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## The case for a loose confederation in Ethiopia

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Ethiopia is in the grip of violent identity politics, with a regional conflict at risk of creating country-wide civil war. A loose political confederation could be necessary reform to prevent further escalation, says Yohannes Woldemariam, but only with significant planning and careful implementation.

Those who subscribe to **Ethiopian exceptionalism**, of a country distinct from the African continent, would regret the loss of a nation built on ahistorical continuity. But the country's growing violence and divisions along ethno-sectarian lines make a centralised political arrangement look unachievable. Through their political choices and geographic movements, Ethiopians are opting for separation. Pervasive ethnically-motivated killings are the most convincing evidence, effectively disproving a national determination for peaceful coexistence. Killings of Amhara farmers have been witnessed in

Oromia, as have Somalis in Ogaden and Djibouti aligning to kill Afar peoples. Warlords are emerging, as seen in Somalia, where the government is weak and groups such as al-Shabaab rule much of the country.

A loose political confederation has been touted as the escape route, where regions with distinct ethnicities would assume primary responsibility for their own security and governance. Ethiopia has about **100 languages** with **eleven regions**, meaning more regions than currently exist would need to emerge. A revised legal framework would be required for the country, as well as new institutions at the regional level and the organised and voluntary movement of large populations.

Further devolution may potentially allow for the possibility, over time and if desired, to re-establish an Ethiopia that is increasingly integrated, rather than permanently segregated, across sectarian lines. If carefully implemented, such an arrangement could help end the war and spare enormous loss of lives on all sides.

## Alternatives to a loose confederation

Ethiopian political discourse encourages a **zero sum solution**, where a clear winner emerges among ethnic groups. It is a scenario that might likely result in **genocide**, followed by warlordism and ongoing civil strife.

Another scenario is that an authoritarian junta should rule by decree and martial law for several years until the current violence settles. Again, it is unclear how such a junta could **enforce its decisions or create security** for Ethiopians, given the degree of chaos, armed groups and sectarianism.

Many oppose the notion of loose confederation, because, in spite of ongoing violence and separation, the Amhara and Tigrean citizens continue to have a strong sentiment of 'Ethiopian national identity'. However, there is strong evidence that the violence has steadily eroded national unity and the notion of 'Ethiopianness' is being torn asunder even within its Abyssinian core of the Tigray and Amhara regions – despite the deep roots of their tensions, such as longstanding Amhara dominance and the subsequent 27 years of

repressive Tigrean rule under the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) party.

Where does this leave the majority of the population? The Oromo population, who make up 40% of the country, have been mostly ambivalent about the idea of a **unified Ethiopia** and see ruptures in Ethiopian history, rather than continuity, since antiquity. The Somalis, the Qemant, the Agau, the Sidama, the Konso, the Gurage, the Wolayta, Nuer, Anuak and the Gumuz are others who have long felt marginalised and distant from the centre. The founder of imperial Ethiopia, Menelik II (1889-1913), saw Abyssinia as 'a Christian island surrounded by a sea of pagans'. By this definition, over 50% of the Ethiopian population is pagan and of a lower caste. It is ironic to see the notion of **pan-Africanism being exploited** by adherents of a version of 'Ethiopianism', who have **glamourised Menelik II**, former emperor Haile Selassie and now Abiy Ahmed.

Elections as practiced by the TPLF-dominated Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a prominent federalist political coalition from 1988-2019, and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's **Prosperity Party** (PP), have been less a transition to democracy than the pursuit of group self-interest. Each side has responded by persecuting those who resist and launching reprisal attacks, such as the recent **rounding up of Tigreans in Addis Ababa** and urban centres based on ethnic identities.

## Making a loose confederation viable

A new political and security architecture for Ethiopia is therefore desperately needed. Short of that, Ethiopia looks to be imploding with serious consequences for its regional neighbours: Kenya, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan. With the spectre of a worsening civil war, escalating violence would likely cause an enormous and potentially destabilising flow of refugees.

To become viable, a loose confederation must address several practical challenges. For one, with **internal displacement** already spurring conflict, minority populations should be supported to relocate if they wish and

security should be provided to those left behind. If offered reasonable and secure passage, there are indications population movements within Ethiopia would be large. For instance, Benishangul and Western Oromia are examples of sites with deeply contentious claims between local populations and the Amhara, who were settled and **transplanted by dictator Mengistu Hailemariam** and his predecessors. Over a century of subordination to Amhara political, social and economic domination have made many Oromo and other minorities deeply resentful. A plan to facilitate such movements cannot be achieved without serious international engagement, for which there is little political will, especially after the US withdrawal from **Afghanistan** and other, closer failures such as in Libya and Syria undertaken in the pursuit of the UN's '**responsibility to protect**'.

Additional challenges concern where the boundaries between new Ethiopian regions should be drawn and who should draw them? Where the Amhara and Tigray regions border begins and ends is a **source of heated debate**, similar to the Oromia-Amhara and Afar-Somali borders. Throughout Ethiopian and African history, borders have been historically porous, with plentiful land and low population density. Ethiopia now has over a 120 million people.

This raises a range of practical questions: how could security and services – such as new settlements, land allocations and jobs – be provided for those relocated? Would new regional institutions be able to carry out responsibilities previously assumed by Addis Ababa? How should revenues from resources be shared and, regionally, resources such as **electricity** be provided? How would extremists responses to such a plan, including from **Al-Shabaab**, be stopped? Each of these matters requires significant planning and careful implementation.

New regions could not and should not be ethnically pure zones. In addition to inter-sectarian marriages, major cities like Addis Ababa (claimed by **Oromo nationalists as their own**, called 'Finfine'), **Dire Dawa** and Hawassa have many ethnic groups who have resided in them for generations. That many people will want to stay where they are, as a minority, should be

respected. Presently displaced Ethiopians may wish in the future to return to their original homes.

Many predict there will be efforts to sustain violence in the country, even after relative coexistence is restored between communities. In such a situation, the benefits of a confederation to levels of violence should be emphasised. While options for relocations might provide fewer reasons for Ethiopians to kill members of other ethno-sectarian groups, a confederation could also address uncertainty about the future nature of Ethiopia's political system, whereby power hungry elites have less incentive to fight to improve their position in subsequent power sharing negotiations. Lastly, as the effects of climate change become increasingly pronounced, a confederation could possibly empower local communities to more effectively deal with complex stresses.

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*Photo: Wheat farmer in Ethiopia. Credit: E. Quilligan/CIMMYT. Licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.*

### About the author



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