The Emergence and Transformation of Tigrayan Nationalism

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Abstract

Since the new federal government came to power in 2018, it is pursuing a more centralized policy that undermines self-government, isolates some stateslike Tigray in what appears to be a federation without Tigray. Tigray, a state that was at the fore front of the struggle for self-government is challenging this trendand asking, if this is the new reality, why staying in a union? There is an ongoing tension between the two governments which if not managed carefully could lead to clash of nationalisms.The article diagnoses this tension tracing its origins and its recent transformation. Whether Tigray will settle for a multination federalism within in Ethiopia as it did in 1991 or secederemains an open question but could lead to fragmentation unless the federal government addresses Tigray's concerns through appropriate institutional and policy options.The study is informed by the theories of ethno national based conflicts andthe idea of search for dignity and collective self-esteem that groups find when treated as secondary citizens in their country.The research is based on an extensive field work conducted in Tigray for three weeks. Data were collected through interviews with thirty one key informants and eleven focus group discussions each containing ten members composed of different sections of society.

Key words: *ethno federation in Ethiopia; nationalism in Tigray; self-government; ethnic conflict*

1. Socio Political Context of Tigray and its Link with Post-1991 Ethiopia and the Horn

Tigray regional state is found in the northern part of Ethiopia and shares common borders with Eritrea in the North, Afar regional state in the East, Amhara regional state in the South and the Sudan in the West.

Historically, Tigray constituted one of the centers of Ethiopian civilization. Experts of ancient history regard the Axumite Empire as one of the four great powers of the time, alongside Persia (Iran), Rome and China (Markakis, 1974). The Yeha Temples of the pre-Axumite era and the Axumite civilization (first century A.D. to ninth century A. D.) are located in Tigray. Axum has left a rich architectural and archaeological heritage of rock-hewn churches, monuments and ancient monasteries such as Debre Damo. The Obelisks, the ancient script - *Geez*, the number system (the use of which is now limited to churches) and the calendar as Axumite inventions and innovations are crucial values that defined the Ethiopian state until 1974 (Levine, 2000; Young, 1997). Christianity was introduced in the fourth century to this area and then became the state religion until the end of the Monarchy in 1974. As is well known, Solomonic genealogy and the Orthodox Christian religion remained the two core bases of the legitimacy and unity of ancient Ethiopia up until 1974 (Markkis, 1974). By the end of the sixth century Islam was introduced to

the area. Adwa, the place where European colonial forces (Italy) were defeated in 1896 thereby reinforcing Ethiopia's pride and uninterrupted independence and symbolizing the entire Africa's struggle against colonial forces, is also located in Tigray.

According to the latest population estimate, Tigray has a population of 5.4 million constituting 6.1 per cent of the total population of the country estimated to be 105 million. Of these, 19.5 percent live in urban areas and 80.5 percent in rural. It has seven administrative zones, one special zone (the regional state capital Mekelle), 55 rural *woredas* and 12 urban local governments (cities).

In terms of ethnic composition Tigray is more homogenous than other regional states. The Tigrigna speaking Orthodox Christians constitute 95 percent of the total population of the region. Muslims constitute 4 percent, Catholics 0.4 percent and Protestants 0.1 percent. There are also a few ethnic minorities like the Irob/Saho (amounting to 33,372) and the Kunama (4,860) respectively. The relative homogeneity of Tigray, ancient civilization and history of own autonomy, proud history of resistance against centralizationexplains Tigray's cohesive social capital, a key factor in ethno national based political mobilization.

1.1 Introduction

Back in 2011, Stephen Walt wrote 'nationalism is the most powerful force in the world.' In 2019, he wrote, 'you cannot defeat nationalism, so stop trying.' The idea that groups that share the same language, culture, history, shared narrative about the past and future destiny, occupy defined territory and feels that they constitute distinct identity ought to govern themselves largely associated with the French Revolution (1789) has led to collapse of several empires (Austrian, British, Ottoman, Spanish etc) in Europe and resulted in the emergence of many nation states in Europe and continues to shape global politics even today. It has a strong emancipatory role for those that aspires autonomy and independence from colonial and authoritarian rule. Yet as witnessed in the two world wars and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, nationalism has also its ugly face. The relationship between the nation and the state is very complex because many states are composed of diverse groups within their territory and the state has enormous resources at its disposal that employs it to ensure unity and territorial integrity while groups within the state that feel politically suffocated aspire to have autonomy or even their own state. Walker Conner way back in 1972 challenged the idea of nation building warning that it could lead to nation destroying. Minorities within nation states faced expulsion, assimilation and in worst forms genocide. Even in the advanced democracies of the west, French speaking Canadians, Scottish, the Flanders in Belgium continues to negotiate for more, not less autonomy. In the face of a state under the control of centrist elite as is the case in Ethiopia, nations within the state aspire to have autonomy or even their own state to ensure their survival and right to self-government. Many have predicted the end of nationalism and the nation state (Gellner, 1983:119-22; Ohmae, 1996)) but as rightly argued by Walt (2011, 2019) and Nodia (2017) nationalism is here to stay. It has survived predications of its demise both from the right and the left and we must find ways to manage it.

Andreas Wimmer (2019) articulated the promise and strength of the nation state and its relations with the nation that goes back to the heart of the social contract. As reflection of nation's right to self-government:

'rulers should govern in the interest of the nation- ensure participation, equality, rule of law, and that as long as they did so, the ruled owed them political loyalty, soldiers, and taxes. Nationalism at once reflected and justified this new compact. It held that the rulers and the ruled both belonged to the same nation and thus shared a common historical origin and future political destiny. Political elites would look after the interests of the common people.'

Empires belong to no body while a nation with a state has an owner that is ready to fight and die for it.
According to Wimmer (2019), 'from 1816 to 2001, nation-states won somewhere between 70 and 90 percent of their wars with empires or dynastic states.' The implication is that the nation state has the owner nation that defends and is ready to die for it. The empire on the other hand is a loose conglomeration of several entities and is not cohesive enough to stand united in times of crisis: it could fall apart.

Ethiopia is in some ways very distinct compared to many countries in Africa as it has succeeded to defeat Italian colonialism in 1896 and the process of nation building was led by its own elite. The fact that it enjoyed centuries of civilization meant the different ethno national groups despite long years of interaction have retained their own distinct features including their language and identity. Ancient experiences under quasi autonomous kingdoms (Greenfield, 1965) also serve as framework to claim self-government at present. There is no English or other foreign language legacy unlike the other African countries where English or French is widely spoken and serves as unifying element cross cutting cleavages. Yet, though the nation building process was led by its own elite, in some ways it had similarities with the nation building process in Europe. It was led by a centrist elite that borrowed the European nation state as its model and brutally enforced it by liquidating quasi autonomous kingdoms that have existed for centuries towards the end of the 19th century. The left outs from the nation building process resent this and have continued to challenge the center. The debate between the centrist elite and the left outs is Ethiopia's major political paradox that the post 1991 federal system aimed to address but continues to challenge Ethiopia making it very fragile. While cleavages in other countries aim for integration, in Ethiopia they also aim at accommodation and exit: there are many nations in search of a state of their own. The Tigray Peoples Liberation Front, the Oromo Liberation Front, the Ogaden National Liberation Front are a few examples. And the more the elite in power tries to centralize, the more it provokes ethno national elites to push to the extreme. Whoever controls power in Addis Ababa often fails to understand Ethiopia's basic political paradox, not even Abiy who came to power from Oromia, the very region that abhorred centralization and federal intervention during the protests between 2015 and 2018. Political elites have little grasp of how much Ethiopia's social fabric has changed since 1970s when the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) articulated on the need to ensure equality among nationalities. Tigray was at the fore front of the struggle for self-government and played a key role in the post-1991 federal system but fears that new regime has since 2018 been engaged in centralization that compromises the federation. The debate on whether Tigray should remain within Ethiopia or begin a new path way has now taken center stage. The article analyses the current tension between the centrist elite and the push for de facto state from Tigray side and proposes alternatives that help resolve the tension.

Given that cleavage and how to manage it remains central to Ethiopia's political system, a short

explanation about the nature of the cleavage is thus in order. Ethnonational based political mobilization has continued to challenge the nation state and attracted experts to look for a distinct institutional arrangement to manage it. Politically mobilized identity based cleavages caused after the end of the Cold War to what Arend Lijphart (2002:37) dubs a 'wave of ethnic conflicts,' instead of the promised 'third wave of democracy' (Huntington 1991).According to Gurr (1993:19) mobilized ethno national minorities are regionally concentrated ethnic groups who once enjoyed or aim to enjoy political autonomy and have become part of states in which they constitute an ethnic minority through conquest, annexation, colonization or incorporation during the coercive process of nation building. They mobilize politically around assertions of national identity and self-determination. The goal of such mobilization is to recover the extensive self-government they claim to have enjoyed historically or they aspire to have it now. The degree of self-government they seek ranges from autonomy, national self-government to independent statehood. Countries that have politically mobilized ethno national groups cannot assume to have stable territory. The demands of such groups are framed and entrenched in relation to a particular territory and the very existence of the unity and territorial integrity of the state is put to test. Tigray regional state of Ethiopia following serious of measures taken by the federal government since 2018 is reconsidering whether it is worth staying within Ethiopia or should secede and have its own state.

The article contains three main sections. As already indicated, section one provides the socio political context and the introduction that sets the theme. Section two explains the push factors in detail going as far back as the factors that gave birth to Tigray nationalism and explains how it has been transformed itself across time. Section three explains the pull factors and the main actors as well as the current state of fact: a nation in search of its own state. The last section contains overall conclusion.The research is based on a field work conducted from February 15 to March 6, 2020 in Tigray regional state and extensive review of secondary sources related to the matter. The researcher spent three weeks in the capital, southern and western zones conducting eleven focus group discussion (each focus group consisting of ten participants) composed of experts, political party leaders, government representatives, historians, elders and youth. Thirty one in-depth interview were also held with academic experts from Mekelle University, political party leaders, business persons, former president and parliamentarians, journalists (VoA, BBC Tigrigna, bloggers), zonal and wereda heads. Secondary sources, internet sites, public consultations organized by different bodies were used as additional source of information.

1.2. The Emergence and Transformation of Tigray Nationalism

1.2.1 All Rounded Marginalization

Despite rich history and serving as foundation of the Ethiopian state for long, Tigray lost and remained a periphery in the last century. The period coincided with the emergence of the centralized and unitary state that replicated the European nation state. This development led to liquidation of semi-autonomous kingdoms in several parts of Ethiopia that along with the extreme centralization of power and the nation building project with its twin tools Amharic and Orthodox Christian religion led to the birth of the what the ESM framed in the 1960s as the 'nationality question' (Bahru, 2014).Extreme centralization of power and resources by the centrist ruling elite in Addis Ababa for the most part of the 20th century coupled with narrowly defined values of the state (mainly language) resulted in marginalization of Tigray. This gave rise

to wide spread dissatisfaction among the population and led to a popular rebellion in 1943 (*kedamay weyane, the first Weyane-revolt*) against the center that virtually expelled the imperial army from Tigray until the rebellion was crushed with the help of British aerial bombardments (Kassa, 2011; Gebru, 1991). Soccer teams and Bahli Tigray (Tigray Culture Troup) in the 1960s played a key role in reviving the Tigrigna culture, language and identity but was soon banned. In the ethno national reconstruction, symbols and unhappy interaction with the relevant other play a role. In the national soccer team tournament held in Addis Ababa in 1973, the Tigray team was given with the name 'Tigre' on it. Unhappy with the pejorative name that carries with it, the team changed it to 'Tigray. The consequence was severing. The team was banned (Alemseged, 1998: 100). This was a clear message from the political elite that controls power: it is us who define who you are, not the Tigrayan identifyingthemselves.

While the seeds of Tigray nationalism emerged a bit earlier, a more concrete and organized form of resistance against the center emerged with the establishment of the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) in 1975. The TPLF that currently rules Tigray played a key role in the post-1991 Ethiopia following the defeat of the military in 1991. The TPLF in coalition with other liberation forces from several parts of the country formed the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and overthrew the military regime in 1991 and restructured the Ethiopian state as a federal system by decentralizing power to nine constituent states largely defined by language and two autonomous cities (the Federal Capital Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa).The Nationality Question was widely shared by the ESM and leaders of nationalist movements though they disagreed on how to address it.Some chose to address it by subsuming it under class while ethno nationalist based parties like the TPLF that later evolved to liberation movements gave it a primacy and picked it as an organizing principle. One of the pioneer movements that long advocated the 'national oppression' thesis was the TPLF.

Historical, economic and cultural factors contributed to the prominence of the 'nationality question' in Tigray. Tigray was always a provincial contestant to the throne and by and large was ruled by its own nobility. Although the Tigrayans shared a long common history, church and culture with the Amhara, after the death of the last Tigrayan Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889) in 1889, Emperor Menlik II (1889–1913) seized the Solomonic title and turned the course of the empire to the South. His agreement with Italy to partition Tigray (since 1890 Eritrea, that constituted part of historic Ethiopia was alienated and ceded to the Italians) created a bitter legacy[1] and thereafter the region was marginalized in political, cultural and economic terms.

Although it was not organized on a nationalist basis against the imperial regime, the Rebellion in Tigray in 1943 shows how the Showan elite was meddling even at local level to further weaken its political rival. Slowly but surely Showa was making sure that its rival remains on its low ebb. With the banning of the army of notables and the centralization of the taxation system, Tigrayan notables' economic and political power was eroded and they lost what Gebru calls (1991:74) 'their corporate identity.' After that they only survived as individuals and with the 'grace' they obtained from Showa. Though the rivalry between Yohannes's heirs Gugsa and *Ras* Seyoum was a catalyst in weakening Tigray, each linked to the Showan dynasty through marriage and administering different parts of Tigray, their crisis also paved the way for manipulation and meddling. After Gugsa's death his son Haile Selassie, who saw his rival Seyoum favored by the Emperor defected and joined the invading Italian army. After 1941, *Ras* Seyoum insisted on the

restoration of Tigrayan autonomy that was never materialized. For one Tigray was now ruled by an appointee from Showa (Alemayehu Tenna) and for other local notables known for being rivals to Seyoum were appointed in different Awrajas. Seyoum was then a loser in between. Political and economic marginalization, loss of local autonomy, the harsh tax system, the introduction of Amharic in all state institutions and the unpopular governor were more than enough to create popular resentment that finally led to the unsuccessful resistance in 1943. Its failure sealed at least temporarily the struggle for centralization and autonomy in favor of the former.

It should be mentioned here that Tigrayan nationalism in particular the one led by the TPLF made it clear that it is the ruling elite that centralized power that has been identified as a source of the problem. As it had also class character, it did not have difficulty to find solidarity with the poor class (the peasant in particular) in other parts of the country. This was the basis for the formation of the EPRDF towards the end of the 1980s.For the most part of the 20th century Tigray remained politically isolated and was simply turned into a battle ground. Economically, while in general little investment and economic progress was common throughout the country, the position in Tigray was even worse and the elite in Tigray relates this to Tigray's 'political emasculation' and deliberate Showan plot. There was no single industrial development in the entire province even by Ethiopian standards. Culturally- Tigray although inhabited by Tigrayans of the same Semitic group with the Amharas, Tigrayans have their own distinct language and they are self-conscious. Yet they were forced to abandon the Tigrigna language in order to attend school and to secure a job. The ban was considered a symbol of Amhara domination. Taken in light of the assimilation agenda of the ruling elite, the measure was perceived as a symbol of Amhara domination and the eventual extinction of the Tigrayan identity. Language then became relevant not only in its own right but also as a surrogate for other issues like cultural preservation, equal access to state power and redefinition of the identity of the state. Political and economic marginalization and the historic divide and rule were to further fuel resentment. These were the reasons for the radicalization of the Tigrayan elite and the reason for the articulation of the question of nationalities in Ethiopia as part of the ESM (Markakis, 1998).

Distinct from the ESM whose predominant view was to shape the struggle of the oppressed people along class lines, some of the University students from Tigray formed an association, which quickly evolved into a party, the TPLF on February 1975. Its purported aim was to defend the identity, dignity and interests of their nationality. Yet in its early stages, the Tigrayan student movement was not homogenous. Evidence seems to indicate that it harbored three different political tendencies. The first was an option to construct what they coined as 'Greater Tigray' that includes the Tigrigna speakers both in Tigray and Eritrea. Perhaps this was the agenda of the little known Tigray Liberation Front (TLF). The second group was more in line with the ESM in suggesting that the liberation of Tigray should be seen in the context of liberation of Ethiopia, hence joined the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and not surprisingly assumed leadership positions (for example Birhane Meskel Reda, Dr. Tesfay Debesay, Zeru Kihishen). The third that was to be the basis of the TPLF focused on the liberation of Tigray both in terms of national and class, leaving the issue of post-independence Tigray unsettled (Adhana, 1998).

In the face of gloomy and unfavorable domestic and global circumstances those young university students were determined to bring to an end the misery. For the TPLF, as far as records show,

the Tigrayan cause was not defined as a colonial one, although it defined its struggle as one of self-determination of oppressed nationalities, secession/independence was an option but not its maximum objective. As one has rightly noted the post liberation political status of Tigray, separation and independence or a nation within a multination Ethiopian polity was not pre-determined, it was to be determined in due course (Medhaniye, 1992).As events unfolded, the Tigrayan cause seemed to have been settled under a federal system in a multinational Ethiopia up until the coming to power of PM Dr. Abiy Ahmed in 2018. Since then the uncertainty begins again. Thus Tigray nationalism is not static. It has continued to adapt itself largely in reaction to the centrist elite that controlled power in Addis Ababa. One could say 1975-1991 as reactive and assertive nationalism that aimed to ensure self-government ending a century of marginalization. 1991-2018, dormant nationalism as the TPLF transformed itself from an insurgent movement to one of the major actors of state power. With the centrist elite back to power again, Tigray nationalism is in search of its destiny.

1.2.2 Identity: Dignity and Collective Self esteem

The nation state as we know it in Europe that came following the collapse of empires with its assumption of a nation- group that shares the same language, culture, territory and history having its own government posed a number of challenges when transplanted to Africa. Although Ethiopia was not colonized, the state formation in the late 19th century and early 20th century however was the same model: the European nation state. This was particularly clear with the coming to power of Emperor Haile Selassie. The 'nation state' in Ethiopia was based on Orthodox Christian religion and Amharic language with the slogan 'one country, one flag, one language, one religion.' In as much as the European nation faced serious challenges by those who were left out in the nation building process (Quebec in Canada, Scotland in UK, Catalan in Spain, the Dutch in Belgium etc), left outs in Ethiopia as well challenged the centrist state. The centralized nation state was perceived as a mask for the 'centrist elite's' culture, language, religion to become the national culture, language or religion(Kymlicka, 2007: 61). In other words, the group, however narrowly found its base may be, which controls the state uses it not only to marginalize others from power and resources but also uses state institutions and policies to 'promote, consolidate and create a privileged position with respect to its identity and its manifestations. The state is defined as the expression of the group's nationhood' (Kymlicka, 2007:62). It is not surprising then that the legitimacy of the government, its institutions and the values upon which it is established remain one of the sources of tension and at times the cause of its terminal crisis. Thus in addition to the marginalization from power and resources, left outs struggle to regain lost social status and for group recognition and accommodation.

It is interesting to note that the Tigrayan resistance, particularly after the 1974 Revolution seems to rather challenge the well-settled idea that the centers of conflict in many parts of the world including Ethiopia are the ones that are politically and economically deprived (relative deprivation theory, Choudhry and Hume, 2001: 364)), in short the instrumental paradigm.[2]The gist of the argument is that ethno nationalist entrepreneurs mobilize their supporters with the end to secure access to power and resources. The most effective and devastating resistance against the center came from Tigray, the birthplace of Ethiopian civilization and the mother of the authors of the *Kibra Negast* that provided the legitimizing basis for the Ethiopian state. It did not come from Afar or Gambela, far more marginalized although all raised their arms against the center. This is not an attempt to deny the political and economic drives behind it. It is simply to

reiterate the point that not all political and economic deprivations automatically translate to ethno nationalist mobilization and lead to stiff resistance. The non-material aspects of conflict such as the search for dignity and collective self-esteem (Connor, 1994), rich history (we were great and we want to be great again), claims by ethno nationalist groups to regain lost social status (dignity), in response to historical traumas on their identity also (Horowitz, 1985:131; Fukuyama, 2018) need to be taken note of.[3] Besides, the passions and emotions attached to identity if fueled by some political and economic deprivations are more than enough to cause conflicts.The instrumentalists by focusing on the more objective variables: economic and political factors, two of the core causes of political instability, they often fail to consider the identity factor as a cause of tension in multicultural societies. They fail to recognize the 'passions and emotions' involved in inter group conflicts. As Walker Connor pointed, 'Men do not allow themselves to be killed for their interests; they allow themselves to be killed for their passions' (Connor, 1994: 206). Those that put too much emphasis on the objective (resource conflict) factors often have troubles understanding the role of identity, prestige, social and political status to conflict and those who emphasis too much on primordial/identity factors as well have troubles understanding the fact that political and economic factors are often part of the political game.

1.2.3 The Role of the Political Elite: Framing Popular Causes

The role of the political elite remains critical, if not decisive in articulating injustice into a political project. As a contestant to state power with its base in Tigray, TPLF had a rich historical resources to mobilize and frame its cause. As argued by Anderson and Choudhry, cleavage or ethno national diversity is not destiny. It needs an agency- political entrepreneur that reads into the political dynamics of the country and frame the issues in a way that appeals to their audience. The process of transformation from a dormant diversity to a political project is heavily associated with the nation building project pursued by the central government including the forceful annexation of previously semi-autonomous territories, the imposition of common national identity including language, centralization of power and resources. *Left outs* from the process design a defensive response to central state led project of nation building (Anderson and Choudhry, 2019: 381). In other words ethno national based cleavage and political mobilization is often a *reaction to centrist elite's project* and a search for finding a political and identity space (Cederman and Wimmer, 2010:87). It is a sub state nationalism framed in reaction to the central government's nationalism. There are thus competing nationalisms within the nation state that if not addressed will led to violence, civil war and state fragmentation. Both are pursued in the name of nationalism and have the potential to fuel the passions and emotions from both sides of the political spectrum to cause havoc and even genocide. This one may call is a *clash of nationalism* one pursued by the central government in the name of nation building, patriotism, civic nationalism, unity, ensuring territorial integrity, (*Ethiopia Tikdem)* Ethiopia First) or *Medemer* (the jargon and new version of Ethiopia Tikdem by prime minister Abiy and the other by the ethno nationalist elite. The ethno nationalist elite frames the centralized nation state as a mask for the 'centrist elite's culture, language, religion to become the national culture, language or religion (Kymlicka, 2007:62).

Exclusion, discrimination and subjugation do not translate automatically to political mobilization nor is the presence of diverse groups alone enough cause. Anderson and Choudhry rightly pointed the role of political entrepreneurs in 'framing of narratives' (Anderson and

Choudhry, 2019:383) and one should add it is a counter narrative that aims to deconstruct the centrist narrative. 'Political entrepreneurs are critical to the success of political mobilization by framing the case (of ethno nationalism), developing strategies, and marshalling resources' (Anderson and Choudhry, 2019: 382). They play a critical role in articulating and framing alternative narratives about the past (land and property looted, women raped, autonomy enjoyed and how it was brutally annexed), present and the future (fears and possible hopes) addressing the grievances and the entitlements of the population they claim to represent including territorial entitlements. Through that a plan is set, an ideology is framed for a concrete action. Gurr (1993) argues that the conflict between competing nationalisms typically escalates in stages: the demands begin with less radical reform in non-violent form and when the state fails to respond, it evolves and begins to be radical and violent and finally to rebellion in reaction to the regime's failure to respond to each modest demand. State policy and action or inaction is thus a major factor that can escalate or mitigate ethno nationalism. As argued later, the new government's narrative and action since it assumed power in 2018 is a major driver and reason for the transformation of Tigray nationalism. It has ignited it.

While it is partly true that ethno-nationalism or when it converts itself fully to nationalism it is a tool for mobilization for the masses to be mobilized, there should be some material or other identity interests of their own in the cause to be promoted. The presence of some level of convergence between the elites and those to be mobilized seems to be crucial. 'A stronger convergence of interest of the elite and the masses leads to more effective political mobilization and conversely, divergence of the interests of the elite and the masses leads to less effective political mobilization'(Merera, 2003:35). That seems to be the link between the elite, its social base, ethnicity and nationalism. As one author eloquently describes it the 'human behavior [the primordial aspect] provides what he calls the 'necessary condition' but elite framing and ideology, political and economic factors convert this into 'sufficient condition' (Kellas, 1991:160).

By creating coalitions with other 'partners,' the TPLF was able to forge EPRDF in its bid to control the political space in Ethiopia after it controlled the whole of Tigray. EPRDF became the most dominant force after the change of government in 1991 and responsible for state restructuring along federalism that grants nationalities with self-rule and a sense of fair representation at federal level. As articulated by several experts however, the federal system and the promise for genuine self-rule at regional state level was curtailed by hegemonic and dominant party, democratic centralism and the developmental state (Aallen, 2002; Assefa, 2019). The extreme centralization of power at federal level, leadership incompetence and crisis within EPRDF and the regime's failure to introduce reform that match the demands and perception of marginalization created resentment and was one of the causes of the 2015 protests in Oromia and Amhara regions that resulted in the emergence of new leadership led by Dr. Abiy Ahmed within EPRDF.

1.2.4 Measures Taken by the Federal Government as the main Driver of Nationalism in Tigray

Dr. Abiy's ascension to power as Prime Minister saw a change in the power dynamics within EPRDF – the coming to power of the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO, later renamed as Oromo Democratic Party- ODP) - the party of the new Prime Minister. OPDO's win

to power was supported by the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM, later became Amhara Democratic Party-ADP) –both coalitions within EPRDF nicked named as 'Oro-Amhara' (representing the two ethno national groups-Oromo and Amhara). The new PM moved rapidly to open up the political space, by reshuffling the cabinet; ending the state of emergency, releasing thousands of prisoners; allowing banned and exiled political organizations and individuals to return home, restoring relations with Eritrea and lifting restrictions on internet and social media albeit only for a short period. Importantly, he proclaimed multiparty democracy as the only route for the country's political future. Exiled opposition groups and armed movements have now returned to the country and are engaged in some consultations with the aim of bringing legal and institutional reform and prepare the country for election.

Yet alongside the promising reforms, the country's political future also remains uncertain. 'When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power, people felt that he was going to be the redeemer of this troubled country. That was exactly one year ago. The euphoria has now evaporated and Ethiopia is officially a failed state by all indicators'[4] wrote a former Derg official Dawit W. Giorgis, a year after Dr. Abiy came to power. As the new leadership came from the same ruling party albeit from a different member of the coalition (ODP), internal tensions within the ruling party soon began to surface. Despite the promises for love and forgiveness, politics of revenge emerged soon when the new leadership put all the blame on one of its member coalitions: the TPLF. Both ODP and ADP were engaged in appointing individuals who had clear grudges against the TPLF. ADP appointed Brigadier General Asaminew Tsige, a retired general who was sentenced for life imprisonment accused of masterminding a failed coup in the early 2000s, as head of Security for the regional state. General Asaminew kept on making inflammatory speeches and organized regional security that in the end allegedly killed Amhara regional state leaders on June 22, 2019 and is suspected for the killing of the army chief General Seare Mekonnen and his colleague Major General Gezaei Abera in Addis Ababa on the same date- both former TPLF fighters.

Roads connecting the federal government with Tigray were blocked and the federal government kept silent (inaction) for nearly two years. Senior army and security heads affiliated to the TPLF were sacked and many of them put to jail. Funny enough some of them were accused for spying against the Eritrean regime and the then 'terrorist parties' Ginbot 7 and OLF. The federal government prepared a fake documentary that narrates as if all human right abuses throughout the country were committed by Tigrigna speakers. This looked like the federal government was preparing for an all-out war against Tigray and the TPLF.[5] The federal government established an un constitutional body 'Identity and Administrative Boundary Commission'[6]allegedly to dismantle the federal system identified by the centrist elite as the main source of Ethiopia's political crisis.'[7] Amidst the winds of change, the Eritrean regime declared 'Weyane/TPLF's game is over.'[8] As if this was not enough and regional states are independent, heads of Oromia and Amhara regional states frequently visited Eritrea's capital Asmera, details of which are little known to date. The TPLF was quick to smell what is coming from different sides and mobilized its supporters saying 'stay united or we will perish' and prepared itself for the worst. In an interview with Kjetil Tronvoll Dr. Abraham Tekeste Tigray's deputy President and former Minister of Finance between 2016 and 2018, stated:

'The blockage of main road infrastructure south and west through Amhara regional state, impedes the trade in/out of Tigray. All trade has to be routed through Afar road, which incurs a higher cost to Tigray producers and consumers. This is a federal highway, and the federal government accepts the blockage. The federal government thus *de facto* accepts that a partial embargo is put on us. …Tigrayan, non-Tigrayan, and foreign companies are all intimidated. If they want to do investments in Tigray, they will hear that this is not acceptable. If they are foreigners, they first try by persuasion to convince them to invest in other regions instead. If not heeded to, they will use measures that are more explicit. Like denying the Chinese business delegation to travel to Tigray, for instance local Ethiopian investors are directly threatened and intimidated to drop their plans… PM Abiy also threatened to hold back the federal grant to Tigray regional state. Abraham underlines: "He has not done it yet. But he has threatened us many times. He wants TPLF to join PP and submit to the new politics, stop criticizing his performances' (quoted in Kjetil Tronvoll, 2020).

On Addis Standard (2020), authors wrote:

'For TPLF, Abiy has committed the greatest betrayal against them. They conceded without bloodshed but were constantly demonized, attacked and bullied by their former comrades. They were blamed for all the bad acts and kicked out of federal power through dismantling EPRDF. They feel that Prosperity Party is threatening even their mandate to rule their own region with the rise of personal authoritarianism and continues silencing of regional voices.'

Furthermore, the federal government has not been able to ensure law and order throughout the country, the bare minimum role of the government.[9]One key feature of the new regime that came to power in 2018 is its tactic of playing deliberate ambiguity on most fundamental issues and leave matters for speculation. The list is very long: conducting or not conducting long overdue population census, on whether there will be elections in 2020, addressing road blockages, failure to ensure law and order, relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, agreements between rebel forces such as OLF and the government, fragmentation within the ruling coalition and the south in particular etc. Informal groups like organized youth (*Qeerroo, Fano, Ejeto* etc) and armed groups will then act and do the 'bad job' for the regime, sometimes on their own and at other times as agents of other political forces. Youth and armed groups literally replaced the government and took several measures. With the crisis mounting and since the coming to power of Abiy, these informal groups were replicated in other regional states. Dual and at times multiple actors exist. Formal state institutions are crippled and not properly functioning. There is as such no monopoly over the use of force. In the latest crisis that followed the assassination of a prominent Oromo Singer Haccaalu Hundessa in Addis Ababa on June 29, 2020, the government was not able to ensure law and order even in Addis Ababa. Vigilante groups organized themselves in different neighborhoods and began to protect themselves against protesters. Security was privatized and an inter communal violence was on its way.The informal actors dictate and are at times more influential than the formal institutions.[10]As a result, individuals and regional states are taking the law into their hands by way of self-defense. The perception that federal government cannot provide security to its citizens is very high, with it, its legitimacy going down fast. This is a paradox because the new leadership's main promise has been political liberalization, building institutions, respect for human rights and transition to democracy. Free movement of people and goods is now scare commodity and with it the economy has begun to decline.The failure on the part of the federal government to act on key issues is creating a vacuum and the vacuum is filled by militant ethno nationalists, youth leaders and the social media actors. The argument that Ethiopia is showing clear signs of a failed state (Dawit, 2019) makes sense. 'Abiy is a Mayor of Addis, not any more Ethiopia's leader as he has little control over the rest of the country' was the view of a security expert during the field work. The

amassing of illegal army and weapons by individuals and regional states can only be seen as mechanism of self-defense. Ordinary citizens are looking for alternative protection and security, Tigray regional state has so far remained peaceful and stable and Tigrayans are watching carefully amidst the anarchy in the country.

One also needs to mention that many of the prime minister's reform-oriented decisions are made while bypassing pre-existing institutions such as federalism, parliament and the party machinery.[11]To be sure, his predecessors also sidelined such institutions, but then at least the party had some life; now it seems in disarray. Institutions and the party have been victims of the new leadership: both are neglected and this has consequences. The federal government has already removed heads of five regional states (Gembella, the South, Afar etc) violating constitutional principles of self-rule. The lesson for regional states such as Tigray that aspire genuine autonomy is clear. Worse yet, PM Abiy dismissed Fetlework Gebre Egziabher, deputy of the TPLF and Minister of Trade and Industry[12] and appointed a disgruntled former TPLF Abraham Belay as Minister of Technology and Innovation. In a healthy federation, regional states designate their representatives at federal level. That is a key component of the shared rule principle. It is not the federal government that picks regional state representatives to the federal level. Earlier on the party was the source of mess and now it is personal rule. This is a paradox given that the new leadership came in from Oromia, the very regional state that opposed centralized federalism and central intervention. Indeed the speed at which the Abiy government's centralizing trend and its frequent intervention in regional state affairs does hint on his style of governance despite his ODP background. The Education road map issued by the federal government in May 2019 required the teaching of Amharic language in elementary schools in contradiction with the federal constitution that empowers regional states to choose their working language including the language of education. The ruling party now has taken over the mandate of appointing regional state heads and thus regional states are now officially and contrary to the constitutional principle of self-rule branches of Addis Ababa.[13]Ethiopia under Abiy is de facto unitary decentralized state, not a federation any more**.**He prefers to decide most controversial issues sidelining his own ministers and the parliament (the much acclaimed improved Ethio-Eritrea relations has never been debated and approved in parliament; details about the agreements with rebel forces such as Oromo Liberation[14] Front are little known by public institutions and continue to be contested). His predecessors may have centralized power using democratic centralism and the hegemonic party machinery while Abiy's style of governance is sheer personal rule. Part of western Oromia, large part of the South, parts of the Amhara and the Somali region continue to be under military rule. There were two emergencies during Haile Mariam's era (Abiy's predecessor), yet they were approved by the federal parliament albeit with some dissent. Abiy's military rule in no less than four regional states has no legal backing either from the federal parliament or regional state councils.

No surprise serious opposition against his rule is emerging from the Oromo elite[15] that had expectations that regional states would enjoy more autonomy than before as the popular slogan during the Oromo protests was 'we need genuine self-rule.'[16] It is too early to tell what the settled trend will be, but despite reformist posturing, early indicators show a typical big man in the making that will surely pit him with his Oromo constituency and other ethno national forces craving for a more genuine self-rule. The increased trends of centralization and undue interference in regional state affairs by the federal government continue to trigger regional state

concerns. Tigray, a regional state that has paid a huge sacrifice fighting seventeen years to dismantle military rule (1975-1991) and ensure self-government remains the only regional state that has resisted Dr. Abiy's meddling in regional states yet it continues to face mounting pressures.

1.2.5 A Federation without Tigray? Fear and an Uncertain Future within Ethiopia

Majoritarian Democracy, the 'Oro-Mara' Coalition and the six percent Narrative

Following the protests in 2015**,** the ODP and ADP created a hidden coalition within the EPRDF and evicted the TPLF from power and we now have now the ruling prosperity party (PP) without TPLF and a federation without Tigray, reminiscent of the pre-1991 Ethiopia. The new EPRDF leadership was then engaged in massively removing TPLF figures from federal positions, army and security sector. The new official narrative since 2018 is 'Tigrayan's constitute only 6%', we the Oromo and Amhara combined are a majority and should monopolise power. This development has ignited fear among the Tigrayans: is majoritarian democracy the only avenue and should it be exclusive? Are we going to accept this exclusive 6% narrative and perpetual minority status? If so, why should we stay in the union? These are serious issues that one continues to hear in Tigray. Of course in many healthy federations with deep divisions as Ethiopia, majoritarian democracy is not the best way to manage diversity. In Belgium where there exists tension between the French and Dutch speaking communities, the federal executive must be composed of equal number of representatives from both communities. In Switzerland where there exist French, Italian and German speaking communities, each segment is represented in the highest decision making body and the seven member presidency is not only representative of all communities but the chairmanship rotates annually to minimize fear of domination by one group (Lijphart, 1979:499; McGarry and O'Leary, 2008). In short, a consociational democracy where different communities are assured of representation (in many cases equal) in federal institutions along with veto power on issues that matter most to ethno national groups serve as mitigating institutional arrangements (Lijphart, 1977). In the literature, these institutional arrangements are called consociational federations that are distinct from majoritarian based federations. Besides independent institutions such as courts, election bodies, human right institutions counter majoritarian institutions and ensure rights of citizens and minorities. In the absence of these institutions, the exclusionary measures taken by the federal government ruthlessly implementing the six percent narrative is at the moment reinforcing Tigrayan nationalism: what is for us in Addis Ababa? The federal government has made itself *irrelevant*was the argument of Girmay Berhe an ideologue of the new party- Tigray Independent Movement during an interview in March 2020*.* Ethno national conflicts are often related to groups demands for more autonomy and the demands may range from accommodation, self-rule, representation and could extend up to secession. It is often triggered by the perceived or real threat coming from the central government in which the group's political, economic, cultural survival is put at risk either by the action or omission of the center (Erk and Anderson, 2009) or could relate to fear of interference in local affairs. Given that many of the leaders of the regional states have been removed by the ruling party (prosperity party- PP) and the party follows centralized process of appointment, in addition to marginalization, there is also fear that PP may at some stage meddle in internal affairs of Tigray regional state. Indeed lately it has appointed PP for the regional state. It also established a fake group called '*fenkil'*) that aim to lead urban unrest laying the foundation for PP to set its foot in Tigray. It should be mentioned that in

addition to the sham nature of the federations, it was the effort to centralize by the ruling elite that triggered the failure of the former USSR and Yugoslav federations (McGarry and O'Leary 2009: 11). There is thus an interesting parallel in Ethiopia at present: the more PP tries to centralize, the more it triggers ethno nationalism and with it comes threats of secession.

1.2.6 Selective Justice and the Assassination of Senior Army Generals

Following the coming to power of the new EPRDF leadership, the initial public speeches and visits to nearly all regional states was reconciliatory and impressive. But that was only short lived. A document was prepared by the federal government and aired by public TV stations at the same time. The message was clear: the major human right abuses were committed by 'Tigrigna speakers.' In his speech to Ethiopian Diaspora community in the USA in 2018, the PM said, 'it was 27 years of darkness.' While it was possible to bring to justice all those involved in human right abuses and corruption, the new regime selectively targeted Tigrayans and sent many of them to jail. As if this was not enough, on June 22, 2019, the army chief General Seare and his colleague Major General Gezaei Aberra were killed in mysterious circumstances and the way the cases were handled by the federal government in general and the justice sector in particular sent a shock on Tigrayans everywhere. It was an indicator of what is at store in Addis Ababa. The entire regional state is still in a shock and there is hope that something will be done to disclose what is kept as mysterious so far. Federal government and Tigray regional state relationships since then is broken, Addis Ababa is a constant reminder of that horror.

1.2.7 Tigray Nationalism as a Reaction

'...after many years of nationalist wars in Eritrea and Tigray, *Adi Abo* (fatherland) is a fine word that thrills no one except the political entrepreneurs, and not all of them, for that matter… it is hard to speak about the existence of national consciousness unless it is entertained by the popular masses. That it has remained sheer musings of the elites in Eritrea and Tigray indicates its under developed nature' (Alemseged, 1998: 169).

This was what Alemseged wrote in 1998, a few months before the eruption of the Ethio-Eritrea war. Tigray nationalism is transforming itself owing to internal political dynamics within Tigray and in reaction to the threat coming from the federal government as illustrated above.

The meta political crisis at national level by creating a clear sense of marginalization and fear is the main driver of Tigrayan nationalism. As is well known in the literature, ethno nationalism and identity is shaped in the process of interaction with the relevant other and it is often a reaction (Brass, 1991). It gets ignited when confronted by the 'other.' As elaborated below political elite in Tigray including the TPLF are closely following these political developments and building different scenarios. Old guards of the TPLF and ordinary men and women in Tigray still hope that if necessary political negotiations are held and if ethno national forces come together under one umbrella as a loose political coalition, there is a possibility to maintain the unity of Ethiopia while at the same time ensuring ethno national groups a genuine self-rule as promised in the federal constitution (interview with former TPLF figures, March 23, 2020). Others think Ethiopia's political crisis is in paralysis beyond repair with two immediate possibilities: collapsed state like Somalia where the federal government will exist only in name (as in the federal government of Somalia international community helping to maintain it) but has little control over the rest of the country or fragmentation as in former USSR and Yugoslavia. Either way they argue there is an urgent need to build de facto state of Tigray. Secession is not

immediate but they think it will come on its own as a consequence of either Ethiopian state collapse or fragmentation.[17]We also have the confederation option who thinks in much the same way European Empires collapsed in the 19th century Europe and resulted in many nation states, the Ethiopian Empire is facing same challenge and confederation could delay the fragmentation, if the center is willing to concede more autonomy to regional states. Two minority extremes need abrief mention: a few ones like Arena party still hope Ethiopian unity will be sustained at all costs and on the other extreme we have elite groups (broadly called *Agaezian* movement with many factions in it) who think Tigrigna speakers on both sides of the Mereb river will come together withstanding Italian and Emperor Menlik's created walls. The latter envisages a bigger Tigrigna speakers' nation state in the Horn. The following section illustrates the different reactions.

1.2.8 Regional and International Actors

Following the election of Dr. Abiy Ahmed as chairman and PM of Ethiopia, there has been a visible political development that aimed to bring 'peace' in the Horn of Africa.[18] Senior Eritrean officials visited Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa and then PM Abiy made a surprising visit to Asmera in 2018/2019. Esayas Afworki, President of Eritrea was quick to respond and made a visit to Ethiopia. Borders between the two countries (Humera, Zalambessa, Rama, Afar area) were subsequently opened making free movement of people possible across the two countries. The opening of the Zalambessa front on the new year of Ethiopia Meskerem 1, 2011 E.C (September 11, 2019) was in many ways symbolic showing how much the people and the army on both sides were really sick and tired of the two decade old border closure. This was indeed PM Abiy's New Year gift to Ethiopia and Eritrea.

But the hope for peace and open border policy was only for a short time. Towards mid 2019, the borders were closed from the Eritrean side and to date no official explanation has been given. Adding fuel to injury, senior figures from Oromia and the Amhara regional states visited Asmera at times without any accompanying figure from the Ethiopian foreign affairs. It is to be noted that in a federation, regional states may have a limited autonomy to conduct political and economic relations with foreign countries but that is often done with the consent of the federal government. Nothing was also reported to the parliament on the details of the agreements made between the two governments. It was left to the leader's of both countries. Ethiopian constitution requires that any international agreement concluded by the executive has to be submitted to the federal parliament (Article 55 sub 12). For the TPLF that remained suspicious from the outset, the secret nature of the agreement and the frequent visit by regional states sent the message that the Addis Ababa- Asmera- Bahr Dar axis is a secret pact to isolate and attack the TPLF. For many Tigrayan observers even outside of the TPLF, the post 2018 political developments in Ethiopia and the Horn is reminiscent of the years that followed the death of Emperor Yohanes IV.[19] Internal and external forces are doing their best to attack the TPLF and marginalize Tigray. Asif that is not enough and as illustrated in the sections above, the federal government took several measures that reinforce Tigray's isolation and accuse Tigrigna speakers' of corruption, serious crimes[20] and branded 'the last 27 years as era of darkness.'[21] By doing so, federal government leaders are making Ethiopia irrelevant in the eye of the TPLF and the Tigrayan elite. As many experts on comparative federalism warn, if one wants to manage ethno nationalism and secessionist threats successfully, federal government need to follow double strategy: genuine self-rule combined with fair representation in federal institutions

(Watts, 2008). Either of the measures alone is not enough and could even aggravate secession. The federal government is doing exactly the opposite of that. Ethno nationalism is many ways a *reaction* to federal government policy. An accommodative federal government policy reduces the resources available for political entrepreneur's mobilization. An unfair federal government policy on the contrary fuels ethno nationalism by providing resources for mobilization. While the federal government has the mandate to make suspects accountable through proper system of due process, the dismissal and marginalization of TPLF and Tigrigna speakers from federal intuitions simply leaves little option for the Tigrayan elite: why stay in a federal union that dismisses and marginalizes its leaders and engages in conspiracy to attack siding with international and regional actors? Right or wrong, this is the perception on the mind of Tigrayans. This is the widely shared narrative in all the focus group discussions held in Mekele in March 2020.

1.2.9 The Promise of Nation state that can provide better security and dignity

The combined effect on the ground is that while many may accuse of the TPLF as hard core ethno nationalist force, the TPLF is now among the few moderate forces in Tigray sandwiched between a rock and hard place. The young generation sees the post 2018 political development in Ethiopia as against Tigray's interest.[22] There is thus strong Tigrayan elite based ethno nationalism in the making with many of them aiming exit as an option. In the sections that follow, the views of some of them is presented. The costs for Tigrayans to keep Ethiopia united are high and the reward is central government design that aim Tigray's emasculation, marginalization and neglect: should we then stay in the Union? There is a very high sense of anger and sense of betrayal.

1.2.9.1 Tigray Independence Movement (TIM)

According to TIM, the TPLF may have been an ethno national force that aimed to address Tigrayan nationalism within multination federation, yet, TIM (and two other parties: Baytona and Salsay Weyane) accuses the TPLF of abandoning Tigrayan nationalism as over the years it has shifted more to class based political movement strengthening the class element at the cost of abandoning Tigray nationalism.[23]They further accuse the TPLF of focusing massive development projects throughout the country abandoning its own social base and political autonomy. TIM thus aims to finish an unfinished project: ensure Tigray's independence from what it calls '*Bituto* (unsustainable) Ethiopia.' TIM and its supports think Ethiopia is a liability to Tigray. Although Tigray is Ethiopia's foundation, it is a paradox that the centrist political elite considers Tigray and Tigrayans as 'strangers.'[24] They provide mounting evidences for this: deliberate neglect of Tigrayan people, their contributions and their leaders' role. The public and main stream media present as if there has never been an Ethiopian emperor between Emperor Tewodros and Menlik; Yohanes IV is almost abandoned from the narrative. The logical question then is why would Tigrayans talk about Emperor Tewodros and Menlik, we just have to reciprocate in kind. Lately former PM Meles (1991-2012) and many of his colleagues are portrayed as enemies and their era openly presented as '27 years of darkness. Needlessto mention of the political and economic marginalization and conflicting vision of the political elite in Ethiopia. The centrist elite has this never ending dream of making Ethiopia 'an Amhara state.'[25] OroMara is not any better- it is a majoritarian chauvinism slowly evolving into an Amhara elite narrative. Finally, Ethiopia is the last surviving empire that has been challenged by several nations aspiring to be states. Same way many European empires collapsed and led to many nation states, Ethiopia will

soon face or is already facing same challenge. TIM's leader has written a book outlining the detail program and strategy to achieve the goal[26] and does not rule out the merger of the Tigrigna speakers on both sides of the Mereb river (Tigray and Eritrea) who he thinks have been victims of Emperor Menlik's power intrigue- as part of his project to consolidate Showan elite, he deliberately separated the two Tigrigna speakers despite his outstanding victory over the Italians in 1896. This state of fact, he thinks should be changed by the new generation. It should be noted that since the last five years there has been an active social media based movement called *Agaezian* (with strong presence in Israel, Europe and the United States) that promotes the unity of the Tigrigna speakers in Tigray and Eritrea. Its end goal is to establish a nation state of Tigrayans inclusive of those in Tigray and Eritrea. In an interesting book, Alemseged Abay (1998: 174) wrote '*people* on both sides of the Mereb perceive a common trans-Mereb identity. Prior to the 1960s, too *political elites* from both sides entertained similar notions of identity. The political actors of the post -1960 era, though perceive divergent senses of identity.' The current movement is to change this mentality within the political elite and it remains to be seen how this will evolve. Certainly with the frustration of the youth in Eritrea and the incompetent leadership in the federal level in Ethiopia, youth on both sides of the Mereb are looking for new political options. Yet political developments both in Addis Ababa and Asmera will also shape the political destiny of the *Agaezian* movement.

1.2.9.2 Salsay Woyane (the Third Woyane)

This is a party established by young Tigrayan intellectuals who were very active in the social media for almost a decade now. The party in principle is in favour of the existing federalism but it thinks it is not enough. It favors a loose federation something close to a confederation with a minimum role of the union government in the area of defense, foreign affairs etc. It claims it is a social democratic party and supports a strong Tigray regional state with its base in Tigray that ensures the unity, land and territorial integrity of Tigray and the cohesion and unity of the Tigrayans. If the federal government is not willing to concede to a more loose form of federation and slowly to a confederation, the party does not rule out secession. The party claims that it is aware of the failed secession projects in Eritrea and South Sudan where independence did not bring democracy, freedom and economic development and yet thinks that Tigray is not south Sudan or Eritrea. Both states failed because they are not nation states but host too many smaller groups thus causing political and identity based rift from within.[27]

1.2.9.3 Baytona (Greater Tigray)

Another group of young Tigrayan intellectuals have established Baytona with its ideology that aims to look into indigenous knowledge and values to build institutions than foreign sources of either the left or right. It is very critical of foreign based ideology and favors indigenous knowledge hence the name Baytona –referring to the age old source of customary law enacted by Tigrayan elders- the Bayto. Baytona thinks that the current federal system is not enough to ensure self-rule to regional state and like Salsay Weyane proposes a more loose confederal type of government in Addis Ababa. It officially proclaims that the boundary of Tigray is Alwaha (10kms away from Woldia in the South and Lemalimo in the west and produces historical evidence to demonstrate that in addition to the wishes of the people.[28]Indeed 16th to 19th century traveller's account show Lasta, Kobo, Semen, Wolkite, Tsegede were all territories of Tigray before they were annexed by the centrist elite in the early 20th century (Michael Russel, 1833:79; Gobat, 1850:42-43;Barradas 1634).

In sum, the political parties and Tigrayan elite currently propose: an independent Tigray (TIM and some elites associated with it); de facto state (elites and TPLF's current leadership; confederation (elites and the two ethno nationalist parties) and lastly democratized Tigray as part of Ethiopia (Arena and a few centrist elites).

1.3 Tigray: a nation in search of a state?

According to Tronvoll, if the present trend continues, Tigray fulfils to be a nation and could unless managed well end up becoming a new state. It has:

> 'a commonly shared historical narrative and myth of origin stretching back two millennia or more; a cohesive identity, common language and culture; and a homogenous population; a historical homeland saturated with blood by sacrifices made to defend it from foreign aggression throughout centuries; a political consciousness shaped by internal aspirations and external marginalization; an economy and livelihood with great potential, but perceived to be held back by outsiders; and deep-rooted warrior culture and military capacity, in the face of felt victimhood and external security threats' (Kjetil Tronvoll, 2020).

As illustrated in this article, Tigray has all the fundamentals needed for a robust nationalist movement to take root that may depending on the state policy at federal level evolve into an autonomous regional state within federal Ethiopia, de facto state (as outlined by the TPLF) or secede as articulated by parties such as Baytona, Salsay Weyane and TIM.

Salsay Woyane and Baytona are led by young intellectuals who have been critical of the extreme centralization of the federal system and TPLF's shift from nationalism to class based politics (Revolutionary Democracy and Developmental state enforced by democratic centralism). While it is too early to conclude, the emergence of radical parties that promote Tigray nationalism, all of them not ruling exit as an option, shows the *political dynamics* in Tigray caused by the policies of the federal government. Tigray has also theexperience of self-government over the last two decades and half (including the experience of de facto self-governance during the civil war 1975-1991 that was the basis for the narrative of coming together federal design in the preamble to the 1995 constitution). Regional and international actors also aim to isolate Tigray and survival by any cost is the reaction. The events in Gondar, Woldia and Metema at the height of the Amhara protests (2015-2016) resulting in death and displacement of hundreds of thousands of Tigrayans, the road blockades meant to stop mobility of labor and capital between Amhara and Tigray regional states and the deliberate silence[29] on the part of the Amhara and federal governments to address that serves as fertilizer to Tigray nationalism. The rise of the Oro-Mara- coalition perceived as deliberately exclusive project of the federal government and subsequent expulsion of Tigrayans from federal government makes staying in the union hopeless. The assassination of senior army generals and lack of transparency and accountability to bring suspects to justice, and subsequent threats by the federal government[30] on their own are more than enough to cause resentment and mobilization. It should be noted that in many ways ethno nationalism is a *reaction* that gets ignited from deep sleep when it is targeted. The resentment is deep: 'both the federal government and the Amhara regional state by committing or omission have made Ethiopia *irrelevant* to Tigrayans. In the opinion of a senior analyst, 'If I cannot do business and live peacefully in the country, what is Ethiopia to me.'[31] Beyond that these acts are also constant reminders of the Derg era politics in

the making *in a new form*.[32] Tigray's relative homogeneity and social cohesion compared to other regional states, experiment with self-government since 1991 (regional state institutions, media and flag, cultural renaissance: *Ashenda, Meskel,* regional state map, powerful art and music that narrates Tigray nationalism including the mushrooming social media activists (*digital Weyane*), newspapers and books in Tigrigna are also factors that are serving as a basis for the transformation of Tigray nationalism and the emergence of Tigray nation in search of its own state. There is as well emerging new educated elite that along with the fast urbanization is facilitating nationalism. Unless something is done, the possibility of conflict between the federal government and the regional state is inevitable. It is the most delicate moment for both the federal government and the regional state.

The new generation of Tigrayan elites think Ethiopia is irreparably damaged owing to incompetent leadership at federal level and lack of independent institutions. It is to be recalled, EPRDF was the machine that was running the country since 1991. The strong party overshadowed all federal and regional state institutions and its collapse owing to internal and external pressures over the last three years meant, the glue that kept centrifugal forces is gone. Worse is the federal government is not seen as inclusive and impartial*.* There is high sense of insecurity and mistrust that is serving as driver for regional states to look for own institutional avenues to defend themselves and their citizens against any attack. Tigray already thinks the attack has started since PM Dr. Abiy came to Power: *Mekete* (self-defence)was the major theme of the 45th anniversary of the TPLF in the month of February, 2020. The emerging narrative is Ethiopia is a collapsed state as in Somalia and Libya (where the international community will continue to deal with although federal government has little control outside of Addis Ababa) or disintegrated state as in USSR or Yugoslavia that is in the making. The Ethiopian nation state is gone by 1991. The effort to save Ethiopia as a multination federation between 1991 and 2018 also failed.[33] According to many participants of the focus group discussion, *violence and state collapse* in Ethiopia is inevitable. The signs of state failure have been on the menu for the last four years. Thus *de facto state of Tigray* is a means of survival ought to be created by default. For some, this is not even an option; it is the only means of ensuring Tigrayans survival.[34] This is also reinforced by the age old demand for genuine self-government and building Tigray identity. 'Self-government and Tigray identity is not up for compromise.'[35] To this Medhaniye Tadesse, an expert on geopolitics of the Horn adds the Horn of Africa and in particular Ethiopia is unique with many nations in a state over the last fifty years waged war against central governments to find a political space. Two of them Eritrea and South Sudan have made it. Others are on their way unless the respective governments in the capital concede and grant a more genuine self-government at regional state level and more inclusive federal institutions.[36]The federal government, international and regional actors are thus knowingly or unknowingly reinforcing Tigray nationalism by targeting it. 'Tigrayans have no illusion about their identity and their relations with Ethiopia. But one may feed and care for a pet dog, yet if the pet gets infested with deadly disease, you do not any more keep it' was the response from one of the Baytona leaders.[37]As the saying goes, all kept constant (leadership quality, internal cohesion, structural problems in the state etc), the more one attacks ethno nationalism, the stronger it becomes- an attack is a natural fertilizer for mobilization. The above political development in Tigray puts the TPLF that for long articulated TPLF as 'ethno nationalism in form, class in content' (to mean ethno nationalism is an instrument, not a goal hence its focus on eradicating poverty- the number one enemy of Ethiopia*)* between a rock and a hard place. If its feels it is losing its social

base to the newly emerged radical parties, it will surely be pushed towards strong ethno nationalism abandoning its leftist ideology. Tigray nationalism appears at its peak and is not anymore imagined- it is getting concrete: map of Tigray is sold by way of souvenir in many shops in Mekelle. Military parades have become common phenomena. Artists seem to be reading the same book: singing very powerful songs that mobilize the people. Social media activists (popularly called *digital weyane*) actively promote Tigray nationalism and symbols of the struggle. For a careful observer, it is easy to smell a state in the making as if it does not care about Ethiopia's existence. As the events related to the 45th anniversary of the TPLF show, *single, uncalculated mistake by either the federal government or any other force is more than enough to ignite a civil war*. As the chairman of the TPLF stated in his speech 'either the Ethiopian parliament should intervene and stop the madness at federal level or should make history acknowledging Tigray's independence.'[38]In any case whether Tigray nationalism will settle for a multination federalism, resort to greater Tigray unifying with the Tigrigna speakers in Eritrea, secede or remain de facto state as it is now remains an open question. With increased centralization of power and intervention in regional state affairs fragmentation seems on its way.

Conclusion and the Way Out

As elaborated in the article, there is a growing tension between the federal government and Tigay regional state. The possibility of an open confrontation is very high and both sides need to resort to political dialogue and settlement of the basic issues. It is possible to mitigate the emerging tension. The solution is for the federal government and the regional state to conduct a dialogue and reach at a political settlement and address outstanding issues and address Tigray's concerns. First and for most, the federal government should end the idea of encircling Tigray (the Addis Ababa, Asmera,[39]Bahr Dar Axis) and submit to parliament whatever agreements that are made between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Such a measure will surely diffuse tension between Tigray and the federal government. It is indeed treason to cooperate with a foreign force and aim to attack your own regional state. Right or wrong, from Tigray's side that is a widely shared view. Secondly, the federal government should promote more accommodation, not isolation of Tigray. Isolation accelerates secession, not unity. TPLF remains the only legitimate force in the regional state and has the legal and constitutional mandate not only to rule the regional state but to designate Tigray's representatives in the federal government. Doing otherwise simply violates the constitutional principle of shared rule and self-rule and can only aggravate tension and friction between the federal government and the regional state. For every negative measure taken by the federal government, the political temperature of nationalism in Tigray increases and could lead to unintended consequences. Thirdly, the federal government should ensure free mobility of labour and capital not only between Amhara and Tigray regional states but throughout the country. Failure to address this has serious consequences both politically and economically. The political message is federal government is too weak and thus emboldens informal groups to take over roles replacing the formal institutions leading to anarchy and fragmentation. The economic cost is very clear and needs little explanation. What Ethiopia needs at the moment is bridges, not walls and if PM Dr. Abiy is serious with his speech that repeatedly focused on building bridges, it is time to demonstrate that now. Fourthly, given the mistrust between the federal government and the regional states, in the short run a more loose confederation in which decision making at federal level is more consultative and inclusive of all regional state actors could serve as a trust building process with a possibility of returning to

normal federation at some stage. The OroMara project is majoritarian and exclusive one, and many political actors are asking: what is it for the Somali, Tigrayan, Afar and the 56 groups in the South?

Fifthly, the federal government should establish a very clear principle based intergovernmental relations (IGR) for dealing with joint mandates as outlined in the federal constitution. Until recently, IGR was undertaken through the party apparatus. With the crisis within EPRDF, its transformation to prosperity party (PP), federal government- Tigray relationships have been severed. With the killing of two senior army Generals (General Seare Mekonen- the chief of the army and Gezaei Aberra), and subsequent dismissal of TPLF leaders from the federal government and Addis Ababa city government, TPLF leadership does not anymore think Addis Ababa is safe place to do business with the federal government. Trust is already broken. Mistrust and antagonism is the order of the day. How do then federal government and regional states deal their affairs short of war? The only acceptable institutional arrangement is the system of intergovernmental relations.A competent leadership at federal level that can provide political solution that match the challenges is missing but there is still a narrow possibility to disarm ethno nationalism peacefully. Ethno nationalism and state policy are inversely related. Repressive state policy fuels ethno nationalism while accommodative state policy has the potential to reduce it into adormant force.

Thus Ethiopia needs to adopt what Watts (2008:183) calls double strategy (genuine self-rule and inclusive federal government with main actors included at federal level) to get out of the political mess. Contrary to centralized presidential federation that may put self-rule under peril, what mobilized ethno national groups need is a genuine self-rule at regional state level and a more consociational and inclusive federal government at the center. *Mobilized ethno national group that feels less represented in federal institutions has little incentive to stay in the union unless it is assured of some level of influence or even a veto at the center.* To minimize the growing mistrust between the federal government and regional states and build trust, indeed key decisions that affect the country and the regional states need to be decided by a consensus between federal government and regional state leaders. An intergovernmental political forum composed of the PM and regional state leaders need to be established, if the current stalemate is to be resolved short of fragmentation and civil war.

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[1] Since then an artificial Eritrean identity was to be constructed along the colonial lines that finally led to one of the longest 'civil wars' in Africa. Colonial coincidence combined with Menlik's willful act caused the historic split (now among Eritreans and Tigrayans who were by then one) of Tigrayan identity to date. Besides, the country's major outlet to the sea was to be blocked. See Gebru, *supra*, 41. For more on the TPLF seeYoung, (1997); Aregawi (2004).

[2] Such thinkers are called instrumentalists because they view religious and ethnic based mobilization by groups as a means to achieve some political and economic goal and having no relevance thereafter. Included in this category are Markakis (1998); Abbink (1998: 60).

[3]Tigrayans had much to recite from history for ethnic mobilization, apart from the harsh state policy mainly reflected in the form of political and economic marginalization and cultural suppression. But more than these factors, there existed national consciousness, that is, an elite group aware not only of its distinctness and the fact that Tigray has become a deliberate target of Showan muscle but also of providing leadership and translating these collective grievances into action (Alemseged, 1998).

[4] Dawit Woldegiorgis, 'Ethiopia: on the Brinks' https://borkena.com/2019/04/10/ethiopia-a-country-on-the-brinks-by-dawit-woldegiorgis/ 10 April, 2019

[5]Nebiyu Sihul MikaelIs Tigray really a drop in the bucket for Abiy's administration? https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/01/17/is-tigray-really-a-drop-in-the-bucket-for-abiys-administration/ January, 17, 2019.

[6] As per the federal constitution Article 48 disputes and misunderstandings between two or more regional states are expected to be resolved amicably by the regional states. If that fails the matter has to be submitted to the House of Federation. The commission takes away the mandate of the House of Federation and is un constitutional. See Yohanes Anberbir The Reporter (Amharic) https://www.ethiopianreporter.com/article/14706

[7] Throughout the public and private media in Ethiopia, the dominant narrative for the last one year and half has been 'the source of all evil in Ethiopia is ethnic federalism.' One of the main opinion makers on this- former Derg official wrote 'ethnic politics that has been institutionalized by the ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) for the last 28 years was the single cause…' Dawit Woldegiorgis, 'Ethiopia: on the Brinks' https://borkena.com/2019/04/10/ethiopia-a-country-on-the-brinks-by-dawit-woldegiorgis/ 10 April, 2019.

[8] See http://awate.com/the-game-is-over/ speech by Eritrean President on June 20, 2018.

[9]Dawit wrote 'Ethiopia under Abiy is officially a failed state' https://www.bbc.com/amharic/news-47879359 10 April 2019

[10] Dawit Woldegiorgis, 'Ethiopia: on the Brinks' https://borkena.com/2019/04/10/ethiopia-a-country-on-the-brinks-by-dawit-woldegiorgis/ 10 April, 2019.

[11]Rene Lefort wrote 'Abiy Ahmed made … mammoth strategic errors. First, he believed that – or at least acted as if – he could carry out his agenda by relying only on his charisma, his immense popularity and a handful of stalwarts, a kind of "team Abiy". In short, he thought he could de-institutionalize his rule. There were even widespread rumors that he envisaged establishing a presidential system, a modern way to fit into the mold and don the apparel of the traditional "Big Man" – the "teleq säw" – in Ethiopian politics. In other words, he seemed to believe that he could bypass the EPRDF and the institutions – notably Cabinet, the ministries and Parliament – by acting unilaterally through his own micro-structure at the pinnacle of the state.' See Rene

Lefort, 'Ethiopia: Climbing Mount Uncertainity' https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/ethiopia-climbing-mount-uncertainty/ October 21, 2018.

[12] Abiy sacks Trade and Industry Minister, Ethiopian Moniter https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2020/01/22/pm-abiy-sacks-trade-and-education-ministers/ January 22, 2020.
[13] See internal rules of the ruling prosperity party.
[14]Ermias Tesfaye, Two steps forward, one step back for Oromia? https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/06/07/two-steps-forward-one-step-back-for-oromia/ June 7, 2019.
[15] Oromo based TV channels such as Oromo Media Network led by the political activist Jowar Mohamed and ONN continue to severely criticize Abiy's government every day much more than other TV channels.
[16]*Fineline*, 19(947) FORTUNE, June 19, 2018, https://addisfortune.net/columns/the-speed-at-which-abiy-ahmed-takes-things-has-begun-to-unnerve-many/.
[17] Interview with Meresa Tsehaye a political science Associate Professor in Mekele University and Abraham Assefa, Mekele March 7, 2020.
[18] According to an interview with senior figures of the TPLF, Eritrean regime is considered as one of the main actors in the current Ethiopian political affairs and thus should be treated as such and not as a remote actor, February 17, 2020, Mekelle.
[19]See Afwork Gebreysus *Tobia* (Amharic old novel) unfounded and infamous accusation of Tigrayans. The Derg pursued an aggressive policy of resettlement that forced hundreds of thousands of Tigrayans to move to Gambella and Benishngul Gumuz. This policy combined with Derg's repressive policy and frequent air bombardments (the most tragic of which is the Hawzen massacre resulting in death of 2,500 people on a market day in June 22, 1989) of Tigray. Former President of Ethiopia Mengistu Haile Mariam said '…Tigray has never been self Sufficient in terms of food or finance…It cannot even cover the cost of papers and chalks for schools in the region.' See his speech on May Day Addis Zemen May 1, 1989, pp5-6. All these is interpreted by TPLF and Tigrayan elites as part of grand project 'drain the sea to kill the fish'. Long before Tigray was isolated and marginalized in the 20th century, starting from Emperor Susneyos all the way to last quarter of the 19th century, Tigray was the main source of (80 %) of government's revenue. See Dejazmach Zewde Gebre Selassie (2007:83).
[20]When the government mounted a purge of the security apparatus, Tigrayan officials were considered selectively targeted for prosecution, a perception enhanced in Tigray by the state propaganda documentaries that accompanied the crackdown: "Tigrigna-speaking prison officials and guards were the abusers of Amhara and Oromo prisoners," it said. Such gratuitous provocation enraged many.'Arefaine Fentahun, When a documentary plays the role of a prosecutorhttps://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2018/11/23/when-a-documentary-plays-the-role-of-a-prosecutor/ November 23, 2018; Maggie Fick, 'Nobody will kneel': Tigrayans defiant as Ethiopian leader cracks downhttps://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics-tigray/nobody-will-kneel-tigrayans-defiant-as-ethiopian-leader-cracks-down-idUSKBN1OF05Fhttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kh841D3YcaM&t=2634s
[21] See PM Abiy's speech to Diaspora Ethiopians in the United States
[22] The PM met Tigrayan business men and women in Addis and informed that he has everything in his hand to marginalize Tigray including cutting electricity, telephone services and the banking sector among other things.
[23] Members of Baytona and Salsay Weyane were quick to point senior TPLF old guards saying 'we will put Tigrigna into museum, narrow nationalism is as dangerous as chauvinism' as evidence. TPLF's focus and priority on Ethiopian development at the expense of Tigray is another.
[24] A key figure from the opposition Bedru Adem in a widely televised speech in the eve of the 2005 election read to his audience "let them go to where they came from" widely understood to imply to the Tigrayan community associated with the ruling party as if they came from another continent, *see*ASQUAL, May 10, 2015. Since then similar kind of narrative was built by media owned by the centrist elite. ESAT, an opposition TV officially declared this is a fight between 95 million against 5 million, a declaration Genocide against Tigrayans.
[25] Should Tigray be a new state? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQB_Jx3ltr8
[26] See Mehari Yohanes, *Tigray: What is Next*? 2011 E.C (no place and name of Publication)
[27] Focus group discussion with leaders and members of Salsay Weyane, Mekelle, 2020
[28] Focus group discussion with leaders and members of Baytona Party, Mekelle, 2020
[29] At times this is beyond silence. A senior political figures that is now promoted to be a minister of Trade once said we have blocked the roads to strangulate Tigray's political elite and its economy.
[30] See Rene Lefort, Preaching Unity but flying solo, Abiy's ambition may stall Ethiopia's Transition, https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/02/25/preaching-unity-but-flying-solo-abiys-ambition-may-stall-ethiopias-transition/ February 25, 2020. '…during a meeting with around 50 Tigrayan businessmen on 24 November 2019, gathered to start a shuttle diplomacy between him (Abiy) and the TPLF, Abiy said: "I am the leader for the next five years; if I don't get enough votes in the ballot boxes, I will rig the elections". His justification: "This is Africa". He is further quoted to have said, if the TPLF does not join prosperity party, he will take serious measures such as cut electricity and stop financing the regional state.
[31] Muluwork Kidane Mariam, interview February 20, 2020, Mekelle.
[32] ESAT narrative of 95 to 5 million is replica of Derg's policy of let us drain the lake to kill the fish. In 2005 CUD kept on narrating 'Tigre wede Mekelle, Eka wede Kebele and that is exactly what happened in Gondar and Woldia.
[33] Most Tigrayan elites that support either secession or de facto state think the planned 2020 election will accelerate Ethiopia's

collapse. The old guards of the TPLF and section of the Tigrayan elite still hope that multinational federalism is an option and think political forces that back multination federalism will come victorious in the 2020 election.

[34] Baytona, Salsay Weyane, TIM and many of the new generation intellectuals based in Mekelle University back this line of argument. Three focus group discussions with three of them separately in February 2020 in Mekelle.

[35] This was a major focus in a focus group discussion in Mekele although some of the participants disagreed on whether secession is a feasible option for Tigray.

[36] Speech at Ghion hotel May 2019

[37] Focus group discussion with Baytona leaders, February 22, 2020 Mekelle.

[38] Public speech by Dr. Debretsion Gebre Michael, Deputy President and chair of TPLF on the occasion of the 45th anniversary of the TPLF, Mekelle, Tigray, Februaray 2020

[39] In a recent interview President of Eritrea, Esayas Afworki openly stated, Article 39 and ethnic federalism have to be eradicated from the Ethiopian constitution. Institutionalized ethnicity is toxic that has to be done away with for purpose of ensuring peace and stability in Ethiopia and the Horn. He stated he will treat Ethiopia as internal affair. He further stated election is not a priority for Ethiopia. PM Abiy in a historic visit he made to Axum some months back stated 'there are many countries in Africa that do not conduct elections for 20 years. His preference to shift to Presidential system and geographic federalism has also been stated in several of his speeches in 2019. The link between President Esayas's and PM Abiy speeches do not seem to be a coincidence and if one adds the secrecy of the talks between the governments, it does hint on something that is more than enough to cause suspicion by the TPLF. The federal government is adding fuel to fire. No federal government appeared in public to denounce Esayas's TV interview and by doing so sent the message: Abiy is using Esayas to send a message to the Ethiopians.