

Don't Blame Amharas for Ethiopia's War

Peace efforts must address the group's legitimate fears rather than casting them as the main obstacle to reconciliation.

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After months of devastation and suffering under the weight of 15 months of war, Ethiopia may be witnessing a rare chance for peace and inclusive dialogue as the government releases prominent prisoners, notably Bekele Gerba and Jawar Mohammed of the Oromo Federalist Congress, Eskinder Nega of the Balderas for True Democracy, and veteran Tigrayan leaders, notably Sebhat Nega and Abay Woldu.

Last month, in recognition of the opportunity, the outgoing U.S. special envoy for the Horn of Africa visited the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, and U.S. President Joe Biden spoke with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. The African Union special envoy also visited Mekele, the Tigrayan capital, on Jan. 11 and met with leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) there. The new U.S. envoy and the assistant secretary of state for Africa have since visited Ethiopia too.

In apparent anticipation of an agreement on the cessation of hostilities, both sides are seeking to gain leverage, with federal forces conducting aerial attacks to weaken rebel capabilities—which have reportedly caused significant collateral damage—and TPLF fighters reportedly regrouping and trying to control some areas in the neighboring Afar and Amhara regions.

One of the biggest concerns is that the federal government's gesture toward peace may fracture the ruling Prosperity Party, which is centered on an alliance between Amharas and Oromos, Ethiopia's two largest groups constituting around two-thirds of the country's population. This stems from outrage against the government and Abiy among some Amharas and unwarranted accusations by Tigrayan and Oromo ethnonationalists and some international analysts and policymakers that Amharas, the second-largest group in the country, may be trying to stand in the way of peace.

While there is no doubt that atrocities have been committed by all sides in the recent conflict, the narrative that Amharas are the main constituency for war and spoilers of peace has often been an underlying assumption in domestic and international analysis, depicting them as seeking political dominance of a centralized unitary state in which their language, Amharic, is already the lingua franca. This approach misses some fundamental historical context.

Amharas were victims of oppression alongside most other groups in Ethiopia for decades under the TPLF-led Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime. Crucially, they were singled out for a government-orchestrated campaign of blame, shame, dehumanization, and consequently cycles of violence in regions where they are a minority.

The fact that Amharas live dispersed across the country has made them the most vulnerable target of hate crime and systematic marginalization, despite being just as poor as the rest of the country.

Accordingly, many Amharas feel that, while the current moves toward peace could avert wider war, they have been asked to disproportionately shoulder the risks in case the peace process fails.

The TPLF's recent military adventures into the Amhara region have caused thousands of deaths, destruction of property worth billions of dollars, displacement of up to 2 million Amharas, and reports of millions of Amharas depending on daily food handouts.

Quite simply, Amharas understand that things can go either way, and while the benefits of peace would accrue to the entire country, the failure of peacemaking efforts would unduly burden the Amhara region and ethnic Amharas. Indeed, if the TPLF uses a lull in conflict to reorganize and reinvade Amhara (and Afar), and if intra-Oromo disputes lead to renewed violence against Amharas and other minorities in Oromia, it is Amharas who will suffer.

Despite these real concerns, media coverage at home and abroad appears to have fallen for the old myth of Amhara bogeymen. This tendency to see contestations through the sole framework of linguistic identity in Ethiopia not only is intellectually lazy and wrong but also disregards Amhara suffering and genuine fears. It is also unjust to a group that suffered through decades of discriminatory official policy under the TPLF-dominated regime.

While the linguistic-based federal arrangement that the TPLF-led EPRDF implemented gave a modicum of autonomy to linguistic groups, power remained centralized under the TPLF.

Crucially, the country witnessed mass arrests and cycles of killings and disappearances of Oromos on the pretext of reining in the armed the Oromo Liberation Front, and against Amharas, particularly after the contested 2005 elections; systematic starvation, killings, and displacement against Somalis; massacres against the Anuak and other minorities in western Ethiopia; suppression of and violence against Sidama and other groups with aspirations for their own state; displacement of the Indigenous minorities in the Omo Valley for large-scale agriculture; an economic stranglehold on Afar; a brutal two-year war against Eritrea; and oppression against the Tigrayan opposition.

Sensing the importance of an alternative source of legitimacy—beyond a brutal totalitarian regime—the TPLF's then-Prime Minister Meles Zenawi launched a much needed and long overdue drive to modernize Ethiopia's infrastructure and catapult the economy on the back of setbacks after contested elections in 2005. The developmental state drive delivered economic miracles and successfully pulled millions of Ethiopians out of poverty.

Nevertheless, the unfair distribution of the economic windfalls reinforced the political and security dominance of Tigrayan leaders. The economic progress counterintuitively worsened intergroup tensions, and animosity grew against the TPLF and Tigrayan beneficiaries of the system, with the myth of special treatment of Tigray taking hold—when it was in fact the

top military, security, and political officials (not ordinary Tigrayans) who were amassing odious wealth.

Amharas were particularly seen as a threat to the TPLF's dominance—part of historical contestations keen observers such as the late sociologist Donald N. Levine have likened to rivalry between twins arising from the close historical and social interlinkage between Amharas and Tigrayans. Indeed, Amhara and Tigray are viewed as virtually the same Abyssinian core of the Ethiopian state, with the country's earlier emperors coming mainly from the two regions.

The TPLF pursued a public policy of blame and shame—boldly inscribed in its original manifesto of 1976 (1968 according to the Ethiopian calendar)—portraying Amharas as the oppressive enemy that dominated, and even colonized, the rest of the country. This narrative simplified a complex history in which Ethiopia's past leaders who gave the country its current shape, notably Emperor Menelik II and later on Emperor Haile Selassie, are labelled as Amhara kings by ethnonationalists.

This is despite the mixed heritages of many of the leaders—and despite them not identifying as Amhara, in fact describing themselves as provincial leaders. The Amhara categorization has roots in the fact that Amharic has been the lingua franca of the country and that some of Ethiopia's modern leaders hailed from provinces that overlap with what is now the Amhara region.

The current generation of Amharas—almost all of whom were born long after the fall of imperial Ethiopia in 1974 and have little actual experience and memory of it—are seen as the exclusive heirs of the violence, oppression, and excesses of past imperial regimes, despite themselves having been on the receiving end of oppression.

It is true that, alongside urbanites across all groups, a significant part of the so-called centralist or Ethiopianist camp constitutes Amharic speakers. There are also some Amhara actors who uncritically dismiss the particular historical grievances of groups in the south and east of the country, and inconsiderately romanticize the memory and leaders of Ethiopia's past regimes.

Fortunately, these are a tiny minority in Amhara society. And, while there may be competing ideas in terms of the institutional organization of the Ethiopian state, Amharas—whether in the current ruling party or the opposition—recognize that Ethiopia's future is decidedly multinational and federal.

In fact, while challenges remain, the Amhara region is the only one in Ethiopia where minority groups have been granted high levels of political, cultural, and economic autonomy—an arrangement that minorities in other regions with dominant majorities do not enjoy. Despite this concrete Amhara endorsement of multinationalism, Amharas continue to be branded with a “unitarist” label, often associated with assimilation and cultural domination.

The policy of shaming and blaming institutionalized by the TPLF and peddled by other ethnonationalist forces puts forth a simplified story of intergroup oppression and continues to put millions of Amharas across the country at risk. The violence continues unabated, with massacres and displacement occurring with impunity and reportedly with complicity of local officials, particularly in the hands of the Oromo Liberation Army in western Oromia, as well as in the Benishangul-Gumuz region.

Moreover, in the late 1980s, the TPLF appropriated contested land (called Western Tigray by Tigrayans and Welkait-Tegede by Amharas) that was historically part of a province that now forms part of Amhara, and it formalized the area as part of Tigray when it ascended to power in 1991.

Despite the contestations and plausibility of the historical Amhara claims over the lands, the TPLF considered Tigrayan access to the border with Sudan strategically nonnegotiable in view of its historical flirtation with secession, its internal rivalry with Amhara state, and its international rivalry with Eritrea. It therefore silenced Amhara leaders in the ruling EPRDF coalition and harassed, arrested, murdered, or terrorized any Amhara who dared to seek respect for their identity and culture, let alone claim the lands.

The Tigrayan control of the lands meant that more people from more populated parts of Tigray were settled or encouraged to settle in these sparsely populated areas, while the Tigrayan control imposed a psychological barrier to Amhara settlement in the areas, which was a historical phenomenon. In fact, the TPLF harassed the Amharas already in the contested areas, required them to learn only in Tigrinya—the language spoken in Tigray and Eritrea—despite a nationwide policy of mother-tongue schooling, and killed and forced many locals into exile. The result is that the demographics of the contested areas were systematically altered.

Three decades later, the contested lands fueled the Amhara popular uprisings that combined with the persistent Oromo protests that ultimately led to a reshuffle within the EPRDF and brought Abiy to power in April 2018.



When the war in northern Ethiopia erupted in November 2020 following the brutal TPLF attack on the Northern Command of the Ethiopian army, federal and allied forces prioritized control of the contested lands as critical to breaking the TPLF's potential supply lines from Sudan. Subsequently, Amharas, in coordination with the federal government, took control of the areas, allowing the federal army to pursue TPLF fighters into central Tigray and control the Tigrayan capital toward the end of that month.

While the areas have not been formally declared part of Amhara, the region has now established governing structures. The Amhara takeover and reports of killings, sexual violence, and other serious human rights violations by Amhara militias and allied forces

against Tigrayans in these areas have triggered an exodus of a significant number of Tigrayans out of the contested lands. The demographics have again been altered.

Finding a sustainable solution to the contestations over the areas and resettling the hundreds of thousands of displaced Amharas and Tigrayans would require a serious political process among the residents of the area, as well as the respective Amhara and Tigray regional leadership.

Considering this complex historical, political, and social context, Amhara anger about the risky gamble toward peace must be seen through the lens of the real and perceived physical and psychological scars Amharas continue to endure. Simply focusing on appearances, blaming them, and seeing their anger as a hurdle to peace increase the genuine sense of Amhara victimization.

Instead, recognizing their genuine fears, giving assurances that the federal and Amhara governments will do everything to prevent a second invasion of Amhara by TPLF forces, offering transparency in pursuing their peace objectives, consulting with Amhara opposition groups, and making a clear effort to carry out reconstruction of the region would go a long way to assuaging Amhara concerns and making them a key constituency in the peace process.

Blaming Amharas for the country's woes was largely confined to Ethiopia during the TPLF's three-decade rule. Since the war erupted, the smear campaign against Amharas has effectively been internationalized. Western governments, international media, and even longtime foreign observers of Ethiopian politics would be well advised to reassess their policies and rhetoric. Without a nuanced understanding of the historical context, international good intentions may simply worsen intergroup relations and harden positions.

Considering the history, size, and significance of the Amhara population, any approach that does not make them key partners in the search for solutions and rather seeks to cast them as the main obstacle to peace will almost certainly fail.

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