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The Story of Ethiopian Governance

From a Centralized Public Service Monopoly to 'Big Man' Politics

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of EDINBURGH



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Introduction and Overview

Ethiopia took its current shape in the second half of the nineteenth century. At that time, the state that was previously confined to the Abyssinian highlands expanded towards the south, southwest, and southeast incorporating most of what is now Oromia, the Somali region, the Southern Nations and Nationalities Regional states, Gambela, and most of current Benishangul-Gumuz.

Imperial Ethiopia was ruled from the centre, leaving most of the lowlands as peripheries. In 1974, the military junta known as the Dergue seized power from the emperor and attempted to extend the state structure to every corner of the country. It failed to do so as many of these areas were under the control of all kinds of armed movements, including liberation movements. It was only under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which ruled from 1991-2019, that the Ethiopian state structure was effectively extended to cover the entire population, and the lowest levels of rural administration became a reality.

The political marketplace framework (PMF) categorizes states according to the organization of power and bargaining, rather than the categories of conventional political science such as democracy and authoritarianism. A state that is a political marketplace, or has crucial elements thereof, is one in which transactional politics trumps the rules, regulations and laws of formal institutions. There are three main formations of this. The first is centralized monopoly, in which a single ruler (an individual or cohesive group) monopolizes the three crucial instruments of power: cash, communication, and most importantly, coercion. This regime can either deliver public services or be kleptocratic. The cash in question is political budgets: money that can be spent on loyalty and political services without needing to account for it. The second formation is oligopoly, in which members of the political elite share control of these instruments. An oligopoly can be either collusive or rivalrous, and can readily shift between the two. The third is a deregulated open market, in which the barriers to entry into the political arena are low, and multiple actors have independent access to sources of political money, can freely communicate and bargain, and (most crucially) have control over their own separate means of violence.

The core thesis of the PMF is that these three governance formations are durable forms. They are not transitory states on the road to state building. And specifically, to the contrary, institutionalized or developmental states need to be especially wary of relapsing into political market forms, from which they may not escape.

During the EPRDF period, Ethiopia was run as a regulated monopoly without competitive bargaining.¹ Most political elites in the country had reached a broad political settlement initially when the EPRDF took power in 1991 through their agreement on the Transitional Charter and later through the ratification of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic in 1995. This can be seen as finely crafted 'political un-settlement'² insofar as it established a consensus that the most controversial political issues, such as the right of self-determination, were left hanging indefinitely. These issues were managed so that the government could pursue other essential goals, namely building an administrative apparatus and economic development.

The EPRDF tried to build a state in Ethiopia. Nothing approaching an administrative state had existed before. Under the former imperial and military regimes, there had been a plausible imitation of an administrative apparatus, and indeed Ethiopia was well known for its bureaucratic proceduralism. The commitment to the minutiae of the formal process, in the administrative system as in the courts, masked the reality that proceduralism was a thin façade. The state had no real reach. The country was overwhelmingly rural and local power was based on feudal relations or force. At community level, power was controlled by local 'big men' who essentially answered only to themselves and intermittently responded to demands of the nobility. Even the Dergue, with its enormous military and elaborate party structure, was present only when in campaign mode.

The EPRDF changed this. For the first time in Ethiopian history, the state began to reach everywhere. Its initial aim was to build an administrative state with political parties separate from that apparatus. Confronted with political challenges that threatened its hold on power, it changed course. Adopting a program of building a 'developmental state' in an accelerated manner, it folded the party and the state together into a single apparatus. This was, for a while, an apparent success story. But in doing so, it created a political void. The state-party became ostensibly technocratic, with political debate and decision-making confined to the Prime Minister's Office. This turned the governing apparatus into a massive national patronage system, ripe for capture.

This political transition from the EPRDF to the Prosperity Party can be understood using the lens of the PMF. The EPRDF did not see politics as a market and indeed explicitly rejected that analysis for Ethiopia. The post-EPRDF system has many features of an emerging PMF, resembling a paradigmatic African neo-patrimonial state run according to the 'politics of the belly'.¹³ We can read these current elements back into recent history.

The EPRDF emerged from the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the final years of a 17-year armed struggle against the Dergue. After winning power in 1991, for the next 14 years it was a coalition of parties that dominated Ethiopia, providing space for other parties, albeit limited. In 2005, after a fiercely contested election, Ethiopia shifted to a de facto one-party state focused on total hegemony and accelerated economic development as a substitute for open political contention. This worked while there was a capable central manager in the office, and with Meles Zenawi in charge, such a figure was present. After Meles' death in 2012, the EPDRF regime shifted to a quarrelsome coalition of rivals, colluding to retain power among themselves but increasingly seeing one another as the key competitors for control over a state that was suddenly both capable and well-endowed with resources. The rivalry among the coalition members became a fight for the spoils: the very success of the development project changed the elite calculus. Over the previous years, the EPRDF had faced challenges to its democratic legitimacy, and faced them down. The new challenges it faced, beginning with massive protests in 2015, had a different outcome, because rivalrous members of the ruling elite tried to instrumentalize the challenges in pursuit of their own political ambitions.

Hence the transition was not from an authoritarian system to a democratic one, but from a centralized, monopolistic political market that sufficiently regulated political transactions to enable a developmental project to proceed, to a turbulent market in which political energy, political budgets, and national resources are dedicated to keeping the central political business manager—the prime minister—in power.

The first section of this paper details how the EPRDF was built as a political front run on Leninist democratic centralist principles. During the 17 years of armed struggle, this proved an efficient and effective way of pursuing a liberation struggle. It managed the Ethiopian political arena with a similar logic to the way it managed its internal politics. Promotion within the hierarchies of the ruling party was based on loyalty and commitment to its objectives.

Transactions were grounded on promoting the collective interest of the ruling elites. Coalition members (both member parties and individuals) had limited access to decentralized resources as the coalition effectively deployed administrative mechanisms to limit such access. As a result, the coalition members were compelled to remain loyal to the coalition. These were the key factors that allowed the political market under the EPRDF to be highly centralized. This highly centralized logic for managing internal politics transcended into the logic of managing wider Ethiopian politics. The EPRDF provided little to no space for new entrants. Those existing contenders were either co-opted by the ruling party or had little to no capacity to upset the agreed political settlement.

At this stage, material rewards were dispensed for loyalty, but without a price mechanism being operational, so it was not a market as such. Despite this origin, however, this centralized logic of managing its internal politics later evolved towards a system where coalition members colluded and partly competed with one another for control. As a result, the public service monopoly began to erode. Three things happened: the advent of decentralized access to resources; the advent of 'administrative nationalism'; and the withering away of the vanguard model of leadership that was exacerbated by the death of its long-serving leader contributed to the shift.

In a competition to dominate, coalition members engaged against each other to weaken 'the other' so that no member could accumulate the strength to dominate everyone. Such a rivalry negatively affected the coalition's capacity to produce political goods. The equilibrium that maintained the oligarchy was shaken and one of the coalition members, namely the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), with the junior partnership of the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), dominated and began shaping a new institutional status quo.

Abiy Ahmed's ascent to power was a result of the internal rivalry and tactical alliance of the OPDO and the ANDM (both among the key players in the EPRDF coalition) and not anything related to the formal institutional norms of the organization. The political agenda of Abiy Ahmed and his allies was a counter-revolutionary state capture and to this end dismantling the progressive forces and progressive agendas in the Ethiopian political space. They coordinated their activities [to grab full power and stay on power afloat](#).⁴ To this end, they re-invented themselves as a group of individuals opposed to the establishment of the EPRDF.

Once in power, Abiy Ahmed and associates promised different things to different audiences. They promised democratization and liberalization to the Western world to get some sort of international legitimacy. They promised to dismantle the constitution to sectors of those opposed to the arrangement of a multi-national federation at home and in the diaspora. They claimed to be the key defenders of the constitution in front of audiences supporting the multi-national federal arrangement. They promised different things to different constituencies, but their actions led towards building what a number of writers including Patrick Chabal, Jean Pascal Daloz, Jean François Bayart, Stephen Ellis and Beatrice Hibou⁵ call a paradigmatic African state⁶ in which the ruler thrives on disorder, creates informal networks of patronage, tolerates and indeed encourages corruption, and yet maintains a façade of stability.

This report discusses how the EPRDF, from operating on the logic of a centralized political market, degenerated into an oligopolistic monopoly and later into a neo-patrimonial state that operates on patronage and sustaining disorder while maintaining a simulacrum of an institutionalized state. The report is divided into four parts. The first part discusses the genesis of the EPRDF and its highly centralized public service monopoly in government. The second part discusses the beginning of the end of the EPRDF's centralized public service monopoly. The third part discusses the complete transformation of the state into what is called a typical African 'big man' politics. The fourth and final part is the conclusion.

The EPRDF: Centralized Public Service Delivery

This section discusses the genesis of the EPRDF and its highly centralized public service monopoly in government. It provides a brief background on the genesis of the EPRDF. The section also provides some background on the internal working mechanisms of the coalition as a vanguard party in general, and its highly centralized vanguard model of leadership in particular. The key issues in the federal constitution will also be covered with a focus on some of the key caveats that contributed to the later chaos.

Background

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (the TPLF) was fighting to assert the rights of the people of Tigray in a restructured Ethiopian state. It believed that the problems of the people of Tigray emanated from the nature of the Ethiopian state and could find a solution within a democratic Ethiopia. For most of the Ethiopian civil war, the TPLF was confined to the territory of Tigray and adjacent parts of the Amhara region. It tirelessly worked to forge some form of alliance and coordination with other similar organizations in Ethiopia and succeeded in creating the EPRDF coalition a few years before the end of the Ethiopian Civil War and expanded the rebellion to the rest of Ethiopia.

The EPRDF coalition was created in 1989 between the TPLF and the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), which began life as a breakaway faction of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party. Most of its leaders were Amhara but it was not, as such, organized on an ethnic or national principle. A year after its founding, the coalition was joined by the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Ethiopian Democratic Officers Movement (EDOM), both created from members within the coalition and formed from former prisoners of war. They were not autonomous political parties or movements that joined an alliance freely but were seen, largely correctly, as instruments of the TPLF and its junior partner the EPDM. Upon taking power, the EPRDF government soon facilitated the creation of several People's Democratic Movements (PDMs) among the cultural minorities of South Ethiopia, which led to the creation of the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM). This organization became the fourth member of the EPRDF coalition in its second organizational congress in 1993. EDOM was dissolved at the end of the war and its members either joined the coalition members or the national defence force.

As one can see, the member organizations of the EPRDF were not equals at the launch of the organization in all measurements of organizational capacity. The EPRDF army was essentially composed of the TPLF army, as the other coalition members had little to no military forces to contribute. The resources used to run the civil war were essentially that of the TPLF. Moreover, the most experienced leadership with elaborate institutions for building the army and running the war was that of the TPLF.

Despite such inequalities, however, the internal structure and decision-making process of the EPRDF equalized its unequal partners. Each coalition member delegated equal members of their leadership to the top leadership of the coalition, the 'EPRDF Council'. Each organization delegated an equal number of executive council members to the EPRDF's executive council, the highest leadership body between council meetings. The chairperson and deputy chairperson of the organization were elected by the EPRDF council. Decisions at all levels were taken on consensus and a majority vote after enough deliberations to narrow gaps and differences. The council elected the chairperson and deputy chairperson of the organization.

However, such an institutional mechanism was not enough to manage the asymmetric power relations without additional measures to narrow the gap. In this regard, the TPLF, the strongest member of the coalition, deployed its senior cadres to the other coalition members for mentoring and sharing experiences and to shorten the learning cycle of the organizations. It encouraged the coalition members to recruit massively and opened its training centres for their service. Its political cadre schools and military academy were also opened for the training of newly recruited cadres of the coalition partners. This was the EPRDF that took power in Ethiopia in 1991.

Once in power, the EPRDF proved to be the most organized to lead a transition into an elected government. However, the legitimacy of its member organizations (except the TPLF) was contested in various forms.

The EPDM was accused of not representing the interest of the Amhara by various elites of Amhara origin. Those elites that felt the new political arrangement sized down the Amhara and they were particularly opposed to the federal arrangement designed along the boundaries of cultural minorities. They called the federal structure designed along cultural identities divisive and anti-Ethiopian.⁷

They claimed that the EPDM didn't represent the Amhara, not least because its leaders were non-Amharas, and they created a new political group called the All-Amhara People's Organization (AAPO), which aimed to rally the Amhara for the re-institution of a unitary state in Ethiopia.

The challenge posed by AAPO and the need to focus on building Amhara democratic nationalism forced the ENDM to rename itself as the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM). Despite this reinvention, however, most Amhara elites continued to consider the ANDM as a junior partner to the TPLF and at times as the "Amharic department of the TPLF" that didn't represent the Amhara in any way. This pressure had a tremendous effect on the later developments that forced the ANDM to move towards extreme Amhara nationalism.

Likewise, the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO) was not considered a [credible Oromo organization](#)⁷ by sections of the Oromo elite. The fact that most of its founding members were former prisoners of war (PoWs) also made it a suspect for being an instrument of the TPLF. Many Oromo elites considered it an instrument to undermine the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), an organization that has been in the field since 1974 and was considered the legitimate custodian of the Oromo agenda by most Oromo elites. As a result, Oromo elites were reluctant to join the OPDO.

The SEPDM was also not free from a similar crisis of legitimacy among the [elites of Southern Ethiopia](#).⁹ Most elites of the Southern Ethiopian Nations and Nationalities were reluctant to join it or its member organizations and its recruitment focused on peasants and rural teachers. Some of the elites not only stayed away from joining and supporting the SEPDM but also created their national organizations competing for the legitimacy of the SEPDM and the more than 15 member People's Democratic Organizations (PDOs) it created for the constituent nationalities and peoples in its region.

Organizations like the Omotic Peoples Organization [led by Assefa Chabo](#),¹⁰ a prominent lawyer from the time of the emperor; the [Hadiya National Democratic Organization](#),¹¹ led by professor Beyene Petros; and the Sidama Liberation Front, led by a former member of the Imperial parliament named [Weldeamanuel Dubale](#),¹² were created and posed significant challenges to the SEPDM and its PDOs. They claimed they were the real representatives of the people and began contending for local and national elections in the Southern part of the country.

Despite these challenges, however, during the transitional period, the EPRDF took various measures to manage internal power asymmetry and related challenges. In its first decade in power, it registered remarkable success in managing the diversity of Ethiopia and fast economic development. The key drivers towards a highly centralized public service were the political settlement it reached in 1991 and 1995; the centralization of rent where there was no political budget used for running patronage networks; and its tested vanguard model of leadership. The next section will outline the details of those three factors.

The end of the war and the advent of a political settlement in 1991

Once in power, the leaders of the EPRDF began working to reach a political settlement with other Ethiopian political forces. It launched this process through a transitional conference, which produced a Transitional Charter, and culminated in the ratification of the 1995 constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), a document that provided a framework for nationalism and self-determination, leading to the fundamental restructuring of Ethiopia's unitary state.¹³

The EPRDF's principled view of self-determination and the urgent need to prevent national collapse were the key factors behind this arrangement. Some nationalist movements demanded secession, including the Ogaden National Liberation Front in the Somali region¹⁴ at the time and the OLF in Oromia. On the other hand, there were several political forces including AAPO that demanded the restoration of the unitary state that had been created at the end of the 19th century.

Despite these opposing views, the different political forces in the 1991 conference 'agreed to disagree' and reached what can be called a 'political unsettlement'.¹⁵ The constitution provided the nations and nationalities full sovereignty (Article 8(1)) and the right for self-determination including and up to secession (Article 39) while demanding continued work towards addressing historical injustices and inequalities and creating a strong political and economic community. It provides nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia a full right of secession when and if they believe their interests are not served properly in the union. These provisions provide a guarantee to those nations and nationalities who might opt for secession out of fear of domination.

On the other hand, the constitution also provides guarantees for those unionist forces to work for a unified Ethiopia. The constitution's preamble expresses the commitment of the nations, nationalities, and peoples to live as one political and economic community by rectifying historically unjust relationships and by further promoting their shared interests. The constitution also empowers the federal government to collect the most lucrative tax resources (Article 98) so that it gets the resources needed for building one political and economic community. This prerogative includes the design of fiscal and monetary policy as well as the design and administration of foreign trade and investment policies and strategies. Enacting laws related to the use and protection of land, natural resources, and historical heritage is also recognized as the sole prerogative of the federal government (Article 51(2)). Some estimates show that 80% of domestic revenue belongs to the federal government and the same applies to 90% of external assistance.¹⁶

The federal government is granted the power to enact labour, commercial, and penal codes (Article 55 (2-6)). These articles also empower the HPR to enact private laws where the interest of creating a single economic community requires that such laws be enacted on a federal level. Such design was intended to promote equitable growth of the states, thereby facilitating the creation of a common economic community. The constitution also provides the federal government the right to organize and guide public safety institutions (like defence forces and federal police) and measures (like intervention and declaration of emergency).

While the regional states have the power to administer standards and regulations, issues related to the control and determination of matters of immigration, passports, entry and exit visas, refugees, and political asylum are allocated to the federal government (Article 51). In summary, the normative framework for self-determination and nationalism in Ethiopia is structured in a way that acknowledges sovereignty to be at the hands of the nations, nationalities, and peoples. The federal government's sovereign power comes from the agreement and decision of the nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia to build a shared political and economic community.

Two dangers could, in practice, undermine the spirit of the constitution. One risk is undermining the rights of cultural minorities in the name of promoting a common economic and political community.¹⁷ The other is a shift into an exclusionist form of nationalism in the name of protecting the rights of cultural minorities as elites, who could instrumentalize nationalism in their attempt to grab power.¹⁸ The following section discusses the implementation of the norms established by the constitution.

One can therefore conclude that the constitution does not provide a definitive political settlement for the national question. Instead, it provides a framework that could either resolve the tension through moving nationalism forward by building a common economic and political community and/or the dissolution of the union if and when the nations and nationalities felt secession is in the best interest of their rights. For that matter, in the earlier years (1991-1995) the EPRDF, though dominant, was not the only party in power and the party and the state were not the same as what happened later. Political parties like the OLF had a significant presence at both the centre of power and in the politics of the Oromia region. Other parties also held positions in the government, though with less influence than the OLF.

Centralized form of rent collection and distribution

The concept of the political budget lies at the centre of the PMF. It is the money spent on politics as such. It is the funds available to the political business manager or political entrepreneur to dispense, without needing to account for them, to buy or rent political loyalties and services. During the TPLF's armed struggle and the EPRDF's early years in power, there was no political budget. The resources to sustain the party and its leadership were raised through the institutional mechanisms of the party itself according to its regulations. The political bargaining that went on was not concerned with financial rewards to individuals or factions.

What this meant was that any surplus generated throughout the party and state systems was a public fund, to be allocated by party or state budgets to public goods. The system could therefore be characterized as a centralized public service monopoly.

The financial and material resources required for the armed struggle came from one source: the TPLF's finance and logistics department. Its finances section was the source of money, its ordinance section for arms and ammunition, and its logistics section for all other types of supplies to all the coalition members. Control over material and financial resources was centralized, with senior leaders of coalition partners making decisions collectively, even though the members varied in individual and organizational capacity. This centralized control of resources continued even at the early stages of the government. The economy in general was constrained by cash. There was only minor support from the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) which came through tough bargaining over conditions, and there was very little domestic capital mobilization. State finances were therefore highly dependent on domestic surplus extraction, which encouraged the regime towards a much more judicious and targeted use of its resources. For this reason, the only source of finance for the coalition members was what the EPRDF could mobilize from its members. As the TPLF was the member with most members at the time, most of the party finance was its contribution.

Following the introduction of a party law that forbids political parties to engage in direct economic activity, the TPLF decided to dedicate its accumulated assets to an endowment fund that focused on the rehabilitation and development of the Tigray region, including support to families of martyrs and war veterans. While doing this, it encouraged its coalition partners and provided them with initial funds to launch endowment funds of their own in their respective regions. The centrality of resources in the initial years, therefore, was not limited to financing internal party functions but also extended to the creation of regional parastatal business organizations under the guise of endowment funds.¹⁹

Decentralized access to resources in the initial years was limited. The value-creating capacity of the Ethiopian economy was small and limited to recovery and reconstruction after the war. Resources were obtained from taxes, foreign aid, and loans which were centrally mobilized and administered. EPRDF membership increased access to employment opportunities. The old civil service was being reformed and increasingly replaced by members of the EPRDF.

Members of the EPRDF underwent continuous performance evaluations, leading to reshuffling based on merit, encouraging members to be more principled and less corrupt. As a result, most reconstruction projects of the time were completed on budget and on time, which enabled the government to be less corrupt compared to other developing nations, according to [the evaluation of international financial institutions](#).²⁰ The fact that there was little space for decentralized access to resources further reinforced the logic of a centralized public service monopoly.

The structural vulnerability of such a system is that it accumulates both resources and the power to allocate those resources within a centralized leadership structure. If that structure is captured and its resources redirected for other purposes, the system will collapse.

The tested vanguard model of leadership

One of the key success factors for the TPLF/EPRDF-led rebellion was its vanguard model of leadership. Policy, strategy, and programmatic level decisions were only endorsed at organizational congresses where the members participated through their elected representatives. Debates and discussions on fundamental programmatic and policy issues were confined to the top leadership in between congresses and members were considered to be 'protected' from wrong ideas. Leaders were leading by example and some members gave everything they had, including their own lives, without asking for anything in return. Such a model of leadership enabled the TPLF to work as a properly maintained and oiled war machine.

During the transitional period this model of leadership continued seamlessly in managing the affairs of the organization and the government. Its leadership's collective model of decision-making continued and its members remained mobilized around the single focus of achieving a successful transition, as defined by the organization.

The EPRDF headquarters was the epicentre for managing the cohesion of the front through quarterly, bi-yearly, and yearly evaluation processes that brought all affairs of the regional parties and their governments into scrutiny. Senior EPRDF cadres—many of them from the TPLF—were deployed alongside the regional parties and given responsibility for coaching and guiding the leaders of the regional parties in building their party and government.

Massive political work aiming to forge a unity of purpose among and between the coalition members continued. Recruits were continuously brought to the EPRDF's cadre school for training. Each coalition member instituted its regular publications for internal political work and the EPRDF's periodic ideological publication named Abiyotawi Democracy continued to be regularly published with a similar aim. Such a model of leadership enabled the EPRDF to manage the problems that emanated from the inequalities of its coalition members and continue as a highly centralized public service monopoly. However, the risk was that should that vanguard cease to function in its designated manner, then the entire apparatus under its control would either become paralyzed or prone to capture.

In conclusion, the critical factors that enabled the EPRDF's government to begin and continue as a centralized public service monopoly were: the clarity of thought within and among the members of the EPRDF coalition that was cemented by the drafting and ratifying of the constitution of the FDRE; the centralized form of rent collection and distribution; and the resilience of the tested vanguard model of leadership. However, following the 2001 split in the EPRDF leadership, power became fully centralized in the Prime Minister's Office, heightening the tensions within the governance model that ultimately led to its demise. The next section will cover the developments whereby the EPRDF shifted towards an oligopolistic model torn apart by increasing rivalries.

The Beginning of the End of the EPRDF's Public Service Monopoly

Following the split of the EPRDF leadership in 2001, the EPRDF continued as a public service monopoly and in fact became more centralized and arguably even more efficient at the allocation of rents to economic development. All real decisions were being taken by the Prime Minister at the centre. After the 2005 post-election violence, key leaders of the opposition were incarcerated, competitive politics ended, and a de facto one-party system emerged. During this time, the party massively expanded and the party melted into the state.

In terms of policy development, the developmental state model became the national party-state project, seeking to emulate the Chinese model of rapid wealth accumulation. The regime strengthened the control of the key levers of the economy, retaining the control of the crown jewels of the developmental state despite the enormous pressure of the Bretton Woods institutions to privatize them, at least in part. Despite its dissent from the Washington Consensus economic orthodoxy, however, Ethiopia continued to be [a key ally of the United States in fighting terrorism](#)²¹ which resulted in lenient treatment from Washington DC. For the Europeans, the fact that Ethiopia was delivering on the Millennium Development Goals with rapid poverty reduction meant that they were ready to provide massive development aid, even while lamenting Ethiopia's unorthodox developmental paradigm.²² For the IFIs, Ethiopia was a place where money could be loaned and spent at scale. This combination also attracted foreign direct investment, including from Asia. Altogether, Ethiopia's economy continued to grow, generating a massive increase in its tax revenue.

However, the expansion of the economy also meant that access of officials to decentralized resources of officials at all levels also expanded. Plenty of opportunities arose for get-rich-quick schemes, either through corruption or through speculation, including the use of illicit trade and human trafficking. The critical challenge of governing the country defined the regime's attempt to stay in control of revenue and its allocation alongside the rush for self-enrichment whereby officials could put their hands in the till.

During these times, Ethiopia registered commendable success in all aspects of development indicators. However, the unity and integrity of the party began fast regressing and the coalition members began competing with one another for dominance and control. The EPRDF during this time also ceased to be a thinking organization. It continuously bureaucratized itself at the cost of undermining its capability for strategic thinking and substantive political debate. The next section will highlight the factors in better detail, followed by a section that will capture the developments leading to the end of the EPRDF as a public service monopoly, preparing it for 'the politics of the belly' at the end.

Key developments leading to the end of the EPRDF's monopoly

The key developments that led to such a regress were: increasing de-politicization and bureaucratization of the party; a major shock to the structure of its leadership; continued regress towards an exclusive aspect of nationalism; decentralized and increased access to resources; and the death of its long-serving chairperson. These factors will be discussed in better detail in this sub-section.

Increasing depoliticization and bureaucratization of the party

The internal political life of the party continued to diminish as the leaders of the party, who also held key government positions, were continuously occupied with routine administrative work. Furthermore, the party was fused into the structures of the state, controlling every aspect of the life of the state.²³

The EPRDF had never had any problem in recruiting members as it controlled the government, and over time began distributing government jobs in exchange for party membership. As recruitment expanded through this process, the party structures slowly began merging into state structures. This was particularly pushed by the EPRDF following the results of the 2005 elections, when the EPRDF lost the vote in the major cities to a coalition of opposition parties, as a result of protest votes from urban dwellers. In its post-election evaluation, the EPRDF decided to massively recruit members from the urban centres using the leverage of the state. University students were asked for membership in exchange for jobs, and urban dwellers were similarly asked for membership in exchange for credit from microfinance institutions and related benefits.

The numbers of EPRDF members expanded to the millions, totalling between 5-10% of the adult population. Membership of the party became a key criterion for accessing public service jobs, resulting in all public service jobs being occupied by members of the party.²⁴

At the highest level, the EPRDF decided to expand party work through government structures and assigned several members of its executive council as ministers for key ministries and advisors to the Prime Minister with specific tasks for propaganda, social mobilization, and organizational affairs. Over time, even all-party institutions including the political cadre training school of the party were dissolved and interactive discussions were replaced by televised monologues by party leaders.

The EPRDF not only expanded its membership into the millions but also incorporated mass organizations into its structures as affiliates. The leaders of the party monopolized policy development, policy implementation, and policy evaluation and failed to create any meaningful partnerships with civil society organizations, academics, and policy research institutions. Such a complete fusion of the party into the state structures completely depoliticized the party as its leaders were swarmed by routine bureaucratic works instead of providing political leadership.

The depoliticization of the party meant the party lost the key instrument that had previously animated the coalition parties and glued them together, namely being partners in developing shared political objectives through active political debate. The organization would instead turn into an instrument of power through distribution of material rewards. This set up a structure for the elites to compete for power and dominance in a zero-sum game. In turn this translated into the rivalry among the coalition parties since membership to the EPRDF was only through membership of the respective parties. This eventually set the condition for an oligopolistic rivalry between and among the coalition member organizations while they stayed united against external competitors.

A major shock to the EPRDF's collective and vanguard model of leadership

The split of the TPLF leadership during its internal crisis in 2001 created a new dynamic in the leadership structure of the EPRDF.²⁵ A divide that began around the management of the war with Eritrea later took an ideological turn within the TPLF and its central committee debated for a solid month.

At the end of the discussion, the position of the chairperson won with a very slight majority, whereupon his rivals walked out and the chairperson seized the moment to consolidate his power. His rivals accused him of selling the revolution under the pressure of the international community and serving Eritrea at the cost of Ethiopia. They demanded the meeting be halted and an organizational congress be called. But the Prime Minister, in violation of the statute of the organization, initially suspended them and later purged them from the organization. As a result, six of the nine politburo members of the TPLF, along with seven other veteran members of the Central Committee, were purged from the organization. Such a result came with several consequences.

The first consequence was that it denied the leadership of experienced leaders. The purge of the veteran members meant they were replaced with junior members who were distant from the intricacies of power. This meant the chairperson remained without significant pressure from his peers, as he was leading a group of junior members who were ready to take instruction. This resulted in a new power asymmetry within the TPLF as its chairperson had unprecedented control. Until this point, the absence of such central power had been a factor that had differentiated the TPLF from most liberation movements in Ethiopia and elsewhere in Africa.

The second and major impact of the purge was the message it passed to the rest of the members of the organization. The fact that the measure was taken in violation of the statute of the organization told the members that nothing could spare them from purging if and when their bosses decided to throw them out. Being purged from the organization automatically meant dismissal from all membership-driven assignments including government jobs. This impacted the independent minds of the members and their integrity. It gave each level of leadership absolute power over its subordinates.

Following this change, the PM eliminated the EPRDF headquarters as a parallel power centre. Its role was reduced to party-related administrative tasks and its senior members were assigned to ministerial and other senior government offices under the PM, who was also the chairperson of the organization. The institution of collective leadership was substantially eliminated, as the balance within the highest leadership of the party changed to a leader and the led, with the former peer relationship eliminated.

The third impact was that the Prime Minister enjoyed an uncontested upper hand and went unchallenged,²⁶ which removed the arduous but productive task of negotiation within the collective leadership for policy development and resource allocation. In the short term, this increased the efficiency of the Prime Minister and his government in his decision-making as he was not required to negotiate fundamental decisions with his peers. However, this was not without its drawbacks. Absolute power was accumulated on the chairperson of the party denying him the benefit of peer scrutiny. The role and impact of internal institutions (like the 'control commission' of the organization) were reduced to a nominal role.

The tradition of collective leadership was fully replaced by a 'one man' absolute power. This quickly led to amassing power at the centre. The regions were being increasingly disempowered as the federal government engaged in generalized problem definition and solution prescription. The federal government began acting as though it were leading a unitary state and not a federation.²⁷ This began creating grievances and regional officials began blaming the federal government and member organizations of the coalition began accusing each other. The OPDO and ANDM leaders increasingly saw the TPLF as exercising an unfair degree of control on the government's decision-making process. Unity of purpose among the coalition members increasingly declined and their unity of action continuously and increasingly deepened in the strong hands of the Prime Minister. This development was a recipe for the coalition members to act as rivals within an oligopoly and compete for power.

Continued regress toward an exclusive aspect of nationalism

For 20 years after the adoption of the federal constitution, overall, Ethiopia's leaders appeared committed to its implementation. This was done not only through devolution of resources from the centre but also through guaranteeing representation at the national level. As a result, minorities and historically marginalized groups achieved political and institutional recognition that they never had before. Furthermore, the practice ensured nations and nationalities in Ethiopia an equitable access to national revenue. Federal grants to regional states were allocated on a defined formula designed by the House of Federations, the upper chamber of the legislature. In sum, the federal system marked a sweeping break from the politically unitary and culturally exclusivist past.²⁸

Despite the defining nature of the implementation, the EPRDF regime was increasingly in violation of the rights of nations for self-administration in various respects. Several examples could be cited, including: the merger of five administrative regions of Southern Nations and Nationalities; the repression of the Sidama zone's peaceful demonstrations demanding to form their regional state; the violation of the rights of the nations and nationalities to administer land through the formation of a federal land bank. In a parallel development, 'administrative nationalism' (a reactionary and exclusivist nationalism) began to develop, driven by the interest in using 'nationalism' as an instrument of bureaucratic and political party power. This problem was further compounded by grievances against the federal government's violations of the rights of nationalities for self-administration. We will examine these issues in better detail below.

The origins of the concept of self-determination in the Ethiopian constitution emanate from the Leninist definition of nations and self-determination.²⁹ The Leninist definition of nationalism identifies the problem of nationalism as historically driven so that any formula for managing the rights and aspirations of national groups needs to be implemented in a flexible and responsive manner, as history is not static.³⁰ Despite this recognition, however, federal constitutions designed according to the Leninist framework (for example, the 1923 Soviet Constitution and the 1947 Yugoslav Constitution), have been exceptionally poor at recognizing and adjusting to changing historical circumstances. Both these constitutions aimed at uniting widely diverse national communities within a single economic and political community. They formed an administrative structure around cultural identities with the stated intent of addressing problems related to historical injustices and inequalities. Such a structure was never meant to be static but moving progressively following historical movements. However, both became stagnant and the political mobilization around national identities regressed into administrative nationalism, in which the rent-seeking interests of the bureaucracy became the dominant factor in sustaining and shaping national sentiment and political organization.³¹ This highlights the need for any theoretically cogent approach to the question of nations and nationality to closely attend to history and innovatively capture historical developments in its governance model. Failing to capture these historical developments in the framework for the practice of self-determination and nationalism makes nationalism inflexible and frozen to certain exclusive identity factors. In the long term, this serves to undermine the very progressive and inclusive nature of nationalism itself.

Ethiopia is not immune to this problem. One key limitation of the EPRDF governance model was failing to capture historical developments in the practice of the normative frameworks for nationalism and self-determination. One example is related to the framework for capturing developments of the metropolitan city of Addis Ababa and its environs and the other example concerns historical developments in the lowlands bordering the states of Amhara and Tigray. Bereket Simon, a veteran of the EPRDF executive, in his intervention at an EPRDF council meeting on 25 April 2016, captured this trend in the following way:

The administrative issue of either Wolkait or Gichew can never be an issue to Northern Gonder. What we see is the decadence of the EPRDF leadership and that of its executive council. For example, in Northern Gonder, the ENDM diverted the demands of the Northern Gonder Amhara to a Kimant-Amhara conflict when it failed the demands of the communities for development and now it is warming up to open a new conflict with the TPLF administration in Tigray... The TPLF says 'we Tigrayians' and the ENDM says 'we Amharas'. Each one of us betrayed the organizing principles of the EPRDF in word and spirit. We considered ourselves as advocates for the particular interests of 'our nationality' and began fighting each other along these lines.³²

Following this argument, Bereket added the following points:

We now see that the key form of the reactionary movement has become 'fighting the supremacy of the Tigrayians'. Tigrayians have never given orders to 'others' in the current federal arrangement and will never be capable of doing so as far as the current politics continues. We all (including those who argue so) know that this is not true and is a cover for something else. If governance in the Amhara region failed it is only because the ANDM failed and not anyone else. The current design of governance has made the domination of one over the other impossible. If and when such an attempt arises the country will not continue for more than two to three years together.³³

In summary, one can see that the EPRDF during these times increasingly undermined the constitution in general and its provisions related to self-determination and nationalism in particular. The deviations had both centripetal and centrifugal dimensions, ultimately undermining the transformative aspect of nationalism as envisaged in the design of the Constitution.³⁴ As a result, the member parties of the coalition began to act as rivals competing for control and dominance rather than coalition partners working towards shared political goals.

In turn, this was another factor contributing to the shift in regime type according to the PMF categorization from a centralized public service, developmentalist monopoly to a rivalrous zero-sum oligopoly.

Decentralized access to resources expanded

The continuous and fast economic development registered in the country created wide opportunities for accessing resources in a decentralized way. As a result of rapid economic development, the price of land (both urban land and land for commercial farming) increased exponentially. This increased demand for land created a favourable environment for lower-level EPRDF cadres and local officials to use their position in administering land for their gains.

Illicit trade expanded along with the growth of the Ethiopian economy, providing local officials with decentralized access to resources. For example, the long and mostly ungoverned border spaces of eastern Ethiopia created significant opportunities for the illicit trade of live animals, coffee, and the most lucrative business of Khat trade, all trade types that bring in hundreds of millions of dollars. The illicit nature of such trade brings the power of local officials and security operators into those areas, which in turn became a wonderful opportunity for decentralized access to resources.

The growing interest in acquiring land for commercial farming—driven by the Ethiopian private sector and foreign direct investment—further facilitated the decentralization of resource access. Such land acquisitions gave the regions access to lease incomes and provided local authorities leverage to use their position for rent scraping. As a result, regions began contending for larger tracts of land for commercial farming. Driven by such needs, issues of administrative boundary-making began to emerge. These turned up the heat of ethno-national tensions.

The centralization of political decision-making went hand-in-hand with the decentralization of opportunities for self-enrichment in the context of increasing local tensions and rivalries. There were periodic crackdowns on corruption, but as the implementation of the anti-corruption drives was in the hands of lower-level officialdom, these became an opening for extortion, favouritism and bribery. The totality was a recipe for local elites to engage in self-enrichment. While the developmental project of the state was powering ahead, corruption was a political footnote. However, it grew into a major political threat.

The death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi

In the summer of 2012, the chairperson of the organization and the Prime Minister of the country passed away. In the few weeks before he passed away, the ruling party was seen in disarray and incoherent in breaking the news to the public. Many of the leaders appeared to be in denial as the PM's health deteriorated. However, following his death the leaders of the party acted together for a peaceful transition and elected his deputy as the head of the party and the prime minister.

The new chairperson and prime minister had no armed struggle credentials of any kind and came from the background of a technocrat. He also came from one of the minority nationalities in Southern Ethiopia and was a Pentecostal Christian. This was not an ideal recipe for ruling a very hierarchical society with a complicated history like Ethiopia.³⁵ A combination of these three factors prevented him from determining a new set of priorities and instead, he defined his task simply as maintaining the legacy of his predecessor, who became fetishized in death to a level he never had during his lifetime.

Soon after his ascent to power, PM Hailemariam Dessalegn began facing challenges. He had the task of filling the big boots left by his predecessor without having the necessary capabilities. He began to agree to whatever the leaders of the coalitions demanded, despite their conflicting requirements. Later he tried to play his comrades against each other, which meant none of them were happy with his performance. This situation is succinctly captured by Bereket Simon in his intervention at an EPRDF council meeting on 19 August 2016, in the following way:

The EPRDF is now left without leadership that fights for principles and leads its members to do so. State power is now without any control. No one would hold anyone in state power accountable. Members fear each other and fighting for ideas and on ideas within the EPRDF council has become a history of the past. Each one of us is ready to sing to any tune that serves our populist drives. When and if the tune comes, we are ready to sing all those dirty songs like 'The Supremacy of the Tigrarians'. Failing to arrest this reactionary trend means continuing fighting one another ending any form of shared and collective leadership.³⁶

This incident, along with the other factors discussed thus far, led the coalition partners to go their separate ways, entering into competition for the power of rent extraction and distribution. This eventually led the coalition members coming from the larger cultural communities to fall under the influence of their challengers (particularly the loud diaspora opponents) and shifted them towards using identity politics as an instrument for power.

The end of the public service monopoly under the EPRDF

Once news of the fatal illness and later the passing of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was heard, the Ethiopian political environment filled with speculations of internal and external interlocutors. Some senior leaders of the EPRDF, notably Sibhat Nega, one of the founders of the TPLF, in his interview [with VOA Amharic](#),³⁷ initially denied the sickness of the PM asserting to the public that he was soon to return to work. In this interview, he stated that the EPRDF government has been functioning normally during Meles' absence and insisted that the 'system does not depend on one person'. The former US ambassador to Ethiopia, David Shinn, stated that the PM must have been at least making a reasonable succession plan once he knew his dangerous illness. The former Kenyan PM, [Raila Odinga, expressed his fear](#)³⁸ for the stability of Ethiopia following Meles' death, citing the continued threat of ethnic violence – a fear that was shared by several other international interlocutors.

Despite speculations over pending instability, however, Ethiopia transitioned smoothly at first. Hailemariam, as the deputy of Meles in the party and the government assumed the leadership role until such time the nation completed mourning the death of the PM and his funeral. As a relatively new figure on Ethiopia's political scene, many doubted [whether the old guard would allow him](#)³⁹ to continue as their leader. Indeed, his ascent to power was not without challenges.

A month after the closing of the mourning and the funeral, the EPRDF council held its meeting on 14-15 September 2012 and elected Hailemariam Dessalegn, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, to become its chairman replacing the late PM Meles Zenawi. [The official news](#)⁴⁰ from the EPRDF indicated that the election was smooth and there was no sign of power struggle at the election.

However, Birhane Tsigab, who was a member of the TPLF Central Committee and the EPRDF council, in [his book on the meetings of the TPLF/EPRDF leaders](#)⁴¹ indicates that a key challenge to his election came from the first lady, who herself was a member of the executive committee of the TPLF and the EPRDF. She argued that Hailemariam should at least stay as a deputy for six more months until the EPRDF could have enough time to weigh his skills and leadership character. When this proposition was challenged, she picked Sofian Ahmed, the long-serving finance minister of the era of PM Meles, as a candidate and strongly argued for him to be voted into the position. Despite this, however, most members of the EPRDF council gave their votes to Hailemariam to lead the party until the next congress of the EPRDF and to lead the country until the next election.

Once in power, Hailemariam and his colleagues defined their task as maintaining 'Meles' legacy' and never came up with a declared vision or plan of their own. Though a bit slower than in the previous few years, the Ethiopian economy continued to grow at 9.9% per annum for the next four years, [much faster than the Sub-Saharan average](#)⁴² of 5.4%. During Hailemariam's tenure, Ethiopia's GDP grew from ETB 517 billion to ETB 828.4 billion. Ethiopia was the major economic powerhouse in East Africa.

However, many development projects that were planned and began to be implemented as part of the first Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP I) under Meles did not materialize. The plan to increase the export of goods and services as a percentage of GDP from 10.5% in 2009/10 to 31.2% in 2014/15 not only failed but actually slumped to an average of 9.7% during this time. The share of the manufacturing sector in GDP also stayed below five percent. Also, many megaprojects, such as the construction of ten sugar factories and fertilizer plants, remained unfinished.

During his tenure, Ethiopia's rank on the Ease of Doing Business Index dropped from 124 to 161. Likewise, tighter regulations that deterred the growth of the private sector were also adopted, [according to many business people](#).⁴³

The development that most affected Ethiopian private sector operations was deteriorating internal stability, with rising protests, local conflicts and the increasing practices of both local authorities and EPRDF powerbrokers to act regardless of the rules and regulations. It appeared Hailemariam failed to act as the chief executive of the nation. At times, he would appear in the parliament and publicly announce that he knew that some private sector actors had prisons the state didn't know about and never controlled. In his interview with [Deutsche Welle](#)⁴⁴ in October 2019, he admitted that he was an outsider to the 'deep state' of the EPRDF.

During Hailemariam's tenure, the country was going through a rough and turbulent time and major shifts were taking place in the developmental state orientation. However, none of those issues were substantially discussed in the formal meetings of the leadership over those five years. As a result, there was policy drift, as the social tensions that arose from accelerated development were left unattended, and central planks of economic policy were co-opted in pursuit of other goals.

One example of policy drift was the shift in the objectives of the industrial zones to primarily attract transnational corporations looking for cheap labour, as opposed to the original objective of supporting the Ethiopian private sector.

Derailed objective of the expansion of Industrial zones

Under the developmental state approach, the government aimed to transition Ethiopia into a middle-income country in 25 years and developed its first Growth and Transformation Plan I (GTP I) to cover the period of 2010-15. In this plan, the industry sector received the utmost emphasis by way of encouraging export-based and import-substituting industries. The plan advocated for vertical and horizontal linkages between agriculture and the industrial sector. To this end, the government planned to focus on strengthening small-scale manufacturing enterprises, as they are the foundation for the establishment and intensification of medium and large-scale industries. Over and above creating employment opportunities and accelerating urbanization, these small-scale manufacturing enterprises were considered to play a supportive role in the development of the agricultural sector. As clearly stated in the country's Industrial Development Strategy, the value-adding private sector is considered the engine of the sector's growth. Recognizing this objective, GTP I detailed all the necessary facilitation and support to the Ethiopian private sector so that the industry growth objectives were met.

As clearly stated in the country's Industrial Development Strategy, the value-adding private sector is considered the engine of the sector's growth. Recognizing this objective, GTP I detailed all the necessary facilitation and support to the Ethiopian private sector so that the industry growth objectives were met.

GTP I's objective of expanding industrial parks was aimed at supporting the Ethiopian private sector by providing access to capital and a focus on investing in new technologies. It aimed to provide facilities with all kinds of services from one centre at affordable lease prices, so that the capital of the private sector could focus on investing in technology. By investing in industry-specific centres (for example the leather and textile industry development centres), the state aimed to support the research and development capacity of the private sector.

However, this policy objective later derailed and refocused towards attracting transnational corporations that were looking for cheap labour and access to the market. This objective made the industrial parks focus on labour-intensive industries (with a huge market potential and agricultural products as raw materials), export-oriented and import-substitution industries, and other industries aiming to benefit from [the migration of industries from Asia in search of cheap labor and markets](#).⁴⁵ This drift not only shifted the support of the state to the Ethiopian private sector but also funnelled the investment into constantly migrating international corporations in search of cheap labour and market-generating profits. This can be observed in the performance of industrial parks built in the years of 2012-2022, as discussed in the next section.

Economic impacts of the expansion of Industrial zones in Ethiopia

Given the zero-tariff opportunity of Ethiopia to the US market and the existence of cheap labour, the industrial parks initially attracted several transnational corporations. The Hawassa Industrial Park, for example, attracted one international company each from Indonesia, Taiwan, Spain, France, the UK, Belgium, India, Sri Lanka, and the US. The Bole Lemi Industrial Park as well attracted a total of 11 international companies; three from China, four from India, two from South Korea, and two from Taiwan. The privately constructed Eastern Industrial Zone has attracted 38 Chinese companies. These companies seemed to provide wide opportunities for jobs, though at very minimum wages that are hard to live on. Tens of thousands of labourers, mostly women, were employed in the industrial parks, easing the burden of unemployment in the urban centres.

But continuity of the operations of these companies was dependent on the availability of the market, cheap labour, and other opportunities that contribute to their profitability. Any development that affects their profitability meant the companies were to move to other places with opportunities for profit. It was for this reason that several of the international companies that invested in the industrial parks fled the country following the US decision to terminate the [AGOA trade preference for Ethiopia](#)⁴⁶ as of 1 January 2022. After this development, several [multinational companies fled the country, including PVH](#),⁴⁷ the biggest clothing and textile company operating in the country. This has resulted in the lay-off of over 11,000 employees, mostly women. The decision has also affected domestic firms that had exportable products under the AGOA privilege – but they had nowhere to flee, instead attempting to develop alternative products and markets for their investments.

Furthermore, the export earnings of the country did not increase. The total export earnings of the country, according to the [report of the World Bank](#),⁴⁸ was \$3.8 billion in 2012, decreased to \$3 billion in 2013, went down to \$2.9 billion in 2015, and further slumped to \$2.8 billion in 2016 with a little spike to \$3.4 billion in 2014. Contrary to this, the financial value of [duty-free incentives by the Ethiopian government](#)⁴⁹ has increased to \$3.261 billion in 2015/16 from \$1.116 billion in 2011/12, according to the data from the Ethiopian Customs and Revenue Authority.

Moreover, the expansion contributed little in terms of [technological transfer and innovation](#).⁵⁰ Almost all firms that got into the industrial zones are subsidiaries of multinational companies. These subsidiaries received knowledge and skills from the international head office and therefore had no incentive to engage in research and development for innovative new practices. In contrast, domestic firms relied largely on self-sustained efforts to attain skills and knowledge. Their efforts for accessing new technologies included: attendance in national and international conferences, the recruitment of foreign experts, and piecemeal organizational innovation in production processes. With a focus on the newly established industrial zones, the Ethiopian government folded its earlier call for a plan towards linkages between local and foreign companies to facilitate knowledge and technology transfer.

This focus on industrial parks came at the expense of major infrastructure and industrial projects. The construction of ten new sugar factories and associated sugar cane farm developments failed to be completed in time as a result of a combination of resource, attention, and management capability limitations. The Yaya Fertilizer factory, which included the development of a coal mine and a 90-megawatt power plant, was delayed. After abandoning it for six years, the current Ethiopian government is now looking for a partner to reactivate its construction.⁵¹ The rest of the 2000km-long railway line planned as part of GTP I was interrupted after the 759km-long Addis Ababa-Djibouti cargo and passenger transport project was completed. The railway line connecting Mile-Hara-Woldiya-Mekelle to the port of Djibouti whose construction began with a total budget of 1.6 billion birr was slowed down during Hailemariam's period and is not officially closed to this date.⁵²

One can therefore conclude that the objective of building and expanding industrial parks derailed from enhancing the relationship between agriculture and industry and building the capacity of the Ethiopian private sector, towards attracting Foreign Direct Investment at any cost. A study report of the World Bank released in December 2024 provides the evidence for this. The annual growth rate of industry decelerated from an average of 26.8% between 2010 and 2016 to an average of 10.5% during the 2016 to 2022 period. Similarly, unemployment nearly doubled in the years 2016 to 2022 to 9% when compared to the 5% unemployment rate during the 2010 to 2016 period. The female unemployment rate also increased to 13% in 2021 compared to 7% in 2013. Job creation in the industry sector not only stalled after 2016, but also led to the loss of around half a million jobs.⁵³ Furthermore, Hailemariam proposed and won the tentative agreement of the EPRDF executive council to privatize the commanding heights of the economy and fully liberalize the monetary policy.⁵⁴

A free fall of the EPRDF leadership

A book written by Berhane Tsigab,⁵⁵ a former member of the TPLF Central Committee and the EPRDF council, summarizes the discussions of the TPLF Central Committee and the EPRDF council and party congresses and conferences in the years 2013-18. Berhane Tsigab served the TPLF central committee and the EPRDF council since the 11th Congress of the TPLF in 2013 and continued until he was purged from the leadership in 2018.

The book summarizes key issues discussed in each of the 15 TPLF Central Committee meetings, one TPLF congress, and one TPLF conference held between March 2013 and October 2018. The book also summarizes the key issues discussed in 13 EPRDF council meetings, one EPRDF congress, and two Amhara- Tigray people-to-people conferences held between September 2012 and March 2018.

According to the key agenda items captured in the book and the official press statement of [the EPRDF executive council in December 2018](#),⁵⁶ the main issues discussed in those meetings were related to what the party called "predatory decadence". Aspects of what they called "predatory decadence" varied. These included: undemocratic behaviour; embezzlement of money and public assets; using one's identity for personal gains; factionalism and the use of informal networks undermining the normative mechanisms within the organization; unhealthy competition between and among coalition members for dominance; and the state being captured by wealthy individuals who unlawfully used it for business interests.

However, while everyone agreed that the key problem in the leadership of the party is this predatory decadence, no one ever took personal responsibility for any of those limitations. At times, allegations of 'predatory behaviour' were made as instruments for power struggle. For example, the massive purge of the TPLF, which removed its chairperson and [the president of Tigray](#) regional administration⁵⁷ is an example. Similar purges were made by [the leadership of the OPDO](#)⁵⁸ and the leadership of the Oromia regional administration.

Despite such incidents where the label of 'predatory decadence' was instrumentalized in the power struggle, everyone, including those leadership members later deposed, enjoyed discussing 'predatory decadence' as a general theoretical concept that was derailing the leadership of the party from its revolutionary agenda. In each of their discussions, the leadership was accused of instrumentalizing power in order to transition themselves into a ruling class without taking any individual or collective responsibility to stop it.

The relationship among the coalition members of the EPRDF also emerged as a main agenda item in the discussions at the EPRDF council meeting held in March 2016. The book highlights that after the recurrent riots in the Oromia and Amhara regions, the leaders of both organizations were at the centre of the criticisms in the EPRDF council meetings. Subsequently, both organizations were repeatedly asked to launch an internal process to cleanse themselves of 'rent seekers'. The leaders of both organizations, who were squeezed between criticism of the council members from the top and the riots of the youth from the bottom, finally reinvented themselves as anti-establishment and created an alliance under [the name Oro-Mara](#)⁵⁹ to jointly stir their way for dominance.

Another important agenda item that continuously appeared in most of the meetings of the TPLF central committee and the EPRDF council meetings was the relationship between the 'old guards' who were replaced by the party's 'program for new leadership substitution' and those who replaced them. The EPRDF has been discussing the issue of developing internal mechanisms to enable it to change leadership hands. Addis Raye (New Vision), the party's ideological magazine, [in its August 2009 edition](#)⁶⁰ discusses the need for limiting the service time of EPRDF leaders and mechanisms for substituting them. According to this plan, all the leaders of the EPRDF from the time of the armed struggle were to go into retirement. In the plan, these replaced members were allowed to participate in leadership meetings with a non-voting status to pass institutional memory to the new members. In the plan, the last person to retire from the old guard was PM Meles Zenawi. In his interview with [Financial Times on 6 February 2007](#),⁶¹ Meles said that he was planning for retirement in three to four years.

Based on this plan most leaders of the old guard were supposed to retire on the 11th congress of the TPLF and the 9th congress of the ANDM respectively. Veterans like Seyoum Mesfin, Arkebe Okubay, Zeray Asghedom, and Birhane Gebrekristos from the TPLF and veterans like Bereket Simon, Tadesse Kasa, Hilawae Yosef from the ANDM were among the candidates for retirement, as noted in the minutes of leadership plenums and congresses. After the death of Meles, however, the veterans changed gears and opted to stay. As one can see from the [list of elected members](#)⁶² of the EPRDF coalition member parties, the ANDM veterans succeeded and continued in their leadership positions but the TPLF veterans were retired according to plan.

Some members of the TPLF leadership, for example Birhane Tsigab, expressed that the relationship of the veterans with the incomers then continued to be turbulent. Tsigab quotes the following statement from one of the veterans during the 9th organizational congress of the EPRDF.

Ato Hilawae from ANDM, a member known for being outspoken and clear in his engagements within the leadership, suggested that the relationship between the veterans and the new generation of leadership is bad and there is a need for both to openly discuss and address it. This was supplemented by Ato Seyoum Mesfin, a veteran and one of the founders of the TPLF, by stating those veterans replaced by new ones should not remain scattered all over. A proper mechanism for their participation in transferring their experiences and assisting the leadership in its decision-making should be in place.⁶³

This turbulent relationship between the veterans and their replacements continued until Hailemariam's resignation. This was particularly so within the TPLF. The veterans were accused of continuously encouraging careerist individuals within the new leadership to rebel against the key leaders of the TPLF. Finally, in a marathon meeting that continued for 37 days without interruption (in October-November 2017) they managed to purge three TPLF executive committee members and six other central committee members, accusing them of rent-seeking expressed in the form of conspiring and using every available means to stay in power, and creating a network of cronies within the EPRDF and the OPDO. This opened the path for the emergence of '[team Lemma](#)'⁶⁴ within the OPDO, a group that was stretched between resistance and governing which eventually led it towards creating the Oro-Mara alliance that was largely an opportunist coalition against the TPLF.

The agendas of the regular and emergency meetings of the leadership bodies of the EPRDF and the members of its coalition were occupied by the kind of issues raised above. Agenda items related to basic plans of the government and major policy decisions hardly appeared in the meetings.

During this time the centralized decision-making practice, something the EPRDF leadership was identified with, changed for good. Given the normative mechanism of the EPRDF and the history of its practices, policy and strategic-related decisions were the prerogative of formal institutions like organizational congresses, conferences, and formal leadership body meetings. The formalities of their meetings gave the impression that they were functioning as designed. The reality was different. These meetings were consumed by jockeying for position and power, leaving decisions related to policy and strategy to be decided and changed as routine government practices by members of the executive, either deliberately or by default. Instead of institutionalized policymaking, the ground was laid for transactional politics with executive authority assumed by office holders without being subject to scrutiny or accountability.

The Politics of the Belly

Jean-François Bayart described the post-colonial African state as characterized by 'the politics of the belly.'⁶⁵ This is an apt depiction of Ethiopia under Abiy Ahmed. Hailemariam left a regime in disarray, with the ruling elites divided and competing for control and dominance along ethnic lines. He left a party coalition that had lost any sense of shared political objective among the leaders of the EPRDF coalition and its coalition members. On the other hand, the country was faced with an unprecedented wave of demands for democracy and good governance that ultimately resulted in the downfall of the EPRDF regime. The complete collapse of the ideas and ideals of the EPRDF was replaced by unregulated competition for power, and associated resources looked like the hyenas closing in and beginning to scavenge.

Abiy Ahmed came to power as a result of this massive demand for democracy and change. He and his colleagues emerged from the EPRDF establishment and reinvented themselves in opposition to that establishment. Initially, they appeared reformist and at times revolutionary, working for the establishment of multi-party democracy and overall democratic transformation. Their objective, in real terms, was to win in the scramble for the riches of the state by controlling state power.

In the first months of the transition from Hailemariam to Abiy, the EPRDF was both fractious and energetic, where the coalition members were both partners and rivals. They colluded in dismantling the developmental state policies but clashed with one another over such issues as the overall political direction of the country. Within a short period, however, Abiy moved to become the dominant member of this cabal. With the release of political prisoners, amnesty granted to armed opposition groups and their declared decision to peacefully compete for power, as well as the promises of the young prime minister and his unreserved denunciation of the previous regime, it looked like a democratic opening was on the corner that promised to transition Ethiopia to new heights.

Abiy Ahmed was described as transactional by [his long-time friends](#),⁶⁶ believing in money and power rather than principles and political ideals. He attempted to show the world that his agenda was entirely in line with the dominant international ethos of economic liberalization and political democratization. He may have believed some of it. But his key strategy was to win international legitimacy to enable him to consolidate power and attract foreign backing.

However, within a space of a few months, the hopes for democratic transformation began to dwindle. The prisons of Ethiopia were soon filled with more journalists and political prisoners. Ethiopia became Africa's highest imprisoner [of journalists following Eritrea](#).⁶⁷

Power was rapidly recentralized under Abiy. His model of governance had much in common with other African 'big man' rulers in countries such as the Congo, who use a suite of practices to promote personal power.

The advent of Ethiopia's 'big man' politics

African 'big man' politics is a highly personalized form of rule, akin to the court of a medieval king.⁶⁸ The big man state is the anti-thesis of a Weberian state. It is run by self-interested, rent-seeking, and autocratic leaders.

On the ascent of Abiy Ahmed to power, the void of leadership in the EPRDF was filled immediately by transactional politics. [EPRDF's consensus based](#)⁶⁹ decision-making was scrapped and replaced at times by obscure deals. The long-held tradition of open debates and discussions was replaced by monologues by the leader and sycophantic responses from party members and parliamentarians. When questions came to a vote, Abiy would secure a majority by side dealings.

A year after his ascent to power, Abiy hyped the issue of eliminating separate parties of the coalition partners and proposed bringing them into a single united party. This issue of a merger had been discussed since the period of Meles Zenawi, but none of the coalition members had taken the challenge seriously. To the contrary, as the EPRDF member parties' positions on fundamental policy issues were more and more divergent from one another, the idea of a unified party disappeared from the agenda. However, once in power, Abiy saw this as a wonderful opportunity to take control over all the member parties. He rushed the unification proposal through, violating the norms and procedures of the internal EPRDF mechanisms, including abrogation of the law of the nation on political party registration and operations.⁷⁰ Abiy's process soon evolved into dissolving the EPRDF altogether rather than merging it.

After dissolving the EPRDF, Abiy launched the Prosperity Party in its place. The TPLF opted out of the Prosperity Party but the remaining coalition members and those EPRDF affiliate parties who were the ruling parties of the Somali, Afar, Gambela, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Harari regional states joined the new party and relinquished their registration as independent parties. Through this development, the limited autonomy of the coalition members and their affiliates and the bargaining power this autonomy provides was removed as each one of the leaders lost their previously well-defined constituencies, and with that they faced much-reduced bargaining power.

In line with his practice of political ambiguity, Abiy proposed that the Prosperity Party would be a unified national party but also seemed to suggest that its regional chapters behave as autonomous regional parties. Abiy did not articulate a cogent, well-articulated political philosophy, but rather made a range of speeches and issued writings that straddled between the thoughts of 'Great Tradition', a school of thought that justifies the Ethiopian empire-building project and stands for a unitary state; and a 'counter-narrative' thinking, which recognizes historical injustices and inequalities.⁷¹ While being a believer of neither 'a great tradition' nor the 'counter histories' narrative, he used both narratives alternatively so that he gained support in the middle of ambiguity.

After the launch of the Prosperity Party, Abiy Ahmed, like the rest of African 'big men', began running the country as his personal domain. Centralizing flows of resources domestically and internationally and ensuring that enough of these flows were off-budget and under his personal control, Abiy secured sufficient funds to buy off enough of the political elite at any one time to build some kind of power base and to engage in his grandiose projects. With this capacity, he began circulating elites through the corridors of power. He undermined institutions and demolished them at times when he thought they were hindrances to his style of rule. He used public money to run his pet projects and finance his patronage network at the cost of neglecting all legal financial instruments and their guidelines. He promoted the assimilation of modern and customary elites by casting himself as a hybrid of the two.

Unpredictability as a constant

Abiy instrumentalized disorder to an unparalleled extent. All policies and alignments are unpredictable, save one: the Ethiopian Prime Minister will do what is necessary to stay in power. Those who refuse to become part of his circus are consigned to the political wilderness. Those who play by his rules can expect intermittent rewards, depending on his largesse. He constantly keeps them off guard by shifting them, dismissing or reappointing them. None can consolidate a position or develop an institution that could threaten Abiy himself.

Ethiopia has become a country with no predictable foreign policy. Abiy signed a [tripartite agreement](#)⁷² with the President of Eritrea and the Republic of Somalia for a larger East African Federation and involved both countries in his war against Tigrai. It didn't take him much time to turn against both countries immediately after the end of the Tigrai War. He declared that Ethiopia has a natural right to direct access to the sea, eying the [port of Assab](#)⁷³ and signed an [MoU with Somaliland](#)⁷⁴ (a self-declared break-away state of Somalia) for exchanging a naval base on the coastline of Somalia in return for Ethiopia's recognition of Somaliland as an independent state. Later he switched to cutting a deal with Somalia, under the facilitation of Turkey. He demanded the President of the Sudan Republic, General Al-Burhan, [control of the al-Fashaga triangle](#)⁷⁵ (a borderland contested by Ethiopia) and close off any access of the Tigraian Defence Forces to Sudan, which he did. A few months later, Abiy Ahmed was accused by Sudan of supporting the forces of the RSF⁷⁶ following the footsteps of the UAE.

Abiy's divide-and-rule approach proved effective at enabling him to dominate the domestic political scene, but at the price of chaos and conflict in the country at levels that had not been seen in half a century. Abiy Ahmed waged war [against the Tigraians](#)⁷⁷ and began committing all forms of crimes against humanity, including [genocide in Tigrai](#).⁷⁸ He could express that he loves the US and [would die for its security](#) if need be⁷⁹ and then accuse [it of neo-colonialism](#)⁸⁰ when it began demanding he stop committing war crimes. He could wage war [on the Amhara](#)⁸¹ security forces after using them for his war in Tigrai and dare to ask the Tigraians to partner with him in his war against the Amhara following the signing of the Pretoria agreement.

This section will identify the patterns of the activities of the Ethiopian regime, illustrating its similarities with paradigmatic African big-man politics.

Constant circulation of elites

Abiy shows the least trust in those around him. He has blamed his colleagues for not being loyal to him several times in publicly televised meetings. For example, he was heard asking his senior cadres to either be fully with him or with his opponents, suggesting that they cannot differ from his views in any way. This has led him to circulate them fast so that they live in an environment of uncertainty.

The Amhara regional state, for example, saw four presidents in the first 25 years (1992-2018), an average of approximately one president every six years. However, it has had six presidents since the advent of Abiy into power in 2018 – an average of one president each year.

Gedu Andargachew was the president of the region when the ANDM created an anti-TPLF Oro-Mara alliance with the then-president of the Oromia region, Lemma Megersa. This was the alliance that brought Abiy to power. A few months after his ascent, Abiy removed [Gedu Andargachew](#)⁸² and [Lemma Megersa](#)⁸³ from leading the Amhara and Oromia regional states by appointing them to the positions of foreign minister and defence minister, respectively. Lemma and other nine senior officials were later fired and removed from their positions for unspecified reasons. In a similar move, Gedu was fired from his position and assigned to be the head of the National Security Council until he was later fired from that position and put under house arrest.

A year after his ascent, the president of the Amhara regional state, Ambachew Mekonen, was murdered, along with three high-level officials of the region, the chief of staff of the Ethiopian army, and another senior army general. These high-level killings occurred within a few hours. Despite the high-level and coordinated nature of the killings, however, no independent mechanism was set up to investigate them.

Following the death of Ambachew, [Temesgen Desalegne](#),⁸⁴ a former colonel and a longtime ally of the Prime Minister whom he brought from retirement, became the president and led the region until the first year of the Tigray war. Temesgen was later forced to resign and was appointed to direct the Information Network Security Agency. [Agegnehu Teshager](#)⁸⁵ was sworn in in his place. Agegnehu, after leading the region in the first year of the Tigray war, was removed and appointed to be the head of the House of Federation. He was then replaced by a former President of Debremarkos University, [Yilikal Kefale \(PhD\)](#),⁸⁶ who led the region until the signing of the Pretoria agreement to stop the war in Tigray. Yilikal Kefale was then removed immediately following the signing of the Pretoria Agreement that ended the fighting in Tigray and replaced by [Arega Kebede](#),⁸⁷ who served as head of the finance bureau.

Most of the leadership of the regional governments has faced a similar rate of circulation of officials. A similar high velocity of turnover was also seen in ministerial positions. In the last five years, [Adanech Ababae](#),⁸⁸ the current mayor of the city of Addis, has served as the mayor of Adama city in Oromia, minister for the ministry of internal revenue, and chief general prosecutor for the country, and now the mayor for the city of Addis Ababa. This is the case for several senior government officials in different regional states and at federal level.

The rapid circulation of elites in power denies them stability and continuously diminishes their bargaining power. Officials in this situation have two options. The one obvious option is to compete to demonstrate one's loyalty to the master to obtain some security of tenure. The second option is to work and wait for a time until they build their constituency so that their bargaining power improves, a strategy that further fragments the political system.

The demolition of institutions

Abiy's governing style has undermined the Ethiopian multi-national republic and its institutions. The rule-bound decision-making structures of the state are increasingly being replaced by single-handed decisions of the PM and his network of advisors, many of whom operate in the shadows. When questioned by his parliament, on the sources of funds for his vanity projects, he was candid enough to tell the parliament that it does not have the right to ask him to account for a budget that it did not approve for him.

Abiy created what [he called the Republican Army](#)⁸⁹ independent of the Ethiopian National Defence Force and without the knowledge and policy decisions of the parliament. He [promoted General Birhanu Jula](#)⁹⁰ to the rank of Field Marshal and later asked the parliament to amend the defence statute so that it recognized this rank, which did not exist until his unilateral appointment. His office declared the disbandment [of the Special Police Force](#)⁹¹ of the regional states in contravention of the power vested in the regional states according to the constitution. There are many other examples. They indicate that the formal structures of the Ethiopian government have been replaced by an informal network, the visible mechanisms supplanted by the invisible. Those informal mechanisms sprout everywhere, joined by an underground root belonging to the prime minister. This is what Bayart calls the 'rhizome state'.⁹²

The centralized and strong budgetary discipline of the EPRDF vanished with its collapse and replacement by the Prosperity Party. Federal government funds ceased being managed by the federal ministry of finance. The prime minister had a parallel source of public funds he claims to have obtained from donations from friendly states, notably the UAE and Ethiopian private sector donations through mechanisms like '[Dine for Ethiopia](#)'.⁹³ Major personalities from the Ethiopian private sector were invited to attend the 'Dine for Ethiopia' dinner. The cost of one dinner was five million birr (which was over 100,000 USD at the exchange rate of 45-50 birr per 1 USD at the time). That occasion raised over 4.5 billion birr for Abiy to finance his pet projects without needing to account for the funds. He also used other mechanisms for raising money from the public and public finances. For example, the PM [claimed](#) to have written two books⁹⁴ and made the regions and line ministries buy them for free distribution and for sale to other citizens. The PM claims to have used the funds for public projects but there has been no scrutiny from public financial control institutions.

Abiy has been privately raising funds from external sponsors. In a speech in May 2019 to the parliament he claimed that a leader of one unnamed country gave him funds which he used to build a school for the blind. He also informed them that the former Italian PM gave him money equivalent to five million birr which he used for a similar purpose. Some of his admissions are hard to understand. In a speech [to his parliament in November 2022](#),⁹⁵ he said that the mayor of Jima gave him 700 hectares of land and the mayor of Arba Minch 400 hectares of land for whatever purpose he sees fit. All these developments demonstrate the demolition of the institutional mechanisms for raising, using, and accounting for public finance.

The use of public money for projects with opaque procedures

The PM spent over \$130 million (the equivalent of 5 billion birr at the time) on the renovation of his office and [old palace and its compounds](#).⁹⁶ Neither the purchase process for the renovation contract nor the contractor are reported by government institutions. The so-called "unity park" built on an open space in front of the national palace was built by a Chinese company contracted by aid money from China. The contract amount is unknown as the contracting process has not followed proper government procedures. He has built similar projects for what he called tourism development, including the Lake Wenchi Hallala-Kiela and Gorgora projects, again from unknown sources of funds and through opaque procedures.

Abiy is building a [multi-billion dollar palace complex under his direct control](#).⁹⁷ The project includes the palace, luxury villas, artificial lakes, and a zoo among other things. The project is expected to take 503 hectares of the Yeka Forest on the north-western outskirts of Addis Ababa. In a live televised question and answer parliamentary session he told the parliament the following:

I hear of a gossip in town accusing me of building a new palace complex at the cost of 49 billion birr on Mount Entoto. It is true I am building a palace but it is a palace plus and I call it 'a city in the jungle'. It is going to cost 400 to 500 billion birr and I am not going to ask you for a coin for its construction. It is grand but that shouldn't be your worry. By way of comparison, the construction of the 'palace of a thousand rooms,' inaugurated in 2014 by the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in Ankara, cost 491 million euros.

The concern here is not limited to the cost of these projects, which is significant when compared to the total budget of Ethiopia, but also the opaque procedures that entirely bypassed the country's financial administrative rules. The PM is 'courageous enough' to tell the parliament that he is not going to account for the money he spends on his pet projects as the money is neither raised nor spent under the purview of parliament. There was nobody in the parliament who could come out and tell him that none of the resources he accessed while in public office were that of the public and that he should be accountable.

Extraversion for resource extraction

Big man states are “Janus Faced” and ‘extraverted’; showing one face to the external world, from where they get their money, and another to the domestic citizenry, from whom they demand supplication.⁹⁸ The state does everything to look friendly and approachable to the external world while it shows all forms of repression internally to discourage any form of resistance from the public.

The EPRDF had some of the characteristics of extraversion and a Janus-face. Its image, as presented to the outside world, was a reliable security and development partner, making progress towards respecting human rights, even while it became increasingly intolerant of dissent domestically. However, its successes in political stability, security, and economic development were genuine. There was a gap between the EPRDF’s claims and the realities, but it chiefly took the form of a time lag between stated and actual achievements. Under Abiy, the disparity between the external image and the internal reality has grown vast. Abiy is a performer for both domestic and international audiences, with the difference that it the international audiences provide the lion’s share of the money. In this regard, Abiy is unduly proud of the international prizes he has received and endeavours to gain new awards and recognition using any means. The award of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize gave Abiy a free pass in prominent international forums. His staff worked hard for him to secure the 2024 Agricola Prize of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, for inflated claims of agricultural development and wheat production. Abiy has been avid in attending global meetings and being seen in the presence of world leaders. This image projection has been remarkably successful in continuing to attract international praise and associated assistance.

Abiy’s vast investment of time and resources in the beautification—as he sees it—of Addis Ababa is part of this effort. He anticipates that the foreign investors he woos, especially from the UAE, are impressed with his flashy new buildings, parks and roads, and that they recognize a fellow traveller in the world of high-end real estate development, a sector infamous for its corrupt practices.

The use of money to build patronage networks

During its decades in power, the character of the EPRDF changed from a vanguard party that bound its members together by ideological commitment and discipline, to a vast state-party that provided material inducements to secure membership and loyalty. It was a patronage system awaiting a takeover by a leader prepared to use patronage far more ruthlessly than his hapless predecessors.

In his objective to build a personal patronage network, Abiy began by persuasion. He was, however, deceptive. He encouraged different constituencies to believe whatever they wanted to about him.⁹⁹ While constituencies from the 'great tradition' of highland Abyssinia considered him a unionist, other constituencies might believe that Abiy was an Oromo nationalist, and yet others that he was a committed federalist. He co-opted influential individuals into his network and thereby isolated them from their constituencies, leaving them with less bargaining power to compete. Birhanu Nega, former head of Arbegnoch Ginbot 7 and later head of the Ethiopian Citizenship Party (EZEMA), and Belete Molla, head of the National Amhara Movement (NAMA), are examples in this regard. NAMA is no longer a vibrant opposition¹⁰⁰ and the Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (aka EZEMA) ended up being a one-man party since the co-option of their leaders.¹⁰¹

The downside of making grandiose promises is that it is impossible to fulfil them. Within a year of assuming office, Abiy was in the position of deciding which group he would disappoint first. He chose the weakest, namely the segment of Oromo nationalists who had been the backbone of the demonstrations.

Abiy used public money to build patronage networks and to buy public sympathy. He targeted influential individuals. For example, in 2019, he gave Pastor Yonatan, an influential evangelical, 25,000 euros on a televised¹⁰² evangelical prayer. It is also rumoured that he has given large sums of money to Andargachew Tsigie, a figure politician in the extreme Amhara group; Mohamed Hassen (a TV journalist working with Walta TV and author of a book chronicling Abiy Ahmed's first two years of power); Alemneh Wassie (a prominent journalist since the days of Mengistu Hailemariam); and Tewodros Teshome (a prominent filmmaker). He authorized Tewodros Teshome to use the public park at Ghion Hotel although there is no contract to enable this businessperson to use this public place for organizing public events.¹⁰³

The businessman has built a traditional restaurant with traditional music. He has also given Henok Alemayehu, founder and [owner of Zehabesha](#),¹⁰⁴ a YouTube-based media and entertainment channel, a chunk of land in the city of Debre Birhan as a price for his contribution to the Tigray war.

Abiy also spent public money to buy public sympathy and to portray himself as a philanthropist, particularly in Addis Ababa with a particular focus on the peripheries of the national palace. The PM built two four-story buildings with 24 units of [apartments built at Abware](#),¹⁰⁵ adjacent to the palace and Yeka sub-city, Addis Ababa, and distributed the apartments to it to 24 old and poor women who were living in makeshift shelters in that community. He also upgraded a football field in a similar location with grass coverage and handed it to the community. Abiy has made a point of publicly hosting a program that he called “Me-ad Magarat” which literally means “sharing a food on the table” in which he is photographed serving lunch to thousands of poor people on [public holiday occasions](#).¹⁰⁶ Over and above sharing lunch, each of the invitees was given a chicken, five litres of edible oil, and a sack of wheat flour. Government media reported that the events cost the PM five million birr each.

Reciprocal assimilation of elites

‘Reciprocal assimilation of elites’ refers to the way in which traditional and modern, formal and informal roles are merged, so that political leaders can drink from diverse streams of legitimacy. Abiy himself claims to be everything. He claims to be a [pastor](#),¹⁰⁷ an [academic scholar](#),¹⁰⁸ a [technologist](#),¹⁰⁹ a [playwright](#)¹¹⁰ and an artist, a Muslim, a Christian, and an evangelical. Most importantly, he portrays himself as a God-given leader of the nation. Other officials in the regime follow this pattern. Many claim to have PhDs.

The merging of the modern and customary is particularly advanced in Oromia region. An increasing number of politicians claim the title of aba ghada, a traditional title for Oromo elected elders who have important cultural roles. The existing aba ghas of Oromia are meanwhile being given a role in the political endeavours of the Prosperity Party. For example, they were tasked as mediators between OLF and the Oromia PP and later made political statements labelling OLA as an enemy of the Oromo people. The government uses the aba ghas as either messengers to the people of Oromia to support the ENDF in its war efforts against its people or as ambassadors for peace, as it did during and after the Tigray war.

This assimilation extends to the leadership of higher education as well. Most board members of the 47 public universities are federal, regional, and zonal officials. The board chairpersons of the universities in particular are all higher officials of the Prosperity Party. For example, Frehiwot Taye, CEO of Ethio Telecom; Dr. Lia Tadesse, Minister for the Ministry of Health; Adam Frah, the speaker for the House of Federation and deputy president of the Prosperity Party; Legesse Chaffo, Speaker for the House of Representatives; and, Ambassador Awaal Wagris, are board chairpersons for the universities of Addis Ababa, Jimma University, Bahir Dar, Arba Minch, and Assosa universities respectively.

One can therefore observe that the continued actions of Abiy Ahmed's government undermine professionalism and their actions fuse traditional, religious, and state structures where ministers are at times pastors, university board directors, and customary elders.

Perpetual creation and administration of disorder

The most notable feature of the six years of Abiy Ahmed's rule has been the eruption of instability descending into outright war, including genocidal war.

One of the factors propelling the terminal crisis of the EPRDF was its inability to manage the increasing insecurity across large parts of the country. Its declaration of a state of emergency, empowering the security services to use force without a political strategy for resolving the conflict, led to a fatal crisis of confidence. As Abiy ascended to power, the instability reached new heights. [From April to July 2028](#),¹¹¹ a localized conflict between communities in Ethiopia's Gedeo Zone of Southern Nations and Nationalities Regional state West Guji Zone of Oromia region flared up and resulted in huge loss of life and property and the displacement of a million people. The communities had a long tradition of resolving such conflicts and controlling the damages before they expanded. However, during this time, security forces of the Oromia region were involved in mobilizing the Guji to cleanse their area from Gedeo communities. It was heard that [the Gedeo minority](#)¹¹² had filed a case against the Oromia region on their rights as a minority living in the Oromia region. This triggered the elites of the Borena zone and their security forces to cleanse them out before any formal legal proceedings began taking place on the issue.

Abiy did not create this problem. However, rather than embarking on a systematic political strategy of defining the nature of the crisis, seeking a consensus among all those involved on a shared understanding of the problem, and embarking on a strategic political resolution, his government instead began by trying to manage the conflicts in a haphazard way, before turning to a practice of instrumentalizing the conflicts for political gain.

Faced with the array of local conflicts in 2018, beyond attempting to address the emergency humanitarian situation, the federal government did nothing to promote accountability and justice. This set a precedent for similar acts in different parts of the country. Thousands of Tigraians residing in Western Gonder were soon displaced from their homes, leaving their hard-earned assets and sent to Tigrai. Similarly, hundreds of Amharas and Oromos residing in the Metekel zone of the [Benishangul-Gumuz regional state](#)¹¹³ were killed and several thousand displaced. Such acts of displacement continued in most of the regional states including Oromia, Gambela, Somali, and the Southern Nations and Nationalities regional state. With this, it appeared that the national political crisis [was playing out in the regions](#).¹¹⁴

The government abandoned the established practice of setting up inquiry commissions in conflicts that have significantly impacted the lives of civilians. Undermining the constitutional right of the House of Federation to deal with and decide on relations between states, the regime established new mechanisms such as the Administrative Boundary and Identity Issues Commission, an entity that was abandoned after two years without dealing with a single boundary dispute and/or identity issue. The government continued to manage the chaos by declaring a state of emergency and setting up emergency administration command posts that mainly consisted of the security forces.

Abiy expected the major challenges to his new regime to come from the TPLF. However, instead of attempting to create a collaborative stance to nurture the confidence of the leaders of the TPLF, he became combative. He comprehensively removed TPLF members from their federal power positions and did everything to undermine the TPLF. His government continuously accused the TPLF of being behind every crisis in the nation, which in return escalated the tension between the federal government and the TPLF.

These developments – along with the reconfiguration of ethnic politics, the domination of transactional politics, and the advent of the security alliance with Eritrean President Isayas Afewerki – resulted in war in Tigrai. With the creation of the Oromo-Amhara alliance, ethnic politics in Ethiopia was reconfigured to become exclusive and reactionary.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, the Bretton Woods institutions provided an unprecedented level of financial assistance, based on their mistaken acceptance of Abiy Ahmed as a reformer.¹¹⁶

Once Abiy signed agreements with Isaias, the relationship between Asmara and Addis Ababa completely sidelined Tigrai, the region that shares the most in terms of boundaries and divided communities with a long history of cooperation and conflict. The war began in November 2020 and quickly became a genocidal assault on the people of Tigrai. The war ended in November 2022 following the signing of the [Pretoria Permanent Cessation of Hostilities Agreement](#).¹¹⁷ The Pretoria deal was not a comprehensive political agreement, but rather a truce that permitted Abiy to extend his brand of divide-and-rule politics into Tigrai. The agreement was focused solely on Tigrai, excluding not only Eritrea but the neighbouring regions of Afar and Amhara. Within weeks, the Pretoria agreement became the crucial background to the eruption of war in the Amhara region.

Currently, [most of the regional states](#)¹¹⁸ including the regions of Amhara, Oromia, Tigrai, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Gambela regions are at war, while the rest are marred with localized conflicts. There is no regional state that is free from any form of armed conflict.

In sum, it appears that the default operating procedure of Abiy Ahmed's government has become manufacturing chaos and trying to administer it. Instead of engaging with the root causes of conflicts, the regime accused the TPLF of being behind the Guji-Gedeo conflict, the Oromo-Somali conflict in Eastern Harar, and the conflict in most parts of Oromia. Instead of constructively engaging the TPLF, Abiy's regime cornered it, accusing it as the sole owner of past and present problems of the nation. It created an anti-TPLF alliance with Isayas and waged the two-year devastating war on Tigrai. At the culmination of the war, it excluded the Amhara security forces from the peace process with Tigrai and disarmed those security forces when they began expressing their disappointment. This provoked a rebellion in Amhara. At every stage, Abiy presents himself as the essential protagonist in resolving conflicts that he himself has created, and then reduces peace negotiations to piecemeal transactional bargains that create further grievances and divisions, and conflicts. Ironically, the architect of chaos presents himself to the world as the one who stands between Ethiopia and chaos.

Four key elements that maintained Abiy Ahmed's regime in power

Abiy Ahmed maintained control of the state on attributes similar to the typical post-colonial African state described by Bayart.¹¹⁹ The first factor is the full control of the security forces that has enabled him to maintain overt and covert harassment of the opposition forces. The second factor is the full control over economic rents, with which he bought off dissident politicians and at times used the resources for the fragmentation of opposition groups by distributing rents. The third factor is the support of the Western powers and international financial institutions, who, despite having waved the flag of democratic conditionality and respect for human rights, have not dared to pursue such principles to their logical conclusion, and have continued to provide finance. The fourth factor is control over the means of communication and domination of the substance of public discourse. These four factors overlap closely with the three currencies of the political marketplace: coercion, cash and communication.

Full control over the security forces

Abiy Ahmed's key focus in the first months of his ascent to power was assuring the allegiance of the security institutions. During his ascent, he was primarily engaged in creating his VIP protection force and active in the selection, training, and deployment of what he called 'the republican guard', whose training and armament were managed through [the assistance of the United Arab Emirates](#).¹²⁰ Over the following years, he expanded the size and organization of the republican guard and made it a parallel security institution answerable directly to him.

The republican guard was trained, armed, fed, and salaried differently from the rest of the army. Furthermore, this unit was directly answerable to the PM and did not have organic relationships with the command of the army or any of the other security institutions of the government.

Abiy changed the leadership of the Ethiopian National Defence Force until he made sure of the absolute loyalty of the command. In a very short period, he changed to the Chief of Staff of the army. He sent General Samora Yonus, the long-serving Chief of Staff of the Ethiopian army to retirement and replaced him with General Seare Mekonen. A few months after his promotion General Seare was killed.

To date, no independent investigation has been done on who was behind this assassination. Immediately after his death, General Adem Mohamed became Chief of Staff to only stay in the position for a few months and was removed on the day the Tigray war was launched. He was then given an ambassadorial assignment to Turkey. His replacement was [General Birhanu Jula](#),¹²¹ who was later promoted to the rank of Field Marshal and continues to be the Chief of Staff of the ENDF.

The allocation of ranks by itself is a source of a rent dividend, as the benefits someone gets increase as they progress up the hierarchy. Over and above the benefits the senior officers get pertinent to their ranks, based on the rules and regulations of the army, Abiy has been distributing rents in different forms. One example is the distribution of urban land to senior military officers. For example, in September 2023, Andargachew Tsige, a former ally of Abiy who had recently fallen out with him as a result of the Pretoria agreement and the war in Amhara, produced a document that revealed that Abiy Ahmed had recently awarded prime urban land to senior military officers: 3,000 square meters of prime urban land to Field Marshal Jula, 2,000 m² to each of the four full-star generals; 1,500 m² each to 17 three-star generals, 1,000 m² to 31 of his two-star generals, and 800 m² of urban land to 58 one-star generals. Another mechanism of buying allegiance was the widespread distribution of rank advancements. In doing this he ignored the established procedures of the army for promotion and delegitimized the rules and procedures of the army.

On one day alone, on [17 January 2022](#),¹²² Abiy distributed over 101 promotions to the rank of a general, including creating the new position of a five-star general, field marshal. Promotions to lower-level officers also continued massively. At the same time, he called for the review of the military doctrine, military art and science of the army, and other internal guidelines of the army, labeling them as 'politically tainted' instruments tailored to serve the EPRDF.

Abiy also encouraging the creation of parallel security institutions. The initial massive expansion of the Special Police under the command of the regional states and the creation of various forms of armed groups loyal to Abiy are examples. The Special Police of the regional states were deployed in the Tigray war along with the ENDF and continue to do so in the war in Oromia and lately Amhara regions. A secret security committee by [the name Koree Negeenya](#)¹²³ was established, headed by the President of the Oromia region, Ato Shimelis Abdissa. This committee not only eliminates suspected enemies but also acts pre-emptively to keep protesters off the streets.

Full control of the economy

There is an inherent tension between the allocation of funds for a developing economy and the large political budget needed for big man patronage. It is a common experience in Africa for structural adjustment or economic liberalization, notably privatization of state-owned businesses and assets, to result in takeover of these assets by political cronies, leading to inefficient, kleptocratic crony capitalist systems. The Ethiopian experience of dismantling the developmental state replicated this.

Abiy inherited a vibrant economy that was growing at almost 10% each year for two decades. During the five and a half years that Hailemariam was in office, Ethiopia's GDP grew¹²⁴ by an extraordinary 60% from ETB 517 billion to ETB 828.4 billion (approximately \$30.1 bn at the exchange rate of the time)¹²⁵ enabling Ethiopia to become a major economic powerhouse in East Africa.

While the developmental state economic policy was in place, the role of the government in the economy was significant. Some major sectors of the economy were under government monopoly serving as major sources of revenue and growth. The sectors the state monopolized and the companies it owned included: Ethiopian Telecommunications; Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation; Ethiopian Airlines; Ethiopian Shipping Lines including Ethiopian Maritime Authority; and Ethiopian Railway Corporation, among others.

These companies have been a source of major resources from the profits of their operations. Furthermore, their part or full privatization promised a major source of income for the government. For example, in 2021 a second cell phone license,¹²⁶ ending Ethio Telecom's monopoly, was sold to a consortium of telecom companies led by Safaricom Kenya for \$850 million. The Safaricom consortium included Japan's Sumitomo, Vodacom, Vodafone, and the British development finance agency CDC Group. The government is now asking international companies to submit expressions of interest for the partial sale of Ethio-Telecom,¹²⁷ a finance ministry document showed. There is also an intent to privatize the ten sugar factories that were under construction, with the sugar-cane farms under development.

The funds from these sales are not used to further national development. Instead, substantial revenues have been used to buy weapons. The government has financed the purchase of an assortment of armed drones from Turkey and Iran, huge arms purchases from the former Soviet satellites, and new upgraded SU-30 fighter planes purely from government finances and revenues from the privatization of public companies.

The support of foreign powers and the Bretton Woods financial institutions

Abiy had powerful international friends who benefited from his position and were ready to help him in return. One of the first was the US. Another was the United Arab Emirates, which lavished him with investment, diplomatic backing, arms, and cash. The foreign support Abiy received also included very sympathetic profiling from the Western media, promoting him as a leader of a kind to transform Ethiopia into a democracy. Time magazine named him as one of the most [influential 100 people of 2019](#)¹²⁸ a year after he came to power. The Financial Times gave him a front-page cover calling him [Africa's new Talisman](#).¹²⁹

The foreign finance support he received was huge. The US alone gave more than \$4.1 billion [in aid to Ethiopia](#),¹³⁰ including more than \$600 million to support democratic and economic reforms. Part of the latter funds were paid to embedded advisors to the Ethiopian government ministries. The support of the Americans was not limited to money but also extended to [diplomatic support of all forms](#).¹³¹ In its internal strategy document of 2018, the American embassy in Addis Ababa cheered Abiy's 'strongly Western orientation' and argued that his administration represented a 'once-in-a-generation opportunity to advance US interests in the region.' This support continued through the early months of the Tigray War. While a full-fledged war involving the whole army of Ethiopia, Eritrea, and all forms of security actors in Ethiopia was continuing to commit crimes against humanity, the American embassy was singing along with the Ethiopian government, reducing it to 'a small law enforcement operation'.

The UAE agreed to \$3 billion [investment support](#) package¹³² to Abiy Ahmed's regime in 2018 alone. Out of the total investment agreement, \$1 billion was to be directly deposited in the Ethiopian national bank to ease the foreign currency shortage in the country. The UAE's support was not limited to financial assistance but also included arms supplies. It allowed the Ethiopian government to use its armed drones, initially deployed to UAE anti-Houthi operations in Yemen from the Eritrean port of Assab, in its war in Tigray. It also air-bridged its military support to the Ethiopian government at several intervals.

International financial institutions like the World Bank and the IMF also provided a large amount of support. [The World Bank in October 2018](#)¹³³ began its support by approving \$1.2 billion in grants and loans to support economic development and continued its support by approving large sums of money in support of his regime. In 2024, the IMF Executive Board approved a four-year US \$3.4 billion [extended credit facility arrangement for Ethiopia](#).¹³⁴

Control over communications

Abiy was, from the outset, focused on his image, his narrative, and his control over communication. This involves both promoting his own persona and polishing his credentials, and suppressing independent media.

The regime has zero tolerance for any form of dissent. Independent voices and professional journalists are subjected to all forms of harassment, including forced disappearance. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) report of December 2022 indicated that Ethiopian authorities had detained [more than 60 journalists](#)¹³⁵ since the start of the Tigray war in November 2020. This made the regime the worst jailer of journalists in Africa following Eritrea. In its June report, the CPJ indicates that it is aware of at least 54 Ethiopian journalists and media workers who [have gone into exile](#)¹³⁶ since 2020 for fear of risks to their lives and professions. On the other hand, the regime has deployed a large number of paid social media activists, which the regime calls "the digital army", to disseminate messages from the centre of the PM office and to suffocate any independent voice in the media. A BBC investigation confirmed that the Prosperity Party's "Media Army" is involved in the dissemination of [false information](#)¹³⁷ in social media campaigns.

Is Ethiopia a political marketplace?

In summary, the key factors that kept the Abiy Ahmed regime similar to those African states that had lived on manufacturing chaos and managing disorder include its control of the security institutions, its control of the economy that enabled it to finance wars and patronage networks, and massive support from Western and Arab interlocutors who not only supported it diplomatically but also supplied finances and arms.

The question arises, is this more akin to a traditional 'big man' political apparatus, albeit using modern technologies, or is it a version of the political marketplace? The two are not incompatible, and 'big man' centralized patronage can over time become a purely monetized system of transactional bargaining. For now, the most plausible conclusion is that Ethiopia is further down the path of the marketization of politics, but has not arrived there yet.

Conclusion

The EPRDF leadership was transformational when measured by Ethiopia's tangible achievements in the first 25 years of its rule. Its economic development project has been one of the most successful in sub-Saharan Africa, registering over 10% economic growth for 15 consecutive years.¹³⁸ Its federal system had transformed the nation from a 'prison of nations' into a 'nation of nations'.¹³⁹ It was an anchor of stability in a turbulent region and one of the most politically stable countries in the Horn of Africa.¹⁴⁰

One of the key reasons behind this success was the fact that the EPRDF ruled the country on the logic of a centralized, institutionalized state dedicated to public service. The key features of the centralized state included the political settlement it reached at its ascent to power; a centralized form of rent collection and distribution; and its tested vanguard model of leadership that incentivized members to comply with collectively designed rules and regulations of the party. However, such a centralized public service monopoly could not last indefinitely as key factors emerged that worked against it.

The regression of the public service monopoly was driven by a mixture of internal and external factors, structural problems and political conjuncture and decisions. The internal structural factors included the continued bureaucratization of the party; continued regression towards an exclusive form of nationalism; and the tensions arising from increased access to resources by distributed power centres increasing alongside the inevitable societal disruption that accompanied rapid economic growth. Unemployed educated youth who were left out of development, along with farmers displaced en masse for urban expansion and private sector development, combined to create intense pressure for change, and the EPRDF was unable to meet their rising expectations or put in place a credible political process to bring the leadership of the young protesters inside the political fold.

Conjunctural factors and poor political decisions included the death of its long-serving chairperson and the mismanagement of elite political rivalries by his successor. The failure of the EPRDF to deal with the combination of a popular uprising and elite disaffection and rivalry spelled its demise. Meanwhile, international donors and financial institutions failed to recognize the structural fragility of the Ethiopian state and recklessly encouraged accelerated political and economic reforms, disregarding the risks.

At the collapse of the EPRDF under Hailemariam, Abiy Ahmed and his colleagues reinvented themselves as in opposition to the EPRDF establishment, snatched state power, and began shaping the government to resemble a paradigmatic African neo-patrimonial state that generates chaos and survives through administering disorder.

Abiy Ahmed completed the demolition of the EPRDF and its ideals. He launched the Prosperity Party on its death and skilfully laid the foundation for typical African 'big-man' politics.

He reconstructed the security forces of the nation in a manner that created multiple armies, including a new republican guard loyal to him, a reconstructed national army in which the officer corps was focused on personal material rewards obtained by gratifying their commander-in-chief, and multiple regional special forces and paramilitaries that were increasingly pitted against one other. In practice, he eliminated the security sector and instead created a divided security arena where security is the result of the competition and balance created by different security actors, and insecurity is a result of the competition between the security actors for domination and control.¹⁴¹

Abiy reconfigured economic decision-making and rent allocation, using his discretionary power to cement patronage networks and position himself as the principal economic actor. Currently, the country is at war with itself. There is no region that is free of armed conflict. The continued economic development the nation was demonstrating has now become a thing of the past. The regime is surviving on proceeds from the sale of long-accumulated assets of public sector enterprises and licenses. Inflation and unemployment have become unbearable for the citizens. The relationship among the nations and nationalities has never been as balkanized as it is now in its history. Will the country come back to its senses and get out of the current quagmire? Time will tell.

Over the course of a few years, Abiy came to power, the multi-national republic the EPRDF began building was completely demolished and replaced by something resembling a typical African big man state, where the ruler thrives on disorder, informal networks of patronage tolerate and indeed encourages corruption, and yet that maintains a façade of stability. The continuity of national leadership is not to be confused with stability: the status quo in Ethiopia today is not only unstable, but it is on a path to intensifying instability that can only lead to further turmoil and disaster.

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