive growth to advance human development and uphold the basic human rights of all as a means to end poverty and expand the choices of Ethiopians" (United Nations Development Programme, 2018).

The speed in which the world's information technology is revolutionizing has eased modalities to spread all kinds of data, therefore, it turns to be hard to keep in secret the material causes of poverty and economic difficulties in Ethiopia. It all began in November 2015, when protests cropped up in Ginchi, Oromia region. The ensuing protests pervaded the entire Oromia region over the following three years. The initial anxieties of protesters were to halt the government's proposal to expand the original perimeter of Addis Ababa city, which would have otherwise led to the further displacement of Oromo household farmers (Human Rights Watch, 2016). What began as a slight dissent against the implementation of the government's masterplan to expand Addis Ababa later pervaded across Ethiopia's major regions and towns. After three years of shoulder-to-shoulder mass demonstrations demanding an end to the EPRDF's rule, the Ginchi revolution detracted from the most powerful regime in Addis Ababa and reconstructed the 27-year one-party rule of the EPRDF regime. Also, the domino effect of the Ginchi uprising stretched far and wide and caused significant implications for peace and security in the Horn of Africa. For

example, the political movement that began some five years ago in Oromia region is now widely known as the 'Qeerroo[1] cross-hands revolution.' This started originally as an obstruction against land seizure accommodating the Addis Ababa city expansion. However, it quickly changed into a continued resistance against the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government's unabated stranglehold on the political scene, constantly accused of bias in dispensing national assets and the ceaseless utilization of brutal force to quell political dissenters against their regime. It went on for just about four years, coming full circle with the fall of the EPRDF's vanguard party system, thereby introducing a new era of democratic transition. This development paved the way for the installation of radical political and economic reforms under the bureaucratic leadership of the new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali — ethnically an Oromo, which is actually a single majority nationality in Ethiopia. In this article, I offer an account that explains the contemporary image of Ethiopia's democratic transition undeniably using my own physical experience and observations as an academic and a humanitarian practitioner. I have spent nearly ninety percent of my time, if not more, in the country and often close to the decision-making tables in Addis Ababa as well as in the Somali region in the last fifteen years. Of course, I will also use all other relevant information, academic analyses, and other testimonials pertinent to the ongoing socio-political and economic transformation in Ethiopia.

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## 2. The EPRDF transition: an enigmatic somersault

*"I see my resignation as vital in the bid to carry out reforms that would lead to sustainable peace and democracy."*

*From the resignation speech of Hailemariam Desalegn (BBC News, 2018a)*

In the wake of the second wave of democratization, there were hundreds, if not thousands of thesis and antithesis papers penned by prolific authors and doyens of the subject matter. Most importantly, these experts put their exposition in questioning the theoretical appropriations and the fitness of its application in a cultural context (i.e., Africa) quite dissimilar to the place of its origin, the Western Hemisphere. The third wave of democratization dawning from Western Europe, particularly Portugal, a predominantly Roman Catholic country with a close-knit family ethic, would later flounce through most parts of the developing world in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Towards the mid-1990s, the whirling wind carrying this significant and historically influential ideology, as noted in Huntington's Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century (Huntington, 1991b: 2), invigorated an extremely scorching discourse among African leaders, the political elite, and academics on the establishment of the pertinent linkage between western democracy and the socio-cultural reality awaiting it in Africa. Considering the 'third wave' events that followed, democratic transitions in mainly Global South countries started from the 1980s and early 1990s, while the challenges of the infamous Cold War threatening authoritarian regimes in Africa receded. International donor countries, chiefly the United States of America, the EU, and other actors of influence, such as the World Bank and the IMF, started to put the promotion of democracy at the top of their developmental aid program in post-Cold War Africa as an indispensable, crucial element of foreign policy like development aid. By the mid-1990s, most of the multilateral organizations and a large number of national and international civil societies felt the influence and jumpstarted the reintroduction of their commitments to international engagement to support efforts of transitioning to democracy in Africa. At the time in question, Burnell argues, in order to promote and to transnationalize democracy and democratization values across the four hemispheres, the international community adopted the following three approaches: via economic relations, via the state, and via civil society (Burnell, 2004).

During this period, growing demand for multiparty democracy emerged from the political elites, intellectuals, and the public at large, following a mushrooming of democracy assistance projects from bilateral governments and related efforts by the civil society and multilateral organizations. Thereafter, authoritarian regimes in the continent, mainly in the sub-Saharan region, started feeling the threat and the snowballing effect of the third wave democratization from within. Consequently, not only did democracy appear as a worldwide objective, but also standards correspondingly arose in the international community signifying the lawfulness of having developed the curiosities of endorsing and supporting democracy abroad (Bjornlund, 2004).

After the fall of the Derg, the TPLF-led EPRDF coalition party reportedly applied liberal democracy policies at the onset of the transitional period (1991–1995). This was the political reality and represented the conditions of "doing a deal," which surfaced at the end of the Cold War. Whereas other African states, such as Kenya, tried to reshape it, the EPRDF's post-Derg transitional government leaders were disposed to a discursive shift for survival at the heights of the third wave democratization. Under the provisions of the new constitution formulated in 1995, Ethiopia proclaimed a new political system based on ethnic federalism, thereafter to be called the 'Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia,' in which a multi-party system has, from then, been backed by periodic national elections. On the contrary, PM Meles Zenawi incomprehensibly reaffirmed his former Marxist-Leninist revolutionary democracy ideological line by establishing a government giving protection to democratic centralism under the watchdog of the vanguard party.

The government, which had been firmly in control for nearly three decades with a high element of honey-glazed policy frameworks that were not upheld during implementation, kept nearly 110 million people under severe surveillance. Consequently, this created a situation where no one was beyond suspicion, which finally led the security regime to produce a rock-hard, restive, and highly secretive government. These regime-controlled political, socio-cultural, and monetary circles created a special strategy that most of the time fit the enormous personal interest of the EPRDF's deep state. At once, after 27 years of an unshakeable rule, public dissatisfaction began to crop up to a perceptible point. The time bomb "detonated" in Oromia region where the Oromo youth's, the Qeerro's, tenaciously irksome disposition (partly pervaded with an ethno-nationalist sentiment), which chiefly emanated from vexation or the discontent with the EPRDF's rule, demanded change.

Often marred by such inconsequential hassles and the ensuing instability that were embedded virtually in every nook and cranny of the country and in an attempt to put the genie back in the bottle, the EPRDF government invidiously issued two martial law orders, one after the other. As the public dissent and discord continued to gather momentum in Oromia region, other parts of the country, such as Amhara, Somali, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State, joined the ongoing Oromia cross-handed remonstration, only to augment the existing political crisis right up to the hilt. To add insult to injury, the youth, mainly of Oromo origin, in the remaining mega-municipalities of Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa metropolitan areas, finally joined the ever-growing public dissent across the country in a way that worsened the EPRDF's already frail situation. At this moment in time, a flickering sign of deep polarization within the ruling coalition of EPRDF emerged for the first time since coming to power in May 1991. The widening interstices of the overarching coalition increased to the maximum extent possible between 2016 and the early quarter of 2018, literally exposing the entire government functions of the EPRDF to a partly or completely fragile situation. The rattling sounds of discontent sharply knocked at the EPRDF's flimsy door and further strengthened the flaring political rifts among the top echelons of the EPRDF leadership. With it, both the socio-political and the economic wellbeing of the country dwindled, which finally catapulted the vanguard party regime into a stage of losing the balance of legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry.

For a country once hailed as an economic force to be reckoned with by achieving a 10 percent GDP growth rate in 2017 according to the World Bank, and whose troops played critical roles in UN peacekeeping missions around the world, and at the same time, which had become an important hegemonic power in the Red Sea region, it was a bitter pill to swallow. All of a sudden, Ethiopia leaped off the precipice into a deep abyss of political uncertainty. PM Hailemariam Desalegn's unprecedented resignation on the eve of February 15, 2018, left the ruling coalition's further hope of survival reeling. Unfortunately, before the arrival of the much-yearned-for archetypally fictitious "trickster," who would re-establish Ethiopia according to the EPRDF elites' wishes, the ambitious ruling coalition, now petrified by the youthful Qeer-

roo's obstinately irritating temper, lost its stranglehold on power once and for all. As luck would have it, Hailemariam's resignation paved the way for Colonel Abiy Ahmed Ali to be selected as the youngest but a "redemptive" chairman of the ruling coalition party of the EPRDF, which was now losing public trust, and a few months later, in April 2018, he became the new prime minister of Ethiopia at the age of 42.

Therefore, the selection of a "savior," particularly from the ethnic Oromo group, was an aptly well-calculated decision to repair the already cracked wheels of the ruling EPRDF coalition that was near the end of the road. Within the first hundred days of his rule, PM Abiy Ahmed embarked on a historical journey of reform that he thought was necessary and timely in order to save nearly 110 million Ethiopians from falling into political and socio-economic chaos. From day one, Prime Minister Abiy discharged political detainees, rescinded bans on ideological groups, lifted the emergency laws, and indicted authorities blamed for gross human rights violations. Furthermore, he initiated a momentous rapprochement with neighboring Eritrea after more than two decades of conflict, appointed women to more than half of his cabinet posts as well as other government parastatals that possess political clout. Last but not least, he planned to liberalize the country and close down once and for all Chinese-like business models of monopolies in vital fiscal sectors, including telecommunications, energy, the airlines and other service industries (banks), etc. These reforms were not only historical on their own merits but also unique innovations to transform Ethiopia's rigid political tradition.

The despotic society, which suffered from a form of government in which a single entity ruled with absolute power, started inhaling the fresh and healing wind of change. By achieving most of the constructive and unprecedented socio-political and economic reforms in a span of less than a year, and so much more in the making, Prime Minister Abiy would have been a sure bet to deliver reforms that could have helped the country if his opponents had given him the benefit of the doubt to do so. If the new reform agendas had progressed as planned, Ethiopia would have heralded a considerable triumph of democratic governance and would have become a remarkable model at least for countries in the Africa continent, if not worldwide. Regrettably, ever since the dawn of modern Ethiopia, this country has never been lucky enough to embrace peaceful democratic transitions.

Towards the start of the 21st century, when the rest of the world enjoyed inhaling the breath of democracy, Ethiopians were unfortunately subjected to the prescription of a new political drug that the EPRDF vanguard party leaders would call 'Revolutionary Democracy.'[2] Through this approach, they claimed the prioritization of economic growth under a patrimonial system, which had overseen political, economic, and civil rights for nearly three decades under a consistent chain of command. As election date nears (August 17, 2020), it seems that PM Abiy, who wishes to implement his reforms to transition the country to a full-scale democracy, has to face challenges along the way, which may shrink his chances as new obstacles continue to rise to the surface. Therefore, it looks likely that the momentous strides and scope of PM Abiy's government's restructuring process would mean to some or

perhaps to the majority of citizens, who have never experienced the height of the new PM Abiy's speedy transparency and accountability, nothing less than a roller-coaster ride. Thus, in this article, I am particularly interested in examining the extent to which the changing landscape of the contemporary transition in Ethiopia can attest PM Abiy's reform agenda.

Abiy's amazing ascendance to power and his capacity to chart a swift and increasingly serene political course in Ethiopia revealed the pressures and complexities of the nation's governmental issues both at ethnic and ideological levels. Thus, it is true that taking steady steps to launch pragmatic reforms was not only a thoughtful transitional strategy but also a risky decision, which threatened the political hegemony of the two historic houses of the nobility and the privileges that the 'deep state' had accrued over the past two and half centuries. This triggered stubborn cynicism and resentment, which activated latent hazards to the contemporary transition in Ethiopia. However, the big-heartedness of the reformist prime minister would soon goad the already insecure 'deep state,' which was provoked by a sudden and unexpected fall from power. In retaliation, the 'deep state' employed its strategy of blocking PM Abiy's new ideologies from flourishing, and this act had a noticeably detrimental effect on the new prime minister's plans.

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Here, by 'deep state' I mean a well-connected ruling clique comprised of characteristically powerful members of the ruling party (EPRDF), government agencies, and the military, alleged to be involved in secret government business operations or the control of government policy. In the last two decades, such categories have been covertly forming the architecture of the government in the style of a business in a patrimonial system characterized by close, mutually advantageous relationships between business leaders and government officials. This situation has often led to allegations of designing and operationalizing an obsolete hybrid of economic principles hidden in the form of "crony capitalism." These were the circumstances

that eventually brought the legitimacy of the former EPRDF rule to its knees to get their just deserts. Allegedly, the departing 'deep state' orchestrated deadly schemes and spoiler events in a bid to pull back the fast-rolling reform machines from their advancement and instead push the country to the brink of political implosion. This article takes a heuristic approach to highlight the salient features of the Ethiopian transition by analyzing the core implications set forth against Prime Minister Abiy's ongoing policy and practices, transformational objectives, and goals.

To start with, precisely two months after the new prime minister took office in April 2018, major blood-stained events, which often made strong assertions against the departing 'deep state' cliques, began to unfold. Some of the remarkable and vulgar incidents included an attacker who, wearing a police uniform, hurled a grenade at a rally exhibiting solidarity, in word and in deed, with Ethiopia's new prime minister and his reform agenda. This incident culminated in a sudden stampede leaving at least two people killed and more than 150 people injured, triggering pandemonium as panicked people rushed to safety (Hadra, 2018).

In the following month of July, an Ethiopian engineer, who served as chief project manager of the $4-billion Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, was killed; thereby the progress of such a megaproject was hindered. In October the same year, a contingent of angry soldiers from the Ethiopian National Defense Force walked into the PM's palace under the pretext of requesting a pay rise. Although PM Abiy tactically calmed the situation by offering to do ten military push-ups with them, later in a session with the country's legislative branch, he openly accused the soldiers of not only being unlawful and dangerous but having the intention to abort the ongoing reforms in the country (BBC News, 2018b). Perhaps, this incident might have been an ominous sign of a similar lethal event that materialized nearly a year later, namely the foiled coup in Amhara region, in the mountainous north of Ethiopia, in which the chief of staff of the Ethiopian army was shot and killed by his bodyguard at his home in Addis Ababa. In parallel, these serious incidents served to fuel the ongoing and deadly inter- and intra-communal conflict and violence in almost all of the major regions in the country, Oromia, Somali, Amhara, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region as well as the two municipalities of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, and resulted in displacing almost 3 million people since 2018 (Pinna, 2019). In any case, unconfirmed hearsay creates additional doubts that the brutality has been incited by the new 'deep state' overwhelmed by the PM's Oromo ethnic nation as an approach to legitimize security crackdowns and to introduce territorial organizations that are more in line with the political goals of the experts under the head administrator's control in the capital. PM Abiy Ahmed, who rose to power as Ethiopia's fourth prime minister by a stroke of luck, faces critical and lengthy challenges obstructing his ambitious reform pledges, in which he thought he would deliver Ethiopia to Nietzsche's Superman status and thereby would herald a future of abundance and peaceful co-existence among Ethiopians. However, PM Abiy is confronted with the same anxiety that Nietzsche expressed in Zarathustra, that is, the populace would soon refuse admittance to this ideal due to lassitude, so they

would cast off 'Superman' to replace him with the 'Last Man' (Fukuyama, 2018). On the contrary, it appears that PM Abiy's political reforms have not been well-received, and the vivacious and charming 43-year-old prime minister has been severely criticized for being more concerned with designing a cult of personality than solving the country's crisis. In his maiden speech as prime minister, Abiy Ahmed said, "In one way, the world is eagerly awaiting our country's transition, and in another way, they are waiting in fear…" (Manek, 2018). In fact, a year later, the country was far closer to political turmoil than it had been when he had made his inauguration speech on April 2, 2018 (Manek, 2018).

Retracing the Hegelian principle that argues that the only rational solution to the desire for recognition is universal recognition, in which the dignity of every human being is recognized, such concept of universal recognition is only a catchword. This "beguiling model on the front page" and the distinctiveness based on socio-political identity, particularly in modern Ethiopia, are some of the chief challenges that the empire builders of northern Abyssinia, who constitute the 'deep state,' should confront. The reality, true to the Hegelian principle, that the world was formerly accustomed to regarding the definition of universal recognition is now facing the challenges evolving from, but perhaps not limited to, the ever-changing communication technology repositioning civilizations in a new era, which seemingly perpetuates an existential threat to the recognition of the rights of individuals, groups or nations and cultural identity.

'Cultural identity' is an unavoidable reality providing self-definition to the entire Africa continent, and more so, Ethiopia's already polarized heterogeneity. Ethiopia's emerging cultural identity, its consciousness, and the insatiable hunt for realigning the nation's strategy with the interests of different groups and individuals are becoming important concepts that form the basis for what is happening to Ethiopia's political transition. It is an undeniable fact that, in the event of entirely ignoring populist patriots, government officials will exploit the situation just to drive themselves forward to the highest political echelon. Such ethnic-nationalist politicians lock onto the feelings of disparagement and would go all out to appeal to those people who express the concerns that they were formerly disregarded and now the same is happening to PM Abiy's ongoing government reforms. Accordingly, such groups with their narrow nationalist agenda will soon pose direct threats to the reform agenda of the new PM. However, the current transition is also tested by the efforts to heal past hurts and reunite a country seemingly Balkanized into smaller ethnically homogeneous nations and nationalities that have felt affronted in the past two centuries. It is important to note that Abiy's first few months in office have seen numerous positive human rights changes and a restored feeling of good faith following quite a long time of fights and instability that accompanied the many years of the tyrannical rule.

Consequently, the question on the table is whether PM Abiy and his established reformist team could give a guarantee to all marginalized nations, groups, and individuals that their concerns will be satisfactorily addressed and consolidated in

the ongoing transition. Another perilous challenge to PM Abiy's reforms emanates from the foreign debt he inherited from the previous government in April 2018. How many of his government's operations come from foreign debt? Even though PM Abiy Ali claimed that the ongoing economic reforms were designed in such a way to thrust Ethiopia forward to an iconic stage by 2030, the UN's cautionary remarks regarding Ethiopia's foreign debt burden may hinder the government's restructuring processes, which may further increase the existing macroeconomic imbalance. On another occasion, Vera Songwe, the Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), raised eyebrows on the worrying status of Ethiopia's foreign debt, which, according to the Ethiopian finance ministry, amounted to $52.57 billion (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2019). She further recommends that, in order to implement reforms, Ethiopia needs about $10 billion to support investments. Ethiopia's government, in 2018 alone, recorded a debt equal in value to 60 percent of the country's gross domestic product. Perhaps the lull in the mechanical and extractive industries has basically brought slower growth in construction, owing to foreign trade deficiencies and, more significantly, higher prices of imported construction materials. In addition, in more manufacturing and agriculture sectors, these factors may have contributed to a huge degree of growth deceleration, shackling Ethiopia's real gross domestic product's (GDP) growth rate to 7.7 percent in FY2018 (World Bank Group, 2019).

Dr. Abiy Ahmed Ali came to power when each component of the nation encountered a dangerous realignment process slanting towards culture and creed; where the center is never again trustworthy, and as time passes by, the shortcomings of the system turn out to be increasingly discernable to everybody and anybody. Now, anybody with preconceived ideas about the EPRDF's firm grip of leadership would not be swayed to accept the inclination that Ethiopia is now tiptoeing on the way towards a failed state. Such a political setting portrays Ethiopia at a stage of total insufficiency both at the center and the regional level, thus creating a vast power vacuum, making authority at every level flimsy. This causes two primary side effects, one with the determination to speed up the further weakening of the regime and the second with the capability of creating a hostile atmosphere, ostensibly fostering the emergence of ethnic-based conflicts.

Thus, in this part of the article, I am obliged to address the ongoing political talk in Ethiopia in the light of the ongoing transitional reforms, major changes, and the important agreements that brought about new sets of political standards. For example, there are neo-ultranationalist groups, i.e., heavyweight politicians with an unshakeable enthusiasm for a neo-patriotic plan, in which they still keep the outrageous political

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feelings based on ultra-nationalism as a metaphorical "holy relic" through which they believe they can win the enthusiasm of their kin. The political philosophy of PM Abiy Ahmed's 'Medemer' to merge the peripheral regional states' political parties who were formerly affiliates, such as those of Somali, Afar, *Benishangul-Gumuz,* and Harar regional states, was criticized by his opponents for building a massive power base. However, the new premier feels this is the only way to lead the country out of the maze of tyrannical regimes that have long lingered in the second most populated nation in the continent for nearly two centuries if not more.

## 3. Challenges
### *3.1. The dilemma of 'deep state' and 'departing dynasties'*
Since Abiy Ahmed took over premiership, the front coalition that had ruled Ethiopia for nearly three decades did a somersault by moving from its previous policy of national independence to one of welcoming Western capitalists, while the new premier started to incorporate his country into the community of America's Middle Eastern Arab allies in the region, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. As he made such a major but exclusive decision without national agreement or even discussion, it became a possible cause of conflict fueling the persistent and widespread racial tensions that were synonymous with Ethiopia's bloody transition resulting in lots of deaths from violent inter- and intra-ethnic clashes. The highly pragmatic PM advocated a strong state to bring about market-like reforms in every aspect of the Ethiopian political society, to establish political order and an ethical way of life based on respect for freedom, human rights, impartiality before the law, and finally, a democratic regime that shall conform to the principles and the values derived from the premises of the civil public discourse. The fact of the matter is that novelty is persistently confronted by enormous challenges.

Herein lies the crux of the problem and what could present a potential hindrance to the implementation of PM Abiy's bold political pledges to transition Ethiopia to a fully-fledged liberal democracy. Some of the major stumbling blocks are the "indefatigable" challenges of introducing liberal reforms to a country where everything and anything about authentic democracy in the former regime was considered unfit for the system and where the despotic rule was considered inherent in the country's culture and history. Abruptly opening up a democratic opportunity that values the freedom of speech and the right to assembly, among others, without providing context-based knowledge of the process of democratization might be a significant barrier to the PM's reform project. Adherents of the 'deep state' remaining in the various government organs, who are not on board for implementing the reform agenda, are in a position to derail the momentum of change and cause frustration among the public. The liberal reformist government riding a wave of good feeling about the socio-political and economic changes has suspected the motives of these established elements and has held them responsible for designing deadly schemes to disrupt the flow of progress realized in the country so far. For example, Abiy's government laid allegations against the disappointed but departing 'deep state' in the

security services for some disruptive acts of subversion, including the projectile or grenade assault at the pro-Abiy rally in Addis Ababa in June, 2018 (Badwaza, 2018).

### 3.2. The awareness of ethnocultural identity

The end of the TPLF-led EPRDF regime brought a new wave of ethnic identity consciousness, which departed from the principle of ethnonationalism to create a kind of ultranationalism that was not known in the country. It has been unknown to ethnic groups to gather in crowds on the streets waving various nations' flags symbolizing the differences from others while marching all over the megacities built on multicultural diversities, such as Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa. Accordingly, in the rise of ultranationalism, every ethnic group and individual steadfastly demand full autonomy to exercise their choice of self-governing to uphold both their communal affiliations and their cultural identity. Ethnonationalism, evolving from various ethnic groups, proceeds to challenge PM Abiy's call for Ethiopian solidarity, maintaining the conflict between major ethnic nations alive; in Oromo and Amhara, for instance, where different nationalities keep on requesting the privilege to frame their own states under the government's framework, or in the case of the recent Sidama referendum demanding to form the 10th regional state, an event to be respected as a sign of self-motivation and a pluralistic interpretation of culture. Nowadays, we see crowds of people flapping ethnic flags as they parade all over the world: "in Barcelona, Britain, Austria, and France, in the main streets of Kurdistan, in the United States, and in the public squares of Istanbul. Flag-waving for and against political causes is back in fashion. [Neo-]Nationalism is everywhere" (Tamir, 2019). Therefore, the comeback of extreme nationalism, 'ultranationalism,' has taken the world by storm (Ibid.). Regional political pundits contend that the quick pace of the political changes under the new premier's leadership has given breathing space to some of the ethnic-based aspirations that in the past were held under tight restraints. This has "played on historic grievances between the different ethnic groups and reignited territorial border disputes that have resulted in mass displacement" (Jeffrey, 2019).

The ever-widening ethnic divide in Ethiopia, mainly between Oromos and Amharas, presents two distinct differences: one evolving from the Oromo and Amhara elites' historical interpretations of Ethiopia's diehard dynasties, as the former believe that the present political society of Ethiopia is the inheritor of the departing Axumite and Solomonic dynasties, who forcefully conquered and disgracefully manipulated the peripheral sovereign tribal nations including, but not limited to, Oromos, Somalis in the Ogaden region, and others at the hands of Ethiopian emperors. The once-dynamic core state conquered the periphery region at the end of the 19th century (Markakis, 2011). The subjugated marginal lands, mostly present-day Oromia and Ogaden regions, possessed the needed resources and the strength of the Abyssinian Empire that ruled Ethiopia from the late 18th to the late 19th century. Thus, considering such disgracefully prejudiced historical events, the Oromo elite feels eligible to rule Ethiopia as a *de facto* reparation gift to erase the erstwhile dynasties' acts of the humiliation of Oromos. Moreover, they also demand to have their language

recognized as an official language given that Oromos form the single majority ethnic group in Ethiopia. In contrast, the dissolving dynasty consisting mainly of the Amhara ethnic group considers that had it not made the sacrificial offerings during the past Abyssinian era, the faultless and virtuous formation of the modern Ethiopian state would have not been achieved. However, Amhara elites argue that no one should be held responsible for the events that took place centuries ago and that the prospect of power and access to national resources shall be handled in an equitable and democratic manner.

These accounts alone are insufficient to identify the last indicator to measure the degree in which the contemporary ultranationalist division in Ethiopia is inconveniencing PM Abiy's reform progress. In any case, they show how the ascent of the two major ethnic and ultranationalist discourses together with the permissiveness of social media can spur the wistful battle for power during the nation's historical political transition through capitalizing on the historical interpretation of Ethiopia's past occasions, which process would grant the triumphant group a bright political future in Ethiopia. This is the current reality, not only posing a challenge to PM Abiy's infant government but also causing the decline of state-nationalism.

## 4. Theological schism within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

While all around the world of today power has been characterized as political, monetary, and military in nature, in present-day Ethiopia the idea of 'power intensity' necessitates somewhat to be deciphered as an indispensable subject arising from the religious-cultural reality of the country. Political challenges and civil strife in Ethiopia are currently in an indefensible and even conceivably ill-fated phase. This is neither an overstated case, in order to make my point of view attractive, nor is it blown out of proportion as endless conflicts and clashes have had precarious consequences, e.g., claiming many lives and making Ethiopia become the host of the largest number of internally displaced people in the world. However, the EPRDF's severe system and its ethno-federalist political order that began to govern the country as far back as 1991 have been frequently blamed for the underlying reasons of the present challenges confronting PM Abiy's transitional reforms. At least, this helped the ascent of the open awareness of its social character and an innate ultranationalist realignment through which they look for "political amazingness." Despite the fact that the EPRDF's rule, taken at face value, was simply regarded as a law-based democratic system with a stable practice of separating states from religions, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) has been indisputably the "preeminent gift" of the regime's political force. As a result, the more and more influential and potent Orthodox Tewahedo Church, until now, has remained intolerant to the beliefs of other Christian denominations. This tendency was challenged by PM Hailemariam Desalegn, the successor of PM Meles Zenawi who passed away on August 20, 2012. As Hailemariam Desalegn (the eighth prime minister of Ethiopia from September 21, 2012, to 2018) and his successor, PM Abiy Ahmed Ali (in office from April 2, 2018), have happened to be people with Protestant background, they have been

exposed to the concepts and values of Anglo-Saxon Protestants, the companions of their denominations, and no wonder that the new "political darlings" and this new political asymmetry redefining the original proximity seemingly pose a threat to Ethiopia by an uncommon, disturbing state of power imbalance.

The second challenge seems to be more relevant than the former one, as the biggest and most precarious challenge that the EOTC has ever confronted is the growing schism within its congregational churchgoers. Given the growing aware-ness of multilingualism and multiculturalism in Ethiopia, the realignment of cultural identity through language is becoming a serious concern that questions not only MP Abiy's transitional agenda but also the religious institutions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC). The Oromo clerics' recent grievances are partly linked to those historical grudges that resulted in the long-standing rift between Amhara and Oromo people. Hence the Oromo clerics' definitive demand for an urgent reform to pave the way for the process of the conceptualization and institutionalization of the Oromo language (Afaan Oromo) within the EOTC. Oromo clerics claimed that there is "no sacred document or scripture or tradition that pre-vents using various mother tongues for religious practices; rather all the scriptures of the church including the Holy Bible support the use of different languages for spiritual ministry" (Desalegn, 2012: iii). Such concern, which is on the rise, is part of today's global reality. Recently, in a joint statement signed by the head of Egypt's Al-Azhar Mosque and Pope Francis, the head of the Catholic Church and sovereign of the Vatican City State avowed that "[t]he pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings" (Lawler, 2019).

Historically, similar concerns precipitated the final separation between the Eastern Christian Church from the Western Church. "The Great Schism of 1054 is actually noted as the first major split in the history of Christianity, separating the Orthodox Church in the East from the Roman Catholic Church in the West" (Fairchild, 2019).

Therefore, the Great Schism of 1054 paved the way for the division of Chalcedo-nian Christianity along geographical patterns of faith into what are now known as the Western liturgical denominations, such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church, which differ in, among others, whether they use unleav-ened bread for the ceremony of communion or not. Thus, the likely split coming about to the EOTC could be associated with more of the cultural identity of these groups. Hence, the face value of the budding theological contests revolving around the demand for the recognition of religious-cultural and multilingual diversity within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church is likely to create great schisms. This, in the end, could result in the disruption of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church into two bodies; the Oromo Orthodox congregation and Amhara Orthodox church-goers, both soon departing with their own language of the Lord, Afaan Oromo and Amharic, respectively. Thus, the combination of the above narratives is a practical test capable of presenting a new recipe to "blow up" MP Abiy's reform agendas.

## 5. Conclusion

The premier's move of swiftly pressing the pedals has exacerbated longstanding tensions between ethnic nations, and as a consequence, there emerged a large number of ultranationalist politicians of which many spread straightforwardly narrow-minded messages. As a result, Ethiopia has recorded more internally displaced people since PM Abiy's come to power. The most recent episode happened in October 2018 after prominent media mogul and Oromo activist Jawar Mohammed blamed PM Abiy's regime for attempting to coordinate an assault against him. In response to this claim, Jawar's supporters expressed dissension and discord against the government, a move that later developed into an ethnic conflict across all major cities in Oromia region leaving 86 people dead. Such an unprecedented act can make the already fragile situation of the country worse unless a quick but institutionalized solution is put in place in time, thus the prime minister and his team are not assured of success in the elections of May 2020.

Given the premier's unapologetically personalized rule, he has chosen to make key policy decisions singlehandedly with little or no reference to party procedures to reach structural consensus. Some of the major policy decisions executed steadily include, among others, the shaky rapprochement with Eritrea. From a "heretic" viewpoint, water is one of the priorities of the deal. Regrettably, the terms, conditions, and parameters of the Ethio-Eritrea peace deal were neither plainly spoken out nor were communicated to the public, thus the sustainability of the peace accord remains doubtful. Last but not least, PM Abiy did not enjoy the full-fledged consensus of the front coalition to officially dissolve the alliance of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In order to establish a new national political party, the Ethiopian Prosperity Party raised from the ashes of the former EPRDF. Henceforth, the cynical political opposition, as well as key members of the former coalition, see this move as a design strategy of institutionalizing a "tailored" powerbase allowing PM Abiy to exercise greater and more personalized control over the state and the party machinery countrywide.

While there is some truth to those criticisms, the Ethiopian leader has generally proved to have an "all talk" leadership style — saying he will do many impressive or politically exciting things but, in essence, he is often confronted by a bagful of challenges. Colonel Abiy Ahmed himself being a political orphan of the former EPRDF was nearly born and brought up in an unreliable regime that later defied even analysts' judgmental assumptions in the early years of its establishment by providing political opportunities to their people in a bid to reap the donors' support. However, inwardly, they installed an impermeable elite protection system to shield themselves from open political challenges that might undermine the tenure of the occupants. With such historical circumstances forming the background of the country's political trajectory, it is difficult to predict the course in which the present transition in Ethiopia would end up. They try to guarantee transparency and democratization through a process of fast, befuddling, and troublesome decision-making, which may also contain additional hazards. As the former regime started behaving

at the onset of their rule between 1995 and 2005 similarly, it is difficult to predict whether the new premier will soon take a different course. One would wonder why a son's character or behavior cannot be expected to resemble that of his father. A "like father, like son" leadership attitude is apparently in display in contemporary Ethiopia's transition. While the jury is still out on the question of providing a pertinent and straightforward recommendation, I believe that getting timely and appropriate answers to the abovementioned challenges is not only critical, but it is also a litmus test for PM Abiy's reform era's successes. As the Somali proverb goes, however sweet date bran is, the palm's seed tests the strength of the jawbone (that is, there is a stone in every date). ☀

## Notes

1   Qeerroo and Qarree (literally, 'bachelor' and 'bachelorette,' respectively) are Oromo terms meaning politically active young men and women.
2   Revolutionary democracy is a term of political science, first coined by Vladimir Lenin, leader of the Russian Bolshevik Revolution, denoting a political economy of nations in transition from feudo-capitalism to socialism. But in Ethiopia, and according to the interpretation of the EPRDF's vanguard leaders, it means establishing democracy by forcefully restoring a former undemocratic government to power.

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