

The Rise and Fall of Ethnic-Based Federalism and its Predicament for Humanity in Ethiopia

By

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Introduction

The thinking and experimentation in social science can have huge, unreparable and intergenerational human costs if not managed well. This is the case in Ethiopia, where political entrepreneurs and ethnocentric nationalists have experimented and imposed a uniquely entrenched ethnic-based federalism in the country over the past three decades. These activities have made a significant impact, resulting in the production and reproduction of social bankruptcy manifested in national disunity, lethargic development and human rights violations, including genocide in some parts of the country.

This article examines the rise and fall of ethnic-based federalism in the Ethiopian state which has over 83 ethnic groups with distinct languages, cultural practices and religious beliefs.² It presents the opportunities and challenges behind the imposition of the government's organizing practice of constitutionally backing ethnic-based governing entities, using insider-outsider views and taking into account testimonies and reports from several regions of the country.

The article first begins by outlining the political and social contexts of Ethiopia since the cold war and the imposition of the ethnic-federal government arrangement in 1991. This is followed by an examination of the country's political journey and key milestones from the lens of national disunity, impoverishment, human rights violations and insecurity that the country has been trapped with since the implementation of the ethnic-based federalism project. Finally, the article suggests possible solutions towards addressing the predicaments.

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² <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ethiopia/Ethnic-groups-and-languages> accessed on 5/2/2021

The context

Ethiopia, with around 108-million people (July 2020 est.),³ has the second-largest population in Africa and is made up of over 83 ethnic groups, all with their own cultures, languages or dialects. In terms of population size, the largest ethnic groups include: Oromo (34.4%), Amhara (27%), Somali (6.2%), Tigray (6.1%), Sidama (4%), Gurage (2.5%), Welaita (2.3%), Hadiya (1.7%), Afar (1.7%), Gamo (1.5%), Gedeo (1.3%), Silte (1.3%), Kefficho (1.2%) and other groups (8.8%).⁴ Unlike other African countries, state formation in Ethiopia was not the product of European colonization.⁵ Instead, 'modern' Ethiopia has gone through centuries-long state formation, which up until 1974 was ruled by a monarchical system. The Ethiopian Socialist Revolution erupted after a series of mass protests stirred by left-wing student movements and later joined by people from all walks of life, including the military. This then led to the hijacking of political power by the Derg,⁶ under Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, who ruled the country until the regime had become defunct in 1991.⁷ The downfall of the Ethiopian Socialist regime was propelled internally by civil war and the armed struggle of rebel groups. This was advantageous for international efforts to end the cold war, which remarkably did occur by the collapse of the Soviet socialist block.

The political landscape in 1991 was dominated by the TPLF⁸/EPRDF⁹ and OLF¹⁰ parties as well as some ethnically-organized groups, which created the force to form a transitional government fully backed by the Western world.¹¹ The TPLF/EPRDF was the chief architect of ethnic-based federalism and remained dominant, ruling the country for 27 years until the party was removed in March 2018. The current government, dubbed as being a modified extension of EPRDF-I by

³ <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/ethiopia-east-africas-emerging-giant>, accessed on 5/2/2021

⁴ 2020 CIA World Fact book- Ethiopia

⁵ Irma Taddia. Northeast African Studies. (Michigan State University Press). Vol. 12, No. 2/3 (1990), pp. 157-170

⁶ a communist military junta or provisional military standing "committee" that overthrew Haile Selassie-I in 1974.

⁷ History and A+E Networks.1991. <https://www.history.com/emails/single/history-in-the-headlines> accessed on 5/2/2021

⁸ Tigray People Liberation Front

⁹ Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front

¹⁰ Oromo Liberation Front

¹¹ John Young. (1996). Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia. Review of African Political Economy Vol. 23, No. 70. pp. 531-542

some political opponents,¹² came to power under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed following widespread protests and an internal leadership rift against the TPLF, a dominant member of a coalition of four parties called EPRDF.

The past three years of the political arena have been marred with more ethnic clashes, crimes against humanity and genocide among Amhara and non-Amhara orthodox Christians. On the other extreme, many Oromo nationalists, especially the Qeerroo, place blame on Abiy for squandering the Oromo revolution on the other ethnic group, 'the Amhara', who ruled Ethiopia for centuries. There are still others who mistrust Abiy because of his Oromo ancestry.¹³ Rival political forces active in the Oromia Regional State have also formed a joint front to deny support to Abiy's party in the Oromia region.¹⁴

Overall, these last three decades for Ethiopia have been a hard route under a government structured by the remnants of ethnic-based federalism. The country has been divided into ten national regional states, grouping the dominant ethnic group(s) within ill-demarcated ethnic and physical boundaries, and subsuming smaller nationalities or ethnic groups in their settings.¹⁵

Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession, under Article 39.1 of the 1995 constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.¹⁶ The constitution thus accords official recognition of Ethiopia's ethnic communities, transforming them into political communities. This means that the Ethiopian Constitution allows every ethnic group to form its own political state. These

¹² Marara Gudina interview with Addis Getachew Tadesse. 06.12.2019. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/ethiopia-merger-election-and-popular-apprehension/1665642>

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (Feb 2021). General Country of Origin Information Report Ethiopia. PP 7-9

¹⁴ Addis Fortune News. (Jan 4,2020). English Weekly Newspaper, Vol 19. No.1027. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

¹⁵ The regional states or Kililoch that formed the federation in 1991 were: 1. Tigray; 2. Afar; 3. Amhara; 4. Oromia; 5. Somali; 6. Benishangul-Gumuz; 7-11 Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples (merger of 5 regions); 12. Gambella; 13. Harari; and 14. The two administratively independent cities are Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa. Sidama becomes the 10th National Regional States in June 2020, while the other ethnic groups from the Southern Region were also filing their demands to become independent regions.

¹⁶ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Ethiopia_1994?lang=en

narratives accord the sovereignty of states in Ethiopia to what it generically refers to as Nations, Nationalities and Peoples,¹⁷ instead of to individual citizens who are born and live in the federation. Therefore, ethnic groups have the right to remain as a member of the ethnic-based federalism or they can exercise their right to cession from the federal government arrangement.

Although these constitutional rights have been stipulated, there have not been official claims for cession. This was partially due to the strategic move of the federal government to remain a *de facto* one-party state, particularly during the dominant 27 years of the TPLF/EPRDF regime, in which ethnic organizations were mere satellites of one ethnic organization. Nonetheless, after the TPLF was removed from central power in 2018, Tigray had challenged the federal government and even expressed their appetite to form a *de facto* state.

Some political groups among the Oromo ethnic nationalists have also attempted to acquire greater political power through securing control over key resources and decision-making roles in critical political apparatuses of the federal government. Some argue that the new Prosperity Party is internally controlled by its Oromia branch and this internal entity has continued to replicate what its predecessor, the TPLF, had done against Amhara and other nationalities. That is, to bring all other regional states under their satellite influence as they are the heirs of the past ethnic political legacy.¹⁸

The political chemistry of Ethiopia's ethnic-based federalism

Proponents of ethnic federalism derive their rationale from the idea of ethno-nationalism. Ethno-nationalism proclaims the distinctiveness of a particular people and their right to self-rule in their homeland through a variety of institutional arrangements, though, marrying

¹⁷ The Preamble of the 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia attaches the ownership of the constitution to the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia with full and free exercise of their right to self-determination.

¹⁸ <https://borkena.com/2021/04/17/amhara-genocide-ataye-oromo-radical-forces-launch-attack/>

political and ethnic boundaries is, arguably, the primary way.¹⁹ Since 1991, Ethiopia has uniquely used ethnicity as the chief organizing principle for their federal system of government. Ethnic-based federalism has created the breeding ground for a mushrooming of political parties along ethnic lines. According to the National Electoral Board, there were over a hundred registered political parties, with a significant majority organized along ethnic background, championing an ethnic-based federal state.²⁰ This makes Ethiopia an exceptional country as compared to even the few federally arranged governments in Africa (Nigeria and South Africa), ex-communist countries (Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union) or other pluralist countries (India, Swiss Confederation and Canada).²¹

Over the past three decades, the articulation of a strategy for "ethnic liberation" and the spur for a new identity for the Ethiopian state, which was driven, if not exclusively, by two national-regional movements: the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), has contributed to the cloning of similar political parties across the country. What is most common with all these movements is the fact that they are self-appointed and purportedly speak on behalf of their respective ethnic communities. In each case, they express resentment drawn from their experiences of subordination imposed by the so-called '*Neftegna*',²² whose ancestral lineage traces back to Amhara ethnic groups. For ethnic nationalists, ethnic-based federalism has become the salvation for the respective ethnic group members who believed they were the victims in the building of the 'modern' Ethiopian empire by "colonizing groups" (notably Amhara and for some including Tegar).²³ The ethnic-centric political parties have thus earned the emotions of the masses with their struggle and mobilized the public with a sense of revenge. In the process, they have diminished the symbols of the past

¹⁹ Alemante G. Selassie. (2003). Ethnic Federalism: Its Promise and Pitfalls for Africa. The Yale Journal of International Law, Vol 28. PP.68-82

²⁰ "Ethiopian Politics - Election 2020". www.globalsecurity.org.retrieved 2021-05-02.

²¹ Turton David. (2006) Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective, 2006

²² Means an owner of a gun but, in the recent Oromo political discourse, it symbolically labels ethnically Amhara people who 'settled' outside of their ancestral land during the Monarchical period and who used the power of their guns to kneel others and become their political subordinates.

²³ Mohammed Hassen. a Short History of Oromo Colonial Experience 1870 -1990: Part One 1870s-1935,". The Journal of Oromo Studies. Vol 6, Number 1&2. July 1999.

and amplified newly created banners, songs and monuments, resulting in the inculcation of anti-Amhara sentiments. The sentiment is especially held among the younger generations, below the age of thirty years, who were born and grew up in the milieu of ethnic regional boundaries, where little connections existed with others. This is particularly apparent, and worrisome, with the younger generations who mostly identify themselves more as 'Oromo', 'Tegaru', 'Amhara' or 'Somali' than as an 'Ethiopian'. Recently, there have even been instances of young groups at demonstrations chanting that they are not Ethiopians.²⁴

On the positive side, the establishment of the ten national regional states has been accompanied by extensive road construction and highway connections. As a result, several rural towns, as well as regional and zonal capitals, have shown expansion and growth in urban infrastructural development and housing. The promulgation of the use of the Afan Oromo, Tigrigna, Somali and Afar as federal working languages and the medium for communication in political, legal, administrative, cultural and educational spheres, has elevated the enrichment of these languages and enabled each ethnic group to retain their cultural identity and exercise their right to use their native language. However, these positive developments have been overshadowed by the negative impact of pairing federalism with ethnicity, namely, the establishment of systemic instruments that divide citizens along ethnic lines and institutionalize their divisions, and generating national disunity. It is this impact that has created the following socio-political and economic predicaments.

Ethnic-based conflicts and national disintegration

Over the past three decades, political "elites" claiming to speak on behalf of their ethnic groups have primarily engaged in the deconstruction of prior political structures, blaming Amhara-writ. New narratives have been constructed in their place bringing forward the other ethnic groups and threatening their rights to live and have livelihoods. These narratives are based on rejection and ethnic liberation, rather than accommodating ethnic cooperation and acknowledging intermingled relationships and shared histories among many ethnic groups, either by cohesion

²⁴Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Country of Origin Information Report Ethiopia. February 2021. P.10

or cooperation, over the centuries. This has now resulted in manifestations of ethnic-based conflicts, most notably in the cleansing of Amhara and other non-Oromo nationals from Oromia; Benshangul Gumuz; and the Southern Nation, Nationalities, and People's Regional States.²⁵ Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Oromo people were driven out from the Somali National Regional State and, in retaliation, ethnic Somalis and ethnic Gedeos were forced out of Oromia.²⁶

It is unfortunate that since ethnic identity gained constitutional currency²⁷ in the country, it has become an 'accepted norm' among many political rulers to be indifferent to the tragedy of over two-million people being displaced and negligent in the malicious murder, ethnic cleansing, rape and torture of tens of thousands of innocent human beings, including children, women and older people. The increasing trend of ethnic-based conflict and austerities in Ethiopia, unless checked, could reach horrible and devastating levels.

From a human rights perspective, the practice of Ethiopia's ethnic-based federalism project places ethnicity and collective rights over humanity and individual human rights, even though the 1995 Constitution of Ethiopia absorbed various articles from the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights.²⁸ Over the past thirty years, by conferring sovereign powers on an ethnic group, ethnic-based federalism has also allowed one dominant ethnic group to control the apparatus of government and impose itself on the identity of the sub-state. The controlling party, formerly the TPLF/EPRDF and later the Prosperity Party, have been in a position to frame and enforce rules and practices that are to their advantage and perpetuate the privilege of its ethnic members as first class citizens. Consequently, ethnic political leaders have polarized

²⁵ <https://borkena.com/2021/04/17/amhara-genocide-ataye-oromo-radical-forces-launch-attack/>

²⁶ Yohannes Gedamu. Quartz Africa (Oct 2018). How Ethiopia's history of ethnic rivalry is destabilizing its reform gains. <https://qz.com/africa/1411519/ethiopias-ethnic-violence-history-with-omros-amharas-somalis-tigray/>

²⁷ Jon Abbink. (1997). Ethnicity and Constitutionalism in Contemporary Ethiopia, 41 J. AFR. L., 159

²⁸ The 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Constitution Fundamental Human Rights and Freedom that include Article 10. Human and Democratic Rights; Article 14. Rights to life; the Security of Person and Liberty; Article 15. Right to Life; Article 16. The Right of the Security of Person; Article 17. Right to Liberty; and Article 18. Prohibition against Inhuman Treatment.

Ethiopians so that those who do not belong to the ethnic majority are considered “alien” or “newcomers” and have been treated as a second class citizens.

As exhibited over the course of the 27 years of TPLF/EPRDF rule, recruitment and promotion of elite positions, especially in critical sectors, such as security services, armed forces, trade, investment and economic development, were disproportionately and overwhelmingly from the incumbent ethnically-organized political party.

The situation has been further complicated these past three years (2018-2021). Contravening Article 32 of the 1995 Constitution that provides the freedom of movement and establishing residence,²⁹ people who are not ethnically the same or who are labeled as “ethnically alien” in parts of Oromia, Benshangul Gumuz and the Southern Regions, have been discouraged from owning or leasing real estate or commercial farmland. Some regions or administrative zones have also seen bans on the use of Amharic languages on commercial signs within their towns.

As a result, a considerable number of property owners and business people were looted or had their properties burned because of their ethnic identities. The recent tragedies in Shashemene and Zeway towns are evidence of this.³⁰ Large, informally organized groups of predominantly young people, sometimes called Qeerroo or Shene from the Oromo community reportedly killed members of ethnic minorities in the region and burned down hotels, schools, business centres and residential homes belonging to ethnic Amharas, Gurage and other nationals though the properties of Orthodox Christian Oromos were also damaged.³¹ These are undoubtedly clear demonstrations of an undermining of individual rights for those who do not belong to the

²⁹ Article 32. Freedom of Movement states that any Ethiopian or foreign national lawfully in Ethiopia has, within the national territory, the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose his residence, as well as the freedom to leave the country at any time he wishes to.

³⁰ Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (31 December 2020). Report on the investigation of human rights violations in relation to the assassination of Hachalu Hundessa.

³¹ <https://minorityrights.org/2020/07/22/ethnic-cleansing-oromia>

ethnic majority.³² Such acts of discrimination have truly been in violation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.³³

In addition to this, ethnic-based federalism has violated the international human rights law that guarantees citizens the right to equal political participation. Contrary to Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, non-native or non-indigenous ethnic groups in the Benhsangul Gumuz,³⁴ Harari³⁵ and Oromia³⁶ National Regional States may vote but are not permitted to be elected to serve in public spheres or polity even if they were born and grew up in these regions. This was established on the ground that the states and their governances constitutionally 'belong' to the 'natives' and not to ethnic 'others'.

Over the past thirty years, it has been observed that although Ethiopia's constitution incorporates international human rights norms, they have been selectively applied. The guarantee that citizens have the right to move freely and reside wherever they choose within their country, have access to employment opportunities, political power and rights for political participation, were prioritized for those who belong to the "right" ethnic group. So for those who do not belong, they have no incentive to move into areas controlled by such groups, and for those who are already reside in these regions, they have been evicted from their lands. This

³²Minority Rights Group. 22 July 2020. Retrieved 23 July 2020.

³³ UN General Assembly.(1965).The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

³⁴ The Benshangul Gumuz Constitution, Article 2, Owner's Nation and Nationalities, evidently states that even if it recognized that other people are living in the regional state, the owners are Berta, Shinasha, Gumuz, Mao and Kamo Nationalities. See. <http://www.ethcriminalawnetwork.com>

³⁵ The Constitution of the Regional State of Harari, Article 8, stipulates that the state supreme power holders are the ethnic Harari people; while Article 6 states that the working languages of the states are Harari and Afan Oromo despite equal or more number of people from non- ethnic Harari and Oromo are born and live in the regional state and capital. <https://chilot.me/2012/02/revise-constitutions-of-regional-states/harari-regional-state-constitution/>

³⁶ The Constitution of the Regional State of Oromia, Article 8, states that the supreme power of the Regional States rests upon the people of Ethnic Oromo. <https://chilot.me/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/oromia-national-regional-state-constitution.pdf>

was the experience of many groups in Gura Ferda, Bench Maji Zone, Southern Ethiopia³⁷ and Western Wellega,³⁸ who were forced to return to their ethnically Amhara "ancestral lands." Given the thirty years of ethnic-based politically charged strife in Ethiopia, each ethnic group has been coerced to become absorbed with the pursuit of their own interests. Under these circumstances, it has become difficult for the federal government to persuade the ethnic sub-states to cooperate for the sake of national unity or to make sacrifices for members of other ethnic groups. This is repeatedly mentioned by the current government of Ethiopia and the regional states where nationals show low interest in getting new army recruits for the national defense force.

A by-product of ethnic-based federalism that has further entrenched disunity is the formation of powerful ethnic allegiances and rivalries across sectors. The political emphasis on ethnic identity has percolated to the economic sector and many other sectors of social life and has given rise to institutions organizing along ethnic lines. Political elites, who serve as ethnic agents, have portrayed themselves as strong advocates of their ethnically-organized business communities' interests and have sought to distribute and control economic assets, including urban lands, banking services, micro-financial institutions, investment and trade licenses, and transportation licenses, to first benefit their own ethnic constituents. This has gradually diminished market rules of competition so that members of other ethnic communities have been systematically excluded from participating in the local or regional economy. Some rich business entities have then diverted the hard-earned foreign currency to invest income in other middle eastern countries, notably in the United Arab Emirates.

Concluding remarks

Ethiopia has gone through painful experimentations of government organizing practices over the past 50 years, where neither the unitary government, under the Socialist Regime, nor

³⁷ ESAT News. (April 2013). Ethiopia: New Amhara People Evicted from the South.

³⁸ Zecharias Zelalem. Aljezera. (20 Mar 2021). <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/20/worsening-violence-western-ethiopia-forcing-civilians-to-flee> accessed on 5/2/2021

ethnic-based federalism, under the TPLF/EPRDF, could serve the majority of its citizens the right to justice, sustainable peace and inclusive development.

Even after three years of post TPLF/EPRDF, the lingering ethnic-based federalism project did not lead to any solutions. Instead, it led the country to the brink of collapse as manifested through ethnic cleansing, mass evictions, economic impoverishment and injustice. The failure of the regular administrative and political apparatus in several regions or zones precipitated the survival of ordinary citizens to come under the mercy of military command bases and their commanders.

Even if the incumbent government penciled into its calendar the 6th round of national 'election' amid this coming summer, only fractions of the eligible population are and have been able to register to cast their votes as the majority of ordinary people have expressed their distrust and discontent with politics.

Military interventions against TPLF in the Tigray National Regional State, on the other hand, has earned the attention and the sympathy of the 'international' community due to the negative consequences of the fights and the claims of human rights abuses amounting to war crimes. The Tigray Region, as a result, cannot take part in the upcoming election. Similarly, major political opponents and political parties in the Oromia Region have withdrawn themselves from the rallies, and non-Oromo parties were shown a red card preventing them from freely carrying out their election campaigns across many parts of Oromia. A handful of political parties have registered and begun to conduct a public rally in the Amhara Region, although the majority, if not all cross-sections of the general public, have openly expressed their dissatisfaction over the upcoming 'election'. This is due to their rights to life being put under question from the ethnically-targeted mass killings and the in-action of the incumbent government to protect its citizens in those hotspot conflict areas.

The situation in the Benshangul Gumuz Region, bordering Sudan, has become an active conflict zone, ferrying armed rebel groups and causing the evictions and mass murders of non-native ethnic groups. The Southern Nation, Nationalities, and People's Region has been untying its geographic merger and mutilating itself to form many more ethnic-based regions. The Somali National Regional State has, comparatively, maintained peace and order, partly due to its charismatic and modest leader. However, it has recently faced conflicts from its neighboring Afar Region, which is casting a shadow on the upcoming 'election'. Additionally, many cities and towns have remained under threat because of the urban 'induced-demographic change' project. They include Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital which is named Finfinee by Oromo Nationalists; the city of Dire Dawa and many towns in the Oromia Region, such as Adama, Shashemene and Zeway, which have been homes for various nationalities. For all these reasons, the upcoming 'election' is marred with the lowest poll turnout ever and its public and international legitimacy is already undermined. However, election can still be the most legalistic route to form and assume political power.

Ethiopia is, therefore, at a crossroad, where its survival and continuity as a nation are at stake. The longer the inaction, the higher the instability of the country and the greater the risk of its collapse. Ethiopians, specially its elites, from all sects and directions must reconstitute and act beyond their ethnic constituencies and come out of their ethnic silos to draw the minimum common ground for their peaceful co-existence. They should learn from their past mistakes of the ill-management of changes in the political arena and prevent another political hijacking in the formation of a legitimate government. They should focus more on their future pathways than on their past legacies so that they should rethink their thinking towards co-creating the minimum legal ground for all people, regardless of their ethnic background and political orientations, at least to enjoy their basic rights to life and livelihoods. The rapid political detour may include:

1. Condemnations and cessation of all forms of crimes against humanity and genocides at any time and everywhere in the country;

2. the amendment of the current ethnic-based federal constitution, specially removing the article on the rights for cession and keeping the balance between individual citizens' and collective rights;
3. ensuring the rights of all people to vote and be elected wherever they are born, work and live through amending the constitutions of the national regional states;
4. banning of the institutionalization of ethnicity currently being fabricated through the issuance of ethnically-labeled identity cards, vehicle plates and ethnically-tagged banking and financial institutions;
5. revising wrongly crafted and ethnically provocative regional state anthems; and
6. demobilizing quasi-army or special forces from all national regional states and reforming the rank and files of army and security force compositions and representations.

Even if few ethno-nationalists think the solution is to break away from the Republic of Ethiopia, they must recognize that their separation or divorce under such swampy political grounds and ill-marked ethnic boundaries would not yield them a viable, peaceful and sustainable option for the new nation that they 'imagined'. Without peaceful co-existence, they are just playing a zero-sum political game that could trigger new political disaster, insecurity and displacement.

Ethiopians shall prioritize humanity over ethnicity and peaceful co-existence over political dominance. They need to accommodate political negotiation and renegotiation to move their country forward, usher sustainable peace, enhance unity in diversity and maintain dynamic stability across Ethiopia and the Greater Horn of Africa.

The end.

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