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# The Amhara of Ethiopia: Embracing and Using Imposed Identity to Resist Injustice

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**Abstract:** Ethnic identities often solidify in response to perceived or actual injustices endured by groups. Historically, Amharic-speaking people in Ethiopia have resisted ethnic identification, aligning instead with broader Ethiopian nationalism. However, the rise of extreme ethnonationalist forces in the country has subjected the group to negative narratives, violence, and marginalisation, associating them with past state domination. In response, the Amhara have increasingly embraced ethnic identity as a form of self-defence. This study employs thematic analysis to explore the experiences of the Amhara people and the subsequent emergence of their collective identity, including the rise of resistance movements. Despite this new alignment, Amhara elites and activists paradoxically maintain a strong commitment to Ethiopian unity, reflecting a complex duality in their socio-political stance. This balancing act illustrates their struggle to survive while remaining loyal to national unity. The article argues that sustained violence and marginalisation have catalysed the rise of Amhara group consciousness, transforming Ethiopia's political landscape. This study offers broader insights into how group mentality can emerge as a response to systematic and sustained injustice and the implications this has for redefining power politics in Ethiopia and beyond, providing insights for policymaking and future research.

**Keywords:** Addis Ababa; civic nationalism; Ethiopian Orthodox Church; ethnic consciousness; ethnic marginalisation; ethnic violence; ethnic nationalism; Oromo; territorial disputes; Tigrayan

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## 1. Background

There is widespread consensus that ethnicity has become a significant driver of global conflict (Choudhry 2007; Lijphart 2002; Morrow 2005; Vanhanen 1999). Ethnicity-based conflicts have particularly escalated since the end of the Cold War, impacting both the Global South such as in Nigeria (Nwangwu 2023) and the Global North such as in Belgium (Grillo 1998). Muller (2008) underscores the enduring influence of ethnic nationalism, pointing to its role in the violent dissolution of multiethnic states in Europe, with the former Yugoslavia serving as a prime example. According to Muller, ethnonationalism has been a double-edged sword, contributing to conflict and stability. While ethnic diversity has often led to strife and instability, Muller argues that the collapse of empires into nation-states in Europe has promoted harmony by creating more ethnically homogeneous societies, thereby reducing internal conflicts.

Ethnic identities often solidify in response to perceived or actual injustices (Smith, as cited in Coakley 2012). Similarly, Lonsdale (1994) attributes the rise of ethnicisation in Africa to competition for resources, compounded by the legacy of colonialism on the continent. Outgroups are often excluded from access to public goods such as employment, promotions, and project opportunities (Osaghae 2005; Tarimo 2010; Vanhanen 1999). Even more concerning, as Nwangwu (2023) highlights about Nigeria's Biafra conflict, ethnic power struggles can escalate into violence aimed at suppressing certain groups.

Ethiopia, a multiethnic society, has faced considerable turmoil, particularly since the 2018 power shift from ethnic Tigrayan to ethnic Oromo elites. The country's major

ethnic groups have, at various points, accused each other of monopolising state power and resources. During informal talks in March 2024, residents of Addis Ababa mentioned to this researcher the growing dominance of Oromo elites in state institutions since the current government assumed power six years ago. Oromo elites, however, contend that they deserve greater representation in public offices, given their status as the largest ethnic group in the country. Accusations of domination are not new to Ethiopia. Similar claims were made against Tigrayan elites, who were accused of monopolising political power, economic resources, and security sectors during their rule from 1991 to 2018. Moreover, some Oromo and Tigrayan writers (Jalata 2017; Fiseha 2019) pointed to past Amhara domination. However, this raises the question of whether the Amhara acted with a collective ethnic consciousness, given their historic support for civic nationalism rather than ethnic nationalism (more on this later). Nonetheless, Oromo and Tigrayan elites continue to associate the Amhara with the ruling classes of the past.

Amidst the power reconfiguration in 2018, Amhara ethnic nationalism has emerged and intensified as the members of the group have experienced violence, hostile narratives, and marginalisation. This study explores how this group identity and solidarity has emerged and evolved as a response. While the literature has addressed the rise of Amhara nationalism (Tazebew 2021), there is a need for a comprehensive analysis that situates this development within a broader context and implications.

In this article, while 'ethnicity' generally refers to linguistic and cultural groups, and 'nation' and 'nationalism' denote the political dimensions of ethnic groupings, the terms are used interchangeably.

The remainder of the article is divided into two sections, followed by concluding reflections. Section 1 outlines the experiences of the Amhara people as a group, including negative narratives, marginalisation, territorial dispossession, and attacks on the Orthodox Church, which is perceived to favour ethnic Amharas. Section 2 delves into the academic literature to examine elite narratives concerning the Amhara people, as well as the broader state and society. This section also explores how members of the group have become increasingly ethnically conscious, engaging in grassroots resistance that has since evolved into a region-wide movement.

## 2. Factors for the Rise of Amhara Ethnic Nationalism

The emergence of ethnic nationalism among the Amhara is shaped by a complex interplay of historical, political, and social factors. The next section explores the key drivers behind the rise of Amhara nationalism, including hostile narratives, violence, political and economic marginalisation, territorial dispossession, and attacks on the Orthodox Church.

### *2.1. The Otherness of Amharas through Elite Narratives*

Divisive propaganda by ethnonationalist elites and writers has likely laid the ideological foundation for anti-Amhara sentiment and the resulting persistent violence and hostility towards the community. Derogatory terms have frequently been used to describe the Amhara, labelling them as "nefitegna" (militarist), nostalgic, or chauvinist (Tazebew 2021, pp. 301–2), "alien conquerors" (Chanie 1998, p. 96), "centralists" (Baxter 1998, p. 52), "enemies" and "colonial settlers" (Jalata 2017, 2023), as well as "oppressors" (as cited in Yetena 2022) linked to past rulers. They have also been called "Ethiopian colonisers" and "Abyssinian conquerors" (Bulatovich, as cited in Jalata 2017, p. 85). Jalata (2023) further described the current government as "neo-nefitegna" after it ostensibly promoted a discourse of unity. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) has campaigned to "rid the country of foreign settlers (nefitegna)" (Baxter 1978). The use of terms like "aliens" is particularly problematic when applied to segments of society. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.), "alien" refers to "a person who is not of a particular group or place; a foreign-born resident who has not been naturalised and is still a subject or citizen of a foreign country". In modern times, this term, which has largely fallen out of use, serves to isolate or portray the targeted group as outsiders or strangers. As part of this narrative, Ethiopia has been

depicted as a "colonial state" and "a colonial construct by Abyssinians" (Jalata 2017, 2023, p. 87).

The terms Abyssinia and Abyssinians historically refer to traditional Ethiopia and the population inhabiting the northern highlands, particularly the Amharas, Agews, and Tigrayans. In contrast, the Oromo and other southern ethnic groups are often characterised as colonised and oppressed peoples (Jalata 2017; Baxter 1998).

From its inception, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) promoted a hostile rhetoric towards ethnic Amharas (Yetena 2022). Berhe (2008), one of the TPLF's founders who later left the organisation, noted the following:

> *Contrary to its publicly stated objective, anti-Amhara propaganda was subtly encouraged within the movement [i.e., TPLF]. Cultural events, theatrical performances as well as jokes and derogatory remarks were used to disseminate this poisonous attitude. Fuelling some historical grudges perpetrated by the ruling classes, the Sibhat [a highly revered figure within the TPLF leadership] faction tried to cast doubt on the possibility of living in unity with 'the Amhara'*. (Berhe 2008, p. 201)

Some Oromo scholars have advanced a contentious, often-disputed, colonisation thesis. The expansion of Ethiopia's border to the south, southwest, and southeast is characterised as a conquest and colonisation (Jalata 2017; Hassen 2002). However, the colonisation thesis is problematic because historical accounts show that Oromos came and settled in most areas they inhabit today after migrating from today's southern Ethiopia around the sixteenth century (Henze 2000; Yates 2020). This mass movement occurred when the monarchy was weakened by the invasion of the Ottoman Turks and Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, also known as Ahmed Gragn (Trimingham 1952). Later, many Oromos integrated themselves into the ruling class in Shewa and led the southern expansion under Menelik II (reigned from 1889 to 1913). Moreover, some view Menelik's march to the south as an effort to regain territories that had been part of the empire during medieval times (Henze 2000). Therefore, describing the Amhara as colonisers is not valid. Despite this unfounded claim, history is often contested and reconstructed to serve political ends and build a positive collective self-image. This tendency to reinterpret past events illustrates the complexity and ongoing debates surrounding Ethiopian ethnic identities and histories.

Despite the validity of their underlying claims, politically motivated discourses have significantly contributed to perpetuating the marginalisation, hostilities, and violence directed towards the Amhara people. These narratives have reinforced a cycle of "othering," which positions the Amhara as outsiders within their own country, leading to ongoing conflicts and attacks (Yetena 2022; Shiferaw Chanie and Ishiyama 2021; Tazebew 2021; Atnafu 2018). Tazebew (2021) further clarifies this issue, explaining how these discourses provoke violence and discrimination against the community. Tazebew shedded light on the impact of rhetoric in instigating conflict in this way:

> *Competing ethnic nationalisms have dominated the Ethiopian political landscape since the late 1960s. Most of these ethno-nationalist movements are underpinned by a common hostility towards the Amhara. In other words, the nationalist movements that engulfed Ethiopia were in a way based on the othering of the Amhara. The nationalist movements claimed that their national territories were either incorporated or colonized by the Ethiopian empire, where Amharic high culture was dominant*. (p. 298)

### *2.2. Ethnic Violence and Human Rights Violations*

According to Triandafyllidou (1998), the concept of national identity must be understood as inherently relational, defined both from within and through contrast with others. This intergroup relation can in its extreme form involve physical harm to individuals based on their ethnic background (Popitz and von Trotha, cited in Wimmer and Schetter 2003).

Ethnic violence has significantly impacted the Amhara community, with its severity escalating notably since 2018. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC 2021) reports that the Amhara have been victims of killings, massacres, ethnic cleansing, sexual

violence, forced evictions, property destruction, pillaging, looting, and vandalism between 2021 and 2023. Furthermore, ethnic Amharas have been subjected to kidnappings for ransom, hostage-taking (Enact 2023), prosecutions, and unlawful detentions, often in undisclosed locations. They have also faced ethnic slurs, discrimination, and job dismissals.

Additional acts of injustice include mass atrocities, a crackdown on the Orthodox Church (and its clergy and followers), and mass displacements and restrictions on entry to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital. Since the current government assumed power, Amharas have faced travel blockades to and from Addis Ababa; these were implemented by the city mayor citing security reasons, despite the absence of credible threats at the time. Moreover, transporters have been kidnapped for ransom. This pattern of systemic violence underscores the profound challenges facing the Amhara people within Ethiopia's complex ethnic landscape. Furthermore, following the state of emergency issued in the Amhara region in August 2023, politicians, activists, and journalists have been routinely kidnapped in broad daylight by security in plain clothing (EHRC 2023). These detainees were held without court orders, and some were subjected to torture (EHRC 2023).

### *2.3. Political Marginalization*

Amharas have faced political marginalisation since the TPLF's rise to power in 1991. The TPLF and OLF restructured the state with an emphasis on ethnic diversity, excluding pan-Ethiopian parties with which the Amhara identified. Consequently, the Amhara were the only major group without representation when the foundation of the current ethnic federal structure was laid down in 1991. The exclusion of pan-Ethiopian political parties was justified, saying they did not subscribe to peaceful political engagement (Fiseha 2019).

The pro-TPLF line of argument states the following:

> *In the context of political uncertainty given the collapse of the military regime, there were some centrist political forces that opposed the agenda of the 'National Liberation Fronts'; these forces established a new party under the umbrella of the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces, both at home and abroad, and condemned the peace process in London as well as the subsequent conference in Addis Ababa; they called for the dissolution of the TGE [Transitional Government of Ethiopia]. These radical and centrist groups, which included the former regime's party, the Workers Party of Ethiopia, were left out because of 'their unwillingness to renounce violence as a means to achieve political ends'*. (Fiseha 2019, p. 8)

The ruling party of the Amhara region, ANDM (Amhara National Democratic Movement), became a proxy to control the region, first under the TPLF and now under the Oromo-dominated Prosperity Party. The regional constitution of Amhara contains a statement implicating the Amhara in the oppression of other ethnic groups, describing them as "being duly convinced of the fact that. . . an atrocious national oppression. . . committed. . . against the majority of nations, nationalities, and peoples".

Over the last three years, the current governing elites have routinely employed force, making peaceful power struggles a risky affair. Amhara lawmakers, both from the incumbent party and the opposition, have been detained for criticising the war and the killing of civilians, in breach of constitutional rules regarding parliamentary immunity. According to the Constitution, parliamentarians have the privilege not to be arrested (except for flagrant offences) unless their official immunity is withdrawn by the respective legislative bodies (Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 1995).

### *2.4. The Ceding of Amhara Territories*

During the post-1991 transition and the redrawing of the reorganisation of the subnational units, the Amhara went unrepresented through a political party. The lack of representation was particularly consequential during the boundary re-demarcation. A closer look at the commission's membership reveals the conspicuous absence of the Amhara as a group (Vaughan 2003). And when the boundary commission was set up, there was no Amhara political party. The ruling party, the EPRDF, comprised four parties: the TPLF, rep-

resenting ethnic Tigrayans; the OPDO, for ethnic Oromos; the SEPDM (Southern Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Movement); and the EPDM (Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement). As the name suggests, the EPDM was a pan-Ethiopian party until it was converted to an ethnic Amhara party in 1994. Consequently, despite being the second largest ethnic group, the Amhara were not represented in the boundary commission, the body overseeing the "ethnic 'Scramble for Ethiopia'" (Borago 2018). Not unsurprisingly, the Amharas lost vast fertile and geopolitically strategic areas along with their populations, namely the Raya and Welkait areas to Tigray, Metekel to Benshangul-Gumuz and Dera, and Siyadebrina Wayu and Fentale to Oromia (Council of Representatives 1984, E.C.).

Following the decline of the TPLF's dominance in 2018, long-standing territorial disputes between the Amhara and Tigray regions resurfaced, particularly over the Welkait area. Although Amhara grievances had been building for years, tensions boiled over in July 2016 when security forces attempted to arrest the leader of the Welkait Amhara Identity Question Committee, which had been advocating for the return of Welkait to the Amhara region (Lyons 2021). This confrontation marked the beginning of the Gonder/Welkait crisis, as efforts to detain the committee's leaders sparked widespread unrest (Lyons 2021). Formed in August 2015 by members of the Amhara community in Welkait, the committee sought recognition of the area's historical ties to Amhara, predating its controversial transfer to the Tigray region during the 1990s (John 2021). This event ignited a stronger sense of ethnic identity and collective political mobilisation among the Amhara people.

### *2.5. Oromo Elite Aspiration for Exclusive Ownership of Addis Ababa*

An enclave within the Oromia region, Addis Ababa has constitutional autonomy with "a full measure of self-government" (*Constitution of Ethiopia*, Art 49.2), and its accountability lies with the federal government (ibid., Art 49.3). According to the 2007 official census (whose credibility was highly disputed), the top three ethnic groups, Amhara, Oromo, and Gurage, accounted for 47%, 19%, and 16% per cent of the population of Addis Ababa, respectively (Central Statistics Agency 2007). Addis Ababa has always been the seat of national governments since the 1880s. It is also the country's political, economic, and commercial, as well as its spiritual, cultural, and intellectual hub. Ethiopians refer to Addis Ababa as the "capital of Africa," as it hosts the African Union, and numerous international organisations, and ranks as the fourth-largest diplomatic centre globally.

In recent years, Oromo politicians, inside and outside the government, have turned attention to the capital city arguing that it should be part of Oromia, claiming it was founded on Oromo land. However, as noted earlier, the area was inhabited by other ethnicities before the arrival of Oromos in the second half of the sixteenth century. In contrast, Amharas maintain that Addis Ababa has always belonged to all Ethiopians, not just one group, and should remain so. Habtamu, a history professor, mentions that Addis Ababa (and its predecessor, Barara) was established by the ethnic Amharas (Tegegne 2019).

The Constitution governs the relationship between Addis Ababa and the Oromia region. Article 49(5) of the Constitution provides the following:

> *The special interest of the State of Oromia in Addis Ababa, regarding the provision of social services or the utilization of natural resources and other similar matters, as well as joint administrative matters arising from the location of Addis Ababa within the State of Oromia, shall be respected.*

Despite their relatively small size, as noted earlier, Oromo politicians from both the government and the opposition have made their intentions clear regarding the future of Addis Ababa, aiming to make it an exclusively Oromo city. In 2019, Lemma Megersa, then president of the Oromia region, announced plans to "secure Addis Ababa as part of the Oromia region" (Shiferaw Chanie and Ishiyama 2021, p. 1047). Similarly, prominent opposition leader Jawar Mohammed stated that the issue concerning Addis Ababa had evolved from one of border demarcation to one of ownership. This push for exclusive ownership represents a new development, previously unheard of. Historically, the focus had been on Oromia's 'special interest' in the city, as outlined in the Constitution, and the

implementation of this provision. Additionally, there had been calls for border demarcation and the preservation of the cultural identity of surrounding communities in response to the city's expansion.

With the ongoing demographic changes and the control of the city's administration and security apparatus by Oromo elites, its autonomy and status as a federal capital are being eroded in a way that will ultimately undermine the sovereignty of the national government. In 2023, parts of the capital city were transferred to Oromia through an opaque deal between the regional government of Oromia and the Mayor of Addis Ababa (Borkena 2019), who is also an ethnic Oromo. During his time in Addis Ababa in 2024, this researcher observed the demolition of homes and businesses in Addis Ababa, a continuation of what happened in its outlying areas, on a grand scale (Baye 2024). This took place with little consultation with affected residents (The Guardian 2014).

### *2.6. The Onslaught on the Ethiopian Orthodox Church*

The ethnic violence and animosity in Ethiopia have taken a religious dimension as well. Ethnonationalists have accused the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) of being a tool of Amhara's domination of their ethnic groups (Tadesse 2024). On the other hand, the proponents of the EOC view it as one of the pillars of the Ethiopian state and as a thread connecting its heterogeneous society (Tadesse 2024). The contribution of the Church to state building, spiritualism, culture, written language literature, and scholarship has been enormous (Trimingham 1952). However, the church has come under sustained hostile propaganda and state interference, particularly over the last two years. A schism was introduced within the church in 2023, with the support of the governing elites, in an attempt to form a new synod for Oromia and other nationalities. Although the attempts seem to have been thwarted after public outcry, the onslaught on this ancient church is far from over. On many occasions, the EOC clergy and laity have been attacked and killed (Borkena 2024; Addis Standard 2024).

The preceding section has highlighted the experiences of the Amhara as a group subject to negative discourses, violence, gruesome human rights abuses, political marginalisation, loss of territories, and attacks on the Orthodox Church, which is perceived as an Amhara entity. Now we turn to the Amhara community's responses to extremist groups within Ethiopia.

## 3. The Genesis of Amhara Nationalism

Gellner argues that "nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist" (Gellner, as cited in Harris 2009, p. 52). However, the invention of a nation through nationalism must have "some pre-existing differentiating marks to work on, even if. . . these were purely negative" (ibid., p. 54). On the other hand, Adhana (1998) describes identity formation as a process rooted in historical experiences.

Paradoxically, the Amhara, although subjected to various forms of injustice, have resisted group identification for a long time (Tazebew 2021), favouring instead pan-Ethiopianism. This attitude seems to have changed only in recent years, as the attacks against the group intensified in recent years (Shiferaw Chanie and Ishiyama 2021; Tazebew 2021). As Yetena (2022) points out, the genesis of Amhara identity is linked to the community's experiences amid competing ethno-nationalist narratives, hostilities, and violence. Consequently, members of the group have slowly embraced the ethnic identity which was externally imposed upon them.

Amhara ethnic nationalism has evolved from a denial of collective identity to one of acceptance. The evolution of Amhara national identity has followed a complex trajectory, marked by distinct stages that blur into one another. These stages encompass a progression from denial to partial acceptance, culminating in a broader recognition and acceptance of Amharaness without abandoning Ethiopianism.

### *3.1. The Phase of Ethnic Identity Rejection*

The literature distinguishes two forms of nationalism: civic and ethnic nationalism (Coakley 2012). Some tend to favour civic nationalism, often dismissing ethnic nationalism as the perspective of the "bad guys" (Coakley 2012). Coakley argues that civic nationalism is understood as essentially "political, and coextensive with the state." In contrast, ethnic nationalism tends to be "a protest against existing state forms, expressed initially largely in cultural terms, and was 'a venture in education and propaganda rather than in policy shaping and government'" (Coakley 2012). In other words, some groups may identify themselves more in political terms along with the state, while others identify along their linguistic and cultural lines. The distinction between ethnic and civic nationalism has been criticised for being biassed, and both nationalisms are bound to have a degree of overlapping. Despite this limitation, the dichotomy has indirect significance (Coakley 2012).

The Amharas were at the heart of the building of the Ethiopian state, and they identified themselves with the state, not their linguistic/ethnic identity. In other words, Amharas disavowed an ethnic-based identity (Teka 1998; Yetena 2022; Tazebew 2021). The view expressed by the late Professor Mesfin Woldemariam sums up the long-held view of the Amhara (Zenawi et al. n.d., YouTube). In a debate between the late prime minister, Meles Zenawi, and Addis Ababa University scholars, the professor disputed the existence of Amhara as an ethnic group and questioned the need for its representation at the Peace and Democracy Conference that laid down the foundation for the current ethnic federal project in Ethiopia. The professor argued the following:

> *The thing called Amhara is challenging to represent because it is non-existent. It is impossible to represent something that doesn't exist. If someone were to present themselves as a representative of the Amhara at the Conference, I would view that individual as either having a mental issue or some other problem.*

Historically, expressions of group identity among the Amhara have been rare in public discourse, art, or other forms of cultural expression. In other words, Amharic speakers did not traditionally perceive themselves as a distinct group. Their songs often focused on geographic spaces such as Ethiopia, emphasising the nation as a whole or its provinces like Gonder and Gojam, or even smaller units such as Minjar in Shewa or Raya in Wello. Similarly, research centred on Amhara identity was virtually non-existent until more recent years (e.g., Tazebew 2021; Atnafu 2018; Abera 2021, 2022; Yetena 2022).

In contrast, Oromos and Tigrayans have had a strong sense of ethnic consciousness (Adhana 1998; Baxter 1998). A rich body of academic and non-academic works are also available about the other groups in question (Gudina 2007; Jalata 2017; Hassen 2002, 2015; Tafa 2015). On top of that, an oppressor-oppressed narrative is kept fresh through media and public discourses. In this regard, Vestal (1999) once observed the following:

> *A historic grievance is kept festering by the retelling of events, real or imagined, that puts their ethnic group in a bad light… EPRDF cadres and their servitors skillfully stir up the most sensitive memories of lingering antagonisms long after the people who were offended are gone. Ethnic resentment of conquerors or rulers of decades or centuries ago is remembered as if events happened yesterday.* (pp. 167–68)

In a review of two Afan Oromo novels, Tafa (2015) mentioned that "Ethiopianness is depicted as a symbol of imperialism and oppression. The novels associate Ethiopianness with Amhara elite culture" (p. 89). As described by Tafa, the authors used Amharic names to represent past Amhara landlords, while Afan Oromo names were used to signify Oromo *gebar* (serfs). Despite the abolition of the "feudal" system during the 1974 revolution, the two novels that came out decades later portrayed the Amhara as oppressors. Such a negative narrative continues to spread, even though the Amhara have been on the margin of Ethiopian power politics since the 1990s.

In contrast, Oromo and Tigrayan nationalisms have well-documented histories dating back to the early 1940s (Baxter 1998; Chanie 1998; Adhana 1998; Shiferaw Chanie and Ishiyama 2021; Tareke 1984). Both ethnicities have a history of armed rebellion against the

state at least since the 1970s. From an Amhara perspective, all communities, including their own, are integral to the Ethiopian state. They do not view their identity as having exclusive claims over the state; the Amhara discourse centres on Ethiopia, its uncolonised history, patriots, successes, and failures.

Election results can provide valuable insights into recent trends in ethnic consciousness and mobilisation among the Amhara. Your sentence is clear and effective but can be improved slightly for flow and precision. The 2005 election, the most competitive in Ethiopia's multiparty history, offers a useful starting point for assessing the development of Amhara ethnic consciousness. The main opposition party, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), which campaigned based on pan-Ethiopian policies, made significant gains in the Amhara region and across urban areas with Amhara majorities. The CUD secured over 120 of the 445 parliamentary seats nationwide and won all except one seat for the Addis Ababa City Council. Despite subsequent crackdowns on the opposition and the imprisonment of its leaders, the aftermath of the 2005 election demonstrates that, following years of divisive policies and discourses, the Amhara community maintained a strong commitment to their civic identity. The National Movement of Amhara (NaMA), founded in 2019, was considered a potential counter to the OLF and TPLF, the heavyweights of Oromo and Tigrayan ethnonationalism in the country. However, the election results proved that ethnicity did not appeal to Amhara voters. NaMA won just five seats, while the incumbent party won 133 legislative seats allocated to the region (NDI 2021).

However, the lack of group identification and unity among the Amhara has been considered a significant weakness in the face of growing ethnic extremism in the country. The failure to ethnically identify has brought them such negative labelling as being chauvinistic (Abera 2024; Yetena 2022).

### *3.2. The Phase of Accepting Ethnic Identity without Abandoning Etiopiyawinet*

In a significant shift of alignment, recent years have seen the rise of Amhara nationalism, especially among young males (Shiferaw Chanie and Ishiyama 2021; Yetena 2022, p. 1275). Now derogatory terms such as nefitegna attached to the group are used in reverse discourse (Yetena 2022; Tazebew 2021). New words and derivatives have been added to the vocabulary of Amhara nationalism, such as *Amaranet* (as in Americanness) and *Amarawi* (as in American). Amhara-centric patriotic songs have emerged, narrating injustices and calling the people to stand up and defend not just the collective existence of the Amhara but also the rest of the country from ethnic domination.

Developments after the signing of the peace accord that ended the two-year war between the TPLF and the federal government have been transformative for Amhara nationalism (ICG 2023). To give context, Ethiopia, under Abiy Ahmed, the current prime minister of the country, was at war with the TPLF from 2020 to 2022. Soon after a cessation of hostilities accord was signed in 2022, the government moved to disarm and disband the Amhara special forces and the Fano forces that had fought on its side against the TPLF.

During the war, the region of Amhara was devastated in terms of human casualties and material destruction. The Amhara felt that the disarmament would make the region vulnerable to continued attacks by extremist ethnonationalist forces in the country (Workneh 2024). There was also fear of government conspiracy to transfer the contested territories of Welkait and Raya to Tigray (ICG 2023). The lack of transparency and exclusion of the Amhara along the way instilled a sense of betrayal among Amharas by the federal authorities. Recent developments have confirmed this. Over the past few months, the federal authorities have said that the fate of the disputed territories would be resolved through a referendum, but, subsequently, the army deployed in Raya and Telemet has been accused of dismantling existing administrative structures and facilitating the TPLF's takeover. This has already resulted in the displacement of over 50,000 people from Raya this year (OCHA 2024).

Finding their grievances unheard of through peaceful protests, the Amhara youth turned to the grassroots resistance movement known as Fano. Initially comprising localised

operatives, the movement sprang up across all four provinces of the region in a short period and evolved into province-wide forces. The ethnic identity, which was largely an imposition of external actors and resisted by the Amharas for long, has now been embraced and is employed to fight back against what the members of the group consider an existential threat to their survival.

Despite a year-long massive deployment of troops and weaponry in the Amhara region and deceptive propaganda, the Fano forces have taken the upper hand on the battlefields. The war has also resulted in the loss of innocent lives in Wello, Gojam, Shewa, and Gonder, largely due to the indiscriminate killing of civilians by government security forces (EHRC 2023). The Prime Minister tried to divert attention from the political crisis by announcing its intention to acquire a seaport from Eritrea, peacefully or otherwise. However, the public's reaction was lukewarm at best. Shortly afterwards, the Prime Minister signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Somaliland, a breakaway territory of Somalia, for acquiring the seaport. This move led to a diplomatic row with the government of Somalia and foreign powers (The Conversation 2024). On the domestic front, the reaction from the traditionally Ethiopian civic nationalists was contemptuous. Many observers speculated that the port discourse was an attempt to reignite Ethiopian nationalism and divert attention from the domestic crisis. However, this strategy seems to have failed to resonate with the public.

It is important to note that the Amhara have not abandoned their Ethiopian identity. Meskerem Abera (2024), a jailed prominent Amhara nationalist, argues that the Amhara must put their collective interests first and foremost and overcome the injustices they have faced. She believes this unity is essential for effectively collaborating with other ethnic groups to rebuild inclusive governance. Meskerem criticises the blurred distinction between Ethiopian and Amhara nationalism, claiming this ambiguity has provided anti-Amhara forces with a pretext for attacking the former. She contends that Ethiopianism unfairly places the burden of preserving the Ethiopian state on the Amhara, while others focus on their ethnic rights, ultimately harming both Amhara and Ethiopian nationalism. However, she notes that the Amhara movement lacks a coherent guiding ideology. For instance, within the Fano movement, there are policy differences: some leaders, like Eskinder Nega, envision using the Amhara region as a stepping-stone for a pan-Ethiopian struggle, while others focus solely on Amhara-specific concerns. At this stage, there is no coherent statement that clearly defines the movement's direction and scope. However, most Fano leaders have consistently stated that they struggle for the whole of Ethiopia, not just their community.

In summary, contrary to the belief that ethnic nationalism was a temporary "tragic detour" in history, it continues to profoundly impact social cohesion in multiethnic societies (Muller 2008). The *Etiopiyawinet* project has placed the Amhara people in a precarious situation, making them targets of sustained violence and other forms of justice. Given the absence of common ground and vision among the main ethnic actors (Gudina 2007), the *Etiopiyawinet* project has proved costly for the Amharic-speaking population. Considering these challenges, the Amhara elites need to come up with a proactive approach and articulate their group's interests as a group, rather than to merely keep reacting to the zero-sum politics characteristic of the extreme ethnonationalism in the country.

The ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia have been multidimensional, involving the political, economic, military, and spiritual realms. A year has passed since the war in the Amhara region began, and the government has taken no credible steps to end the conflict apart from paying lip service to peaceful negotiations. Meanwhile, the Fano forces have expanded the territory they control within the region. The movement's leaders assert that their community faces an existential threat and are using group identity to rally support for what they view as a self-defence response. The younger generations have found group solidarity as a viable option.

The nature of the conflict in Ethiopia is not well understood. The political instability and the plight of the Amhara are often wrongly attributed to the ethnic federal structure,

with constitutional reform proposed as a panacea. This argument has two major flaws. First, ethnonationalist forces have dismissed the idea of reforming the ethnic-based federal arrangements, arguing that such changes would revert to the old unitary system which they relate to past Amhara dominance. As a result, support for constitutional reform is lacking from the other two major ethnic groups, the Oromos and the Tigrayans. Second, critics of the ethnic federal structure overlook the fact that ethnic power struggles started long before the federal setup was installed in 1995.

## 4. Closing Reflections

Ethnic nationalism continues to exert a profound and enduring influence in societies with territorially concentrated ethnic groups. This reality must be acknowledged, particularly in this era of growing modernization, which has intensified competition for state power and resources.

In Ethiopia, the Amhara people have endured a range of overt and covert injustices, including group violence, hostile narratives, political marginalisation, the loss of territories, travel restrictions, and property demolitions and evictions. The rise of ethnonationalist elites to power has consistently placed the Amhara at the receiving end of these hostilities and injustices. The experience of the Amhara under the banner of *Etiopiyawinet* has placed them in a precarious position, often unable to defend their interests. The so-called civic nationalism, in contrast to ethnic nationalism, has proven costly for ethnic Amharas in a context where there is a lack of commonly shared identity and vision among the major ethnic actors. In recent years, the growing ethnic consciousness among the Amhara has led them to embrace ethnicity as a tool used for self-defence.

Addressing these challenges requires a proactive approach—one that articulates the interests of the Amhara as a group, rather than simply reacting to the zero-sum power politics that dominate identity politics in the country. Younger generations have increasingly found group solidarity as a viable option for protecting their interests. Moving forward, major ethnicities need to renegotiate a new social contract if Ethiopia is to progress as a multiethnic and inclusive body politic.

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