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*Diaspora Views on Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia*

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**Abstract**

Ethiopia currently is governed under a system of ethnic federalism, one in which its many ethnic groups reside within prescribed states, states which retain a degree of political autonomy. This system of governance was created after the country's Civil War as a means to ensure that its ethnics would retain a degree of self-determination, are able to speak their native languages, celebrate their cultures, and practice their religions. However, overtime, tensions began to rise as questions of equity among ethnic groups became more salient. These tensions eventually lead to anti-government protests in 2015 that assert that the head of the central government coalition, The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), had perpetuated inequality and mass corruption. This then led to the appointment of current prime minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018. In 2019, he would announce his intention to create a new coalition, the Prosperity Party, which would stray away from the system of ethnic federalism. Consequently, this study's intention is to evaluate the system of ethnic federalism and root causes for current tensions in the country. This study does this through the lens of the Ethiopian diaspora in the United States. Their perspectives are important as they have shaped domestic politics in Ethiopia in the past. Consequently, 10 members of the diaspora were interviewed about their views of the system of ethnic federalism, the current administration, the TPLF's past, the role of the diaspora, and Ethiopia's future. In the end, I found that the system of ethnic federalism may be the only system in which Ethiopia can support. Furthermore, I discovered that the diaspora's impact can have both positive and negative impacts on domestic issues in Ethiopia.

## ***Acknowledgements***

I would first like to sincerely thank all of the participants of this study. Your perspectives, thoughts, ideas, and experiences were fundamental to the completion of this project. I also sincerely appreciate your bravery in engaging in discussion related to the conflict happening in Ethiopia. I realize that it was not an easy thing for you to do especially as all of you have family in Ethiopia, and some had not heard from their families in several weeks at the time.

Furthermore, I thank those participants who are actively engaged in the community and work to shed light on the situation in Ethiopia. At the time this study had been conducted, our country continues to be pitted in violence, displacement, political instability, and uncertainty. Your perspective helped me to shed some light upon factors that have may explain where our country is today. Finally, like many of you, I pray for the safety and security of the people of Tigray, hope to witness accountability, and one day soon a peaceful resolution. May Ethiopia have a future not burdened by our past and the many things have divided us in the past

Next, I want to thank members of my committee for their support, guidance, expertise, and patience. Thank you for continuing to guide me even as the nature of my topic had drastically shifted throughout the course of this project. Furthermore, I want to give a special thanks to my main advisor Dr. Michael English. Thank Dr. English for your consistent support and for helping me establish a framework to ensure this project was carried out in an effective and profound manner. In addition to this, thank you for supporting me as this project became emotionally burdensome and taxing as conflict began to escalate in Ethiopia. That point of time was the most difficult for me, especially as I began to re-evaluate my intentions of continuing this project and contemplated whether or not I could engage with the community. That form of support was needed as I began to find the right in path in which to pursue this project in light of the situation in Ethiopia.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their continued support throughout this project, but I want to especially thank my parents. Mom and Dad, you left your home and came to the United States fleeing conflict, and with the hopes to one day build a better life for you family. I will always admire your resilience, tenacity, patience, and strength in the face of adapting to American society and securing a better future for your children. Throughout this project I caught a glimpse of the challenges you endured, especially as I saw pictures of Tigrayan refugees cross into Sudan, the same path you both had taken. I took on this project for our community, the people of Ethiopia, and for your both. Thank you so much for your love and support.

## Introduction

At the time of this writing, Ethiopia currently finds itself in the midst of a civil war. Starting in November 2020, a surprise military offensive was launched by the Ethiopian government under President Abiy against the country's Tigray region in response to earlier attacks attributed to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) on federal bases.<sup>1</sup> The TPLF, once the former ruling party, was pushed from power in 2018 and began its attacks after claiming it no longer recognized the federal government.<sup>2</sup> The current conflict between the government and the TPLF has led to the death of hundreds of people, and the New York Times reports that the Ethiopian government and allied militias are engaged in a systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing in the Tigray region.<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International asserts that Eritrean soldiers are supporting Ethiopian forces and have been running military operations within Tigray. These soldiers are accused of committing a massacre killing approximately 800 in the city of Axum, an important city to the people where queen Sheba is said to have been born.<sup>4</sup> A witness said that "bodies had been piled up on the streets"<sup>5</sup>.

The fighting between forces supported by the Ethiopian government and the TPLF, unsurprisingly, created a refugee crisis on the border between Ethiopia and Sudan.<sup>6</sup> The United Nations notes the conflict created a major humanitarian crisis, calling it the worst exodus of Ethiopians since the country's Civil War decades before.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, humanitarian aid to the Tigray region has been largely restricted by the Ethiopian government.<sup>8</sup> The ethnic dimension of the conflict has led to further violence between ethnic groups in Ethiopia, as well as calls from the international community to stop the war and for investigations into alleged human rights abuses.<sup>9</sup>

The resurgence of violence in Ethiopia, particularly along ethnic lines, is a disturbing development, especially given that prime minister Abiy Ahmed's appointment in 2018 was seen as a move in the direction of peace. Abiy brokered a peace deal with Ethiopia's longtime rival Eritria, which won him a Nobel Peace Prize.<sup>10</sup> In 2018 Prime Minister Ahmed also passed a law that gave amnesty to political prisoners, which was widely praised as his predecessor, Desalegn had detained over 30,000 people deemed terrorist threats, part of opposition groups, journalists, and political commentators during his tenure.<sup>11</sup> During this same year he announced that he would direct investigations that look into accounts of state sponsored torturing, killing of protesters by state police, and state officials who engaged in these brutal practices.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Tigray Crisis."

<sup>2</sup> "Tigray Crisis."

<sup>3</sup> "Ethiopia's War Leads to Ethnic Cleansing in Tigray Region, U.S. Report Says - The New York Times."

<sup>4</sup> "Ethiopia's Tigray Crisis: How a Massacre in the Sacred City of Aksum Unfolded - BBC News."

<sup>5</sup> "Ethiopia's Tigray Crisis: How a Massacre in the Sacred City of Aksum Unfolded - BBC News."

<sup>6</sup> "Stories of Separation and Violence as More Ethiopians Reach Sudan | Conflict News | Al Jazeera."

<sup>7</sup> "Fleeing Ethiopians Tell of Ethnic Massacres in Tigray War - The New York Times."

<sup>8</sup> "Aid Agencies Renew Appeals for Aid Access to All Areas in Ethiopia's Tigray."

<sup>9</sup> "Amidst 'Conflict, Blanket Denials and Finger-Pointing', UN Rights Chief Calls for Probe in Ethiopia's Tigray."

<sup>10</sup> "Ethiopia's Abiy and Eritrea's Afwerki Declare End of War."

<sup>11</sup> Fick, "Ethiopia Offers Amnesty to Recently Freed Political Prisoners."

<sup>12</sup> Fick.

Additionally, he was praised for facilitating large economic leaps such as speeding up the construction of “Grand Renaissance Dam” in 2019 and 2020 which would provide 6,000 megawatts of energy to the country and provide energy to 65% of the country’s population who currently does not have access to the power grid, as well as sell some to neighboring countries.<sup>13</sup> However, this led to tensions rising between Ethiopia and Egypt, since the dam’s construction is on the Blue Nile which provides water to Egypt.<sup>14</sup>

In December of 2019, Abiy helped establish the Prosperity Party to replace the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and this action was seen as an attempt to replace the country’s ethnic federalist system with a more civic-style federalist structure rooted in multi-ethnic political parties rather than single ethnicity federal party.<sup>15</sup> The creation of this coalition party was significant for a number of reasons the first being that it was inclusive of parties that were not allowed to join the EPRDF such as ones in the Somalia and Gambella regions of the country who had been previously deemed to be lacking in the proper agrarian class structure deemed necessary under the revolutionary democracy.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, this had signified the end of the coalition created by Meles Zenawi of the TPLF who was deemed as a strongman, his death ultimately led to the inability of the four parties to share power, ultimately leading to Abiy’s rise to power.<sup>17</sup> The move to end the EPRDF sparked major opposition from the TPLF, which saw it as detrimental to the centrally directed economy established in the 1995 constitution.

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was established in 1989 as a coalition between the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and groups such as the Oromo Democratic Party, Amhara Democratic Party, Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement.<sup>18</sup> From 1991 to 2018, the TPLF acted as a major political power in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in part due to the system of ethnic federalism established under the ERPFD. The coalition that was established agreed that a federalist form of government would be created which would be based on ethnic identity. Under ethnic federalism, 10 regional states were created in which the dominant ethnic identity group of a respective regions is given local control of that territory within the state, with some states consisting of several ethnic populations.<sup>19</sup> Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia allowed for groups to be able to express their cultures, dialects, and religion openly and freely.<sup>20</sup> Although not all groups were provided a state or territory, certain states were established in which these many ethnic groups would preside together peacefully.<sup>21</sup> The EPDRF had also established a provision in the Ethiopian constitution that would even allow states to succeed from Ethiopia in the case that they were being oppressed by the central government.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the EPDRF had devised and centrally commanded

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<sup>13</sup> “Egypt-Ethiopia Row.”

<sup>14</sup> “Egypt-Ethiopia Row.”

<sup>15</sup> Gebreluel, “Analysis | Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Wants to Change the Ruling Coalition. Who’s Getting Left out?”

<sup>16</sup> Gebreluel.

<sup>17</sup> Gebreluel.

<sup>18</sup> Gebreluel.

<sup>19</sup> Cohen, “‘Ethnic Federalism’ in Ethiopia.”

<sup>20</sup> Fessha, *Ethnic Diversity and Federalism*, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Fessha.

<sup>22</sup> Cohen, “‘Ethnic Federalism’ in Ethiopia.”

economy that would be in charge of shaping economic activity and creating critical infrastructure throughout the country.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, the distribution of political power among ethnic groups in Ethiopia in the new Federal Democratic Republic had not been done equitably. There were disparities in the allocation of political power, economic resources, land, and representation within the federal government.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, this led to many ethnic groups to feel marginalized by the ethnic federalist system, while at the same time, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was able to concentrate power. The TPLF was seen as a problematic faction by many groups in the country since it had been led by Meles Zenawi for over 27 years, the perception being that he strong armed his way to maintaining his positionality.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, many believe that under their leadership of the coalition, issues such as corruption and marginalization arose, particularly in ways that repressed the Oromo and Amhara groups, and was a driving factor for the protests that began in late 2015.<sup>26</sup> Another perception that sparked controversy was the idea that people with connections to members of the TPLF were able to easily access positions in public office, and economic assets.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, it was held that the TPLF's (in particular Meles) used larger sets of national agendas such a fighting poverty and developing infrastructure as a means to further justify the consolidation of power and leadership for themselves, but also to continue to maintain the centrally directed economy which led to inequity and controversial moves related to land use such as the expansion of Addis Ababa in 2015.<sup>28</sup> The brutal response to protesters under TPLF leadership as well as national security measures that led to thousands to be imprisoned also made the TPLF widely criticized.<sup>29</sup> The controversial standing in EPRDF was further proven as protestors in the Oromo and Amhara region, who have had a contentious past, worked together to protest TPLF leadership during the protests that took place between 2015-2018.<sup>30</sup>

Challenges to the ethnic federalist system and the ruling coalition began to emerge when a proposed expansion of the capital city of the federal government, Addis Ababa, was put forth in 2015 that would cut into Oromo territory in 2015.<sup>31</sup> This led to a massive protest movement that grew larger in 2016, which began to challenge the TPLF led EPRDF.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, protesters also vented the government's treatment of citizens, political repression, jailing of journalists and activists under national security directives, corruption, unemployment, and the need for redistribution of wealth and economic resources.<sup>33</sup> The protests in Ethiopia then garnered more international attention during the 2016 Rio Olympic games in August when marathon runner, Feyisa Lilesa, finished the race (winning a silver medal) with his arms crossed above his head in

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<sup>23</sup> Gebregziabher, "Ideology and Power in TPLF's Ethiopia."

<sup>24</sup> Yusuf, "Drivers of Ethnic Conflict in Contemporary Ethiopia."

<sup>25</sup> Gebreluel, "Analysis | Ethiopia's Prime Minister Wants to Change the Ruling Coalition. Who's Getting Left out?"

<sup>26</sup> Gettleman, "'A Generation Is Protesting' in Ethiopia, Long a U.S. Ally."

<sup>27</sup> Gebregziabher, "Ideology and Power in TPLF's Ethiopia."

<sup>28</sup> Gebregziabher.

<sup>29</sup> Fick, "Ethiopia Offers Amnesty to Recently Freed Political Prisoners."

<sup>30</sup> Gettleman, "'A Generation Is Protesting' in Ethiopia, Long a U.S. Ally."

<sup>31</sup> "Why Ethiopia Is Making a Historic 'Master Plan' U-Turn - BBC News."

<sup>32</sup> Gettleman, "'A Generation Is Protesting' in Ethiopia, Long a U.S. Ally."

<sup>33</sup> Gettleman.

solidarity with protesters in the Oromo region.<sup>34</sup> He went on to say, “The Ethiopian government is killing my people so I stand with all protests anywhere as Oromo is my tribe. My relatives are in prison and if they talk about democratic rights they are killed. I raised my hands to support with the Oromo protest.”<sup>35</sup> Lilesa was referring to the fact in August of 2016, over 100 protesters in the Oromo state had been killed by security forces, and over 400 since the protests had begun, thousands were also arrested with impunity.<sup>36</sup> This led to the struggle be protracted for about three years, until the resignation of prime minister Desalegn in February of 2018, after he failed to end these demonstrations, and ultimately lost support from leaders in the EPRDF. It was then in April of 2018, Abiy Ahmed, the first prime minister from the Oromo region (and not from Tigray) was elected, since he was deemed a reformist.<sup>37</sup>

During the protests, it became apparent that the Ethiopian diaspora, particularly those based in the US were seen as a major factor in Ethiopian politics. Diasporas play an important role economically and politically in their countries of origin. Diasporas in general play many roles in terms of shaping affairs back in their home countries. For example, diasporas send remittances to their friends, relatives, and family which have major impacts on the economy.<sup>38</sup> It is even noted by the IMF that a 10 percent increase in remittances would lead to about a .4 percent increase in overall GDP per capita for a country.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, as discussed in the case of Burundi, diasporas have the power to increase transparency for issues happening their respective home countries.<sup>40</sup> This case also demonstrates that diaspora groups also at times have been proven to be consequential in domestic politics in their home countries in both productive and non-productive ways. In the context of the protests that happened from 2015-2018, the Ethiopian diaspora proved to be so consequential in their efforts to raise awareness in their host/migrated countries that the Ethiopian government had blocked access to Twitter and Facebook.<sup>41</sup> The EPDRF cited that social media had only fueled more unrest in the country, saying that false information had been cited, which had only made things worse, this claim of course was largely disputed.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, it was noted by the William and Mary Law School in the U.S. regarding Ethiopian diaspora involvement at that time that, “The diaspora can speak truth to power in ways that is not imaginable in their own homeland.”<sup>43</sup>

Considering how influential the Ethiopian diaspora was during anti-government protests in from 2015-2018, it is evident that the diaspora will be largely influential throughout the current state of conflict as well as the process of eventual resolution. In the past few months, the diaspora has proven to be consequently as internet access was cut in the Tigray region and members of the diaspora worked to raise awareness and promote accountability. Furthermore, after the current state of conflict, there will be a re-establishment of the system of government that will occur in

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<sup>34</sup> “Ethiopian Runner Makes Protest Sign as He Crosses Line in Rio.”

<sup>35</sup> “Ethiopian Runner Makes Protest Sign as He Crosses Line in Rio.”

<sup>36</sup> “Ethiopia Protests: ‘Nearly 100 Killed’ in Oromia and Amhara - BBC News.”

<sup>37</sup> “Abiy Ahmed Sworn in as Ethiopia’s Prime Minister | Abiy Ahmed News | Al Jazeera.”

<sup>38</sup> Dridi et.al, “The Impact of Remittances on Economic Activity: The Importance of Sectoral Linkages.”

<sup>39</sup> Dridi et.al.

<sup>40</sup> Turner, “Cyberwars of Words.”

<sup>41</sup> “Why Is the Ethiopian Diaspora so Influential?”

<sup>42</sup> “Why Is the Ethiopian Diaspora so Influential?”

<sup>43</sup> “Why Is the Ethiopian Diaspora so Influential?”



the upcoming elections, in which the diaspora will continue to play an important role in shaping that process. Thereby, this study is being conducted in order to gain a better understanding of the perspective of members of the Ethiopian diaspora living in the United States on the topic of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia. Additionally, this study seeks to expand our existing knowledge of fundamental components to support countries in establishing equitable and stable democratic institutions that are representative and inclusive of all groups in a given country. This research project was initiated before the current civil war began and has become all the more pressing over the past few months.

## Literature Review

### Historical Background

Ethiopia is characterized as an African country of minorities. No one ethnic group constitutes a majority of its population and this is demonstrated by the fact that Ethiopia has approximately 80 different ethnic groups. The largest of these groups are the Oromo (34.49% of the population), Amhara (26.89%), Somali (6.2%), and Tigray (6.07%).<sup>44</sup> The most widely spoken language in Ethiopia is Amharic, stemming from its wide dispersion during the reign of the Ethiopian monarchy. Consequently, Amharic has been largely used in instruction, media, and governmental business.<sup>45</sup> Further, some customs are shared among groups such as martial engagements and ceremonies, similar cuisines are enjoyed across ethnic groups as well.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, outside of the region, the Eritrean and Ethiopian diaspora communities widely accept the pan-ethnic identification of “Habesha”.<sup>47</sup> This term transcends ethnic and national identities, and places emphasis on common customs and origins. Christianity served as the official state religion until 1974, but the country has long had a religious plurality of Christians, Muslims, and Jews living within its territory. The U.S. Department of State estimates that the current religious demographic in Ethiopia consists of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian (44%), Sunni Muslim (34%), Christian Evangelical (19%), the other 3% consisting of Jews, Jehovah’s witnesses, and indigenous religious groups.<sup>48</sup> The Orthodox community primarily resides in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara, while the Muslim community primarily resides in Afar, Somali, and Oromia regions. Additionally, protestant groups reside in the SNNP, Gambella, and Oromia regions.<sup>49</sup> These religious demographics indicate an additional potential dimension for rooted divisions among ethnic groups and regional groups.

The Ethiopian empire, formally known as Abyssinia, was founded in the Northern part of the state, in what are the Amhara and Tigray regions. Since Christianity’s introduction in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, it has remained fundamental to the establishment of its statehood.<sup>50</sup> Tejre Ostebo goes on to note, “the inclusion of elements from Judaism added to its peculiarity, and legends connecting the Solomonic dynastic line to King Solomon and Jerusalem produced a theologically based notion of state- and nation-hood”.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, “Ethiopia was a country chosen by God, who had entered into a covenant with his people”.<sup>52</sup> Ethiopia’s (formerly Abyssinia) identity as a kingdom and state was founded on the assertion that it was a Christian kingdom, consequently making Christianity foundational to its identity as a whole. This of course was done in order to add further legitimacy to his dynasty, which was foundational to the influence and power of Solomonic dynasty for the next several centuries.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Fessha, *Ethnic Diversity and Federalism*, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Fessha, *Ethnic Diversity and Federalism*, 2010.

<sup>46</sup> Madebo, “Re-Imagining Identity.”

<sup>47</sup> Madebo.

<sup>48</sup> “Ethiopia.”

<sup>49</sup> “Ethiopia.”

<sup>50</sup> Østebø, “Islam and State Relations in Ethiopia.”

<sup>51</sup> Østebø. Pg. 1034

<sup>52</sup> Østebø. Pg. 1034

<sup>53</sup> Fessha, *Ethnic Diversity and Federalism*, 2010.

Ethiopia's contemporary divides can be traced back after the fall of the ancient Axumite Kingdom in the 8<sup>th</sup> century – which ruled over current north Ethiopia and Eritrea. At this point Ethiopia had been ruled two predominant monarchies.<sup>54</sup> These monarchies were founded in the Tigray and Amhara regions. The Amhara monarchy was divided into regional administrations that included Wello and Gonder. While the Tigray region included what is considered modern day Eritrea.<sup>55</sup> In the Amhara region, the Zagwe dynasty ruled until 1270, when it was overthrown by Yekuno-Amlak, from the Amhara region Wello. Later, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Yekuno-Amlak, emperor at the time, declared his lineage as Solomonic, meaning that his line had descended from King Solomon of Israel and Queen Sheba of ancient Abyssinia, then ultimately Jesus.<sup>56</sup> This legitimacy being derived from the fact it perpetuates the idea that to go against the monarchy was to go against the direct descendants of Queen Sheba and King Solomon. Furthermore, the assertion that the Ethiopian monarchy was a Solomonic one was also meant to be symbolic of Ethiopia's largely rooted history with Christianity, giving it the legitimacy to pursue its ultimate goal of supremacy over regional lords.

The Solomonic dynasty extended their military capacity and territory but did not however rule over the entirety of modern-day Ethiopia.<sup>57</sup> The Solomonic dynasty was largely concentrated in the north part of present-day Ethiopia, meanwhile groups in the southern region had systems of hierarchical kingdoms and egalitarian societal organizations<sup>58</sup> The Oromo region in the south had a hierarchical set of kingdoms.<sup>59</sup> Muslim populations at the time largely resided in the Somali, Afar, and Oromo regions.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century southern groups began to collide with the major kingdom in the north starting with a coalition of the Muslim regions of Somali and Afar, who impacted losses on the Solomonic dynasty.<sup>60</sup> Right after these series of conflicts, the Oromo began to carry out an expansive military campaign, which extended into north kingdom territory.

In an effort to continue to pursue the expansion of the Solomonic dynasty, emperor (self-proclaimed) Tewodros in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that ethnic factor was emphasized in Ethiopia, this was part of his efforts to undercut Oromo dynasties- a major rival- throughout Ethiopia. This campaign also had entailed brutal crackdowns, looting of crops, and other forceful actions. The expansion of imperial rule during this era had entailed alienation of land, claiming 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of lands in the southern regions.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, expansion of imperial rule also entailed political and cultural centralization and domination. This entailed efforts to try to implement Amharic- the language predominately spoke in the Northern regions as well as by the monarchy- as the official language of business, a move that would have a lasting impact even to this day.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Fessha.

<sup>55</sup> Fessha.

<sup>56</sup> Fessha.

<sup>57</sup> Fessha.

<sup>58</sup> Fessha.

<sup>59</sup> Fessha.

<sup>60</sup> Fessha.

<sup>61</sup> Fessha.

<sup>62</sup> Fessha.

Hallie Selassie would oversee the restoration, expansion, and institutionalization of the Solomonic empire prior to and during the Second World War. He did this through the creation of Ethiopia's first constitution in 1931, its first parliament, and joined the international system via the League of Nations and later the United Nations. Although these moves seem to be democratic in nature from our current vantage point in history, Selassie's intention was to abolish regional autonomy and implement a centralized form of government.<sup>63</sup> Selassie carried out his policies with the goal of taking away political power from nobles that traditionally had ruled their respective autonomous regions. Furthermore, Selassie sought impose linguistic and cultural domination, as the government had prohibited the use of languages other than Amharic.<sup>64</sup> His efforts for expansion and modernization were severely interrupted in 1935 when 200,000 Italian troops arrived in Ethiopia in an effort to capture it for Mussolini's "new Roman Empire".<sup>65</sup> This was Italy's second attempt in colonizing Ethiopia after they had been defeated in 1896. In 1936, Hallie Selassie fled the country, and Italy now occupied Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. This set off a guerrilla conflict against Italy, then in January of 1941 British forces arrived in Ethiopia to counter the occupation, in November of that year Italian forces surrendered.<sup>66</sup> The occupation took the lives of almost 400,000 Ethiopians civilians, a large number being lost as a result of the use of chemical weapons.<sup>67</sup>

After the end of the Italian occupation in 1941 Selassie revived his efforts to centralize power and carried out the marginalization of non-Amharic speaking groups, as might be assumed, wound up provoking resistance in the country to Selassie's rule. In 1943, in Tigray, a coalition of peasants and other from different social classes in Ethiopia's feudal system carried out mass violence against the Solomonic monarchy, which would be known as the "Weyane Rebellion".<sup>68</sup> Tarke states, "Weyane was relatively restricted, localized uprising with strong provincialist or ethnic undertones"<sup>69</sup> Things that incited this frustration include Selassie's change of the tax system in a way in which northern provinces paid half the rate to the central government, a land tax that impacted peasant farmers was introduced, all while government officials abused their power to collect taxes.<sup>70</sup> The rebellion was also carried out in light of the fear of the loss of autonomy, which groups such as the Rayo and Azebo join together to rebel against the central government, as they had done for centuries before.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore there also was the dynamic of intraclass class conflict as Tigrayan nobility began to decline in the wake of the bolstering of Hallie Selassie to power, which contradicted the nobles of Tigray's goal to reassert former privileges.<sup>72</sup> In all, the Weyane revolution cut across class lines, led to the incorporation of previously autonomous groups. Later the 1963, the Bale Rebellion emerged from the alienation of Muslim populations when Selassie asserted Orthodox Christianity as the

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<sup>63</sup> Borruso, "Politics and Religion in Haile Selassie's Ethiopia."

<sup>64</sup> Fessha, *Ethnic Diversity and Federalism*, 2010.

<sup>65</sup> González-Ruibal, "Fascist Colonialism."

<sup>66</sup> González-Ruibal.

<sup>67</sup> Grip and Hart, "The Use of Chemical Weapons in the 1935–36 Italo-Ethiopian War."

<sup>68</sup> Tareke, "Peasant Resistance in Ethiopia."

<sup>69</sup> Tareke. Pg. 77

<sup>70</sup> Tareke.

<sup>71</sup> Tareke.

<sup>72</sup> Tareke.

state religion. Fessha writes, “The retention of ethnocultural identities were the primary goals of the rebellion”.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, these forms of religious alienation led to tensions rising in the Somali and Oromo regions, as a large number of Muslims made up this region. These tensions were only furthered as the settlement of Christians in these regions. The marginalization of Muslim groups is further demonstrated as Muslims were designated as “Muslims residing in Ethiopia” by the state and were not recognized as Ethiopian until the Derg would come to power in 1974.<sup>74</sup>

Selassie’s policies and rule would eventually cause those opposed to him to create the Eritrean People’s Liberation front (EPLF) in 1972. The efforts of the monarchy to centralize authority and political power, as well as its actions to regulate culture, religion, and language led to contention within the country. Rebellions against the monarchy occurred along ethnic lines, primarily based in factions who had been marginalized. The creation of these factions and divisions on the basis of ethnic identity would prove pivotal in the conflicts that have emerged in Ethiopia since the monarchy was abolished in 1974.

Selassie, the last emperor of Ethiopia, was overthrown by the Derg, a communist paramilitary group led by Mengistu Mariam in 1974.<sup>75</sup> The Derg had not represented any particular ethnic group but rather worked to dispose of feudal institutions in Ethiopia, as the current tide in sentiment began to turn.<sup>76</sup> This system had come under scrutiny after series of student movements as well as the poor conditions that came after a bad drought in 1973-74, which illuminated its inefficiencies and inequities. At the same time academics laid out political demands such as civil liberties, abolition of censorship, freedom of press, and agrarian reforms, these demands served as foundational to the movement.<sup>77</sup> It was at this point the “committee” (Derg) was established, for the coordination of armed forces, at this point the Mariam’s military faction took over the revolutionary cause.<sup>78</sup> The Derg ran the country through a military junta in which it formally oversaw all matters related to the administration of the state. Breaking with Selassie’s policies, the Derg nationalized the country’s economy, which benefitted ethnic groups in the Southern region, namely agricultural laborers who no longer paid northern landlords. The Derg abolished the status of Orthodox Christianity as the official state religion and recognized the practice of Islam. Interestingly, the Derg promised to restore regional autonomy similar to what had once existed.

In the mid 1980s the Derg would go on to assert that it was a force of unity and implemented a centralized structure, abandoning its initial plan to respect national autonomy, done under the guise of the slogan “Ethiopia first”.<sup>79</sup> Demands for political autonomy were considered counter revolutionary in nature. As opposition groups became more vocal, the Derg carried out political repression, especially against vocal activists. This led to what would be known as the “Red Terror”, which began as it had declared war on its former ally the Ethiopian People’s

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<sup>73</sup> Fessha, *Ethnic Diversity and Federalism*, 2010. Pg. 166

<sup>74</sup> Østebø, “Islam and State Relations in Ethiopia.”

<sup>75</sup> Whitman, “Haile Selassie of Ethiopia Dies at 83.”

<sup>76</sup> Bellucci, Stefano, “The 1974 Ethiopian Revolution at 40: Social, Economic, and Political Legacies.”

<sup>77</sup> Bellucci, Stefano.

<sup>78</sup> Bellucci, Stefano.

<sup>79</sup> Fessha, *Ethnic Diversity and Federalism*, 2010.

Revolutionary Party (EPRP).<sup>80</sup> From 1974 into the 1990s, the Derg engaged in mass arrests, torture, and killing of members from opposition groups and members of the EPRP, provoked a deadly civil war that lasted 16 years and claimed the lives of 1.5 million Ethiopians.<sup>81</sup> The war also included foreign actors such as the Soviet Union, the United States, Israel, Somalia, and others.

The civil war illuminated many of the cultural and ethnic divisions within the country. As rebel factions emerged, each came under the banner of an ethnic group and promoted its own set of ideological beliefs and political agendas. Rebel factions included the TPLF, Eritrean's People's Liberation Front (EPLF), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Sidama Liberation Front (SLF), and others.<sup>82</sup> The ideological spectrum among these groups ranged from socialism to democratic capitalism. In the case of the EPLF, its involvement was to support its efforts for Eritrean independence.<sup>83</sup> One ideology that would prove vital to the post-Derg period was the ethno-based federalism advocated by the TPLF.

After Mengistu's government was overthrown in 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was created. Tamrat Layne was appointed Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi was appointed President and Siye Abraha was appointed Minister of Defense; all three men were members of the TPLF.<sup>84</sup> Yet the intent of the EPRDF and TPLF was to create a solid foundation for a democratic governance in Ethiopia.

### **What is Federalism?**

Before we can understand why the EPRDF and TPLF wanted to implement an ethnic federalist system in Ethiopia, it is important to first understand what federalism is and how an ethnic federalist system differs from that of a civic federalist system. There is a rich set of literature on the dynamics of federalist systems given that the federalist model is widely adopted throughout the world in both Western and non-Western countries. Schuck defines federalism as, "A system that divides political authority between a nation-state and subnational polities within its territory so that both the national and sub-national polities govern individuals within their jurisdiction, and that confers both national and sub-national citizenships."<sup>85</sup> This a system in which groups who already have some sort of semblance of autonomy and independence agree to come together to form a unified government in the interest of overall security and stability. In these systems the central government has some degree of supremacy over subnational governments (which usually tend to be called states). States or prescribed subnational governments have some degree of autonomy, and usually can exercise sovereignty, collect taxes, host elections for state leaders, in some nations draft their own constitutions, and pass laws. The prime example and origin of the formalized structure of federalism is the United States. Federal government has three branches, the executive, legislative, and judicial. While state governments have their own constitutions, laws, judicial systems, police forces, and tax laws. This system was adopted for the United States since there was a large amount of fear that a central government would wield too much intrusive

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<sup>80</sup> Tegegn, "Mengistu's 'Red Terror.'"

<sup>81</sup> "Ethiopia - Socialist Ethiopia (1974-91) | Britannica."

<sup>82</sup> "Ethiopia - Socialist Ethiopia (1974-91) | Britannica."

<sup>83</sup> "Ethiopia - Socialist Ethiopia (1974-91) | Britannica."

<sup>84</sup> "Ethiopia - Socialist Ethiopia (1974-91) | Britannica."

<sup>85</sup> Schuck, "Federalism." Pg. 5

power. At the time, there was also a need to address cultural differences between southern states and northern states. The federal system would allow states to retain a degree of political autonomy, under the condition they adhere to federal supremacy when applicable.

Karl Deutsch, a multiple-factor theorist of federalism, states that there are several practical reasons in which federations are created. These include the need to overcome military insecurity, to pursue economic advantage, and to be independent of a foreign regime.<sup>86</sup> Federal governments because although states or subnational governments are allowed to maintain police and law enforcement agencies, military forces and weaponry are concentrated within the federal government. The centralization of military power serves as a more effective combative force and deterrent for foreign entities. Furthermore, the consolidation of a centralized economy allows for more overall wealth and exchange capacity, facilitating for state entities. Additionally, William Riker noted, "federalism creates and expanded political community without the use of coercive and aggressive methods of imperialism".<sup>87</sup> As federalism is founded upon democratic principles, it works to find a means to unify political entities within a prescribed territory that is peaceful, since social solidarity tends to be foundational for governmental stability.

However, in addition to just breaking up the governance duties between federal and local authority, there remains questions about the extent to which federalism has to balance local desires against national desires. Fessha writes, "As a normative concept, Federalism has two essential aspects: autonomy and union. Simply put, the autonomy aspect is a reference to self-government and about making self-rule possible for the constituent units. The union aspect is, on the other hand, a reference to the co-management of the whole society and about the desire of people and polities to come or stay together for common purposes. Autonomy in this context refers to the ability of independent actors who sign on to a federal system to be able to exercise a large degree of political autonomy and some degree of authoritative autonomy in their respective states and or regions. Union, however, tends to be the foundation for federalism, since as discussed previously, federalist systems are agreements among self-governing bodies to ensure common political and economic security. As emphasized by Fessha, these two aspects are essential for a stable federal system, any infraction in these two essential aspects puts it at risk.

To create autonomy, federal systems are often described as devolved governance. This is especially frequent in post-conflict cases where a national authority is transferred back to regional levels. Devolution is "the allocation of authority to sub-national units of government".<sup>88</sup> The process of devolution is an important process during the creation of a federalist system. The devolution process allows for the creation of local governments and political administrative entities. Devolved governance also provides a structure for the sharing of exercising of sovereignty and enforcing the law between central and state governments. One aspect of the process entails the division of natural resources, which often become points of contention during these processes. For example, the challenges of devolution were seen in Iraq in which the point of contention was the determination of which regions in the federation got which oil deposits and how the profits would be split with other regions and the national government.<sup>89</sup> A

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<sup>86</sup> Thorlakson, *Federal Institutional Design*.

<sup>87</sup> Paleker, "FEDERALISM." Pg. 307

<sup>88</sup> Schuck, "Federalism." Pg. 6

<sup>89</sup> Schuck.

unconventional example of devolved governance is the case of the Northern Ireland, as it involved a shared power agreement with a foreign entity, the United Kingdom.<sup>90</sup> In the late 1960s pressure began to build with demands for institutional change, as the United Kingdom at the time had complete control over Ireland at the time, and were unwilling to accept any power sharing agreement. Consequently, in the late 1960s violence would ensue between groups who had wanted to leave United Kingdom (groups such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and those who had not (Ulster volunteer force) and United Kingdom military, this period of time was known as the “Troubles”, and would last until the 1990s.<sup>91</sup> The conflict came to an end in 1998 with the signing of the “Good Friday Agreement”, which created a power sharing system in which North Ireland would remain largely autonomous, additionally should a majority call for Irish unity at any point, the United Kingdom must legislate for it.<sup>92</sup> This agreement was crucial as there was a large amount of animosity after the troubles, and division among, Catholic and protestant groups, and separatist and loyalists persisted.

While the structural arrangement between local and national is easy enough to imagine, a different set of issues arises when we consider who actually comprises the population that must live under this federal system. Civil societies within federalist systems, at least if we take the United States as an example, often assume that the population of the state is made up of a plurality of religions, cultures, and identities. In theory, a democratic federalist system contains and preserves diversity, while at the same time, the plurality of the population remains singular in terms of defining who counts as the nation.<sup>93</sup> William Livingston writes, "These diversities must not be too great to break the community into independent groups nor should they be suppressed to make way for a unitary form of government."<sup>94</sup> Livingston argues that federalism is a balance; it must provide autonomy for the diverse identities of its membership, while at the same time it must constrain autonomy so as not to embolden groups to strive for independence. Thus, federalism cannot have all power consolidated at the center of the system, nor can that system become seen as exclusive to one group.

### **Social Identity and Its Role in Conflict**

Barth notes, “Identity is generated, confirmed, and transformed in the process of interactions between groups and individuals; it is a dialectic between similarity and difference”.<sup>95</sup> One’s identity is derived from commonality and resonance among a group of people. These come in the form of common geographic origin, lived experience, traditions, religious identity, and binding factors. Furthermore, Korostelina describes two important factors of identity, those being first the realization of the individual need to belong to a group that provides protection and confidence, and inclusion into a system of social relationships.<sup>96</sup> The purposes of this research,

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<sup>90</sup> Doyle, John, “Reflecting on the Northern Ireland Conflict and Peace Process: 20 Years since the Good Friday Agreement.”

<sup>91</sup> Doyle, John.

<sup>92</sup> Doyle, John.

<sup>93</sup> Schuck, "Federalism."

<sup>94</sup> Parker, "FEDERALISM." Pg. 305

<sup>95</sup> “Korostelina Social Identity.” Pg. 16

<sup>96</sup> “Korostelina Social Identity.”



the primordial (ethnic and religious) and social constructed (nation and political party) groups will primarily be emphasized.

An individual becomes more fully immersed within a specific identity in light of the presence of extreme difference or a foreign entity of the social group, which warrants some form of unity. An example of this includes the presence of armed conflict, which initiates a “rally around the flag effect” in which individuals become strongly immersed in their national identity in the face of a foreign military threat. Within these contexts, collective social identity determines the “interconnection between social identify and collective actions in the political arena”.<sup>97</sup>

In the context of the creation of nation states that are inclusive of a number of social identities, there comes a point of identity crisis for individuals and groups. Melosik and Szkudlark describes this dilemma, “by achieving a goal, I lose my freedom; by becoming someone, I cease to be myself”.<sup>98</sup> Although this is stated in the context of an individual’s perspective, this applies to the context of social groups such as ethnic and religious group. In the formation of nation states, these groups are faced with the anxiety that they must give up parts of their identity, culture, traditions, and at times faith in order to assimilate within these states as they are pressured to subscribe to achieve some semblance of stability.

In the context of Ethiopia this is also the case, especially as it is seen in the form of widespread debate over the concept of what is known as “One Ethiopia”. One Ethiopia is the idea of a unified Ethiopia, one in which ethnic identities are not emphasized in the formation of a system of governance, but rather, the is an adoption of system in which there is complete centralization of political power and or state or municipalities are established not on the basis of identity. Under one Ethiopia, ethnic group histories are respected, however there would be a larger emphasis on the assimilation to the uniform identity of Ethiopian. The identity and term “Ethiopian” being derived Ethiopis, the name of a Abyssinian king, believed to be the twelfth descendant of Adam.<sup>99</sup> One Ethiopia remains contentious as groups perceive this to be the same forms centralization efforts carried out throughout Ethiopia’s history. All these efforts share the commonality that the exercise of ethnic and or regional groups were challenged or repressed all together. Furthermore, many feared that this will result in the complete loss of their culture, language, difficulties in practicing their religion openly, and ultimately largely compromise their social identity.

In all, these concepts of social identity and group identity are important in the context of the formation of unified governments whether they are democratic or not. Within a democratic context, or for our purposes a federalist context, the challenges that ensue in the pursuit of equity amongst prescribed groups. This has seen in many different contexts such as the formation of the United States. In extreme cases such as Rwanda, this can lead to massive conflict. These factors are also becoming largely important in the context of Ethiopia as loyalty towards ethnic and other primordial identities have are fueling the current state of social unrest and conflict.

## **Ethnic Federalism**

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<sup>97</sup> “Korostelina Social Identity.” Pg. 23

<sup>98</sup> “Korostelina Social Identity.” Pg. 17

<sup>99</sup> BEKERIE, “Ethiopica.”

Ethnic federalism was seen as a means to protect minority groups from total marginalization from the dominant culture or social identity within a prescribed nation state. It is noted by Gagnon, "As in the case of India, Pakistan, and Nigeria linguistic, racial and religious minorities feared discrimination at the hands of numerical majorities but were unable alone to support effectively a separate independence, have sought provincial autonomy within a federal political system as a way of preserving their own distinct identity and way of life".<sup>100</sup> Ethnic federalism was established as a means to preserve culture, traditions, religious faith, and social identity. It was a far better alternative than war and protracted violent independence movements. Furthermore, the devolution of political power would also ensure no one particular political group would consolidate too much centralized power.

Schuck notes in the case of ethnic federalism, "minority group demands are among the most important reasons for establishing a federal system".<sup>101</sup> Within these systems, the languages, cultures, traditions, and religion of prescribed groups are recognized and respected. Furthermore, although there is no uniform way in which national languages are identified, citizens within these systems are able to speak whatever language they choose, however, it can be assumed that most will learn the language of the most populous groups within these countries. The division of land for states is ideally done based on the population size of these groups as well as historical ties to certain areas of land.<sup>102</sup> In addition to this, the federal constitution will outline fundamental rights all citizens have within the country, to protect groups who live within states in which they are not part of the ethnic majority.<sup>103</sup> However, in practice, it is clear these ideals are much harder to achieve in a meaningful manner.

Under a political framework, Buschges asserts that "ethnopolitical activists and organizations legitimize ethnicity as a political resource."<sup>104</sup> This dynamic is especially important to establish a general framework for the role of ethnicity when trying to establish a collective democracy. Especially when it consists of groups who historically have not identified with each other on an ethnically, culturally, and at times religiously. The functionality of ethnicity is essential in the discussion of the case of Ethiopia and its current state of conflict.

Furthermore, as discussed by Fessha, there is a more pessimistic outlook on the dynamics of an ethnic federalist system stating, "A multi-ethnic state that claims a policy of neutrality when it comes to ethnic relationships cannot avoid identifying itself with a particular ethnic group. State neutrality on ethnic relationship mostly turns out to be a myth".<sup>105</sup> As alluded to, Fessha believes that there is almost no way to avoid the dominance of a particular ethnic group in a multi-ethnic state. This stems from the fact that the ruling ethnic group will favor its own interests to some capacity. Regarding the creation of a unified state, he states, "In other instances, repression has taken the form of building national identity based on a putative majority ethnic identity. Such practices include attempts to suppress the voices of a distinct ethnic group or to suppress ethnic

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<sup>100</sup> Fessha, *Ethnic Diversity and Federalism*, 2010. Pg. 28

<sup>101</sup> Schuck, "Federalism." Pg. 9

<sup>102</sup> Cohen, "'Ethnic Federalism' in Ethiopia."

<sup>103</sup> Fessha, *Ethnic Diversity and Federalism*, 2010.

<sup>104</sup> Krämer, "Introduction." Pg. 100

<sup>105</sup> Fessha, *Ethnic Diversity and Federalism*, 2010. Pg. 9

groups economically, politically, culturally and/or linguistically”.<sup>106</sup> Although these types of stratification occur overtly in extreme cases, however they can operate in more covert and subtle ways. This type of domination comes in the form of the gradual consolidation of power among one ethnic group. Although Fessha does believe that ethnic federalism does have merit, especially within the context of Ethiopia with its diverse nature as well as its history of marginalizing certain ethnic groups, it is almost impossible to create a flaw less institution based upon it. He goes on to assert that it, “has the propensity to promote ‘ethnic fundamentalism’. In a state that promotes politics of difference, ‘those who seek popular support must strive to be the most authentic and “ethnic” of the candidates or parties, and the most resolute in asserting the ethnic interest as against the “others””<sup>107</sup> Fessha proposes the potential dangers of ethnic based federalist systems as polarization amongst groups is almost inevitable. The potential for ethnic based fundamentalism tends to invoke tensions, incite competition for political power among groups, and evidently alienate a number of ethnic groups.

### **Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia and TPLF Rule**

Concerning the case of Ethiopia and the process of reconciling the varying agendas of the other ethnic-based factions, the concept of "federal bargain", was essential to create the democratic coalition built after the end of the civil war in 1991. This factor acts as a means to consolidate power to appease those who may have desires for complete autonomy and ensure the military and diplomatic capacity of the nation-state. The creation of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was established at the end of the war to reorganize the country into an ethnic-based federalist system. This model was promoted by the dominant ethnic-based political group of the coalition, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). An ethnic group as defined by Article 39 of the Ethiopian Constitution, “A group of people who have or share (a) large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or relatable identities... and who inhabit an identifiable, predominately contiguous territory”.<sup>108</sup> As noted by John Cohen, the objectives were to decentralize administrative and fiscal authority to different regions, reduce inner ethnic conflict, promote equitable conditions throughout the country, and improve the effectiveness of the public sector.<sup>109</sup> Under proclamation 7 of the Ethiopian Constitution in 1992, 10 regions based on ethnic identities 5 of which were consolidated regions that consisted of a highly diverse array of ethnic groups. The EPRDF would continue to serve as the centralized government, while each region would retain political autonomy. Cohen notes, "Ethnicity was a major criterion in drawing boundaries. Ethiopians are to be registered based on their ethnic identity".<sup>110</sup> The official national language chosen was Amharic, but each state would enjoy the agency to set out their own official languages.

Yet from the outset, the EPRDF did not address the challenges that come with devolution. Cohen writes, "little attention was given to states respective geographic size, population densities, agriculture and resource bases, levels of infrastructure, existing administrative capacity, or ability

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<sup>106</sup> Fessha. Pg. 11

<sup>107</sup> Fessha. Pg. 29

<sup>108</sup> Epple and Thubauville, “Cultural Diversity in Ethiopia Between Appreciation And Suppression.” Pg. 154

<sup>109</sup> Cohen, "'Ethnic Federalism' in Ethiopia."

<sup>110</sup> Cohen. Pg. 164

to generate tax revenue".<sup>111</sup> The implication of this point of analysis by Cohen being that there was some degree of negligence was present during the devolution process and the establishment of Ethiopia's contemporary states. Lack of meaningful consideration on these points would eventually lead for to assertions of inequity among ethnic based regional states. Additionally, the number of states had gone from 14 under Haile Selassie to 10 under this new federal system, thus raising the question of what an equitable division of states within the federation should look like and importantly, which groups should control those territories.

Gebregziabher argues that while the TPLF promoted regional control, it also worked to maintain its power within the EPRDF coalition by routinely shifting its ideology as well as its political platform and thus, consolidating influence over the federal government. He asserts, "A rhetoric of respect and equality of all ethnic and national groups has been,. There is sufficient evidence that the 'ethnic card' has been used for divide and rule. This could be seen in the context of ... the systemic capture of business and economy by political elites".<sup>112</sup> Gebregziabher asserts that the TPLF worked to consolidate and maintain power with the guise of equity among ethnic groups while in reality in reality the division it incited was utilized. The division among certain groups also allowed for the consolidation of business and economic assets by these political elites. According to Gebregziabher, this puts the true intent of the TPLF's advocacy for ethnic group autonomy and potentially ethnic federalism.

One ideological shift that is described as a means to consolidate power was the making of poverty as an existential threat to the state. Gebregziabher asserts, "In this incarnation, the regime presented poverty as an existential threat, while the answer to this threat was found in developmental state ideology. Presenting poverty as an existential threat, for Fana Gebresenbet, is just 'securitization of development' that 'gives credence to the immediate need for wider state powers and the aggressive mobilization of (natural, financial and human) resources.'"<sup>113</sup> This perspective holds that the declaration of a state of emergency was done with the intent consolidate power for the regime, while at the same time enjoying the benefits of public popularity. However, it can be argued that the consolidation of resources and capital was necessary in order to quickly carryout much needed infrastructure projects, as the country had been poorly managed under the past regime. Nonetheless, there exists there exists the perception that inequity amongst accessibility to public office, economic opportunities and allowed for coalition leaders to solidify their positions.

Consequently, as noted by Semir Yusuf, over the course of years since its establishment, the inequity perpetuated by the federalist system has created ethno-nationalist struggles in the country. <sup>114</sup> Yusuf notes that there has been a consensus that there has been an unequal process of Devolution in the past, which has led to massive inequity among regions. Consequently, this led to tensions among ethnic groups. This led to Ethiopia having the highest number of internally displaced people as a result of the conflict in the world in 2018, with 2.9 million people being

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<sup>111</sup> Cohen. Pg. 164

<sup>112</sup> Gebregziabher, "Ideology and Power in TPLF's Ethiopia." Pg. 466

<sup>113</sup> Gebregziabher.

<sup>114</sup> Yusuf, "Drivers of Ethnic Conflict in Contemporary Ethiopia."

displaced. Yusuf attributes these dynamics as a result of the early drawing of states along ethnic lines, while not addressing the centralist and authoritarian tendencies of the past.<sup>115</sup>

In all the dynamics, historical context, and theories explored in the literature outlined all are reflective of the many aspects of the current crisis in Ethiopia. These all attribute to the tensions that have been built since the creation of the contemporary Ethiopian state and have now largely erupted. These main dynamics as well as historical context reinforce conflict and rivalries that exist among ethnic groups. Consequently, there is a need to address these in order for the country to move forward and reconcile its conflicted past and troubled present. If these points of contention are not addressed, they will eventually further fragment the country.

### **Role of Diasporas**

A diaspora, as cited by Baser and Swain, is “A people with a common origin who reside, more or less on a permanent basis, outside the borders of their ethnic or religious homeland”<sup>116</sup> The authors also cite the notion that the diaspora is described as, “the exemplarily communities of the transnational moment”.<sup>117</sup> This term had referred primarily for Jews, Armenians, and Africans in the past, it has since been expanding to describe a number of other groups. Further, “Belonging to a diaspora entails a consciousness of, or emotional attachment, to commonly claimed origins and cultural attributes associated with them”.<sup>118</sup> With all these characterizations, one can describe a diaspora as a group of people who reside outside their respective homeland who also have a deep emotional attachment to their identity, homeland, culture, and feel as if they still retain a stake in its domestic issues and or political and social evolutions. Diasporas play many roles to shape the political and economic climates of their respective home countries, one fundamental one being the input of remittances. Remittances are the direct transfer of funds of money earned from the income of diaspora communities back to their family and relatives in their respective home countries. The sending of remittances in certain countries allows for more consumer buying power which helps to stimulate economies, provides a foundation for upward mobility, and in turn can shape the political climate and overall economy. These remittances shape the political climate in other ways such as them being sent to support opposition groups in their home countries. One example being how the Kurdish European diaspora has been documented in the past to send remittances to rebel groups in Turkey.<sup>119</sup>

Diaspora also tend to shape politics in their home countries by running media platforms to discern information, as well as hold governments accountable during conflicts or social unrest.<sup>120</sup> This is important as during times of social unrest, many governments will work to carry out media and political suppression. These then become instances in which diasporas can speak out in ways in which people their respective home countries cannot.<sup>121</sup> By means of remittances and transparency, diaspora communities can also support efforts to facilitate peace and

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<sup>115</sup> Yusuf.

<sup>116</sup> Baser and Swain, “DIASPORAS AS PEACEMAKERS.” Pg. 8

<sup>117</sup> Baser and Swain. Pg. 8

<sup>118</sup> Baser and Swain. Pg. 8

<sup>119</sup> Baser and Swain.

<sup>120</sup> Turner, “Cyberwars of Words.”

<sup>121</sup> “Why Is the Ethiopian Diaspora so Influential?”

democratization within their home country. Examples of this include economic investments, contributions to political candidates or initiatives, lobbying government actors in their host countries to support or intervene within their home countries, maintain social and media news platforms to discern information in times of crisis and promote meaningful initiatives.<sup>122</sup> In the context of Africa they play an especially important role.

Beyene, outlines the impact East African diasporas have on current issues in their home country looking at case studies of Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Kenya. Beyene writes that diasporas provide significant economic contributions to home countries through their remittances – money that is sent back to these countries, often by individuals to family members.<sup>123</sup> These remittances strengthen the buying power of consumers in these prescribed countries, which in turn contributes a significant amount of GDP to these economies. Furthermore, with the experience and tools the diaspora has (especially those residing in Western democratic countries), they are also able to at times, positively influence political transitions and reform in their respective home countries. Additionally, African diaspora communities who reside in Western countries are able to speak and openly demonstrate about issues within their respective countries, which allows for these issues to receive saliency throughout the international community.

Yet there are also challenges raised by diasporas, particularly when it comes to their involvement in politics and the extent to which they influence areas such as post-conflict peacebuilding and democratic transitions.

Media and social media have played a fundamental role in allowing the diaspora to carry out their goals of increasing transparency of the social issues in their respective home countries for the international community. These platforms have also functioned as a means to unify the diasporic platform to address certain issues in their home countries. The African diaspora also tends to have influence on media in their home countries. Furthermore, it is a reality that diaspora actually facilitates African media production in their home countries. Skjerdal writes, “Much African media production does not take place on the African continent, but overseas. The people behind this production usually belong to the African diaspora, in other words they represent Africans abroad who maintain ties with their country of origin.”<sup>124</sup> This is significant because if this is the reality of African media production, one could assert that is largely run from an outside perspective rather than ideally being dominated by journalists and media companies within these respective countries. Consequently, the African diaspora have a large amount of influence in African media, which could be said to be a good thing since it is important that the public receives transparency and more accessible form of information. However, it could also be said that this reality may be troubling as the diaspora tends to be more detached from the implications of the information they discern, especially if certain information incites social unrest and or tension. Ya’u appears to support Skjerdal’s insight and contends that “more online content about Africa is being produced by Africans abroad than within the continent itself.”<sup>125</sup> Further he characterizes diaspora media sources as “media channels of the kind analyzed in this

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<sup>122</sup> Baser and Swain, “DIASPORAS AS PEACEMAKERS.”

<sup>123</sup> Beyene, “Are African Diasporas Development Partners, Peace-Makers or Spoilers?”

<sup>124</sup> Skjerdal, “Journalists or Activists?” Pg. 1

<sup>125</sup> Skjerdal. Pg. 1

study are distinct in at least three regards: they are usually aggravated by less fortunate conditions in the homeland; they provide a vivid perspective on translocation in the usually extreme span between content producers and local audience markets; and the websites are often produced by persons who were media practitioners under vastly different conditions on the public arena back home”.<sup>126</sup> Skjerdal discusses the very merged forms of professionalism and politically driven agenda within these sources. Consequently, when a majority of African media is facilitated by a detached African diaspora, which then is carried out in a matter that does not adhere conventional standards of news media, issues can arise. Furthermore, news media platforms that are founded upon a specific political agenda tend to lack an objective framework in discerning news and information. When there is a compromise in objectivity within news media, especially organizations founded by the diaspora, information that is discerned will almost certainly invoke controversy.

Turner discusses the role of the diaspora in Burundi. The ethnic based conflict in the country during the 1970s and 1980s to the domination of the Tutsi ethnic group over the Hutu ethnic group, and the establishment of a one-party state of government. During this time, the Hutu diaspora in Europe and other parts of the world sought to raise awareness of what was happening in their country of origin. Turner writes, “The Burundians in exile were not only concerned with awareness campaigns among fellow-Burundians in the diaspora and at home; they also targeted ‘the international community’ which concretely meant doing their utmost to influence host societies. They would lobby parliamentarians, NGOs, church organizations and the general public.”<sup>127</sup> However, even as the country began to democratize, including the establishment of a free press, the diaspora community remained untrusting and critical of the government. Thus, while many in Burundi felt the conflict was settled and the need to move forward, those in the diaspora continued to agitate for conflict. Their continued advocacy was viewed as burdensome by those living in the home country.

In the context of Ethiopia, scholars see the same trends. The Ethiopian diaspora, as with other African diaspora communities, has been consequential in pushing for transparency, shaping narratives, and holding actors accountable. Yet at times, and as described by Beyene, they have escalated conflict by providing skills, knowledge, and resources to certain movements.<sup>128</sup> This was seen during the 2016-2018 anti-government protests in the Oromo and Amhara regions. They were largely instrumental in raising awareness about the protest movement and calling for actions from the international community, it is noted, “The diaspora has been instrumental in raising awareness about atrocities taking place in Ethiopia”.<sup>129</sup> This became the case as independent news media sources were suppressed under the guise of the state of emergency declared by the government at the time as well as its monopoly on news media, which led to the dependency of diaspora news platforms.<sup>130</sup> During this time, remittances from the diaspora community increased drastically, it was noted, “Opposition groups in Ethiopia significant funding from anti-EPDRF diaspora sources”.<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, it was also noted that, “This

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<sup>126</sup> Skjerdal. Pg. 2

<sup>127</sup> Turner, “Cyberwars of Words.” Pg. 1163

<sup>128</sup> Beyene, “Are African Diasporas Development Partners, Peace-Makers or Spoilers?”

<sup>129</sup> “Why Is the Ethiopian Diaspora so Influential?”

<sup>130</sup> “Why Is the Ethiopian Diaspora so Influential?”

<sup>131</sup> “Why Is the Ethiopian Diaspora so Influential?”

financial dependency hinders them from attempting to political compromise and engagement with the ruling party”.<sup>132</sup> It is also noted that as the government continued to suppress peaceful political parties and opposition, the influence of the diaspora became foundational.<sup>133</sup> With the continued support of the diaspora community and large scale social unrest, Ethiopia’s prime minister Desalegn resigned in 2018. The EPDRF then appoint Oromo leader Abiy Ahmed as prime minister, which excited many as he was from what was considered a marginalized group. As previously mentioned, Ahmed was largely favored with his reformist mindset, releasing political prisoners from the former anti-government protests, and making peace with Eretria (this move was somewhat controversial within some parts of the community). However, in light of the recent set of conflicts, the government has once again come under scrutiny from the diaspora community.

In all, it is evident that the diaspora will be consequential in the reshaping of Ethiopia’s political future as a result of their capacity to organize, provide transparency, and cultivate saliency of contemporary issues. As shown during the 2015-2018 protests as well as the Burundi case, they also wield the capacity to continue to support social movements, as well as fundamentally shape peace processes. As a result of this reality, it is important to understand their perspective on the current system of ethnic federalism, as well as their views on efforts to revitalize “one Ethiopia”. Furthermore, although it is useful to explore and establish a historical framework or timeline regarding how Ethiopia finds itself in its current state of social unrest, hearing from the diaspora is more useful. This is the case as they can draw on the most salient aspects of historical events or dynamics that shape the current state of the country. Furthermore, their lived experience also tends to reveal dynamics and perspectives shaped by contemporary issues not reflected upon in existing literature. In addition to this, their proclaimed social identity is relevant for the discussion of ethnic federalism as they can provide perspectives that counter common narratives and illuminate inequities that existing literature is oblivious to. Lastly, by gaining their perspectives, we can gain a better understand of the power of their influence, the ways in which it can shape the outcomes of contemporary issues both for better and for potentially worse.

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<sup>132</sup> “Why Is the Ethiopian Diaspora so Influential?”

<sup>133</sup> “Why Is the Ethiopian Diaspora so Influential?”



## Methodology

This thesis sought to answer two related research questions: 1) What are the potential benefits and consequences of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia as perceived by the Ethiopian diaspora? and 2) expand existing knowledge of fundamental components to support countries in establishing equitable and stable democratic institutions that are representative and inclusive of all groups in a given country. To answer these questions, a qualitative research design was used. Interview data was collected through a semi-structured interview process. Interviews focused on participants' perceptions and experiences as a member of the Ethiopian diaspora in the United States. Participants were asked to discuss what they see as the major issues facing Ethiopia, prospects for the federalist system, and perceived perceptions and solutions for contemporary issues (Interview questions are included in appendix A).

A purposive sampling strategy and snowball sampling strategy were utilized for this study. The sample consisted of community leaders, academics, and activists, chosen in part due to their ability to speak knowledgeably and from a professional position about contemporary issues in Ethiopia and the ethnic federalist system. Participants were initially selected from references received from friends, family, and relatives. As initial interviews were conducted, some participants provided references who were willing to provide points of contact. Not all participants were able to provide reference due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Consequently, the last few interviews required more references from family and friends of people they knew who were active and well-spoken in the community, mostly residing in Colorado, for convenience. Participants were contacted and interviewed through Facebook, LinkedIn, telephone, and in person.

In all, 10 members of the Ethiopian diaspora residing in the United States participated in this research. These participants were largely diverse as they ranged in age, ethnic identity, political standing, language ability, education, and gender as almost an equal amount of male and females who volunteered to take part in the study. The length of these discussions tended to vary based on the level of knowledge participants had on the topic as well as how firmly they held their views and beliefs regarding contemporary issues in the country. Overall, participants were largely willing to discuss current issues in Ethiopia as well as the topic of ethnic federalism. Furthermore, all agreed that the interview could be recorded.

Participants were also diverse in their views on the topics stated. Each participant placed certain emphasis on specific issues or called attention to what they deemed to be relevant dynamics in context of contemporary issues in Ethiopia. Participants also varied in their level of overall knowledge regarding issues and or driving dynamics of these issues in the context of Ethiopia. This was demonstrated as some assertively presented their perspectives or positions, while others tended to be somewhat neutral or deferred to things they have read or heard. Furthermore, participants varied in the factions that they supported. A majority either supported or sympathized with the TPLF, while some although critical of the government, believed they would be the sole source for resolution of the conflict and ethnic divides. However, all participants were sympathetic to the people of Tigray in light of the current military conflict and refugee crisis that is ongoing.

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:**

Inclusion Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Members of the Ethiopian Diaspora</li> <li>● Recent and later immigrants</li> <li>● Be able to speak near-fluent English</li> <li>● Must be in the United States</li> </ul>
Exclusion Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Not a part of the Ethiopian Diaspora</li> <li>● Candidates younger than the age of 18</li> <li>● Living outside of the United States</li> </ul>

**Data Analysis**

Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author. Throughout the course of these discussions, I began to develop thematic frameworks for what I perceived to be relevant points of discussion that answered by initial research questions. Interview responses were analyzed and coded based on the prevalence consistent points of discussion/themes. These points of discussion included points about the TPLF, discussion of future governance of Ethiopia, efficacy of ethnic federalist system, views on the role of the diaspora, and unity under the guise of “one Ethiopia”. Themes/subtopics will be discussed in the findings section. Furthermore, quotes and statements were chosen as points of focus for analysis if they invoked new ideas or larger points of discussion. These were selected to be further discussed in the findings section. I also looked for consistent and relevant terminology used throughout discussion in which I had not explored. For example, participants consistently used terms such as “Weyane” (referring to governmental opposition), “one Ethiopia” (which invokes the idea of supremacy and inequity), and other terminology.

Responses were also analyzed within the context of the demographic or positionality of the participant. An example of this being, participants who had been born in the United States would provide responses different from participants who had been born and spent a significant amount of time in Ethiopia. Furthermore, older participants were analyzed in a different context since they had views on the current conflict that is founded upon personal experience with conflict in the past, which seems to set a tone for their mindset on other issues explored in the study. The younger participants and those born in the U.S. focused on issues from a social justice context. In all, analysis of responses within specific context was necessary to meaningfully extract as much significance as possible. Emphasis was also placed on closely analyzing follow-up question responses, since these tended to derive more points of discussion as well as more personalized responses.

**Research Concerns and Limitations**

This project had been largely disrupted by the current conflict in Ethiopia. Initially, the purpose of this study was to gauge diaspora views the current views of ethnic federalism, the prospect of the newly created “Prosperity Party”, and ultimately what conflict or larger points of contention

may occur in the country. Consequently, I anticipated that these conversations may invoke sensitivity, emotional reactions, and in turn potential harm to participants.

When the war in Ethiopia began in early November of 2020, this paper was impacted and the focus would shift. The conflict has drawn massive international attention, cost the lives of hundreds, and has created a massive refugee crisis in the Tigray region of Ethiopia.

Additionally, risk to participants would be put at a higher risk for being potentially emotionally triggering, especially as all participants had family members and or relatives living in Ethiopia. Resultingly, these conditions required new considerations to be made to facilitate interviews. Questions considered include the length of discussions, gaging participants responses to potentially sensitive points, and what points of discussion to evade within the context of a specific discussion.

The integrity of study was maintained as discussion points that were prioritized were ones related to the system of ethnic federalism and impacts of the diaspora on contemporary issues in Ethiopia. Furthermore, the current crisis did allow for responses that were critical and profound as the interview had now been related to a current and salient issue. Times of crisis tend to invoke a much more reflective mindset, which for the purposes of this study, allowed for more engagement on the issue.

To evade harm, participants had the choice of skipping points of discussion due to sensitivity to the topic. Additionally, several participants requested to skip introductory questions and focus discussion on the prescribed issues. All participants were willing to discuss issues and points of discussion relevant to the study. It was evident that the war had changed my initial vision of these discussions since question response were largely redirected to the current state of conflict in Ethiopia. But these points of discussion were also largely informative to the focus of the study, and of course made reconsiderations because of this reality.

In regard to challenges, I found myself in tough positions when a few participants asked me the question, “What do think of everything that is going on in Ethiopia”? This placed me in a difficult position not because I did not have an opinion, but rather I did not want to compromise the objectivity of my study. I feared agreeing with participant views would compromise my impartiality, objectivity, and pose a risk of reshaping the discussion to move forward in one direction. Furthermore, I was afraid to potentially offend participants when providing my point of view. In the end, I had expressed the point that I was actively shaping my opinion and attitudes towards points we had discussed. I did however acknowledge my discontent with the current war, and the deaths of hundreds of people in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. The participants who asked these questions, respectfully accepted my views.

## Research Findings

Research interviews yielded three broad themes that were recurrent across most participants: the disputed role of the diaspora, challenges to the idea of a single Ethiopia, and concerns over the TPLF. In this chapter, I will discuss each of these three themes in turn, and in the next chapter I will connect these findings with earlier commentary.

All participants in the research had family living in Ethiopia and was in regular contact with them. Participants from the Tigray region noted concern with their recent lack of contact with family members. One participant stating they had not been able to contact their family in the region for weeks at the point, as a result of the current military campaign. Additionally, most participants had consistently stayed up to date with current issues in Ethiopia and had received their news from state news agencies, YouTube, and other forms of news media. However, some participants had not stayed up to date with news in Ethiopia until recently and lacked some historical context. This reality demonstrating that there tends to be a large variation in both engagement and knowledge in the current state of domestic politics within Ethiopia amongst the diasporas. This also shapes the types of responses or reactions that are invoked, since a lot of people who are younger and not as engaged tend to engage in rhetoric largely founded in principles of social justice. Consequently, solutions proposed or largely advocated may be done in a manner that is not founded with well-founded knowledge of Ethiopia's past and foundational dynamics that continue to shape the current state of affairs.

### The Disputed Role of the Diaspora

Participants were first asked about their background such as their ethnic identity as well as their experiences being within the Ethiopian community in the United States. Most participants noted – mainly the ones who were born and raised in the United States – they had a mostly positive experience in the United States. Some participants did note that, at times, they were conflicted reconciling their Ethiopian identity with the ones prescribed in the context of American society. One participant stated, “But the bad thing with that is we have a deep sense of identity crisis, and confusion as to where we fit in, in this society. Because, you know, you're we're sitting there, we're halfway between back home halfway between here with like, where you would never be able to 100% fitted back home. But you'd never be able to 100% fit in here. And I think that's a big aspect to us, that comes to my mind when I think about what it is to be Ethiopian diaspora here.”<sup>134</sup> This statement is profound because this dynamic is relevant to first generation Ethiopians who were born and/or raised in the United States. The first challenge being Ethiopian youth struggle to be both assimilate into American society while at the same time hold on to their cultural roots and expectations from the community at-large. Furthermore, first generation Ethiopians also struggle reconciling the Black identity prescribed by American society with the Ethiopian identity which becomes a challenge due to not sharing the same history as Black Americans. As this participant alluded to, there is feeling of ‘not belonging’ due to lack of historical ties with Black Americans and American society and are far removed from their homeland.

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<sup>134</sup> Participant #4

Meanwhile, other participants who recently migrated within the past 10 years, noted they found it difficult to integrate due to language barriers. One participant who more recently moved to the U.S. noted they struggled to find work due to language barriers and found working as driver to be the best means to be employed. Language barriers also made it, so they were unable to feel fully welcomed in the United States and perceived there was a bit of an unwelcoming sentiment by people they encountered outside of their family and friends.<sup>135</sup> This point places large emphasis on the need of strong and sponsoring communities to ensure immigrants adjust well to American society. Communities that foster a safe and supportive place for Ethiopian immigrants include Silver Spring, Maryland and Aurora, Colorado which are places know to have well organized and coordinated networks to provide work for migrants and help them get settled.<sup>136</sup> Diaspora's adjustment to American society may impact their level of engagement with several factors regarding their homeland such as politics and staying updated in current events.

Additionally, the participant who came during the Civil War characterized their presence in the U.S. as grateful, emphasizing their enjoyment of freedoms they had not received back in Ethiopia during the time of the Derg communist regime during the 1980s and 1990s. The participant discussed how when they lived in Ethiopia, certain forms of speech, especially those critical of the regime, were suppressed brutally. There was a consensus of fear that people would be killed, attacked, or forced to fight. Migrating from Ethiopia at that time was largely because of the Civil War. The participant discussed migrating to Sudan, then working for years to be granted asylum in the United States. Although settlement in the United States had been characterized as difficult, the security, stability, and freedoms provided in the United States was largely valued.<sup>137</sup> The participant went on to discuss that for members of the diaspora community who migrated during the Civil War in 1990s, tend to continue to have points of contention that date back to their support for specific factions during the Civil War.<sup>138</sup> These points of contention are profound because they have large implication on the community at large, even to the point it has divided the community to some extent.

Furthermore, the diaspora who migrated as refugees, also tend to be largely engaged in current events in Ethiopia. They consume a large number of media from Ethiopian news sources, but also largely subscribe to video bloggers from the diaspora community who provide commentary on current issues. Members of the community have well-founded animosity towards certain factions and or political parties in the Ethiopian government. This point is important because these members of the community shape the lens in which their children, the younger generation of the diaspora, perceive current issues back in their parents' homeland. Resultingly, this continues to shape the types of activism both on social media and in person that we see coming from the younger generation of the diaspora community who are better equipped to engage actively on social media and organize different forms of social activism.

When asked about the role of the diaspora in regard to working to raise awareness on issues in Ethiopia or potentially contributing for the better or worse, results showed split responses. Some participants asserted their active participation on social media and other platforms impacts

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<sup>135</sup> Participant #9

<sup>136</sup> "Aurora Reaching out to Refugee Community – The Denver Post."

<sup>137</sup> Participant #8

<sup>138</sup> Participant #8

Ethiopia in a negative manner. For instance, one participant noted, “There's so many Americans who don't know anything about what's going on, the last thing they need to do is see a divide within us, and then get conflicting ideas, or even just like, information about what's happening. that's the toughest part for it with me, because the last thing we need is for us to be divided while the world is also trying to, you know, get up to speed on”.<sup>139</sup> In the context of the current crisis in Ethiopia this form of division within the diaspora community on social media takes the form of members either being supportive of the current regime under Ahmed or being very critical of him. Furthermore, those critical towards Ahmed and the actions of the Ethiopian government in the region tend to use rhetoric which call him “a dictator” and carrying out “a genocide”. This type of decisive rhetoric tends to be polarizing within the diaspora since many still hold the belief that the Ahmed regime was forced to act on the account of the TPLF, believing that they were in fact the instigators of the current crisis. Additionally, things posted on social media that criticize the TPLF and the actions of successionists, are polarizing as they are viewed as insensitive to the current state of conflict in the region. An example of this being anti-TPLF content that asserted “We need to support the people of Tigray, but the TPLF has got to go”. Anti-TPLF content also provide links to information that is largely founded upon narratives of inequality, oppression, and injustice that is claimed to have been caused by the TPLF. Consequently, these narratives regardless of their merit, impede on objective reporting of the current crisis as many outsiders who consume this content may become conflicted or potentially confused in their views of the crisis as they lack the necessary context. In turn, this divides the larger reaction of the international community, since all though they may oppose violence against civilians (as both sides of the argument do), they may be unsure in their assessment of the causes of the crisis, instigating actors, and the best way forward for the country.

Another participant spoken passionately about negative impacts of the diaspora, discussing how the community’s contribution can inhibit productive processes of peace by making inflammatory statement that have major implications. “I think the greatest thing that the diaspora can do is be silent. I think we are so annoying. I think we're destructive. I think we're hateful and I think we're clueless and selfish and. We'll never put our bodies on the line. I think all we want to do is talk because we feel structurally powerless here. You know, you think you're a big man because you're here and because you're American, but you'll never actually do anything about what's going on back home... The best thing is to support legitimate cause backed by expertise”.<sup>140</sup> This point alludes to a large discussion of the utilization of diasporic influence, as well as the actual weight it carries. A lot of diasporic communities are in fact very consequently shaping domestic politics and issues back in their country. They do this in the forms of remittances, engagement on social media, lobbying in their respective governments to demand action or support, and encourage civic engagement in their respective home countries. However, as expressed by the participant, the community at times may see themselves as the only ones capable of solving issues in their home country, when the larger question becomes how influential can they be when they are far removed from their home countries? This is an important question to pose as much of the diaspora community feels empowered by the positionality within the United States as they are removed from direct harm, thereby can speak openly about issues happening in Ethiopia in ways that people in their home country cannot. Further, the power and influence provided by the

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<sup>139</sup> Participant #1

<sup>140</sup> Participant #5

United States' positionality in the international community, also empowers members of the diaspora that change can be facilitated if they work to make issues salient the U.S. government. ,

On the other hand, as discussed by the participant, there is the perception that the actions by the diaspora community are far removed from the consequences of the things or actions they cause or influence. Their actions can potentially lead or encourage civil unrest in their home countries, and they are not forced to directly engage with these issues, thereby do not take into consideration the implications of continuing to encourage these types of actions. So, in the view put forth by this participant, the potential harm caused by diasporic engagement may not be worth the good that may come from it, especially since they can do so without fear of the repercussions that come as a result. So, within the context of the current state of conflict, there becomes an issue of discerning information that may continue to sustain or further escalate conflict. There is also the potential concern that diasporic engagement may, because of the dynamics discussed above, may hinder processes of peace and conflict resolution. This is a fear held by the participant as well as other members of the diasporic community who hold the same view.

Yet views of the diaspora were not all negative. One positive point includes that the diaspora raises awareness on events happening in Ethiopia. This is especially important since the government has routinely engaged in censorship of information. One participant noted, "The government has literally kicked out all foreign journalists. And they're also imprisoning journalists. "So, I get most of my news actually from Twitter. And the reason for that is most of the journalists that have been kicked out of Ethiopia, they have gone to Sudan to interview refugees coming in from Ethiopia. So, this news is literally firsthand information that the diaspora is helping to make trend and get out there".<sup>141</sup> This point of view contends the more negative and pessimistic views of the impacts of the diaspora as this perspective represents the diaspora's role as keepers of accountability rather than simply making inflammatory statements. The Ethiopian diaspora, as other diaspora communities have done, have upheld transparency throughout this crisis as well as tell the stories of its many victims. One could argue that this form of attention drawing is in fact justified especially as media sources and journalists are brutally repressed in their home countries. Through social media and demonstrations, a platform has been provided for those that no longer are able to have one. An example of this is the hashtag "Tigraygenocide" on the social media platform, Twitter. Although this hashtag may seem to some as overly decisive in its position of what is unfolding in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, it does in fact serve a profound purpose for the community. The presence of this hashtag on social media serves as a place in which members of the community can share stories they hear from friends and family members in the country and in Sudan, a place where casualty numbers can be shared, a place where people and loved ones can be mourned, and a place where solidarity can be facilitated. Another point of significance of this hashtag, as well as other forms of diasporic presence on social media, is that while Prime Minister Ahmed and other state officials had declared there were no civilian casualties as well as declared that fighting had ceased in the region, these platforms directly and strongly contradicted these points of false information. At this point of time (from November onward) the diaspora community shared stories, casualty

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<sup>141</sup> Participant #7

numbers, and the traumatic experiences of Tigrayan refugees in Sudan, all of which directly contradicted state officials and provided transparency for the international community at large.

One participant who had recently migrated from Ethiopia held the perception that news media and social media tended to be what continued to escalate things. They recounted how they believed during the anti-government protests that began in 2015, trending narratives on social media worsened the situation. Furthermore, they made the claim that to some degree things were mostly stable, until this perception of panic was perpetuated by narratives on social media and news media, adding to social unrest.<sup>142</sup>

It is also evident that narratives and information put on social media tends to shape the outlook of members of the diaspora who are not as engaged with the politics back in Ethiopia. One participant, who was born in the United States went on to say, “My parents don’t talk much about politics, so I never heard much about things happening back home. I only started seeing more of the news on Twitter from other people sharing things, that is kind of how I know what is going on. So, I don’t have much deep knowledge of things that are happening, but I see things on my timeline”<sup>143</sup> It is evident that social media tends to have a large impact on the younger generation of the diaspora who do not retain as strong of ties for current events happening in Ethiopia. Although many within group tend to be very knowledgeable, outspoken, and retain a well-founded in their knowledge, there are also many who subscribe to trending narrative found on social media for better or worse. This of course was the place in which I found myself in before taking on this project.

With this, one cannot help but see both the potential benefits as well as consequences of social media use. Even participants who were proud of the diaspora for providing transparency on the situation in Ethiopia, they were weary of some members discerning information that is damaging. One participant stating, “And I think that the sheer like the fact it is that we can do that, right. In fact, we can go on there. And that's a plus. But the flip side of that is that they can do that as well, is that they can go out there and do what is that they can learn from us watch exactly what we're doing. And do the exact same thing. Yes, everybody can retweet and help you, but you also give the enemy or so to speak enemy. The same access to the same people, you know, the same ideas as you. So, I think it's, I think I think you had a lot of challenges, but I think overall it's going to be, it's going to serve to be, what saves our people in this situation is because they can't hide it. They can't hide it.”<sup>144</sup> The participant in this instance alludes to the dilemma discussed earlier by participant 1, where any action regarding current issues in Ethiopia will result in a reaction or an opposing view being presented. A troubling point for these participants is the fear all the work and advocacy engaged in, opposition groups will not only try to curb their work, but also incite tension within the community which may make the international community conflicted in their views of the current crisis. However, even with this general fear the participant asserts – as do others in the diaspora community- the work is still essential even in light of points of contention that may occur. This poses the question of whether or not division within the community are a price worth to pay for advocacy and providing a

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<sup>142</sup> Participant #9

<sup>143</sup> Participant #10

<sup>144</sup> Participant #4



platform for people suffering throughout this conflict and other instances of crisis? Many of the participants believe that it is in fact worth the cost.

### **Although “One Ethiopia” may sound ideal, it has many troubling implications**

At the heart of this project is the question of the role of ethnic federalism and its ability to ensure a stable democracy and represent all of Ethiopia’s peoples in an equitable manner. President Abiy’s call for unity and decision to amend the tradition and end the ethnic federalist system with the creation of the “Prosperity party,” was seen as revolutionary in the eyes of the international community, and a means to finally establish a stable democracy in Ethiopia.

After discussions with members of the diaspora community, a majority of the participants held the position that the Prosperity Party and “One Ethiopia” would be beneficial for the country. Participants had asserted that as a result of the deep-rooted history of marginalization and inequality, it would be almost impossible to facilitate any other form of a democratic government besides one in which ethnic groups and their respective regions retain their autonomy. One participant from the Tigray region noted, “So we know that I do believe that there will continue to be a need for representation, equal representation of all ethnic groups. I'm not going to sit here and kind of, you know, say that like, I know what type of government structure is best, but what I do know is that whatever it is that we put into place cannot mirror what we've done in the past, which is completely silent or even try to justify, you know, us being representative of all ethnic groups, when in actuality, like that's far from the truth, you know?”<sup>145</sup> The implication of this statement being that although the system of ethnic federalism does seem to have failed, the absence of a system in which ethnic groups do have any semblance of political autonomy worries the diaspora even more so. This relates directly to concerns held by many political actors as well as members of the diaspora about the foundation of the Prosperity party, as it hopes to distance itself from the system of Ethnic federalism. When the participant discusses a fear or “mirroring the past”, they are making direct references to efforts throughout Ethiopia’s history, such as the efforts of Hallie Selassie, the Eritrea and Ethiopia war, ect to consolidate power and establish a government in which many believe will make it so many ethnic and religious groups are marginalized. So, although there is uncertainty in the reforms or restructuring that is needed to stabilize Ethiopia’s government, many hold the belief that some sort of ethnic federalist system is the only way forward for Ethiopia. There is a consensus among participants and other groups of the diaspora that any political initiative in Ethiopia with a platform claiming it is founded upon intentions of unity and overcoming ethnic divides is one in which all should be weary of.

Another participant also noted how the diverse nature of the country makes the concept of “One Ethiopia” incompatible, “On paper, it sounds good, and it looks good. And some people say, oh, we're divided on ethnic or divided into ethnicities. It's like well, Ethiopia is very diverse though, so what's the alternative? We should only have one language, one flag, one ideology. I don't believe that. Actually, work to be on, in my opinion, I don't believe that's going to work. I don't think it's going to work at all. So, I think there is a way to build up this. I think there's always room for improvement, you know, but it is a really, really hard country to govern, it seems

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<sup>145</sup> Participant #1

like”.<sup>146</sup> The ideas presented in the state reflect the ideas discussed by the previous participant, however it also presents another layer foundation against the establishment of a non-ethnic based federalist system. As mentioned, Ethiopia is a very difficult country to govern, and part of that reason is because of ethnic divides and inequity. However, with the long history of movements that fought against centralized authority and repression of ethnic identities, their cultures, and their languages, makes it impossible to have a system that disregards their ability exercise autonomy and maintain their roots and values. It will not work because in the eyes of Ethiopians, the creation of a non-ethnic based federalist government, goes against their consist struggles to advocate for their respective groups and for equity across the board, and fear that this will only lead to the further marginalization of certain groups.

One older participant spoke against this point. The participant discussed how during the Civil War, one could characterize the active rebellion movement as a coalition of independent movements that were founded upon ethnic group/regional liberation such as the TPLF and OPLF.<sup>147</sup> They went on to say that after the war had ended, he witnessed the conflict begin to move on from fighting the Derg to ethnic groups fighting each other. The participant further asserted that there is no semblance of trust among ethnic groups, and racism consequently remains large issue.<sup>148</sup> On this issue, the participant concluded that Abiy Ahmed’s efforts to establish the Prosperity Party is a worthy endeavor, since they believed that the ethnic federalist system cause nothing but division and conflict. Asserting this point by citing their belief that he eased tension between Muslim and Christian population in the country have improved under his leadership, and that they hold faith he will find a peaceful resolution with Tigray.

Meanwhile another participant who had recently migrated to the U.S. stated that the system of ethnic federalism seems to be the only means by which Ethiopia can exist.<sup>149</sup> The participant noted that the system in not perfect, and that individuals and groups needed to be more adaptive and understanding of each other’s demands and needs. The participant went on to say that the system itself was not the root of Ethiopia’s current issues, but rather its rooted history of division among ethnic group. Further, that the scale tends to tip on the basis of which group holds the majority in the federal government, thereby it is not easy to say one group is the root cause of oppressing other groups, as others would do the same if in the same position. The participant ended by discussing how in light of the current conflict, it is clear that a centralized system of government is not the right direction, since ethnic groups will continue to fight for their political autonomy, as they had done for generations before.<sup>150</sup>

Another participant had put forth the question if there was truly another way in which to govern Ethiopia. Going on to say, “I think for a country like Ethiopia, where we have 86 different languages and ethnic groups, what is there to do but appreciate them? So, when someone comes along and says, ‘One Ethiopia!’, I reply, ‘aren’t we already one?’ I am just learning and speaking my language, practicing my culture. But at the end of the day, I am still Ethiopian, right?”<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Participant #6

<sup>147</sup> Participant #8

<sup>148</sup> Participant #8

<sup>149</sup> Participant #9

<sup>150</sup> Participant #9

<sup>151</sup> Participant #7

Asserting the question, does there have to be centralize governance in order for Ethiopia to exist? Ethnic federalism recognizes not only the cultural roots, languages, traditions, and autonomy of ethnic groups throughout Ethiopia, it also recognizes each of their struggles to maintain and hold on to them. That is the reality in which many of the ethnic groups exist within, one in which each of them has fought for generation to be able to openly express their languages and cultures, and for some groups practice their regions. In all, the historical context of consistent and brutal efforts to centralize power as well as former campaigns to force assimilation, the idea of unity and putting an end to ethnic based federalism is not supported.

### **Views of the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) and Their Role in the Future**

Initially, one of the central questions of this project posed the question of what the potential consequences were after the TPLF was left out the new coalition Abiy Ahmed is working to create. That question of course has unfortunately been addressed since the events of November of 2020. Consequently, the focus of this point was rendered null, however, in the context of the current crisis, it proved to be a fundamental conversation throughout the course of participant interviews. Part of the reason for this of course because the TPLF is the faction fighting against the central government, but in addition to this, they represent the old guard of political power as well as the right of group to secede Ethiopia's federalist government. This is the case as they had they served as leadership in the EPDRF coalition for 27 years. Additionally, now they were in a state in which the central government was directly attacking a state, the first formal military action against an ethnic region since the Civil War had ended. Consequently, discussion about the TPLF still remained very relevant to conversations with participants. Views on the TPLF's role and continued standing within Ethiopia were the most contentious parts of the interviews. Some participants completely supported the TPLF's stance and their actions, while others were highly critical of the group. Furthermore, while some reminisced about the TPLF's efforts to help form the first truly democratic government in Ethiopia, others perceived the TPLF as power hungry and the sole reason many Ethiopians were oppressed and marginalized.

One participant spoke highly of the TPLF's 27 years in power stating, "They definitely could have done better on transitioning and getting other people in certain positions of leadership to make people feel like they're part of this, you know, because from the outside looking in, it looks like oh man, Ethiopia is doing good, man, they've got more schools now. They're building better roads, infrastructure, there's, you know, there's no more war, there's no genocide, things like that. But there was always that ethnic tensions not only because the TPLF, but it was even there before that, you know, so, um, historically, I support them".<sup>152</sup>

Another participant also had spoken highly of the TPLF and its leaders that had served in the central government but took it a step further by stating their time consolidating power for 27 years was in fact justified. The participant went on to say, "What the government did was they literally went into every single town selected with community leaders, women, and train them to be midwife was helped either, like drastically decrease the mortality rate. They open clinics, schools in every town, like prioritized developing rules so that farmers can get their food into the market faster? They did a lot of little thing, these things revolutionized Ethiopia. Now, so then

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<sup>152</sup> Participant #6

people say, Oh, where's our democracy? Like if people majority people can't read or write who's democracy serving? As majority people are completely disconnected from what from the central government. They don't even know what's happening. They have no access to media. So, what so the good some of the things you like, so what good is democracy? You want to go vote? We have nothing! So, I personally don't believe in believe in democracy, for developing countries, makes no sense".<sup>153</sup>

Participants who had been critical of the TPLF and their actions were vocal about what they believed to be inequity that they had perpetuated. One participant had noted, "I think TPLF is brilliant as far as waging a propaganda war and I think they'll continue to do that. They're very good at it. To have that kind of influence so deep in the Western media is impressive. Um, I'm glad they're gone. Um, a lot of the issues that stemmed from them I think they, um, added fuel to it."<sup>154</sup> The participant went on to say, "I don't think they were worthy of Ethiopia and its legacy and its power and its use, especially because it's such a young nation. Um, there's a lot of hates that, that got spewed. There's a lot of, um, my ethnic group and your ethnic group kind of conversation where I never really remember before then".<sup>155</sup>

An older participant who had migrated from Ethiopia during the Civil War had expressed their discontent with the TPLF. Stating that they believed that they did in fact consolidate an excessive amount of power, and marginalized other ethnic groups.<sup>156</sup> Going on to assert that they should in fact no longer exist as a party for their action, and inciting conflict. Additionally, that the Tigray people are suffering because of their actions and they should be represented by a different party entirely.

Those in support of the TPLF and the Tigray movement spoke strongly of their right to govern themselves and cited the usage of Article 35 of the Ethiopian constitution which allows states to secede in instance of crisis. This Article of the constitution has remained very contentious because of the fear that different states would begin to succeed over time. Thereby, it is always controversial when individuals assert that Tigray should succeed from Ethiopia, since many fears the precedent it would set. This general fear has been seen all over the world including places such as Spain during the succession crisis with Madrid in 2018. However, the current state of military conflict has made this discussion for more salient.

One participant however drove a very impactful point to respond to this fear of precedent, stating, "If they want to tell me I should feel Ethiopian, stop attacking Tigray. Did you ever hear any talk about succession before this? No, not since the Derg, since they attacked us...I don't see Tigray as part of Ethiopia right now, especially as they send foreign countries (Eritrea) to fight us."<sup>157</sup> The participant would go on to say, "If it bothers you more that Tigray is wanting to secede than Tigray people being killed...there is a fundamental problem."<sup>158</sup> Many from Tigray in the diaspora truly feel that they can no longer call themselves Ethiopian any more after

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<sup>153</sup> Participant #7

<sup>154</sup> Participant #3

<sup>155</sup> Participant #3

<sup>156</sup> Participant #8

<sup>157</sup> Participant #4

<sup>158</sup> Participant #4

witnessing these tragedies carried out by the central government and Eritrean forces. This participant's statements put forth a very fundamental question of where priorities should lie in light of crisis such as the one happening in Tigray? It is disturbing to see that to some extent the central government has prioritized the unification of Ethiopia over the lives of many civilians. It is also shocking to see some of the narrative coming from some groups in the diaspora not emphasizing the human tragedy happening in the country, but rather focusing on anti-TPLF rhetoric. But at the same time, a majority of the diaspora, regardless of if they are from Tigray or not or support the TPLF have emphasized the loss of life, and supported members of the community from Tigray.

In all, as described in these discussions, the TPLF's position in this current state of crisis for Ethiopia is very relevant and its future seems to be very uncertain. Many participants had held the position that Tigray would no longer be a part of Ethiopia after this conflict. One participant who recently migrated from Ethiopia noted that they did not believe there was any chance of reconciliation between the TPLF and Tigray, and the central government, especially after the massive amounts of casualties this war has caused, and if Tigray will secede. After all this violence, the Tigray people can no longer be trusting of the central government.<sup>159</sup> It is clear that the TPLF's future in Ethiopia is uncertain, but the legacy they leave will have a very last legacy. Regardless of one's view it is clear they progressed modernization, provided the foundation for Ethiopia's first democratic institution, and in many ways uplifted historically marginalized and misrepresented groups throughout the country.

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<sup>159</sup> Participant #8

## Discussion

Considering all these discussions, there is a consensus that the diaspora does in fact have a large amount of influence on how issues play out in Ethiopia. However, it also became apparent that there is contention over how involved the diaspora should be in current issues, and whether their impact tends to be positive or negative. Furthermore, as discussed in the Burundi case, negative views of the diaspora are somewhat justified, as members of this diaspora community had hindered processes of democratization due their continued involvement and detachment to the progressive shifts that the country had experienced.<sup>160</sup> The Burundi case also describes how the diaspora unjustly asserted that they were able to see a different or more “enlightened” perspective since they were removed from the different forms of indoctrination that the government had perpetuated.<sup>161</sup> In the context of Ethiopia it seems that there are some similarities to the positionality of the diaspora from ones from Burundi. However, in the context of the current state of conflict, as well as in light a number of discussions with members of the diaspora, there is a large degree of importance for diasporic involvement and engagement. Although the diaspora may invoke a perception of division among the community, their engagement ensures transparency of the current state of conflict which helps to ensure accountability. This unfortunately has become the only means in which the international community and human rights organizations such as Amnesty International can have a understand of what is happening in Tigray.

Consequently, I hold that although there are a lot of challenges and issues that result from diasporic involvement, currently their activism is very much needed. What we are witnessing in Ethiopia is a crisis that is verging upon the designation of ethnic cleansing, one in which people are being killed and the central government is trying to hide and distort this reality.

We have also learned that the diaspora will continue to shape this how this crisis plays out and will also continue to be relevant after the direct conflict has ended. The diaspora will continue to work to ensure there is transparency and accountability are upheld as discussions of peace and reconciliation are held in the future. Furthermore, the diaspora will also be present during elections as Ethiopia decides whether or not to abandon the ethnic federalist system. The problems that may arise from this reality are yet to be fully understood.

After the many discussions I have had with members of the diaspora community, it does not seem like there will be much support from the community to introduce the prosperity party as Ethiopia’s new coalitions government. These interviews have taught me that in the context of all the conflict Ethiopia has endured, the idea of one Ethiopia will never become a reality. I am confident that in fact the system of ethnic federalism will endure because for many, it is the only means in which they can retain their culture, language, traditions, and social identity. In that light, some semblance of autonomy for ethnic groups and regional states must be maintained in order to ensure the overall stability of the federation. Furthermore, abandoning this system of government will remain contentious as ethnic groups continue to hold onto the impacts of past conflict and ways in which their groups had been repressed by a centralized entity in one capacity or another. I realized this as many participants had cited the Civil War throughout our

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<sup>160</sup> Turner, “Cyberwars of Words.”

<sup>161</sup> Turner.

discussion as well as the imperialistic motives of Haile Selassie. These attempts to suppress their group's language, roots, culture, and at times religions are things that will forever stay with people throughout Ethiopia. Their pasts of struggle and rebellion is the spirit that continues to drive them in their efforts to contest any perceived attempt to strip them of their autonomy and to be fully embrative of their social identity. Consequently, a federal system that recognizes their struggles, their cultures, roots, language, and past will be the only system of government that can be applicable.

Regarding the TPLF, it is unclear what the future has in hold for them as well as the people of Tigray. But what is clear in light of these discussions is that they have been fundamental to both Ethiopia's progress as well as its current state of social unrest, as well as some groups feeling that they have been marginalized. However, regardless of one's views on the TPLF, it is clear that the tragedy in Tigray is something that needs to be addressed in a just manner. Since although allowing them to secede will create a dangerous precedent, allowing this type of injustice and systematic violence to persist and go unquestioned would set an even more dangerous precedent.

## **Conclusion**

In the end I do not have a definitive answer as to how to make the system of ethnic federalism work in a profound manner that ensure equality and equity. However, I know that it is in fact the only system of governance that will be able to sustain a union of the many diverse groups throughout Ethiopia. This system of government is one that provides, at the very least, a foundation to establish a state in which Ethiopia's many ethnic groups can be recognized, speak their respective languages, express their cultures, and honor their many past struggles for some semblance of self-determination.

It is clear that the diaspora has and will continue to have a large impact on Ethiopia's domestic political climate. Although in many ways their influence can continue to drive social unrest and uncertainty, they continue to ensure accountability and transparency are maintained. Consequently, their activism and involvement will remain important.

Lastly, the people of Tigray are in a state of uncertainty and crisis. Many have already been killed in the current conflict, and many will continue to be killed. Although the TPLF will continue to hold a contentious position in Ethiopia, what is happening in Tigray is completely unjustified. As I write this, I hope a peaceful resolution to the current state of conflict can be found, for the sake of the many innocent civilians who have perished.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

I recommend that future researchers work to further diversify the pool of participants in which they select in order to receive many engaging and important perspectives. Although the pool I had was diverse, I could have done better, this fact is also a result of the many constraints I faced due to the COVID 19 pandemic. I also recommend future researchers focus on social media platforms and activity of the diaspora since I learned that is foundation to their overall involvement in domestic politics. Lastly, I recommend future researchers tread lightly on issues related to ethnic conflict since although the war may be at the end, its impact will remain sensitive.



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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

#### Background

1. How would you describe your experience as an Ethiopian living in the United States?
2. Are you involved with the Ethiopian community where you currently live? If yes, in what ways?
3. Do you have family or relatives back in Ethiopia? If yes, are you in regular contact with them?
4. Do you follow current news and events taking place in Ethiopia? If yes, where do you get your news/information?

#### Current Context

1. When you think about Ethiopia today, what do you see as the main challenges facing the country?
2. Do you see the current Ethiopian government as capable of dealing with these problems? If yes, how do you see them tackling these problems? If no, why do you think they are unable to tackle these problems?
3. What is your view of the Federalist system of government in Ethiopia?
4. Do you think the Federalist system represents all of Ethiopia's ethnic groups fairly? If yes, ask them to explain how. If no, ask them to explain why not.
5. What role do you see for the Tigray People's Liberation Front in the governance of Ethiopia?

#### Future

1. What, if anything, do you believe should be done to improve the Federalist system in Ethiopia?
2. What role do you see for Ethiopians living abroad to contribute to improving and/or worsening the situation in Ethiopia?

