

# The Tigray Identity and the Securitization of the Oromo and Amhara Identities

The Tigray's ethnic nationality is the minority identity in the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)<sup>[1]</sup>, a coalition of four political parties under the leadership of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). For decades, the ruling party has governed by pitting the Oromo and Amhara against one another. Accordingly, the Oromo-Amhara solidarity is the greatest threat to the Ethiopian government. Within the framework of the Copenhagen school, we will attempt to analyze the securitization of the two majority identities. This essay will be split into two sections. The first will examine why and how the Oromo and Amhara identities have been securitized by the dominant force of TPLF within the governing EPRDF coalition. The second section will then attempt to examine the implications and consequences of this securitization. I argue that the securitization, while a natural choice in many respects, has perhaps been detrimental to the overall security of the Ethiopia's Tigray-dominated government who perceives the Oromo and Amhara are a more serious threat to Ethiopia's leadership.

## The TPLF Political party as the Securitizing Actor

As an authoritarian government and noncompetitively elected party state, the TPLF led government is deeply concerned with issues of legitimacy and asserting that it has the right to rule all those within its borders. Although the TPLF established the EPRDF in order to gain a national base and legitimacy in Ethiopia, it never lost its minority identification, and this has always been a source of insecurity. [1] The EPRDF is therefore left with a dilemma – being an umbrella of ethnonational fronts and of which the TPLF forms a 6% of the ethnic portion but it is the dominant political force of the country. On such a dubious platform of legitimacy, and as the leaders of a 'minority', the TPLF "either do not have or have failed to create, a domestic political and social consensus of sufficient strength to eliminate the large-scale use of force." [2] If they are to remain in power, the TPLF clearly needed to build on this position because of the importance of "national identity and social cohesion in terms of the degree to which the population identifies with the nation-state and accepts its legitimate role in their lives." [3] The EPRDF, therefore, has to both appear inclusive, while simultaneously promoting "the ANDM, OPDO and the SEPDM to the vanguard of the peoples of the People's Republic," [4] as this is where its main volume of support comes from. However, the EPRDF's ethnic policy has empowered some groups but has not been accompanied by dialogue and reconciliation. Real power in Ethiopia is in the hands of TPLF. The other parties in the governing collisions are puppets and TPLF is their puppet master. [5] The TPLF therefore, is the securitizing actor, as it "securitize(s) issues by declaring something, a referent object, existentially threatened." [6]

## The Tigrayans as the Referent Object of Security

Referent objects are "things that are seen to be existentially threatened and that have a legitimate claim to survival." [6] In this case, the referent object is the Tigrayan's Ethnic identity, as referent objects "can be collective identities." [7] These minorities fought to liberate their Ethnic elites from the oppressive military regimes. However, due to domestic tensions at all corners of the country, the Tigrayans along with some representatives from the majority Oromo and Amhara Populations form allies to be called as EPRDF.

## The Reasons for Securitizing the Oromo and Amhara Identities

Why has the TPLF political party as the securitizing actor chosen the Tigrayan identity as its referent object? Essentially, securitizing the Oromo and Amhara identities is a means to an end that end being ethnic dominance and regime security.

## Extraordinary measures of Securitizing the Oromo and Amhara Identities:

- **The ethnic classification project from the transitional government to the Federal Democratic Republic (1991-1994)**

One method used by the TPLF led the ruling political coalition has been that of naming and classifying

ethnic groups. Meles Zenawi (the former PM) engineered one-party rule in effect for the TPLF and his Tigrayan inner circle, with the complicity of other ethnic elites that were co-opted into the ruling alliance, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The Front promised freedom, democracy, and ethnic devolution but is highly centralized, tightly controls the economy and suppresses political, social, ethnic and religious liberties. Ethiopia's political system and society have grown increasingly unstable largely because the TPLF has become increasingly repressive while failing to implement the policy of ethnic federalism it devised over twenty-five years ago to accommodate the land's varied ethnic identities. The result has been greater political centralization associated with ethnicization of grievances. The TPLF remained the center of political decision-making in the EPRDF and kept the principles and discourses of its guerrilla years. This includes Leninist "democratic centralism", in which the executive and central committees make all major political decisions, and then transmit orders to junior officials and administrators. "Revolutionary democracy" that advocates capitalism and the free market is promoted, but at the same time state and party retain iron control through five-year development plans. Meles's absolutely pivotal role developed during the armed struggle to overthrow the Derg – the military regime of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam that ruled from 1974 to 1991 – when he was a core member of the TPLF, an ethnic Marxist guerrilla movement founded in the northern Tigray region. [8]

### ● Exoticization of the Oromo and Amhara Identities as a means of Securitization

One of the more obtuse ways of securitizing the Oromo and Amhara identities is by the dominating of the internal other. This is because "the objectified portrayal of majorities as exoticized is essential to the construction of the Tigray's minority, the very formulation of the Ethiopia 'nation' itself." [9] Like naming, this intense othering is designed to quantify the majorities as commodities rather than equal-footed citizens. It seems "the state has turned its gaze upon the internal other, engaging in a formalized, commodified, oriental orientalism that may be focused on the minorities but represents a long tradition of fascination with the outsider in Ethiopian society." [9] Securitizing the Oromo and Amhara Identities in this unique manner and emasculating the other is essential to the EPRDF. "Belonging to a distinct culture tells us 'who we are' and it is this process of self-identification which is key to nations." [10] This non-violent and arguably non-repressive means of objectification nevertheless constitutes a speech act, as "the exoticization of majorities essentializes the imagined identity of the Tigrayans and reaffirms Tigre feelings of superiority," [9] crucial to the existence of the regime.

As ethnic mobilization was the TPLF's means to seize power, it now appears that the ethnic polarization being created as a result is threatening the state power structure and national cohesion. There is insecurity about sharing on national agenda, mistrust against the government and other ethnic groups, many times irrational (political and economic) competition, and a new dynamics of 'we vs. them' conceptions. [11] The previous Prime Minister, Meles was the unchallenged intellectual and ideological guide of the party and government, and as a result, had accumulated a disproportionate share of power in the Ethiopian state. He had successively and effectively marginalized his TPLF opponents and concentrated power in his own hands and those of close colleagues. [1] Moreover, the TPLF has a project which hatred the other two major ethnicities (The Oromo and Amhara). They gave a name for Oromo "Tebab" and for Amara "Temketgna". The name "Tebab" in the Amharic language stands for 'Narrow Oromo Nationalists' as the Oromos believe in Oromoness and "Temketgna" stands for 'Arrogant Amhara Nationalists' as the Amharas believe in Ethiopianess. Indeed, it is a deliberate 'speech act' used for the last 25 years for subjugating the other ethnic majorities and solidifies the referent object (the Tigray identity) at the center. It helped the TPLF to prolong its power by dividing the two largest ethnic groups.

### The Securitization Process

The most notable feature of the securitization process of the Oromo and Amhara identities is that it is circular. The Securitizing actor (the TPLF) securitizes the Oromo and Amhara identities (which the EPRDF is also comprised of) from an internal threat (other Ethiopian citizens) by subverting and subsuming the internal other (Amharas and Oromos). While "transforming an issue into a security question only requires the audience's acknowledgment that it is indeed a threat," [7] in this case, the audience is the referent object of which the securitizing actor is also a part. Therefore admission of the existence of a threat is pre-determined so long as the audience (Tigrayan Ethiopian) keep faith in the securitizing actor (the TPLF), which it is not going to do whilst the securitizing actor has securitized their identity, thereby ensuring it. This, therefore, legitimizes "the claims of the state to authority over citizens as citizens [which] provide a source of its ability to exert violence against them." [12] This logical process is difficult to follow, but it boils down to a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby as the EPRDF articulates the threat as an "existential threat to a referent object" [7] and hence propagates its own existence because "in practice, the idea of state security – the integrity and functioning of the institutions and the idea of the state – and regime

security – the security of the ruling elite from violent challenge – become indistinguishable.”[3]

## **The implications and consequences of securitization**

### **o Marginalizing the dominant Ethnic Nationalities-the Oromo and Amhara**

The fall-out from the securitization of the Oromo and Amhara identities is in many ways quite predictable. Favoring the minority ethnic group and trying to dominate other cultures is usually met with ill feeling and violent resistance. Ethiopia is left with “the lingering problem of large marginalized groups, which have implications for the threat towards territorial control, and ultimately, for sovereignty. The net result of this failed forcible integration is the EPRDF “faces continuing ethnic unrest amongst ‘majority’ peoples (particularly in Oromia and Amhara) exacerbated by an assertive Tigrean nationalism that the EPRDF has itself encouraged (directly and indirectly) in a bid to bolster its legitimacy by highlighting its patriotic credentials. It is a matter of time before two of the three members of the EPRDF, the Oromo Peoples’ Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) desert them in their role as puppets. They hold little real power but simply have been personally rewarded for going along with the TPLF under the name of their ethnicity. The transparency of the close relationship between the Tigrayan identity and the Ethiopian state has made any pretensions of multi-nationality increasingly difficult. One obvious such failure is amongst its major population – “the OPDO/EPRDF’s ideological project in Oromia – to win recognition as the sole legitimate representative of Oromo’s interests and to make Oromos think of themselves as Ethiopians and citizens of the Ethiopia – has not been successful.

### **o Ethnic cleansing of Amharas and forced displacement of indigenous people from their ancestral lands**

Population transfer as a method of gaining regional preponderance and ensuring the stability of the minority ethnic group is deliberate activity so as to benefit from the resources of regions other than the Tigrayans original settlement. The net result of this is that “increased Tigrayans migration to participate in the region’s Sesaaam production continues to exacerbate ethnic tensions”. “Tigrayans flooded the territory, especially from the 1980s on, when the TPLF led government reform program created new opportunities for migration and profit. Although they probably make up no more than 10 percent of the population, the Tigrayans are concentrated in Wolqayt’s cities and dominate the modern sectors of the economy. The close ties between economics and demographics are illustrated here, as well as the fact that “many Wolqayt’s claims they are being pushed to the economic margins and overwhelmed by Tigre’s immigration. In the next section, we will look at the economic implications of the securitization of the Tigrayans in these ethnic areas. Article 32 of the Ethiopian Constitution guarantees freedom of movement within the national territory. Ethiopia is also a signatory to several conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, which, clearly state that a citizen has the right to work and live in any part of his or her country. However, ethnic Amharas have been subjected to forcible eviction from Guraferda Bench-Maji in Southern Regional State as well as from Beni Shangul regions of Western Ethiopia since 2012. Targeting Amharas, one of the largest ethnic groups in Ethiopia, for illegal deportation, is a barbaric act that will have dire consequences for fostering ethnic harmony in Ethiopia. Stoking hatred will only serve to destabilize the country. [13].

Moreover, there is an ongoing hostility in the Amhara region. The government annexed the Wolqayt communities to the Tigray administrative region has raised serious questions by its indigenous Wolqayt people who claim to be Amhara. We should not be surprised at the failure of communities to accept the imposition of identities that do not correspond with how they view themselves and their surroundings. Favoring the minority ethnic group ensures a strong base of support, but discontented majorities have the possibility of taking asymmetrical means to destabilize key elements of the EPRDF rule and the Ethiopian economy. As we established that Wolqayt and Addis Ababa especially are areas which are vital for the EPRDF to retain control for geopolitical imperatives, the securitization of the Oromo and Amhara identities comes with its own set of problems as “the formulations of Tigrayan nationalism generally limit the extent and ways that non-Tigrayan Ethiopian voices are recognized, and the EPRDF has problems in dealing with ethnic or nationality difference other than as a function of economic development.”

### **o The Addis Ababa ‘Master plan’ and the using the ‘Ethiopian Somali special forces as a means of displacing the Oromo’s from their ancestral lands**

In April 2014, the government announced its readiness to implement what it called the "Addis Ababa Integrated Regional Development Plan" (the "Master Plan" for short), which proposes to annex most of the

city's surrounding areas belonging to the National Regional State of Oromia, it provoked an immediate reaction from the public but, the government responded with brutal repression of the protests. Clashes are thought to have claimed 140 lives as students and farmers from the Oromia region. The announcement of the Master Plan has led to another round of killing and arrests of the Oromo youth. Ethiopian jails are beefed up yet more. Oromia is subjected to a continued state terror. Ethiopia is fast becoming a concentration camp of Oromo's.

As many argue, Ethiopia's tense ethnic federalism is being tested as it experiences the recent deadly clashes between ethnic Oromos and ethnic Somalis in the country's dry and mainly pastoralist south-east. Local militia and police, including the controversial Somali Special Forces known as the Liyu (for Amharic 'special') issued as a proxy against the Oromo. There is no doubt that, the Liyu force has the full support of the Tigrayan people's liberation front (TPLF) government in Addis Ababa. The TPLF initially set up the Liyu police as a counterinsurgency force against the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), a group fighting for self-determination for the Somali region. Importantly, these ethnic clashes arise during the time, where there is an ongoing protest in Oromia and Amhara region and while the two major ethnic groups showing their unity to resist the TPLF led ruling party. I argue that this is a deliberate political decision made by the TPLF, unless and otherwise, these new ethnic clashes at the Somali- Oromo border would not have erupted. Due to the silence response from the ruling government, one of the high-level OPDO officials Abadula Gameda (speaker of the House of People's Representatives) has resigned out of his own free.

## Conclusion

In this analysis, the securitization of the Oromo and Amhara identities contradict the existing literature where "elites favor certain groups in the allocation of state resources, oppress minorities viewed as hostile, create minority scapegoat groups during times of unrest and appoint members of the elite's own ethnic group to positions of power"[3] However, what a paradox is a tiny minority in the ruling coalition not only become a securitizing actor and referent object in the securitization process but also demands and monopolizes the federalism for the last 25 years. In the Ethiopian context, the TPLF was inherently and structurally deficient in establishing a genuine accommodative federal political framework in the country. Hence, it has been embarking on sustaining a political travesty via EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Force) that would assure its hegemonic project by using ethnic rights as a discourse to attract and subdue the disoriented ethnic elites. As the Copenhagen school forecast, securitization is not a positive tool of statecraft. "Security is what we make of it"[14], and "what constitutes an existential threat is regarded as a subjective matter"[7], but in dealing with these subjective 'threats' we often ignore other threats and simultaneously create new ones.

To ensure the Tigray identity at the expense of others "the state confronts powerful social forces with substantial coercive force, which in turn provokes violent resistance." [3] But securitizing an issue can make you vulnerable to the consequences of the exceptional actions you undertake, something that has been bitterly experienced by those in Rwanda, where the tradition of use of State violence in the exercise of power has got deep roots in history. It is this violence that facilitated Tutsi political domination over Hutu masses. [15] The government intensively works in divide rule system so as to polarize the two major ethnic groups unless and otherwise, its ruling period might be end up. For decades, the ruling party has governed by pitting the Oromo and Amhara against one another. Now the two groups are joining forces against the government; therefore, the Oromo-Amhara solidarity has become the greatest threat to the Ethiopian government. However, as much as the dominant elite TPLF utilized ethnicity to come this far and defend the present power structure, the marginalized elites may use a similar tool to resist domination, fomenting ethnic conflicts in which civil liberties and human rights, the essential elements of building civil society, will be the casualties. As Berhe strongly argued, ethnic mobilization can only play a positive role only if it is based on establishing and institutionalizing civil liberties and human rights upon which diversities are accommodated and differences are mediated democratically. [11] To mention, "Bete Amhara" is a typical and successful resistance movement in Amhara region, witnessing the rise of Amhara Nationalism. The Copenhagen school advocates desecuritization and repoliticization as more sustainable methods of dealing with security issues, dealing with them in the political sphere. I believe this securitization essay has hopefully shown the decidedly limited benefit of the Oromo's and Amhara's identity's securitization. This is due to the fact that securitization is succeeded only by the acceptance from the audience so as to move the issue above the sphere of Normal politics. [16] However, by observing the overall hostilities in the country, one can understand that the Ethiopia's Tigray-dominated government may not be able to sustain its hold on power for much longer if the current nationwide uprising in Ethiopia against a minority tyranny continues without changing its phase. Though it is not going to be attempted here, what can be suggested here is that desecuritization of the Tigrayan's identity through power sharing

can be used as a means of curing the current unrest and future political stability.

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[1]"The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) is a ruling political coalition consists of four political parties; Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), and the Southern Ethiopia Peoples Democratic Movement (SEPDM).