

"How can two ideas be merged to produce a new structure which shows the influence of ancestor ideas without being a mere cut and paste combination?"

Margaret Boden

Rethinking the violence in Ethiopia

*Minga Negash*¹

Finding conflict monies and analysis of violence requires competency in the disciplines of forensic accounting, criminology and police science. Defining the term accountability as answerability, responsibility, and liability, there are at least five forms of accountability (Sinclair [1995](#)). They are political, public, managerial, professional, and personal. Violence has been studied from social, behavioral, political, economic, security, and media perspectives. Several books, academic papers, and think tank and election observation organizations have linked finance with political institutions. Ethnicity and finance have become important variables in explaining political behavior in Sub Sahara Africa (Agesa [2000](#); Noyoo [2000](#); Ilorah [2009](#); Lieberman and McClendon [2013](#); Hassan [2018](#)). Analysts agree that ethnicity is associated with bias, favoritism, corruption, social grievances and political instability. In his [2018](#) book "*Identity:-the demand for dignity and the politics of resentment*" and in his most recent piece in Foreign Affairs (July/August [2020](#)) Fukuyama documents the emerging global (dis) order and the capture of the institutions of the modern State by organized groups that spur nationalism, fascism, isolationism, and xenophobia.

Domesticating the accountability theory in conflict analysis may lead to overborrowing, the corporatization of the State, and can contribute to the lack of novel contextual theories to understand contemporary issues of power and politics in Ethiopia. On the other hand, pluralism lacks the resilience against internal inconsistencies. In this third installment on youth unrest in Ethiopia, I attempt to show why the current unrest has its roots in the metaphor, rhetoric, and narratives provided by political institutions and politically charged scholarship. The first two commentaries were written at the height of the earlier unrests ([January](#) and [February](#) 2016) respectively under the titles of "*managing African universities in turbulent times*" and "*understanding the current protests in Ethiopia: A rejoinder*". The violence of 2016 was between the State and the youth. Arguably it appeared to have aimed at the liberalization of the political space and raising awareness about the severity of the economic misery indices. The sustained protests resulted in a change of the equilibrium within the ruling ethnic coalition, eventually forcing the resignation of the then Prime Minister.

The new Prime Minister who came from the same ruling party had no option other than promising reforms, taking populist decisions and minimizing Eritrea's role in Ethiopian affairs. The metaphor and rhetoric used in his inaugural speech of April 2018 which was

¹ The author is a Professor of Accounting at the Metropolitan State University of Denver and a Visiting Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand. The views expressed in this commentary are the author's own and do not in any way represent the views of the institutions he is associated with.

followed by a series of actions, brought acclamations. The world recognized the work by awarding the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. The government however had a series of setbacks, some of which are its own making. The attempts on his life, the series of high-profile assassinations, and the communal violence inflicted deaths and mass displacement. The low-intensity armed conflict in his own power base continued. Many questioned the wisdom and efficacy of the reintegration of former combatants into society while others speculated (i) the presence of a Sinn Féin-IRA type relationship between the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and its former armed wing, and (ii) the penetration of hardliner disciples of ethnicity in the ranks and files of the ruling party. The contest for the soul of Menelik's palace became intense long before the election date. The rhetoric used at public gatherings were sectarian and revanchist. Concerned by these developments, in [May 2020](#) Vision Ethiopia identified four thematic areas that are "believed to be legitimate threats to the freedom of the people and the survival of the country". The four areas identified by the group were:

- The Covid-19 pandemic & its social, economic, political, & national security implications;
- Egypt's coercive diplomacy towards the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD);
- Elections & government accountability, transparency and rule of law; and
- The Eritrea-Ethiopia relationship.

In early [July](#) 2020 mayhem followed the assassination of yet another public figure, a popular singer. Residents and the diplomatic community were caught by surprise. Politicians are accusing each other, looking for a sacrificial goat or "*ye'tos doro*". The speculations are many. They can be synthesized into two competing hypotheses. The first is the common one. It has the characteristics of most street protests that get sparked by some event which incense the public. In this case protesters often blame the authorities and sympathize with the victim. The second hypothesis is more complex. It alleges that the scale and nature of the violence observed in the Oromia region would not have been possible had it not been premeditated, guided, and organized. According to this hypothesis, the violence instrumentalized by a segment of the Qeerro (youth) was not meant to be releasing grievances. Subscribers of this hypothesis claim that the assassination is part of a strategy to accelerate the control of the levers of political power by encircling the capital and, applying human wave in capturing the palace. Which of the two hypotheses explain better the July 2020 phenomenon is hotly contested. The case is yet to be presented to the courts.

At the time of writing this commentary (July 13, 2020) the Government reported the death of some 169 people. Over 229 people were wounded, and thousands have fled their homes fearing for their lives. Damages to property, businesses and churches are yet to be determined. Internet has been closed. About 5k people, including the leaders of ethnic and non-ethnic parties, members of local police forces, and city administrators have been arrested. More cleansing and purges appear evident. The Government is now vowing to allow the law to take its course while idolizing the late singer.

Notwithstanding the above the metaphor and rhetoric of the current violence are essentially the same as that of May 1991, when Addis Ababa was captured by guerrilla forces. Typical of left leaning agencies that crafted the post Dergue politics had two enemies:- coded as *chauvinists and (ethnic) extremists*. Now the power blocks are “unitarists” and “federalists”, and slogans are "down-down neftegna! down-down Ethiopia! down-down *Habesha!* down-down Abiy!". The attacks are against heritage & religious institutions, the national flag and symbols. Seen in toto, the series of events that are unfolding do not suggest that they are random and isolated incidences.

By the end of 2019, there were at least 106 legally registered political parties. Most of the parties are ethnic/clan parties. A few political parties, including the ruling party itself are critically dependent on historicity and revanchism. In other words, the legal instruments allow competition among and within ethnic/clan groups. According to the 2007 population estimate, about 34.4% of Ethiopia's population was classified as Oromo, followed by Amhara, which is 27%, indicating the need for rethinking majoritarianism and entrenchment. Not surprisingly the number of Oromo parties aspiring for power and the intensity of the competition within and outside, are anyone's imagination. It has reached a point of identifying who is a “true Oromo”, “true Amhara”, etc.

The intellectual powerhouse of Oromo nationalism is the Oromo Studies Association (OSA), the owner of the Journal of Oromo Studies.² The theme of its forthcoming conference (July 25 & 26, program not yet available) [2020](#) provides clue about the association's pressing issues of the day. The theme of the conference is “*Revitalizing indigenous Oromo national institutions: emancipating and empowering Oromo society in the 21st century*”. Authors are specifically requested to submit papers that deal with the following issues:

“For the 2020 annual OSA conference, we invite scholars to present research-based papers by imagining how the Oromo have used their institutions and cultural capital in defending and maintaining their society by exploring the following three major areas. First, we request to identify and examine the mechanisms by which the regional and global empire-builders have perpetrated the attack on Oromo national institutions. Second, we remind them to explore the consequences of the attacks on the Oromo and their institutions. Third, we recommend envisioning the possible ways that the Oromo can revitalize their cultural capital to rebuild Oromo national institutions and an Oromia State in particular.”

The interesting question here is whether there is change in the association's use of metaphors, rhetoric and narrative in constructing Scott's ([2014](#)) cognitive-cultural pillars of institutions. Derrida ([1983](#)) in his *Dissemination* argues that a “text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer the laws of its composition and the rules of its game.” Using

² According to its 2015 call for papers, the association was created in 1992, after the collapse of the coalition government between the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the TPLF. Many of the leaders of the association were and probably still are either members or sympathizers of one of the factions of the front. The editors of the journal are based in U.S academic institutions and feature well in contemporary politics

features of institutional sociology, fear and victimology, the authors have crafted a rather invisible enemy from which the community must be “emancipated”. There is no supplement that fills a void. The 1011 worded text used the word Oromo 44 times, attack 11 times, empire 6 times, Ethiopia 4 times, episteme 4 times, colonial 1 time, and emancipate 1 time.

Absent from the text is critical inquiry as to whether the metaphors, rhetoric and narrative are associated with violence in general and the series of attacks in Oromia against minorities. Another void is the management of diversities within Oromia and how sizable minorities’ and groups with mixed heritages exercise their rights in states that continue to get organized along the lines of ethnicity. Another useful intellectual engagement with reality is the need to understand the duality and multiplicity of identities.

In an undated text (circa 5 July 2020) the Nobel Laureate belabored to respond to those who question his “true” Oromo-ness. He wrote the following:-

" In its literal meaning neftegna means "gun bearer." It refers to military occupiers who settled in Southern Ethiopia from the late 19th century onwards. This was a historical development that came to an end in 1974 with the fall of Emperor Haile Sellasie's monarchy and the rise of the Dergue communist regime to power.... Neftegna is a name often related to the ethnic Amhara, the second most populous ethnic group in Ethiopia. Historically speaking, however, not only the Amharas were part of the Neftegna ruling class. Some of them were also ethnic Tigres, Oromos, Ghuraghes, etc."

The Prime Minister did not give direct indication as to whether there is an association between the neftegna-Amhara narrative and the violence in Oromia. Identifying the behavioral factors that prompted the youth into committing horrendous crimes and vandalism that are being reported is important. The link between conflict, radicalism and regulation of political behavior is a contemporary issue. Mapping the interests, finances, powers, and contextualizing the games (Ordeshook, *A political theory primer*, Routledge 1992; Shaw, *War & Genocide*, Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2003; De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power*; Polity Press 2015) is important for policy formulation.

A United Nations [2014](#) publication on the prevention of “atrocities crimes” (war crimes, genocide³, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity⁴) declares that the responsibility to prevent such crimes falls right at the doorsteps of the individual States.

³ Article 6 of the Rome statute defines genocide as "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; forcibly transferring children of the group to another group, enforced disappearance of persons

⁴ Article 7 of the Rome Statute defines crime against humanity as "any of the following acts when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack, including the crime of apartheid; and other inhumane acts of a similar character intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or mental or physical health."

It argues that prevention *“requires sustained efforts to build the resilience of societies by ensuring that the rule of law is respected and that all human rights are protected, without discrimination; by establishing legitimate and accountable national institutions; by eliminating corruption; by managing diversity constructively; and by supporting a strong and diverse civil society and a pluralistic media”*.

Most legal scholars agree that circumstantial and/or prima facie evidence of “atrocities crimes” warrant watertight investigation. The signs of atrocity crimes are many (Wisniew, 2012; [United Nations](#), Kuper [1989](#); Stanton [1998](#)) and worrying. The indicators need to be carefully handled before the planned election. The challenge for public intellectuals, politicians and the Government of the day is establishing the truth, managing the conflict of interests, and identifying the risk faced by broader society. If the Government cannot handle the problem alone it needs to consider seeking technical help from the international community. I am hoping that scholars of substance will fill the voids in their engagement with the issues of public governance in contemporary Ethiopia.