

Ethiopia: Federalism, Party Merger and Conflicts

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Abstract: This article has a twin mission: examining the impact of party merger on the federal arrangement and its association with the current conflicts in Ethiopia. The 1995 federal constitution of Ethiopia devolves powers to regional states. Since then, each regional state was fused with its distinct ruling party that created a coalition at the federal level. This state-party fused federal arrangement faced serious challenges with the rise of intra-coalition disagreements since 2016 following the protest movements in the country, which further plunged Ethiopia into a devastating civil war since November 2020. This article asks what caused the conflicts. While recognizing the multidimensional roots of the conflicts, this article uses a political party-driven theory of federalism in order to identify the political processes that led to the conflicts. It argues that in a multiethnic federation such as Ethiopia where there is state-party fusion, a ruling party's metamorphosis from a coalition to a union may not only centralize power but could also result in both *de facto* merger of that fragile federation and conflicts. Delinking the state from the party through inclusive national negotiations and democratic elections within a federal arrangement might help transition Ethiopia to a stable country.

Keywords: Civil war, conflicts, political parties, Ethiopian federalism, Prosperity Party, power centralization, Abiy Ahmed.

Introduction

Conventional wisdom connects the outbreak of ethnonationalist conflicts and civil wars to the weakness of the government to impose central control over its territorial limits. Contrary to this assumption, "civil wars are more likely to erupt where the state exercises more control" (Koren & Sarbahi, 2017, p. 274). This is more so in multinational federations where regional forces vying for greater autonomy encounter a centralization policy that envisages

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to penetrate provinces and local communities. This article attempts to examine the relationship between power centralization and ethno-regional conflicts and civil wars relying on the case of Ethiopia. William Riker (1964), a leading scholar on federalism and party politics, establishes a firm association between the degrees of centralization in federations to the degree of centralization in political parties. Riker is known to have built the first systematic analysis of the political party-driven conceptualization of federalism. The dimensions of his analysis are the party's structure as well as its ideology across the federal and state governments. First, where a national party commands all federal and state governments [vertical union of party structure], the party/government leaders at the federal level will extend their control over the states, leading to a more centralized administration than what the constitution portrays (Riker, 1964). In contrast, where different parties command different levels of government in federations, state governments, in particular, could use their powers to resist any attempts of centralization (Riker, 1964). Secondly, the ideological orientations of political parties could foster a political atmosphere of competition or cooperation: "Ideological congruence is related to cooperation" (Thorlakson, 2011, p. 726). Both the vertical union of party structure and ideological homogenization, as will be discussed shortly, are the major outcomes of Ethiopia's ruling coalition merger in 2019 on a *medemer* ideology of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed who dissolved all semi-autonomous regional state ruling parties except that of Tigray where the civil war has been most devastating.

According to Ronald Watts (2008), the influence of the party system on the functioning of a federal system is more aggressive in emergent federations than in consolidated federal democracies. India in its early decades of independence, South Africa since the end of apartheid during the 1990s; Mexico until 2000, and other Latin American federations have been dominated by one-party rule in both orders of government and thus resulted in centralized policymaking and implementation (Watts, 2008). Daniel Elazar (1975) illustrated the importance of a noncentralized party system to federalism by contrasting it with "those formally federal nations dominated by one highly centralized party, such as the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Mexico", in all of which "the dominant party has operated to limit the power of the constituent polities in direct proportion to the extent of its dominance" (p. 35). Similarly, John McGarry and Brendon O'Leary (2007) argued that "while its state structure was federated from the beginning, real power lay in the tightly centralized Communist Party of the Soviet Union, a totalitarian party that functioned in accordance with the principle of 'democratic centralism'" (p. 193). As a result of the subordination of federal values and constitutions to the party disciplines and institutions, many authoritarian federations violently crumbled following the end of the Cold War.

In Ethiopia, the end of the Cold War ended seventeen years of civil war and replaced a unitary system with a federal arrangement. More precisely, the Ethiopian Peoples'

Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) controlled state power by militarily overthrowing the Marxist-socialist military rule known as *Derg* (an Amharic term for committee) in 1991. After a brief transitional period, a new federal constitution was promulgated in 1995 establishing a multinational federation. The second most populous country in Africa with well over 118 million population, Ethiopia is home to no less than 80 different ethno-national groups, of which the major ones include the Oromo (35 percent), Amhara (27 percent), Somali (6.2 percent), Tigrayan (6.1 percent), Sidama (4.0 percent) and other groups (World Population Review, 2022).

The EPRDF was basically a coalition of four regional *member* parties: the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement (SEPDM), each were responsible for governing their respective regional states of Tigray, Amhara, Oromia and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP). The remaining five member-states, mainly pastoral regions of Ethiopia, were run by "affiliate" parties: the Somali region by the Ethiopian Somali People's Democratic Party (ESPDP), the Afar region by the Afar National Democratic Party (ANDP), the Harari region by the Harari National League (HNL), the Gambela region by the Gambela Peoples' Democratic Movement (GPDM), and Benishangul-Gumuz region by the Benishangul-Gumuz Democratic Party (BGDP), respectively. It appears that the ethno-national based party system evolved to fit into the state structure of the Ethiopian multinational federation. Each national-regional state had a corresponding ethno-national ruling party. The constitutional right to self-determination guaranteed for each national group in Ethiopia became the foundation for the national-regional states as well as their respective parties (Government of Ethiopia, 1995).

In practice, there was an unequal relationship between *member* and *affiliate* parties. Only *member* parties of the EPRDF coalition were able to form government at the federal level. The EPRDF leaders often argued that those "largely pastoral regions lacked the agrarian class structure that revolutionary democracy presupposed" (Gebreluel, 2019). Even within the member parties of the EPRDF, the TPLF was a senior and hegemonic party, accused of masterminding the creation of the remaining "member" and "affiliate" parties of the EPRDF coalition (Gudina, 2007).

The TPLF dominated EPRDF, using the party channels, prevented civil societies from flourishing, discouraged any democratic elements, and paralyzed the constitutional institutions of the federation (Fiseha, 2012). It centralized the federation by fusing the party and the state together in a way that the latter operates in subordination to the former. All regional ruling parties, whether they were members or affiliates, were fused to their respective regional states. It was difficult to conceive of decoupling, for instance, the TPLF from the Tigray region, the OPDO from the Oromia region, and the HNL from the Harari region. Despite their constitutional autonomy, the regional states

were all controlled from the center through the party line. This is so because, Assefa Fiseha observed, “the federation operates under the circumstances in which EPRDF controls not only the institutions of the federal government but also all the regional state governments in the federation either directly through its member parties or indirectly through affiliated parties” (Fiseha, 2012, p. 458).

After two decades of the authoritarian TPLF-dominated EPRDF rule, the Ethiopian public started to question the system and demand democratic multinational federalism. Popular protests and mass movements that began in 2014 in Oromia, spread to the Amhara region in 2016, and thereby caused disagreements within the ruling coalition, which changed the balance of power in favor of the protesting regions and parties (Lyons, 2021). As a result, the ruling coalition was compelled to appoint in April 2018 a new Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, with the aim of transitioning the country to a democratic multinational federation. Though the power transfer was historical and peaceful, it was an internal affair of the ruling coalition which does not in any way denote the “era of democratic transitions” in Africa’s second-most populous country, Ethiopia (Huntington, 1991, p. 12).

In order to show his commitment to the public mandate bestowed on him, Abiy introduced political reforms by releasing political prisoners, opening up political spaces, encouraging press freedom, inviting exiled oppositions back home, and promising economic liberalization, particularly in the first six months of his rule. He also ended the 18 years of “no war, no peace” deadlock between Ethiopia and the neighboring state of Eritrea. As a result, he was overwhelmed by domestic popular support from across the country. Moreover, the international community was impressed by Abiy’s political and economic reform agendas at home and his rapprochement policy toward Eritrea. As a result, the Nobel Peace Prize 2019 was awarded to Abiy, particularly “for his efforts to achieve peace and international cooperation, and in particular for his decisive initiative to resolve the border conflict with neighboring Eritrea” (Nobel Peace Committee, 2022). A year after this award, Abiy’s international *peace pact* turned a *war pact* against Tigray region’s ruling party, the TPLF. So, the question is what threw Ethiopia back into a civil war?

In September 2016, a group of reformists led by Lemma Megersa controlled regional party-state power in Oromia; and in November 2017 made a trip to Bahir Dar to discuss with Amhara regional party-state officials the possibility of Oromo-Amhara (also known as Oromara) alliance against the TPLF dominance. By April 2018, a man from the OPDO, Abiy Ahmed, has become the chairperson of the coalition and the prime minister of Ethiopia. Subsequently, in September 2018, the OPDO and the ANDM rebranded themselves as Oromo Democratic Party (ODP) and the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP) in order to change the *bad image* associated with their old names due to their surrogate positions under the TPLF rule. In December 2019, Prime Minister Abiy

Ahmed dissolved the EPRDF coalition as well as its member and affiliate parties, except TPLF, and announced the formation of a national party called Prosperity Party (PP). After the successful dissolution of the ruling coalition at the federal level and its member and affiliate parties in eight regional states, the former party structures, leaderships, individual members, and properties were declared as the structures, leaderships, individual members, and properties of the new party, PP. As will be argued later in this article, the process of the merger was more of a disbanding of the former parties' brand names and their political programs and a nationalizing of all of their institutions and members into the PP.

This article, however, argues that with the formation of the Prosperity Party by the merger of the EPRDF coalition and its regional parties, the Ethiopian Government led by Abiy Ahmed systematically embarked upon a political shift from accommodating ethnonationalism to a centralized Ethiopian nationalism as its fundamental principle of state-society organization and mobilization, aiming to centrally command the whole country. Because the party is fused to the state at both federal and regional levels in Ethiopia, the political action of merging (some say nationalizing) regional parties into an outfit national party resulted in direct central control of regional states. TPLF's resistance to this metamorphosis of the ruling coalition threw the country back into a bloody civil war. Though the major conflict has been raging in Tigray, there were also conflicts in Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambela, Amhara, Afar and other parts of the country. As to the ideological menus regarding the political history of Ethiopia and its federal system, there are two competing blocs: "the nation-building/Ethiopianist camp" which advocates a more uniform set of policies aimed at glorifying the past to maintain Ethiopian unity; and the ethnonationalist camp which prioritizes the realization of the rights of ethnonational self-determination (Yusuf, 2020). Unlike the EPRDF coalition which had at least theoretically advanced the rights to self-determination, the Prosperity Party has pragmatically chosen the first ideological camp just for tactical reasons. "It should be noted that the balance of factors encouraging unity and regional autonomy is important not only in leading to the creation of federations," Ronald Watts warns, "but also in their subsequent operation" (2008, p. 64). So, over time, in the post-2018 Ethiopian case, the balance of pressure seems to have shifted from advocating ethnonational self-government to advancing power consolidation in the name of restoring Ethiopian unity (that is a highly centralized state). The creation of the Prosperity Party is one of the outcomes of, and key instrument to, perpetuating such an ideological shift. As a result, it would be logical to expect grievance, resistance, and rebellion from the side of pro-regional autonomy in the multiethnic, multireligious federation of Ethiopia.

This article examines intra-party-political processes that led to the current civil war in Ethiopia. To this end, it offers an analysis of the ideological and structural organization of the ruling party and its impacts on the functioning of the Ethiopian federal

constitutional institutions during the EPRDF (1991–2018) and the PP (2019–2022) periods. In the following sections, the article first briefly presents theoretical considerations on federalism, party system, civil war, and their interactions. Second, it elaborates on the emergence of federalism in the context of party-state fusion in Ethiopia. Third, the discussion emphasizes the birth of the Prosperity Party through the union of national-regional parties, the attempt to establish a centralized *de facto* one-party state, the collapse of the “federal pact” and the outbreak of the civil war. Finally, the article ends with a concluding remark.

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

In this section, the concept of federalism and the impact of a centralized party system on the functioning of a federal system, and the genesis of civil wars are discussed. Michael Burgess (2006) distinguishes federation, “a particular kind of state”, from federalism, “the thinking that drives and promotes it” (p. 2). In this distinction, federalism is approached essentially “not as a descriptive but as a normative term and refers to the advocacy of multi-tiered government combining elements of shared-rule and regional self-rule” (Watts, 2008, p. 8). Scholars of federal studies define federalism from different approaches. Daniel Elazar (1987), for instance, defined federalism as a covenant combining regional self-rule and shared rule. K. C. Wheare (1946) defined it from legal-institutional aspects; Carl Friedrich (1966) approached federalism as a process that evolves and changes over time. William Livingston (1956) defined it from a sociological standpoint: “The essence of federalism lies not in the constitutional or institutional structure but in the society itself. Federal government is a device by which the federal qualities of the society are articulated and protected” (1956, p. 1–3).

With respect to a federation, a more comprehensive definition is offered by Ronald Watts (2008): “Compound polities, combining strong constituent units and a strong general government, each possessing powers delegated to it by the people through a constitution, and each empowered to deal directly with the citizens in the exercise of its legislative, administrative and taxing powers, and each with major institutions directly elected by the citizens” (p. 10). In this article, federalism is seen from an integrated approach, and in Ethiopia, federalism is legal-constitutional, it is also a socio-cultural reflection of the multinational society of the country, and the functioning of this covenant has been affected by a one-party system. In multinational Ethiopia, federalism was adopted as an antithesis to the pre-1991 unitarist nation-building polity that shared elements of the classic French Jacobins unitarism. For the Jacobins unitarism, “federalism was regarded as part of the counter-revolution, hostile to the necessity of linguistic homogenization, a roadblock in the path of authentic, indivisible, monistic popular sovereignty” (McGarry & O’Leary, 2007, p. 184). Because federalism was conceived as a threat to national unity for the unitarist model, cultural assimilation was preferred

to cultural self-rule for diverse communities. As will be discussed, the formation of the Prosperity Party revived the unitarist nostalgia in Ethiopia.

Federalism in many cases has been employed as one of the major tools for managing cultural diversities, thereby encouraging national (or multinational) unity. According to Ronald Watts (2008), federations function well when the two opposing — centripetal and centrifugal — forces are placed in equilibrium: “Where one of these pressures is strong and the other weak, the result is likely to be either unitary political integration, on the one hand, or the independence of the regional units or at least a confederal solution, on the other” (p. 64). In maintaining a healthy balance of power in federations, political parties play significant roles. William Riker’s (1964) party-based analysis of federalism, as discussed in the introduction, associates the extent of centralization of the party structure with the functioning of the federation. The association may ultimately lead to party-state fusion, interlocking party and state hierarchies which are common in authoritarian contexts like Ethiopia. Building on Riker’s thesis, Ronald Watts (2008) examines four aspects of political parties that could particularly affect the functioning of a federation: “(1) the relationship between the party organizations at the federal level and provincial or state party level, (2) the degree of symmetry or asymmetry between federal and provincial or state party alignments, (3) the impact of party discipline upon the representation of interests within each level, and (4) the prevailing pattern of political careers” (p. 145).

If we argue that party institutions could influence the functioning of a federation, what about the converse of it? Meaning, political parties may have to organize their institutions, structures, political programs, and ideologies in accordance with the federal constitutional dispensations - party system fitting into the federal system. By definition, political parties are the product of modern representative democracies, which seek legitimacy from citizens as they attempt to occupy positions in government (Duverger, 1965). In this regard, William Buchanan (1965) argues that American political parties were built parallel to the coming-together approach of the establishment of the U.S. federation. Because federal ideas might have shaped the party system, he adds, both systems have shown enormous stability: “American parties have established a unique record of durability. Without change of title, or break in the continuity of leadership, they have remained on the political scene for more than a century. This, too, may be attributed to federalism. The national parties are loose aggregations of state and local parties, which have their roots in the compost of local politics” (Buchanan, 1965, p. 113). Local politics in this regard is federal politics. In the United States, therefore, ideological orientations of the parties do not fundamentally contradict the federal ideals and established institutions. Michael Burgess (2006) contends that while it is difficult to conclude either that particular federal institutions caused the decentralization of parties or that the decentralization of parties sustained a decentralized federation, “there was

a high probability that the two things go along together in a relation of reciprocal reinforcement” (p. 151). From the preceding discussion, one can infer that in authoritarian federations, the ruling parties through their structures and ideologies subordinate and undermine federal constitutional institutions, and tend to close peaceful and democratic ways of dispute settlements. Thus, making violent conflicts and wars inevitable.

This logic explains the genesis of the civil war and conflicts in Ethiopia. For the purpose of this paper, an operational definition of civil war is needed: “A civil war is a violent conflict within a country fought by organized groups that aim to take power at the center or in a region, or to change government policies” (Fearon, 2007, p. 4). The government of Ethiopia regards the conflicts in Tigray and Oromia regions as “law enforcement operations”, not a civil war. The major anti-government armed forces in Ethiopia, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front-Tigray Defense Force (TPLF-TDF), and the Oromo Liberation Front-Oromo Liberation Army (OLF-OLA) on their side put that they are fighting to defend the self-determination rights of their respective peoples in Tigray and Oromia. According to James Fearon (2007), a major reason for the protracted nature of civil wars is that they have been hard to end: “Their long duration seems to result from the way in which most of these conflicts have been fought: namely, by rebel groups using guerrilla tactics, usually operating in rural regions of postcolonial countries with weak administrative, police, and military capabilities” (p. 4). One of the causes of civil war is a collective grievance: “Many of today’s civil wars have an ethnic or nationalist dimension; and ethnicity, whether based on language, religion or other distinctions, is often a superior basis for collective action in contemporary conflicts in poorer countries than other social divisions such as class. In coalescing groups, therefore, present-day and historical grievances play a crucial part” (Murshed, 2002, p. 389).

For the grievances to be transformed into large-scale conflicts and wars, there must be other factors at work, specifically “a weakening of the social contract” (Murshed, 2002, p. 389). Historically too, “the failure of longstanding independent states to strengthen mechanisms of political representation, notably Ethiopia, Haiti and Liberia, also lie behind weak social contracts” (Murshed, 2002, p. 390). Interestingly, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), had also fought guerrilla warfare for seventeen years (1974–1991) against the *Derg* rule in Ethiopia and were able to topple it. While the TPLF had a history of ruling the country by being the dominant member of the EPRDF coalition, the OLF did not have that. Sadly, “civil wars rarely end in negotiated settlements” because the groups fighting civil wars tend to choose to fight to the finish (Walter, 1997, p. 335). This dilemma shows the importance of a third party, often a stronger party from the international community, to play a role in facilitating negotiations and enforcing peace deals. In order to write this article, various sources of data including political party documents and press releases, legal and constitutional

documents, party officials' interviews on media, relevant secondary documents, and my own personal observations have been used.

Ethiopian Federalism and One-Party Rule of the EPRDF

For the first time in modern Ethiopian history, the multinational, multicultural, multi-religious character of the Ethiopian society was formally acknowledged by the 1991 Transitional Charter which later became the 1995 federal constitution. Founded as an empire-state in the last quarter of the nineteenth century mainly through wars of conquests, Ethiopia had been a unitary state, dominated by Amharic-speaking ruling class (Markakis, 2011). With a vision to create a homogenous nation-state of one language, one religion, and one cultural identity at the expense of the languages, religions, and cultures of the subjugated multitudes, the successive regimes of Ethiopia — the Imperial (1890s–1974) and the *Derg* (1974–1991) — implemented coercive assimilation policies (Markakis, 2011). This coercive assimilation policy led to the rise of social revolution and nationality questions in Ethiopia which overthrew the imperial regime in September 1974.

Even if there was a regime change from a kingship to a military dictatorship by the 1974 revolution, the nationality questions of the right to self-government remained unanswered. The movement also gave birth to various opposition parties for the first time in Ethiopia: “Ethiopia entered the era of party politics only at the eve of the revolutionary upheaval of 1974 that ended the country’s *ancien regime*” (Gudina, 2007, p. 1). The Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement (MEISON) were the two oldest parties in Ethiopia which were direct offspring of the ESM. However, the revolutionary upheaval of 1974 brought the military rule of *Derg* to power. The *Derg* in a tactical short-lived alliance with MEISON swiftly adopted Marxism-Leninism as its governing ideology and abolished Ethiopia’s long-established feudal landholding system by what was popularly known as the Land-to-the-Tiller decree in 1975. It also ended centuries of alliance between the state and the Ethiopian Coptic Orthodox Church and declared a socialist state. Despite these changes, the *Derg* was not only unwilling to resolve the nationality questions, but it employed violence against those struggling for autonomy and self-rule. As a result, different political parties and liberation fronts rose up in arms to fight for the right to national self-determination. The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) were armed political parties already engaging in rebellions since the mid-1970s. These liberation movements fought a bloody civil war for seventeen years and defeated the *Derg* in May 1991.

Following the collapse of the *Derg* in 1991, the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (1991–1994) was formed by the Transitional Charter drafted by the victorious political coalition — the EPRDF. Although the OLF briefly participated in the Transitional

Government of Ethiopia, it was militarily pushed out in 1992 by the TPLF which was dominant at the time. The transitional process rather emphasized power consolidation in favor of the victorious TPLF party than power-sharing and in the process failed to transform the authoritarian state of Ethiopia (Aalen, 2020).

A federal constitution was adopted in 1995 reconfiguring Ethiopian polity into nine national-regional states (the tenth and eleventh regional states have been admitted to the federation in 2019 and 2021 respectively). Four regional states were directly governed by the member parties of the EPRDF coalition, whereas the remaining five regions were administrated by the affiliate national-regional parties. Therefore, for each of the nine ethno-regional states, there was a corresponding ethno-national party. Put differently, when the ethno-regional states federated to form the federal government of Ethiopia, the ethno-regional parties also ‘federated’ to form a ruling coalition at the federal level, but on unequal partnership. The TPLF was the single dominant party within the ruling coalition. Furthermore, the affiliate parties were neither equal members of the EPRDF coalition nor opposition to it. Even though national groups in Ethiopia were granted constitutional autonomy, the ruling coalition practically undermined it.

The constitution established a multinational federal democratic republic on the principle of the rights to national-regional self-determination including and up to secession. It also required democratically elected parties to run the governments at both levels (Government of Ethiopia, 1995). The member states of the federation enjoy constitutional autonomy to organize their own administrative institutions; legislate on cultural and language matters including primary education, arts and media; administer land and natural resources as well as exercise reserved powers (Government of Ethiopia, 1995). Moreover, state governments have the authority to implement laws and policies enacted by the federal legislature and by their respective state councils. Although the 1995 federal constitution grants broader rights of self-rule to regional states, TPLF’s interventions have undermined regional states’ capacity to determine their own affairs (Aalen, 2021).

From 1991 up to 2018, the EPRDF coalition was the sole ruling party of Ethiopia. This does not mean that there were no elections at all. There had been ritual elections every five years and the same ruling coalition always declared the winner. The recent national election, which was held after a one-year delay in June 2021, was no exception, and the successor of the EPRDF — the Prosperity Party (PP) established at the end of 2019 — was announced as the winner. The TPLF held its election in Tigray Regional State without postponement in September 2020 and declared the winner. During the EPRDF period, the TPLF had sheer dominance in the federal army, intelligence, politics and economy as well as influences over member states through the party channels. The EPRDF coalition had the executive council (*politburo*), central committee and general assembly at the federal level. Its member and affiliate parties also had similar party

structures and organizations at the regional level. These structures were fused into the federal and regional state institutions. Whatever policy formulated by the EPRDF *politburo* would flow down through party channels to get implemented in all regions by the member and affiliate parties. The latter will only do translations of the policies into their respective regional languages and contexts in order to implement them.

As a result, in Ethiopia, the party channel has so far been the dominant means of control and instrument of implementing policies than the state institutions. Lovise Aalen (2002) studied the first decade of the EPRDF rule and provided an analysis of the implementation of a federal system within a dominant party state which still resonates: "The overall conclusion of the analysis is that although the Ethiopian *de jure* model meets the requirements of a federal system, the *de facto* relations between the central government and the federal units are so centralized that the federal division of power is severely undermined. A major reason behind this is the centralized structure of the party system" (p. 100). Ronald Watts (2008) similarly observes that "an emergent federation with particularly unique features has been Ethiopia (1995). Ethiopia is particularly interesting in the way in which the ethnic basis of the constituent units is emphasized, but to date the federal policy process has been mainly channeled by and through the ruling political party" (p. 26). As a result, the EPRDF's metamorphosis from coalition to union destabilized the state-party fused system.

The party channel was constructed on the basis of "*maikelawinet*" (democratic centralism), a core value of the Leninist revolutionary democracy which was the sole guiding ideology of the EPRDF. It was sustained by an institutionalized system of self-criticism and party discipline known as "*gemgema*" which was extensively used to provide governance from the center (Lyons, 2021). The *maikelawinet* had brought structural cohesion, policy coherence, cooperation, and sharing of resources and staff between federal and regional party and state structures. However, the mass protests and protracted civil disobediences in different parts of Ethiopia (2014–2018) demanding political reforms created political cracks in the EPRDF coalition, reinforcing the argument that structural cooperation and flows of resources and services among the ruling coalition on their own "do not create sufficient organizational conditions for the development or maintenance of shared values that contribute to federal stability" (Thorlakson, 2011, p. 726). The political cracks within the EPRDF coalition, which brought the era of the TPLF-dominated EPRDF to an end, began when the regional-party-states of Oromia and Amhara formed an alliance and asserted their powers to disobey the TPLF between 2016 and 2018 following mass protests in both regions.

The Birth of Prosperity Party and the Outbreak of the Civil War

As a major step to consolidate his personal power, Prime Minister Abiy dissolved the EPRDF coalition members and affiliate parties to form a single outfit national party called Prosperity Party (PP) in December 2019. By this transformation from coalition to union, all ethno-regional states' parties were "nationalized" except TPLF, the ruling party of the Tigray region which was too powerful to be coerced by Abiy. The TPLF rejected the merger proposal first in November 2019 at the EPRDF coalition executive council meeting and repeated it at the central committee level because it did not want to lose its brand name, identity, ideological orientation, and autonomy (VOA, 2019). That was the last time the TPLF attended the EPRDF meeting in the capital, Addis Ababa. This led to the divorce between the Abiy-led EPRDF coalition and TPLF, which prepared the background for the war between the TPLF-led Tigray Government and PP-led Federal Government and his partners that began on 4 November 2020. As a result, Tigrayan's representation in the federal government was radically altered and TPLF's major federal leaders retreated to the Tigray region. The disconnection between the TPLF and the EPRDF/PP was in effect a disconnection between Tigray and Ethiopia because there is no intergovernmental institution in Ethiopia to bridge and facilitate cooperation between federal and state governments in the event of disagreements among parties.

In the process of the merger of parties, Prime Minister Abiy also paid emphasis on the ideological reconfiguration of former party institutions. Except the TPLF, all coalition member and affiliate parties of the EPRDF declared their dissolutions one after the other, and then their structures, leaders, members and properties automatically became the structures, leaders, members and properties of the new party. The process was a nationalization of eight regional parties. According to the party's political program, "*medemer*" (an Amharic term roughly translated as summation, synergy, or integration) is the ideological foundation of the Prosperity Party (Prosperity Party Program, 2019). *Medemer* is a personal belief and thoughts of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed that he published in September 2019. It glorifies Ethiopia's past, criticizes Ethiopian federalism for promoting ethnic divisions, and imagines a very centralized Ethiopian state and national identity (Ahmed, 2019). It deemphasized a divided multiethnic identity and reemphasized a united "intermingled nature of Ethiopia": "In addition to moving beyond ethnic identity as the basis for political participation, the new party committed to pursue Abiy's *medemer* political ideology, which emphasized a kind of synergy and unity" (Lyons, 2021, p. 1060). Building on this, the Prosperity Party declared its social basis to be all Ethiopian peoples through Ethiopia-first nationalism, which competes with regional ethnonationalism. Ethiopia-first nationalism was an official party-state ideology during the *Derg* (1974–1991), when the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE) was legalized single party of the country. Thus, the PP, which shares similarities with the WPE in terms of political program, ideology and structure, was created on the graves

of ethno-regional parties. While the EPRDF coalition claimed to represent Ethiopia through ethno-national groups and the PP claims to directly represent all Ethiopian citizens. Goitom Gebreluel observed that “the most controversial reform, however, was Abiy’s move away from the EPRDF’s nationalist narrative” by formulating “an alternative history that de-emphasized ethnic oppression” (Washington Post, 2019).

A sudden shift of policy which led to the creation of a national party through the merger of regional parties sent political shockwaves among ethnonationalists and federalists; and “political leaders who emphasized federalism also condemned the move” (Lyons, 2021, p.1060). This radical and unprecedented move threatened to alter the multiethnic character of the Ethiopian federation. Thus, the structural and ideological tension between the architecture of the new party and the central tenets of multinational federalism was obvious from the outset. In his presentation titled *New Paradigm, New Politics*, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed lectured the central committee of his Prosperity Party, on 20 April, 2022. He explained his new paradigm as follows:

We, the Prosperity Party, are patriots. We are not ethnonationalists. Patriots and ethnonationalists are two different things. Ethnonationalists are separatists, they are pro-autonomy. They glorify themselves by belittling their brothers. If you are an Oromo nationalist, your nationalism is founded on belittling Amhara, Gurage and others. Contrary to this, we are patriots, we love, we prosper and we die for our country, Ethiopia (Ahmed, 2022).

In an attempt to differentiate his “new politics” from the “old politics” of ethnonationalism, the prime minister has made it public that his political-ideological orientation does not fall within the federal model that accommodates ethnonationalism. It shows that his new paradigm contradicts the founding principle of Ethiopian federalism — national self-determination right. As Awol Allo observed, “at first glance, the demise of the EPRDF and the creation of the PP as a pan-Ethiopian party seems like a positive step towards uniting a long-divided country. But on closer inspection, it becomes clear that the architects of the move failed to take into account a range of constitutional, ideological and representational issues” (Allo, 2020). One of the reasons why Ethiopia adopted a multinational federal order was because there were politically salient ethnonational cleavages that have received theoretical and political articulations, particularly since the 1960s (Allo, 2020). The denouncing of ethnonationalism came about while “the central demands of Ethiopia’s ethnic groups for political autonomy and cultural justice remain unresolved” (Allo, 2020). This suggests the ideological roots of the current conflicts in Ethiopia.

The creation of the PP seems to have worsened the problem of party-state fusion in Ethiopia through a vertical union of the party system. The EPRDF was accused of fusing the state and party institutions to centralize power through its democratic centralism

(Fiseha, 2012, Gudina, 2007). Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed repeatedly promised to decouple the party from the state and democratize the letter, but the problem went from bad to worse with the homogenization of party structure which was already pinned to the state structure. Indeed, the party president became the brain and the nerve center to dictate the government. Government bodies, including the judiciary, the army, and the security services, continue to operate as mere instruments or extensions of the PP. In the bureaucracy, just like during the EPRDF period, all civil servants are expected to be members of the PP, without which they would risk losing their jobs (Teshome, 2020).

Structurally, the PP has had an executive and central committee since its formation, but it did not have a general assembly until 12 March, 2022 (Ethiopian Monitor, 2022). Members of its executive and central committees are the top officials of the party and at the same time hold key governmental positions both at the regional and federal levels. The PP has a president and two vice presidents. The president of the party (the Prime Minister) has the ultimate power over all structures and members of the party at all levels. The party has one head-office and “regional chapters” in all regional states of the country, except in Tigray. The Secretariat of the PP head office, in consultation with its president, assigns the secretariats of regional chapters including the federally administered cities of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa. “Accountable to the party’s head office, regional chapters...shall be established” (Article 25), and “the head-office of the party is accountable to the president of the party” who is the prime minister of Ethiopia (Prosperity Party Bylaw, 2019, Article 24). This makes the Prosperity Party a unitary and extremely centralized entity both constitutively and practically than its predecessor. This party machinery is the key mechanism that the party president uses to control regional governments, distribute rent or punish any member anywhere with no checks. The chairperson of the EPRDF coalition did not command such absolute power over the regional parties, and the influence of the TPLF over the regional states and parties was from behind the scenes (Teshome, 2020). It was difficult for the historically dominant TPLF to accept another dominant group.

Moreover, the regional state autonomy was endangered with the control the PP exercises over regional governments by assigning a “coordinating committee” for each regional state. Out of the five members of the coordinating committee, the one assigned as its chairperson would automatically assume the position of the regional state governor. The main responsibility of this committee is to coordinate regional state political, administrative, security, economic, organizational, and party mobilization functions based on the directions by the PP head office. The other members of the committee hold the vice governor position in the regional government, and the party’s regional branch office secretariat, vice secretariat (political affairs), and organizational affairs. The president of the PP, in consultation with the executive committee, assigns the co-

ordinating committee of regional states (Prosperity Party Bylaw, 2019). The party's executive committee is chaired by the president of the party to whom "the executive committee may delegate part of its duties and responsibilities" (Prosperity Party Bylaw, 2019). Therefore, the regional coordinating committee, in other words, the regional state government's senior leaders, are assigned by the president of the party through the party channel. In such a party-state fused situation, the regional state government is effectively controlled by the prime minister than by the regional legislature. The prime minister assigns, removes or replaces any regional state official through the party channel contrary to the constitutional autonomy of regional states. This undoing of regional self-rule — defederalization and thereby causing a constitutional crisis is what Murshed (2002) called "a weakening of social contract" (p. 390).

In general, the disagreements on the terms of the merger in the context of state-party fusion, the birth of the Prosperity Party (which excluded the TPLF), the *medemer* political ideology, the swift political centralization move endangering the federal system, and TPLF's war preparations coupled with immediate incidents such as the postponement of the 2020 national election by the federal government and TPLF's defiantly holding its regional election in September 2020 were the key factors for the outbreak of the devastating civil war in northern Ethiopia (Allo, 2020). The Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) launched its insurgency against Abiy's government in early 2019 even before the Tigray conflict. According to Human Rights Watch (2022):

Western Oromia has been the site of a three-year-long conflict between federal and regional government forces and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), an armed group that broke from the political opposition party, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), in 2019. A federal command post in western Oromia coordinates federal and regional security forces in the area, including Ethiopian Defense Forces, Oromia special police, Oromia regular police forces, and administrative militia forces.

Therefore, Ethiopia's conflicts that began in the Oromia region escalated to a conventional war in the Tigray region, where the neighboring Eritrean forces intervened in the internal affairs of Ethiopia on the side of Abiy's government forces. As an immediate cause, the government accused the TPLF of attacking its northern defense command and launched an all-out war in Tigray in what it called "law enforcement operations" on 4 November 2020. The reality on the ground was that both sides were preparing for the inevitable war. With the help of Eritrean soldiers from the northern direction, in December 2020, Abiy-led military forces were able to control Tigray regional capital, Mekelle establishing a transitional regional government in Tigray. Subsequently, in May 2021, Ethiopia's Parliament proscribed TPLF and OLA as terrorist organizations. Moreover, the Amhara militia joined the war on the side of the federal forces and annexed the southwestern part of Tigray including Welkait-Tsegede and Humera

territories. However, in June 2021, the TPLF forces decisively defeated the federal forces in major parts of Tigray including its capital city except western and southwestern part of Tigray. In August, the Tigray Defense Force (TDF) announced its alliances with the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and began southward marches to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia (Aljazeera, 2021). However, with the help of extensive strikes by drones bought from Turkey, UAE, Iran, and China, the Ethiopian government was able to push back Tigrayan forces within the boundaries of Tigray (Mwai, 2022). After a year of a ceasefire, another phase of the conflict broke out in August 2022 and a ceasefire agreement, which is being criticized for not including Amhara regional militia and Eritrean forces, was signed in South Africa on November 2, 2022. On the other hand, the conflict between the government and OLA forces in Oromia intensified since April 2022 (Gebissa, 2022).

In nutshell, the political processes and effects of the formation of the PP, which could not strike balance between regionalism and centralism, exacerbated by the security dilemma posed by the considerable fears and suspicion of the PP-led Federal Government regarding the TPLF's military trainings and preparations triggered the conflicts in northern Ethiopia.

Conclusion

Federalism was introduced in Ethiopia as a means of managing ethno-regional diversity. The 1995 constitution of Ethiopia provided ethnonational groups with the right to self-determination, which became the core principle of Ethiopian federalism. On this principle, the original nine semi-autonomous regional states were established and two more regional states were later admitted to the federation. However, the party structure of the EPRDF coalition members and affiliates was fused to the federal and regional state structure that subordinated the state to the party for over a quarter-century (1991–2018). Despite this fusion, the very existence of regional parties and the EPRDF's coalition structure being less flat at federal and state levels had offered semi-autonomous status to each regional state. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who came to power in 2018 and won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for initiating political reforms in Ethiopia and ending the conflictual relationship with neighboring Eritrea, abandoned the political programs of the EPRDF coalition members and affiliate parties except that of the TPLF and replaced them with his *medemer* political program of the PP. The emergence of the outfit PP and the demise of ethno-regional parties resulted in the shift of emphasis from the accommodation of ethnonational diversity to the restoration of an extremely centralized Ethiopian state contrary to constitutional principles. Using the merged party structure, which is fused to the state, the PP's President is able to control members including governors of regional states. Therefore, the subordination of federal institution to the party institution went from bad to worse.

The party merger process and the attendant crisis of regional autonomy stand out to be the major cause of the conflicts in Tigray and Oromia. As William Riker sharply observes, the extent of centralization of power in a federation is greatly determined by the extent of centralization of the party system which proved to be the case in Ethiopia. Following the creation of the PP, as part of the centralization process, most opposition parties and independent media were systematically weakened; opposition leaders and members were arrested, and their offices were closed. The conflicts in Ethiopia can be explained in terms of the attempt to establish greater central control and resistance by regional forces vying for greater autonomy and self-government.

Ethiopia is a multinational federation in crisis. Any attempt to restore peace requires a feasible equilibrium and moderation between the centripetal and centrifugal forces. It needs democratic multinational federalism in which the party is separated from the state. The current *de facto* one-party state should give way to a multi-party democratic federation. Ethnonational autonomy should not be conceived as disintegration. In such a polarized situation, aligning one side and trying to impose a centralized state on regional forces that are fighting for more autonomy would further worsen the problem. Peace negotiations should be inclusive and practical, and redirect the country on the path of stability, democracy, development, and federalism.

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