

Historical and Current Resistance of the Sidama Nation against the unitarist Ethiopian nationalism

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CHAPTER 1: The root causes of perennial Ethiopian political instability and conflicts

1.1 Indigenous peoples of northeast Africa

Cushitic language speaking peoples have been the indigenous dwellers of northeast Africa from southern Egypt to Tanzania for several millennia. Cushitic language was first spoken in northeast Africa 13000 years ago. Christopher Ehret (2023) argues that there was a unified Proto-Cushitic language in the Red Sea Hills as far back as 11000 BC (Early Holocene period), that is 13000 years ago. At present, the descendants of these ancient Cushitic peoples include the Beja in Southern Egypt, Eastern Sudan and Eritrea, Nubia in Sudan (who speak a mix of Cushitic and Nilo-Saharan languages), Agew/Qimant, Afar, Saho, Somali, Oromo, Sidama, Hadiya, Halaba, Kambata, Maraḳo, Darashe in Ethiopia, Rendille and Sakuye in Kenya, Iraqw, Burunge and Gorowa in Tanzania, among others. Although limited records exist about the dispersal and migration of the Cushites in Northeast Africa, archaeological, anthropological and linguistic evidence point to their ubiquitous presence in the region for thousands of years. Cushitic peoples must therefore learn, preserve and defend their 13000 year heritage in northeast Africa against the onslaught by late comers who attempted in vain to deny, denigrate and adulterate our history. Due to limited literary tradition among the Cushitic peoples, the late comer settlers fabricated false historical narratives to legitimize their rules and exploit the natural resources of Northeast Africa, the homeland of the ancient Cushites.

The Cushitic civilization of Kerma in northern Sudan was one of the oldest civilizations in the world that flourished in ancient Nubia, Northern Sudan from 2500-1500 BC and was not only rival to ancient Egyptian civilization but also a source of it. During the Napata Cushitic civilization 750-590 BC Cushitic kings conquered Egypt and established the 25th Egyptian dynasty. The 25th Kushitic dynasty of Egypt was known by Greeks and the rest of the world as “the Ethiopian” dynasty of ancient Egypt referring to the Cushitic peoples south of Egypt. However, due to invasions by the 26th Egyptian dynasty, the capital of Cushitic kingdom was moved to Meroe, south of Napata in Northern Sudan in 656 BC. Nevertheless, the Cushitic civilization of Meroe declined after invasion by the Aksumite King Ezana in 330 AD. The Aksumites came across the name Ethiopia or Cush for the first time when they conquered Meroe in 330 AD.

1.2 False historical narratives: Who are Ethiopians?

The 8th century Greek poet, Homer was believed to have coined the term Aethiopians or Aithiopians (people with burnt faces in Greek) referring to the Cushitic peoples living south of Egypt. Later, Herodotus, a 5th century BC Greek historian wrote extensively about Aithiopians

referring to people living in the present day Northern Sudan. Ancient Egyptians and the Hebrew Bible referred to Northern Sudan just south of Egypt as the Land of Cush. Louis Jonker (2023) in his paper, "The Cushites in Herodotus and Chronicles (Bible): Revisiting the Asa Narrative" argues that there is no doubt, through Herodotus' use of the term Aithiopia that he referred to the region on the African continent to the south of Egypt, which was Cush. Ethiopia is an English translation of the Greek word Aithiopia. Therefore, Ethiopia referred to in the Bible was Cush and was never Abyssinea. The Cushitic peoples must claim the name Ethiopia as synonymous to Cush. All Bible references to Ethiopia were Greek translations from the Hebrew Bible that referred to Cush. The original Hebrew Bible referred only to Cush and never to Ethiopia.

Contrary to this scientific etymological evidence, some unitarian writers fabricate false claim with no foundation in history and fact about the origin of the name Ethiopia. They claim that the word Ethiopia originated from the name of unknown ancient 12th king of Ethiopia called "Ethiopsis" or "Itiyyopsis" who they argue was the father of Aksumawi (see Ayele Bekerie 2004). This is a patently false narrative without any foundation in history and etymology. It is a pure lie and fabrication to distort history and deny historical legitimacy to the indigenous Cushites.

Another false historical narrative is unitarits' claim about Abyssinean Ethiopia's 3000 year history. This is yet another pure historical perjury. Tadesse Tamirat (1972), a renowned Tigray historian wrote: "South Arabian immigrants began to settle in the hinterland of Adulis as far inland as the surroundings of Aksum before the 5th century BC. From then on their settlement became the spearhead of the long process of semitization in the Ethiopian region. The extensive area of north-east Africa between the Red Sea and the Nile as far north as the first cataract and including the whole of the Ethiopian region is still predominantly inhabited by a large family of people known to anthropologists and linguists as Kushites." This historical evidence attests two facts. First, the ancient indigenous residents of north-east Africa were almost exclusively the Cushites. Secondly, there was no recorded Abyssinian civilization in north-east Africa before 1st century AD, that is before 2000 years. The first known major civilization led by the assimilated Kushites and the descendants of Semitic language speaking migrants from Arabia was the Aksumite civilization which began in the 1st century AD. The Aksumite civilization is therefore 2000 years old today and not 3000 years old. Therefore, the repeated claim of 3000 year Abyssinian civilization is unfounded and a false historical narrative. In addition, in Tigray there is an ancient building site which was referred to as the palace of the Queen of Sheba. The mythological Queen of Sheba and King Solomon of Judah were believed to have lived 900 years before the establishment of Aksum. How could the mythological woman who lived in 900 BC could build a palace in Aksum which was founded in 1st century AD. This is yet another false theological-historical narrative far from the truth.

A notable feature of the Aksumite civilization was the constant wars of occupation and assimilation of the indigenous Cushitic peoples. The Agew, who occupied most of the present-day Ethiopian highlands since the ancient time, were the immediate victims of wars of occupation and assimilation that went on for 2000 years. The Aksumite also assimilated Saho, another ancient highland Cushites and in 330 occupied Meroe in northern Sudan.

It was this constant expansion of the Aksumite empire into the surrounding Agew land and the intermarriage between the Aksumite soldiers and officials on the one hand and the indigenous Agew on the other hand that resulted in a new tribe known as Amhara. The substratum of the Amharic language are both Geez and Agew providing the linguistic evidence to the assimilation process. In this regard, Tadesse Tamirat (1972) wrote: "...the Agew were the native inhabitants of the Ethiopian plateau north of the River Jema. The immigrants from South Arabia settled in

the northern part of this region and lived among the Agew population, who gradually adopted the language of the settlers. These linguistically semitized natives later constituted the dominant section of the peoples of Aksum. As the kingdom acquired additional territories, large groups of these people were apparently recruited and settled in distant frontier stations. Here they intermarried with the local people and formed yet another semitized zone in the interior of the Agew country, which was gradually passing into the influence of Aksum. ...The Amara tribal group ...was probably the earliest to be established as such during the pre-Christian period of Aksumite history...". This historical evidence further disproves any claim that there was any notable Abyssinian civilization before the 1st century AD, that is before the Aksumite civilization and there was no tribe called Amhara before Aksum. Both Axum and Amhara were the offsprings of assimilation of the Agews and settlers from southern Arabia. This identity crisis has been the root cause of all false historical narratives and conflicts in present day Ethiopia for the past 2000 years.

1.3 The Cushitic Agew Dynasty 930-1270 AD

After 700 years of conquest and assimilation of the indigenous Cushitic peoples, the Aksumite civilization declined in the 8th century AD due mainly to the expansion of the Islamic Rashidun Caliphate in the 7th Century AD. The Arab occupation of the Aksumite port of Adulis in 640 AD heralded the beginning of the decline of the Aksumite empire. Consequently, in 930 AD the indigenous Agew took power and ruled northern Ethiopia including Eritrea until 1270 AD. However, despite their adherence to Christianity and lineages with the Aksumites through marriage, the Aksumite always considered the Agew an illegitimate usurper of power from what they called a mythological "Solomonic" dynasty. Solomonic dynasty is yet another false historical narrative authored by Tigray Orthodox monks in a fictional book called the "glory of kings" or "kibre negast" in which the descendants of the Arabian migrants claimed to be the descendants of king Minelik I, the son of Queen of Sheba and King Solomon of Judah. King Solomon was believed to have ruled Judah from 970-930 BC. This was over 900 years before the historically documented first civilization, the Aksumite civilization, that was led by the descendants of the migrants from southern Arabia. If there was King Minelik I, he should have lived in the end of 10th century and beginning of the 9th century BC. Whose king was he? Where did he live? Whom did he rule? These are all fabricated historical narratives to delegitimize the access to power by the indigenous Cushitic peoples. Solomonic dynasty was a fake story never acknowledged by Israel, the true source the biblical history of King Solomon. It is mind boggling that the Abyssinians ruled this part of north east Africa with an absolutely fake story of Solomonic dynasty from 1270-1974, that is for 704 years. The Cushitic peoples were taken for a ride for 704 years. We should never happen any more.

In sum, we have shown unequivocally that there was no 3000 year Abyssinian civilization, there was no King Ethiopis or Itiyyopis that ruled Axum or Abyssinea, there was no King Minelik I, and there was no Solomonic dynasty.

Today in the 21st century, there must be a DNA evidence to proof lineage. There has never been a DNA evidence that links any person of Amhara or Tigrayan origin to the people of Israel. If that evidence can be provided, it is welcome. We have dispelled all the core unitarist historical claims and showed that their drive for assimilation of others is to conceal their own identity crises and legitimize their illegitimate political power grab and continue to perennially exploit the natural resources of the indigenous Cushitic dwellers of the country.

1.4 The 1270 rebellion against the Cushitic Agew dynasty

Armed with false historical narrative, the Orthodox Church led mainly by the Tigrayan monks sought to delegitimize the Agew Dynasty and actively supported an uprising by an Amhara local ruler known as Yekuno Amlak in 1270. As advised by the church, Yekuno Amlak claimed false descent from King Menelik I, which the church claimed was the son of King Solomon and Queen of Sheba. This fabricated justification was used to justify the quo d'etat against the agew leadership.

Yekuno Amlak was a local ruler at Gishen and Ambasel near Lake Hayq who overthrew the Agew King, Yitbarek, in 1270 and assassinated him. Through the support and guidance of Tigray and Amhara Orthodox monks, Yekuno Amlak founded a fake Solomonic dynasty in 1270 which ruled the northern part of the country and the entire Ethiopian empire later from 1890s until 1974.

It must be noted that the fake Solomonic dynasty ruled only Abyssinia, i.e parts of northern Ethiopia and Eritrea and Agew from 1270-1889, when King Minelik II took power and began to annex the independent eastern, western and southern nations including Sidama in 1890s. Sidama was never part of Abyssinia until 1892. Except Agaw and Saho who were constantly invaded and assimilated since the time of Aksumites, most of the 90 ethnic groups that make up the Ethiopian empire today were independent African states before 1889. Moreover, the name Ethiopia replaced Abyssinia (Habesha) only in the 1931 constitution adopted by emperor Haile Selassie. Therefore, the narrative that the old testament (Hebrew Bible) referred to the present-day Ethiopia was patently false.

The Fano uprising today is clearly an attempt akin to that of Yekuno Amlak uprising to usurp power and reinstate a fake Solomonic dynasty. The only difference between the Yekuno Amlak uprising in 1270 and the Fano uprising today is that in 1270 political power was in the hands of Cushites while today the political power is in the hands of neo-nafxenya ruler Abiy Ahmed who is more committed unitarist than the Fano themselves. Fano and Abiy do not have any ideological differences. Their only contest is that neither wants to share credit for restoring unitarism.

1.5 Antagonism to multinational federalism by a unitarist group

As we have shown above, unitarist reject multinational federalism and the Right to Self determination because their history is a myth. It is because they have a deep rooted identity crises. It is because they strive to hide behind an assimilated identity that conforms to their "superior" Abyssinian language and culture. It is because they despise the indigenous Cushitic language and culture as barbaric, backward and uncivilized.

The oppressed indigenous Cushitic, Omotic and Nilotic nations must defend their identities and their rights to self determination from a perennial existential threat anchored on a false historical narrative. The root cause of the perennial political instability and conflict in Ethiopia is such unfounded historical narrative aimed at legitimizing access to political power by people of Abyssinian origin, in particular, the chauvinist right wing unitarist group. We must unequivocally reject any attempt to derail the gains made in the past three decades to restore nominal rights to self rule, as provided in the current framework of multinational federalism, the exercises to use own languages as working languages and teach children in primary education. These are sacred rights which are currently under threat by both the ruling prosperity party and the right wing Fano group.

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CHAPTER 2: Delusional unitarist intellectuals and the historical political instability in Ethiopia

2.1 Introduction

The movement by the Ethiopian nations and nationalities began half a century ago between Italian occupation and the overthrow of Haile Selassie's regime in 1974. The domination of absolute power in the state of Ethiopia backed by Amhara intellectuals was the hallmark of the Ethiopian history. The oppression of nations and nationalities began with the occupation of various nations in the south. Subsequently, Amharic was declared a national language although 85% of the population did not speak it. The Orthodox church was placed under the authority of the emperor as an ideology of the palace, despite most non-Amhara were not Orthodox. Moreover, the annexation of Eritrea by dissolving the federal administration was a clear indication of national oppression which unmasked Amhara's domination and fuelled an armed struggle that culminated in Eritrea's secession.

A Unitarist Pan-Ethiopian nationalism is an idealized form of national identity, which is promoted as a supra-ethnic identity that ethnic groups need to integrate into. On the other hand, ethno-nationalism perceives Ethiopianness as the sum of ethnic groups guaranteed through their participation. It is the manifestation of the new construct of Ethiopian identity "from below", which would emerge from the "first" and "real" identities of Ethiopian peoples, i.e., their "ethnic" belonging (Bach, Citation 2014, p. 105)¹. In contrast to the former, now it is possible to have double loyalty to the group and to the state i.e., Ethiopian national identity without losing one's own ethnic identity. The ethnicity of other ethnic groups has centered on the discourse of "Amhara domination", with roots going back to the student movement of the 1960s and 1970s and ultimately to the territorial expansions of Menelik and the birth of modern Ethiopia at the end of the 19th century. A centralized absolutist state, where the imperial regime led by Amhara intellectuals and some assimilated to Amhara from neighboring nationalities replaced the traditional administrations, dislodged the local leadership from power, and increasingly concentrated power at the center, thereby triggering resistance with

an ethnic dimension. The extraction of resources in the form of taxes to meet the growing budgetary needs for building a modern state structure was also an exacerbating factor to the grievances of nations and nationalities.

2.2 Resistance against domination by unitary regimes

Resentment over the identity of local governance structures and the extortionist policies of the unitarist regime eventually led to multiple rebellions. The most prominent peasant uprisings against imperial rule were, the 1942 Tigrayan rebellion known as the “Weyane,” the 1960 Gedeo rebellion also called the “Michille war,” the beginning of the Eritrean secessionist movement in September 1960, the Bale rebellion in 1965, and the rebellion of peasants in Gojjam in 1968 (Gebru, Citation 1991)². The underlying causes of these rebellions point to the key political problems of the imperial regime that ultimately led to its collapse in 1974 (Berhe & Gebresilassie, Citation 2021)³. All rebels (Tigray, Oromo, Gambella, Sidama, Ogaden, and afar and Eritrea) who fought for their rights were seen as separatists or narrow nationalists and anti-Ethiopianists. These perceptions were created by the Amhara ruling elites to undermine the struggle for the rights of nations and nationalities. As a result, many intellectuals who spearheaded the demands for the rights of oppressed nations to self determination were accused and murdered as anti-Ethiopian elements including Haile Feda, Baro Tumssa, Qesse Gudina Tumesa, etc. from Oromo, and Melese Tekle (Tigray). Liberals and socialists were certain for a long time about their expectation that ethnic and national identifications would wither away as the unification of the world was realized through international trade and mass communication (Hutchinson & Smith, Citation 1996)⁴. However, as Connor (Citation 1999) put it, ethno-national forces have been a political reality of most states in the world irrespective of geographic location, level of economic development, democratic culture, religion, and ideology (Connor, Citation 1999)⁵. Ethno-national mobilization is a universal phenomenon of ethnic groups’ struggles with the state, claiming autonomy, representation, or fair socio-economic share (Kymlicka, Citation 2006)⁶. Despite the presence of a few homogeneous states, equating the borders of political authority with national identity in the name of nation-state they remained more aspiration than reality (McGarry & Keating, Citation 2006)⁷.

2.3 The Student movement and the right of nations to self determination

The Ethiopian Student Movement rejected the idea of Ethiopia as a nation, seeing it instead as made up of diverse cultures and semi-autonomous nations. Ethiopia, it was held, was a multinational state restrictively defined through the prism of Amhara cultural hegemony (Walleign M, 1969)⁸. In his seminal 1969 article, Walleign condemned national oppression in Imperial Ethiopia and argued that Ethiopia was not one nation, but rather an amalgamation of different nations and nationalities, whose struggle for self-determination should be supported⁸. This is the core issue in the struggle of Ethiopian nations and nationalities for self-rule. This line of thinking came to shape Ethiopia’s political discourse and the way the state is viewed over the past four decades, it has led to the 1995 constitution that led to nominal self rule by ethnic based regional states in most parts of the country except the south. The argument that the proponents of unitarism make was the domination of one group, the

“Amhara ruling class”, against all others. Thus, it is the conviction of the majority of nations that only ethno-linguistic political characterization can guarantee the equality of all nations and nationalities within the country. Despite Amhara being referred to as “empire builders,” “oppressors,” or both, except the elites, the people have benefited little from the empire, and this extends only to cultural matters (Markakis, Citation2005)⁹. In reality, the northern region and south of the country were marginalized, were victims of underdevelopment, and struck by famine by the end of the imperial government. Although the oppressed Amhara have are not considered as foes, Amhara intellectuals should carry the blame for propagating hateful narratives on nations and nationalities.

2.4 The fall of the military regime in 1991.

Beginning in 1991, Ethiopia shifted from a centralist state into a constitutionally entrenched ethnic-based multinational federal state (Dereje, Citation2013)¹⁰. The then-ruling EPRDF claimed to be the successor of the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) and adopted a unique federal arrangement. “New frontiers in Ethiopian politics” appeared in which ethnic groups became building blocks in the Ethiopian polity (Andreas, Citation2003)¹¹. The year 1991 marked not a mere regime change; it was a turning point at which the Ethiopian state was fundamentally restructured (Dereje, Citation2013)¹².

While the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (commonly known by its Amharic acronym (MEISON) took the class struggle under the Pan-Ethiopian umbrella, the TPLF and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) choose the national liberation struggle as their prior mission (Merara, Citation2006)¹³. After the class-based parties were wiped out by the military group, Dergue, the ethno-nationalist movements had gained momentum that dominated the political climate of the country and took power by overthrowing the military regime. The new political system that began in 1991 was thus antithetical to the past regimes. The government began to encourage ethnic mobilization and ethnic-based self-government based on the Soviet federal model. Many states embrace federal arrangements for the sake of maintaining territorial integrity and managing intrastate conflicts through the accommodation of diversity. This was the major factor for the adoption of post-Cold War federal arrangements (Choudhry & Hume, Citation2011; McGarry & O’Leary, Citation2009)¹⁴. Some African states adopted federalism and devolution in their post-conflict situations, among them South Africa (1995), Ethiopia (1995), Sudan (2005), Kenya (2010), South Sudan (2011), and Somalia (2012). The hallmark of post-conflict federations is the drawing of internal borders that aim to ensure territorial autonomy to those ethnic minorities which constitute a majority in a region. The division of powers between different levels of government is designed to ensure that no national group is left out and has sufficient powers to protect itself from economic and political disadvantages. However, this is not always the case when it comes to practice. In some federations like Ethiopia, the design has been working as a fragile experiment (Kymlicka, Citation2006)¹⁵. Steytler and de Visser (Citation2015)¹⁶ also designated the African federations as “fragile federations” to signify the federal arrangements designed to solve the fragility of the state are themselves fragile.

The ethno-nationalist group, the TPLF prevailed in the armed struggle against the Dergue, established an ethno-nationalist coalition, EPRDF, and seized central power in 1991. EPRDF claims to be the main successor of the Ethiopian Student Movement, advocating the rights of nationalities to self-determination up to and including secession, and adopted federalism in which ethnicity is an organizing principle of the polity. The primary reason for adopting federalism was the need to respond to the “national question” that various ethno-nationalist groups demand self-determination (Assefa & Zemelak, Citation 2018)¹⁷. However, after three decades of experimentation with multinational federalism, the “national question” endures as many groups are still seeking recognition, self-government, and political participation. The number of ethnic nationalists pursuing armed struggle against the EPRDF regime is not much less than during the Dergue regime. This was mainly because EPRDF and its successor Prosperity Party violated the constitution and the rights of nations to a full degree of self rule. We know or heard of abuse of power and coercive control of the state to limit their victim from seeking his rights. The perpetrators work to isolate and intimidate the victim by creating “perceptions”. Amhara intellectuals succeed by isolating TPLF, OLF the victims from others. This gave the perpetrators immense power and control. Such a dangerous ploy, where the pattern of a behavior is used by Amhara intellectuals to frighten, threaten, and oppress, which is done through, isolating from the support group, denying freedom and autonomy, lying and gaslighting, name calling, undermining their culture and language and making threatening and accusations. The Amhara intellectuals used dehumanizing rhetoric through continuous propaganda by deploying multimedia outlets calling for violence. They made dehumanizing language part and parcel of their political and cultural discourse.

Ethiopia adopted a federal government arrangement in the early 1990s under the defunct EPRDF regime on an ethno-linguistic basis to decentralize the Amhara-dominated highly centralized structures of imperial Ethiopia. By attributing the failure of the ruling regime to ethnic federalism, the Amhara elites want to score two goals: to take back the Menelik palace and demolish the self-determination of nations granted by the 1995 constitution, at least in theory. They currently refer to this arrangement as tribal politics (*ye-gosa politika*) and a linguistic-based division (*Zeregnoch, gotengnoch, Bekuankua kefafelun*). Indeed, it is difficult for ordinary individuals to disentangle the socio-economic and political failures of EPRDF from the so-called “discontents” of ethnic federalism.

However, this is not due to the failure of the structure per se but rather to the regime’s unwillingness to implement constitutionally mandated rights of nations. In their advocacy for a return to the pre-1991 centralized state structure, these elites often criticize ethnic federalism for weakening the Ethiopian identity. Whenever tribal clashes occur – including instances where the conflicting tribes share the same ethnicity – the Amhara elite deliberately blame ethnic federalism to mislead the public and whip up public opinion against the federal structure. In this context, they try to use public grievances toward the regime for their disguised agenda of reclaiming ‘one Ethiopia.’ In addition, since they cannot dismantle multinational federalism alone, the Amhara elites hope to ride on public grievance both to abolish multinational federalism and overthrow the regime. However, they seem not to comprehend

that such a misguided strategy risks further balkanization of the country, not to mention it's too weak a strategy to be taken as an alternative to the former EPRDF regime.

2.5 Historical circumstances

The current geo-political boundary of Ethiopia was formed roughly about a century ago when King Menelik II of Abyssinia conquered the hitherto independent states and kingdoms to the south and southeast of its territory. While his war of conquest was one of the bloodiest in the country's history, understanding how the right to self-determination of nations came about and why it is vital to the territorial integrity of the empire requires a closer analysis of the post-war period. After the forceful incorporation of southern nations into Abyssinia, Menelik and his successors designed a strategy to preserve the empire intact. At the heart of this strategy was a plan to undermine the languages, cultural heritages, and economies of conquered nations. They established a feudal system whereby the natives were required to pay at least a quarter of their hard-earned produce to landlords. In other cases, the natives were evicted to free up land for settlement of people from northern chiefdoms. Such mass evictions over a protracted period particularly targeted the Oromo. For example, until the 1940s and 50s, many Oromo clans from Shawa were forced to flee their original homeland and relocate to the southeastern parts of Oromia in search of farmland. Besides economic exploitations, the feudal state also conducted extensive campaigns to exterminate native people's cultural heritages, religious institutions, and languages. In some places, the effects were so expansive that people concealed their innate identity and changed names to assimilate.

The feudal system was abolished in 1974 reform. While it ameliorated the sufferings of the masses to some extent, the extractive state structures were left untouched by the reform. For example, given their differential access to educational opportunities and the enabling imperial structures, the feudal Amhara rulers continued their dominance of the country's politics and economy. The limited reforms did not allow for the self-determination of nations, either. For example, until the 1990s, attempts to transform Afan Oromo into a written language were repeatedly thwarted. Those who tried to devise an Oromo writing script were targeted and killed. The awakening of oppressed nations and nationalities with access to education posed a grave danger to the status quo. Subsequently, the brutal economic, cultural, and political oppression gave birth to dozens of ethnic-based liberation fronts. In the later parts of the 1980s, these forces aligned to squash the military and political power of the Amhara-based rule. In 1991, they drafted a transitional constitution that became an antidote to the country's most fundamental problems through the right to self-determination. In theory, the ethnic self-rule freed all nations from the century-old economic, cultural, and political domination by the Amhara ruling class. Moreover, it became a shield for endangered languages, cultural heritages, and identities from the inertia of the country's institutionalized assimilationist policies. It allowed the nations to manage their land and other resources. In this context, the relevance and legitimacy of the right to national self-determination in other countries such as India, Canada, and South Africa, was accompanied by 'affirmative actions' of one kind or another for historically marginalized groups. Ethiopia's 1974 revolution was anti-imperialism (to dismantle Amhara culture and language imperialism) and anti-bureaucratic capital. But did not dismantle

the imperial bureaucracy that Amhara intellectuals hung onto and harassed minorities till today.

In the 1990s reform, instead of establishing a truly decentralized and inclusive governance structure, the ruling Tigrean elite, TPLF, imposed its prototype of extractive political and economic institutions using their comparative military advantage. It replaced forces that fought for the self-determination of other nations with quack organizations made up of incompetent, craven, self-seeking, and less educated individuals from each of these nations. These individuals were used as representatives of diverse groups for international propaganda consumption. Nevertheless, the constitutional reform removed restrictions on the use of own language for administrative and educational purposes, and the right to preserve local culture, historical heritages, and identity.

2.6 The resurgence of unitarism since the failed democratic transition in 2018

TPLF's opportunistic behavior and the inability of oppressed nations to compel the regime to respect hard-earned constitutional rights are now giving the Amhara elite a return to their outdated model of campaign for power. They attack self-determination while ironically accusing TPLF of hijacking the victories of the oppressed people in pursuit of its economic exploitations and political domination. Briefly, one may presume that Amhara's deep-rooted scorn for TPLF is intertwined with that of self-determination and their inability to retake the state power. First, had the problem been the partially implemented self-determination, such a sentiment would have been shared by other ethnic groups. Amhara elites lamented and tried to bring other nations and nationalities to their side that the TPLF failed to respect the rights of individuals and nations, and that it 'divided' the country along linguistic boundaries which they used as the stepping stone for power. They also argue that the current structure limits the rights of Amharic-speaking people to move around the country in search of better opportunities.

They argue that ethnic federalism undermined the mobility and thereby economic benefits of Amharic-speaking groups. This could well be one of the downsides of ethnic federalism, but we don't hear Oromos, Sidamas, Somalis, Tigrayans, and other ethnic groups complaining about this. One wonders if a return to a "one language, one nation" unitarist policy is the best way out as often suggested by these groups. So why is it only the Amhara's complaining? It is simply because they cannot afford to be equal. In the pre-1991 era, Amharic was the only official language in every corner of the country. As a result, Amhara children had no problem getting admission to schools. Upon graduating, they had no constraints in moving around the country to seek better job opportunities. The same was true for well-connected Amharic-speaking business owners. They could open a shop or restaurant in Jijiga or Nekemte without having to speak the local language. The burden of learning the language was transferred from the businessman offering the services to residents who sought those services. In other words, the locals had to learn Amharic to do business with them in their homeland. In those days, without

speaking Amharic an individual from Sidama, the Somali or Oromia region, who had no access to schooling, could not even be hired as a driver, storekeeper, or gardener in any government institution

The 1991 reform flipped the odds by putting an end to Amhara's privileged status at the expense of three-quarters of the country's population. For those who had been favored for so long, the leveling of the field may seem unfair. But one reality must sink. A return to an Ethiopia where Amhara's are once again the overlords is gone forever.

These Amhara groups don't realize that their supposed unity agenda has adverse effects on the very virtues they vow to protect. The Amhara politicians' demagoguery is filling Amharic-speaking innocent youth with illusions and empty hopes that everything that came with TPLF will go with it – soon. As a result, instead of adjusting to the changes in the system, most Amharic-speaking groups line up behind their politicians to abolish the system. Many are running into similar problems. But instead of hoping against hope for a return to 'united' Ethiopia with Amharic as the only official language, Amharic-speaking individuals residing in the south should consider adjusting themselves to this irreversible reality.

Now, two opposing political narratives are dwarfing the struggle for justice and freedom in Ethiopia. While those who advance the 'united Ethiopia' political paradigm are hoping to undo the country's ethnic federalism, their opponents are struggling to consolidate the gains that came with such structural changes. Had it not been for their amnesia, there are several lessons the Amharic-speaking elite could learn from the changes of the last three decades. Eritrea went while a loose confederation could have easily been pursued. And they blame TPLF for making the country landlocked. Continued attempts to scoff at the national self-determination of ethnicities will only replicate this mistake. The Amhara elites have only themselves to blame for the current misery of poor Amhara. It will be worse if they do not adjust themselves to the current political dispensation of multi-national federalism and join federalist forces to fight and remove the most brutal regime of "prosperity party".

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CHAPTER 3: Sidama’s Long Campaign for Statehood: Where are we now? What are Future Priorities?

3 1 Background

The Sidama nation, one of Ethiopia’s largest ethnic groups, is known for their indigenous democratic governance system known as ‘Motte’. However, conquerors from the Abyssinian highlands incorporated Sidama territories into Ethiopia in the early 1890s. For many decades since then it existed as part of a multi-ethnic province named ”Sidamo”. Under a succession of emperors headquartered in Addis Ababa, the Sidamas felt socially-, economically-, and politically-marginalized for more than a century and consistently demanded ethno-cultural justice and equality expressed in a lot of different ways. Notably, the Sidamas rebelled under the Marxist Derg, which ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991 and – like its predecessors – also ran a unitary nation state. The armed struggle against Derg by various national liberation fronts, such as the Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM), played a key role in the 1991 revolution, which transformed the country from Marxist-Leninist military dictatorship into a multi-national federation [1].

Following the collapse of Derg in 1991, the Tigray People Libration Front (TPLF) -led coalition known as EPRDF who came to power promised to decentralize power. The new constitution introduced a system that aims to protect the rights of Ethiopia’s ethnic groups and prevent the return of the oppressive rule from the center they had endured for far too long [2]. The constitution allowed for self-rule in nine regional states, plus the federal capital, Addis Ababa. It even went a step further and included a provision for self-determination for nations, nationalities, and peoples including secession by regions as independent nation-states [3]. After consolidating its power, the ruling coalition

controlled by the Tigrayan minority elites suppressed autonomy demands. It kept regional state governments under complete control through its proxy four regional coalition member parties as well as other closely affiliated parties that run the five other regions [4].

In the south, the EPRDF's decision to bundle 56 different ethnic groups into one regional state called the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNPPR) after a brief transitional period fuelled discontent, primarily among the Sidama. Ethiopia's constitution granted some ethnic groups that were far smaller than the population of the Sidama [5], allowing them to choose a working language and other things like levying some taxes and legislate in areas such as education and land administration. In this sense, the merger of the 56 different ethnic groups in the south was inconsistent with the constitution and caused huge resentment among the Sidama [6].

Peaceful protests associated with Sidama's statehood struggle periodically erupted in Hawassa and other places in the Sidama Zone. In 2002, more than 69 peaceful protesters were gunned down by security forces in broad daylight and hundreds more severely injured on Hawassa's outskirts called Looqqe during demonstrations against measures aimed at moving the capital of Sidama Zone to a different place and making Hawassa directly accountable to the regional government [7-9]. Some 4 years later, then-Prime Minister Meles Zenawi bullied the Sidama Zone leaders to suspend their pursuit of a regional statehood after the Sidama zonal council voted for a referendum on statehood.

Since that time, Sidama's campaign for statehood was weakened until 2018, when it gathered momentum as the EPRDF became increasingly weak, due to internal power struggle following the sudden death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and anti-government protests led by the frustrated youth, primarily in the Oromia region [10]. The Sidama held a series of grassroots consultations and petitions, with the majority of Sidama woreda or district assemblies voting in favour of a statehood referendum [11]. Following the assemblies' vote, another vote took place at the zonal council level on 18 July 2018, which received the support of more than the constitutionally required two thirds of Sidama Zone legislators [12]. The vote by the Sidama zone legislators meant that the Ethiopian authorities (namely the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia; NEBE) had to organize a referendum within a year of the regional council receiving the zonal request – that is, by 18 July 2019 – and create a new regional state if a majority backs that option via referendum [13]. Ethiopian authorities were initially hell-bent to block the statehood demand by using delay and defeat tactics to frustrate the Sidama people. The Sidama people were united in rejecting the Ethiopian regime's bullying tactics. And pro-democracy activists from the Ejeetto movement were in no mood to accept further delays to forming a state for which they long campaigned and sacrificed for. This forced Prime Minister Abiy to appear in his rubber-stamp parliament on 1 July 2019 and declare that "There is no government that can compromise Ethiopian unity". He said failure to follow correct procedure for declaring statehood could result in federal intervention [14]. [He vowed to crush any move to declare statehood in the same manner he dealt with the

Somali Regional State]. As he promised to do so, Abiy dispatched his security forces in a bid to prevent the Sidama from self-declaring statehood and killed more than 153 Sidamas and injured many more in what has come to be known as the 11/11/11 (July 18, 2019) massacre.

After a rather long campaign and huge sacrifices, referendum was eventually held on 20 November 2019, with nearly 99% of the registered voters supporting formation of Sidama statehood. The referendum was historic in its own right because it was the first such electoral exercise in Ethiopia (and even in Africa) that was conducted to implement a vote on regional statehood. There were 1,692 polling stations, 2,280,147 registered voters, of whom 2,277,063 cast their votes, resulting in a 98.86 percent voter turnout [source: *International Foundation for Electoral Systems*]. On November 23, the NEBE announced results demonstrating that 98.5 percent of voters were in support of the Sidama national statehood [*International Foundation for Electoral Systems*: <https://www.ifes.org/news/ethiopia-holds-referendum-determine-statehood-sidama-zone>].

3.2 Establishment of the Sidama Regional State and the Right to Self-Rule

The Sidama National Regional State was officially admitted as the 10th State of FDRE on June 20, 2020. Nevertheless, Sidama's right to self rule enshrined in the constitution was violated by the Prime Minister who directly appointed the new leaders of the state. This was a deliberate political interference to exact revenge on the Sidama nation for their relentless campaign to secure regional statehood. As the prime minister vowed to render the new regional state a failed state, he selected those cadres who were not only the least capable to govern the new state but have worked to stifle the campaign for statehood with the now defunct South Ethiopia Peoples Democratic Movement (SEPDM). As a result, the Sidama Regional State remained a failed regional state to date.

3.3. State of governance and challenges

- a) Corruption and nepotism: Corruption is rife in Sidama. The meager budget subsidy allocated for the region is openly looted by pp cadres at all levels of the administration. Corruption is particularly widespread at the regional and district levels. This is expected since the cadres appointed by Abiy Ahmed as the top rulers of the region were previously indicted for corrupt practices during the EPRDF rule and removed from their posts. These cadres should have been tried in courts of law for their crimes of corruption during the previous regime and not be promoted to loot the region. Nepotism is widespread. Employment is primarily family based and to a great extent clan and locality based. There is no consideration for merit. This divisive nepotism has eroded the social fabric and unity of the Sidama society, as intended by the revenge project.

- b) Massive poverty and unemployment: Due to bad governance, impacts of climate change and declining productivity in the agriculture sector emanating from a rapid population growth and subsistence farming practices, Sidama has faced severe food insecurity particularly in the past five years. Rural poverty has increased significantly pushing households to urban centres including Hawassa and Addis Ababa in search of livelihoods. These migrants either live in precarious conditions on the streets as beggars or survive on unsustainable petty activities. Such level of abject poverty amid lush green natural environment, reflects the total failure of governance. Youth unemployment has skyrocketed. Estimates indicate that youth unemployment and underemployment has reached over 70%. The same is true for graduate unemployment reflecting skills mismatch amid poor quality of education and anemic private sector development stifled by inimical business climate.
- c) Appalling conditions of basic economic and social services: Economic and social services have collapsed due to lack of maintenance, upgrading and expansion of economic and social infrastructure such as roads, water and sanitation, electricity, ICT, schools, and health facilities, among others. Roads connecting district capitals built three decades ago have fallen apart due to lack of maintenance and upgrading. Less than 10% of all weather roads are tar marked undermining investment, trade and economic development and perpetuating poverty.
- d) Grave violations of basic human rights: The administrators of the Sidama Regional State continues to grossly violate the basic rights of civilians. Citizens are imprisoned without any arrest warrants on daily basis in clear violations of fundamental human rights and their constitutional rights. Freedom of association and speech have been curtailed. A media network created by volunteer Sidama diaspora group has been hijacked and used as an instrument of the propagandist machine for the ruling party effectively silencing alternative voices in the region.
- e) Deteriorating peace and security: The failed governance has risked peace and security in the region. At one point the regional state security bureau head, alemayehu timotewos debochi, attempted to create a state sponsored "liberation movement" in the spirit of gachana sirna in Oromia region to terrorize the Sidama civilians with impunity. Although his criminal enterprises were exposed and nipped in the bud, he and his partners in crime abraham marshallo and destaw ledamo instigated nearly a dozen conflicts with the neighboring Oromia region in which dozens of civilians were killed. The security of the Sidama nation has never been as precarious in the history of the nation.

3.2. Priority areas for intervention

- Human rights of Sidama people are being violated at an alarming rate in what appears to be a revenge campaign by Abiy's PP-led government. Police and security officials targeted real and perceived supporters of any opposition party. We know that Sidama Federalist Party (SFP --- I think that is what it's called) leaders and other pro-democracy groups are being hunted and attacked, detained, and disappeared. So many Sidamas are

either in prison or fled their country, such as opposition party (Sidama Federalist Party) leaders including Tessema Elias Sho'le. Those who are detained are often held under inhuman conditions. Those who are lucky enough not to be arrested are usually given stern warnings to stop criticizing the ruling Prosperity Parity (PP) in any way, shape, or form --- or else, face severe punishment.

- Youth unemployment is skyrocketing.
- In a very dangerous move, PP cadres spearheaded by Desta Ledamo (administrator of the SNR region) interfered with the management and day-to-day operation of the Sidama Media Network (which until recently was the one and only community media that served as the voice of the Sidama people).
- We want to see an end to all of the above.
- Lack of advocacy by those in the diaspora on behalf of their fellow Sidama back home seemed to give PP cadres confidence to misuse and abuse government power for suppressing dissent without any hesitation or thinking twice about any consequences for their reckless actions.
- We need a platform to serve as facilitators of dialogue among the diaspora with the same shared common goal to find the middle ground between the differing views that are often voiced in the Diaspora and especially within the Sidama elites.
- Outreach to faith-based Sidama groups, Sidama democracy advocates, Sidama youth-based associations, and media organizations – especially in the diaspora – is crucial. They can each be a representative voice of the Sidama people in Ethiopia – where most (if not all) of the people are silenced by Abiy's authoritarian PP-led regime.
- It is vital for those of us in the diaspora to speak against the vicious attack on our people by the PP regime in order to draw international attention towards what is happening in the SNR state, including calling on human rights groups to conduct impartial investigation into the above claims and hold perpetrators accountable.
- Foster alliance with and outreach to other non-Sidama diaspora groups, such as those from the so-called Southern Region and Oromia, and of groups that represent the wide range of opinion and experience, including those who may not have visibility abroad but strong grassroots support in Ethiopia for their cause. Having a conversation on Ethiopia with these groups is vital in order to assist a country that is fragile right now to find its footing and get to an all-inclusive multicultural democracy that respects the rights of Ethiopia's ethnic groups.
- Regarding the last bullet point, I think that we need to discuss the criteria carefully. I think that we can try to engage with those groups that would be on the same page with us when it comes to issues that are dominant in the country such as the status of the constitution and the future of multinational federalism,

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