

# RETHINKING ETHIOPIA: LEGACY OF THE ETHIOPIAN REVOLUTION SEMINAR REPORT

INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND SECURITY STUDIES  
AND RIFT VALLEY INSTITUTE

ADDIS ABABA, 22 FEBRUARY 2024



**IPSS**  
Institute for Peace and  
Security Studies



**Rift Valley Institute**  
MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK



**Peace  
Research  
Facility**

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# ABBREVIATIONS

**EPRDF** Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front

**IPSS** Institute for Peace and Security Studies

**PRF** Peace Research Facility

**RVI** Rift Valley Institute

## Acknowledgements

The organizers of this event wish to extend their sincere appreciation to all the individuals and institutions that contributed to the success of the seminar. Special thanks go to the essay finalists, panellists, moderators the reviewers and translators, who dedicated their time and expertise. The support and participation of the audience and the cooperation of the Institute for Peace and Security Studies, the Peace Research Facility and other affiliated organizations were instrumental in making the seminar a meaningful and productive event.

## SUMMARY

The Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) of Addis Ababa University and the Peace Research Facility (PRF) of the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) jointly organized a seminar on the theme ‘Rethinking Ethiopia: A Seminar on Youth Voices’, held on 22 February 2024. The seminar was based on a call for submissions that these organizations made in September 2023, requesting essays commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 1974 Ethiopian revolution. The seminar upon which this report is based was comprised of three parts.

Part 1 was a welcoming and opening of session greeting delivered by Dr Fana Gebresenbet from the IPSS, followed by opening remarks by Hannah Stogdon, from the RVI and Hannah Milne from the British embassy. Bringing Part 1 to a close, Dr Tekalign Woldemariam from Addis Ababa University gave a keynote speech. Part 2 consisted of presentations by the five essay finalists: namely, Betelhem Molla, Lamesgnew Negalign, Yidinekachew Solomon, Meselu Birliew and Lidya Yohannes. Part 3 was a panel of discussion on the theme of ‘Legacy and Looking Ahead’, with remarks by Dr Netsanet Gebremichael, Dr Yonas Ashine and Dr Semir Yusuf. Both the essay presentations and the final panel discussion were followed by question-and-answer sessions, offering the audience an opportunity to reflect upon and share their feedback. Dr Fana Gebresenbet concluded the seminar with final remarks and a thank you to the presenters, participants and everyone else who contributed to the success of the event.

This summary highlights the key takeaways from the seminar, including the importance of youth voices, the need for re-evaluating the challenges faced by Ethiopia and the significance of collaborative efforts in shaping the future of the country.

# BACKGROUND CONTEXT

The Ethiopian revolution marks a significant turning point in Ethiopian history, bringing about major social and political changes with far-reaching consequences. In commemorating the 50th anniversary of this historic moment, it is important to reflect on this legacy and the lessons that can be drawn from it. Moreover, the ideas discussed and debated at that time remain central to public life in contemporary Ethiopia. The Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) of Addis Ababa University and the Peace Research Facility (PRF) of the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) provided a national platform for further articulation, exchange and debate about the future(s) of Ethiopia.

To this end, these organizations invited young Ethiopians (18 to 35 years old) to contribute their ideas, in the form of a 2000-word essay, on what they take to be the contemporary challenges in Ethiopia and to propose solutions from variety of disciplinary backgrounds. The essay competition was intended as an opportunity for young writers to assess the legacy of the Ethiopian student movement and revolution, identify the main causes of current predicament(s) facing the country and look ahead to the next 50 years. Through this initiative, the host institutes aimed to provide a national platform for young Ethiopians to discuss and debate the challenges and contradictions facing the country and to propose solutions to make Ethiopia a more peaceful and prosperous nation for all its citizens.

Those wishing to submit an essay were instructed to outline an analysis of their view of the Ethiopian problem(s) and proposed solution(s). Contributions were welcomed from all disciplines and backgrounds and were not expected to be heavily referenced. The call for ideas was advertised on 12 September 2023 (<https://ipss-addis.org/call-for-submissions-rethinking-ethiopia-a-call-for-youth-voices/>), which coincides with the date that Atse (King of Kings) Haile Selassie I was deposed from office. Given internet shutdowns affecting some parts of the country, particularly Amhara region, we sought to ensure equitable representation and participation from across the country. To this end, we assigned focal persons as the primary point of contact in Gondar, Bahir Dar, Dessie and Debre Birhan.

We received more than 40 submissions in four different languages: English, Amharic, Afaan Oromo and Somali. These submissions came from several areas, including Addis Ababa, Oromia, Amhara, Somali, Southwest region and Central region. A panel composed of 4 RVI and IPSS representatives reviewed the submissions based on agreed selection criteria that focused on originality, progressive value and clarity of thought of the proposed recommendations. Ensuring a diversity of voices (societal, sex) was also a key consideration.

The panel then selected 15 contributors, who received mentorship to further refine and shape their essays. The 15 selected semi-finalists received writing mentorship from esteemed Ethiopian scholars: Dr Serawit Debele, Dr Netsanet Gebremichael, Dr Kiya Gezahegn, Dr Mercy

Fekadu, Dr Yonas Ashine and Shimellis Hailu. These mentors were selected for their expertise, diverse educational background and capacity, and willingness to work with and mentor the young contributors. After a month-long mentorship process, the mentees submitted their final essays.

The final version of these 15 submissions were reviewed by a four-member group from the IPSS and the RVI to select the 5 best essays for presentation to a wider audience at the seminar in February 2024 and for publication in a range of languages: Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Tigrigna, Somali and English. The same agreed criteria were used to select the essay finalists: originality, progressive value and clarity of thought. We also aimed for gender-balanced group of finalists, with two young women and three young men selected. Among the five finalists, two are undergraduate students in their final year, one is an MA candidate, one is a graduate degree holder, and one is a recent LL. B graduate. Three are based in Addis Ababa, one is from Debre Birhan in Amhara region, and one is from Hawassa in Sidama region.

The seminar on 22 February 2024 was organized with the intention of providing the selected essay finalists an opportunity to present their work to a wider audience. It also intended to solicit reflections on the last 50 years since the 1974 revolution from scholars familiar with relevant social, economic and political issues. The seminar brought together interested scholars, students and professionals from the social sciences to discuss and debate the challenges facing the country, while reflecting on the legacy of the Ethiopian revolution and possible socio-political future(s) for Ethiopia, looking ahead.

The seminar consisted of a keynote speaker, guests, panellists, selected essay finalists, moderators, and emcee and other invited audience members and participants from institutions such as the IPSS, the RVI, Addis Ababa University and various embassies, among others. Organized in three parts, Brook Abdu from the RVI served as the seminar emcee. Part 1 was a welcoming and opening of session greeting delivered by Dr Fana Gebresenbet from the IPSS, followed by opening remarks by Hannah Stogdon, from the RVI and Hannah Milne from the British embassy. Bringing Part 1 to a close, Dr Tekalign Woldemariam from Addis Ababa University gave a keynote speech. Part 2 consisted of presentations by the five selected essay finalists: Betelhem Molla, Lamesgneu Negalign, Yidinekachew Solomon, Meselu Birliew and Lidya Yohannes. Part 3 was a panel of discussion on the theme of ‘Legacy and Looking Ahead’, with remarks by Dr Netsanet Gebremichael and Dr Yonas Ashine, both from Addis Ababa University, and Dr Semir Yusuf from the RVI. Dr Fana Gebresenbet concluded the seminar with closing remarks and a thank you to the presenters, participants and everyone else who contributed to the success of the event.

Both the essay presentations and the final panel discussion were moderated sessions followed by question-and-answer sessions, offering the audience an opportunity to reflect upon and share their feedback. The seminar moderators were Fiker Getachew, Messash Kassaye and Yonas Tariku from the IPSS. The seminar was recorded and reported by Afomiya Ayalew and Eldan Gizaw from Addis Ababa University.

# OPENING REMARKS

Part 1 of the seminar began with the seminar emcee, Brook Abdu, welcoming seminar participants and introducing the programme for the day. Opening remarks were then delivered by Dr Fana Gebresenbet, director of the IPSS. This was followed by further opening remarks from Hannah Stogdon, head of the RVI Ethiopia office, and Hannah Milne, a representative from the British embassy in Addis Ababa.



**Dr Fana Gebresenbet** starts off by welcoming everyone and stating the overall rationale for why the essay competition and seminar event were being held. He notes the continuing importance of the ideas and ideologies that defined the student movement and the revolutionary transformations in the 1960s and 1970s. The student activists engaged in debates,

dialogues and other political actions that allowed them to recognize the challenges of the time and propose solutions. He explains that these ideas and solutions were recognised through various state policies such as the 1975 land reform (the nationalization of rural and urban land) and the federalization of Ethiopia in 1991 and 1995.

Despite the time it takes, Dr Fana asserts, ideas play a major role in any country. As such, he also notes that new ideas are also expected from the current generation, given that public space in Ethiopia is deprived of these. There is a need to help young people to take lessons from the successes and shortcomings of the older revolutionary generation and help them to come up with ideas that can be shared in coming decades. It is with this spirit that the Rethinking Ethiopia project was developed and the call for essay submissions was advertised.

Dr Fana reiterates the various stages of the essay competition, including the call for submissions in early September 2023, two rounds of reviewing the submissions and the writing mentorship that the 15 selected writers received from Ethiopian academics. Dr Fana also congratulates the winners and invites Ethiopian youth to engage in constructive public debates centred both on ideas and proposing new solutions to problems that were identified. Finally, Dr Fana acknowledges the partnership with the PRF that made the Rethinking Ethiopia project possible.



**Hannah Stogdon** was the second speaker of the event. She starts by explaining what the RVI does in Ethiopia and why this event is so important. She states that it is timely and necessary to think about new ideas in contemporary Ethiopia. It is also the aim and goal of the RVI to make local knowledge work. A big part of that is working in Ethiopia, with Ethiopian researchers, to

bring that local knowledge to the forefront—to produce and share it. She goes on to explain that the PRF is a UK government-funded project with three main components: 1) peace and conflict analysis; 2) knowledge for peace; and 3) conflict sensitivity. As part of the knowledge for peace initiative, bigger questions—thematic questions that pertain to issues in Ethiopia under the umbrella of social cohesion—are being studied. This past year, publications on religious polarization and the political economy of resources in the periphery have been produced. All these publications are available.

She also indicates that a new programme starts this year (2024) to support a women’s research network in Ethiopia. The network intends to facilitate peer-to-peer sharing and learning, as well as amplify the voices of women researchers in Ethiopia. She further notes that this event and the partnership with the IPSS are important since it is a sign of shared values around research excellence and innovative solutions for the multifaceted problems in Ethiopia. Finally, she concludes by thanking the UK government for funding the project and supporting the work and shared vision that the RVI and the IPSS have in Ethiopia.



**Hannah Milne** was the third and final speaker of the welcoming section of the event. She begins by congratulating both institutes for this initiative, which is fostering dialogue in Ethiopia today. Initiatives such as this, which cultivate new ideas particularly from young and diverse voices, are very important for navigating challenges and reaching the full potential of any country, including Ethiopia.

She then goes on to congratulate and thank all the participants and essay finalists for their dedication and commitment addressing pressing issues on rights, governance and identity. She states that the UK priority to support these kinds of discussions is due to the recognition of the pivotal role of young people in shaping the future of Ethiopia.



## KEYNOTE ADDRESS



A keynote address was delivered by Dr Tekalign Woldemariam, associate professor of history at Addis Ababa University. Dr Tekalign begins by recognizing the honour of being invited as a speaker and continued to recognize the creativity employed by the Ethiopian youth in framing the political and social problems in contemporary Ethiopia. He states that rethinking Ethiopia means

not just thinking again or reconsidering the problems and the issues that earlier scholars or the revolutionary generation had thought about, but also thinking about Ethiopia in ways that those scholars or members of that generation did not or, for whatever reason, had been unable to do so. Given that the focus of this seminar is on new ideas and new ways of thinking about contemporary Ethiopia, Dr Tekalign calls attention to elements that he believes merit careful attention for encouraging the emergence of an intellectual engagement with ideas that stands any chance of leading to paradigmatic change on the intellectual landscape and, hopefully, on the political landscape. Dr Tekalign specifies that he does not want to indulge in complaining about the failures in studying Ethiopia by neglecting the historicity of ideas. Going forward, any serious rethinking of Ethiopia must take this as both a point of departure and an organizing principle. There also needs to be usage of local ideas that might have been overlooked. For this to happen, it is important to forge links between political science, thought, theory and history by sustaining engagement to produce enhanced capacity in understanding the present. He concludes his keynote address by stating that his speech is not to judge but to articulate the value of incorporating history and other social sciences. He sympathizes with this academic vision of rethinking Ethiopia as it is not be a luxury in the face of the multitude of urgent problems facing the country (see Annex 1 for the full keynote address).

# OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENTATIONS

With the aim of providing a platform for young Ethiopians to discuss and debate the challenges facing the country and to propose solutions, in Part 2 of the seminar the five selected finalists presented their respective essays (see Annex 2 for the full text of all five finalist essays). This was followed by a question-and-answer session and discussion. The presentations took place in two rounds.

## ROUND ONE



*From left to right, Meselu Birliw, Yidinekachew Solomon, Betelhem Molla, Liya Yohannes, and Lamesgne Negalign.*

The first two presentations were moderated by Fikir Getachew, a researcher with a background in political science and international relations from Addis Ababa University. The first two presenters were Betelhem Molla and Lamesgne Negalign.

Betelhem Molla is a Bachelor of Law graduate from the University of Gondar, currently serving as a public prosecutor at the Addis Ababa city administration justice bureau. Lamesgne Negalign graduated

with an MA degree in international relations and diplomacy and a BA degree in political science and international relations from Addis Ababa University. He has taught political science and international relations for more than nine years and is currently enrolled in a joint programme between the IPSS and Leipzig University to earn an MA in global studies.

### **'A nation and an idea: the role of scholars in Ethiopia' by Betelhem Molla**

Betelhem highlights the significance of ideas in nation-building, noting the impact of revolutionary ideas and the 1960s student movement in shaping Ethiopia. The subject of nations, namely the elimination of ethnic dominance, is one of the concerns raised by the student movement. The current system of ethnic federalism is the outcome of this idea being processed by successive generations. There are adversaries and protagonists in the system. The speaker argues that the issue lies not in ethnic federalism itself but in a lack of understanding about its principles and objectives. Therefore, she emphasizes the need to educate society about the true nature and goals of ethnic federalism as a social structure to ensure effective implementation. Most importantly, it ought to be put into practice while maintaining a balance between the protection of individual rights and the rights of groups. She also argues, however, that since the government is failing to maintain the balance between these rights, it is the responsibility of Ethiopian intellectuals and scholars to mediate this process. Despite this fact, Ethiopian intellectuals have essentially played little role in the process of nation-building in recent years.

According to Betelhem, students from the 1960s should serve as role models for the scholar of today in terms of fulfilling their social obligations and feeling responsible to contributing to improving the quality of life for every citizen, in accordance with their areas of competence.

### **'A president for all, a vote for every voice: how reforming governance and electoral systems can heal Ethiopia's ethnocratic wounds' by Lamesgenew Negalign**

Lamesgenew starts by telling the story of a lived experience about how language skills and ethnic affiliation benefits social status in an ethnocratic country such as Ethiopia. He addresses what he calls 'Ethiopian ethnocracy'. This ethnocracy has resulted in conflicts and inequality as various ethnic groups have held varying degrees of power over the country and its society. He identifies four important periods that helped Ethiopia fight inequality: 1) the 1960s student movement; 2) the 1974 revolution; 3) the 1987 constitution; and 4) the 1991 regime change. After all these efforts, however, he notes that we still find ourselves in conflicts that are mainly fuelled by ethnic narratives. He states that the Derg regime was dominated by the Amhara, the EPRDF [Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front] by Tigrayans and Prosperity by the Oromo. He argues there has been a cycle of dominance that has exacerbated ethnic tensions and violent conflicts. For these reasons, he proposes a dual approach to end the cycle of ethnocratic dominance because neither the unitary nor the federal state structures have been able to adequately handle this issue. Lamesgenew advocates for the implementation of a strategy based on a mixed electoral system that combines majoritarian and proportional representation. He proposes this approach because of the difficulty faced by opposition parties during election. He emphasizes how difficult it is for opposition parties to win since the electoral system is predictable. He also recommends a semi-presidential system in which the prime minister and president come from separate ethnic backgrounds. This not only allows different ethnic representation but also fosters power-sharing and inclusion for all Ethiopians. This would only be possible, however, Lamesgenew insists, if the president has real power rather than only a ceremonial role.

### **Discussion points**

When the first round of presentation was concluded, the moderator briefly summarized what the speakers said and opened the stage for questions. A total of six people posed questions for both presenters. They point out the apparent differences between Betelhem and Lamesgenew: the irreconcilability of a strong central government, which Betelhem suggests, versus the power structure Lamesgenew recommends; Betelhem's focus on social cohesion versus Lamesgenew's emphasis on checks and balances. Betelhem is lauded for writing in Amharic, which was seen as an exercise in decolonization. Both presenters were criticized for neglecting the primacy of democracy. Lamesgenew's presentation generated critical discussion based on his romanticizing ethnocracy and presidentialism, given the challenges a president would face in terms of having a critical distance from his [or her] ethnic identity to become a unifying symbol. The two essay finalists then provided their reflections. Whereas Betelhem emphasizes the need for the domestication of democracy, Lamesgenew defends his arguments for a presidential system in the ethno-federal context of Ethiopia and the necessity of bridging the Amhara–Oromo political divide.

## ROUND TWO

The second round of presentations began after a 15-minute tea break. This round was moderated by Messash Kassaye, who is a PhD candidate at the IPSS with more than a decade of research and work experience in peace education, conflict management and leadership. The three presenters were Yidinekachew Solomon, Meselu Birliw and Lidya Yohannes.

Yidinekachew Solomon is a lecturer at the department of English language and literature at Debre Birhan University. Meselu Birliw is a final year economics student at Addis Ababa University, with active participation in extracurricular activities. Lidya Yohannes is a final year law student at Hawassa University, who is actively involved in various extracurricular and community service initiatives.

### **'Rethinking Ethiopia: proposing rhizomatic solutions for ethnic politics' by Yidinekachew Solomon**

Yidnekachew examines the social and political implications of ethnic politics for Ethiopians, drawing from his personal experience of being uprooted from school as a youngster. He argues that language is dislocating by design, and it is the main factor guiding Ethiopian politics. To substantiate this, he analyses the merger of the heterogeneous spheres of politics and of language through Lacan's psychoanalysis. He argues that the functional characteristic of language has been fused with politics, which results in the corresponding dislocation of people. Based on his findings, the speaker suggests a rhizomatic solution. A rhizomatic solution would help us reconsider, the author argues, the authentic condition, which is a unique reality where linguistic diversity is no longer a problem. Language policy should be understood as exclusively exclusionary. If we continue to pursue, adjust and dictate our politics through language, the end will be fragmentation and state collapse. He argues that since the gulf between language and politics is far from being bridged, the solution for this complicated situation is rhizomatic analysis inspired by Deleuze and Guattari. Because of their political relevance, rhizomes support inclusive, flexible approaches to power and organization.

### **'Landownership rights and agricultural development in Ethiopia' by Meselu Birliw**

Meselu begins by noting that a large percentage of people in Ethiopia depends on the agriculture industry for their livelihoods, making it the backbone of the Ethiopian economy. In line with this, the climate and varied agro-ecological zones across the country make it an ideal place for agriculture. Despite this, the agriculture industry has not been able to keep up with the growing demand for food from the population. Meselu emphasizes that agricultural development is hampered by restrictive land policy in Ethiopia, which forbids farmers from trading or selling their land for a variety of reasons. This makes it more difficult for farmers to grow their farming businesses or move into other professions. This policy also forces more than 80 per cent of the population to keep working in agriculture, which resulted in fragments land holdings and limited trade. These restrictions also impede economies of scale and worsen financial situations, resulting from few purchasing and selling opportunities. He argues that to support informed decision-making and increase agricultural production for sustainable development, governments should

implement land policy reforms that would allow farmers complete land rights. He encourages intellectuals to offer politicians suggestions for successful land reform and asks young people to get involved in lobbying for changes in policy that are appropriate for their generation.

### **'Reclaiming rights: citizenship in the face of police brutality in Ethiopia' by Lidya Yohannes**

Lidya begins by stating that she will discuss the main argument, supporting arguments, its relevance, and conclusion of her essay. She critically examines how Ethiopian citizenship has changed over time, going beyond traditional subjectivity to emphasize the crucial role that the government plays in defending the rights of its people. With a focus on the political environment that emerged after 1974, she makes the case that one of the greatest problems in Ethiopia right now is the citizenship crisis, which is caused by pervasive police brutality and judicial injustice. These practices not only harm citizens but also jeopardize the legitimacy of the government and encourage militarization. She explains how law enforcement agencies are not safe havens anymore but rather give rise to concerns for safety. The reason for this, Lidya states, is political censorship, which creates the opportunity for police brutality. Lidya further illustrates how human rights compliance and government–citizen relations affect public confidence, crime prevention and the global reputation of the country. She uses historical events as a teaching tool. She substantiates her claim by stating the fact that due process of law is not being implemented at Ethiopian law enforcement agencies. She mentions prominent political activists, journalists and advocates such as Jawar Mohammed, Eskeder Nega, Bekalu Alamerew and many others. Finally, she asserts that government legitimacy is all about the will of its citizens and reflects on how much power citizens actually have. As this is one of the ways to be an influential actor in the global political arena, governments should play their protector role effectively. She therefore suggests that the situation in Ethiopia should not be sugar coated. Rather, scholars, citizens and the government should work together to tackle the current citizenship crisis. Only then, Lidya argues, can citizenship be truly achieved in Ethiopia.

### **Discussion points**

As with the first round, when the second round of presentations was concluded, the moderator briefly summarized what the speakers said and opened the stage for questions. One comment indicates that Meselu's argument contradicts the 1960s student movement. His proposal is also unfeasible as it requires constitutional amendment. In another comment, Lidya's presentation is criticized both for allegedly portraying political activists, journalists and advocates as angels and for questioning trust in law enforcement in an exaggerated manner. In terms of his essay, Yidnekachew is asked to clarify the distinction between language and ethnicity, and the possibility that more languages mean more conflict. The presenters responded to these and other questions. Meselu clarifies that his argument is a continuation of the 1960s struggle demanding 'land to the tiller', which does require a constitutional amendment. Lidya explains that she is using the umbrella term 'police' to refer to any agency with power. Yidnekachew notes two traces of similar velocity are coming together as destructive to the state. History shows that language is the main problem by itself. He argues that we have failed to address this because we do not understand the value and influence of language in our politics.

## PANEL DISCUSSION



*From left to right, Dr Netsanet Gebremichael, Dr Yonas Ashine, Dr Semir Yusuf, and Yonas Tariku.*

Following the essay presentations during the morning session, Part 3 of the seminar consisted of a panel discussion on the theme of ‘Legacy and Looking Ahead.’ This afternoon session was moderated by Yonas Tariku, a lecturer and academic coordinator at the IPSS. The panellists, Dr Netsanet Gebremichael, Dr Yonas Ashine and Dr Semir Yusuf engaged in a lively discussion on the challenges and prospects of democratisation and development in Ethiopia. Dr Netsanet

is an assistant professor and researcher at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University. Dr Yonas Ashine is an associate professor of political science and international relations, also at Addis Ababa University. Dr Semir is a senior research advisor at the PRF of the RVI with decades of experience in teaching and research.

The panel discussion began with the moderator posing the discussion questions, which revolved around three key themes: the nationality question, gender equality and democratization. The specific question for discussion were:

1. How have different regimes and their proponents approached the question of nationality in Ethiopia and with what implications?
2. How have regimes conceptualized and addressed gender equality in Ethiopia and how far have we come in addressing the gender gap?
3. How much have we progressed and/or regressed along the democratic path since 1974? What major factors stand between the dream of democracy in Ethiopia and the persistence of authoritarianism?

### **Dr Netsanet Gebremichael**

As an interdisciplinary scholar, Dr Netsanet frames her response to the questions from an interdisciplinary angle. She first discusses an event that took place in 1967 Ethiopian Calander (EC) in the aftermath of the Ethiopian revolution. Then she discusses what modern and historical archives offer about that event. She notes that using and emphasizing different archives resulted in different interpretations of the revolution and the resultant violence. She defines the revolution as a combination of an armed struggle and a people’s uprising. There is a need to recognize the multiplicity of that event itself as it was simultaneously a social and political movement. If seen from the vantage point of previous government leadership, it was not a revolution. It was an execution of all those people who were involved in the movement. To

reckon with this element of the revolution, she argues we should re-examine the limits of legacy mode of thinking and bridging with the past and look in to ruptures and their political and theoretical significance by exploring marginal archives on and about the Ethiopian revolution from multilocational and pluralistic political imaginaries that go beyond violence–nonviolence binary. She asks: How can the archives enable us to do so? Dr Netsanet explains that she looked at two archives: ‘archives of 1967 at *Wemezeker* (National Library and Archives Agency) and oral history recollection of former residents of Asmara from Ethiopia about their recollection on the historical significance of 1967 in Asmara.

The first archive is a poem written by an Eritrean Muslim man who was arrested during the revolution. The poem is translated into Arabic. Dr Netsanet explains how this poem redefines the revolution, where those who advocate for the slogan ‘Ethiopia First’ are seen as betraying the Eritrean cause. The second archive she explores is the testimonies of women, thus constituting what she refers to as a ‘feminine archive’. In particular, she discusses the testimonies and struggles of the wives of imprisoned or executed men. These women engaged in litigation against the state for the confiscation of their property. Dr Netsanet highlights the importance of recognizing these negotiations and continuities within the archival records, which often go unnoticed in the literature. On the third question, Dr Netsanet says that unfortunately, the violent–nonviolent dichotomy does not allow us to see the small-scale negotiations that happened in the aftermath of the revolution and even the 1991 regime change. She thus reiterates the need to include women’s voices, using often underutilized and neglected archives, so that the everydayness of the revolution can come to the fore.

### **Dr Yonas Ashine**

Building upon Dr Netsanet’s insights, Dr Yonas focuses on the evolution of questions regarding nationalities, democracy and women. He asks: What are the historical conditions that necessitated the emergence of such questions? The most important one is the making of the modern state and the modern subject that follows. The second condition is the making of intellectuals, who also articulate (in their own language) the democratic question, the nationality question and any question being asked today. Third, the international context is important. During the colonial period, being admitted into the League of Nations and putting Ethiopia on the world map was very important. In examining the rise of the nationalities question, Yonas also underscores the importance of the brief fascist Italian occupation (1936–1941).

Dr Yonas goes on to explain that the post-liberation era since 1941 saw a domestic discussion on nationalities by Ethiopians themselves through literary works such as Haddis Alemayehu’s *Fiker eske mekaber* [*Love to the Grave*] and *Ethiopia mn ayet astedadar yasfelgatal* [*What kind of governance does Ethiopia require?*] and Abe Gubegna’s *Melkeam-Seayfe nebelbal* [*Melkeam—the Sword of the Flame; Melkeam was the name of the lead protagonist*]. In addition, the civil society moment was very important during that period as such groups as the Mecha and Tulema Association (a social movement considered as a major step in the development of Oromo ethnic nationalist movement) became sites of articulation of the nationality question. Finally, the period also saw the eruption of social questions articulated through such movements as peasant rebellions.

As he notes, the history of the nationality question can be traced as the anchor of the struggles and the Ethiopian student movement. Debates among revolutionary leaders and student activists such as Andreas Eshete, Tilahun Gizaw, Walegn Mekonnen and others revolved around what it means to talk about the nationality question in Ethiopia and how we can apply it to ourselves. Because the nationality question and self-determination were a Marxist ideology, the first question was: Is the Ethiopian historical condition suitable to apply the nationality question and self-determination?

Echoing the student activist, Andreas, Dr Yonas emphasizes the importance of political theory aligning with the mass struggles for emancipation and articulating popular and global terms. He explains that the revolutionary regime attempted to address the nationality question through regional autonomy, socialism and violence. The post-1991 regime introduced federal governance to respond to the same question. While they have their differences, he observes that both arrangements fail to address the conceptual debate. Thus, Dr Yonas highlights the crisis of self-rule in Ethiopia, emphasizing that the concept of the self has never been resolved and is continually contested. He emphasizes the question of who constitutes the self, and the urgent need to address the minority question, within the framework of self-determination and self-rule. Dr Yonas finishes up his remarks with an invitation to further theorize the concept of self and the minority question in Ethiopian federalism.

### **Dr Semir Yusuf**

Building on Dr Tekalign's focus on the historicity of ideas in his keynote speech, Dr Semir emphasizes the importance of structural analysis, focusing on the importance of the structural factors that influence political processes. He notes that one very important vantage point we might need to understand about the power of structural forces is the debacle of the democratization process in Ethiopia.

Dr Semir points out that Ethiopia has experienced several forms of regimes over the last 50 to 60 years, including a market-oriented system, a military dictatorship, an electoral authoritarian state under the EPRDF and the recent resurgence of authoritarian rule after a brief interlude of political liberalization (in 2018). He goes on to point out that there is some element of competition such as the existence of semi-independent institutions and some element of competitiveness in the last election. In the end, however, he concludes that the post-2018 era has been and is authoritarian at its core. He asserts that this is a very important part of the analysis. Dr Semir argues that the persistence of authoritarianism might be explained by the imbalance of power between state and social forces, and the nature of their interaction.

He notes that this analysis provides four key insights into the socio-economic origins and mechanisms of authoritarianism in Ethiopia:

1. Historically speaking, the modern Ethiopian state grew hegemonic in the process of state expansion, overpowering its potential contenders and laying the foundation for subsequent authoritarian regimes.



2. Once established, this foundation of authoritarianism has been supported by political stability. Moments and zones of political stability have really anchored regimes in Ethiopia, further enhancing their authoritarian grip.
3. Protest movements in Ethiopia have played a role in regime change but they have failed in consolidating democratic governance in Ethiopia.
4. Armed resistance, as the most radical form of challenging autocracy, has also not contributed to the consolidation of democracy in Ethiopia. War eliminates the foundations of democracy, justifies state violations of human rights and creates conditions for a coherent autocratic rebel group to capture state power and perpetuate authoritarian rule.

Dr Semir's analysis draws on the work of the political sociologist Charles Tilly, who highlights the emergence of democracy in Western Europe through negotiations between expanding states and the bourgeoisie to secure resources for war projects. In Ethiopia, however, the absence of a strong contender such as the bourgeoisie during the imperial era allowed the state to grow powerful and establish a semi-absolutist foundation for subsequent autocracy.

In conclusion, Dr Semir argues that the autocratic predicament in Ethiopia is fundamentally structural in nature. Thus, the structural forces and their historical trajectory (origins and continuity) need to be appreciated to properly understand and explain this predicament, a predicament which the student movement and the revolution attempted to address, among other things, and which continues to characterise the political struggle in Ethiopia.

## Discussion points

Following these opening remarks by the panellists, seminar participants raised several questions and reflections. Some of these are presented here. They have been clarified for better understanding.

Question 1: The participants acknowledge student movement abilities to predict the consequences of not addressing the nationality question from a class perspective, leading to a narrow-minded nationalistic movement. They also recognize the success of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party in making the ethnic question a national one, supporting Eritreans. Can we credit the students for providing answers to these issues?

Question 2: The process of state formation in Ethiopia involved expansion to the south, influenced by global phenomena and external assistance. From the late nineteenth century to the Italian occupation and the 1960s revolution, external powers and global movements played a role. Are our reforms primarily influenced by internal forces or driven by external factors?

Question 3: In the era of artificial intelligence, regionalization and the resurgence of authoritarians, where the boundary between the state and democracy is blurred, what challenges do international civil society organizations face? How do we navigate this landscape?

Question 4: Considering that protests and armed struggles have not resulted in democracy, what is expected from scholars and citizens? Should we accept authoritarianism and live with it? Or what actions would you suggest taking to address this situation?

Question 5: In the context of the ‘Legacy and Looking Ahead’ theme, in the past, the nationality question was anchored in socialism. In the current era without a dominant ideology, however, ethno-nationalism persists. Can ethno-nationalism without an ideology be acceptable? What are the challenges and prospects related to this, and how should we approach it?

## REFLECTIONS: THE PANELLISTS RESPOND

**Dr Netsanet Gebremichael** emphasizes the need to historicize the political debates and assess what has been missed and what has been gained from those questions of nationality. There is a land question today and we need to understand its various political economic manifestation of contemporary agrarian questions at a macro and micro national international formulations and policy options. So, there are also issue-based questions behind these ethno-nationalist questions. She calls for a deeper examination of these issues, urging scholars to move beyond the framing of ethno-nationalism and consider the political economy aspects each issue in their contemporary formulations.

**Dr Yonas Ashine** notes the importance of the nationality question, which the student movement archives show was sacred, delicate, fundamental and the most dialectical question of all the questions. The problem is how we articulate it, trying to understand and explore it. Also, the question of the minority. Minorities are always being reproduced in each regime. Displacement is also there, which leads to the question of the articulation of the nationality question in every linguistic group. Any linguistic group can be called a ‘nation’, if they articulate their question as a nationality question. But how do we answer their question within the Ethiopian framework, within the pan-African spirit, regional integration, within global politics because the lesson we draw from them? Why the pan-African? Because if pan-Africanism is taken seriously, we would not see Ethiopia and Somalia on this stage, or Kenya expanding towards the Horn. The East African Community would not expand into the IGAD [Intergovernmental Authority on Development] region if there was a remnant of pan-Africanism.

Dr Yonas proposes that there is only a rhetoric of pan-Africanism. When we come to Ethiopia, how do we address the minority question in each locality? He replies that we should address this when we talk about the nationality question, about which the Ethiopian student movement has already spoken. The second one is the question about the self. When you answer the Oromo question, within the Oromia region, we see that many selves have proliferated. So, how do we articulate self-determination to those new selves? The south, especially, is a very important theoretical site because when you answer the question about the self, there is another self being reproduced. What (who) is the self that deserves determination and administration? How can that self also participate in shared politics (the federal)? The big groups in terms of number—the Oromo, the Amhara and the Tigray—are competing for shared rule. While they are also fighting over the territory of one another. So, you have the self and the shared-rule crisis in the

Ethiopian federal literature. So, how do we translate this crisis? How can democracy answer the question of the minority and self-administration together in each locality? He also mentions the need for intellectuals to draw ideologies from the experiences of the masses and theorize their actions. Dr Yonas calls for finding ways to accommodate the crisis of self and shared rule within the Ethiopian federal literature, and to examine how democracy can address the concerns of minorities and self-administration in each locality.

**Dr Semir Yusuf** highlights the paradoxical nature of the Ethiopian state, which is both strong and weak. It is strong enough to weaken opponents but weak enough not to eliminate them. This is ironic because Ethiopia is a land with a very strong state that has a very strong coercive apparatus, on the one hand, but is also a land where there are still very strong, formidable and durable insurgent groups, on the other. He notes that this kind of insurgency is found in very few African countries. So, strong state, strong resistance to the state in the form of armed movements. And both are a hindrance to any possibility of democratic transition. Herein lies our predicament, he asserts: either no contestation or bad contestation. No peaceful contestation because the state is too strong to allow that but bad contestation in the form of insurgencies and armed movements, which further weakens any possibility of democratic transition.

Dr Semir also discusses the influence of foreign forces and the complex context of the Global South, where demands for democratization, self-determination, economic development and national unity coexist and often contradict one another. He emphasizes that Global South experiences cannot be replicated from Western history, which followed a sequential process. Dr Semir raises the question of what options are available to navigate these complexities, suggesting the possibility of an approach structured in terms of incentives to incentivize the state to concede and move towards democratic consolidation. He calls for further exploration and consideration of this approach. In addition, he criticizes the intellectual sterility in Ethiopian nationalist and ethno-nationalist discourses, urging for more intellectual dynamism to redefine the meanings and ideologies behind movements such as Amhara nationalism, Oromo nationalism and Ethiopian nationalism in the twenty-first century. He poses thought-provoking questions about the ideological underpinnings and significance of these movements in the current context.

# CONCLUSION

The seminar concluded with closing remarks by Dr Fana Gebresenbet, who expressed gratitude to all the participants and contributors for their valuable insights. The seminar provided a platform for young voices to contribute to the discourse on the challenges and prospects Ethiopia faces. The presentations and panel discussion fostered critical thinking and dialogue, generating valuable insights for a more peaceful and prosperous Ethiopia. The seminar also served as a reminder of the significance of past events and the need for continuous reflection and reimagining to shape a path forward for Ethiopia.

## ANNEX 1: KEYNOTE ADDRESS

It is an honour to have been invited to speak on this workshop whose objectives as well as approach I not only share fully but also admire and applaud very much. I would like to thank the organizers of the workshop as well as all those individuals and institutions that have come together in this great effort to rethink Ethiopia.

However, I must start with a confession. What I had thought of talking about prior to receiving the essays of the young scholars who had been chosen as finalists in the essay competition was altogether different from what I am going to try to draw your attention to now. In fact, only a couple of days before I received the essays, I had confided to the organizers that I will probably speak on a few strands of thought that would seek to link my own ongoing work on the political economy and social history of late Imperial Ethiopia (by which I mean Ethiopia from 1941 to 1974) to some of our recent experiences and current concerns. After I read the essays, I decided to instead to focus on what I thought might be more helpful towards not only strengthening the effort that these young scholars are making to think creatively about how some of the most serious political and social problems of contemporary Ethiopia might be solved, but also towards emboldening them (as well as all of us) to go beyond merely seeking solutions for what we believe (or are widely believed) to be existing problems and begin to ask or pose new questions or new problems and broaden the reach of our investigative gaze.

I am saying this because I understand rethinking Ethiopia to mean not just thinking again or reconsidering the problems and issues that earlier scholars (or the so-called generation of the 60s) had thought about, but also thinking about Ethiopia in ways that those scholars or members of that generation didn't or, for whatever reason, had not been able to.

I do not want to be misunderstood here: It is an excellent idea to engage young people who are one or two generations remove from the generation of the 60s, whose backgrounds, assumptions and intellectual formations are different from that generation, to try to think creatively and innovatively about the problems with which that generation had wrestled (and the efforts that these men and women have made are quite impressive, very brave, and in one or two cases quite original), but it is only when they are encouraged to ask (or when we are all encouraged to ask or find our own way of asking) new questions, or at least reframing long-standing problems in some original ways that, to steal a line from Thomas Kuhn [*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*], that we start a process that can hopefully culminate in a paradigm shift about the way we understand ourselves, our times and our roles in it.

Given that our focus on this workshop is on new ideas and new ways of thinking about contemporary Ethiopia, what I therefore thought I should do (as briefly as can be managed within the 10 or 15 minutes allotted to me) is to call attention to a couple of elements or areas that I believe merit very careful attention if we are to encourage the emergence of an

intellectual engagement with ideas that stand any chance of leading to paradigmatic change on the intellectual landscape and eventually (or concomitantly) on the public/political landscape in Ethiopia.

As you will see momentarily, these areas or elements are those which historians are almost habitually inclined to call attention to. So, I am not going to do anything revolutionary or unheard of before. One of these areas has to do with what I will call the deep historicity of many of the ideas that we work with in both the public and scholarly arenas in this country, a point that I believe is not sufficiently appreciated by many. The other has to do with the importance and the need for a deeper, deliberate, and sustained engagement and cross-fertilization between history and social science fields like political science (as well as other social science and humanities disciplines) to prepare the ground for new thinking and greater imagination about Ethiopia.

By the historicity of ideas, what I mean is the emergence and development of ideas across time as well as across geographical and intellectual landscapes. And the claim that I am going to make is that the ideas on the basis of which scholars and other intellectuals of Ethiopia try to tell Ethiopian stories of politics and society (but also of economy and culture) have deep historical provenance, whereas in glaring contrast to that fact they continue to invoke or deploy them either in totally unhistorical (not to say a-historical) ways or, if they factor in history at all, do so in a rather perfunctory manner.

What I mean by this is that any number of these ideas have histories of their own, both on the global and or/on the Ethiopian political and intellectual landscapes, a history that not only links them to a particular period or periods in which they emerged, gained currency, or declined but also to the interests that motivated their emergence, the purposes that they served during their currency, and the factors that brought about their decline and in some cases retirement or abandonment. What I also mean is that, as they are developed, used, and decline, ideas not only generate or mediate change but are also modified, altered, expanded, truncated, or otherwise changed themselves.

On the wider global scale, there have always been three important dynamics that are known to have entailed these kinds of changes for ideas. One is *socio-economic, political, and cultural transformation of societies* in the wake of major technological breakthroughs. The second has to do with *shifts and changes in global political economy and consequently of relationships of power and influence* among as well as between different components of the global system. The third would be *the transmigration of ideas across geographical and cultural boundaries* or the efforts that are made to inject, impose, adopt, or adapt them to new political, economic and cultural ecologies. It is very important not to think of these as distinct, separate or unrelated factors. They were, in fact, not only intimately related but also intimately interconnected.

There are three additional but very important points to keep in mind as we think about this historicity of ideas on the global plane (and here in Ethiopia, with a major caveat, of course, that

only broad similarities but no direct parallels can be drawn between the two on any one or all the three points).

One is that during their first articulation and ascendancy, ideas often tend to be partial or one sided, highlighting certain phenomena, conditions of life, or trends of thought while omitting, overlooking, or denying others; and those omitted, overlooked, or denied phenomena or conditions of life get little or no alternative arenas of expression. They tend therefore to be marginalized and inarticulate, e.g. the idea of the Modern and its political economic trappings: Liberty, equality, freedom, fraternity, democracy, humanity, rationality, nationality, society, citizenship, property, market economy, etc. versus slavery, colonialism, racism, patriarchy, etc. These two sets of ideas were coeval, as you know, and throughout the period between the 18–20th centuries, they had a rather perverse (even if somewhat concealed) intimacy and interrelationship.

The second point is that in due course these originally dominant and popular ideas come under increasing scrutiny and challenge either as fault lines begin to develop in the phenomena, the conditions of life, and trends of thought that they had privileged and highlighted before (thus bringing them under closer critical examination and challenge) or as major upsets happen in the relationships that had privileged the previous ideas leading to the previously suppressed ideas coming to the surface and becoming increasingly vocal. In the first category are articulations that highlight previously suppressed social identities (ethnic, racial, gender, etc.) and a whole set of ideas that are often subsumed under the rubric of *postmodernism*, *post-structuralism*, etc. In the second category are articulations that seek to highlight new subjectivities in the wake of the decline and retrenchment of empire, bringing forth national and cultural ideas rooted in those subjectivities as alternatives to those that had been dominant before (the major foil for this set of ideas as you know is what is known as *postcolonialism*).

The third point is that in the wake of the decline and retrenchment of empire, there was a felt need to limit and curtail the scope and force of sovereignty that had gained currency in the formerly colonial world and to put in place terms of re-engagement between former colonizers and their former subjects. These terms of engagement, as you know, would take the form of negotiated and agreed arrangements around a whole set of arenas of relationship, both between states and their subjects as well as among states.

The UN would be the most important setting for the production and dissemination of a panoply of these agreements called *Conventions*, *Covenants* or *Declarations*. The predominant, if not singular, language underpinning these Conventions is the language of *rights*. (It is in this context that human rights, civil rights, political rights, rights to justice, to assemble, expression, etc.; group rights, rights of individuals, rights of movement, etc., come accompanied at the same time of course with *obligations* (obligations to protect or defend the rights of minorities, cultural groups, political groups, etc.; obligations mostly imposed on or willingly subscribed to by sovereign states but in some instances delegated or arrogated to supranational bodies and institutions with a mandate to supervise or regulate one or another area of rights).

Accompanying the language of rights and obligations in the framing of these conventions or covenants was of course that of *violations and/or abuses* and in some instances that of *recourses* available to those who are victimized or aggrieved by the violations.

On the national scale here in Ethiopia, the dynamics of change that had consequences for ideas in certain ways mimic those I have outlined for the wider global plane, except for major technological innovations or breakthroughs and empire (at least in the form of colonial empire) not having as much significance here as they have had elsewhere. Ideas *shifted and changed with shifts and changes in relationships of power* among different entities here too; and here too, ideas were, *modified, truncated, or otherwise changed* in the process of their transmigration or movement across regions and different ecologies. Here, too, some ideas are *new articulations of the interests and feeling of the formerly inarticulate*, etc., etc.

What is equally important in our context, may be in place of technology that entailed change in ways of life and social organization (and therefore of ideas) elsewhere is the transmigration into Ethiopia of exogenous ideas and the tortured history of their transplantation, adoption, or adaptation. A great many of these transmigrations happened during the long history of the country prior to the mid-twentieth century. A great many others have been transmigrating since the mid-twentieth century as part of the global terms of reengagement that I have just referred to above as part of the country's membership in the global community of sovereign nations.

To help make my point a bit more concrete and give a clue as to its immediate relevance to this workshop, let me give you a quick rundown of some of (not all) the ideas that have been used by our essayists selected for this workshop. My listing in English and Amharic has nothing to do with the exogenous-ness (or foreign-ness) or indigenouness of the ideas. It reflects only that they are expressed in one or another form depending on the language used by the writer:

*Government/Government structure; State; Citizenship, Legitimacy (government/political), political transition, Image building; Rights (Human Rights; Property rights, Rights to life, Rights to justice) Revolution, Continual Revolution, Progress, Nations, and nationalities; Federalism, Confederation, Ethnocracy, Equality, Humanity, Development, The Developmental State; Governance; Marginality; Democracy; Elections.*

*Ager, Mengist, Maikelawi-mengist, Meekelawi-teqwamat, Saynsawi Ewqet, Zemenawi Technology, Yemeret-balebetnet, Arash (Arashu); Geberew; Feudal, Yefeudalu-serat, Ye-feudalu zemen; Beher, Behereseb, Ye-beher federalism, Capital (Menesha capital), Policy, Ye-hig-yebelaynet, Zemen-teshagari-hasaboch, Dehenet, Higemengist, Ameknyoawi, E-ameknyoawi, Aselasaynet, Mebt/mebtoch, Ye-budinena Ye-gil mebtoch; Yemezawawor-mebt, Nibret-yemafrat-mebt; Discipline, Le-hilina-megezat, Balemoyanet.*

Again, to reiterate, each one of these ideas (or part-ideas if you like) has a history of its own, and comes out of one or another time, place, or situation in the long history of the modern (and



to some extent the pre-modern) era and that, in the process of its use or deployment in other settings and times, it might have accumulated new attributes and shaded off some others.

I don't want to indulge in some kind of critical rant or complaint about our failure (by which I mean of all of us) engaged in the study of Ethiopia or (of thinking or rethinking it) having thus far largely failed to take these truths and points of fact about the historicity of ideas into account. Nor do I want, as I said before, to judge or derogate from any of the brilliant efforts that these young thinkers have made in this particular exercise.

I want instead to underscore the point that, going forward, any serious rethinking of Ethiopia must, of necessity, not only take serious note of this but make it a fundamental point of departure and core organizing principle. This should be the new foundation, *raison d'être* if you like, of Ethiopian studies in all areas and arenas of intellectual engagement, not just around politics or political studies. I want also to call attention to the need for searching, excavating, and valourizing local ideas that might have been overlooked or undervalued as much as we reach for those whose currency and or wide circulation makes them readily available or convenient.

If any of this is to happen, however, it is necessary that a deeper, critical, informed, and sustained engagement be forged between political science, political thought, or political theory and history in Ethiopia (history both at the global and local levels, that is). To think and seriously take up the idea of sustained engagement between historical and political science scholarship would, in my thinking, mean a lot more than just enhanced sensitivity to the historical material (i.e. greater exposure or awareness of narratives of historical events or processes) or to the sensibilities of historians.

It should mean to have greater awareness and appreciation of some of the key building blocks of historical scholarship and the ways in which they enrich our knowledge of the past and enhance our capacity to understand the present. For our present purposes, these building blocks or foundational ideas about history can be briefly summarized under four headings.

## 1. HISTORICAL AGENCY

The first is appreciation of what we call *historical agency* by which is meant the determination and interrogation of the historical subject or entity whose interests, ideas, or actions constitute the subject matter of our historical investigation, analysis, and narrative construction.

One value that historians attach to this exercise is that it helps guard against the very common mistake of telling stories from the vantage point of certain, usually powerful or dominant, elements or strata of society. But it's even greater value, in view of the most common tendencies across both the social sciences and the humanities (both here and elsewhere) is that it enables us to talk about the motivations and roles of individuals or cohorts of individuals that inhabit larger collectivities of people or institutions in whose name they claim to act or speak.

As such, they help us guard against associating certain tendencies, attributes, or inclinations with a whole group of people; or even worse, from talking about large groups of people or institutions as if they were living and breathing historical actors. The importance of this point in settings such as present-day Ethiopia in which we have increasingly made the habit of talking about this or that people or this or that ethnic group doing this or that thing cannot be lost on anyone.

## 2. EMPIRICAL GROUNDING AND ENLARGED SCOPE

There are three basic elements that both constitute and measure deep historical understanding of any given event or phenomena: the degree to which it is *empirically grounded*, *temporally deep*, and *socially and geographically broad* in scope.

The combined interplay of empirical wealth and broad coverage not only makes for textured examination of complex interplay of factors that go into the making of historical events and processes, but also helps historians go beyond the limitations of looking at things in terms only of the recent past (a phenomenon to which we sometimes refer to as a ‘rear view mirror’ or ‘*presentist*’ approach to the past) or in terms of direct and simple relationship between single causes and direct outcomes.

Again, the lessons of this in view of current tendencies to talk about Ethiopian history in terms of three (or now four) successive regimes over the last half century or so or in terms of single factors like the student movement bringing about the 1974 revolution are fairly evident.

## 3. THE STUDY CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

People often say that the stock-in-trade of historical work is the study of change and the stories that history should tell are about what changed where and how. However, all but the most simplistic and episodic historical accounts also show how change is often interlaced with elements that exhibit continuity or resilience over longer periods of time or tend to endure with minor modifications or changes of form rather than of substance.

As such, deeper reading and understanding of history has the value of appreciating deeply structural elements that tend to recur or reappear sometimes even after what might have been deemed to be rapturous, radical, or revolutionary episodes. Appreciating this point is helpful if we are to go beyond the rather emotive explanations of certain negative elements persisting or recurring as simply unfortunate or plain bad luck or nightmare (as encapsulated in the most common expression in public parlance these days: *alemetdel hono* [unfortunately] or *ittakiflachin-hono* [it was our bad lack], etc.).

## 4. EMPATHY AND BALANCE

History as a methodical study of the past makes a big virtue of understanding people and their actions in the past in the context of their time rather than judging them one way or the other.

It is therefore highly empathic in its attitude and orientation towards individuals and groups whose latitude of both thought and action was limited and circumscribed by the strictures of their times.

It also makes an equally big virtue of looking at what they have done or achieved in conjunction with what they have overlooked or failed to see or understand. It therefore seeks or aspires to come to a balanced account and evaluation of their roles or agency as well as their legacies for the present.

The significance of these two virtues of the historical enterprise in view of the tendency in our country to credit or discredit one or another individual or group, or even worse to be sentimentally attached to, inspired by, or be proud of one or another individual or group is equally evident.

I am saying all of this, at the risk of repeating myself once again, not to criticize or point out weaknesses or failures but to make a case for the necessary enterprise of rethinking Ethiopia in a manner that brings together and makes an effective use of the combined strengths of historical and other social science and humanities scholarship.

Having said that, let me conclude by saying that I can anticipate and even sympathize with (the very legitimate question of whether this futuristic and seemingly overly academic vision of rethinking Ethiopia would not be a luxury in the face of the multitude and urgent problems that we are facing today, at this very moment. I honestly would not have an answer for this, except to say that the sooner we come together and get on with it, the better it would be for all of us.

## ANNEX 2: ESSAYS

### **'A nation and an idea: the role of scholars in Ethiopia' by Betelhem Molla**

I believe that the phrase, 'Nation is Its People!' represents the idea that a nation is a concept rooted within its people. In various spiritual and social spheres, we hear that individuals mark their beliefs through their lived experiences. A nation, therefore, is born from the collective imagination of its people. Our country, Ethiopia, has been passed down through generations and constructed in a way that unifies diversity.

When we especially consider the ideas put forward by scholars since the 1960s and 70s – which will be the focus of this article – it becomes clear that questioning and activism stirred people's sentiments, which then led to the collapse of Ethiopia's long-standing imperial system. This paved the way for the establishment of socialist Ethiopia, which tried to address the issue of landownership by granting farmers landownership.

However, in a nightmarish turn of events, even the architects of the revolution found themselves disillusioned when they saw the revolution hurting its own supporters as a result of the harsh government system that followed. The consequences of this were loss of lives, injuries, and youth migration – which instead of growth, gave rise to a new cycle of oppression. Ethiopia then transitioned into a liberal democracy when other advocates – after 17 years of fighting for their ideals – secured support and assumed leadership. Since then, the nation has witnessed the end of the Red Terror and the White Terror, and experienced notable economic shifts and diplomatic achievements such as the inauguration of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and the continued recognition of Addis Ababa as the headquarters of the African Union.

On the contrary side, however, the monopolization of central government institutions by a single ethnic group, together with inequalities in the economic development of regions, created a sense of oppression and hushed the free exchange of ideas. Instead of addressing citizens' concerns, the government resorted to suppression, which resulted in disappearances, arrests, torture, and forced migration. This, over time, necessitated change. Hence, the 'Change' that happened in 2018 brought hope and optimism to almost all Ethiopians. However, this transformation has failed to deliver equitable benefits as anticipated by the majority – with reports of violence, theft, conflicts, hunger, displacement, and vandalism of places of worship becoming common in our daily news.

So, what is the root cause of this? The immediate explanation people tend to come up with is that Ethiopia's population, with its diverse ethnicities and religions, struggles to coexist. Additionally, 'Ethnic Federalism', introduced as a response to the revolutionary questions, is perceived by many as a problem. Currently, ethnic federalism is viewed through two opposing lenses in our nation: some believe that without it, the country would plunge into chaos; while

others argue that it serves as the promoter of the many challenges facing Ethiopia. Hence, they advocate replacing it with a different form of non-ethnic federalism in order to protect the future of our nation.

I disagree with both views for two reasons. Firstly, because Ethiopia is a diverse nation with multiple ethnic groups, I think ethnic federalism is best suited to accommodate this diversity. This system provides a platform for individuals to take pride in their identities and to nurture their languages, cultures, and values. Additionally, achieving peace cannot be as simple as disregarding the factors that define our communities and solely accepting citizenship based on geographic location. Such an approach would set us back and potentially worsen conflicts. However, it is obvious that certain aspects of ethnic federalism require revision. I therefore propose two potential solutions that acknowledge this reality to address our current challenges.

Our first focus should be integrating ethnic federalism with indigenous knowledge. Before the revolution, our forefathers [*sic*] integrated diverse global ideologies to shape nation-building and governance to the best of their abilities. However, early Ethiopians not only borrowed these concepts but also skillfully applied them to our society. It is therefore important to understand ideologies such as democracy and ethnic federalism and explain them to societies to avoid any misconceptions. We need to protect Ethiopian society and create a lasting social order that will benefit future generations by studying how these beliefs have developed over time. In doing so, studying why the 1974 student movement introduced ethnic federalism can help us understand where we are heading now. While the student movement aimed to address oppression and ensure equality among nations, current realities show an atmosphere of mutual suspicion because the dominance of one ethnic group often suppresses another. The saying ‘...*it is not only the right but the duty of the most conscious nationality to first liberate itself and then assist others in the struggle for total liberation*’, stated by Waleign Mekonnen in ‘On the Question of Nationalities’ means a nation that has secured its liberation is not only allowed but morally obliged to aid others in doing so. With this, we can see that mutual support and cooperation among nations to ensure a strong state was what they envisioned, rather than a cycle of replacing one ethnic domination with another. Therefore, it is important that we properly understand and promote the idea of ethnic federalism.

Secondly, the central federal government should not be dominated by a single group. Rather, it should stand as a unifying institution that ensures equality for all Ethiopians. This can be achieved through formulating policies that protect the human rights of both individuals and communities. This needs the presence of a strong central authority that not only respects the self-governance, linguistic expression, education, and economic activities of the various nations and nationalities, but also protects the rights of individuals to movement, life, employment, and property ownership. Although ethnic-based organizations lead the ongoing crisis in the country, the fact that this is happening shows the government’s failure to protect the human rights of its citizens. Regardless of whether one identifies as Amhara or Oromo within Ethiopia, there should be no grounds for him [or her] to pose a threat or infringe upon the rights of other ethnic groups while residing, working, and owning property in different regions. Knowing the

local language and respecting the local culture and values is indeed the responsibility of citizens residing in other regions. However, should individuals face discrimination or violence based on their ethnic background, it is the government's responsibility to defend their rights as citizens. Both extremes must come towards a middle ground and reach an agreement that acknowledges the equality of group rights with individual rights.

Therefore, I believe that just as ethnic federalism that jeopardizes individual rights is deemed invalid, any form of federalism that threatens the rights of ethnic groups should be unacceptable. Achieving harmony involves balancing group and individual rights through institutions that are led by ethical professionals who adhere to discipline and prioritize human rights and equality. However, if regional administrations and the central government are organized along ethnic lines, our problems will continue. In ethnic federalism, the central government comprises representatives from different ethnic groups. Yet, leadership tends to be held by a person from the largest ethnicity. Thus, central governance needs a unifying theme, policy, or directive that is equally applicable to all. Without this, sayings like 'Tigreans rule over you', under the EPRDF era and 'Oromos rule over you' under PP will continue. Such a path prompts people to ask, 'Which ethnic group will rule next?' If the central government continues a cycle of oppression by rotating dominance among ethnic groups, the nation risks fragmentation and eventually separates into several weaker states.

From my understanding thus far, it seems that nobody – regardless of their attachment to their ethnic identity – desires the division of our country into smaller entities. Hence, if we could develop legal structures that make regional administrations accountable for ethnic conflicts within their jurisdictions, and if our central government leaders and officials are not biased towards any ethnic group, have a sense of responsibility, operate under strict rules, and ensure equality of all citizens, then achieving the peace we yearn for becomes easy. And even though we may come across disagreements, the chances of being subjected to violence highly decrease.

Perhaps our next questions can be 'What methods can we use to turn this into reality?' and 'Where do we begin?' In this article, I'd like to focus on the role of scholars – which is one of the many crucial methods we can use. Today's scholars can draw valuable lessons from their predecessors. This is because in the struggle that has laid the groundwork for a democratic Ethiopia, the scholars of the 1960s and 70s – despite leading comfortable lives – dared to challenge the government and the system, advocating for causes such as 'land to the tiller', 'improvement of livelihoods for the urban poor', and 'ethnic equality'. Many renounced their social status for the sake of freedom and a better life for the people. As we think of the sacrifices made by the fighting stars of the 1974 student movement – who could have lived comfortable lives but instead chose to fight for a brighter tomorrow – we should ask ourselves if we are living in the future they envisioned. The 1960s student movement had the belief that our people deserved better than what they were given. Those students marched the streets chanting 'land to the tiller', with the well-being of farmers in mind. However, in today's educated society, there's often a tendency to distance oneself from societal issues and believe that benefits should solely be given to the educated. Yet, if the ideals of 'land to the tiller' were to be followed by

initiatives like ‘Roads for the farmer’, ‘Electricity for the farmer’, ‘Clean water for the farmer’, and ‘Health centres for the farmer’, the lives of farmers would have improved.

If the educated society and the young generation dedicated themselves to solving the current social and economic challenges faced by both farmers and urban residents, ethnic federalism by itself would not have been a problem. To overcome the infrastructural challenges and other problems affecting our agricultural sector, we must at least produce modern agricultural tools and maintain self-sufficiency in our food production. In addition to the struggles of farmers, scholars must also try to help urban residents who suffer from mental health issues and other hardships as a result of rising living costs, unemployment and various societal pressures.

However, instead of taking ownership and actively seeking solutions to the country’s challenges, some individuals have prioritized ethnic interests over unity. In doing so, they have contributed to societal harm rather than promoting the collective well-being of the nation. Others have chosen to remain indifferent by only focusing on their own and ignoring the existence of the country’s problems. This negligence has deprived the people of the solutions they deserve. Therefore, scholars must show the dedication of their predecessors and make meaningful contributions to society by offering knowledge-based solutions – without expecting unrealistic compensation. Even if we are unable to directly improve people’s lives through tangible applications of knowledge, refraining from spreading corruption and unethical practices, and avoiding actions that worsen people’s difficulties, can still contribute to our country’s progress and the well-being of our citizens. Therefore, institutions of higher education – particularly universities that produce scholars – should mandate social service. By allowing scholars to engage with societal issues and potential solutions, we can empower them to make meaningful contributions.

To conclude, I think the key to resolving the chaos is for scholars to look inward instead of solely blaming society. They should ask themselves: ‘What can I do for my society?’ and ‘How can I fulfil my responsibility?’ They should contribute to the peace and advancement of the nation within their respective fields. This includes having a sense of ownership over all aspects of society, being self-aware, acting as responsible problem solvers, striving to stop external dependencies, and prioritizing activities that will benefit future generations. Therefore, drawing upon the legacy of courage, resilience, and compassion from our predecessors, we should work towards creating a more successful Ethiopia as they envisioned. This requires integrating modern concepts with traditional ones and achieving a transition that preserves the foundational principles of Ethiopian identity, commitment to the values of coexistence, and transferring these values to future generations. The educated community needs to care about the country and its people. For this to happen, we need to start by having good attitudes ourselves, and then share these virtues to society.

## **'A president for all, a vote for every voice: how reforming governance and electoral systems can heal Ethiopia's ethnocratic wounds' by Lamesgnew Negalign**

From my great grandparent, who felt the need to adopt Amharic names (a trend sustained by the subsequent generation), to his kids in an Imperial system that exclusively recognized Amharic as the official language, to witnessing my Oromo mother strategically utilizing her Tigrigna proficiency—acquired during her time in Eritrea—to navigate TPLF's ethnocratic rule and secure enhanced services in governmental offices, the pervasive impact of ethnocracy in Ethiopia has shaped the trajectories of our lives. Today, as I observe friends benefitting from their fluency in Oromiffa, while others face barriers due to their inability to speak the language within government structures, it becomes increasingly evident that Ethiopia's ethnocratic quandary is not an abstract concept but an everyday reality affecting us all.

Even now, this reality shapes my understanding of Ethiopia's journey towards equality. This journey has been difficult, a never-ending battle between inclusion and exclusion, fuelled by the toxic vines of ethnocratic power. Looking back at key moments provides both bleak lessons and glimmering hope.

Ethiopia's struggle against the crushing hold of ethnocracy has echoed throughout history, but few episodes stand out more than the 1960s student movement. These young voices, though nourished by privilege, refused to be seduced by its comforts. Instead, they became amplifiers for the silent clamour of the marginalized, channelling a socialist dream of equality into a potent demand for a society where identity wouldn't be a barbed wire fence around citizenship ([Kasim, 1985](#)). Their struggles for land redistribution and an inclusive system were more than just ripples; they were tsunamis, contributing to the 1974 revolution that overthrew a monarch and transformed a country ([Kasim, 1985](#)). Their legacy is engraved not in privilege, but in the battle for a future in which belonging is based on the shared fabric of humanity, rather than the ethnic hues painted on one's birth certificates.

The 1974 Ethiopian revolution, which overthrew the feudal order, aimed to address landownership as a cause of inequality. Redistributing land to peasants was more than simply a legislative shift. It was a courageous step toward empowerment, giving the tillers the ground that they deserved. Despite this daring action, the revolution's aftermath demonstrated the difficulties of achieving long-term equality. Ethnic, ideological, and social conflicts erupted, demonstrating that dismantling one hierarchy does not always result in the building of a correct one ([Kasim, 1985](#)).

The 1987 constitution, which recognized the existence of diverse nationalities, languages, and religions, was another important step toward inclusion. Equality, a cherished aspiration, was inscribed onto the constitution, signaling a substantial departure from prior exclusionary regimes ([PDRE Constitution, 1987](#)). However, accusations of Amhara hegemony persisted, and armed factions continued to exploit 'Amhara dominance' as a rallying cry; the ideals remained elusive ([Balcha, 2007](#)).



The 1991 regime change sought to address these concerns by granting self-governance rights to ethnic communities ([Balcha, 2007](#)). However, this power shift, while replacing Amhara dominance with Tigrayan leadership, merely replicated the core issue: concentrated control over a diverse nation. The federal structure, designed to empower regions and nationalities, proved tragically insufficient in delivering on its promises ([Tefera, 2019](#); [Tola and Royo, 2022](#)).

Ethiopia's recent history is also characterized by intense conflicts, driven by narratives of ethnocentric marginalization and struggles for political legitimacy. The 2015 Oromo uprising, triggered by the 'Integrated Addis Ababa Master Plan', stood as a powerful protest against the perceived threat to Oromo identity and culture under the then-dominant Tigrayan ethnocracy ([Asafa, 2017](#)).

Oromo resistance to ethnocracy has traditionally pursued a variety of goals, ranging from creating a distinct route in a looser federation to complete independence. However, the 2015–2018 chapter unfolded differently. It was mainly a struggle for redress inside the system's framework, rather than a dramatic transformation ([Jawar, 2023](#)). This strategy shift proved beneficial in 2018, when an Oromo leader finally took the stage, answering a crucial demand for political inclusion.

Nonetheless, the winds of change didn't last very long. While the reform purported to dismantle Tigrayan ethnocracy, many, particularly within the Amhara political elite, argue that it simply resulted in a replacement, with Oromo dominance taking the reins ([Tezera, 2021](#)). This perception fuelled another round of conflict, which is haunting the country now.

The perception of ethnocracy can be pointed at as one factor in the 2020–2022 Tigray conflict, which, according to the database of [Herre et al. \(2023\)](#), was the deadliest in the world since the 1994 Rwandan genocide. While Tigrayan leadership framed the conflict as a defence of federalism against its erosion, it also harbored anxieties about a potential resurgence of Amhara power.

The latest chapter in this ethnocentric cycle unfolded in 2023, with Amharas' concern against the Oromo-dominated government manifesting as another armed conflict. This time, the target is the very foundation of the current political landscape: the constitution and the ethnic federal system, both deemed sources of suffering for the Amhara population.

A closer examination reveals three distinct legitimization strategies employed in these successive conflicts: Reforming governance while defending federalism; advocating for a loosened confederation, with a diminished central government to remedy perceived inadequacies of the current federal system; and championing a strengthened central authority and the dismantling of ethnic-based federalism. All seem fixated on maintaining or altering the state structure as the panacea for Ethiopian inequality.

However, this fixation risks overlooking the limited explanatory power of state structure alone in determining societal outcomes. A historical analysis reveals that neither the previous unitary state nor the current ethnic federation has effectively mitigated ethnocratic tendencies.

This suggests that we are trapped in a cyclical pattern of ethnocracies, where change of government and state structure merely facilitate replacing one dominant group with another. Therefore, it is imperative to seek alternative strategies that transcend the state structure debate.

### *Reimagining Governance: Breaking the Ethnocratic Cycle Through System Reform*

To quench the burning thirst of Ethiopians for equality and genuine representation, this paper proposes a two-pronged approach: a decisive shift towards a semi-presidential system and the adoption of a mixed electoral system, while keeping in mind the need for a firm commitment to democracy.

### *Unity and Progress with a Premier–Presidential System in Ethiopia*

This proposal advocates for the adoption of a semi-presidential system– with its Premier–Presidential version, where the president is elected separately from the parliament with a direct election, and where only the parliament has the power to dismiss the Cabinet ([Sedelius and Linde, 2018](#)). This paper suggests a two-headed executive branch: a directly elected president who needs an absolute majority (50+%), a prime minister, and a cabinet accountable to the parliament. Moreover, to ensure the elected president has support in every region, and to incentivize him [or her] to be inclusive, it would be very important to necessitate at least 20% support from every region of the country.

Such a system aligns with several considerations:

- **Continuity and Familiarity:** A semi-presidential model offers a less radical transition compared to a purely parliamentary system. Ethiopia previously embraced a similar structure between 1987 and 1995, albeit with a parliament-elected president ([PDRE Constitution, 1987](#); [Transitional Charter, 1991](#)). Familiarity with this framework can ease implementation and foster public acceptance.
- **Enhanced Legitimacy and Accountability:** A directly elected president fosters a stronger sense of public mandate and accountability compared to a prime minister elected by a single electoral district or ruling party. This direct accountability to the entire electorate, not just a dominant party, can bolster national unity and mitigate perceptions of imposed leadership ([Getachew, 2017](#)).
- **Promoting Inclusivity:** The direct election of the president incentivizes inclusive policies. Achieving re-election necessitates securing support beyond a single ethnic group, encouraging broader perspectives, and mitigating ethno-nationalist tendencies. This aligns

with the effort to escape the ethnocratic trap that is plaguing Ethiopian politics ([Walle, 2017](#)).

- **Balancing Executive Power:** While the directly elected president wields significant authority, the indirectly elected prime minister serves as a crucial bridge between the legislature and the executive. This division of power helps prevent presidential dominance and ensures a functional separation of powers ([Getachew, 2017](#); [Walle, 2017](#)).
- **Safeguards against Ethnocracy:** To further counteract ethnocratic tendencies, restrictions on sharing both chief executive positions within the same ethnic community are recommended. This measure complements the inherent inclusivity fostered by the president's broad electoral support.

### *Championing Diversity: A Mixed Electoral System for a More Inclusive Ethiopia*

Despite arguably fair representation of ethnic groups and regions in Ethiopian Federal legislative bodies, the current first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system exhibits significant shortcomings. These drawbacks undermine voter turnout and exacerbate one-party dominance and ethnocratic tendencies.

Firstly, FPTP's winner-takes-all approach discourages voter participation due to the perceived futility of opposition votes in districts unlikely to produce a majority for their candidate. For this, a good example is the 2015 Ethiopian election, where the ruling Coalition won 100% of the parliamentary seats at the Federal level wasting lots of votes cast to the opposition. Out of the 23 seats allocated to Addis Ababa, 16% of voters from Addis Ababa voted for the Semayawi Party and only 85% voted for the EPRDF Coalition. But EPRDF won 100%. This disenfranchisement of minority voices leads to low turnout and perpetuates a sense of irrelevance among non-dominant parties ([Adem, 2015](#)).

Secondly, FPTP has reinforced one-party dominance by concentrating power in the ruling party. Consequently, the dominant ethnic group within the ruling party automatically becomes the dominant ethnic group in the politics of the country, it will be able to exert substantial influence on decision-making even before legislative debates commence, rendering parliament's role largely symbolic. This undermines representation and reinforces ethnocratic tendencies ([Eyob, n.d.](#)).

The 2017 consensus between the ruling coalition and opposition political parties, to adopt a mixed electoral system, acknowledged these flaws. While negotiations centered on the ratio of FPTP to proportional representation (PR) seats, ranging from 50:50 (opposition preference) to 90:10 (government preference), agreement ultimately materialized on an 80:20 mix. However, this reform remained unimplemented due to the subsequent regime change ([Neamin, 2017](#)).

Despite the setback, compelling arguments support the adoption of a mixed system, particularly with a 50:50 ratio of FPTP and PR seats. Such a model presents several advantages:

- **Enhanced inclusivity:** A mixed electoral system ensures significant representation for both majority and minority groups, allowing smaller parties to flourish and challenge the dominant ones ([Gebremeskel, n.d.](#)), and smaller/dispersed ethnic communities to get fair representation. This can gradually break the cycle of one-party dominance and ethnocracy.
- **Increased voter engagement:** Every vote carries weight, motivating citizens to participate and fostering more competitive elections. This strengthens democratic legitimacy and empowers political parties.
- **Reduced wasted votes:** PR elements ensure that votes cast for non-winning candidates contribute to party representation, mitigating disenfranchisement and encouraging broader participation ([Gebremeskel, n.d.](#)).

To sum up, the current FPTP system demonstrably hinders democratic participation and reinforces problematic power dynamics in Ethiopia. A transition to a 50:50 mixed electoral system offers a promising pathway toward enhanced inclusivity, increased voter engagement, and a break from the vicious cycle of one-party dominance and ethnocracy.

### *Conclusion: Breaking the Ethnocratic Grip through Action and Commitment*

While my proposal for a semi-presidential system and a mixed electoral system isn't entirely new to Ethiopian political discourse, it offers a practical strategy to break free from the ethnocratic trap. As discussed, a president and prime minister from different ethnicities, and potentially even different parties, could foster power-sharing and mitigate ethnocratic inclinations as democracy matures.

However, the critical missing piece is not more discussion, but unwavering commitment to implement these reforms. Only by prioritizing them in legislative and executive agendas can true change be achieved. Therefore, I urge all stakeholders to actively champion these reforms:

- A directly elected president to unify the nation and embody shared aspirations
- A mixed electoral system that ensures minority voices are heard and represented

Coupled with a genuine commitment to free and fair democratic elections, these reforms can fulfill their promise: breaking the ethnocratic grip and paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable future for Ethiopia.

## **'Rethinking Ethiopia: proposing rhizomatic solutions for ethnic politics' by Yidinekachew Solomon**

### *Alarm 1. The Riddle: My Childhood in Selale*

My country is truly remarkable. I remember my city, village and especially the compound I grew up in. Our compound was like a vibrant garden. Everywhere I looked, there were chirping birds, buzzing bees, and chattering children. It took both money and effort to maintain such a spectacle. Every morning, I feel a sense of wonder as I walk through the fragrant yard until my mother serves breakfast. I sometimes can't help but compare our compound to Abdissa Aga School – it had the largest compound in the village, with its variety of trees, flowers, and buildings. My mother used to teach there. So, in a way, it always felt like it was ours. However, in 1993, when I was six years old and ready to start first grade, I had to transfer to Abiyot Firei School, which was an hour away from my village, because Abdissa Aga School stopped accepting Amharic-speaking students. The decision weighed particularly heavily on my father. This was obvious in his expressions of dismay whether he was eating, dressing, or preparing for the day.

'Are they benefitting the Oromo by blocking Amharic?'

'Ask your friend the school principal, who reported that there are few students enrolled for Amharic language classes.'

'I don't have a problem accepting any language.'

'Stay brave, young man', he said, as I slung my bag to head out.

After unlocking the wooden door lock, I start my journey to Abiyot Firei School by crossing the dew-covered field of Fitawrari Amde Abera. Occasionally, I hear Ato Kacha rhythmically chanting, 'What cold weather. Just like a donkey's horn!' Yet, I've never quite understood the meaning behind his words, much like I've never understood what my father meant when he said, 'I don't have a problem accepting any language.'

However, over time, I have come to understand that my transfer from Abdissa School to Abiyot Firei School was a result of language-driven politics. I have also realized that language-based politics hunts down and displaces people. The disruption caused by it has made Ethiopia a leading country in internal displacement. In Debre Birhan city alone – where I currently reside – over 90,000 displaced people are struggling to survive. This upheaval has not only uprooted them from their villages but also disrupted their sense of security. Their social life has been torn apart, and their peace replaced with chaos. To maintain the courtesy of my narrative, I have refrained from detailing the evidence of displacement, violence, and destruction caused by such politics. Yet, this makes me wonder why we have to endure all this misery.

This essay aims to propose a rhizomatic solution for the ethnic politics of Ethiopia – referred to as the 'Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia' politics (ethnic politics from here

on). Firstly, I will explain that in the Ethiopian political context, ethnicity is synonymous with language. Then, drawing on Lacan's psychoanalytic insights, I will explain how language politics worsens the lack of peaceful coexistence among Ethiopians – this in turn leads to displacement. Finally, to ease the current ethnic hostilities and political hostilities in Ethiopia, I will briefly present the rhizomatic solution, which is derived from Deleuze and Guattari.

### *Alarm 2. Exploring Ethnicity: The Real Crisis behind Meaninglessness*

In the essay “Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia,” Walelign Mekonnen acknowledges the existence of ethnic oppression in Ethiopia and highlights its impact on national politics. This essay is significant in Ethiopian political discourse, advocating for the recognition of ethnic oppression and understanding the country's diverse ethnic landscape. Following the fall of the Derg regime, a coalition of ethnically organized guerrilla fighters, later known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), redefined Ethiopia as a nation of various nationalities and peoples. The new Constitution, introduced after the regime's downfall, aimed to correct issues of ethnic oppression and promote mutual benefits among different ethnic groups. This recognition of ethnic diversity and historical repression paved the way for political transformation. Since the adoption of the 1995 Constitution, efforts have focused on rectifying historical imbalances among ethnic minorities to promote mutual benefit and ensure peaceful coexistence within Ethiopia's diverse population.

Unfortunately, since the time of its inception and during its procedural and legal implementation, the ethnic model constitution has turned away from its goal. This has led to ethnic conflicts and prolonged social crises across the country. At the same time, closely examining the meaning of the word ethnicity reveals its vague nature. For instance, [Biruk A \(2009\)](#) pointed out that, ‘Ethnicity hides itself in between great mountains and is often mistaken for race, culture or religion.’ Thus, by using this overlooked point, I will argue that our political instability is caused by the failure to grasp the meaning and implication of this dominant concept, i.e. ethnicity.

As we can see from EPRDF's Constitution, ethnic governance in the country is primarily language centered, and this has also made the politics language oriented. A good example of this is the equivalence between the number of ethnic groups and the number of languages spoken in Ethiopia. Therefore, it can be argued that Ethiopian politics is not ethnic but rather language based. Similarly, the question of nationalities (ethnicities) can be interpreted as asking for the right to use one's language. To support this argument and show the significance of language in Ethiopian politics, I will mention three literatures.

First, the Ethiopian Students Association in Europe pointed out the importance of language in the revolutionary struggle through its *Tatek* magazine, which aimed to represent people in their native languages. This was highlighted in its introduction, which stated ‘One of the crucial aspects of Ethiopia's future revolution is the language issue and, breaking Ethiopia's feudal system requires addressing this issue. ... Language and revolutionary struggle are closely related.’

Another example is the 1978 publication by the Institute of Ethiopian Studies titled ‘A Short Understanding of Ethiopian Ethnicities.’ This publication shows that language is critical in defining societies in Ethiopia. It also serves as a linguistic map showing the origin and distribution of languages throughout the country.

Thirdly, according to Takele Tadesse (a linguistics PhD), Ethiopia’s political crisis comes from our limited understanding of the role of language in politics. He argues that ‘Even though it is not widely recognized, the key issue in Ethiopia is language. A better understanding of language can be achieved through collaboration between social scientists and linguists: especially by focusing on its nature and structure. In multilingual countries like Ethiopia, language has the potential to disrupt social life and the very structure of the state’ ([Takele, 2013: 30](#)).

Based on the above empirical data, I want to offer my perspective on the unique role of language in Ethiopia. Language is often tied to ethnicity and is used by politicians to gain power. It has also become a key part of people’s identity and is even central to government administration. In the newly formed Sidama Region, for example, civil servants are required to speak Sidama. Those who did not speak the language were transferred to nearby regions. This led to public chaos, with non-Sidama businessmen [*sic*] and other city dwellers forced to abandon their city. This pattern is also seen in other regions. To reduce such political tensions, the focus should shift from ethnic politics to language politics, which would raise a deeper understanding of the issue. However, it’s important to note that until recently, there hasn’t been historical evidence of disputes over language in Ethiopia. Nonetheless, traces suggest that linguistic diversity has been and remains to be an agenda in some countries.

To further support my essay, I’ll use the approach of French philosopher Jacques Lacan to the nature of language. Lacan built upon Freud’s theories and his work was acknowledged for developing Freudian ideas. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, there’s no direct connection between an object and its linguistic representation. It’s arbitrary. Lacan applied this insight to the study of the mind, explaining that the construction of the unconscious mind resembles language. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, there’s an unbridgeable gap between the signifier (the linguistic form) and the signified (the concept it represents).

According to Lacan’s philosophy, identity is shaped by our connections with others. It’s hard to imagine without language. Before we learn to speak (when we’re infants), we can’t identify ourselves. Instead, we go through stages of imagery where we don’t fully understand ourselves or our surroundings. Language helps us see ourselves as separate from others, beyond our visual understanding. As we grow, we learn about our culture and society through language. It shapes our needs and desires. This process can lead to emotional repression, where language becomes both the cause and the result of suppressing our feelings. Thus, humans are shaped by the unconscious mind – which develops as soon as they start using language. Speaking a language moves us into a symbolic culture. Simply put, language is where human identity is formed, developed, and enhanced. But it’s a process of constant change and transformation. This dynamic nature of language means that it’s not purely based on cognitive understanding.

Lacan's philosophical view on language teaches us that when we try to define something, we often miss its true meaning. Giving a name and explanation to an idea can both conceal and reveal its truth. For example, simply labelling something as part of an ethnicity can hide the importance of language and mislead political explanations. This means that trying to change reality through language may face resistance from our natural understanding. Lacan calls this loss of meaning the 'trauma of the real'.

Furthermore, being governed by language is the same as having an uncontrollable governor. We can mention scholars such as Habib in this regard. Keeping this in mind, I believe the trends of displacement, pervasive fear, and oppression seen in our country are caused by the current language-based political structure. Rather than granting rights to individuals, we've granted language the legal authority to divide and separate us. This is because humans cannot control language's unpredictable and expansive nature. The displacements in our country are clear examples of this. To my knowledge, such issues haven't been common in Ethiopian history and culture before. Thus, one might ask where they come from. The simple answer to this is the unusual union of language and politics.

Our country's politics is heavily influenced by language. And this blend of heterogeneous matters creates a complex situation with no clear direction. Thus, the current instability in Ethiopia raises doubts about whether ethnic federalism can maintain stability.

### *Alarm 3. The Rhizome: An Alternative Solution*

The French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari introduced the concept of 'rhizome' in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, published in 1980. This concept reflects the complexity of our world today. Rhizome is a word borrowed from botany – which refers to the root system of a plant. Let's look at the following as an example.

Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature. It brings into play very different regimes of signs and even non-sign states. The rhizome is reducible neither to the one nor the multiple. It is not the One that becomes two or even directly three, four, five, etc. It is not a multiple derived from the One, or which One to which one is added ( $n+1$ ). It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows. It constitutes linear multiplicities with  $n$  dimensions having neither subject nor object, which can be laid on a plane of consistency, and from which the One is always subtracted ( $n-1$ ). When a multiplicity of this kind changes dimension, it necessarily changes in nature as well, undergoes a metamorphosis.

The above text explains the idea of rhizomatic thinking—motional direction. Here, numerical superiority doesn't necessarily guarantee freedom. To realize freedom in today's world, it's



important to have qualities like diversity, flexibility, inclusiveness, and openness to new ideas. Thus, it is short-sighted to think in a rigid, hierarchical manner.

The rhizome could be an alarm for the next generations. Contemporary novelist Adam Reta has experimented with the rhizome in his writing style. Additionally, the artwork of the Honourable Laureate Maitre Artiste Afewerk Tekele such as ‘Total Liberation’ and ‘The Abstract’ can portray the rhizome and be easily adapted by Ethiopians. As the political crisis in our country is complex, we need to find a way out of our language-driven politics. To do this, we must seek an alternative solution guided by a deeper understanding of our reality. However, this doesn’t mean giving up or changing the subject. Rather, it means bringing all stakeholders, from the lowest to the highest levels of government, to address the issue collectively.

I believe that by doing this, we can find a way to transition from the current politics of tolerance to a politics of understanding. This shift will be a revolution in Ethiopian politics. According to Deleuze and Guattari, we need to break away from the belief that declares human beings are disturbed solely because of family or cultural oppression. This shift to the rhizome helps people address their problems by focusing on things that are beyond easily measured aspects such as language. For example, the issue of discrimination against Amharic-speaking students at Abdissa Aga School was resolved when the administration reversed its decision after three years in 1996. Today, education is provided for both Amhara and Oromo language speakers, which highlights the importance of inclusiveness for peace and harmony. Thus, by adapting the rhizome, we aim to establish a culture of inclusiveness.

### **‘Landownership rights and agricultural development in Ethiopia’ by Meselu Birliew**

Agriculture is crucial for many Ethiopians. It serves as their primary livelihood and provides life security for millions of families, youth, and children. It’s also widely recognized as the backbone of our country’s economy. Ethiopia has extensive arable lands, abundant rivers, diverse topography, and favourable climates that support the cultivation of various crops. Having more than 3,000 years of farming experience and with over 80% of its population engaged in farming, agriculture plays an important role in providing food, income, and employment opportunities in Ethiopia. Recent data indicates that 77% of our country’s exports are agricultural products. This shows the significant contribution of agriculture to our nation’s economy and sustenance.

However, it’s widely known that Ethiopia’s agricultural sector faces significant challenges. Regardless of the efforts made over the past three decades to boost productivity using innovative resources, achieving food security for the growing population has been impossible. The Agricultural Development-Led Industrialization (ADLI) – an agricultural policy adopted in 2003 – was put in effect to transition the country from agricultural development to industrial growth. The strategy aimed at supporting agriculture with scientific knowledge and modern technology, improving leadership skills and knowledge, and increasing agricultural production and productivity. The goal was not only to improve output and efficiency but also to reduce the need for human labour in agricultural services by integrating science, technology, and mechanization into agriculture. This approach was expected to generate surplus manpower [*sic*] and funds.

Eventually, the vision was that a small number of mechanized farmers could effectively meet the food needs of the entire population.

As a result, many farmers leave rural areas to work in urban industries. This shift, along with the expansion of mechanized farming methods and the use of large-scale machinery, increases the demand for consumer goods and services among workers. Thus, industries producing these goods grow and achieve high economic expansion by driving investment into the sector. The agricultural productivity witnessed in 18<sup>th</sup> century England can be used as an example of this. However, Ethiopia's agricultural sector has been incapable of feeding its people, let alone generating wealth. With agricultural production and productivity failing to keep pace with demand, many scholars have put their evaluations and conclusions regarding its effects on food security and industrial resources. I will also offer my perspective on this matter, as follows.

The 1960s and 70s marked a significant period of transformation in Ethiopia. This transformation was primarily led by the youth, particularly university students. The main question of this change was the issue of landownership. The struggle aimed to remedy the injustice experienced by most people who were marginalized by a small elite controlling large areas of land. It's fair to say that this landownership question was the primary facilitator for the 1974 revolution. Upon assuming power, the Derg regime agreed to address the students' demand for land reform. A decree issued on March 4, 1975, proclaimed that land belonged to the public. However, it's important to note that while this decree addressed the issue to some extent, it didn't entirely resolve it. The *Land to the Tiller* issue was tied to the question of farmer landownership. While the Derg regime claimed to have seized land from feudal lords and redistributed it to the people, it needed to establish structures to affirm that the people collectively owned the land. This approach indirectly placed land under governmental control. Critics argue that while the decree aimed to redistribute land from large landholders to farmers, it failed to effectively ensure secure land tenure for farmers. After the Derg's 17-year rule, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) held power. The 1995 Constitution declared that both rural and urban land's natural resources belonged to the government and the people. This meant that land was the common property of Ethiopia's nations and nationalities. This constitutional provision prohibits the sale or transfer of rural land. Leaders like Mengistu Haile Mariam and Meles Zenawi claim that they had granted farmers ownership rights by labelling land as public and governmental. Yet, critics argue that this move was primarily driven by political motives rather than the genuine betterment of farmers. This practice of is significant hindrance to agricultural sector development as it does not grant farmers full ownership rights. Below, I will present four points that show the negative impact of denying farmers the right to sell or transfer their land on the development of the agricultural sector.

The first challenge is that a farmer who faces setbacks or loses interest in agriculture is often held back from pursuing other paths where he [or she] may find success and satisfaction. Essentially, even if a farmer isn't thriving in agriculture or finds the work unfulfilling, he [or she] often lacks the initial capital to transition to other preferable fields. As a result, the farmer will remain trapped in a poor agricultural livelihood. This not only hampers agricultural sector

efficiency but also the growth of other economic sectors. On the other hand, a farmer who effectively manages a small plot of land and gets good harvests can sell the surplus produce annually. If such a farmer finds fulfilment and success in his [or her] agricultural endeavors, he [or she] might choose to expand. However, the land policies prevent this expansion, leaving capable farmers with limited landholdings. This not only holds back farmers' ability to generate more wealth but also delays growth within the agricultural sector.

My father, Birliew Abate, can be taken as an example. He is a resilient farmer who has been engaged in farming for over two decades on his modest two-hectare plot of land. However, despite relentless efforts throughout the year, his annual yield remains small. As a child, this continuous cycle of labour that did not produce much progress fascinated me. Even though my father is a passionate farmer who is committed to his profession, the land policies in our country have hindered him from using his modest earnings to acquire additional land and expand our farm. Consequently, he has not witnessed any significant increase in our annual output for years.

If the land policies allowed farmers to sell or transfer their land, those who are unsuccessful in agriculture could work in other sectors – such as industry or service sectors – where they can use the capital gained from selling their land to follow more promising opportunities. This not only benefits individuals but also contributes to the country's overall economic progress. Moreover, successful farmers can expand their landholdings which in turn leads to increased productivity within the agricultural sector. This expansion can be beneficial for both food security and foreign exchange earnings. However, advocates of maintaining restrictions on land sales raise three arguments. Firstly, they suggest that allowing land sales could prompt farmers to sell their land and migrate to urban areas – which could potentially exacerbate migration issues and unemployment rates. Secondly, in regions such as Ethiopia, where development is still progressing, individual landownership requires significant investment and slows down progress as landowners demand large compensations. Lastly, they argue that allowing land sales could bring back the feudalistic system by putting landownership in the hands of a few wealthy individuals. Thus, they advocate for preserving land as an asset to maintain farmers' interests and protect against exploitative practices like land hoarding.

If land sales were permitted, the concern that farmers would sell their land and migrate to urban areas holds little weight. This is because agriculture, much like any other profession, requires dedication and skill. It would be unreasonable to withhold landownership rights from those who face challenges in this sector. If individuals choose to sell their land and seek better opportunities in urban areas, they should be supported in their transition. The second argument that says individual landownership in less developed regions that lack infrastructure could hamper infrastructure expansion is not very convincing either. This concern can be addressed by implementing strict legal frameworks within land policies. The notion that allowing land sales would lead to a return to feudal systems again is also flawed. While some farmers may accumulate more land through purchases, the mere sale of land doesn't signify a return to feudalism. Those who sell their land may become day labourers for land-rich individuals, but

this doesn't create a full-fledged feudal system. Above all, the emergence of wealthy farmers hiring other farmers for labour on their lands represents the capitalist system.

However, in a just capitalist framework, the country is protected from resource misuse. Unlike the feudal system—where workers lacked legal protections and feudal lords were immune to the law—the presence of a government in today's context ensures that landownership doesn't overtake the law. Landowners are obligated to fairly compensate and uphold the rights of the labourers they employ. Therefore, the accumulation of land wealth doesn't pose a threat of returning Ethiopia to a feudal system. As previously mentioned, the existence of the rule of law and government regulation bans this from happening. The central government must ensure fair labour practices and uphold human rights. With such protections in place, the accumulation of land wealth won't lead to the return of feudalism in Ethiopia.

The second issue is that a large percentage of our population is confined within the agricultural sector. In Ethiopia, 80% of the population lives in rural areas, while only 20% live in urban centers. Surprisingly, this rural majority comprising 80% struggles to adequately sustain the 20% of urban residents. In contrast, the United States only has 2% of the population as farmers, while the remaining 98% engage in non-agricultural activities. Unlike in Ethiopia, these 2% of American farmers efficiently feed the entire 98% of the population and even produce surplus food for aid and export. This disparity isn't unique to the United States. It is also observed in other developed nations, where a small percentage of farmers ensure food security for the entire population and generate a surplus for international trade. This efficiency is largely attributed to the significantly larger landholdings of farmers in these countries. Accordingly, a handful of farmers own extensive areas of land which enables them to achieve high levels of productivity.

In Ethiopia, however, although there are many farmers, their landholdings are often small and fragmented. Larger landholdings enable farmers to get higher yields. This is because owning more land allows for the creation of *Economies of Scale*, which is the idea that *costs to produce a single product decrease with an increased volume of production*. Following the revolution, the Derg government took control of landholdings and implemented land reform, which led to widespread fragmentation as land was redistributed. Population growth further worsened this fragmentation. Additionally, the country's land policy discourages the sale and conversion of land which prevents the concentration of land in the hands of few productive farmers. However, this approach hampers the agricultural sector by hindering the creation of *Economies of Scale* and impacts agricultural productivity and efficiency.

My third argument is that the impact of land fragmentation that results from population growth constrains the resolution of agricultural challenges. Fragmented land tenure traps farmers in a vicious cycle of poverty by preventing them from accessing essential resources, adopting advanced technologies, and increasing production cycles. A farmer with a small landholding – with one or two hectares – cannot invest in agricultural inputs, adopt modern technologies, or hire agricultural experts. These require large landownership and economic viability. Even if a small-scale farmer aspires to implement these advancements, the practicality remains thin due

to limited resources and land size. Expanding landownership is crucial for farmers to break free from this cycle. By acquiring more land, farmers can enhance production, adopt technological innovations, and transition towards mechanization. For instance, a farmer owning only two hectares may find it impractical to invest in well digging or mechanized harvesting. Similarly, the purchase of machinery isn't feasible given the limited land area and expenses. On the contrary, a farmer with larger landholdings faces no such constraints. Therefore, facilitating land expansion enables farmers to overcome the limitations posed by small-scale farming.

The fourth problem is economic issues related to buying and selling, which are fundamental components of any market economy. A functional market is essential for growth and innovation. Without it, progress does not happen. Restricting the ability of farmers to buy and sell land eliminates the market from their livelihoods. Such legislation not only hinders economic activity but also hampers growth. In a country like Ethiopia – which is heavily dependent on agriculture – denying the right to buy and sell land has macroeconomic consequences. Moreover, despite the constitution stating that land is public and government property, there are concerns regarding the unlawful appropriation of land by cadres and brokers. Reports of mismanagement, corruption, and embezzlement are becoming common. For agriculture to become a viable economic sector capable of attracting technology and investment, a land management framework that ensures secure ownership rights is important. Addressing these landownership challenges is an urgent task that should not be postponed.

### **'Reclaiming rights: citizenship in the face of police brutality in Ethiopia' by Lidya Yohannes**

Citizenship, extending beyond mere subjecthood, implies certain rights entrusted to the government for protection and enforcement. Unfortunately, in the post first republic political arrangement that emerged after the 1974 political movements, dethroning centuries old monarchical rule, the state of citizenship in Ethiopia is still in its infancy. This paper argues that the major factor behind this citizenship crisis is rampant police brutality and systemic judicial unfairness, posing a severe threat to the government's legitimacy and fostering increased militarization. Highlighting three major areas of concern—violations of property rights, infringements on the right to life and protection from torture, and unjust and delayed judicial proceedings—this essay draws from historical and global experience to underscore the urgency of addressing this pressing political issue.

In the contemporary global context, the notion of subjecthood as the foundational relationship between the society and the government is virtually non-existent. Major revolutions and turning points of history have started as questions directed to the [extent of government power](#). This has created the consequent reality where political legitimacy is garnered through the [goodwill of the people](#) toward a ruling regime. And this goodwill is heavily tied to the government's efficacy in fulfilling its responsibilities. Foremost among these responsibilities is protecting citizens and safeguarding their most essential rights, including the right to life, protection from torture, property rights and the right of access to justice. These rights are foundational in state-society relations and can serve as criteria by which to evaluate government performance. It is when

governments fail their citizens in this regard that a citizenship crisis ensues, which not only harms citizens but jeopardizes government legitimacy as well, as is evident in historical and global experience.

Governments must never take lack of legitimacy lightly regardless of their affluence. Lessons can and should be taken in this regard, from the cases of Rodney King and George Floyd in the USA, Nahel Merzouk's killing by police in France, Jean Charles de Menezes in the UK, killed under suspicion of terrorism, and the 15 people killed by Kenyan police during the COVID-19 pandemic and many more that have shown exactly how fearful losing favour with the citizen can be. The lack of a good relationship between government and the citizen will take away from the support that the government gets. As can be guessed, a government that is unresponsive to the needs of its people will likely receive less support and acceptance. And instead of paying millions for flashy advertisements about the importance of paying tax, the government can increase active support from the citizen relatively easily by working on its image. Research has also found that public [trust in justice institutions](#) is a major factor in crime reduction and creating a safer society. Finally, in the modern highly globalized reality, the acceptance a government has with other countries governments is seen as a measure of power. A government that is known for its sustained disregard for human rights is never the recipient of much respect from other states' governments, as world history shows. Therefore, these indicators of how favoured a government is by its people can also measure the government's international standing.

The Ethiopian situation is indicative of a certain [nonchalance from the government](#). At the time of the student movement, the imprisonment and killings of key figures, notably the mysterious death of Tilahun Gizaw, was a [powerful catalyst](#), propelling the movement's momentum and broadening its acceptance with the general public. It is disappointing that despite the birth of the first republic of Ethiopia out of this bloody struggle, a tradition of a government beneficial to the people has still not materialized. In fact, many issues persist from that era to the present, yet we are not seeing a similar degree of outrage from the citizen. It is disheartening that even with this apparent submission from the public, the government fails to be the bigger person and take initiative in upholding basic rights.

With the coming to power of the current regime and the revelations regarding past human rights abuses in places like Maekelawi, as well as the promised justice sector reform, there were expectations of improvements in law enforcement. Unfortunately, no significant strides have been made to this end. In fact, conditions seem to have worsened. For instance, comparing [Ethiopia's press freedom](#) index through 2020, 2022 and 2023 shows a decline down the ranks from 99<sup>th</sup> to 114<sup>th</sup> and finally to 130<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries. Similarly the number of [human rights defenders](#) who have been kidnapped has increased from 27 in 2020 to 30 in 2021 to 37 in 2022 and to 48 in 2023.

What's new, however, is an effort to frame this issue as an ethnicity-specific problem, which is both disappointing and untrue. People are being [kidnapped and tortured](#) irrespective of their ethnicity and merely for expressing dissent. For the sceptics, here are a few of the widely

publicized and ethnic unbiased attempts at censorship by intimidation in the past few years. We can start by reflecting on the numerous occasions where figures like poet Belay Bekele Weya, Jawar Mohamed, Eskinder Nega and others seemingly disappeared without any explanation whatsoever. Then we can look to the kidnapping, torture and subsequent return of Yegna media panellist, Nigusie Berhanu, and the prior case of Taye Borkena, an activist and history teacher who was [kidnapped by the police](#) and returned after being beaten. Finally, the detention of a senior journalist, Temesgen Desalegn, for more than five months for allegedly writing about the defence force is also another prime example.

The threat extends beyond the person of those involved to their property rights, as well. Instances of police seizing the properties of an accused/suspected person and being uncooperative when asked to return them after the person has been acquitted are innumerable. It is usually that either the property has been allocated among the officers involved or that it has truly been lost due to their negligence. The police, instead of protecting the public, have become instruments of societal attack. The already vulnerable sects of society are put in an even worse position. And because law enforcement in many cases only respects one thing, which these people lack, i.e. money, rights have devolved into commodities for sale and are quickly becoming too expensive to afford.

Even more disturbing is that this is a minor issue when contrasted with the many instances of people being held in custody without a court hearing for years on end. The 48 hours of the *habeas corpus* [you should have the body] is taken as a mere recommendation rather than a binding law. ‘Don’t fall into the hands of the police because if you do there is no getting out’ is the common sentiment when someone’s arrest is heard in Ethiopia. Is the government then truly serving its citizens? Is this not a relationship of intimidation instead of protection when individuals can be arbitrarily picked off the street, held for trivial offences in deplorable jail cells for God knows how long? Where are our rights, those rights we traded off for the protection offered us by our government? What does our citizenship mean at this point? Yet again sadly enough, these two issues pale in comparison with the issue of police killings.

Young men, guilty of offences not even worth being jailed for, have been shot and killed by the police in Ethiopia. This is especially apparent in conflict areas where it can be ‘justified’. A recent case in Ambo, where a defence force member fired at a four-year-old child for walking outside during curfew hours, has been circulating on social media. As well as the killings of many civilians, including a child of thirteen years old, who were killed by federal armed forces in the move to take back control of Ambo Town, with a very disheartening [‘finish him off’](#) heard to encourage the killing of an already wounded civilian.

This is the very unfortunate situation we are in, yet I don’t believe it is without solutions. The major solution lies in facing rather than ignoring or sugar coating the existing reality. Mao Zedong’s theory of continual revolution is fitting here in that in it, both the citizen and the government are called to step up and not let revolution die. The government is called upon to continually evaluate its policies to keep up with the needs of the people as they change, and

the citizens are called to keep revolution going as per the context and needs of the country at a given time, i.e. to frame again and again what their needs are and to express them. I believe that this citizenship crisis should be of the main themes for the next revolution that is to birth the Ethiopia of the coming 50 years. To this end a strong political will and understanding of the perils of illegitimacy is needed from the government, along with sound intellectual leadership from scholars and a willingness for the silence to be broken from citizens.

## Conclusion

Police brutality and judicial unfairness have regrettably become a political tradition in Ethiopia, constituting a distressing reality. However, as Mao would advise, citizens need not passively endure or accept such abuse. The saying *'ngus aykeses semay aytates'* [The king should not be accused; the sky should not be ploughed] encapsulates the prevailing political sentiment of the majority of Ethiopians and I am pained by this. This silence and lack of realization that the government is here to serve and not to be served. I yearn for my people to raise their heads, refusing to tolerate any form of abuse. But alas, we seem to lack the collective realization or perhaps this collective realization requires considerable effort to cultivate. While all this might not appear to be the most pressing issue in a third world country, dismissing it as an expected imperfection in law enforcement to be addressed at a more convenient time would be a fallacy. There is no more convenient time than right now. A government's law enforcement organ simply must never be the most imminent threat felt by its citizens. Standing today in the legacy left by the Ethiopian student movement, content acceptance of 'where Ethiopia is now' would be a betrayal. A revolution fitting the needs of Ethiopia today is needed to build a better Ethiopia for tomorrow. And to make sure the woes of today are not the cries of future generations as well. The ESM [Ethiopian student movement] leaders called for 'land to the tiller' and now it's time for us to rally for the restoration of rights to their rightful owners. And this is my vision as a 5th year law student: A country shaped by this revolution to reclaim the citizen's rights.





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