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Western Tigray: The Unresolved Challenge and a Test for Ethiopia

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Contents

Executive Summary	01
<hr/>	
Introduction	03
<hr/>	
A Brief History of the Ethiopian State and its Internal Boundary-making	05
<hr/>	
The Current Ethiopian State and its Principles of Internal Boundary Formation	07
The Normative Framework and its Limitations	07
The Implementation of Ethiopia's Normative Framework for State Organisation and Internal Administrative Boundaries	10
<hr/>	
Western Tigray and the Contested Issues in the Region	13
<hr/>	
Western Tigray, the Tigray War, and the Current Situation	17
Another Cycle of Disappointment with the Newly Formed Administration	17
Pretoria Agreement Provisions and Western Tigray	19
<hr/>	
Conclusion: The Way Forward	22
<hr/>	
Endnotes	24
<hr/>	

Executive Summary

Contest over administrative boundaries and demands related to identity-based issues has become one of the major forms of conflicts in contemporary Ethiopia. Currently, there is virtually no regional state that does not have a contest over its internal administrative boundaries. Demands and contests over identity and identity-related administrative boundaries are also rampant.

This paper attempts to discuss the nature of these conflicts and the way forward through a detailed investigation of Western Tigray. It concludes that contested administrative boundaries and identity-related contests are only a manifestation of the overall national political crisis, and not independent issues themselves.

The Ethiopian federation is a type of multi-national federation whose structure is based on the recognition of national identities, but this framework carries the constant risk of devolving into reactionary and exclusionary forms of nationalism. Amid the overall decay of the Ethiopian system, where rent-seeking behaviour has become the norm, political elites have begun to creatively deploy nationalism as a tool in their fight for control and dominance, leaving the country emerged in various forms of conflicts. Current disputes over administrative boundaries and identity-based demands are a continuation of this reactionary and exclusionary nationalism.

The paper highlights that there is no constitutional solution for these problems. It illustrates the need for the key national actors to begin to work collaboratively to address the existing crisis in an incremental, yet transformative, manner.

The regime has been considering holding a 'referendum' in each of the concerned territories to settle these contests. However, a referendum would not address the root causes of the problems. For example, holding a referendum in Western Tigray to determine its association with the surrounding regions would not resolve the actual demands of the population.

As part of an incremental and transformative path forward, the paper suggests a three-stage process to resolve the crisis in Western Tigray and all other contested territories in contemporary Ethiopia.

First, secure a temporary political settlement to stop the situation from deteriorating further. This would entail a cessation of hostilities in the ongoing conflicts in Oromia, Amhara, and other Ethiopian regions, alongside the creation of a nationwide transitional arrangement that can provide a proper holding environment for political dialogue, ultimately leading to a comprehensive political settlement.

Secondly, all parties should agree to return to the status quo regarding administrative boundaries, identity-based claims, and other issues related to the norms and rules of the constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Such an agreement should serve as a pre-condition for launching a credible, all-inclusive national dialogue among the country's key actors.

Third, engage in a multi-level national dialogue aimed at building consensus on fundamental approaches to solving Ethiopia's multi-faceted political problems. This includes reaching agreement on the internal administrative boundaries of the regional states.

Sustainable peace can only be achieved through such an all-inclusive national peace and dialogue process that pursues incremental yet transformative solutions.

Introduction

The Ethiopian multi-national federation emerged from a '[Counter Histories' narrative](#)¹ (CHs), which gained prominence over the 'Great Ethiopian Tradition' (GT) narrative that had defined the ideological core of all modern Ethiopian regimes prior to 1991. The GT represents an epistemological framework that portrays Ethiopia as the cradle of civilization, characterised by a long-standing sense of nationhood and set apart as the only African country to defy colonialism. It is a Eurocentric approach that, at best, ignored communities outside the northern highlands of Ethiopia, and at worst, portrayed them through a lens reminiscent of colonial discourse—dividing societies into those 'with history' and those 'without history'. In contrast to the GT, the CHs narrative understands Ethiopian studies as disproportionately focused on Semitic languages, Orthodox Christianity and state formation in the northern highlands. This narrative is advanced by ethno-nationalist movements.

The [new Ethiopian multi-national federation](#),² introduced in 1991, provided a new kind of unity based on the free consent of all 'nations, nationalities, and peoples' of the country. The new arrangement worked well, driving progress across various developmental indicators and laying the foundation for a republican state that recognized and respected cultural identities. Over the last six years, however, Ethiopia has increasingly been immersed in complex and multifaceted conflicts, casting doubt on the country's viability as a 'nation of nations'.

There is virtually no regional state that is not embroiled in a contest over its internal administrative boundaries. Some of the major contests include: [Western Tigray](#),³ the [Metekel zone](#)⁴ of the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state; the contest for [Adamaytu Gedamaytu](#)⁵ among the Afar and the Somali regional states; the contest over the [Meiso-Mullu](#)⁶ in Eastern Harerge between the Oromia and Somali regional states; the Oromia regional state's claim over the [city of Addis Ababa](#),⁷ and the contest for the [Dire Dawa](#).⁸

Some studies suggest that the Ethiopian federation has been constrained by the prevalence of an authoritarian centre and the regime's excessive use of violence to suppress political demands. These analyses conclude that federalism itself has not failed, but rather has been betrayed—both historically and in the present—preventing it from functioning as a platform for intergovernmental bargaining and negotiated reform.⁹

This paper attempts to discuss ongoing contests over administrative boundaries in regional states and identity claims and counterclaims in contemporary Ethiopia. It does not attempt to discuss every issue related to identity or states' internal boundaries in detail. Neither does it attempt to provide an innovative solution for these issues. Instead, the paper focuses on one case study and showcases the key issues at play. It attempts to appraise the federal government's proposed solutions for this particular case, including whether the approach addresses the communities' needs and demands and makes progress towards the long-term resolution of the issues. The chosen case study is north-western Ethiopia, with particular focus on Western Tigray due to its emergence as a conflict hotspot that has escalated into active warfare.

This paper focuses on the instrumental use of identity politics for power and control as a key driver of Ethiopia's widespread and ongoing crisis, expressed in the form of administrative boundary disputes. The analysis is structured into four sections. The first section offers a brief background to the history of Ethiopia and its internal boundary-making. The second section examines the current landscape of internal boundary-making, exploring both the normative principles and the practice of internal administrative boundary-making in Ethiopia. The third section offers an in-depth analysis of the Amhara claim over Western Tigray. The fourth and final section includes reflections on possible pathways forward.

A Brief History of the Ethiopian State and its Internal Boundary-making

Ethiopia has a long history of statehood. Its recorded history begins during the Axumite civilization in the first century AD. This great civilization endured for centuries, controlling a large territory extending to South Arabia with access to vast trade routes that link all the way to India. [The Axum kingdom](#)¹⁰ exercised administrative and economic control over territory encompassing current Tigray, current Eritrea, the Danakil depression, and coastal plains including several sea ports on the western side of the Red Sea in present-day Djibouti and Somalia.

Axum lost its influence in southern Arabia with the rise of the Islamic Califate of Persia, which conquered Yemen in the 6th century. This development was soon followed by the emergence of the Arab Muslims, who became the region's dominant power in the 7th century and assumed naval control of the Red Sea. The loss of mercantile revenue undermined the Axum nobility's ability to hold the state together. [Environmental factors](#),¹¹ most notably the degradation of soils from over-use and a decline in rainfall, created additional pressures which contributed to the decline of Axum. Power shifted to the Zagwe Dynasty, which established its base in the city of Lalibela, a civilization that continued until the 12th century.

After ruling for nearly two centuries, the Zagwe Dynasty was overthrown by the Solomonic Dynasty, based in Shewa. The Solomonic era began in 1270 AD when Emperor Yikuno Amlak defeated the last Zagwe ruler. This dynasty, with a few interruptions, continued to rule Ethiopia for over 700 years. It came to an end in 1974 during the Ethiopian Revolution, which led to the deposition and death of Emperor Haile Selassie I, the last reigning monarch of Ethiopia.

One of the major interruptions to the Solomonic Dynasty was the 'Zemene Mesafint' (which literally means 'era of the princes'). This began in the mid-18th century and lasted until the first half of the 19th century. During this era, emperors from the Solomonic Dynasty were reduced to little more than figureheads and largely confined to the capital city of Gondar. Real power was held in provinces such as Yeju, Gonder, Menz, Gojam, Tigray, Semien, and in Shewa, notably with the provincial kings there. The most powerful and influential nobles were concentrated in the kingdoms of Yeju.

Kings fought against each other for the expansion of their territory and to become guardians of the 'King of Kings' in Gondar, the capital of the empire at the time. Though stripped of real power, the monarchy endured due to its sacred status, with the emperor seen as a divinely ordained figure, helping preserve the dynasty from total extinction.

The Ethiopian Empire experienced a revival in the second half of the 19th century under Emperors Yohanes IV and Menilik II. Their ambition was to expand the empire's administrative boundaries to the west, south, and eastern parts of current Ethiopia. For centuries following the collapse of the Axumite Empire, the Ethiopian state had largely been confined to the current central and northern Ethiopian highlands of Abyssinia.

Internal administrative boundaries during these periods were determined by the actual power balance of the local rulers, expanding and contracting accordingly. This pattern was interrupted during the two-decade rule of Emperor Yohanes IV, who came to power in 1871. The Emperor assumed the title of 'King of Kings,' allowing the kings of each region the autonomy to run their own state's internal affairs while paying their dues to the 'King of Kings.'

This system was soon replaced by a highly centralised state, which began with the reign of Emperor Menilik after the death of Emperor Yohanes in battle in 1889. Menilik not only centralised the power of the kings but also expanded the empire to the south, west and east, defining most of the boundaries of current Ethiopia. This was further established by Emperor Haile Sellasie I through the introduction of a modern bureaucracy and security institutions. The internal boundaries fixed by the princes during these periods were largely determined by central authorities and based on strategic calculation for control and rule. These divisions often reflected the personal judgement—or wit—of the emperor.

Internal boundary-making first attempted to provide regional autonomy to the different Ethiopian nations and nationalities¹² during the 17 years of revolutionary military regime known as the Dergue, from 1974 to 1991.

Under the rule of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the approach to internal boundary-making underwent a fundamental shift. Moving away from a unitary form of ruling, the EPRDF introduced a decentralised form of internal administrative boundary-making, reflecting the multi-national nature of the country.

The Current Ethiopian State and its Principles of Internal Boundary Formation

This discussion will be divided into two sub-sections. The first sub-section describes the normative framework of the Ethiopian state, its origins, and limitations. The second sub-section covers the normative framework in practice and emerging problems associated with internal boundary-making, before the paper moves on to discuss the case of Western Tigray in greater detail.

The Normative Framework and its Limitations

The current organisation of the Ethiopian regional states was essentially guided by the Ethiopian 'state structure'-related [constitutional provisions of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia](#)¹³ (FDRE). Article 46 of the constitution states that:

- (1) The Federal Democratic Republic shall comprise of States and
- (2) States shall be delimited on the basis of the settlement patterns, language, identity and consent of the peoples concerned.

Article 47 further outlines the following additional provisions related to the organisation of the regional states:

47(1) names the nine regional states organized at the time as the regional states of Ethiopia 47(2) Nations, Nationalities and Peoples within the States enumerated in sub-Article 1 of this article have the right to establish, at any time, their own States.

47(3) The right of any Nation, Nationality or People to form its own state is exercisable under the following procedures:

- a. When the demand for statehood has been approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of the Council of the Nation, Nationality or People concerned, and the demand is presented in writing to the State Council;
- b. When the Council that received the demand has organized a referendum within one year to be held in the Nation, Nationality or People that made the demand;

- c. When the demand for statehood is supported by a majority vote in the referendum;
- d. When the State Council will have transferred its powers to the Nation, Nationality or People that made the demand; and
- e. When the new State created by the referendum without any need for application, directly becomes a member of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

In Article 47(4), the constitution also states that member States of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia shall have equal rights and powers.

The conceptual framework¹⁴ underpinning the Ethiopian constitution finds its origins in the Leninist concept of national self-determination, which was adopted by leaders of the radical student movement in the 1970s. This idea remained influential during the Ethiopian civil war. Even the constitution's definition of a nation is very similar to Stalin's definition: 'a nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.'¹⁵ The definition of nations and nationalities in Article 39(5) of the Ethiopian Constitution is:

'A "Nation, Nationality, or people" for the purpose of this constitution is a group of people who have or share a large measure of common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identity, a common psychological makeup, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory.'¹⁶

Notably, this definition does not explicitly require that such an identity be historically constituted or that it reflect a stable, long-standing community. However, one can reasonably infer that this is implied, as shared culture, language, and identity are typically the products of a society's historical development. It is also clear that the constitutional recognition of the right of nations and nationalities to self-determination—including the right to secession as enshrined in Article 39(3)—is a direct reflection of leftist principles on the question of nationalities.

Stalin's definition of a nation suggests that nationalism is a historically driven phenomenon, with a beginning and an end.¹⁷ However, federal systems designed on this basis elsewhere (for example, the 1923 Soviet Constitution and the 1947 Yugoslav Constitution) have struggled to recognize or adapt to changing historical circumstances. As Stalin noted, 'It goes without saying that a nation, like every historical phenomenon, is subject to the law of change.' A federation grounded in such principles, therefore, must be implemented innovatively and strategically, recognizing that history is not static.¹⁸

In both the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the constitutions were designed to unite diverse national communities within a single political community. Over time, the constitutions became outdated, and political mobilisation around national identities regressed into administrative nationalism, whereby the bureaucracy's rent-seeking interests became the dominant factor in sustaining and shaping national sentiment and political organisation. This highlights the need for a constitution that can continuously evolve. To remain relevant and effective, such frameworks must develop a theoretically coherent approach that is responsive to historical change and capable of innovatively incorporating unfolding political and social developments into the governance model.

When the practice of self-determination and nationalism fails to incorporate historical developments, the focus shifts to exclusive identity markers, thereby encouraging division along identity lines. This undermines the progressive and inclusive potential of nationalism, transforming it into an exclusionary and reactionary form of administrative nationalism. Such a failure was one of the key factors that contributed to the fracturing of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

This stagnation undermines the progressive and inclusive potential of nationalism, transforming it into a reactionary, exclusionary form of administrative nationalism. Such a failure was a key factor in the eventual disintegration of multinational federations like the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, where the inability to adapt to changing historical realities led to fragmentation and collapse.

The Implementation of Ethiopia's Normative Framework for State Organisation and Internal Administrative Boundaries

After the basic principle for organising Ethiopia's internal structure was established—first by the Transitional Council, the Transitional Charter, and related laws, and later by the newly adopted Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE)—a detailed ethno-linguistic map completed by [the Institute of Nations and Nationalities in 1987](#)¹⁹ was used as the main reference for drawing the administrative boundaries of the regional states.

Accordingly, Ethiopia was organised into twelve regional states and two chartered cities, answerable to the federal government for three years between 1992 and 1995. However, five of the regional states in southern Ethiopia merged into one, stating that their socio-cultural and economic similarities would grant them efficiency without compromising the autonomy of nations and nationalities for self-rule. Once the Ethiopian constitution was ratified in 1995, Ethiopia was organised into seven regional states and two chartered cities relatively smoothly, with only minor localised contests.

The smaller contests over administrative boundaries between the Amhara and the Tigray regions, for example, were limited to the densely populated areas of Tselemti in the north-western zone of Tigray and areas of the Wag Khimra zone in the Amhara region. Neither Western Tigray nor the Raya region of Southern Tigray were involved in disputes in the early years. Similarly, there was no contest over the Metekel zone of the Benishangul Gumuz with the Amhara region and none between the Dera Woreda of North Shoa with Oromia.

The disputes did not involve the federally administered cities of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa or their relationship with the surrounding Oromia and Somalia regional states. Addis Ababa was designated a separate administration in the Ethiopian Constitution not only because it is the seat of the federal government, but also in recognition of its historical development as a multi-ethnic metropolis, despite being located within the Oromia region. Similarly, Dire Dawa—a diverse city situated at the intersection of Oromia and Somalia regions and primarily inhabited by Somalis and Oromos—was placed under federal jurisdiction to ensure inclusive administration reflecting its multilingual and multicultural character. These arrangements were initially accepted without significant resistance, contributing to a prolonged period of peace regarding internal boundary issues or city-related claims.

In fact, the Oromia region decided to move its capital to Adama city²⁰ (90 kilometres outside Addis) in recognition of the multicultural metropolitan nature of Addis Ababa. It only reversed this decision and relocated its capital back to Addis²¹ following the total loss of the city's administration to the Coalition of Democratic Union (*Kinijit* in Amharic), anticipating that it would challenge the opposition from within the city.

This apparently peaceful and widely-accepted form of internal administrative boundary-making did not last long. A new political development emerged, marked by the use of identity politics as an instrument of power rather than as a means to address historical injustices and inequalities. This instrumentalization of identity politics, combined with the system's inability to adapt to evolving realities—particularly in the sparsely populated lowland areas that straddle two or more regions—posed a critical challenge. In a related development, both of the federally administered metropolitan cities saw significant growth in terms of wealth and development, sparking new forms of competition for access to resources, increasingly framed through the lens of identity politics.

The Ethiopian model aimed to solve the challenge of building a common political polity within a highly diverse society. However, like the Soviet and Yugoslav models, it suffered from a critical blind spot that limited²² its ability to adapt the system in response to evolving historical realities, while remaining vigilant against the exclusionary and reactionary tendencies of nationalism.

In the sparsely populated lowland areas, massive investment in infrastructure was made so that large-scale resettlement and agricultural development could take place. As part of the federal government's developmental state economic strategy, major infrastructural developments,²³ including the construction of all-weather roads and airports, social infrastructure like clean water sources, medical facilities like hospitals and clinics, and schools were made, in turn attracting commercial agricultural investment. This brought new competition between the authorities over the right to issue licenses for commercial agricultural land and associated state and personal rents.

In the same way, the two federally administered cities of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa saw massive development in the first decade of the EPRDF's time in power. The two cities expanded, encroaching towards the surrounding regional state of Oromia in the case of Addis Ababa, and towards the Somali and Oromo regions in the case of Dire Dawa.

The development significantly affected the interests of the indigenous populations in the lowlands, especially the peasants that were displaced from their farms and livelihoods as the two major cities expanded.

The next section will delve into the case of the Western Tigray disputes in greater detail. Focusing on this case allows us to showcase the nature of the wide-ranging crises related to contested administrative and identity issues. Western Tigray was selected due to its emergence as a conflict hotspot that has escalated into active warfare.

Western Tigray and the Contested Issues in the Region

The administrative boundaries of Northwest Ethiopia have changed several times during the last four centuries. This change of administrative boundaries has also impacted Western Tigray, also known as Wolkait-Tsegedie. With the exception of changes over the last three decades, most changes were not influenced by the settlement patterns or ethno-linguistic composition of the population. Nevertheless, the area has remained within the administrative boundaries of Tigray for the majority of the last four centuries.

A recent meta-analysis of 66 historical maps since the year 1707 indicated that Western Tigray has been part of Tigray for most of history. Except for a brief period between 1891 and 1909, Western Tigray fell within the administrative boundary of Begemdir solely between 1944 and 1990. The rest of the maps covering the years of 1707 to 1794, 1831 to 1886, and 1939 to 1941 show that the area was part of Tigray proper.²⁴ Historical documents also indicate that Wolkait was administered as part of Tigray, paying tribute to Ras Gugsa of Tigray, whose authority ended in 1930 when Prince Regent Ras Tafari was crowned Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. Following this, Tselemti and Wolkait were gradually incorporated into the Gondar region between 1930 and 1957.

As illustrated by the historical maps, Tigray has been Ethiopia's northern-most province for the majority of the past five centuries. At various times, its territory extended to include present-day highland Eritrea to the north, Wolkait to the west, and parts of modern-day Raya Kobo and Yeju to the south.²⁵

Be that as it may, it is important to recognize that the delineation of Tigray's boundaries was not based on historical claims, but rather ethno-linguistic considerations. It is due to this rationale that areas such as the Dallol Depression and the entirety of Zone Three of Afar regional state—despite having historically been administered under Tigray—were excluded from the current arrangement. Instead, these areas were incorporated into the newly established Afar Regional State, reflecting the ethno-linguistic identity of the population.

The organisation of the present-day regional states and their administrative boundaries are determined by ethno-linguistic demographics rather than the historical dominance of a group over that land. Western Tigray therefore became part of Tigray proper based on ethno-linguistic factors, as over 90% of the residents in the area were Tigrinya-speaking. This classification was supported by ethno-linguistic boundary studies conducted by the [Institute of Nations and Nationalities of the People's Republic of Ethiopia](#), finalised in 1987.²⁶

In the name of encouraging agricultural investment, the regional administration of Tigray began working to expand social and economic infrastructure in the lowlands of Western Tigray as of the year 2000, including [the launch of an agricultural research centre in 2003](#).²⁷ Following these developments, Western Tigray saw many large-scale mechanised agricultural investments. Notable among these were the Banat farms, owned by the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT), a consortium linked to the ruling party, as well as numerous TPLF-affiliated investors who were granted land in the area. Towns such as Humera, Dansha and May Kadra were transformed into agricultural hubs, attracting youth from all over the country to take up seasonal jobs.²⁸

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Western Tigray also saw the resettlement of tens of thousands of peasants from other parts of Tigray. To find a long-term solution to recurring drought and food insecurity in the rural areas of Central and Eastern Tigray, these communities were relocated to the lowlands of Western Tigray. Returnees who had spent years in Sudan were also resettled in towns such as Humera, Rawyan, and May Kadra.

Between 1995 and 1996, [demobilised fighters from the TPLF and their families were settled](#)²⁹ in a place known as Woynat—later renamed Division—where around 9,000 families were reported to be living prior to November 2020. These resettlements led to local land redistributions, which were widely perceived by long-time residents as acts of dispossession. The redistribution process disrupted traditional land tenure systems and agricultural practices, particularly the shifting cultivation practice known as [mofer zemet](#).³⁰ Under this process, highland peasants would move down to the lowlands for the agricultural season, farming different parcels of land each year.

Following the land registration process in the area, a group of civil servants and wealthy peasants from the Dansha and Addi Ramets regions capitalised on growing resentment to establish the 'Committee for the Restauration of the Amhara Identity of Wolkait-Tegeḍé' (CRAIWT – *YeWolkait Tegeḍé yeAmara Mannenet Asmelash Comité* in Amharic), which went public in September 2015. According to land administration agents and officials from Western Tigray, the key figures in CRAIWT—such as [Colonel Demeke Zewdu](#)³¹—were already at odds with the TPLF. Many felt that the Tigray regional investment law had disadvantaged them.

Land registration led to the implementation of the Tigray regional land law and directives, allowing peasants to keep just two hectares of land in the highlands, and five in the lowlands. Farming a larger parcel of land required an investment permit—which necessitated TPLF connections—while the *mofer zemet* system was, in practice, prohibited. Conversely, the vast lands of Setit-Humera were being distributed to individual investors affiliated with the ruling party in Tigray. In some cases, civil servants, senior TPLF cadres, and their associates began acquiring land under the guise of investment, only to repeat the *mofer zemet* style of farming that the indigenous population were prohibited from practicing. Most of these investors were absentee landlords who would simply come to plant crops in the rainy season and then return to harvest, with virtually no tangible investment in the land. This became a source of grievance to the indigenous populations who were prevented from practicing the *mofer zemet* style of farming they were accustomed to.

Many investors who became leading figures of the CRAIWT [were once TPLF members](#).³² Most had always spoken Tigrinya as their main language, and had not viewed ethnicity as a point of contention along these lines. However, activists framed their cause using the language most resonant within Ethiopia's system of ethnic federalism: ethnicity. After an initial public meeting in Gondar, they brought a petition of 25,000 signatures to Tigray's regional government in Mekelle, asking for the restoration of an autonomous 'Amhara zone' in Western Tigray. While CRAIWT activists would later adopt a strongly anti-TPLF stance, their initial approach was legalistic, and they hoped to secure government support for the implementation of a constitutional procedure. Their main claim was that before 1991, Wolkait had never been part of Tigray, and that the Tekeze River had always marked a boundary.

The CRAIWT, however, faced repression. On 12 July 2016, some of its prominent members including Colonel Demeke Zewdu were arrested in Gondar, triggering several days of riots in the city. In Western Tigray, members of the committee were forcibly disappeared, and some were jailed. The summer of 2016 saw large-scale protests in both the Oromia and Amhara regions, leading to internal party reforms and the eventual nomination of Abiy Ahmed to the Premiership in early April 2018. In the months leading up to his rise, CRAIWT members and Amhara nationalists were gradually released from prison and resumed their activism, arming themselves in the process.³³

Western Tigray, the Tigray War, and the Current Situation

This section addresses three major issues: First, how the conflict evolved after the agenda was hijacked by the demands of the people of Wolkait-Tsegedie. Second, it examines the impact of the Tigray War on the region's administration and highlights emerging grievances of the indigenous population regarding resource management under the new authorities. Third, it explores the aftermath of the Pretoria Agreement, focusing on the ongoing standoff between the federal government and the Tigray Regional Administration, and its effects on the welfare of the local population.

At the start of the Tigray War in 2020, Western Tigray became one of the major epicentres. As part of his preparation for the war with Tigray, [PM Abiy Ahmed asked the Sudanese Sovereign Council President](#),³⁴ General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, to deploy troops close to the Sudanese border so that armed Tigrayans would not be able to leave or obtain foreign supplies via Sudan. Subsequently, al-Burhan deployed over 6,000 soldiers, capturing the Al-Fashaga triangle on 1 November 2020, two days before the start of the war. The war began on 3 November 2020, and within days Western Tigray came under the full control of a coalition of forces comprising the Ethiopian National Defence Force, the Eritrean Defence Forces, security forces from the Amhara region, including the Amhara Special Forces and the informal Fano militias. Soon after, the joint forces began [cleansing the area of Tigrayans from other parts of Tigray](#).³⁵ This continued not only throughout the war but also after the signing of the [Pretoria Agreement for the cessation of hostilities on 2 November 2022](#).³⁶

[International organisations](#),³⁷ including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, reported that the Amhara regional security forces and civilian authorities in Ethiopia's Western Tigray Zone committed widespread abuses against Tigrayans that amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. A new administration composed of officials from the Amhara region and some of the former CRAIWT was formed.

Another Cycle of Disappointment with the Newly Formed Administration

The new Amhara administration's performance on the issues of concern to the people was a disappointment. None of the local population's demands related to land and rights for self-rule were achieved. By early 2021, civilian resentment appeared to be directed more sharply toward the new authorities governing from Bahir Dar than toward the former leadership based in Mekelle.

The widespread looting³⁸ that had occurred in the zone partly explained the lukewarm welcome given to the new 'liberators'. Fano militiamen largely appropriated what they considered 'TPLF wealth', 'Tigrayans' wealth', or, in their own words, 'junta wealth'. In March 2021, looting was mostly concentrated around furniture and construction materials taken from emptied houses and administrative offices.

This revenge by the Amhara incomers sparked deep resentment amongst the remaining inhabitants of Wolkait, although some had also taken up arms against the TPLF. This was the account of a researcher who visited the newly established administration of a lowland village, where only a quarter of the original 4,000 residents remained. In the presence of cabinet members and militiamen, the local chairman expressed his frustration, stating:

'They took everything! The mills, engines, the generators, the public water pumps, everything! We don't have running water anymore.'

When the researcher asked him who 'they' referred to, one of the young militiamen answered, 'the junta!', before the other men corrected him: 'No, they were the Fano, but it's the same!'

The chairman then continued:

'Everything is taken to be brought to the Amhara region. But what's the problem with the Amhara region's authorities, they still don't believe that Wolkait is part of Amhara now? Do they think that the TPLF will be back? [...] When all these things are loaded on trucks, people from the administration see it, they don't do anything! These things do not go by air, they go on the road, through every checkpoint! What does it mean when the truck spends a night or two at the checkpoint before leaving once they've paid what they were asked for? [...] All these things, even if we'd develop this place anew for 50 years, we wouldn't get them. [...] People who did that are not thieves; they are the Amhara region. What has TPLF done worse than this?'

Land transactions have been marked by a high degree of opacity and confusion, with redistribution carried out by the new authorities without any meaningful effort to understand local land use patterns or the community's perceptions of territorial ownership. At present, there is no coherent policy governing land allocation for commercial or private farming. Nevertheless, [land is being distributed](#)³⁹—often arbitrarily—by interim administrators to Amhara farmers displaced from Al-Fashaga, sesame investors from Gojam, returning Amhara refugees from Sudan, and new settlers from other parts of the Amhara region.

[The Amhara irredentist claim to Western Tigray](#)⁴⁰ lacks historical foundation, as the Amhara region itself was a creation of the EPRDF government. Prior to 1991, administrative boundaries—such as those of Begemdir—were not defined on an ethno-linguistic basis. The argument that the border of Tigray should be limited to the Tekeze River, on the basis that areas beyond it constituted Wolkait-Tsegedie, a part of Gonder Province, does not hold. Ethiopia is no longer governed under a provincial system. At the heart of this territorial contestation lies a struggle over access to resources and state services, coupled with growing discontent over the new authorities' practices. It is in this context that Amhara nationalists elevated the district of 'Wolkait' as a symbol of their struggle, but at the same time behaved like an invading and occupying force in what they claimed as their ancestral homeland. This paved the way for a counter-mobilisation by the remaining inhabitants, who have begun to reappropriate the symbol of 'Wolkait' to voice criticism against the occupation.

Pretoria Agreement Provisions and Western Tigray

[The 2022 Pretoria Agreement](#)⁴¹ does not have clear and specific provisions related to the status of Western Tigray, but provides general principles that guide the parties in the implementation of the agreement in good faith. Article 2(a) of the agreement defines respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and unity of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) as a foundational principle. Similarly, Article 2(b) underscores the legality and respect for constitutional norms and principles enshrined in the FDRE constitution. The agreement does not specifically mention the issue of Western Tigray, these two principles can be interpreted as key guides for resolving the dispute.

The Nairobi Modalities of Implementation declaration,⁴² signed by the Chief of Staff for the Ethiopian Army and the Commander General of the Tigrayan forces on 12 November 2022, also lacks any specific mention about how to handle the issue of Western Tigray. Article 2(2.1) (d) articulates that disarmament of heavy weapons is to be done concurrently with the withdrawal of all foreign and non-ENDF security forces from the administrative territory of Tigray.

The federal government has never considered the case of Western Tigray⁴³ a serious political issue that needs resolution, but rather as a political card in its power struggle for control and dominance. During the brutal two-year conflict, when securing the political and military support of the ethnic Amhara people was vital, Abiy Ahmed publicly declared that Western Tigray was undeniably part of Amhara, which everyone understood to mean that the area had been forcibly annexed.

However, the federal government's stance changed following the signing of the Pretoria Agreement. Although Wolkait was not mentioned by name in the agreement, the fact that the agreement states that any dispute is to be resolved 'in accordance with the constitution' is widely interpreted by Tigrayans to mean that Western Tigray remains part of Tigray, at least until a constitutionally sanctioned process dictates otherwise.

The federal government is still reluctant to return the refugees from Western Tigray currently in Sudan, as well as internally displaced civilians from other parts of Tigray. While it occasionally raises the prospect of administering a referendum to determine whether Western Tigray should belong to Tigray, to Amhara, or become a separate administrative entity, this proposal is firmly rejected by the Tigrayan administration. Tigray insists that any resolution must be preceded by the return of the refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their places of origin.

Until then, and despite its de facto association with the Amhara region, Western Tigray is not yet an official part of the Amhara region. It does not feature in the formal budget or subsidy allocations for the Amhara region. Instead, it appears to be directly run and administered by the Ministry of Defence and its unit commanders in the region.

The federal government continues to claim that the status of Western Tigray will be determined through a constitutional process. The Tigray regional administration says that Western Tigray is the western part of Tigray, as its name indicates, and that anyone who claims otherwise should adhere to constitutional processes. In the meantime, the territorial integrity of the sub-region should be restored as part of Tigray, and formal administration should be re-established in the area.

Conclusion: The Way Forward

As mentioned previously, Ethiopian federalism was designed to unite diverse national communities within a single political community. To a certain extent, this formula provided years of continuous peace and development in Ethiopia. However, the danger it posed by enabling reactionary and exclusionary administrative nationalism has been visible from the very start.

This danger contributed to the overall decay of the system. The onset of an all-round reactionary environment, where competition for rent-collection has become the norm, now poses an existential threat to the country. The Ethiopian political environment is clouded by numerous forms of 'identity' related conflicts, driven by claims and counterclaims for territory. As discussed previously, like in Western Tigray, the Amhara are involved in an ongoing conflict over their claim to the Metekel zone of Benishangul-Gumuz regional state. This area has been part of Gojam Province since the times of provincial administration. The Amhara region is pursuing similar claims to parts of the Northern Shoa zone of the Oromia region, parts of the Afar region (that has been part of Hawssa Awraja since the provincial era), and to the city of Addis Ababa as an integral part of the Amhara region.

Similarly, the Oromia region is involved in broader disputes, with claims over several areas. These include ongoing conflicts with the Somali regional state over several parts of the East and West Hararghe zones, a claim to the Southern Wello Oromia zone of the Amhara region, and a demand for the city of Addis Ababa to be recognised as an integral part of the Oromia region, directly answerable to the region's authorities. There are also similar claims and counter claims in other parts of Ethiopia, including in regional states as well.

These hotspots can be considered a manifestation of the overall national political crisis, and not independent issues themselves. There is no constitutional 'magic wand' capable of resolving these issues. Rather, there is an urgent need for key national actors to engage in a collaborative process to address the crisis in an incremental but transformative manner.

A referendum cannot resolve the issues of contested boundaries – and whether the results of a referendum would be accepted is not the only reason. A referendum can never fully address the real issues and problems faced by the citizens in the contested areas. For example, a referendum on Western Tigray to determine its administrative alignment would not resolve the population's actual demand, regardless of which region the outcome might favour.

As part of an incremental and transformative path forward, the paper suggests a three-stage process to resolve the status of Western Tigray and all other contested territories in contemporary Ethiopia:

- ▶ First, secure a temporary political settlement to stop the situation from deteriorating further. This would entail a cessation of hostilities in the ongoing conflicts in Oromia, Amhara, and other Ethiopian regions, alongside the creation of a nationwide transitional arrangement that can provide a proper holding environment for political dialogue, ultimately leading to a comprehensive political settlement.
- ▶ Secondly, all parties should agree to return to the status quo regarding administrative boundaries, identity-based claims, and other issues related to the norms and rules of the constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Such an agreement should serve as a pre-condition for launching a credible, all-inclusive national dialogue among the country's key actors.
- ▶ Third, engage in a multi-level national dialogue aimed at building consensus on fundamental approaches to solving Ethiopia's multi-faceted political problems. This includes reaching agreement on the internal administrative boundaries of the regional states.

Sustainable peace can only be achieved through such an all-inclusive national peace and dialogue process that pursues incremental yet transformative solutions.

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