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**The Amhara-Oromo-Tigray Conflict Nexus in Ethiopia:
Challenges, Opportunities and a Way Forward**

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The Amhara-Oromo-Tigray Conflict Nexus in Ethiopia Challenges, Opportunities and a Way Forward *

1. Introduction

The Ethiopian Constitution has trapped the people in a social dynamic that is anchored in an identity-laden politics. The natural outcome is an innate gravitation of the political order toward centers of polarization. Of recent, Wolkait and Raya (W&R) have become the epicenter of the war theater in the Amhara-Oromo-Tigray conflict nexus. The conflict carries with it the seeds of a protracted war that is bound to draw Eritrea in. Three worrisome current developments need attention.

First, the W&R conflict can potentially become a battleground where long-fostering animosity and ill will between Amhara and Tigray reach the apex of a mutually destructive combat.

Second, the danger is compounded by PM Abiy who is polarizing the conflict and seeking alliance with Tigray to thwart the Fanno uprising. This was manifested in a recent speech at the Mekele Stadium by a high-level Oromo official who called for [Tigray and Oromo to unite and deal with their common enemy for once and for all](#). The official made sure the public knew that his speech was made at the behest of Shimeles Abdissa, the President of the Oromo region.

Third, Getachew Reda, the President of the Tigray interim regional government has publicly stated [Eritrea's involvement is complicating the return of Wolkait to Tigray and expressed his administration's readiness to help the Federal government fight what he called the Eritrea-Amhara alliance](#).

They say behind every dark cloud exists a silver lining. Since the Fanno uprising and revolt, changes in public opinion are fermenting, and voices of discontent are emerging from a growing undercurrent movement in the back alleys of the Amhara-Oromo-Tigray political nexus. These developments have opened a window of opportunity for change.

However, with so many moving parts, seizing the opportunity is by no means straightforward. The window of opportunity is narrow and the time available is short. But it is an opportunity that must be seized. The purpose of this article is an attempt to connect the scattered dots to forge a coherent story and chart a roadmap to seize the moment.

The presentation is divided into five parts. Part one presents a succinct overview of the state of the nation. Part two provides an exposé of the political epicenter and fault lines of the current crisis, focusing on the primary sources of the W&R conflict that precipitated the ongoing war in the Amhara

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region. Part three discusses a scenario whereby the convergence of the Amhara-Tigray-Oromo conflict on W&R risks drawing in Eritrea and opening a gateway for a proxy war involving regional and international forces. Part four proposes specific steps for a way forward. Part five concludes.

Readers who are sufficiently familiar with the sources of the conflict may be tempted to go directly to part three. We strongly advise reading the document in its entirety to understand pertinent facts and situations undergirding the recommended roadmap for a way forward. For example, the viability of the role that the International Community (IC) plays cannot be fully appreciated if the salient points of its strengths and handicaps are not highlighted upfront. Similarly, a viable solution cannot be teased out of the claims and counterclaims of the Amhara and Tigray regions over W&R without identifying and describing the fault lines in their narratives.

2. Wolkait: The Epicenter of the Amhara-Tigray-Oromo Conflict Nexus

There is nothing the PM will not do to stay in power. In this venture, his friends become his enemies and his enemies turn into his friends at the snap of the fingers. The only thing constant is that he has neither loyalty to a cause nor integrity in his person. Some say his loyalty is to Oromummaa (Greater Oromia). Others say he is riding the Oromummaa wave only if it serves a higher agenda of keeping him in office. If not, they say, he will drop it in no time.

Nothing is off limit in his conflict brewing venture in pursuit of perfecting a zero-sum personal political gain. During the war between the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) and Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), he was unequivocal that Wolkait belongs to Amhara. [On national TV he stated:](#)

“The people of Armacho, Wolkait and Tegenie have maintained in the past and continue to maintain to date their Begemder [Amhara] identity, despite 30 years of violence perpetrated against them. They never stopped to uphold their Begemder identity while they were being killed and exiled.”

This was not a onetime statement. [In another televised speech he stated:](#)

“You all know the Wolkait freedom committee has been fighting for years [during the TPLF era]. Who amongst you does not know leaders of the Wolkait Freedom Committee were arrested in Sululta (outside of Addis Ababa) when they were traveling to file an appeal to the Parliament? Wasn't the reason why we established the boarder commission to address this and other similar problems? The Junta [TPLF] is against the boarder commission because it knows what it has done.”

The Fanno uprising led him to change his stance in a New York second. Last week, the minister of defense suggested W&R were illegally annexed by the Amhara. He declared the federal government

will take over the administration of the two areas, return Tigrayans who have been forcefully displaced since November 2020, and conduct a referendum to give the people opportunity to determine where they belong. The Minister suggested this is what was agreed during the Pretoria agreement between the Ethiopian government and TPLF.

This is disturbing on many levels. First, the involvement of the minister of defense militarizes the conflict when in fact the conflict is rooted in a legal dispute of land ownership rights. Second, the PM is using the Minister, who is a Tigrayan, to send a signal of support to the TPLF position. Third, the Minister's statements were politically driven and stand in stark conflict with [the PM'S earlier public statements](#).

"The Pretoria summit has no authority over the issue of Wolkait. I do not understand why the issue of Wolkait is dragged into the Pretoria summit. We need to realize there is border conflict in Northern Shew between Oromia and Amhara. Are we going to take this to South Africa for resolution? Don't we have the means and experience to address our problem by ourselves? Haven't we established a border commission to sort out such conflicts."

The Minister's statement also clashes with a public statement Getachew Reda referred above where he suggested the Abiy Administration is working on returning Raya and Tselemt to Tigray. Regarding Wolkait, he said the presence of Eritrea is complicating the matter and Tigray is ready to help the government if requested. This shows the so-called referendum is a farce. This is clear in Getachew's speech where he made no reference to any referendum.

Evidently, the decision has already been made by Oromo-PP without the involvement of the Abiy administration or the Parliament. The tacit threats embedded in the Defense Minister's statements were unveiled by the above-mentioned Oromo Official who made a public call for a military alliance between Oromo and Tigray against the Amhara.

[A Bird's Eye View of Amhara Grievances on Wolkait and Raya](#)

The Amhara contention that the TPLF annexed Wolkait by force has been corroborated by many Tigrayan politicians. Ras Mengesha Seyoum, a Tigrayan and former governor of Tigray (1960-1974), told the Voice of America: ["When I was the governor of Tigray, \[what is now known as Western Tigray\] was under present-day Amhara region. The same was true when I was a child growing up."](#)

The Governor's statement was affirmed by Dr. Aregawi Berhe, the founding chairperson of TPLF, who publicly stated: ["Wolkait was annexed from current day Amhara during the TPLF gorilla days. The land was critical to get an outlet into Sudan to smuggle weapons and transport food for TPLF fighters. It was unjust for the Amhara."](#)

There are many [TPLF founding members reaffirming this](#), including Abraham Yayeh who in 1982 confirmed W&R were taken from Gonder - aka Begemder - and Wello (parts of present-day Amhara). He further stated the people in both lands were Amharic speaking. [His statement is consistent with the 1984 Ethiopian census that shows 69% of the residents in Wolkait self-identified as Amharic speaking.](#)

Historical documents during Tigrayan Emperor Yohannes' reign (1871 - 1889), also indicate the boundaries between Gonder and Tigray is the Tekezé River, lending credence to the Amhara position.

The fact that the TPLF annexed the two regions long before the 1995 constitution was enacted is incontrovertible. Similarly, the fact that the Constitution has no bearing in the demarcation of borders between Tigray and Amhara is undeniable. Amhara forces further allege the TPLF:

- Settled its former fighters in tens of thousands and forcefully displace people of Amhara heritage out of the annexed regions.
- As part of the social engineering to change the demography of W&R Schools stopped teaching in Amharic in 1991.
- Perpetrated mass killings of Amhara forces.

Amhara's demand is for government administrative and legal recognition as the legitimate owner of W&R. The problem is that though there is unanimous agreement about the question of legal ownership, there is neither consensus nor a legitimate authority with a mandate to speak for Amhara, considering Amhara-PP is seen as Oromo-PP's willful hostage.

Notably, there are Fanno leaders who have talked about the movement's agenda and end goal. But that is not a substitute for a political architecture with an agreed-upon mandate to forge a shared vision, strategy, and roadmap.

Some prominent figures within the Fanno military ecosystem believe the Amhara reclaimed his ancestral lands that were taken by force by Tigray and that is the end of the story. Case closed. Others believe a negotiated settlement is a viable and most peaceful option.

The lack of consensus on Fanno's end game on the issues surrounding W&R, the administration of the Amhara region and Ethiopia at large complicates the problem. There is no guarantee that political differences among different Fanno groups will not lead to armed conflicts and lend itself to the emergence of regional warlords in Gonder, Gojam, Wello and Shewa.

[A Bird's Eye View of the Tigray Stance on Wolkait and Raya](#)

Tigrayan forces allege W&R are historical parts of Tigray before Emperor Haile Selassie transferred them to Begemder (part of the present-day Amhara) by a royal decree. This argument is refuted with

maps showing Wolkait in Gonder during Emperor Menelik, decades before Emperor Haile Selassie was born. In response, the Tigrayan forces use old maps from the 18th and 19th centuries as evidence where Wolkait is shown in Tigray.

The Amhara refuted this with older maps going as far back as 15th century listing the names of regions within Tigray without mentioning Wolkait-Tsegede or Raya (Source: Catalogue Raisonné de Manuscrits Éthiopiens Appartenant à Antoine d'Abbadie). There are also multiple maps between 15th and 17th centuries showing the Tekezé River separating Tigray and Gonder, giving credence to the Amhara narrative (Source: Crawford O.G.S. (1958), Ethiopian Itineraries, Circa 1400-1524, Cambridge; and Paez, P. (2011). Pedro Páez's History of Ethiopia, 1622 (Vol. 23). Ashgate Publishing, Ltd)

There are many more maps produced at different times. For example, during the Italian occupation both contested lands were incorporated within Eritrea. If old maps are accepted as evidence, Eritrea can become a party to the conflict with some degree of legitimacy. Its legitimacy draws from internationally recognized national boundaries that separate and define African nations based largely on lines drawn by colonialist powers.

When the map argument fails to sway the public, Tigrayans shift the argument to language and claim W&R were incorporated into Tigray because the people are Tigrigna speaking. This has been refuted by many including founding members of TPLF. As noted above with a link to a video clip, Abraham Yayeh is on the record, stating the people of Wolkait and Raya were Amharic speaking when the two regions were annexed by TPLF.

The attempt to justify demarcation of regions by language is futile in many ways. If language was the determining factor, more than a third of Benishangul would have been incorporated into the Amhara region. Addis Ababa where Oromos account for only 19% and Amhara represents 47% should have been incorporated into the Amhara region.

Tigrayan forces allege, since the recent war, Amhara forces have forcefully displaced hundreds of thousands of Tigrayans and brought in Amharas to change the demography of the two regions. The allegation is widely covered by *the international media* and *international human rights organizations*. The problem here is Tigrayans are conveniently playing oblivious to the fact that the forceful displacement of people was started and sustained by them until 2018.

Tigray's demand vacillates between three positions. At times they demand the government reinstate the two lands into Tigray, recognizing the prewar status quo as part of the constitutional order. At other times they express to use force to reclaim the two regions. Yet at other times they demand a referendum after the people of Tigray who were forcefully displaced are returned. They put the forcefully displaced number to 1.5 million. According to a 2017 census conducted by the regional government of Tigray, the population of Wolkait Was estimated well under 500,000.

[Getachew Reda's recent speeches in Colorado came with a mixed message](#), partly nuanced (walking a tight line between war and peace) and partly vacillating between peace seeking and war mongering. For example, at some point, he talked about the unimaginable sacrifice young Tigrayans have paid and the fact that “the people of Tigray do not have a shoulder to tolerate another war.” On the other hand, he talked about “the capability or heroism of [Tigray's] over 200,000 soldiers” and offered to help the federal government to fight Amhara and Eritrea.

His speech seems to be crafted to throw enough red meat to Tigrayan warmongers and in the meantime wave olive leaves to calm the peace seeking public in Tigray and the diaspora.

Problem With the Government's Current Position

Though both Amhara and Tigray forces are displaying intransigent positions, there is hope for reasoned dialogue and peaceful resolution. Under the right political circumstances, extremist positions on both sides can be counter-balanced by peace seeking forces.

The most dangerous problem is the Oromo-PP led by PM Abiy that has vested interest in escalating the problem to use Tigray forces in his effort to weaken the Amhara as he has used the Amhara to weaken Tigray. The government's recent policy reflects this on many levels.

First, a key question that Ethiopians and the IC ought to pose to the PM is: If the border commission that he created was mandated to resolve border conflicts, why is the Amhara-Tigray conflict handled with exception? Further, there are many places in the Oromo region that the Amhara are the largest group and Oromos are minority. When the Prime Minister acknowledges prevailing problems between Amhara and Oromo, he always refers to conflict areas where the Oromo lays claim. He does not mention or recognize areas where the Amhara lays claim such as Sheger City or Adama. Will the PM address the issues of Sheger City, Adama other similar areas through referendum?

Second, the PM, who is radio silent about the forced displacement of nearly a million Amhara from the Oromo tribal land, lacks legitimacy to demand the reinstatement of forcefully displaced Tigrayans into the contested areas. Similarly, he has taken a deliberate position to ignore the Amhara demand to govern themselves where they are the largest group outside of the Amhara region. Therefore, he lacks legitimacy to demand the Amhara honor and respect Tigrayans right to decide if W&R belong to Amhara or Tigray.

It warrants emphasis that our argument is in no way to oppose the return of forcefully displaced Tigrayans to their homes regardless of which region is the legitimate owner of the two contested areas. Our focus is the systemic difference in the way Amhara is treated by the PM. Amhara is expected to respect, honor, and protect the rights of other tribes while its rights are systematically and ubiquitously violated.

Third, the PM's disarmament program is another example. Though the policy is supposed to be for all regions, the focus is on Amhara. According to the Pretoria agreement that was signed on November 3, 2022, the TPLF was supposed to disarm both large and small weapons. The President of Tigray and his high-brass military officials are on the record admitting they have not fully disarmed, and they do not intend to do so.

There is no talk about integrating Tigrayan special forces into the Federal structure. Getachew is on the record that he has an army 200,000 strong and he intends to use them as Tigray's asset. The PM has not taken any action against Tigray. Far from it, his administration is asking them to join the war against Fanno.

The Amhara position is to delay the disarmament of regional special forces and militias until trust between the federal government and regional governments is built. The Amhara demand includes forming a joint committee consisting of all regional special forces and militia leaders to develop and oversee a fully transparent and verifiable implementation program. The PM's response is sending tanks and drones to bring the Amhara to its knees.

The Prime Minister's actions reflect systemic and long-standing policy to disenfranchise the Amhara, politically, economically, militarily and even demographically. Let us look at the population issue to drive the point home. In the 1984 population census, Oromo accounted for 29.1% of Ethiopia's population followed by Amhara at 28.3%. The difference in population was 332,414 in favor of Oromo.

In the 1994 census, the first under TPLF, Oromo accounted for 35% of the population. The corresponding figure for Amhara was 25.9%. The population difference between the two skyrocketed to 4,898,228 in favor of Oromo.

In the 2007 census that was conducted under TPLF for the second time, the Oromo population accounted for 36.7% of the population. Amhara was 23.3%. Between 1984 and 2007, Oromos population changed from 29.1% (1984) to 35% (1994) to 36.7% (2007) and to an extrapolated 34% (2023). In contrast, Amhara's population shrank consistently from 28.3% (1984) to 25.9% (1994) to 23.3% (2007) and to an extrapolated 22% (2023).

Consequently, the population difference between Oromo and Amhara changed from 332,414 (1984) to 4,898,228 (1994) to 9,944,415 (2007) and to 13,626,137 (2023) all in favor of Oromo. This has significant implications. The 1994 census results that reduced the Amhara population from 28.3% to 25.9% robbed the Amhara tribal lad over 20 seats in the national parliament. If the current population estimate of 22% is used, Amhara will further lose as many as 30 seats in future seat allocations.

The statistical depopulation of Amhara has adverse budgetary implications. For example, the federal government budget subsidy for the 2023-2024 fiscal year shows 34% of the total federal subsidy was

allocated for the Oromo tribal land. Amhara got 21% based on the systematically and grossly underestimated population.

Evidently, the reduction in the population of Amhara is redistributed to the population of other tribal homelands. For example, in 2007, Tigray accounted for 5.8 percent of the population. In 2023, it accounted for 6.1 percent of the population.

Amhara is also facing economic ostracization. Recently, Yohannes Buayalew (a member of Amhara-PP) lamented at the Amhara Congress meeting that Amharas are not only evicted out of the Oromo region. Their movements are intermittently restricted to their own region. Yohannes stated: "There are five gateways into Addis Ababa. Two of which link the Amhara region to Addis Ababa. The government routinely blocks these gateways, denying Amhara access to the capital city.

Often, Amhara traders cannot transport their merchandises into Addis and through Addis Ababa to southern parts of Ethiopia. Gravely ill Amharas are not allowed to enter Addis to get treatment in big hospitals with lifesaving medical equipment. Furthermore, people from other regional states find it prohibitive to take their merchandise to sell to people in the Amhara region and buy merchandise from them to take back to their regions because of intermittent restriction of people and goods from the Amhara region.

Even worse, the so-called Oromo Sheger City that encircles Addis Ababa in all directions is designed not only to evict Amharas from the surroundings of Addis Ababa, but also to control Amhara's access to Addis Ababa. When the President of Oromo and the Second most powerful official of Oromo-PP was asked the purpose of building Sheger City, his response was "our enemies understand our intentions." Amharas are the enemy. This was reaffirmed in the above noted recent speech by the Oromo official in Mekele.

Sadly, the overuse of the term genocide in Ethiopian politics has watered down its impact. The systemic official depopulation of Amhara by statistical gambit, the frequent mass murders, the forced displacement of "close to a million Amhara from the Oromo region," the intermittent and frequent restrictions on the movement of people and goods from the Amhara region, and the designation of Amhara as "the enemy of Oromo and Tigray" are harbingers of a creeping genocide in slow motion.

The IC cannot turn a blind eye and deaf ear to the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention's Red Flag Alert that "The Amhara are in a perilous discursive position that could easily devolve into genocide." Nor can it ignore the recent public warning by one of Prime Minister's Senior Advisors that "Today's Ethiopia is at a juncture similar to that of Rwanda when it found itself at the dawn of genocide."

The Amhara has more than sufficient reasons to raise arms for survival. If anything, their revolt was delayed and timid, considering the systemic annihilation it has been subjected to for 30 years and continue to be subjected to under the current administration.

The IC has not given the systemic and protracted injustice the attention that it deserves. Part of this is due largely to the Amhara elite who failed to build a robust international PR ecosystem. But the IC with the plethora of embassies in Addis Ababa cannot play oblivious to the systemic Amhara's suffering over the span of 30 years.

3. The Eritrean Factor: A Gateway for a Proxy War

Both the federal government and the Tigray interim administration are gearing up for a showdown with Eritrea. If war breaks, the consequences will be incalculable. On the Oromo side, the PM's ambition includes invading Eritrea to annex the Assab Port. On the Tigrayan side, the motivating factors are reclaiming W&R and revenging Eritrea and Amhara. A political agenda fueled by Tigrayan thirst for vengeance and Oromo's quest for grandiosity will lead to catastrophic regional war.

On its part, Eritrea's concern stems from two sources. First, it sees an existential threat with Tigray reclaiming Wolkait because historically Tigray has used the Wolkait corridor for smuggling weapons large and small. Second, the joint TPLF and ENDF forces present a threat to the Isayas administration and to the territorial integrity of Eritrea.

Isaias' recent trip to China signals a desire to strengthen partnership between the two nations. Chinese President Xi Jinping did not only roll out the red carpet with a guard of honor, a 21-gun salute and a welcome banquet for his Eritrean counterpart, but also avowed to ["firmly support Eritrea in safeguarding its sovereignty, security and development interests."](#) He also pledged to ["oppose external interference in Eritrea's internal affairs."](#)

The China premier further stated China views the two nations' relations ["from a strategic and long-term perspective"](#) and is ready to elevate ["the China-Eritrean strategic partnership to a new level."](#)

An Oromo-Tigray military adventure against Eritrea and the Wolkait conflict will lead to an Amhara-Eritrea alliance. Chinese military support to safeguard Eritrea's sovereignty and security will find its way to Amhara fighters. Add to this ["discussions on the prospects for the development of Russian-Eritrean relations in various areas of regional and international issues"](#) and Iran's and Eritrea's discussions on ["expansion of reciprocal ties between the two nations"](#) that was propagated by Iran.

Don't forget Oromummaa's (Greater Oromia's) anti-Israel position as articulated in a book titled ["Phases of Terrorism in the Age of Globalization"](#) written by Asafa Jalata (the God father of Oromummaa). This was a calculated gamble to get support from Sudan, Egypt, and other Islamic countries. [Keep in mind the recent](#)

[meeting between Shaleka Dawit Woldegiorgis and the Foreign Minister of Israel in Jerusalem](#) to brief the Foreign Minister about “Oromummaa’s anti-Semitic philosophy.” Add to these recent cases of well-trained Amhara-Israelis finding their way to join the war in Amhara.

The PM is biting more than he can chew. The escalation of conflict between Eritrea-Amhara and Oromo-Tigray is bound to lead to a proxy war that will destabilize the entire Horn of Africa. If triggered, the war theater will display shoulder-fired missiles and drones and acts of war crimes unseen and unheard before. Sandwiched between Amhara, Eritrea and Afar, Tigray will be reduced to a scorched land. The humanitarian disaster will be of biblical proportions. The cost is too prohibitive for Tigray to do Abiy’s reckless bidding. But nothing is off the table in Ethiopian politics, including self-destruction.

The IC, most importantly the US and its European allies, have vested interest in avoiding such a scenario from developing.

4. Moving Forward: A Roadmap to A Peaceful Resolution

Ethiopia is confronted with a multitude of complex existential problems, ranging the gamut from a crisis of leadership and a state of emergency to a systemic failure of the constitutional order. The nation is one spark away from disintegration. It is important to realize that there is little chance of fixing the failure of the constitutional order when the nation is tittering at the verge of a cascading collapse. Conflating short-term, medium-term, and long-term issues complicate the problem. It will not solve it.

The analogy we use is the need to safely landing the proverbial plane with a malfunctioning engine that is flying through strong turbulence air. We believe saving the plane from breaking up in midair and safely landing it must be the priority of first order.

The welfare of 120 million people is in the hands of a reckless leader who starts a new civil war six months after he ended another one that claimed nearly a million lives and led to an estimated \$28 billion economic destruction. He is a narcissist with a psychopathic disregard for human life.

He has lost credibility at home and abroad. The IC sees him as a danger to the regional stability. The IC also knows that in 2018 there was the Oromara coalition led by the Lemma-Gedu duo that was ready to take the levers of power to stabilize the nation. Today, the reality is that there is no viable coalition to take over power and stabilize the nation.

Obviously, the solution to the nation’s problem must come from within Ethiopia. However, considering the depth and breadth of the state of emergency, realizing the polarizing nature of the nation’s political culture, and considering the influential role the IC can play, the nation needs all hands on

deck to avert the crisis. In this regard the focus should be on managing the Fanno uprising and identifying where the IC assume the role of a catalyst for change.

Managing the Fanno Uprising

How the Fanno uprising is managed will determine whether the movement will set the nation on the path of peace and security or push it toward an irreversible tipping point. The success in Fanno's armed uprising in such a short time is nothing short of heroic and astounding. However, it is critical to realize every successful military endeavor requires a political organ that guides and constraints it.

Creating a Political Organ

The most pressing challenge Fanno has is transforming itself from a protest movement to a reform movement. In this regard, creating a dynamic political architecture with a robust agenda, dynamic strategy, adoptive roadmap, and a clear and viable endgame is critical.

The challenge is daunting especially since it needs to be done in real time. In the immediate short-term, Fanno must find it possible to build a broad-based political support group that agree on a minimum agenda. The support group needs to have a brilliant, seasoned, and adoptive nucleus that can broaden and deepen the coalition. This is critical because Fanno's success will be short-lived without a sustained support of the people and a coalition with other reform forces.

Unity among various political voices in the Amhara region will take Fanno a long way to win the confidence and support of the silent majority. Fanno leaders must understand the people of Amhara seek peace and stability as much as they long for freedom from Oromo-PP and protection from the hegemonic nightmare of Oromummaa. Having a transparent, flexible, and solution-oriented strategy will take Fanno a long way to win the confidence and support in the Amhara region and beyond.

Fanno can benefit from the successful experience of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) success to mobilize broad support and the failure of the ENDF and TPLF to reach a negotiated settlement earlier than they did.

Benefiting From the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church's Experience

Fanno primary strength comes neither from the barrel of its guns nor its heroic fighters, but from the thunderous voices of the silent majority that have come out in droves to support it. Fanno can benefit from the EOTC experience.

In this regard, Fanno must ask the following questions. How did the EOTC succeed to mobilize a broad-based support?" The answer is the strategic leadership of the synod that rose to the demands of the

time. What is notable was that its supporters crossed over religion divides, tribal lineages, and demographic differences. This tells us as much about the character, prudence, temperance, and fortitude of the silent majority as it does about the leadership of the synod.

The Synod manifested moral courage, religious virtues, and not least political genius. Its moral courage allowed it to fend off pressure from extremist forces that wanted it to take a hardline position. Its humility led it to acknowledge its own shortcomings and promise to address the concerns of the splintered group. Its religious virtues guided its prudence, temperance, fortitude, sense of justice and above all forgiveness. Its political genius helped it to seek a win-win outcome, rising above divisions and avoiding feeding oxygen to the blaze that tribal political actors lit and stocked.

Fanno needs to realize that the silent majority's support in the time of war will not translate to support after the war. The silent majority wants tolerance, peace, and reconciliation embedded in a win-win political solution. If Fanno want a sustained support, it needs to understand the people's aspirations and demands and frame and curate its political strategy and narrative accordingly.

Avoiding the ENDF and TPLF Mistakes of Rejecting Negotiation Earlier

The Fanno must also draw a valuable lesson from the outcome of the recent war between the ENDF the TPLF. The Ethiopian Government could have forced a negotiated settlement in its favor in November 2020, surrounding but not entering Mekele.

The TPLF could have forced a negotiated settlement in its favor in June 2021 after it turned the military tide and made the now Field Marshal Berhanu Julla and his army to sprint faster than a spooked chita.

Both ENDF and TPLF sought total victory and engaged in a mutually destructive two-year war only to end up at the negotiating table after unimaginable costs in life and national treasure.

Fanno must make it clear that a civil war must be avoided, and the demand for a transformative change must be achieved. The risk of a potential civil war must be associated with the government's intransigence and refusal for a transformative change, not with Fanno's uncompromising drive for a government change. Success on this front can push the Fanno movement to the next level, without any discernible loss or weakening of its momentum.

Fanno must judiciously manage the competing objectives of enforcing a transformative change and avoiding a civil war. It must show political wisdom and sophistication. As the saying goes, there is more than one way to skin a cat. Fanno can get what it wants in more ways than one.

The removal of the PM from office needs to be a desired outcome not a do-or-die zero-sum-game. Ethiopians have a country they love and are duty-bound to save. Much as they wish to get rid of the PM, they need to navigate this turbulent time with care. This by no means leads to leave the status quo intact.

The Fanno movement needs to follow a two-pronged strategy. The first prong is where it puts a redline for a transformative change, including its right to protect itself from aggression and choose its leaders. The second prong must focus on elevating itself to a reform movement to be able to play its role in shaping the future of the country. In the short term, its demands may include:

- Immediate withdrawal of ENDF forces that have invaded the Amhara region since the declaration of war and the suspension of the disarmament program until confidence building measures are taken and the existential threat against Amhara is removed.
- Maintain the W&R current status quo until the region's security, peace, and stability is secured and a conducive environment is created for discussion without a military threat
- Immediate action to organize national and international humanitarian support for forcefully displaced Amhara people. The program must be managed by international agencies. This is critical considering the report by the UN and US government that regional and federal government officials were involved stealing international food aid.
- An international investigation of mass killings and mass evictions of the people of Amhara and other ethnic groups and demolition of churches and mosques. The investigation must be unfettered and time bound – no more than six months followed by full accountability based on the findings of investigation.
- A vote of confidence for the Amhara Prosperity Party-led government in the Amhara region within a specified timeframe. The aim is either to establish confidence in the Amhara-PP leadership or recall them followed by new elections if the recall through constitutional means leads to removal from office of Amhara-PP leaders. The recall process and the election process (if conducted) must be monitored by international observers.
- Vote of confidence for the Oromo-PP led government in the Ethiopian Parliament if there is consensus by other regions. This opens the door to replace the Prime Minister if the majority Parliamentarians so choose.

None of the demands violate the constitutional order. This gives Fanno legitimacy in its demands, without undermining its rights and security guarantee. This may lead to the removal of both Amhara-PP leaders and the PM from his office. Even if he survives, he will be a weak leader who cannot determine the fate of the nation by himself.

Winning International Support

Winning the confidence and support of geopolitical forces is critical. In the best-case scenario, the Fanno movement can leverage their support to pressure the government. In the worst-case scenario, it can push back against the government's and TPLF's efforts to undermine its interests.

It is important to understand the government is under enormous international pressure to make concessions and reconcile with opposition forces. The IMF and Paris Club are withholding

international aid (concessional loans and debt relief) to pressure the government for a peaceful political process.

Above all, the Fanno movement must show political maturity and temperance. It must understand the government is under enormous international pressure to make concessions and reconcile with opposition forces. The IMF and Paris Club are withholding international aid (concessional loans and debt relief) to pressure the government for a peaceful political process. The Fanno uprising has helped to step up this pressure. There is no reason why Fanno should not influence and leverage the international community.

The International Community as a Catalyst for Change

At this critical juncture in time, the IC can play a crucial role as a catalyst for change. In this regard the following steps are critical for the success of its intervention.

- Win the trust and confidence of all Ethiopians as an impartial and fair arbiter and partner.
- Have a consistent and principle-based policy of intervention
- Establish clarity on balancing the containment of China and enforcing democratic rules
- Ensure that accountability is a sacred bedrock of its intervention policy
- Give equal attention to armed and unarmed opposition groups
- Give voice to emerging voices of the growing undercurrent movement

Winning the Confidence of All Ethiopians as an Impartial and Fair Arbiter

The historical suspicion bordering on animosity that Ethiopians display toward international intervention and the now defunct #NoMore movement aside, Ethiopians have legitimate grounds to claim lack of impartiality and fairness in the US' intervention in recent memory. Let us look at specific cases.

The Trump administration's intervention in the Ethio—Sudan-Egypt conflict over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is a case in point. The US was supposed to be an observer in the international mediation hosted by the Trump administration. The Trump administration unilaterally made itself a mediator and drafted articles of agreement in favor of Egypt's position. When Ethiopia rejected the articles of agreement, the Trump administration saw it fit to reiterate Egypt's "[we will bomb the dam](#)" threat with sympathy for Egypt, if not with a tone of endorsement. Furthermore, the Trump administration repeatedly petitioned the UN Security Council to intervene on Egypt's behalf.

To its credit, the Biden administration took prompt action to disassociate the US from Trump's biased intervention. In the meantime, it did little to nothing to adopt a principled position in its intervention

in the war between the ENDF and TPLF. If anything, its intervention in the Amhara-Tigray conflict hardened the Amhara suspicion and apprehension about the US.

First, Amhara politicians rightly note that the very fact that the US refers to W&R as “Western and Southern Tigray” is a biased position. So is its repeated call to get Amhara special forces and militia to withdraw from the two regions and return the two regions to Tigray.

Second, Amhara critics of the US intervention point to the US’s call to return forcefully displaced Tigrayans to their homes in W&R and ask why has the US failed to call for the return of nearly one million Amharas who have been forcefully displaced out of the Oromo tribal land? They acknowledge the US has made general calls to return displaced people to their homes. They rightly note, there is a difference in focusing on atrocities in Tigray and in the contested areas of W&R without equally focusing on atrocities committed against the Amhara in the Oromo region.

Of recent, the Biden administration has started taking a more nuanced approach on the issue of Wolkait and Raya. This is encouraging but a deliberate and transparent effort needs to be made. In this regard, acknowledging past shortcomings will signal the dawning of new era of trust and cooperation.

Having a consistent and principle-based intervention policy

Let us open this section with a question. Why has democracy failed to take traction in countries such as Ethiopia? The answer is attributable partly to the elite class that has turned political profiteering and bloodletting into political science and partly to distorted incentive structure and constraint matrix often caused by IC.

The Ethiopian political elites rely on a simple and predictable political calculus. Keep the people hostage as a political currency to leverage the IC in the name of averting humanitarian crisis. This is a strategy both the government and criminal opposition elements rely on. Let us look at a telling example.

On March 24, 2022, having defeated and pushed the TPLF forces out of Amhara and Afar regions the government of Ethiopia decided not to pursue the fleeing Tigryan forces. Instead, it released from prison high-level TPLF officials who were captured during the first round of war. Subsequently, *it declared its second unilateral truce* to thwart the humanitarian crisis and pave the way for a peaceful resolution. The TPLF agreed to a *“cessation of hostilities.”*

On July 15, UN-WFP expressed optimism that the government of Ethiopia had allowed international aid agencies to provide much-needed aid to the people of Tigray region and that *“famine has been averted.”* Further, as reported by the UN, on 20 August, *“the second batch of 840 tons of fertilizer arrived in Tigray to support farmers in the planting season.”*

The future bore a flicker of hope, as farmers prepared to plant their crops. This undermined TPLF crisis leveraging strategy, leading it to launch a new and final round of war. The TPLF knew it had no chance of winning a new round of war. Its strategy was using a humanitarian crisis as a leverage to win concession from the government.

On August 24, the UN World Food Program (WFP) announced [“TPLF forces stole 12 fuel tankers from its warehouse in Mekelle,”](#) the capital of Tigray. The same day, breaching the ceasefire, the malignant front used the fuel to launch its third war to invaded Amhara and Afar regions for the second time.

David Beasley, the head of WFP, condemned the looting as *“outrageous and disgraceful.”* The UN Secretary-General’s office stressed the TPLF’s action *“will impact humanitarian operations,”* such as “the distribution of food, fertilizer, and other emergency relief items.” The head of the USAID, Samantha Powers, characterized TPLF’s action as *“deeply cruel.”*

Nonetheless, the IC stepped up its pressure on Ethiopia to resolve the crisis without demanding to dismantle the TPLF as a political entity or requiring TPLF leaders to be exiled to a safe haven. The Pretoria negotiation lasted for 10 days as they argued about the fate of TPLF leaders.

The TPLF’s strategy was clear in Getachew Reda’s Colorado speech in which he stated: “I don’t want to go into details. We stayed 10 days in Pretoria. We sacrificed more young lives in the 10 days we stayed in Pretoria than we sacrificed in the 60 days of war before going to Pretoria.” Only God knows how many young children were sacrificed to save TPLF leaders from being exiled to a safe haven.

The IC may have helped in bringing the war to an end. But the success came at the cost of giving legitimacy for using humanitarian crisis as a currency for political concession and in the process undermining the most important cornerstone of peace and security: The Sanctity of Accountability.

Making accountability a sacred bedrock of the IC’s policy of intervention

In the current circumstances, the first critical step is to demand unfettered and timebound international investigation of all atrocities committed in Ethiopia. [The African Union’s decision to quietly terminate the mandate of the Africa Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights](#) to investigate allegations of crime against humanity in the Tigray region was a gross dereliction of duty.

With the atrocities in Tigray swept under the rug, the PM had no reason to resist the temptation to launch another war in the Amhara region. The termination of AU’s investigation of crime against humanity in Tigray was tantamount to issuing him a cart blanche for launching a new round of war.

Conspicuously, the leaders of Tigray interim administration are quite because they understand an unfettered international investigation will hold them accountable to the atrocities they committed not

only in Amhara and Afar regions but also in Tigray. When Getachew Reda came to Colorado, his townhall meeting with the Tigrayan diaspora was festive. There was no contrition or repentance. Instead, it was time for a festival of music along with victory dance and competition for a selfie with leaders who are responsible for sending hundreds of thousands of child soldiers to their demise.

Establishing Clarity on Balancing the Containment of China and Enforcing Democratic Rules

In a game theoretic sense, the PM's perception of the IC's resolve determines how he will respond to its intervention. Unfortunately, to date, he has no reason to think the IC will prioritize democratic rules in Africa over the containment of China. The PM understands his stay in power depends on international aid from the West. But he feels there is ample room to play the BRICS (China) card to continue receiving lifesaving support from the West.

One thing is clear. BRICS is a pipe dream in the foreseeable future. The fact that Ethiopia became a member of BRICS will not change this in the slightest, in the short term. For example, in 2022, the World Bank provided *\$37.7 billion (IDA) and \$33.1 billion (IBRD) in credits, loans and grants*. Add to this IMF's, UNDP's development assistance, and bilateral aid from Western donors and get the picture. By comparison, *BRICS' total loan for the same year was estimated between \$8 billion and \$10 Billion*. To put this figure in perspective, *Ethiopia alone received \$9 billion in 2019 from the IMF, World Bank, and bilateral aid from Western nations*. The same year it received *commitment from US Development Finance Corporation (DFC) to invest \$5 billion in 3 to 5 years*.

The PM knows this. But he believes the IC sees Ethiopia as a strategic country in the current geopolitical space and will not take a decisive action against it. If this proves true, the IC will risk seeing Ethiopia slip into a catastrophic civil war in a slow motion. In this scenario containing china becomes meaningless.

The IC will undermine its credibility and influence until it establishes clarity on the conundrum between balancing its interest in containing China and enforcing democratic rules in Africa.

Supporting Emerging Voices of Undercurrent Movements

Unseen and ignored by the IC, voices of discontent are emerging from a growing undercurrent movement in the back alleys of the Amhara-Oromo-Tigray political nexus. Triggered and sustained by economic hardship, and the breakdown of law and order, voices of discontent against the political order are also getting louder in every nook and cranny of the country.

If the government does not manage to nip it in the bud, the movement can shift the center of gravity of the nation away from the Oromo-Amhara-Tigray conflict nexus. This will be a seismic change in the nation's political landscape. It will alter the political agenda from polarizing and diverging tribal conflicts to a consensus building and converging national interest.

Even the most ardent polarizing figures are distancing themselves from the zero-sum politics they have been peddling for years. Let us see how Jawar Mohammed's political position evolved overtime. In 2013 he popularized the slogan "[Ethiopia Out of Oromia](#)," accusing Ethiopia of colonizing Oromia. In 2020, he declared "[Yes, this is our time. We are not going to be bothered if people lament and complain. Their cacophony will not deter us from advancing our agenda. We will move forward with full force.](#)" In 2023, he is a changed man. He now believes the Oromo-led government must listen to and address the concerns and demands of the Amhara.

Similarly, Tigrayan extremists, who, in the past, touted war as part of their culture and bragged about the supposed Tigrayan exceptional military prowess and invincibility are begrudgingly acknowledging peace is a better alternative. This was evident in Getachew Reda's speech in Colorado: "[Our collective understanding, at this moment, is that the people of Tigray cannot shoulder another war. Therefore, as much as we can, we have to create a situation where we can avoid conflict.](#)"

In the same vein, a prominent Tigrayan professor of constitutional law, Alemayehu Fentaw, who was [one of the ardent defenders of the tribe-based constitution now believes differently](#). In December 2022 he wrote: "Ethiopia's ethnic federalism was meant to be a political experiment at accommodating ethnic diversity and managing ethnic conflicts. The experience so far shows that the system has failed. Ethiopia is at a moment of great constitutional crisis. Nothing short of a comprehensive constitutional reform can resolve the conflicts and halt the ongoing ethnic pogroms."

The people want change. The question is what is the trigger point that will mobilize the people to turn the murmurs of discontent and cry for justice to a tsunami of voice for change. The IC can get the most bang for its buck by giving support to the emerging voices of the undercurrent tremor.

Enforcing Immediate Secession of Hostilities and Championing Dialogue

Though there are encouraging signs from the US to take the matter seriously, the EU is reiterating the all too familiar generic statement that have done no good in the past. Its recent statement reads as follows: "[We expresses profound concern. We stand ready to support any process that leads to dialogue \[and\] reconciliation.](#)" Truth be told, the EU knows this will do nothing. The warring factions take it to mean "Carry on." So why bother to release such a statement?

The IC must make international aid conditional to the successful implementation and sustainability of a peaceful resolutions. The PM is bending backward to implement the Pretoria agreement to get the IC release the IMF and World Bank concessional loans of \$4.9 billion. The IC must withhold all loans and grants, barring humanitarian aid, until the PM allows unfettered and timebound international investigations, accepts a ceasefire, and agrees to an internationally monitored dialogue.

We believe the peace dialogue must be bilateral between the government and the various armed groups. This is important because the task of first priority is averting a civil war. We believe it is important to separate short- and long-term issues. Long term issues should not be limited to armed groups.

Obviously, there must also be a mechanism put in place to hold opposition parties accountable if they continue to use terror as a currency for a political concession. This may include designating them as terrorist organizations, and sanctioning countries who provide them support.

5. In Conclusion

Ethiopia is at a critical juncture. At no time in its history has the nation faced the prospect of an apocalyptic civil war as it is today. The possibility that the clash between the Fanno uprising for survival and the PM's unmitigated instinct for waging war risk precipitating a civil war that can morph into a regional proxy war. The crisis can spillover into neighboring countries, weakening the region's security, economic and political environment.

On the positive side, the crisis has led increasing number of political groups to reconsider their zero-sum political warfare. This has created a political undercurrent across various regions of the country, demanding a transformative reform.

Given the current political, economic and security state of the country, in the immediate short term, what transpires in the Amhara region and the nature of the intervention of the IC will determine whether the balance will tip in favor of a negotiated settlement or a civil war. Even though there is a path for a positive outcome, many things must happen simultaneously to repel the political system's innate gravitation toward centers of polarization.

The nation is one spark away from plunging into a cascading crisis. The time is now to do everything possible to avert a civil war. The IC that has promised the world "Never Again" after the Rwanda genocide has moral obligations to intervene before the crisis gets out of hand.