

## THE SCOURGE OF ETHNIC POLITICS IN ETHIOPIA: AN ANALYTICAL COMMENTARY

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### Abstract

*This article offers a critical commentary on Ethiopia's current affairs, delving into 50 years of ethnic politics and the devastation it has wrought, particularly over the past 33 years since the TPLF's ascent to power. Ethnic politics, or broadly, ethno-nationalism characterized by hatred and corruption, has escalated to an unprecedented peak. The indiscriminate killing of innocent individuals—children, elders, mothers, and pregnant women—has become normalized, shockingly without condemnation from the governing body. Hate propaganda, sometimes disseminated by government officials, persists without repercussions, seemingly a prerequisite for maintaining power. The rule of law has become a luxury, as the populace grapples with basic survival. This commentary is rich with factual evidence and proposes concrete solutions.*

**Keywords:** Ethnic Politics, Ethno-nationalism/nationalism, patrotisim

### 1. Introduction

Ethiopia has endured significant social upheaval since the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) came to power in 1991. This ethnic-based organization not only fostered numerous similar parties but also formed a coalition with them and a multiethnic party that quickly adopted an ethnic alignment. As soon as TPLF took the power under the guise of a collation party, it divided the country along arbitrary linguistic and ethnic lines, resulting in economic and educational disenfranchisement for populations residing outside their designated ethnic territories. This

particularly impacted those who prioritized Ethiopian patriotism over ethnic nationalism. This commentary explores these developments, informed by a recent interview with Getachew Reda, a former administrator of the Tigray region and a prominent TPLF figure, on Fana Television. I accessed this interview on YouTube, following a friend’s thoughtful recommendation and provided link.<sup>1</sup> The interview is utilized herein as a framework for comprehending the consequences of ethnic politics, not as the primary subject of its own analysis.

## 2. Key Facts from Getachew’s Interview

Getachew’s interview shed light on two deeply troubling issues: corruption and abduction. He exposed the shocking reality of TPLF military commanders and officials kidnapping Eritrean refugees, demanding ransom from their families overseas. The fate of those unable or unwilling to pay remains unknown, leaving room for further revelations. Such crimes were previously unimaginable—not only for government officials but even for common criminals. Throughout Ethiopian history, I have found no record of such practices, nor had I heard of them before the rise of Abiy’s administration. Reducing the decline of Ethiopia’s well-regarded culture of respect to the political landscape of the past 50 years—and attributing it solely to the generation shaped by that era—oversimplifies a complex issue. Notably, the figures accused by Getachew were already adults before the rise of this particular brand of political hatred, as evidenced by the military commanders he named.

The organized gold theft by TPLF elites that Getachew mentioned is beyond saddening—it is shameful. This is especially true because it happened while they governed in the name of the very people they claimed were oppressed. As the people of Tigray struggled to produce and barely survive amidst the crisis politics created by the TPLF, their leadership was, in effect, taking directly from their mouths.

The atrocities TPLF officials inflicted upon the Amharic speaking people they labeled as enemies are too extensive to detail, not only during

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1 Fana Television. በወቅታዊ ጉዳይ ላይ ከአቶ ጌታቸው ረዳ ጋር የተደረገ ቆይታ -ክፍል 1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCza6t3Zz6g> Accessed on 05-20-2025; Fana Television. በወቅታዊ ጉዳይ ላይ ከአቶ ጌታቸው ረዳ ጋር የተደረገ ቆይታ -ክፍል 2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6VsVFjZeDvU> Accessed on 05-21-2025.

their 27-year rule but also in the recent war. A key point Getachew raised from that war was that the bank robberies were entirely a decision of the TPLF leaders. While Getachew mentioned only one bank, it is plausible to assume other banks were also targeted. Although he claimed this decision was made to secure necessary funds and bolster their budget, Getachew did not mention the dismantling of factories, the destruction of what they could not take, or the theft of even office tables from government institutions. He offered no explanation for these acts. TPLF soldiers and associated individuals who were brought for the purpose of looting took whatever they found from civilians. A notable example is the looting of a small Volkswagen belonging to the former university president. The widespread looting, even of flour from the homes of the poor, was reported at the time, so bringing it up here seems unnecessary beyond recalling it. The author witnessed the devastation firsthand during a trip to Woldia after the war.

Getachew's proposed solution, however, is simply the formation of yet another ethnic-based political party. It seems he remains unwilling to distance himself from the Amharic-speaking people his former party once labeled as enemies. Having previously boasted about "settling accounts" when he held power, he now appears to have returned—whether openly or covertly—under the guise of a new party, poised to undermine that population should the opportunity arise. His ability to push forward a political agenda with a fresh force seems doubtful, even to himself. Despite holding the highest regional authority, he struggled to gather enough support to maintain his own position and was ultimately ousted by his own comrades, whom he accused of corruption and atrocities. Furthermore, with nearly ten ethnic-based parties already claiming to represent the interests of the people of Tigray, time will reveal the extent of backing he can secure for his new venture. What Getachew fails to understand is that his own discourse has further deepened the grave of ethnic politics.

### 3. The 50-Year Journey of Ethnic Politics

It is common to attribute the genesis of ethnic politics in Ethiopia to the creation of the TPLF, thus giving it a 50-year history. In this context, the formation of the OLF can also be considered. While Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) preceded the TPLF in promoting similar divisive politics, they cannot be categorized as primarily ethnic politics. Ethnic politics was not the main

reason for the emergence of ELF and EPLF. Foreign powers, consistently aiming to destabilize Ethiopia, either directly or indirectly engineered the creation of the ELF and EPLF. Recognizing that ethnic divisions would not serve their agenda, these powers instead leveraged the historical narrative of the Italian invasion to establish and empower these organizations, believing it would inflict greater harm on Ethiopia. Essentially, the ELF and EPLF can be seen as entities entirely conceived by Ethiopia's adversaries and developed into potent destructive forces. For more on this, it is useful to consult works such as Rezene Habte (2019)<sup>2</sup> and Andargachew Tiruneh (2015).<sup>3</sup> What unites the TPLF, ELF, and EPLF is their common promotion of divisive politics.

The TPLF played a crucial role in establishing ethnic politics as a strong foundation in Ethiopia. However, it seems that even the TPLF did not fully grasp the implications of ethnic politics from its inception.<sup>4</sup> When the TPLF unexpectedly came to power, it can be said they had no clear idea of how to divide the country along ethnic lines. For example, what is now called the Amhara region, lacking a specific party in its name, was initially assigned a makeshift party called Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement to administer it. Regions were primarily identified by numbers in the beginning. Although regions were nominally assigned to be led by regional parties, in practice every region was initially administered almost entirely by TPLF members. Even if a local native was nominally placed at the top, the true decision-maker and commander was an ordinary TPLF cadre assigned beneath them, who might even have been a driver.

Recalling a remarkable news story from the TPLF's early years in power will further illustrate the point just made. The story, published in one of the many newspapers that sprang up at the time (whose name the author no longer recalls), recounted the exploits of a young man from Nazareth. Because he spoke Tigrinya, he would go around regions and

2 ረዚኔ ሃብተ። (2019)። *ደም የተከፈለበት ባርነት፣ የኤርትራ አብዮት ህልምችና ውድቀት። ትሪንተን፡ ዘፊድ ሲፕረስ።* (Rezene Habte. (2019). *Slavery Paid in Blood: The Dreams and Failure of the Eritrean Revolution*. Trenton: The Red Sea Press.)

3 Andargachew Tiruneh. (2015). *The Emergence and Proliferation of Political Organizations in Ethiopia*. Los Angeles, CA: Tsehai Publishers.

4 Had the TPLF understood the ramifications of ethnic/divisive politics, they would not have started with a minority population. And had they started, they would have corrected it when they had the chance. Divisive politics is not profitable for any segment of society. If it is relatively profitable, it benefits a large population.

districts where judgment was said to be corrupted, conducting evaluations, dismissing culprits from their positions, and even imprisoning them when necessary, replacing them with others he would choose/appoint. For this work, he would receive a certain “operational fee.” What later led to his capture was a case where he helped a woman reclaim her unjustly seized house in Nazareth town, but when she couldn’t pay the fee he demanded, she reported him. This “miracle man” was not a TPLF member, beyond his ability to speak Tigrinya. The newspaper further reporting that none of those he removed or appointed dared to sue him or accuse him in court.

The Derg regime characterized the TPLF and EPLF as “secessionists and instigators of secession.” The Derg’s predictions proved accurate; when the TPLF came to power, it did something perhaps unprecedented globally: it wrote a letter to the United Nations asking for Eritrea’s secession. This shocked not only Ethiopians but anyone who followed the issue. The TPLF’s calculation behind this move became clear later. The TPLF not only facilitated Eritrea’s secession but also began paving the way for its own secession.

It was unthinkable for the TPLF to contemplate secession given its limited territory and economy. Moreover, the people of Tigray at the time were absolutely uncompromising in their Ethiopian identity.

The TPLF had to devise a plan to achieve its dream. The TPLF found it urgent to expand Tigray’s territory and enrich it with resources and educated human capital. To this end, it first brought the fertile lands of Gonder particularly Walqayt and T’egede in the west, and Raya in the south under its direct control. It not only sent its claimed human resources abroad but also placed them in every educational institution. It did not take long to open Mekelle University. They even looted any valuable item including chairs, tables and mattresses overnight from what is now part of Addis Ababa University, formerly a school of political science. As soon as the TPLF came to power, nothing valuable that could be moved from various regions was left untouched and not transported to Tigray.

The TPLF believed its dream of Tigray’s secession could only be achieved by destroying not only Ethiopian institutions but also all perceived Ethiopian values. For this, it suffices to remember that the TPLF’s top leader, Meles Zenawi, famously called the Ethiopian flag “a mere piece of cloth.” During the TPLF era, anyone who disparaged Ethiopia was generally appointed or rewarded. A notable example is the

individual appointed as the security chief in the Harari region during the early 2000s—a former leader in Siad Barre’s army, whose actions contributed to the deaths of numerous Ethiopians. This person would proudly tell anyone publicly that he had reached the rank of major in Siad Barre’s government and had massacred many Ethiopians. In parallel to those who wronged and disparaged Ethiopia being appointed and rewarded, speaking of oneself as Ethiopian in meetings or publicly was unthinkable at the level of TPLF officials.<sup>5</sup>

As we now understand, although many officials, including Meles, were at least a byproduct of two or more ethnic groups, everyone was obliged to choose one ethnic group. It was unthinkable to get an ID that stated “mixed ethnicity” or “Ethiopian.”

From its inception, to destroy institutions that had an Ethiopian “smell,” the TPLF initiated a structural reform study conducted in every institution under the leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. When they submitted their study, the results were set aside, and the focus shifted to people’s identities. Anyone who had written “mixed” or “Ethiopian” was systematically deleted and replaced with “Amhara,” and based on the increased number of “Amhara,” employees were dismissed (with a few exceptions) and replaced by TPLF members. Some individuals from the South protesting, stating they were mixed and had no Amhara “blood,” and were forced to choose one ethnicity before being reinstated.

Realizing it couldn’t control everything directly, the TPLF actively promoted the formation of political parties organized along ethnic lines, effectively making this the only route to power and wealth. For these ethnic parties, a core requirement was to consistently portray those identified as “Amhara” as the primary enemy and to disparage Ethiopian national identity. The consequences of the TPLF’s ethnic politics extended beyond mere disparagement and denial of benefits to those identifying as Amhara or Ethiopian; it led to immense suffering for this part of society. This issue will be explored further in Part Five.

#### 4. Foundations of Ethnic Politics

Ethnic politics/ethnic nationalism, and generally the politics of division in Ethiopia, are built upon two foundations. The first is finding an

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5 It is worth remembering here how the public embraced Abiy Ahmed and Lemma Megersa as saviors simply because they elevated the word "Ethiopia."

enemy, and the second is creating a narrative of “we have been wronged/oppressed.” It is when these two fundamental concepts are fulfilled that the quest for a distinct identity thrives. During World War II, French General and later President Charles de Gaulle contrasted nationalism with patriotism, stating that the primary basis of nationalism is hatred of others, while patriotism’s primary basis is love for one’s own country: “Patriotism is when love of your own people comes first; nationalism, when hate for people other than your own comes first” (Charles de Gaulle).

Although TPLF declared in its 1967 manifesto that the Amhara elite was its enemy, its main rallying cry was “Ethiopia, not led by me, is my enemy.” Disregarding tribal integration and distorting minor injustices committed under Ethiopia’s long administration as if they were perpetrated solely by one tribe, they continuously spread a narrative to instill the ferment of enmity against those they labeled “Amhara” among their followers. When it suited them, they would limit Ethiopian history to a hundred years. Almost all ethnic political organizations established in Ethiopia with the support and approval of the TPLF made this same segment of society their primary enemy.

Parallel to creating enemies in ethnic politics, creating a distinct identity is a primary task. Inventing a “history” that proclaims “I am unique, like a solitary tree growing in the desert” is the next step after asserting uniqueness. After the “we have been oppressed” narrative achieves its goal of consolidating power and drawing the “my ethnic group” segment of society into supporting this evil political agenda, the journey shifts to preaching how great the society from which they originated was. This journey involves allocating budgets for writing narratives in the name of history, all of which aim to assert that they have a history distinct from the people they have labeled as enemies. This “I am unique” identity is always presented as having a historical chain spanning thousands of years, and it is common to connect that people with renowned histories from around the world. In Ethiopia, it is sufficient to observe the “history of so-and-so ethnic group” written under each ethnic administration. The problem is that the two concepts, “we have been oppressed” and “we were a great people,” are not easily reconciled, and these narratives written in the name of history cannot even convince a minimally discerning member of their own community, let alone other people.

In Ethiopia, writing a "unique" history has not been easy. The people they labeled as enemies, or generally the government they shunned from membership, have an undeniable and significant history on a global scale. As a result, some ethnic political parties, proponents of division, i.e. ethnic nationalism, adopted the alternative of associating themselves with countries that possess ancient and competitive histories. For example, Oromo politicians have advanced a narrative asserting ownership of the over four-thousand-year-old Kush/Sudanese civilization. This claim is made despite some Oromo tribes, like the Wat'a in Kenya, remaining hunter-gatherers, and a significant number of others being nomadic.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, some Tigrayan politicians have gone so far as to craft narratives linking themselves to the history of Alexander the Great. The extent to which they sometimes labored to make these narratives convincing was astonishing. For instance, the TPLF fanatics published an extensive fabricated account in a Tigrayan online newspaper, claiming it was an interview with the renowned historian Richard Pankhurst, supporting their narrative.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond simply promoting division and hatred, a core aim of ethnic politics is to enrich the proponent's own ethnic group. However, this approach has historically offered only temporary benefits to a limited few who champion it. Because ethnic politics and nationalism are inherently divisive, once the primary external enemy fades, internal fragmentation and division inevitably emerge, particularly when it comes to the distribution of benefits. Getachew's recent interview and the ongoing fragmentation within the TPLF serve as clear evidence of this pattern.

## 5. The Plan of Ethnic Politics

It is hard to say that ethnic politics, or nationalism more broadly, operates with a well-organized plan. There are many reasons it cannot. Much of what happens is simply taking advantage of opportunities as they arise. What often unites members of ethnic political movements is their shared

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6 This statement is not meant to disparage nomadic peoples or hunter-gatherers. I hold a strong conviction that all human beings are created equal, regardless of their level of civilization or their particular way of living. The focus should be on embracing one's own genuine culture and identity, rather than asserting a history that cannot be substantiated by any evidence.

7 Before the article was removed from the website within two days, recognizing its falsehood, I mediated with Richard and sent a copy of this fabricated interview to his son, Alula, through a friend, and I also kept a copy for historical record.



embrace of theft as a primary source of income. This brings to mind Samuel Johnson's famous adage: "Nationalism is the last refuge of scoundrels."

Ethnic politics, often built on a narrative of "we have been oppressed and wronged," inherently prioritizes accumulating wealth, favoring one's own group in education and employment, and expanding territory. While these goals might be broadly conceived, detailed planning is often impossible, and specifics are rarely known. With theft becoming an unofficial norm, documentation of such activities is nonexistent. For instance, during the TPLF's time in power, there were rumors of a group, allegedly led by Arkebe Equbay, aimed at creating wealthy Tigrayan individuals. While no written evidence of this group has surfaced, it was widely observed that almost all major businesses, from contraband trade to large enterprises, were exclusively controlled by TPLF members. Federal government offices were no exception; people even joked about Bole Airport being like Mekelle, implying Tigrinya had become its unofficial working language. Furthermore, almost all government contracts were reportedly awarded to TPLF affiliates.

The TPLF, while in power, was accused of systematically prioritizing its own members for foreign opportunities. Within the framework of ethnic politics, the enrichment of one's group through any means, including plunder, is not seen as a crime. This extends to individuals as well; if the victim of plunder belongs to another ethnic group, there's often no accountability. This dynamic is not limited to party officials; any member of the favored ethnic group who gets the chance to exploit those outside their group faces no repercussions.

Ethnic politics also involves not just seizing what belongs to others beyond designated boundaries, but also claiming the homes and lands of other groups in areas of mixed habitation. This is precisely what happened to those considered as "Amhara" in the Harari region. For instance, the Harari administration, led by the Adare ethnic group, allegedly seized larger plots of land from the Amharic-speaking group and redistributed them to their own people. The overarching goal, at every level, is to prioritize the favored ethnic group's members in terms of wealth, education, and territorial expansion. A striking example of this disparity can be seen in the same Harari region. Despite Amharic speakers making up over 60% of the population and identifying as neither Adare nor Oromo, a 2005 survey revealed that only 2% were employed in public institutions. These individuals were largely relegated

to low-paying jobs in tea houses and cleaning services, with the majority effectively displaced from other employment opportunities.

## 6. The Consequences of Ethnic Politics

The repercussions of ethnic politics are far-reaching. In Ethiopia, its trajectory has culminated in a generation committing unspeakable atrocities: from the killing of pregnant women and extraction of fetuses to the slaughter of elders and desecration of their remains. One need only look at the TPLF itself to see the devastating effects of ethnic politics. Their initial bravado upon seizing power has given way to desperate pleas for help. The wealth they plundered for 27 years has done nothing for the Tigrayan people, who remain dependent on food aid. Their youth have endured displacement and hardship.

Due to the poison of ethnic division sown over 27 years, the Tigrayan people are now restricted from free movement and work within their own country. Even today, they are hampered from thinking independently and collaborating with their fellow Ethiopians to build a nation that belongs to all. They remain ensnared by a political discourse that has brought no benefit for five decades, constantly being urged to "take up arms because your land has been taken from you." Getachew himself confirmed in his interview that this very narrative forms the bedrock of his new political party.

More than the harm ethnic politics inflicted on the Tigrayan people, it has particularly caused immense suffering to the people who are considered as Amhara, who were made to be seen as enemies by everyone. For this people, it has been unthinkable to be employed in government offices, except in a few regions, under the past TPLF administrations and the subsequent Abiy government. Even if their ancestors were born there, they are denied even ordinary job opportunities, let alone being elected, outside of what they called the Amhara region and a few other regions. Their homes and properties have been unjustly plundered. Children and elders alike have been brutally murdered. Listing the extent and depth of the suffering is painful in itself. If one were to list them, perhaps thousands of pages would not suffice.

## 7. Conclusion

Divisive politics are usually driven by larger groups, but Ethiopia presents a unique and tragic exception. Here, a numerically smaller faction—the

TPLF—became the primary instigator of ethnic and tribal divisions. Whether intentionally or not, TPLF’s declaration of “Amhara is my enemy” appears to be a reckless move. Perhaps this stance arose from their realization that the Amhara generally do not identify themselves along ethnic lines. Because the Amharic speaker cultivated a transcendent identity that goes beyond ethnic considerations, they initially overlooked TPLF’s folly, hoping they would regain their rationality. But as the injustice escalated, they were compelled to defend themselves, leading to rapid and significant changes.

The TPLF’s embrace of ethnic politics ultimately led to its downfall, a path its leaders seemed unable to foresee. It is debatable whether anyone within the TPLF truly grasped the long-term implications, or if such foresight was simply suppressed. Albert Einstein’s poignant observation that “Nationalism is an infantile disease. It is the measles of mankind” accurately describes the TPLF’s narrow-minded perspective. Instead of uplifting the Tigrayan people, who hold a significant place in Ethiopian history and consider themselves integral to the nation, the TPLF’s rigid ethnic stance tragically dragged them into conflict by refusing to compromise on their Ethiopian identity. Getachew’s recent interview, with its vision of a revitalized TPLF, painfully illustrates the leadership’s failure to learn from 50 years of experience.

The destructive consequences of ethnic politics are evident in the contentious nature of administrative boundaries, which in a unified country should be fluid. When the TPLF initially carved out land from Gonder and Wollo under the guise of administrative restructuring, it met little resistance because it was framed merely as a boundary adjustment. Yet, the TPLF later weaponized these administrative changes, making them a matter of survival—including the right to live and work—for the affected communities.

For Ethiopia to move forward, its people must strive for unity. If not the expansive vision of the African Union founders—where any African can live, create wealth, elect, and be elected in any country of their choosing—then at least a concerted effort to ensure these rights are respected within their own nation, just like anywhere else in the world. No Ethiopian should ever have to reclaim or relinquish territory within Ethiopia. Every part of Ethiopia should be open for all Ethiopians to use and develop with equal rights. This concept is fundamental to nationhood and is often taken for granted in other countries. From this

perspective, Ethiopia, in its current state, lacks the basic foundation of a country concerning its citizens' rights. It is imperative to abandon this failing ethnic politics and instead strengthen a political approach focused on building a country where its people benefit, justice is ensured, and peace prevails.

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