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Civil rights activists in Welkait give hope for peace and democracy in Ethiopia

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Between 2015 and 2018, Ethiopian people protested en masse against the TPLF-led government, which was experienced by many as oppressive, violent and self-serving. After the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, the appointed successor Abiy Ahmed promised to reform the country's authoritarian, centralised and hierarchical political system to base it on rule of law. As war consumes the northern regions, and these aspirations are put into question, civil rights activists in Welkait give hope to Ethiopian values of brotherhood, sisterhood and cooperation.

From 1974 to 1991 the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), supported by Eritrean forces, Western governments and humanitarian organisations, fought the Ethiopian socialist government, the Derg. When the TPLF gained control over the country in 1991, overtly a civilian government was installed while covertly its military cadres stayed in control. Along with the introduction of ethnic federalism, regional borders were drawn to reflect language groups. For geopolitical purposes, however, the TPLF included indigenous, geographically and culturally Amhara and Afar territories in the Tigray region. Through the creation of the Western Tigray zone, the TPLF gained **direct access** to the Sudan border while separating the Amhara region from Eritrea.

One of the Amhara regions **annexed** and settled by the TPLF is Welkait. People who kept their Amhara identity were harassed, dispossessed, killed, arrested, kidnapped and deported. Amhara girls and women were reportedly abducted and raped by TPLF fighters and teachers. In schools and administrative offices, people were forced to speak Tigrinya only. Names of places, rivers, lakes, mountains, springs, cities and regions were changed from Amharic to Tigrinya names. Discriminatory practices included 95% of government jobs being given to Tigrayans who also received land from dispossessed and displaced Amhara farmers.

Indigenous Welkait Amhara ask for basic civil and democratic rights

Despite these **violent experiences**, affected people chose a peaceful response. In 2015, displaced people democratically formed the Welkait Amhara Identity Question Committee (የወልቃይት የአማራ ማንነት ጥያቄ ኮሚቴ) and collected approximately 25,000 signatures of Welkait people. They requested state institutions recognise their indigenous Amhara identity and end discrimination. They summarised their grievances, attached evidence and submitted the letter to the zonal, regional and federal offices on 17 December 2015.

Each office refused to hear the case. Some argued that it is a matter of identity, others that it pertains to borders. According to the constitution, the former should have been dealt with on the state or zonal level, the latter on the federal. In sum, the appointed Committee brought its issue forward in a **peaceful and democratic** way, based on legitimate claims and the laws of the country.

A government response of arbitrary arrests, torture and killings

Half a year later, the Tigray region still refused to deal with the question. In July 2016, most committee members were taken into custody in Gondar and transported straight to Addis Ababa's infamous Maekelawi torture prison. Committee member Colonel Demeke Zewdu clashed with and resisted the soldiers who came at night to arrest him without a court order. These arbitrary arrests of Welkait Committee members triggered a chain of protests across the Amhara region. The Welkait question, combined with similar cases in Oromia and other regions, became a national question for democratisation and justice. Peaceful protesters expressed **concerns** regarding the unequal distribution of power and economic exploitation by those aligned to the TPLF government.

Abiy Ahmed and the Welkait question

The release of Colonel Demeke Zewdu was one of the last duties of Hailemariam Desalegn before his resignation in February 2018. Colonel Demeke Zewdu, credited for spurring democratisation in Ethiopia, insisted on peaceful and democratic processes following the rule of law, despite harassment and life threats. His insistence on lawful procedures was regarded as a starting point for political reform processes under Abiy Ahmed.

Shortly after Ahmed was appointed as Prime Minister in April 2018, he met with Welkait Committee members in Gondar. In the meeting, they agreed that the Tigray security forces must stop harassing and killing civilians. Ahmed **promised** that the Welkait Committee would be able to work in peace and that the Welkait question would be dealt with according to the constitution. In exchange, he demanded the Committee keep the people calm.

However, while the committee members in Gondar were free, the TPLF terror has gotten worse in the annexed areas. People expressing their Amhara identity (such as speaking the language or listening to Amharic songs) were beaten, incarcerated, shot or pushed over cliffs to their deaths. In 2019, the TPLF-funded informal youth group **samri** chased many Amhara from their indigenous area in **May-Kadra**, the town which in November 2020 became infamously known for a **massacre**.

Since 2018, TPLF refused to return state power but used its resources and networks to create instability in different parts of the country. The TPLF's attack against the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) in November 2020 united most Ethiopians against them. Despite its **assurance** to only target TPLF leaders with arrest warrants to their name, the government and ENDF were unable to convince the international community of their commitment and service to Tigrayan civilians. Amid accusations of human rights violations and provoking famine in the region, Ahmed's government was unable to contain the conflict and has been accused by the TPLF and INGOs of prolonging the situation further.

After TPLF regained control over the Tigray Region and the ENDF retreated with a unilateral cease fire, the TPLF recruited able-bodied citizens and attacked neighbouring regions. In August 2021, TPLF spokesperson **Getachew Reda** made abundantly clear the TPLF's lack of interest in dialogue or peace but the intention to terrorise the country by raiding neighbouring regions and continued financing of militant ethnic entrepreneurs among Oromo and Qimant communities.

Hope for democracy

Despite the ongoing conflicts, Ethiopia held its most democratic **elections** in June 2021, in which the ruling Prosperity Party secured a majority. The people chose peace, democracy, development and unity. In three of the ten regions elections could not be held due to insecurity and remain scheduled for 6 September 2021. Yet, the situation has not improved and **political opponents** of the government remain incarcerated.

Meanwhile, the contested indigenous Amhara area in Western Tigray was transformed into the Welkait, Tegede, Setit and Humera special zone, and came under the control of Amhara Region Special Forces. Colonel Demeke Zewdu was appointed as Peace and Security Administrator. In May 2021, **reconciliation** talks were held between Amhara and Tigrayan community members. The Welkait Committee remains consistent in its claim for civil rights and justice for all, and likeminded civil rights groups continue to demand justice and democracy while refusing ethnic-based divisions. These groups give hope for lasting peace in Ethiopia.

Photo: Statsminister Erna Solberg og statsminister Abiy Ahmed møtte pressen. Credit: Eirin Larsen, SMK. Licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

About the author



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From 2015 to 2019, Sonja John was assistant professor for Political Science at University of Gondar and, then, Bahir Dar University in Ethiopia. Her research focuses on Indigeneity, incarceration and intersectionality. Currently she is researching police accountability at the Berlin School of Economics and Law.

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