

The Unenviable Situation of Tigreans in Ethiopia

As ordinary Tigreans are increasingly targeted because of their ethnic association to Ethiopia's ruling party, Yohannes Woldemariam points out that the vast majority do not benefit from the rule of Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and live in much the same conditions as most Ethiopians.

Ethnonationalism, a form of politics that depends on strengthening narrow group identities rather than embracing [civic nationalism](#) is often disparaged in academic circles. In as much as ethnicity and race may be dismissed as social constructions, ethnonationalism and racism are, nevertheless, real in their impact. In many countries including Europe (e.g. Catalonia, Scotland etc.), political identities often take ethnic form, engendering competing communal claims to political power. In many parts of the world where some kind of ethnic balance has not yet been achieved, politics remains contentious and at times violent. Lacking ethnic balance, Ethiopia exemplifies the ethnic conflict and violence that has become the norm in much of the world.

Much has been said and written about the excesses and abuse of power by the ruling group of the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The TPLF leaders in power in Ethiopia since 1991 are former idealistic revolutionaries gone sour, as often happens when liberation fronts achieve power. The TPLF in collaboration with other co-opted ethnic elites adopted a federal constitution, yet ethnic relations in the country have been dominated by extra-legal political and economic repression rather than by constitutionalism.



The provinces of Ethiopia prior to 1995 CC BY-SA 1.0

My focus here is primarily on the plight of ordinary Tigreans whom the embattled TPLF claims to represent. The TPLF is the dominant force in Ethiopia's military and a major source of the current civil strife that is proving to be intractable for peace and participatory governance. What is often overlooked in most analyses of Ethiopian politics is that the majority of ordinary Tigreans who are blamed by ethnic association with the TPLF kleptocrats live in no better conditions than average Ethiopians. Indeed, many Ethiopians still see Tigreans as beneficiaries of TPLF rule. It is only a minority of well-connected individuals (these include non-Tigreans), – who benefited greatly from the [inflow of money](#) from collaboration with the TPLF. One cannot emphasise enough that the future of Ethiopia and its prospects for success as a rehabilitated democratic state will largely be determined by how the destiny of Tigray and of Tigreans is determined in the post-TPLF Ethiopia – assuming there will be a post-TPLF Ethiopia. Increasingly, the future of Ethiopia as a unified country seems uncertain.

The dominance of Tigrean elites in TPLF-ruled Ethiopia has created deep resentment within the Oromo and the Amhara. The Oromo and Amhara combined comprise from fifty to sixty percent of the population of Ethiopia while Tigreans are only about six percent. Therefore Tigreans worry about what Tocqueville called "[the tyranny of the majority.](#)" The Amhara/Oromo perception of Tigreans as privileged citizens is pervasive. The perception is that Tigreans have replaced the Amhara as the new ruling class of Ethiopia.

Traditionally, some Oromos consider the [Amhara as colonisers](#) in Oromia. In this account, Menelik II (1889-1913) expanded south incorporating and appropriating Oromo land. Currently, some Oromos and Amharas are in a marriage of convenience against the TPLF in the spirit of the dictum that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. While the TPLF has bungled from the get-go by monopolising power, some feel that the Amhara elite, resentful of their perceived displacement from dominance by Tigreans, were never going to give the TPLF the benefit of the doubt.

All parties involved in shaping Ethiopia's future must therefore ponder the fate of Tigreans in a country in which they have become targets of widespread resentment. Tigrean-owned businesses have been attacked in Oromia and in the Amhara region. In some cases, there are reports that innocent Tigreans have been seriously injured or murdered. Others have abandoned their livelihoods to flee to Tigray. As the situation worsens, the daily life of innocent Tigreans living in Ethiopia is increasingly precarious.



An aerial view of Mek'ele, the capital city of the Tigray region of Ethiopia

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To their credit, recently released political prisoners such as Professor Bekele Gerba, journalist Eskinder Nega and opposition leader Andualem Aragie have expressed alarm over the targeting of ordinary Tigreans eking out a livelihood in Ethiopia while stressing the importance of the non-violent struggle against the TPLF. Oromo activist Jawar Mohammed and other prominent Ethiopians also warn against the targeting of ordinary Tigreans. Nevertheless, social media is still full of derogatory and hateful language towards Tigreans.

The Tigreans have their own grievances against the Amhara which can be traced to the very formation of the modern Ethiopian state under Menelik II. Although Tigreans and the Amhara both consider themselves the nucleus of Ethiopian history and identity, they have widely divergent perceptions of the legacies of Ethiopian monarchs Menelik II and Emperor Haile Selassie (1916-74).

In particular, the reverence that some Amharas have for Menelik II and for Emperor Haile Selassie is not generally shared by most Tigreans. In fact Tigreans view Menelik II as a traitor who betrayed the Tigrean emperor Yohannes by making deals with foreigners including the Italian colonisers behind his back. The historian of the famous [Battle of Adwa](#), Professor [Raymond Jonas](#) corroborates this Tigrean account.

Similarly, a significant number of Oromo intellectuals view Menelik and Selassie as tyrants who oppressed and pillaged Oromia. Indeed, the origin of the TPLF in the mid-1970s was the deeply held conviction especially prevalent among Tigrean university students and Tigreans at large that Tigray was intentionally kept poor, that the Tigrinya language was suppressed, and that any attempt to improve conditions was met with state-sponsored violence. It was a requirement to pass an exam in the Amharic language in order to enter Haile Selassie's University which gave native speakers of Amharic enormous advantage. There were many prominent members from Tigray within the Ethiopian students' movement at Haile Selassie University prior the Dergue usurping power. Many of these students later founded the TPLF and headed into the bush to wage an armed struggle, which eventually succeeded in overthrowing the Dergue by 1991.

Haile Selassie's invitation for the British Royal Air Force in 1943 to bomb Tigray, in order to put down the first Woyane peasant rebellion against [Shoan domination](#) and centralisation left a deep scar in the psyche of Tigreans. Some youth in Oromia and the Amhara region may not be aware of this past when they chant "Death to Woyane". The term "Woyane" is in fact a sacred term for Tigreans in general as it symbolises the resistance of the people of Tigray to oppression by the Shoan elite.

Tigreans who may not necessarily be fond of the TPLF but are fearful of an indiscriminate Oromo or Amhara backlash are increasingly asking the TPLF leadership for protection and refuge. This outreach can only help the TPLF leaders prolong their rule. The mutual mistrust and fear between Tigreans and the Amhara pose a grave challenge to a future democratic and united Ethiopia. In a majoritarian democracy, Tigreans fear their voices would be drowned out by a vindictive majority seething from twenty seven years of TPLF dictatorship. The Tigreans today are no more optimistic about the Amhara intentions than they were in 1943. Again, this is not entirely a case of paranoia: some Ethiopians support violent retaliatory measures against Tigreans. Also, it is important to point out that the beneficiaries of TPLF rule are collaborators from other ethnic groups, including the Amhara and the Oromo. There is a tendency to exaggerate, for purposes of political expediency, the perceived dissension of some Oromo leaders like Lemma Megersa and Abey Ahmed, who were part of the security establishment. These individuals are still an integral part of the ruling group and will have to answer for their roles, just like the TPLF leaders will have to be held accountable, when the time comes.

There are numerous competing narratives purporting to explain what it means to be an Ethiopian. Dichotomies like Tigreans vs Oromo and Amhara are actually very misleading. Oromia itself is quite diverse, having a complex and varied relationship to the political center. The Amhara and Tigreans are far from cohesive within themselves. The Acting Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, [Donald Yamamoto](#), who was formerly an ambassador to Ethiopia, recently described the country as an exceedingly complex place. That suggests to me that he has some understanding of Ethiopia. In contrast, former assistant secretary of state, Herman Cohen recently confessed that he did not understand the TPLF or Ethiopia when he facilitated a major political transition in Ethiopia 27 years ago, after the former dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam (1974-1991) fled the country. Ironically, some Ethiopians are now [nostalgic](#) for the brutal former dictator whom they consider to have been more of an Ethiopian nationalist than the TPLF. Former Dergue officials and generals who committed war crimes in Eritrea and Tigray are now prominently featured and interviewed as patriots in opposition media in the diaspora. Such nostalgia employs selective amnesia to construct a new “truth” but is a dangerous trend and shows insensitivity to the [genocidal](#) and scorched-earth policy that Mengistu and his accomplices waged against Tigreans and Eritreans. Mengistu was also responsible for the elimination of hundreds of thousands of youth from almost all segments of Ethiopian society. Progressive Ethiopians must therefore join Eritreans and Tigreans in seeking the prosecution of Mengistu for crimes against humanity in The Hague instead of longing for his return, especially now that his patron Robert Mugabe is no longer ruling Zimbabwe. This scenario is not hypothetical, with enough concerted pressure, it can happen as we witnessed in the case of [Hissene Habre](#) of Chad who was successfully prosecuted and convicted. Dictators must not be allowed to have a safe sanctuary from justice.

Possible responses to the crisis of ethnonationalism in Ethiopia must recognise that Ethiopia finds itself in an increasingly dangerous situation. There is ample evidence that the TPLF is not a force for good and that its destructive potential is still formidable. The once-taboo prediction of a possible Ethiopian “implosion” is now uttered more freely, but, alternatively, Ethiopia could remain whole by starting over with forward-looking new leaders, ensuring structural change, granting a degree of autonomy and guaranteed rights for all minorities. Considering the great amount of sectarian hostility in Ethiopia, more federalism is the most viable option. If a transitional majoritarian government becomes a reality, a truth-and-reconciliation approach like the ones instituted in Chile, South Africa and Rwanda may help the country heal and move forward.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.