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## Wither Ethiopia? Ethnicity and Nation (Un)Building: An Analysis Focusing on the Period 1991 to 2022

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### Abstract

Ethiopia has become yet another African country that is on the precipice of ruin due to ethnic conflict and failure to create a united or stable nation out of its ethnically diverse population. The fighting between the soldiers of the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) operatives that is largely confined in the Tigray and some parts of the Amhara regions threatens to unravel the country and the chance that was ever there of the hugely diverse country becoming a united nation. The exploitation of ethnic diversity and the socioeconomic challenges that confront Ethiopia by some of the political elites in the country have brought it near collapse. Using a qualitative, case study approach, this article examines the factors that have made it difficult for Ethiopia to form a stable and united nation, and also contributed to the ongoing conflict in the country. Ethiopia is the case study and data sources encompassed scholarly peer reviewed articles and books and media reports on the Ethiopian situation.

**Keywords:** *Ethiopia, ethnicity, nationalism, nation-state, violence.*

## **Introduction**

Ethiopia is facing a political crisis emanating from demands of self-determination by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) for the people of Tigray. Regarding its nature, the TPLF is a complex entity. It was founded in 1975 as a liberation movement with the goal of fighting and dismantling the authoritarian regime of Mengistu Haile Marriam, and subsequently evolved into a political party that took over power in Ethiopia in 1991 (this point is discussed further in the subsequent parts of the article) (Berhe 2004; Young 1997). Interestingly, the new Ethiopian government under Abiy Ahmed designated the TPLF as a terrorist organisation in 2021, owing to the former's reengagement with the idea of separating Tigray from Ethiopia (Aljazeera 2021) – thus it is difficult to categorise it either as a political party or an insurgency movement. The agitations for secession have subsequently escalated into manifest conflict between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF, significantly destabilising the country. While the TPLF is the only significant threat to the territorial integrity of the country, there is also the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) which is likewise calling for the creation of a distinctively Oromo state. These challenges pose a worrisome threat to nation-building in Ethiopia. The country is multicultural and has extensive ethnic diversity which makes it somewhat difficult to build and engender national unity and a shared national identity based on citizenship. The ethnic mobilisation that the TPLF embarked on not only constitutes a threat to nation-building but also a threat to the very idea of Ethiopia as a country, its demographic composition and geographic demarcation. The article first explores concepts such as ethnicity, nation-building, and ethnocentrism. It subsequently applies these concepts to the Ethiopian situation to understand how ethnic diversity has affected nation-building in the country. The objectives of the article include the collection of data on ethnicity and nation building; establishing the link between these concepts; determining how ethnicity impact on nation building; and applying this understanding to the case of Ethiopia.

## **Ethnicity, ethnocentrism, and nation-building: a conceptual clarification**

### ***Ethnicity***

A good number of countries in the world have experienced the phenomenon of ethnicity as a significant stumbling to nation-building. Ethnicity as a social fact is an enduring condition of human life – humanity is composed of many ethnicities underpinned by differences in language, culture, customs, and tradition. Therefore, it is not surprising that the modern state is such that it oftentimes encompasses a variety of ethnic groups within its territorial borders and seek to form a single nation out of the ethnically disparate groups. However, in many instances, some of the nation-states with ethnic diversity have witnessed inter-ethnic tensions that weakened the idea of nation-building and the creation of a common national identity. Worse, others like Armenia, Germany, Cambodia and Rwanda, have experienced horrifying violence as different ethnicities vie for the control of political-economic power and social dominance. In all the above instances, the genocidal terminations were initiated by those who had political power, in the form of control over the state apparatus. Accordingly, political power is pivotal to the initiation and execution of conflicts of identity.

Ethnic identity plays a crucial role in social differentiation of people, and sometimes has a dark side whereby people's access to "opportunities, rights and privileges are functions of who you are and where you are from" (Odeyemi, 2014:3). The implications of Odeyemi's thesis are that control over resources, i.e., goods, services and positions, is important; and that one's ability to access these resources may be determined by their ethnic and/or group identity. Clearly, in such a scenario conditions for inter-ethnic conflict are laid as this will likely generate ethnic discordance and tension, thrusting the country concerned to a stage of latent conflict, requiring only a trigger for it to become manifest or for inter-group violence to emerge.

Logic dictates that the phenomenon of ethnicity is likely to feature prominently in societies that are multi-cultural and multi-ethnic than in those that are more homogeneous. Necessarily, ideas of 'minority' groups and 'majority' groups tend to dominate in public discourses. Odeyemi (2012) contends such social differentiations give the impression that the minority are constantly in competition over resources with the majority who has a numerical advantage. However, the approach taken here is

that the distinction between a minority and a majority cannot be ascribed to numbers but is a function of power; social, economic, and political power. The case of Brazil illustrates this succinctly. Whites of European descent make up less than half of Brazil's population, and yet have astonishing political and economic power in that country (Costa Vargas, 2004). Both ethnicity and race are social constructions that are used to differentiate people, and the phenomena of colonialism and white supremacy highlight that race, interpreted inhumanely, can generate catastrophic human suffering, as is the case with other sources of conflicts of identity.

Social diversity as underpinned by multiplicity of ethnicities is not inherently evil and does not automatically mean that a single nation cannot come out of such diversity. Of course, the existence of intra-group solidarity based on shared ethnicity cannot be denied; however, it is the mobilisation predicated on commonly held biases against outsiders that poses serious problem to nation building. The politicisation of ethnic cleavages seems to be far greater danger to national unity and by extension, nation building. This happens when the political elites use the prism of ethnic identity to label certain section of society as problematic and being source of all or most of the troubles that a country may be experiencing (Newbury, 1998). By this, it is meant that a group of people sharing common identity are targeted for political vilification, with a person's ethnicity being a key determinant of whether one is labelled as wrong or not – a situation Newbury (1998) calls 'generalisation of blame'. If the group that is subject to political vilification lacks power or is in the margins of society, the vilification can quickly transform into a catastrophe. This catastrophe may include targeted efforts to eliminate the unwanted from society – usually this assuming the shape of genocide; or intensification of systematic exclusion from society and opportunities that it offers.

Within the African continent, ethnicity emerged as the greatest challenge to state-building and nation-building in the immediate aftermath of colonialism. During this time, political affiliation tended to be aligned with a person's ethnic identity, as was the case in Zimbabwe, and devastating intra-state conflicts also unfolded as various elites contended for state power and mobilised ethnically (Mpofu, 2021). This is one of the dark sides of ethnicity, especially when identity diversity become a source of tension and subsequently instability. Being a multiethnic and multicultural continent, the idea of creation of nation-states based on ethnic considerations in Africa would clearly not work.

This may result in proliferation of tiny and unviable ‘mini-states’ that neither have resource diversity and depth nor adequate populations to form a proper nation-state.

### ***Ethnocentrism***

Another related yet much narrower phenomenon compared to ethnicity is ethnocentrism. The concept of ethnocentrism features as one of the primary variables in discourses about ethnic divisions and even ethnic conflicts. It is understood as entailing ‘discriminatory attitudes and behaviours’ (Axelrod and Hammond, 2006:926). Insofar as discriminatory attitudes are concerned, they include considering people that belong to one’s in-group as superior while simultaneously seeing outsiders as inferior. Discriminatory attitudes are a state of mind and outlook that one has and project towards others in society (Bourhis & Perreault, 1999:95). Behaviour that is discriminatory in the context of ethnocentrism is underlined by willingness to cooperate with one’s in-group while such behavioural disposition is not depicted in circumstances where others not belonging to the group are involved. Therefore, ethnocentrism generates high levels of empathy and solidarity and a strong group unity. The unity is sectional and narrow as it excludes others who speak other languages or have different cultures; in this sense, ethnocentrism is undesirable for nation-building especially in countries with multiplicity of ethnicities (Axelrod and Hammond, 2006).

Social interaction theory is one of the scholarly endeavours that succinctly captures the concept of ethnocentrism and its power in society (Bourhis and Perreault, 1999:92). A (social) group, whether ethnic or otherwise, contribute to the formation of people’s identities or notions about themselves. Members of a given group tend to compare themselves with those of other groups, with perceptions of superiority and ‘separateness’ from the others resulting from such comparisons, as they pursue positive social identity. Because such conceptions of exceptionalism are not only dependent on attitude and psychological idiosyncrasies but also material resources, i.e., political and economic power, for them to achieve meaning, this can lead to jostling over resources and/or discrimination in the distribution of resources. Therefore, multicultural and/or ethnically diverse societies groups that have elevated levels of ethnocentrism are unlikely to feel comfortable with people outside their group dominating the social, political and economic spheres of their countries, at any given time. Negy *et al* (2003)

also hold a similar position, arguing that in instances where individuals have a very strong in-group identification there tends to be a correspondingly unfavourable view of or attitude toward others not belonging to their group. From the in-group perspective, it is thus unimaginable or unpalatable that power and influence in society can go to members of the rival group.

With its emphasis on group cohesion and identification, ethnocentrism can actually be a desirable phenomenon in countries that are homogenous as it is likely to contribute to strong unity amongst the people. This is also linked to Ernest Gellner's thesis of cultural homogenisation – a process of imposing socio-cultural changes to attain uniformity in society (Conversi 2007:372). The process is usually led by the political elite in society. The unity may also contribute towards social and political stability as most of the people would likely be in support of the political elites and government more specifically. However, the reality is that majority of, not least in Africa, are composed of people with multiple and diverse identities. It is for this reason, amongst others as discussed above, that ethnocentrism is undesirable for nation-building.

### ***Nation-building***

Crucial to the notion of nation-building are political integration and national identification – these being conditions whose existence or presence is required simultaneously or concurrently for a country to reach the goal of a modern nation state (Axtmann 2004, 260-261). This is realised through creating political ties between the state and citizens, connections that transcend the ethnic divide and form a government that is inclusive of both ethnic minorities and majorities (2004:261). Importantly, the moment citizens identify with the government 'through relationships of authority and support, an inclusive national community emerges, and nation building can be said to have succeeded' (Wimmer, 2018:1). Considering the aforesaid, nation-building is dependent on a form of positive reciprocal relationship between all or the majority of citizens of a country and government. Wimmer's account of nation-building appears to set a very high bar for the achievement of the ideal; very few multicultural countries meet the criteria of an inclusive government, in the sense of ethnic inclusivity.

While the exclusion of certain ethnic groups from government and national politics will naturally generate discontent, it does not necessarily follow that such marginalisation will result in calls for a conflict or even

agitations for separation. It is only when such discontent is translated into conflict behaviour aimed the attainment of a separate statehood or self-determination that the state faces a threat of disintegration. This was exactly the case with Sudan which experienced an identity-based conflict that eventually culminated in the splitting of the country into two in 2011 (Jumbert and Rolandsen, 2013). Nigeria nearly had a similar experience when its eastern region unilaterally declared independence in 1967, immediately triggering the conflict that became commonly known as the Nigeria-Biafra war; Biafra was name given to the secessionist region (Heerten and Moses, 2014). While ethnic tensions were the primary cause in both countries, the problem dated back to colonial era when colonialism pitted different groups against each by favouring one ethnic group over another or others, devolving some measure of power accordingly.

In considering the concept of nation-building, a question naturally arises as to whether a nation is something that emerges as societies traverse through to modernisation or whether it requires human intervention of one kind or another. Reflecting on the African continent during and in the aftermath of colonialism, Smith (1986) points out that African elites seized control of the newly independent state and used it to actively pursue the goal of nation-building, encouraging 'national unity' among disparate ethnic groups. This indicates that nations are not given but built through purposive action. When colonial and imperial European powers conquered and colonised many African polities towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they drew territorial borders without considering the existing boundaries that demarcated different communities/societies (Gbenenye, 2016:119). In some instances, erstwhile united communities were territorially divided, while in others they were brought into states or political units that they were previously not part of (Ramutsindela, 2010:24). This necessarily made it difficult to forge ahead with nation-building once colonialism was defeated.

Related to nation-building is the concept of nationalism. Nationalism is broadly defined as an 'ideological movement' aimed at the achievement and protection of political independence or autonomy, unity, and common identity for a specific group of people considered to compose a real or potential nation (Quimpo, 2000:2). In practical terms nationalism can assume many shapes or forms, depending on the issues that have galvanised nationalist sentiments in the first place. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the nationalism that permeated the African continent was in response to colonialism and was geared towards attainment of political

independence for the indigenous people of Africa. The nationalism of this period was based on a common struggle and commitment to forming a viable state that would encompass all the people who live and identify as residents of the states in question, regardless of ethnicity.

Nevertheless, the more problematic aspect of nationalism is narrow nationalism – a situation whereby a group of people sharing cultural or linguistic lineage identify themselves outside the broader nation. In recent times narrow nationalism has emerged and intensified in the West, especially in Britain and the United States (U.S.) in response to the influx of immigrants who have settled there – their movement being made easier by the process of globalisation. In 2016 business mogul Donald Trump successfully ran a campaign for the U.S. presidency, with the campaign being anchored on issues of white nationalism, anti-immigrant sentiments and strong border control to keep out immigrants/foreigners (Harris, Davidson, Fletcher & Harris 2017). Similarly, in a referendum held in 2016 British nationals voted to leave the European Union (EU) mainly on account that the organisation's treaties and protocols on regional integration made it easier for people in other EU member states to move and settle in Britain (Gusterson 2017:1). Lastly, nationalism can also take the form whereby a group of people within a state but possessing a distinctive language or culture identify outside of the broader, inclusive 'nation' and accordingly agitate for separation.

Historically, people organised their societies in terms of ethnic identity and affiliations. This was very apt in Africa before the 20<sup>th</sup> century as various ethnic groups carved out and retained distinctive territories in which they formed and structured their societies. Even during the territorial expansion wars that unfolded throughout history in Africa mainly resulted in the conquered being assimilated into the nation victor's culture, language, and way of life. In this sense, ethnic homogeneity was to a significant extent central to the formation of a nation (Mashimbye 2024). The modern state with its characteristically vast swathes of territories that straddle different communities is an antithesis of the foregoing archaic conceptual state. Indeed, ethnic homogeneity is rare to find in many countries of the world, not least in Africa where states are composed of multiplicity of sub-nationalities. Smith (1986:229) argues that in most countries the cultural unity of the state is based on the ethnic identity of the majority, at the exclusion of minorities. Yet this may create cleavages and divisions which may metamorphosise into antagonism over time. Thus the state-building process, as understood in modern times, is supposed to overcome

previous social organisations that were based on ethnic identity and foster a common identity and loyalty to a single state (Calhoun, 1993:217).

### **Discussion of the Ethiopian crisis**

The formation of Ethiopia began in around 1270 with the emergence of the Solomonic dynasty led by Emperor Yekuno Amlak and encompassed today's Ethiopia and Eritrea (Weldegiorgis 2018). The annexation of Oromo and Ogaden in 1896, and the incorporation of modern-day Eritrea in 1952, turned the empire into a geographically vast political entity. A succession of emperors reigned over Ethiopia and Haile Selassie was the last emperor. He was preceded by emperor Menelik II, who in 1896 oversaw the defeat of the Italian colonial army that sought to colonise Ethiopia. As the empire expanded so was its ethnic diversity, and this characteristic continues to define present Ethiopia.

Ethiopia is often cited as the only African country that strongly resisted colonial conquest to a point that its occupation by Italy was uncharacteristically short-lived. Ethiopia's avoidance of complete colonisation was not fortuitous; it successfully fought the first Italian invasion in 1896, and gallantly resisted the second one in 1935 to 1943 (Hailu 2020:2). The first war broke out in 1896 and became known as the Battle of Adwa. In March 1896 Ethiopian forces defeated Italian soldiers who had invaded Ethiopia as part of Italy's colonial expansion. At the time Ethiopia was still an empire, under the leadership of Emperor Menelik II. In 1935, Ethiopia fought its second anti-colonisation war against Italy. The war started when Italian forces, positioned in the neighbouring Italian colony of Eritrea, launched an invasion from the northern parts of Ethiopia in October 1935. The Italians were able to temporarily establish their rule over Ethiopia, having registered military victories against Ethiopian resistance forces. Emperor Haile Selassie went to exile in England, where he stayed until 1941 when Ethiopian forces opposed to the Italian occupation waged another war of resistance. By 1943, the Italian soldiers were effectively defeated, and a peace treaty that restored the independence of Ethiopia was formally signed in 1947 (Hailu 2020).

The obstacle to building a single and united state emerged when the existing ethnic differences became politicised by those close to the levers of state power. During the rule of Haile Selassie, the Amharic language and native Amhara people became the centre of Ethiopia's social and

political life (Fellman 1992). Ethiopia is a culturally diverse country, made up of over 100 million people, and with vast ethnic demographic differences; the country has well over 80 different ethnic groups. The more diverse a country is the more difficult it is to cultivate nation-building and form a unified nation. It is unlikely that all ethnicities can find adequate representation in a central government. People belonging to powerful ethnic groups (power in this sense does not only come from numbers but also from the level of wealth in the group) may dominate government, and the less powerful are excluded. The marginalised will find it very difficult to identify with the government and may feel less part of the nation. In an attempt to overcome this diversity and ensure that every ethnic group feels represented, a federal system of government was introduced in 1995, by a political coalition led by Meles Zenawi (Negarit Gazette 1991; Lyons 1996). The 1991 National Conference and Transitional Charter emphasised that Ethiopia was an ethnically diverse country and recognised the self-determination right of each nationality and established 'local and regional councils defined on the basis of nationality' (Lyons 1996:123)

The year 1974 was an epochal period in Ethiopian history, being a year on which Ethiopia overthrew emperor Haile Selassie, making a significant step towards the dismantlement of the imperial system of rule that had defined Ethiopia for centuries (Odesola 1990:80). While Ethiopia had suffered many famines induced by droughts in the past, especially in the northern-eastern parts of the country, it was the Wollo famine of the early 1970s that resulted in mass protests against the Haile Selassie regime, whose seemingly lackadaisical and nonchalant attitude towards the hunger crisis riled up the population (Lemma 1979). Against the background of political instability instigated by the economic crisis and widespread hunger, a group of high-ranking Ethiopian military officials seized power from Haile Selassie and established a military structure that would rule over the country – commonly called the *Derg* which is an Amharic for committee. Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged as the chairperson of the military committee/council that subsequently ruled over Ethiopia (Balsvik 2009).

A year later the *Derg* formally abolished the imperial system, replacing it with military rule. Nonetheless, its rule was equally if not more crisis-ridden as famine worsened, resulting in the death of over 1 million people for the duration of the *Derg* rule (Balsvik 2009). The dictatorial tendencies of the previous imperial system had not been cast aside with the rise of military rule; repression against the political

opponents and critics of the junta continued. One of the most tumultuous periods during the Derg's rule was 1975-77, a time in which the *Red October* occurred. The Red October refers to the war that was fought between the Derg regime and various rebel movements from 1975 to 1991. The rebel movements were mainly responding to Ethiopia's many catastrophes during Derg which included state-sponsored violence against government critics, economic collapse, and hunger (Wiebel 2015). The rebel groups – mostly constituted along ethnic identity – formed an alliance and waged a resistance struggle against the Derg. The groups encompassed the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and some from other regions of Ethiopia. The coalition of these forces was called Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF); the name given to the movement alluded to the resurrection of the idea of Ethiopia as an inclusive "nation", as opposed to a region- or ethnic-based notions of identity (Vaughan 2011). Made weak by the unrelenting resistance of the EPRDF and rendered vulnerable by the withdrawal of military aid and political support from the disintegrating Soviet Union, in March 1991 Mengistu quietly abdicated his rule and bolted for Zimbabwe, where he received political asylum (Broich 2017). The EPTDF triumphantly marched to Addis Ababa and took control of the state.

Being a coalition formed from different ethnicity-based rebel movements, the EPRDF struggled. The TPLF dominated the EPTDF, and government programmes were skewed to unfairly benefit the Tigray region and Tigranya-speaking Ethiopians (Tsehay & Chekol 2021). By so doing the EPTDF planted the seed for the current ethnic discord in Ethiopia. A fateful moment came when the new Prime Minister, Abiy, dismantled the EPRDF and formed a new party called the Prosperity Party which would supposedly represent all Ethiopians (Molla Ademe & Seid Ali 2022; Lyons 2021). Considering that the EPRDF was constituted by movements coming from certain and not all ethnic groups of Ethiopia, Abiy saw as it fit to dissolve it and create a successor party that would be inclusive of all groups and regions of the country. The overarching and long-term goal that informed such a standpoint was to extricate Ethiopia from the entrapment of ethnic politics and lay the foundation for the building of a nation that would be based on notions of shared and inclusive national identity. The TPLF faction in the EPRDF became aggrieved with the approach of government under Abiy and began to withdraw from the government (Tsehay & Chekol 2021).

## **An analysis of Ethiopia's failure to build a coherent national identity**

The elites, especially political elites, act as a medium through which sentiments of ethnic marginalisation and even subjugation are aggregated and subsequently vented. It was exactly this role that Abiy and his inner circle played through dismantling the dominance of the Tigrayans in Ethiopia's political and economic life (Fisher & Gebrewahd 2019:195). This was a positive intervention. Equally, the TPLF elites who were exiting the government also started to mobilise Tigrayans against the central government. The perceived suffering becomes a central focus of a political cause, mostly in the form of demands for secession and self-determination, a cause conceived and spearheaded by a group of elites. In the case of Ethiopia, the TPLF has performed the abovementioned roles. As a political movement that is currently almost entirely confined in the Tigray region, the TPLF has acted as the vanguard on the question of Tigray self-rule (Berhe 2004). Problematically, however, argues Calhoun (1993:214), is that elites are able to use the notion of 'nation' for the purpose of manipulating sentiments in order to gain political power. As previously indicated, the TPLF once dominated political power in Ethiopia (1991-2012), and it was during this period that the idea of Tigray self-rule was mostly silent. The TPLF no longer has political power, as interpreted in terms of control of state power, and was after the loss of political power in this sense that voices of self-determination for Tigray became prominent. The Tigray people are sold the idea that they form a distinct 'nation' by the TPLF, and agitations for Tigray separation from Ethiopia have intensified.

The standoff between the federal government and the TPLF eventually escalated into a full-blown conflict in the second half of 2020. This was after the federal government decided to postpone the general elections that were planned for 29 August 2020 because of the Covid 19 pandemic. The TPLF defied the government and convened regional elections in Tigray in September 2020, and Abiy's government responded by not extending recognition to the elections. As the tensions boiled, the Tigray regional forces attacked the bases of the Ethiopian National Defence Force stationed in the Tigray region on 3 November 2021. This triggered conflict between the Ethiopian national armed forces and regional forces and militias sympathetic to the TPLF. As the fighting intensified between the groups many people living in the Tigray and

neighbouring Amhara regions have since become displaced and even massacred. The TPLF has held steadfast to its position that Tigray should be granted independence status, while the government have insisted that the territorial integrity of Ethiopia is sacrosanct (Nyadera & Osedo 2023). The conflict will make it even difficult for Ethiopia to create a united nation-state, as many people affected by the war may develop resentment and antagonism towards the government.

Given that Abiy had long proclaimed the goodwill of his government to all the people of Ethiopia regardless of ethnicity or region, and considering that at no point during his term, at least before the conflict, did Abiy demonstrate any malice or intent thereof towards Tigray people in general, are the claims by the TPLF that Tigrayans are being sidelined by the Abiy government genuine? The claims of government neglect of the Tigray region by the TPLF are incorrect; the allegations are informed by a desire on the part of the TPLF, erstwhile dominant actors in Ethiopian politics, to pursue a narrow political agenda aimed at securing self-determination for Tigray. As previously indicated, Ethiopia is a multicultural, multi-ethnic society with a population of just over 100 million people. Tigray has about 6 million people who are mainly Tigranya speaking and Abiy's dismantlement of TPLF's political dominance appears to have been interpreted as the end of the former's political dominance (Nyadera & Osedo 2023). Thus in the eyes of the TPLF leaders, separation from Ethiopia is the only direct path to state power.

Beyond the TPLF agitations for self-determination, another factor constraining nation-building in Ethiopia is the absence of a single, common flag and identification document. While there is one federal flag for Ethiopia, all the 11 semi-autonomous regions of country have their own distinct flags and identity cards for their respective residents. This can be problematic for the idea of building a united nation with a common national identity that transcends regional boundaries. Flags are social constructs that contribute toward the construction of a people's national identity, and the symbolism they carry in terms of sentiments of belonging, especially to a political community, is significant. People are loyal to the political entity (state, region, or province) that the flag represents. Similarly, an identity document is another important social artefact that demarcates between insiders and outsiders of a political community. Given the challenges that the country confronts regarding nation-building, it would be important to reconsider the type of federalism characterised above, or some of its aspects, as the government

strives to stave off secessionist demands up north of the country and build a nation with a common identity and strong patriotism. Basing federalism on ethnicity is a grave mistake a country can make, as this will likely accentuate ethnic differences and render it painstakingly difficult to forge a single national identity (Tolz 1998).

As Ethiopia struggles to forge a strong national identity that cuts across the many ethnicities as marked by the resistance of the Tigray region to the idea of a united and single nation, it is also facing an armed insurrection by the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA). The OLA is made up of former combatants of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), who upon the signing of a peace agreement between the Ethiopian government and the OLF in 2018 that ended the armed struggle against the government as waged by the OLF, decided to form a breakaway liberation army to continue the struggle. However, the OLA has for the longest time been viewed as the armed wing of the opposition party, the OLF; however, the latter has denied this association (IOL, 2022). There has been a state-led crackdown against certain leaders of the OLF, some of whom have been imprisoned on account of their association with the OLA. The OLA was designated as a terrorist group in May 2021 by the Ethiopian parliament.

The organisation has been waging a war of resistance against the federal government in Addis Ababa, describing its *raison d'être* as the achievement of self-determination for the Oromo people. The paradox is that the Oromia people are the numerical majority in Ethiopia and the current Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, is of Oromia ethnicity. Abiy's resounding victory in the 2021 general elections (Abiy's Prosperity Party won 410 of the 547 seats in the national legislature) indicates that his government is undoubtedly popular with the majority of Ethiopians, including those of Oromia ethnicity. The OLA's assertion that it seeks a separate state for the Oromo people in Ethiopia who in its view are oppressed is without merit, and instead constitutes an attempt on the part of its leaders to use ethnicity to gain political power. This strategy is similar to that of TPLF leaders who have propagated a false narrative that the Tigray people are targeted for discrimination and repression by the federal government.

## **Conclusion**

A significant national ethnic diversity does not necessarily constitute a threat to forming a united, peaceful and stable nation. However, in

instances where ethnic diversity and differences are mobilised and used to pursue a political cause, they can prove to be a serious impediment to building a united nation. The political and security instabilities that permeate throughout Ethiopia are a result of political elites exploiting the country's vast ethnic diversity to pursue selfish interests. Ethiopia continues to be unstable notwithstanding the tenuous peace settlement that was reached in 2022, and the instability is framed in terms of ethnic heterogeneity. The only prospect for a lasting peace and stability resides in addressing ethnic tensions and forging a non-ethnic and non-tribal nation based on common or shared citizenship. In summary, it is fundamentally crucial that African leaders desist from using ethnicity to mobilise in order to achieve what appear to be narrow political interests and recognise that the diversity that so characterises the continent is not an impediment but inescapable fact that makes Africa what it is and as such, work to achieve 'unity in diversity'.

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