



By Hibist Kassa



Since 4 November last year Ethiopia has been caught in a devastating civil war with the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) which has been marked by escalating genocidal attacks on ethnic minorities in Ethiopia. The scale of misinformation and disinformation on the war, brazen lack of context, shameless and downright dangerous attempts to not only impose false narratives, but also impose a narrow human rights agenda skewed to ignore abuses by Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) and its allies is deeply troubling and pervasive.

At the moment, a dangerously simplistic and false narrative labelling the federal government as having an agenda for centralisation, as opposed to the TPLF which is pushing for federalism, is being spread in mainstream media outlets and through scholarly networks. This is drawing on a further over-simplification of the history of empire building and contestation, and the nature of cultural and language identities and their relationship to class stratification.

This year marked the 125th anniversary of the Battle of Adwa in 1896, a historic defeat of a European imperialist power by Africans, with the unification of divided peoples. Lords, serfs and slaves, women and men, mobilised an army of about 100,000 to defeat Italian troops in a matter of hours. The aftermath of the victory also laid the basis for further empire consolidation and forging of the modern state, a contested historical process that has been foregrounded in the current conflict. A nuanced and historically grounded approach is needed to analyse the ways the centre-periphery tensions shaped autonomy in Tigray, recognise the wide spectrum of debates within the TPLF and how elites have deployed this in the current conflict (I examine this in some detail in the [Agrarian South Bulletin here](#)).

While the need to get the analysis right on the crisis is important to inform interventions, we also need to understand the nature of the accumulation strategies of elites, the contradictions in these strategies and where this leaves the working class and the advancement of a progressive alternative from below.

What are the competing narratives?

At the moment, mediation is being proposed as was recently advocated in a statement by [African intellectuals](#), that eerily followed the line of the United States and TPLF on the crisis. A robust response by the [Global Ethiopian Scholars Initiative](#) and [Jon Abbink](#) have highlighted the problematic nature of the statement, and the need for an understanding of what is really at stake in the volatile Horn of Africa region, where a realignment of geopolitical relations between Eritrea-Ethiopia-Somalia, with South Sudanese solidarity, is potentially decentring US domination in the region, and sealing the decline of TPLF. Understanding the tricky and complicated context of the changes underway, demands also for careful attention to what is left out of the dominant narrative of the crisis.

For instance, it was shocking to hear pro-TPLF commentator, Martin Plaut, and now visiting researcher at Kings College Department of War Studies, declared boldly on 5 February this year, that even though a massacre in Mai-Kadra in Western Tigray was terrible, [‘I don’t care who carried them out’](#) (see 30:00-31:21). This was a genocide of about 1000 men, the elderly and children who were identified as ethnic Amhara by TPLF youth groups. As the men were being slaughtered, women overheard them say they would come for them next. Zelalem Tessema, Co-Chair Ethiopian Association in the UK, who was on the same panel as Plaut said that this was the ‘Srebrenica massacre’ of Ethiopia. Accountability which was so important for Plaut when examining Amhara militias, Ethiopian federal troops and Eritrea’s involvement, was suspended in the case where TPLF militia and its youth members, who later escaped to join refugees on the Sudanese border. The TPLF has continued to commit atrocities in its vicious expansion into Afar and Amhara regions displacing up to 4 million people.

Meanwhile, a coherent campaign sympathetic to TPLF by the US, EU and UN, including the IMF and World Bank, have focused on aspects of the Tigray crisis pressuring the Ethiopian Federal government to revert to mediations with the TPLF. Even when a unilateral ceasefire was declared by the government, the TPLF has continued to encroach upon other provinces in Amhara and Afar provinces, temporarily occupying Lalibela, and slaughtering civilians, destroying historic Churches in Gondar, there was still no universal condemnation of the TPLF except for the instance where the [USAID Director in Ethiopia cited widespread TPLF looting of aid goods](#).

There has also been complete disinterest in the killings of ethnic minorities elsewhere which have been linked to the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), openly allied to TPLF. In principle, violations by any state and non-state actor in Tigray and other parts of Ethiopia should be investigated, victims provided care and culprits held to account. But the geopolitical power struggle that is ongoing has no interest in this kind of accountability agenda. Instead, human rights violations, whether they be genocide, widespread rape, recruitment of children as combatants and violations against Eritrean refugees, have been ignored when TPLF forces have been identified culprits. Talk of accountability and human rights is just a game in a bigger geopolitical battlefield.

Getting the facts right is key!

To make sense of what is an intensely complex crisis, it is important to focus on the following key facts:

1. On 4 November, after the Federal Government of Ethiopia had transferred US\$281 million to the Tigray provincial government, a 'lightning strike' so described by TPLFs' spokesperson, was unleashed on federal troops who were undertaking joint operations with the Tigray provincial forces. Unarmed soldiers and generals were slaughtered in their pyjamas and their bodies left to rot, while other troops were taken as prisoners. Soldiers with specialised training were later summarily executed, ran over with trucks, and women soldiers were raped. When the news of this shocking attack trickled in, it horrified the general public and ended all attempts to mediate tensions between the Federal government and the TPLF.
2. Prior to the above attack, tensions had been building between the Federal government based in Addis Ababa and the TPLF. The loss of TPLFs almost three-decade dominance of power in the federal government had aggrieved the committee members. To recall, TPLF itself was a political party, with its own hierarchies and membership drawing from various constituencies within Tigray province.
3. Normalisation of relations with Eritrea was an extremely significant change introduced by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018. This significant change in foreign policy of Ethiopia was made possible under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition with new leadership under Abiy Ahmed as a member of Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO). It was a decisive break from TPLF foreign policy which had treated the Eritrean government as a lethal enemy. The latter which has acted as a bulwark against the expansion of the United States' AFRICOM in the Horn of Africa, and retained some semblance of sovereignty over its national policy space. These former allies who waged war against the Derg (the military regime that ruled Ethiopia and Eritrea from 1974 to 1987), soon turned into foes over the TPLFs ethnonationalist agenda entrenched in the Ethiopian federalist system, redrawing provinces and the entire governance system on the basis of ethnicity. Each province formed standing armies of their own and entrenched the right to secede in the constitution.
4. Tigray province is in the northern most part of Ethiopia and shares a border with Eritrea, over which war was waged from 1998-2000, when Abiy was then on the frontline as a soldier. A peace treaty was only signed in 2018 once the OPDO under Abiy was in power after a wave of popular protests against TPLF. According to Iqbal Jhazbay (former South Africa ambassador to Eritrea) since the Peace Treaty was signed, this provided Eritrea, '[a previously isolated regime which has stubbornly resisted being turned into a pawn by foreign powers](#)' a bridge with which to expand its foreign policy influence in the volatile Horn of Africa. Asmara has resisted a regime change agenda, a challenge now facing Ethiopia, under the new Progress Party (PP) under Abiy, which has now had to resist pressure from foreign powers to dictate its relations with Eritrea.
5. The successful completion of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has been resisted not only by Egypt and Sudan, but also with backing from the US and Israel. Although GERD was conceptualised and initiated by former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, its successful implementation did not have full backing of his heirs in the TPLF. The Metal and Engineering Corporation, a mega-parastatal, which was charged with manufacturing parts of GERD, manufactured them below expected standards. This delayed the project and has been suspected as an act of subversion instead of incompetence on the part of the parastatal. The combination of Egypt and Sudan, and the realignment of interests with internal actors, like the TPLF (and now OLF), has created another deadly alliance that threatens stability in the Horn of Africa.
6. Ethiopia is on the brink of national self-sufficiency in wheat production within two years. The Abiy government has also been setting up bread factories to ensure affordability for the urban poor and working people (especially in a time when food prices continue to skyrocket). In addition to the GERD and its potential to provide renewable energy resource to the Horn of Africa and beyond, these developments should be seen as efforts to strengthen productive capacity in the region and hopefully also address energy poverty that falls on the back of

women. It is also a case that the infrastructure investments and Industrial Parks especially in the garments industry, have had keen interest from global brands, but also significantly drawn upon domestic resource mobilisation. All these are signs that concrete gains are being made in the country.

7. Nonetheless, in spite of the Ethiopian governments [commitment to liberalisation](#), this has not enamoured the regime to donors and the Bretton Wood Institutions. Sanctions have been imposed on government officials to travel to the US. Conditionalities for loans are being attached to ensure mediation with TPLF. The interest of the IMF, primarily influenced by the US, in this conflict is noteworthy.
8. Bretton Woods Institutions, especially the IMF, have been attaching conditionalities to assistance obliging the government to make concessions to the TPLF. This hard-line towards the PP government is [puzzling](#) given that it has declared the country open for business, liberalising one of Africa's last heavily regulated economies and allowing competition with State-Owned Enterprises, electricity and the telecommunications. The Abiy government has also been a very consistent partner in the War on Terror, especially as it relates to operations against Al-Shabab in Somalia.
9. This indicates that there are higher stakes in Ethiopia's forging of alliances with Eritrea and Somalia and the broader goal to stabilise the Horn of Africa in a manner that has not centred Washington and its 'War on Terror'. Lawrence Freeman, on a panel on Ethiopia Television, "Addis Dialogue", argues that a global [political oligarchic faction](#) that maintains neo-colonial control of African countries in particular, sees any actor operating outside US control as threatening their dominance and needing to be dealt with as a threat. Deacon Yoseph Tafari, Chairman of the Ethiopian American Civic Council, concurs and emphasises that the [US had initially misread the Abiy government](#) in the beginning of its tenure, and had to confront the reality of its more autonomous approach to foreign policy and its persistence with state led developmental initiatives such as the GERD. It is this aspect that has informed a regime change agenda.
10. The TPLF which was the dominant force in the previous coalition government had been able to control the security and governance arms of the state and considerable investments in SOEs. It is an open secret that the TPLF had amassed offshore accounts of US\$30 billion. At its height, foreign aid reached US\$3.5 billion a year. Two to three billion dollars were lost annually through under and over invoicing of imports. Parastatals had become effective vehicles for accumulation of wealth by the top tier of the regime, with varied forms of patrimonial relations with less powerful actors within the party machinery. Proximity to power had its benefits, but none compared with the accumulation of wealth and deepening inequality that was apparent over the last three decades.

Q & A between Munyaradzi Gwisai and Hibist Kassa which reflects on the state of the working class in Ethiopia today.

MG: *The emergent Ethiopian working class was a key player in the 1974 revolution that eventually ousted Emperor Haile Selassie. The wave of strikes helped inspire the popular protests of students, peasants and the junior soldiers. The later eventually wrested power led by the [Marixst Leninist] Derg, provoking a nearly two-decade period of Civil War and instability.*

What happened to the Ethiopian working class in this period, in the struggles that ensued... Was class militancy and organisation crushed by repression and war?

HK: As the parastatal, Metal and Engineering Corporation (MetEC) case highlights, trade unions have struggled, and continued to struggle to organise in Ethiopia. IndustriALL Federation has been making important interventions especially in industrial parks. Important analytical work has been done on the super exploitation of women workers has drawn attention to how the accumulation

strategy of the state that relies on cheap wage labour and the creation of an enabling environment for foreign direct investment, demands the repression of organised labour.

In response to high turnover of the workforce and a wave of wildcat strikes, there have been some moderate reforms to create a means for workers to raise concerns through the Labour Department inspectors and the provision of district offices. In spite of this, trade unions still need to be able to organise workers on the shopfloor. Resistance to this persists.

Moreover, the tension between the focus on large scale foreign direct investments as a means of enabling industrialisation places this strategy in tension with the dynamic and diversified economic activities by smallholder producers in agriculture, cottage industries and the retail sector. Ethiopia has a history of cooperative associations traced to the Derg regime, but these were demobilised by the TPLF dominated EPRDF regime.

MG: *Ethiopia is amongst the top five performing economies in Africa in the last decade with annual growth rates of over 10%. A new, younger and expanded working class must therefore have emerged. If the working class retreated in this period leaving the petite bourgeoisie in charge, was there not a significant growth and re-emergence of the working class in the period after 1995? Quantitatively and qualitatively especially after 2000?*

What is the degree of organisation, class consciousness, and militancy of this new expanded class? How does it compare to the leading role played by other working classes in the region recently, in Sudan, Egypt, Kenya for example and does it provide a counter to the petite bourgeoisie and their ethnicity - region based politics and mobilization?

HK: A new, younger and expanded working class has emerged, and its face is that of women migrants. The new subjects arising out of the industrialisation process is that of women workers, who are being superexploited as part of the country's development strategy. Rural-urban migration, and now with covid-19, urban-rural migration, has become significant.

I think if we are to consider the primarily informal character of the labouring classes or working people (as Issa Shivji says) we need to use different approaches to analyse the forms of resistance to capital and the state, and the ways in which people are building autonomy from below through their livelihoods and even survival strategies. This expanded approach to resistance and understanding of class helps us better draw the connections between the urban poor and dispossessed masses, and rural communities who in carrying the burden of social reproduction even as a gendered cheap wage labour strategy is imposed from above become a basis for drawing organic linkages with 'wage workers' in the formal sector. I think this is an opportunity to think in an interlinked manner and develop a more holistic understanding of what organising interventions can be made by trade unions working in alliance with women's groups, farmers associations, artisanal miners and casual workers.

Elite wealth accumulation and the gendered working class

It is crucial to also reflect on the nature of corruption facilitated via illicit financial flows and how this has fed into the wealth accumulation strategies of elites in the TPLF dominated ethnic coalition government prior to its removal in 2018. A prime example of this is the mega parastatal, Metal and Engineering Corporation (MetEC).

With about seventy SOEs, seven military hardware manufacturing entities, about 12,500 employees, MetEC is a significant force in the Ethiopian economy. Under the TPLF, it successfully disbanded trade union organising on the shopfloor. In 2014, labour unions confronted the then CEO Knife

Dangew and they were dismissed for being focused on rights bargaining and of being wedded to the legacy of the previous 'Marxist Leninist' military dictatorship. Instead, the trade union federation was expected to focus on the objective of attaining middle income status. In 2018, a parliamentary review revealed extensive graft, with overpricing of domestic and international procurement of up to US\$2 billion, in some cases 400% higher than market prices. He was arrested in November 2018, and charged over the procurement of two shipping vessels, two hotels and a plastics factory.

The description below by Tim Hall of an industrial park, in Hawassa, now in the newly established Sidama province, [gives us a glimpse of the pre-Covid situation](#):

Over 17,000 young women from predominately rural areas and a variety of ethnicities have, from 2017, migrated to work at the Hawassa Industrial Park (HIP), employing around 120,000 mainly women workers at potential full capacity. They face long shifts, low salaries given living costs between 800 to 2000 BIRR a month (US\$27-68) and new challenges in an unfamiliar urban context, which are exacerbated by their status and dislocation from familial networks.

The brief description Hall offers above is that of women who form self-help groups on the basis of ethnicity and religion.

While there is a case for understanding ethnicity (or kinship as Archie Mafeje argues) in terms of how it can be an organising element in the labour process, the rigid and impervious colonial conceptions of ethnicity institutionalised by the TPLF cannot be underestimated. As relevant as this is to understand the reproduction of inequalities, in the Ethiopia case, it is also important to weigh how these have been entrenched as an organising principle of society.

The ability to render some groups as vulnerable as in the case of the non-Sidamo women migrant workers in Hawassa or the migrant farmworkers massacred in Mai-Kadra also needs to be treated with caution. TPLF as a dominant force in the EPRDF coalition had almost three decades with an effective machinery to entrench this in the everyday forms of social, political and economic spheres of society, from ethnic development banks to redrawing provincial borders as in Raya to subsume areas where Amhara ethnic minorities can be disenfranchised.

Beyond this, there is also a dangerous oversimplification of vast periods of history and the association of repressed classes with specific language and cultural groups has fed a dangerous and divisive propaganda. This labels certain language groups as exploiters and oppressors and others victims of dispossession and oppression without a grounded understanding of complex and fluid categories, alongside complex economic and historical processes. These claims have also justified horrific violence by the OLF against the Amharic speaking people such as the disembowelment of pregnant women, the slicing off of the breasts of women and rape.

Progressive scholars, the working class and Ethiopia

Progressive scholars have to build bridges to engage with the intelligentsia in Ethiopia who have persevered through military dictatorship under the Derg in the 1970s and 1980s, and through 27 years of TPLF-dominated rule. Ethiopian scholars have been speaking out, as in [this speech in 1994 by Mammo Muhcie](#) in London that is an eerily precise analysis of TPLF as it is today.

In the midst of this conflict, Ethiopian scholars have been repeatedly trying to get their voices heard by the Ethiopian government and the international community. The statement widely shared by African intellectuals (including on roape.net) that presumed Ethiopian scholars cannot speak for themselves therefore came across as deeply condescending. If there is genuine interest in supporting Ethiopian scholars to get their perspectives and analysis on the crisis, and build bridges

for meaningful interventions, the first step has to be through a serious and deliberate process of engagement.

There is also a need to pay attention to the accumulation strategies of elites and the manner they fit (or do not fit) within imperialism. Within this, an expanded understanding of a gendered working class is needed, recognising the strategically important role of women's labour as a source of cheap wage labour. In addition, it is still important to not lose sight of how a liberal government like the PP, in pursuing its own ambitions to assert sovereignty over foreign policy and natural resources, has fallen from grace and is facing the age-old colonial/imperialist strategy of 'divide and rule' tactics both at the national level and regional levels through the TPLF, OLF and external actors such as Sudan and Egypt.

This also gives us insight into the accumulation strategy of the EPRDF, which still operates under a constitution and governance system setup by the TPLF dominated government. This draws out a broader lesson to the challenges arising out of an ambitious developmentalist elite in Africa. Although, the TPLF has been subjected to accountability processes after their removal from control of the federal government, there is still a broader lesson here for development in Africa, and this demands further interrogation.

Some on the left have admired the capacity of the ruling class in Ethiopia to pursue developmentalist ambitions with industrial parks as a strategy, for instance. But the limits of this strategy also need to be highlighted, as this also has relied on cheap wage labour and migrant women workers who have been rigidly constrained from organising in trade unions. Wildcat strikes and high turnover of labour has meant this is not a stable accumulation strategy, even on their own terms. It begs a broader question, what is the nature of a viable developmental strategy?

In addition, the pressures arising out of a gendered understanding of working class dynamics lays a basis to consider what developmental alternatives can be fought for. Such an alternative also demands a rupture from the existing imperialist architecture of power to assert control over resources which destabilises the global financial and geopolitical arrangements that the emerging Eritrea-Ethiopia-Somalia relations pose. Failure to recognise this is akin to enabling the catastrophic outcome of interventions in Libya, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, the reason why there has been a robust and vociferous rejection of any possible intervention by the likes of Global Ethiopian Scholars Initiative and Jon Abbink.

Progressives have a responsibility to centre an understanding of imperialism and the national question, as Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros pull together in [Reclaiming the Nation](#), to navigate this terrain and build bridges with the radical intelligentsia and popular formations in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa who want to construct a transformative agenda themselves. A first step has to be rejecting the ethnonationalist, genocidal agenda of TPLF, OLF and their allies.

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