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Institutionally crafted Amhara-domination narrative: an existential threat to Amhara people

Dereje Melese Liyew

Department of Political Science and International Relations, Debre Markos University, Debre Markos, Ethiopia

ABSTRACT

Political narrative is an instrument for political actors to construct a shared meaning, and it can be harnessed to harm political opponents. The Italian invaders, the Ethiopian Student Movement, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, the Oromo Liberation Front, and the incumbent regime contributed in varying degrees to the Amhara domination narrative. TPLF, in its political manifesto and later in the 1995 FDRE constitution, institutionally crafted an anti-Amhara narrative, reaching a crescendo after Abiy Ahmed assumed office in 2018. Thus, this research article tried to scrutinise and weigh the discourse of institutionally crafted Amhara existential threats. The study employed a qualitative research tradition and an exploratory research design approach that involved a political-economic analysis. The study finds that the century-old Amhara domination narrative, coupled with institutionally supported recurrent mass killings and expulsion, especially in Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Amhara regional states, posed a real and perceived existential threat that gave birth to the Amhara Fano armed struggle.

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1. Introduction

The power of political narratives to shape world politics is a scholarly concern. Political narrative emerges from a formal political forum, such as a parliament, a cabinet, party meetings, or political demonstrations, or as a narrative produced by politicians and public officials in the course of their duties (Shenhav, 2006). It is then an instrument for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future and for international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors (Groth, 2019). Thus, controlling the political narrative is pertinent to framing political processes according to one group's politico-economic interests.

Narrative as a political strategy is an intentional or automatic use of politically charged thoughts to further relatively specific goals. Sharing and distributing political narratives helps in actively conveying political messages and worldviews to harm political opponents and support political movements and ideas (Groth, 2019). Pizzagate¹ witnessed this reality. In this backdrop, the Amhara domination or oppression narrative has been

installed so far. The Amhara domination narrative traces back at least to the five years of Italian occupation or so.

Divide and rule policy was the colonial strategy of fascist Italy. Accordingly, the then ruler of the invaders deployed a tactic of categorization against Amhara to weaken the anti-colonial struggle. The Amhara people were labelled as the devil-incarnate, and an impediment to Europe's mission to colonise Africa (Prochazka, 2013). The anti-Amhara narrative keeps going strong because it aligns with the agenda of powerful forces with a vested interest in keeping Africa forever fragile, and these forces see Amharas as an impediment to this grand strategy (Workneh, 2024). Amhara demonization, dehumanisation otherwise, via the anti-Amhara narrative has been a solid wall since then. Later on, under the Ethiopian Student Movement, the Amhara domination narrative was resonated in Walleign Mekonnen's and Tilahun Takele's articles, which mainly focused on the national oppression thesis.

The TPLF, in its party manifesto in 1976, boldly pronounced the oppressor-oppressed dichotomy, Amhara on the side of the oppressor. The manifesto labelled ethnic Amhara people as oppressors and primary enemies of Tigray and other peoples. Again, the TPLF in the Second Organisational Congress,² insisted that the Amhara feudal class, led by Menelik II, expanded and consolidated their power by conducting predatory campaigns against the peoples of the southern, western, and eastern parts of present-day Ethiopia. Such anti-Amhara narratives in later days became the mainstream discourse in Ethiopian politics. The 1995 FDRE constitution resurfaced the Amhara domination discourse in its preamble.

The Amhara domination narrative has brought uncountable attacks against the Amhara people. Forced displacement, expropriation of property, demonization, and mass killings are undeniable practices, particularly in Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz Regional States. During the Italian occupation, for instance, between 600,000 and 800,000 Amharas were chased out from various parts of the country, and around 320,000 Amharas were killed and evicted from Arba Gugu, a tiny province in the Oromia region, between 1991 and 2001 (Bitew Geremew, 2023). Amnesty International reported³ that on 9 November 2020, Tigrayan local police, aided by a local militia and an 'informal' Tigray youth group called 'Samri,' killed at least 600 civilians pre-identified or profiled as Amharas in Maikadra town, Kafta Humera woreda. Amnesty International (2020) also reveals that at least 54 people from the Amhara ethnic group were killed in an attack late on 1 November 2020 by suspected members of the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) armed group. Recurrent and massive attacks on Amharas in Oromia-Wollega, Gumuz, and Addis Ababa because they are ethnic Amhara are yet unresolved. Thus, there are armed groups (Fano), scholars, civic associations, and individuals who strongly believe that the age-old institutionally and structurally supported anti-Amhara narrative is posing an existential threat to the Amhara people.

A renowned politician, Andargachew Tsige, insists that 'while the existential threat of Amhara has historical roots extending back centuries, it has intensified over the past 50 years, reaching its peak in the past five years.'⁴ Another scholar also confirms that 'Amhara identity, in its current form, is a recent introduction and forced self-appropriation, caused by an existential threat and alienation.'⁵ The armed group, Fano, fights against the incumbent regime in the name of the existential defense of the Amhara people. However, such propositions have no place on the part of the

existing regime. Therefore, this research article aims to examine and evaluate the discourse of institutionally and politically constructed existential threats in Amhara, which are intertwined with the ongoing armed conflict between the Amhara Fano and government forces.

2. Methods and materials

The study is based on desktop research and interviews with experts, scholars, and civil society organisations involved in participating in and supporting the Amhara people's cause. The study thus employed an exploratory research design approach, employing the qualitative research tradition that involves a politico-economic analysis to explore the phenomena further. In addition to scholarly articles, Human Rights Commission reports, conferences, legal documents, press releases, and media outlets on the Amhara cause were deeply consulted to investigate the issue under investigation.

The study thematically focuses on the role of political institutions and political narratives in crafting Amhara domination or anti-Amhara narratives and critically analysing the discourse of the 'Amhara existential threat' pronounced by pro-Amhara scholars and armed groups. In terms of the time framework, the study targets the two recent consecutive regimes (EPRDF and PP), with a special emphasis on the post-2018 regime.

The primary data had been analysed qualitatively through critical discourse analysis, while the data collected from secondary sources had been analysed qualitatively through a systematic review.

3. The genesis of the Amhara domination narrative

The colonial and pre-1991 discursive narratives against Amhara are not the prime coverage of this study, yet understanding the root of the current existential threat gives nuanced insight into the post-1991 institutional and political causes of the Amhara existential threat. Accordingly, the intent to demonise the Amhara people can be traced back to the five-year Italian invasion. To the interest of the divide and rule strategy, the invader employed a tactic of categorising ethnic groups. Earlier, in their published journal (Isenberg et al., 2011), they spewed anti-Amhara tirades at every turn. Their anti-Amhara rants, along with their diatribe against the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, resonated with the Italians in 1935 and resurfaced in Sibhat Negga's infamous boast, 'We have broken the backbone of Amharas' (Workneh, 2024). Based on the nature, intensity, and damage of the narrative, three critical phases are discussed as follows.

3.1. The pre-1991 discourse

The unity of Ethiopians at Adwa alarmed Mussolini, causing him to divide the people in his effort to avenge Ethiopia. The most divisive strategy that the Italians used was the categorization of Ethiopians into unequal human races. Adolf Parlesak, a Czech who was a participant in the war on the Ethiopian side, recorded one of the letters that were distributed to the Tigray people, intended to disseminate hate towards ethnic Amhara. The letter reads:

We were sent by God to bring civilisation to your country. Nevertheless, we are unable to carry out this God-given civilising mission because we are forcefully deterred by the Amhara oppressors. Dear Tigray people, we preach you to whisk them away like a dog. You have to chase away the Amhara bandits and brigands when they come to purchase food and beverages. We strongly urge you not to provide any form of assistance to the Amhara bandits' if you failed to carry out this order, your village would be bombarded without any excuse. (Parlesak, 2002)

Besides, Baron Roman Birara (2023) and Prochazka (2013) a Polish lawyer, published an article titled '*Abyssinia: The Powder Barrel*,' a propaganda booklet, whose goal was to portray the Amhara people as the devil-incarnate and an impediment to Europe's mission to colonise Africa. During the five-year Italian invasion, the Amhara people were intentionally demonized and excluded from government offices, and the use of the Amharic language in non-Amharic territories was prohibited (Sbacchi, 1985).

Uncritically accepting these narratives, Ethiopian ethnic elites viewed Ethiopia as 'a collection of discrete ethnic communities, brought together by Amhara colonialism' (Maimire, 2005). This belief became popular in the 1960s due to the advent of Marxism-Leninism in the country's political atmosphere.

Ethnic-based antagonism highly follows students' national oppression thesis. On the Question of Nationality in Ethiopia, written by Walleign Mekonnen and published in the student magazine *Struggle* on 17 November 1969, and 'The National Question in Ethiopia,' written by Tilahun Takele and published in the student magazine *Struggle* on 17 November 1971, made nationalism a topic of discussion among Ethiopian students (Selassie, 1992). The Amhara domination narrative was at the heart of nationalities questions. Walleign's accidental rise was the most profound sprint board for the ethno-nationalist politics on the perimeters of enemizing Amhara. Birara (2023) commented that since Walleign, it has endured to be the standard of Ethiopian politics to posit Amhara as a colonizer and oppressor of Ethiopian ethnic groups. This narration has been widely indoctrinated including or through government structures, for more than six decades now.

4. Amhara during the TPLF-led EPRDF regime (1991–2018)

The year 1991 was a turning point in Amhara politics; during which the Ethiopia politics was restructured based on the institutionalization of a state system based on the Amhara domination narrative (Workneh, 2024). Thus, there are imputations that the TPLF-led EPRDF regime deployed revolutionary democracy as an ideological instrument to attack Amhara peoples for decades. Consequently, people with Amhara identity has been exposed to multi-dimensional attack in different parts of Ethiopia. Ethno-nationalist labelled ethnic-Amhara as '*Chequagn*' (Oppressor), '*Neftegna*' (warmongers), and '*Timkihtegna*' (Chauvinist), which resulted in deadly consequences.

In this regard, Tsega (2018) put it as follows: 'The incessant propaganda the TPLF and its cohorts mounted against the Amharas has succeeded in reducing the Amhara people into a population that is fit for any act of dehumanisation by groups such as the TPLF who continue to perpetrate atrocities with impunity against the Amharas they identified as their mortal enemies.'

The spirit of the 1995 constitution as stipulated in the preamble also dubbed a certain group oppressor, Amhara otherwise. The consequence is deadly; the continual displacement, expropriation of property, and mass execution⁶ for Amhara people almost in every corner of the republic is a daytime practice; more alarmingly in Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz regional states.

4.1. *The 1995 FDRE constitution*

A constitution is the primary and most important institution that reflects and shapes the overall political and legal image of a state. The 1995 FDRE constitution is strongly accused of its failure to accommodate individual rights in relation to group rights. The constitution does not recognise citizens as individuals; instead, it portrays citizens in their ethnic groups. It provides ownership of the state to ethnic groups; the preamble begins with 'We the Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples of Ethiopia,' which shows its emphasis on ethnic groups.

An informant in the area insists that:

The political spirit of the constitution is mainly focused on ethnic groups. It does not give freedom and recognition as an individual, the constitution knows individuals in their group (ethnic) membership. Because of the denial of individual rights such as freedom of movement, individuals, those who are labelled as minority or newcomers, are facing multiple casualties, including confiscation of their properties and loss of life; Amhara are prime victims in this regard.⁷

The FDRE constitution unnecessarily labelled certain ethnic groups (Amhara, otherwise) as oppressors and other ethnic groups as oppressed. A close look at the preamble of the 1995 FDRE constitution reveals intentions to divide the people into two or more antagonistic groups: 'Fully cognizant that our common destiny can best be served by rectifying historically unjust relationships and by further promoting our shared interests (the 1995 FDRE constitution)'.

In a similar vein, an informant argues that 'the constitution was established based on three implicit propositions: creating a union of autonomous states, ending the perceived dominance of Amhara, and providing leverage for the geographic expansion of the TPLF party'.⁸

It is safe to argue that the constitution has become the source of cleavages and divides the already existing political community into friends and enemies. A government affiliated official also noted that 'in order to rectify past injustices, the constitution dubbed some lords and others slaves; the narrative and the structure of the constitution are against the age-old harmonious co-existence among ethnic groups.'⁹ Thus, the legal frameworks and philosophical orientations are the persistent as well as the root cause of contemporary galvanised conflicts and Amhara domination narratives.

The regional constitutions, derived from the federal constitution, are also very exclusionary. The Oromia Regional State Constitution, for example, states that 'regional supreme power resides in the hands of ethnic Oromo people, and it is exercised through democratically elected representatives and/or direct participation' (see Article 8 of the revised 2002 Oromia Regional State Constitution). Similarly, the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State Constitution states that 'despite the existence

of other ethnic groups, the owners of the region are Berta, Gumuz, Shinash, Mao, and Como' (see Article 2 of the revised 2003 regional state constitution). Accordingly, citizens outside of their designated ethnic homeland are excluded from political and economic involvement. They are considered newcomers (in its Amharic version *Metie*),¹⁰ and even exposed to multiple attacks, expropriation of property, and killings.

The narrowing of regional and local citizenship to the level of primordial ethnicity frequently led to conflict between the titular and non-titular groups (Abbink, 2011). No matter how many years one lives in or was born in that regional state, if that individual's ethnic background is from another regional state, that individual will never be treated equally with natives of the state. It is in this spirit that ethnic Amhara have faced forced displacement, expropriation of property, and mass killings in different parts of the state. Given the large number of Amhara living in various parts of the country as a result of reasons related to historical, personal, and government policies, they have been prime victims of attacks (Workneh, 2024) such as ethnically motivated killing and displacement, which endured for more than three decades.

5. Post-2018: escalated Amharas carnage

Commencing during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, the scale of the Amhara mass killing increased at an alarming rate after ethno-nationalist groups seized power in 1991 and reached a crescendo after Abiy Ahmed assumed office in 2018. The continual forced displacement, expropriation of property, and extrajudicial killing of ethnic Amhara have been quite alarming in the last six or so years. The unilateral decision to disband the Amhara Special Force without due consultation with the general public, coupled with the subsequent declaration of a state of emergency, exacerbated holistic casualties for the Amhara people. There is a strong belief on the part of the people that the Amhara Special Force (ASF) is the trusted force protecting Amhara communities. Amidst such solid support for the special force, disbanding it caused distrust in the federal government, while the TPLF force is claiming Wolkait, Raya, and other provinces. Following the state of emergency, the people have faced uncountable damages. An Amhara-affiliated association also called the Amhara Association of America (AAA) (14 February 2024), reported that:

In the 6 months following the declaration of the SoE in Amhara Region (between 4 August 2023, and 31 January 2024, killed at least 1,606 civilians, predominantly unarmed civilians, conducted at least 37 verified drone strikes targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure, raped at least 210 young girls and women; mass arrested over 10,000 ethnic Amharas in Addis Ababa city administration and Amhara Region alone, pillaged, caused extensive damage to private and public property, and many more casualties.

Besides, the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (13 October 2023) in its comprehensive investigative findings and legal determinations, also confirmed forced displacement, detention, and extrajudicial killings of ethnic Amhara by extremist groups and government forces.

British charity worker Graham Peebles underscores that, 'in the last five years, Amhara communities living in the Oromo region have been subjected to sustained violence by

Oromo nationalists: the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)/Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), together with the Oromo Special Forces (OSF) and the Queero (Oromo youth group), are behind the violence, with, it seems, the approval, perhaps active participation, of some government officials.¹¹ Thus, the post-2018 so-called political transition resonates the already installed Amhara domination narratives with deadly consequences.

6. Existential threats to Amhara and the armed struggle

As the name itself implies, an existential threat is a threat to existence, or it is something that is perceived to have a reasonable chance to end someone's or something's existence (Kucherenko, 2023). Thus, an existential threat to an ethnic group appeals to the fear of one's ethnic group's death or elimination. Stating it otherwise, existential insecurity is associated with the imminent and tangible fears and threats perceived by political actors and shared with or passed onto their followers (Akkoyunlu & Öktem, 2018). Threats may stem from foreign invasion, violent overthrow by coup or revolution, repression, the possibility of going to prison, or worse.

There are references that show existential threats: collective physical annihilation and symbolic collective annihilation. Collective physical annihilation constitutes a threat to the physical existence of the group, for example, the Israeli fear of Iran's nuclear programme, while symbolic collective annihilation constitutes the fear that the group will lose its identity in the future. In this parameter, the Amhara people are assumed to be facing both types of threats. A figurative Fano leader argues that 'when we say Amhara is under existential threat, we mean the people are physically insecure in every corner of Ethiopia, and the political and social values are annihilated through age-old anti-Amhara narratives'¹² Symbolic and physical threats sometimes go hand in hand because when the group is physically destroyed, the culture will be destroyed as well. In these backdrops, there are significant numbers of pro-Amhara actors; armed and non-armed groups, who have boldly pronounced Amhara's existential threat: manifested via physical elimination and political, economic, and social annihilation of the people.

In the research of the researcher, the Amhara people's struggle for justice and equality traverses at least three critical phases. The first phase was a roundtable appeal for fair representation of Amhara in economic and political decision-making. The second was a peaceful demonstration in different Amhara towns in quest of the Amhara people's right to life, liberty, and legal protection from arbitrary eviction and killings outside the designated region. The failure of the regimes to address these fundamental and reiterated questions gave birth to the third phase, the Amhara Fano armed struggle. Therefore, the current development of the defensive struggle is a product of a 'security dilemma' dynamic facing the Amhara as a result of the continuation of the 'Oppressor-Oppressed' narrative that has been adopted by the EPRDF regime (Shiferaw Chanie & Ishiyama, 2021) and resurfaced by the incumbent regime.

6.1. The Fano armed groups

In today's understanding, Fano is recognized as armed groups of the Amhara people that see themselves as defending the interests of the Amhara people and Ethiopians at large. Of course, unlike the traditional conception of Fano (mainly associated with riflemen),

currently the group also devises a political wing. The Amhara Fano has reinvigorated itself, taking on a new shape as a politico-military force in its resistance movement against Abiy Ahmed's regime (Chanie, 2024). So, it is a political-military group fighting for the Amhara people's cause. That is why different Fano leaders frequently states that they are fighting for political power and justice.¹³

Previously, 'the Fano played prominent roles in areas where Amhara populations are often perceived as being under threat, often outside of the Amhara region, in the border areas between Benishangul-Gumuz and Amhara regions (Metekel Zone); in the area around Ataye, in the Oromo Special Zone; and the border with North Showa.'¹⁴ They also played a crucial role in the fight against the TPLF alongside the Amhara Special Force and the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF). As a result, the Fano groups have widespread support from the Amhara people and the Amhara diaspora mainly because of their close ties with the community they are fighting for.

Currently there are four major Fano factions in the four clusters (with subsequent division, brigade, battalions, companies, and so on): Gondar, Gojjam, Wollo, and Shoa fighting against the incumbent regime. These include the Amhara Fano in Gondar, the Amhara Fano Shoa command, the Amhara Fano in Wollo, and the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, groups centralised under powerful individuals' leadership. There is also progress to establish a central command of Amhara Fano.

Notwithstanding Fano's loosely coordinated central commandment, nearly all Fano from the four clusters justify their struggle in the name of Amhara existential defence. These armed groups officially waged a so-called existential war against the prosperity-led government. Whether real or perceived, the existential threats serve as a solid justification for a defensive war; thus, the Fano armed groups attract significant support in and outside Ethiopia.

Several important questions with political salience in the region have not been resolved, which is the root of the Amhara Fano armed struggle. 'Territorial claims, freedom of movement for Amhara within Ethiopia, and the attacks on and displacement of Amhara living in other regions are prominent questions left unresolved and pronounced by Amhara Fano'.¹⁵ The leader of Amhara Fano in Gojjam, Zemene Kassie, insisted that 'because we have no strong organisation Amhara has faced horrific genocide in different parts of Ethiopia; we shall organise ourselves to secure our existence'.¹⁶

To date, significant numbers of rural areas of Amhara the Region are under the administration of the Amhara Fano. The Amhara Fano, mainly based in the Amhara Region, has become the major politico-military rival power in Ethiopia and the Horn regions with significant geopolitical and security repercussions.

6.2. *The Amhara intellectuals and others*

Recently, in addition to the armed groups, a significant number of scholars and individuals also joined the Amhara's existential threat discourse. Carpanelli and Fagiolo commented¹⁷ that, Amharas are currently targeted and blocked from travelling to the capital Addis Ababa; those living in Addis Ababa face ethnic-based evictions as 15,000 homes have recently been destroyed; and Amhara intellectuals and political leaders are also targeted. They also insist that, there seems to be a dreadful continuity in the persecution and genocide of the Amhara under Italian fascism, the TPLF regime, and today's Oromo-led prosperity regime.

Andargachew Tsege¹⁸ says that, unless Amharas address the current existential challenges, their future is insecure. He boldly associates the existential threat, with Abiy Ahmed's rule, and the solution lies in bringing a swift end to the rule of Abiy Ahmed. Thus, Amhara, in the view of the mentioned politician, is under existential threat and he suggests collaboration with the Amhara people, specifically Fano, to end ethnic conflicts and bring about transformative change.

Anonymous informant 'Ethiopia, now a days, is a hot bed for Amhara; recurrent killings, dehumanization, and displacement of Amhara from every corner of the state because of their identity implies existence challenge'.¹⁹ Borkena²⁰ The Fano movement gained broad-based support in the region because the notion of an 'existential threat' is a shared sentiment in the region and beyond. The blog based news also justifies that the lack of legal, political, and security actions on the part of Abiy Ahmed's government gave rise to a sense of existential threats in the Amhara region.

Berhanu 2022 insists that:

The Amhara have increasingly become deliberately 'The forgotten people,' whose blood is thin. The global media and public opinion are indifferent to the humanitarian crisis and genocide facing the Amhara population persecuted by the ethno-nationalist armed groups, including some different sections and units of the security apparatus within regions where the Amhara reside. Amhara identity, in its current form, is a recent introduction and forced self-appropriation, caused by an existential threat and alienation.²¹

In addition to the aforementioned scholars, others, such as Tesfaye Demmellash,²² Girma Berhanu,²³ Birhanu Bitew,²⁴ and Desalegn Birara²⁵ also strongly support the proposition of an Amhara existential threat. Accordingly, the continual and targeted attacks on the Amhara people in the last half-century or so have attracted scholars and individuals to the discourse of the Amhara existential threat.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned scholars' contributions, there are tough critics against Amhara intellectuals for their failure to provide institutional, political, and academic influence for the Amhara people's cause in this crisis.

6.3. Civic association

Amhara affiliated civic organisations in Ethiopia and abroad, reiterated the existential defense and existential threat to Amhara people. Organisations of Ethiopians in the Diaspora (45 signatories) in a letter written to the Human Rights Commission (HRC) call that, the Amhara population has been subjected to oppression and ethnic cleansing for the past five years by the Oromo extremist forces, including the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), the Oromo Special Forces (OSF), and Queero (Oromo Youth Group), with the full support and intervention of the government.

In a joint statement from 28 Amhara civic organisations, they underscored the killing of thousands of Amharas in the latest massacre of the ongoing Amhara Genocide in the Oromia Region, and thousands of rape survivors are dealing with trauma, stigma, and poverty.²⁶ According to a new investigative report by the Amhara Association of America (AAA), at least 3,308 ethnic Amhara civilians were killed in targeted massacres across Ethiopia between January 1st and December 31st of 2021.²⁷

A statement submitted to the 136th session of the Human Rights Committee also exhaustively reported targeted attacks on ethnic Amhara:

Ethnic killings of Amharas in Horo Guduru Wellega Zone, West Wellega Zone, and Kellem Wellega Zone, Oromia June-September 2022, were horrifically committed. Amhara people are repeatedly attacked, and their livelihoods are destroyed in Northern Shewa and South Wollo by the Oromo Mercenary Group of the incumbent government. Segregation, marginalization, and human rights abuse of Amharas have been committed.²⁸

It is safe to argue that due to extreme ethnic politics and orchestrated mal-narratives, ethnic Amhara, especially those outside the designated region, have faced multiple attacks. The attacks show escalation from day-to-day. Beyond civic organisations, the international communities have expressed their concerns about the Amhara people's casualties. The European Union, through its high representative, Josep Borrell, expressed serious concern regarding the on-going conflict, alleged violations and abuses of human rights, and reports of dozens of civilian casualties in the Amhara region of Ethiopia.²⁹

7. Who threatens Amhara thereof?

Scholars, civic associations, armed groups, and individuals who pronounced existential threats to the Amhara people, perceived or real, associate the threat with at least four clusters, ethno-extremist groups (most importantly; the OLA Shane, the age-old TPLF, the Gumuz militant group, etc.), consecutive regimes (the military regime, the EPRDF, and the incumbent regime), Amhara intellectuals and elites and to a lesser extent, foreign powers (such as some European countries, Egypt, Eritrea, etc.).

7.1. The ethno-extremists

These groups, whose political ideology is framed based on Amhara domination narratives, date back centuries. In this regard, Wachiso Gichamo (2023) found that Italy's discourse of Amhara domination, unsubjected to critical mediation by Ethiopia's political forces, has introduced a re-politicisation of ethnicity to the politico-intellectual makeup of the country, which has resulted, *inter alia*, in ongoing societal (in)securities of the Amhara population.

In the last half century, uncountable atrocities have been committed against ethnic Amhara people; most of them are associated with the TPLF, OLA-shane, and Gumuz militant groups. To mention a few; in the 1990s, around 320,000 Amharas were killed and evicted from Arba Gugu (Bitew Geremew, 2023) no less than 600 Amharas lost their lives and tens of thousands were evicted on October, 2014 from Gura Ferda,³⁰ in 2021, more than 370 Amhara households were forcibly and violently evicted from the area known as 'Bole homes, Addis Ababa City Administration,³¹ TPLF youth wing, known as Samri, slaughtered about 1563 Amharas between November 6 and 10, 2020 thousands of Killings in Wollega; and others.

Places told of Amhara atrocities:

Gura Ferda	Metekel
West Arsi	Gelemso
East Wollega	Shashemene
Bedeno	Mai Kadra
Gara Muleta	Arba Gugu
Tole-Gimbi	Ataye
	Chenna
	Horo Guduru
	Welega Zone

The above-mentioned atrocities against Amhara were committed by either the TPLF or Oromo extremists (OLA), if not by Gumuz militant groups. Accordingly, it is sound to argue that these ethno-extremists are live and real existential threats to the Amhara people.

The incumbent regime: government officials

Consecutive regimes, especially the TPLF-led EPRDF regime, resonated with anti-Amhara discourse for many decades, which resulted in deadly and everlasting consequences. Yet, there are individuals, politicians, and armed and non-armed groups, condemning the existing regime for the recurrent Amhara atrocities in every corner of the republic.

The parliamentary speech of Gedu Andargachew (ex-president of the Amhara Regional State and one of the figures in the post-2018 reform) against the state of emergency witnessed government officials’ involvement in the atrocities:

The Amhara people have been facing recurrent dehumanisation, displacement, and genocide. Because of the government’s categorization and dehumanisation, the Amhara people are facing mass arrest, eviction, and mass killing nationwide. These atrocities happened due to the leadership failure of the prosperity’s government.³²

There are public allegations that government officials participated in the mass eviction and killings of Amhara in Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz regional states. In this regard, the National Movement of Amhara (NaMA), in a press release³³ insisted that ‘a considerable part of the Oromia region’s government structure has become a participant in the massacre and provided cover for the armed militant group-OLA.’

Recently, the European Centre for Law and Justice (on 26 April 2024), in an article titled ‘The Silent Suffering of the Amhara People in Ethiopia,’ revealed a troubling pattern of extensive human rights abuses against the Amhara people in Ethiopia, marked by recurrent incidents of massacres, extrajudicial killings, drone strikes, forced displacements, and mass arrests. The centre more critically noted that ‘the Ethiopian government’s response to these violations has been critically insufficient, with many instances suggesting possible negligence or even direct state involvement in the human rights abuses.’ The Enat Party, on a press release³⁴ accused the government of being responsible for the Amhara people’s massacres in Oromia regional state: ‘the ruling party within its structure in the region supports the terrorist group, deprives the victims self-defence mechanisms, and deprive media coverage thus is responsible for the genocide.’ Informants in the area also underscore that ‘the threat to Amhara people emanates from multiple sources; the

Oromo-extremist elites, the TPLF, and Egypt are living threats to Ethiopia and Amhara people.³⁵ Accordingly, government officials, either through direct involvement or negligence in the atrocities, participated or are responsible.

Foreign powers (some Europeans, Egypt, Eritrea, etc.)

The geopolitical importance of Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa, coupled with historical trajectories with Europeans, Egypt, and other states, will potentially threaten Ethiopia and the Amhara people in particular. Following the victory of Adwa, Ethiopia is considered by some Europeans to be a bad example for Africa.

As Roman Procházka in his book titled 'Abyssinia: The Powder Barrel' deeply states, the Ethiopian monarchy, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, and the Amhara people were the strongest institutions that defeated the colonial wars against European powers (Prochazka, 2013). The hatred toward Amhara, their monarchy, and their religion emanates from the Adwa victory. Procházka not only identifies the powerful establishments but also forwards dismantling policies.

According to Procházka, Westerners should do their best not to allow nationalist Amharas to rule Ethiopia, and if they happen to rule Ethiopia, such an 'Amhara-ruled' Ethiopia should be severely weakened, lest its leaders unify 'all black people so as to attack and destroy Western culture' (Prochazka, 2013). His prescription for weakening Ethiopia is to demonise the Amhara and to instigate 'the numerous tribes who inhabit the Ethiopian state' to rebel against the Amhara so that these tribes will freely choose to be colonised by Europeans. So, in his view Amhara were labelled as a threat to European colonialism.

Adolf Parlesak (2002), the military advisor of Ras Kassa Hailu during the Second Ethiopian–Italian War, also clearly recorded how the Italians dehumanised and singled out the Amhara people to destabilise and control Ethiopia. They tried to construct artificial narratives to create cleavages between the Amhara people and other ethnic groups and were successful in the later days. Such historical trajectories have a living impact on the Amhara people's peace and security. Some neighbouring states, like Egypt, Sudan, and Eritrea, which perceive Amhara as a real threat (due to geographical and historical factors), also targeted the Amhara people to secure their national interests.

Amhara intellectuals and cadres threaten Amhara

The failure of academic and political elites to defend the interests of the Amhara people at the grassroots level is at the heart of the current casualties in the region and beyond. It is not extremist groups, the incumbent regime, or others that solely threaten Amhara existence, but Amhara intellectuals and political elites as well. The threat is bi-dimensional; on the one hand, negligence, political apathy, and failure to influence policy outcomes in favour of the Amhara people's cause, and on the other hand, self-inflicting narratives by ethnic Amhara intellectuals. Daniel Kibrt³⁶ in a recently published book titled 'The Curse and Blessing of Narrative,' for instance, badly criticises and downplays the current struggle for justice and Amhara Fano leaders in the Amhara Regional State. He insists that:

The struggle of Fano (he was labelled 'Jawussa') is not emanated from Amhara people's questions and resentment. This group is looter and extremist and has not any leadership. It creates an ideal social media division, brigade, and battalion. It is not Fano but the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP) that can for the first time well-articulate and entertain Amhara people's fundamental questions to the surface.

Thus, leave alone their support; there are tough critics against ethnic Amhara intellectuals who hold back the Amhara people's struggle for justice and equality. The renowned politician Andargachew Tsigie once also denounced the very existence of Amhara as an ethnic group in Ethiopia. 'Pro-regime Amharas are traitors; belly and the like are self-deafting.'³⁷ Thus, intellectual dishonesty, brinkmanship, and self-centredness of significant Amhara intellectuals tightly challenge the Amhara peoples' quest for justice.

8. So what?

8.1. Inclusive and genuine negotiation: as a panacea

There is a bold claim from different segments of the Amhara people that Amhara is not well represented since the post-1991 regime restructuring, including the 1995 constitutional making. State-sponsored anti-Amhara discourse in the last five or more decades, followed by recurrent atrocities, has resulted in a real existential threat to the Amhara people. Therefore, the researcher strongly argues that to overcome the age-old crises among the Amhara people and the current war, inclusive and genuine negotiation is mandatory.

A renowned politician, Gedu Andargachew, in his recommendation to settle the current Amhara people's crisis, underscores that 'the relationship between the Amhara people and prosperity regime is irreversibly broken; thus, genuine political negotiation and establishing an interim administration are key solutions.'³⁸ Another scholar in the area argues that 'the military deployments bring no winner history told us this fact; thus, the only sound solution is to undertake a political negotiation between all actors – government and the Fano armed groups.'³⁹ Of course, the deadly war between the TPLF and the central government (estimated death toll of 360,000 civilians and 500,000 fighters), with its own odds, is finally settled through the Pretoria peace agreement.

A statement by the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, on the situation in the Amhara region on 16 August 2023, also urges the parties to engage in dialogue to reach a peaceful solution. In the same fashion, a statement by the Spokesperson of the European Union on the latest developments in Amhara reaffirms its readiness to support any process leading to dialogue, reconciliation, and peace to find a political settlement to the current conflict.⁴⁰ Accordingly, political negotiation, a head of additional casualties, between the armed group (Fano), the government, and others shall be the prior mechanism to solve the live crisis among the Amhara people.

To overcome the current crises in Ethiopia and the Amhara region, the role of Amhara Fano should not be underestimated. Proponent argues that 'Fano has become a household name and a crucial movement tasked with saving the very existence of the Amhara population as well as the integrity of Ethiopia.' Indeed, the force can challenge the incumbent regime, ranging from significant political-economic reform to regime change that potentially brings justice for the Amhara people and Ethiopia at large.

9. Conclusion

Foreign powers who have visited Ethiopia at different periods invented the Amhara domination narrative to further their cause. The TPLF-led EPRDF regime then institutionally and structurally crafted an anti-Amhara narrative throughout its tenure. These wrongly constructed Amhara domination narratives resonated with ethno-extremists and resulted in innumerable atrocities against Amhara people. The atrocities alarmingly escalated in the post-2018 regime; thousands of Amhara were massacred and millions evicted in different corners of the republic due to their ethnic identity. This, in turn posed an existential threat to the people. The Fano armed group, scholars (both foreign and national), civic groups, individuals, and the public are voicing the existential threat to date.

The threat to the people stems from at least three directions at varying degrees: the ethno-extremist groups (prominently, TPLF, OLA, Gumuz militants), the existing regime, Amhara intellectuals and political elites and foreign powers (such as some Europeans, Egypt, Eritrea, and the Arab world). Although the incumbent regime undermines the discourse of existential threat, recurrent mass killings and evictions against the people threaten the very survival of the Amhara people.

To heal the age-old casualties against Amhara, genuine and inclusive dialogue in a way that can rectify the post-1991 Amhara domination-state restructuring, including the amendment of the 1995 constitution and with the active involvement of the Amhara Fano, is crucial.

Notes

1. It is an attempt to manipulate the political opinion with the help of fake news websites and social bots, automatically distributing the story to reach a larger audience.
2. People's Democratic Programme Tigray People's Liberation Front (Tplf) <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ethiopia/tigray-program.pdf>.
3. Amnesty International report Ethiopia: Investigation reveals evidence that scores of civilians were killed in massacre in Tigray state: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/ethiopia-investigation-reveals-evidence-that-scores-of-civilians-were-killed-in-massacre-in-tigray-state/>.
4. Existential Threat to Amhara, Ethiopia and East Africa by Andargachew Tsige, 17 January 2024, retrieved from Borkena blog based news: <https://borkena.com/2024/01/16/existential-threat-to-amhara-ethiopia-and-east-africa/>.
5. Girma Birhanu on Eurasiareview <https://www.eurasiareview.com/>.
6. Mass killings and displacement in areas of the Oromia region such as Bedeno, Arba Gugu, Garra Muleta, and Eastern Wolega, and recently the massacre in Attaye, Gura Ferda, Mai Kadra, Metekel and Shashemene are not figments of Amhara imagination and there is also a live attack: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/>.
7. Key informant interview with, Asst. Professor Political Science, Bahir Dar University, interviewed on 2 July 2023, Addis Ababa.
8. Key informant interview with an Asst. Professor Political Science, Bahir Dar University Interviewed on 9 July 2023.
9. Interview with high-ranking government official at Amhara National Regional State Justice Bureau, interviewed on 11 July 2023, Bahir Dar.
10. *Metie* – an individual or a group who is considered emigrated from other place in the past.
11. An article by Graham Peebles titled Ethiopia: Amhara People, Betrayed Persecuted and Ignored, 21 April 2023, on CounterPunch.

12. We secure our existence and save our country: Fano Asress Mare, Vice chair of Amhara Fano in Gojjam on Ghion TV, 27 June 2024: <https://youtu.be/v5jW0RzYNBc>.
13. <https://youtu.be/wireDjDrZLE>, <https://youtu.be/GYtaL1mQW2c?si=IPDOXlrjUIIZ4o8R>.
14. A briefing paper by Peace Research facility titled “Understanding the Fano insurgency”, February 2024.
15. A briefing paper by Peace Research facility titled “Understanding the Fano insurgency”, February 2024.
16. A mobilization speech by Zemene Kassie: <https://youtu.be/gAFhdBMkqSw?si=J2whqGgSGNqKXPKe> also magnifies Amhara Existential threat <https://youtu.be/kww5LKUnJ84?si=gZf0ounfeJhUYGs5>.
17. A commentary on Reset DIALOGUES by Aster Carpanelli, and Nicoletta Fagiolo: Identity and Violence: Abiy Ahmed’s Amhara genocide denial: <https://www.resetdoc.org/story/identity-violence-abiy-ahmed-amhara-genocide-denial/>.
18. Existential Threat to Amhara, Ethiopia and East Africa by Andargachew Tsige, 17 January 2024, retrieved from Borkena blog based news: <https://borkena.com/2024/01/16/existential-threat-to-amhara-ethiopia-and-east-africa/>.
19. Lecturer, Political Science, Debre Markos University, Interviewed on 9 April 2024.
20. Amhara Affiliated blogger based news ... 7 February 2024.
21. Eurasia Review <https://www.eurasiareview.com/>.
22. Borkena The Amhara Existential Struggle Against Tribal Tyranny : Thoughts for Strategy and Action: <https://borkena.com/2022/03/14/amhara-existential-struggle-against-tribal-tyranny-thoughts-for-strategy-and-action/>.
23. Thoughts on the Amhara Existential Struggle against TPLF and OLF/PP Tribal Extremists: Can Ethiopia Survive the Scourge of the two Extreme Centrifugals? https://www.eurasiareview.com/30122022-thoughts-on-amhara-existential-struggle-against-tplf-and-olf-pp-tribal-extremists-can-ethiopia-survive-scourge-of-two-extreme-centrifugals-oped/#google_vignette.
24. Italian narratives about the Amhara helped lay the seeds of genocide in Ethiopia on LSE, 27 February 2023: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2023/02/27/italian-narratives-about-the-amhara-helped-lay-the-seeds-of-genocide-in-ethiopia/>.
25. The Course & Curse of Amhara Politics: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371120899_The_Course_Curse_of_Amhara_Politics.
26. Amhara organizations in Ethiopia and abroad wrote a letter to diplomatic community: Amhara Association of America (AAA) የዕግራ ማህበር በኢሜሪካ on X: “Joint statement from 28 Amhara civic organizations across North America, Europe, Oceania & Ethiopia: 18 August 2022 Exclusion of Amharas from Peace Negotiation Process will not Bring Lasting Peace in Northern Ethiopia #IncludeAmharas <https://t.co/EK58NGMLj5/X> (twitter.com).
27. AAA: Report: Massacres of Ethnic Amharas in Ethiopia Continued Unabated on 27 May 2022.
28. Statement submitted 136th session Human Rights Committee (10 Oct 2022–04 Nov 2022) on Ethiopia Incidents targeting the Amhara community in 2022: Statement submitted 136th session Human Rights Committee (10 Oct 2022–04 Nov 2022) on Ethiopia Incidents targeting the Amhara community in 2022 | CAP Freedom of Conscience.
29. Ethiopia: Statement by High Representative Josep Borrell on the situation in Amhara | EEAS (europa.eu) 29 August 2023 EEAS Press Team.
30. Report by Moresh Wogene Amhara Organization, 2016.
31. Amhara Association in America Annual Human Rights Report: <https://www.amharaamerica.org/post/aaa-annual-human-rights-report-may-2022>.
32. A parliamentary speech of Gedu Andargachew against the State of Emergency on the Amhara Regional State <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yK5LSN2W5OA>.
33. The National Movement of Amhara (NaMA)’s Statement on the press release by the U.S. Department of State: on 22 June 2022.
34. A press release by Enat Party on 08 July 2022, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
35. An interview with, Lecturer and researchers of Political Science at Government University, interviewed on 22 April 2024.

36. Daniel Kibret, Advisor Social Affairs of the Prime Minister, Amharaic book titled 'the Curse and Blessing of Narratives' July 2024, Addis Ababa.
37. Tesfa ZeMichael; Fano and Amhara Intellectuals on Borkena. <https://borkena.com/2024/02/02/fano-and-amhara-intellectuals-tesfa-zemichael/>.
38. A parliamentary speech of Gedu Andargachew against the State of Emergency on the Amhara Regional State <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yK5LSN2W5OA>.
39. Key informant interview with University lecturer and researcher on identity politics, Addis Ababa, interviewed on April 2, 2024.
40. Ethiopia: Statement by the Spokesperson on the latest developments in Amhara: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/ethiopia-statement-spokesperson-latest-developments-amhara_en?s=98.

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Notes on contributor

Dereje Melese Liyew is a lecturer of Political Science at Debre Markos University, Ethiopia. His research interests include but not limited to religion and politics, identity politics, Horn of Africa geopolitics and political transition.

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