Ethiopia:
Motivations, Strategies and Interests
of the *Fanno* in the Conflict in Wolkait

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Abstract: The political landscape of Ethiopia has been replete with recurring incidents of intra-state conflicts along class, ethnic, religious, or regional lines. To stem the recurrence of such conflicts, 'ethnic federalism' was adopted as a conflict management strategy in 1991. Yet, rather than preventing conflicts, it has changed the arena in which conflicts take place. Various forms of conflicts proliferated in many parts of the country, putting ethnic federalism at the center of debates on the persistence of conflicts. Hence, the role of local non-state actors responsible for the emergence, escalation, or termination of conflicts has been glossed over. One of the determining factors for whether conflict erupts or lingers pertains to actors' motivations and strategies. Against the backdrop of this, the conflict in Wolkait, Ethiopia will be investigated by shedding light on the motivations and strategies of *Fanno*, one of the local non-state actors involved in the conflict under study. To this end, a critical research approach is employed within a qualitative case study design in the course of data collection and analysis.

Keywords: Ethnic federalism, Conflict, Non-state actor, Motivation, *Fanno*.

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1. Introduction

Ethiopia has been portrayed as being synonymous with conflict. Its political landscape is replete with recurring incidents of intra-state conflicts along class, ethnic,

religious, or regional lines. The occurrence or persistence of conflicts in Ethiopia has been perceived as originating from a host of factors. Yet, recent literature tends to characterize conflicts as 'ethnic', while in fact, the real issues that lie behind conflicts are other issues such as territory, resources, competing ideologies, or even personal greed (Gudina, 2003; Kefale, 2009; Ndiyun, 2024; Wonbera, 2024). Adopted in 1991 after decades of civil war, 'ethnic federalism'[1]It was acclaimed for being an antidote to protracted conflicts that plagued the country. However, it was not long before conflicts involving various ethnic groups came to be the dominant feature of the political system. The federal system has failed to prevent conflicts; it rather changed the arena in which conflicts take place. Previously, it was, for the most part vertical- the central government pitted against various armed groups or the general populace. Since 1991, the conflict has become horizontal- pitting ethnic groups against one another (Kefale, 2009; Regassa, 2010; Abbink, 2006).

Because of this, many conflicts came to the political scene. The ones that have been at the center of scholarly debates include Silte-Gurage conflict, the Wogagoda language conflict, the Sheko-Mejengir conflict, the Anyuwaa-Nuer conflict, the Berta-Gumuz conflicts, the Gedeo-Guji conflict, the Oromo-Amhara conflict, the Borana-Garri conflict, and the Oromo-Somali conflict, and 'natives'-'migrants' (as in Benishangul-Gumuz region) or 'titular'- 'highlander' (as in Gambella region) (see Kefale, 2009; Regassa, 2010; Abbink, 2006). Apart from the weakness of ethnic federalism, local non-state actors have a role in the emergence, escalation, or termination of conflicts. Hence, this article probes the conflict in Wolkait[2]—one of the peripheral issues glossed over by scholars (John, 2021) from the perspective of the motivations, interests, and strategies of the *Fanno* armed group.

1　The federal system in place since 1991 is often dubbed 'ethnic federalism' to signify that its constituting elements are ethnically defined regional states. Yet, some prefer to call it multi-ethnic federalism or multi-national federalism for its purported aim of ensuring equality among 'nations', nationalities, and 'peoples'. It is also argued that ethnicity was not the sole criterion used for demarcating regional states. For example, multi-ethnic regional states such as the SNNPR, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Gambella were formed on the basis of a mix of criteria such as political exigencies, settlement patterns, and economic considerations (Tesfai, 2015). Such assertions are, however, open to controversial debates as the major provisions for self-determination are not enforced on the ground, for their implementation has been overridden by political pragmatism and economic considerations. It was adopted in 1991 by ethno-nationalist groups coalesced under the EPRDF so as to address what they called the 'national question'- the alleged ethnic domination of the Amhara ethnic group since the formation of the modern Ethiopian state in the early 20th century (Vaughan, 2003).

2　In various literature, Wolkait is also written as 'Welkait' or 'Wolqait'. Yet, 'Wolkait' is used throughout this article. In direct quotes taken from previous literature where other usages appear, they are retained as they are.

2. Methodology and Methods

The study adopts a critical qualitative approach, which allows an investigation of social phenomena by using descriptive, explanatory, and interpretive techniques (Yin, 2003). Critical qualitative research provides a framework for researchers not only to explain the *status quo*, but also uncover values, policies, or processes in the prevailing political system that give rise to injustices in society. As such, researchers using this approach delve deeper into a specific context to deal with critical questions such as: what is the existing political system like? Who is then privileged? Who is marginalized? and how do the marginalized groups grapple with the prevailing oppressive system or group? (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). In this study, Wolkait presents an important case or context for probing a conflict situation in terms of contradictions arising from competing interests and strategies pursued by conflict actors. It specifically centres around the *Fanno* armed group—a non-state actor claiming to fighting for the cause of the marginalized Amhara people in Ethiopia. Data relevant to the study were collected from purposefully selected informants who included individuals acting on behalf of the *Fanno* and Wolkait Amhara Identity Committee, political analysts, and notable members of the community in Wolkait. Moreover, a wide range of pertinent data was gleaned from published and unpublished secondary sources that pertain to the themes of the study such as peer-reviewed journals, books, dissertations, archives, official documents such as reports, proclamations, policy and strategy papers, as well as websites of the actors. According to Creswell (2007), studies anchored in critical approaches are by no means entirely objective, for researchers begin their study with the assumption that systems are biased and there is asymmetry of power in every society. Thus, efforts were made to ensure objectivity by avoiding neglect or misrepresentation of data, use of value-laden words, as well as ensuring inclusivity of contradicting views advanced by other actors on the issues at hand.

3. Conceptual Framework

Conflicts are part of our life and manifest themselves in many forms. Inter-state conflicts comprise a range of disputes between nation-states. These conflicts, considered as ones that mattered the most, received the bulk of scholarly attention in the period before the Cold War. Internal conflicts, those that occur within states, have come to be the most prominent in the wake of the Cold War due to their frequency and intensity. There are also conflicts encapsulated as state-formation conflicts, which include civil and ethnic wars, anti-colonial struggles, secessionist and autonomous movements, territorial conflicts, and battles over control of government (Kaldor, 1999; Wallensteen, 2002).

Most intra-state conflicts in Africa involve the state on the one side and a mix of various non-state armed actors (Mateos, 2010; Baregu, 2011). It is for this reason that scholars direct their attention to the role of non-state organized groups in the dynamics of intra-state conflicts. Having this in mind, this article adopts an actor-based analysis of conflicts with

the view to understanding the role of intentional factors, namely the interests, motivations, and strategies of actors responsible for the onset, perpetuation, or transformation of conflicts. To this end, some of the concepts, namely the nature of non-state armed actors, their motivations, interests, and strategies are explained below.

3.1. Who are the Non-State Armed Actors?

Broadly speaking, non-state armed actors are organized armed groups that operate outside of state control with different organizational structures, objectives, strategies, and ideologies. Yet, they defy a comprehensive definition, as they are fluid in nature (Grävingholt, 2007). It is impossible to lump all non-state armed groups together in one category as they show variations in terms of their attitude towards political power (e.g., do they operate in disregard or in compliance with rule of law?), towards territory (e.g., are they interested in control of territory or not?), social and economic support (e.g., do they garner the support of population or operate in isolation?), use of force (e.g., do they target civilians or not?) and whether they are predatory or engaged in functions beneficial to their community (Grävingholt, 2007)?

Two broad categories of armed non-state armed actors can be distinguished: community-based armed groups (CBAGs) and non-state armed groups (NSAGs). The main difference between them is that NSAGs are politically motivated, and ideologically or religiously driven (as in the case of terrorists or insurgents), while CBAGs are devoid of political motives; if anything, they may be led or manipulated by political entrepreneurs for their parochial political ambitions; or serving as armed wing of political parties (Schuberth, 2015). CBAGs are multifaceted as they operate in various situations or spheres. In the sphere of security, they are considered vigilante groups, acting as crime control groups, self-defense forces, or para-states. They act as ethnic or popular militia, or warlords if considered from a political perspective. Lastly, seen from the perspective of economics, their role can be one of a criminal gang, a youth gang, or a criminal fiefdom (Schuberth, 2015).

Despite their varying nature, non-state armed actors are considered illegitimate/illegal within the state they operate; they have the state as their main protagonist. Since the state is seen as the sole legitimate actor wielding a monopoly of means of violence, they are devoid of legal standing thereby deserving subordination or elimination. Except for some groups such as classical rebels or guerrilla movements, who depend on the population as a source of support, most NSAGs use violence as a strategy to "exploit, intimidate or deter people, to provoke reactions from the government and to undermine the authority and legitimacy of state institutions who are apparently not able to protect the population" (Schneckener, 2009, p. 14).

3.2. Motivations of Non-State Armed Groups

NSAGs by no means come into being in a vacuum. There must be circumstances that give rise to their formation or operation. In this regard, there is a fierce debate on whether it is greed or grievance that drives them. For proponents of greed theory, the greedy behavior of armed groups is the main reason behind conflicts. Conflict brings about possible benefits to those involved in it in the form of pillage, racketeering, an informal market economy, exploitation of natural resources, forced labor, foreign aid, diaspora contributions, etc. Due to these economic benefits, actors are motivated in the onset or protraction of conflicts (Spittaels & Hilgert, 2008). Thus, conflict is a resource-seeking enterprise. By contrast, the grievance model focuses on the salience of identity (ethnic or religious divisions), political repression, and horizontal inequalities between groups along ethnicity, religion, or language as factors behind conflicts. Conflicts are the means for NSAGs to address grievances resulting from economic inequality, political repression, economic incompetence, etc. (Collier, 2000). As such, conflict is a justice-seeking enterprise as groups fight in response to grievances (Murshed & Tadjoeddin, 2007).

Yet, what appears to be greed for one may be a case of grievance for another. For leaders fighting for power, it may be a case of greed; but for the ordinary people, the conflict may appear to be a case of grievance. Moreover, apart from greed and grievance, we need to consider other aspects of conflicts. For example, people are predisposed to fight when they face conditions that threaten their survival (Vinci, 2006). State failure is also another factor having the potency to create a favorable opportunity structure for various non-state armed actors to emerge (Ballentine & Nitzschke, 2003). Not only are fragile states unable to provide basic services for their people, but they are also engaged in activities that result in human rights violations. It is this situation that makes the people question the legitimacy of their government and force them to look for alternative sources of support in the realm of NSAGs (Grävingholt, 2007).

3.3. Interests of Non-State Armed Groups

In a conflict setting, actors and interests are intertwined. Determination of which actors pursue which interests depends on context. For example, in a political system where ethnic politics prevails, contending actors are bound to organize around ethnicity and are likely to articulate and fight over cultural issues. People are mobilized on the basis of ethnic identity markers towards a collective action against an actual or perceived threat. Likewise, where class comes to dominate the political system, actors are conceived in class terms, and their overriding interests pivot around economic issues (Young, 1972). In other words, the nature of their interests varies depending on the type of motivations that derive them. Those driven by greed are more likely to engage in personal economic enrichment. Those actors motivated by grievance tend to work towards political change. Since the state is perceived to disproportionately benefit particular groups, or when state institutions and

social structures are weak, the likelihood of conflict appears high. They feel compelled to fight off the state against real or perceived injustices. They also aim for advance military control of a certain territory, regime change, territorial adjustment (through annexation or irredentism), political change (for increased participation, autonomy, or power sharing), secession, or revolution (Spittaels & Hilgert, 2008).

3.4. Strategies of Non-State Armed Groups

Actors in conflicts deploy a range of ways and means to achieve their objectives. As weak sides in conflict, NSAGs try to avoid the opponent's strengths and exploit their weaknesses (Smith, 2011). In the face of asymmetry of power, NSAGs follow unconventional military strategies including, among others, guerrilla warfare, systematic murder, ethnic cleansing, terrorism, rioting, destruction of certain areas by physical means (laying landmines, destroying civilian buildings, hospitals, and water sources), economic means (famine caused deliberately, forced migration), and psychological means (desecration of elements of social importance through the destruction of symbols, religious institutions or historical monuments) (Grävingholt, 2007).

Unlike non-state actors, the state enjoys the benefits of sovereignty: non-intervention in internal affairs, freedom to manufacture or import arms, and levying tax on the population and extracting revenue for its war efforts. Apart from deploying a conventional army, the state has other strategies at its disposal such as measures of counter-insurgency. The aim is to win back the hearts and minds of the population. Such measures are, however, used in tandem with forced removals, mass killings, political intimidations, etc. (Kaldor, 1999). Despite variations in the amount and kind of violence they employ, states "can deploy police forces to arrest or fire at demonstrators; they can indiscriminately attack population centers; they can ethnically cleanse populations through population exchanges; they can even commit genocide" (Chenoweth & Lawrence, 2010, p. 4). Counter-insurgency measures include a mixture of paramilitary terror, military presence, and targeted social programs.

Having explained the concepts of motivations, interests, and strategies, the following section takes on the *Fanno* and sheds light on its motivations, interests, and strategies.

4. Who is the *Fanno*?

In the long course of its history, Ethiopia has been subjected to a series of invasions mainly from Turkey (Ottoman Empire), Egypt, Mahadist Sudan, and Italy. In the face of such invasions, it was not the monarchs alone that endured the burden of defending the country, the various sections of the society also developed a culture of warriorhood assuming the patriotic responsibility of defending the country. Variously called the *Fanno*, the *shifta*, and the *mekwanents*, these warriors have come to the scene at least since the reign of King Yikuno Amlak (r. 1270-1285), who founded the Christian Kingdom in the 13th

century. These three categories of soldiers are collectively called the *chewa*, meaning a war captive, prisoner, refugee, or one that lives by wandering about. In the 19th century, the *chewa* came to mean a "population of soldiers milling around the courts of the powerful" (Berhane-Selassie, 2018)

These three categories of warriors were different, however. While the *shifta* (bandits) were rebels engaged in fighting mainly for personal reasons, the *mekwanent* were officers or governors engaged in state service. The *Fanno* were volunteer soldiers, receiving support and commendations from their communities by virtue of their personal beliefs, commitments, and operational strategies (Berhane-Selassie, 2018). The term *Fanno* is derived from the Amharic word 'fanene', meaning 'to go out for a campaign or a battle' (a member of *Fanno*, interviewee #3, October 2022, p. 2). It literally means "someone who travels of their own volition or a 'band of leaderless soldiers' who were not accountable to anybody" (Berhane-Selassie, 2018, p. 47)

The *Fanno* engaged in military activities in border areas and thus acted as a guardian of state territories (Berhane-Selassie, 2018). They also propagated pan-Ethiopian patriotism- a shared national spirit in the local communities where they operated. They were strong, self-made warriors, originating in the culture of warriorhood inherent in Ethiopian society for centuries. The *Fanno* is a generic name encompassing all individuals from all walks of life: peasants, leaders, men, women, etc. who felt a sense of responsibility to defend their country and fight the excesses of monarchs. This life of warriorhood did not include monks, priests, merchants, and judges (Berhane-Selassie, 2018). They engaged in military training involving games, horse riding, and roaming around away from their community to be familiar with the ecological environment away from their locality. They shared common traits: being selfless, rising above challenges, forfeiting personal safety or comfort for the interest of the community without distinction in ethnicity, religion, or gender. They are all ready to act in a moment of notice; in times of trouble, they readily act as warriors, in times of tranquility, they engage in their own private lives as farmers, priests, craftsmen, etc. (personal communication with a member of *Fanno*, interviewee #3, October 2022, p. 6).

The availability of these categories of warriors proved a blessing in disguise for the monarchs at various junctures. The victory of Adowa by Emperor Menelik II was a case in point. Apart from the military might he had built in preparation for the war, Menelik rallied the armies of provincial rulers, consisting of infantrymen, archers, horsemen, and musketeers (Markakis, 2011). They were also part of the core of the Menelik's army that achieved another historical project- the southward march that led to the ingathering of the people and recovery of lost territories. With the use of these warriors, Menelik completed the territorial expansion into the various ethnic groups found in the southern part of present-day Ethiopia (Markakis, 2011).

The formation of modern Ethiopia in the 19th century saw the decline of *Fanno* activities. They were viewed by the subsequent monarchs not only as a threat to their throne but also as an impediment to their quest to build a strong salaried army capable of withstanding

foreign invasions. Emperor Tewodros II was the first monarch to undermine these warriors whom he considered as leftovers of *Zemene Mesafint* (Era of Princes). He wanted to overcome regional rivalries by absorbing them under a strong national army (Zewde, 2002). The modernization projects of Emperor Haile Selassie I also made them redundant. Loyal, salaried leaders were appointed to take over the task of collecting tributes and determining access to land. Moreover, rituals of gaming, hunting, horsemanship, *zeraf*[3] Recitations, and other martial activities were banned in the 1920s. Subsequently, traditional warriors were forced either to join the national army of the monarch or continue clandestine self-training continued in far-flung areas (Berhane-Selassie, 2018).

Despite such hostile state policies towards them, the *Fanno* showed resilience during the second invasion of Italy in 1935. They demonstrated their virtue, and a sense of responsibility for defending their land from enemies. For them, land is an ancestral place deserving protection at any cost. The *Fanno* became the force to fall back on, notably after Emperor Haile Selassie I fled the country. Despite a few *bandas*[4] that collaborated with the Italian army, the majority of warriors joined forces with *Fannos* in the fight against the Italian army. At the time, by the estimate of Italy, the population of Ethiopia reached seven million of which the number of the patriots was estimated at 123,350. The geographical distribution of the patriots varied across provinces. Gojjam was the bastion of the majority of the *Fannos*, with the highest number of the patriots (80%), followed by Gondar with 12% of the patriots; Oromo and Sidama accounted for 6%, followed by Shewa, 2% (Wolde-Mariam, 2015, p. 127).

The *Fanno* Resistance movement involved all regions and ethnic groups. The patriots persevered in their struggle, coordinating their attacks and rallying around their leaders in their respective communities. As Berhane-Selassie (2018) recounts: *Yegobez aleqas* (locally elected leaders) "saw the whole country as a large *fanno* territory, in which various similar groups could operate" (p. 378). They made the whole country ungovernable for the Italian army for the duration of five years. Following the liberation of the country, Emperor Haile-Selassie I returned home after five years of exile on 20 January 1941 accompanied by the British troops. To the dismay of the patriotic fighters, the emperor failed to ask the Ethiopian people for forgiveness for his betrayal during his exile. He also pushed aside them for appointments and promotions, while favoring the bandas and exiles (Gudina, 2003). The areas considered as bastions of the patriots were also condemned to neglect and deprivation. Gojjam, Gondar, and other areas that put up fierce patriotic resistance were deliberately left behind other provinces in terms of schools, clinics, and roads (Wolde-Mariam, 2015).

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3 'zeraf' refers to declamations of patriotism and militaristic candor (Berhane-Selassie, 2018).

4 Not all people and *chewa* soldiers acted in unison with a sense of patriotism. Due to their grudge against the emperor, some regional lords used the opportunity to collaborate with Italy and enjoyed personal glory and spoils (lira-money of Italy). For their betrayal, they earned the name *banda*—group (in Italian) serving as mercenaries; derisively 'deserter' Amharic).

The *Fanno* spirit of warriorhood and resistance did not cease to permeate the psyche of the opposition. The very elites nurtured by the modern bureaucracy of the emperor turned against him. The bastion of such opposition was the Ethiopian Students Movement (ESM), which came to be a common platform for movements that raised ethnic, class, or regional interests (Zewde, 2002). They resuscitated the spirit of *Fanno* as a rallying point against the injustices of the regime:

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Get out and about, fanno!

Get out and about, fanno!

Like Ho Chi Minh and like Che Guevara[5]

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Despite the *Fanno* being their rallying point, the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM)[6] Was not a united front advancing a common agenda. Some groups advocated the 'class question', favoring a common class struggles against the 'feudal' regime, while others such as the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) advocated the 'question of nationalities'[7]. The latter were ethnic-based armed groups that invoked ethnicity for their disaffections. Influenced by alien values and ideologies such as Marxism-Leninism, they vowed to fight for the right of nationalities to self-determination (Zewde, 2002; Berhe, 2008). They were of the conviction that the various nationalities in the 'empire-state' were oppressed by the 'Shewa Amhara nation' and thus deserved self-determination up to secession. Whether their interpretation of the country's politics was correct or not, they launched an insurgency and toppled the Dergue regime, which came to power by coup d'état against the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie I in 1974.

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5 Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara are among the important figures that fought Western Imperialism in Vietnam and Cuba respectively. The youth that brought about the 1974 revolution in Ethiopia were inspired by these two figures.

6 The ESM was a period of student activism in Ethiopia in the 1960s and 1970s initially protesting against social and economic injustices. It shifted later to a struggle for radical revolutionary ideas such as the self-determination of ethnic groups.

7 The 'question of nationalities' refers to the struggles by ethno-national groups to rectify the alleged ethnic domination and marginalization at the hands of the Amhara since the formation of the modern Ethiopian state in the early 20th c. It served as a mobilization tool by ethno-nationalists that rallied their ethnic folks towards realizing self-determination rights up to secession. Some groups (mainly the OLF) went to the extent of portraying the Ethiopian state as a 'colonial empire' waiting to be decolonized for the people to exercise their self-determination (Vaughan, 2003).

5. Conflict in Wolkait

Against all odds, the *Fanno* movement endured as a symbol of struggle. It showed remarkable resilience among the Amhara ethnic group following the adoption of ethnic federalism in 1991. Its resurgence has been fueled by grievances against ethnic federalism, which was perceived as a political device of the TPLF. For the *Fanno*, ethnic federalism was a misnomer - it was a political strategy devised by the TPLF/EPRDF[8] To punish the Amhara in all ways possible. As an offshoot of the ESM, the TPLF identified the Amhara ethnic group as an oppressor nation imposing its own language, political system, and culture on other 'oppressed ethnic groups' (see the TPLF Manifesto, p. 76). As an oppressor group, the Amhara were depicted as enemies to be eliminated or subdued, while other ethnic groups, being one of the oppressed, are friends (Gudina, 2003). According to Vaughan (2003), despite the reticence among its protagonists to openly admit it for fear of loss of legitimacy, there is no denying that the current ethnic federalism has its ideological precedent in the colonial, fascist Italian system.

The *Fanno* raised a long list of grievances. One such grievances that pertain to our discussion is the annexation of Wolkait. Following the adoption of the current ethnic federal system in 1991, the previous administrative boundaries were demarcated putatively along ethnic criteria. While this was officially lauded as an important measure to respond to the 'national oppression' of ethnic groups through creating ethnic homelands for self-rule, it was perceived as a scramble for territory among the victors, notably the TPLF and the OLF (Gamachu, 1994). The Amhara lost territories they claimed as their own. According to Gudina (2003, p. 124), the victorious Tigrayan elites insisted on ethnic/linguistic criteria for the demarcation of territories to "expanded their Tigrayan home base by incorporating the Walkait and Humera region of Gondar" as envisaged in the TPLF's Manifesto-76. Indeed, the new territorial arrangement was a political process that entailed clear winners and losers. The Oromos, Afars, and Somalis became beneficiaries accruing the largest territories, while Amhara elites lost territories they claimed as their own (Abraham, 1994; Vaughan, 2003).

The redrawing of boundaries was among others the salient factors that became the hotbed of conflicts in Ethiopia. Contrary to expectations, ethnic-based federalism ended up being at the root of grievances for most ethnic groups (Kefale, 2009). Since 1991, the conflict

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8 The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was a coalition of ethnic-based parties formed with the political patronage of the TPLF out of prisoners of war. When victory over the Dergue loomed large, the TPLF shifted its interest from secessionism to capturing the state. Yet, as one from a minority ethnic group, it had to forge an alliance with other ethnic-based armed groups that readily share its political program/manifesto. Accordingly, it forged an alliance with the EPDM/ANDM, the OPDO, and the SEPDM as its surrogates to govern the Amhara, Oromo, and the various groups in Southern Ethiopia. It then orchestrated a political process ushering in the adoption of ethnic federalism in 1991 (Gudina, 2003; Vaughan, 2003).

has become horizontal—pitting ethnic groups against one another. Incidents of violent communal conflicts became the norm: Oromo against Amhara, Somali against Oromo, Tigray against Amhara, etc. In other words, conflicts have increasingly become localized, pitting ethnic groups against each other (Abbink, 2006). The following section probes the motivations, interests, and strategies of the *Fanno* armed group.

6. Motivations, Interests, and Strategies of the *Fanno*

6.1. Motivations

Wolkait covers a vast swathe of territories south of the Tekeze River that were historically part of Begemedir province (Gamachu, 1994; Fitaye, 2021). The area consists mostly of mountainous areas in the east and plain lowlands in the West stretching over into the Sudan and Eritrea. Historically, it was part of the province of Begemidir/Gondar up until 1991, accommodating not only the indigenous Amharas but also the Tigrayans and Eritreans that crossed into the area seasonally for farmlands and trade (Fitaye, 2021). Quite unprecedently, when ethnicity emerged as the official criterion for defining administrative regions in 1991, Wolkait was officially incorporated into the Tigray Region. Although the issue of Wolkait has been viewed as originating from ethnic federalism, the roots of the conflict date back to the formation of the TPLF in the 1970s (personal communication with a local notable, interviewee #1, October 2022, p. 4).

The first instigating factor for the onset of the conflict was the formation of the TPLF in 1976. As its 'Greater Tigray Manifesto' narrates, the foremost objective for which the TPLF was established was to end the alleged domination and exploitation of Tigray at the hands of the Shewan Amhara elite[9]. The TPLF vowed to establish 'Greater Tigray', an independent Tigray Republic, with territories extending to the Sudan in the west, Aluha River in the southeast, and the Port of Assab (Eritrea) in the east. To this end, the TPLF

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9   The charges of Amhara domination were just political stereotypes exploited by ethno-nationalist groups for their assertions of ethnopolitical ends. Many scholars (e.g., Henze, 1986; Clapham, 1989; and Berhanu, 2000) ascertain that the 'Amhara domination' thesis held by the TPLF is replete with contradictions. First, the people of Tigray have a clear sense of being 'the foremost Ethiopians' as with the Amhara (Berhanu, 2000). The use of Amharic was not an issue for the traditional Tigrayan elites including Emperor Yohannes IV, who used Amharic for official correspondence within Tigray and elsewhere (Berhanu, 2000). Besides, Tigrayan culture was already a culture at the core of Imperial Ethiopia. Second, Tigray was immune from an economic surplus extraction imposed in other regions of Ethiopia (Berhanu, 2000). Third, the Tigray nobility was part of the power struggle in the national politics. The Shewan ruling class represented elites from the traditional Abyssinian core (Eritrea, Tigray, and Amhara) as well as some sections of Oromia. Zewde (2002) also notes that the mode of political struggle in Ethiopia was not ethnic in character, but regional, with Gondar, Yejju, Tigray, and Shewa provinces jockeying for power.

needed to annex territories from the neighboring Amhara and Eritrea. It crossed the Tekeze River in 1978 set foot on Shirela in Dejena, Wolkait, and deployed some of its fighters. The Amhara inhabitants were gathered and told that they were Tigrayans, and Wolkait was part of Tigray. If they wanted to live in the area, they should accept a Tigrayan identity, otherwise, leave the area, Tigray is for Tigrayans (personal communication with a local notable, interviewee #1, October 2022, p. 5).

Amharas in Wolkait did not sit idle in the midst of such invasions and brutalities. They launched an armed resistance by organizing an armed group called Kefagn Patriotic Front. The word *kefagni* literally means 'I am aggrieved', for they faced persecution and loss of their ancestral land at the hand of the TPLF. It was formed out of patriots and vigilantes that came from various adjoining places of Gondar, reaching as many as 3000 armed fighters. They unleashed the first military encounter with the TPLF in Mezega, Wolkiat on 29 December 1979 for the aim of deterring the TPLF's further incursions into the rest of Wolkait (personal communication with a member of *Kefagni Fanno*, interviewee #4, October 2022, p. 8). The local notables and administrators of the area who understood the ulterior motives of the TPLF felt the need to fight back against the TPLF. They wondered: while the TPLF was formed for the liberation of Tigray, why did it make inroads into Wolkait? (personal communication with a member of *Kefagni Fanno*, interviewee #4, October 2022, p. 8).

In the initial years of the annexation, the ordinary people were ambivalent towards the TPLF. Since most of the people were frustrated with the brutal Dergue's rule, they readily embraced the TPLF as a liberator. Far from it. As time passed by, the people came to realize that the TPLF's motive was none other than subjugating them under the Tigrayan rule. The people from all walks of life, farmers, women, the youth joined the *Kefagni Fanno* fighters, launching a series of onslaughts on the strongholds of the TPLF in Dansha and Mezega. Indeed, the *Kefagni* fighters were able to protect some important areas such as Humera area from the TPLF's incursions well until1991 (personal communication with a member of *Kefagni Fanno*, interviewee #4, October 2022, p. 9).

Yet, the triumph of the TPLF over the Dergue in 1991 did not bode well for the *Kefagni* fighters. The TPLF captured the state and orchestrated the adoption of federalism based on ethnicity. In the guise of the right to self-determination, the TPLF officially declared Wolkait part of the sovereignty of Tigray[10]. The TPLF reinforced its grip on the area by

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10 The TPLF claim that administrative boundaries have never been static in the history of Ethiopia, and thus there is nothing wrong with boundary restructuring that created nine ethnic regions and two autonomous cities in 1991 out of the old provinces. This territorial readjustment entailed that some ethnic groups take or forfeit territories they historically controlled. Tigray took Wolkait from the former province of Gondar, as it gave away territories on its eastern side to the newly constituted Afar Region (Tesfaye, 2022). The Amhara were given their own regional state out of territories from Gojjam, Gondar, Shewa, and Wollo, which they claim as their ancestral

launching what it termed as *shifta mintera* (a mission of eliminating rebels) throughout Ethiopia. In Wolkait, individuals having links to the *Kefagni* movement were targeted for persecution (personal communication with a local notable, interviewee #1, October 2022, p. 5). The TPLF was bent on settling its score with the fighters who killed more than 12,000 of its fighters during its invasion of Wolkait. Elderly people were told that if they wanted Wolkait's restoration to Gondar, they had to pay 1.3 million USD in compensation for the sacrifices of its fighters (Fitaye, 2021).

The TPLF intensified the 'Tigrayanization' of Wolkait. With the declaration of Tigrigna as the official language of the Tigray Region, the use of Amharic was not only prohibited but also punishable as a criminal offense. No one was allowed to use it in schools, marketplaces, churches, festivals, or even for conversations (personal communication with a local notable, interviewee #5, October 2022, p. 6). A resettlement program was also launched to overwhelm the Amhara by Tigrayan settlers. Tigrayan refugees from the Sudan and farmers from other parts of Tigray were resettled on the farmlands snatched from Wolkait farmers (Berhanu, 2000).

In a bid to erase the Amhara identity, the TPLF masterminded acts of genocide such as gang rape, killings, looting, abduction, subjugation, torture, incarceration, displacement, abortion and sterilization of women. It was recorded that Libanos Gebre-Selassie, a Tigrayan, raped and impregnated 15 school girls (personal communication with a local notable, interviewee #5, October 2022, p. 7). The TPLF followed a policy of assimilation (encouraging Tigrayan men to marry Wolkaite women; crowding out Wolkait men out of the area or killing them). Wolkaite women were sterilized through family control programs. Tigrayan men do not bother in their parlance to disclose their intention of taking the land and women (personal communication with a local notable, interviewee #5, 2022, p. 7).

The TPLF built notorious prison cells in Wolkait where Amharas were tortured or killed, such as Minmine Washa, Belesa Mai Hamato, Bahla, Gehaneb, and others in Dejena, Maikadra, Tirkan, Bereket, Fiyel wuha, Dima, etc. The bodies of thousands of Wolkaite Amharas were unearthed recently by the community (Alemu *et al.*, 2022). Wolkaite

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homelands. Thus, the Amhara claim of Wolkait is irredentist—a threat to the rationale of ethnic federalism, which aims to address the national question by ensuring self-determination (Tesfaye, 2022). As the TPLF argues, the old Ethiopia came to an end with the demise of the Dergue regime in 1991. It survived total disintegration after 'sovereign' ethnic groups 'came together' to form a federal system based on self-determination (Melesse, 2022). If anything happens that threatens their sovereignty, ethnic groups are entitled to secede as stipulated under Article 39 of the FDRE constitution. However, the historical fact is that Ethiopia was a unitary state before devolving into a federal system. The federal system that came about in 1991 was not a 'coming-together' federalism, as advanced by the TPLF but that of 'holding together federalism' (Kefale, 2009). The obvious evidence is that sovereign ethnic groups with their own fixed territory as we see today did not exist prior to 1991. Neither Tigray nor Amhara, Oromia, etc. existed as sovereign entities with their own delimited territories.

Amharas were forced to adopt Tigrayan names or modify their names so as to sound like typical Tigrayan names to avoid risks of harassment and discrimination. Original Amharic names of their ancestral lands were given names in Tigrigna. Historical places, palaces (reminiscent of Amhara history), schools, hospitals, towns, hotels, shops, rivers, and local homesteads became targets of name-changing (Alemu *et al.*, 2022).

6.2. Strategies

Amidst such brutalities, the Amhara identity of the population has not withered. All these atrocities and brutalities only reinforced the resolve of the people to pursue their struggle using a range of strategies, both peaceful and violent.

6.2.1. Armed Resistance

As reiterated already, the TPLF relied on brute force to subdue the people and force them to embrace Tigrayan identity. As a reaction, the *Kefagni* armed resistance movement was formed by the Wolkait Amharas. They waged guerrilla warfare with the support of the Dergue for its supplies. When the TPLF defeated the Dergue and captured the state in Addis Ababa in 1991, parts of Wolkait such as Dansha and Humera were still free. The *Kefagni* armed resistance was not, however, a strongly organized armed group with well-defined objectives and hierarchical organization. It was no match for the TPLF. They were only driven by the simple goal of fighting the TPLF after the fall of the Dergue. It was recorded that the TPLF lost around 20,000 of its troops in Wolkait at the hands of *Kefagni* fighters, from the total 65,000 soldiers it had sacrificed throughout its insurgency (personal communication with a veteran of the TPLF, interviewee #1, October 2022, p. 8). Yet, the armed resistance faltered in the face of the TPLF's brutal force.

6.2.2. Use of Traditional Mediation

The people persevered in their struggle against the TPLF's annexation by abandoning government channels. Instead of going to courts, for example, they used their traditional conflict resolution system called *shimglina* to settle cases of disputes and disagreements. The government run by the TPLF was considered an alien system hellbent on subjugating them. They boycotted administrative and judicial offices filled by Tigrayan cadres, and rather resorted to their elderly people to resolve issues. They had various reasons for abandoning the local government. First and foremost, their mother tongue, Amharic, was strictly forbidden in schools, markets, or government offices. The TPLF cadres are everywhere to enforce the use of Tigrigna (personal communication with a local notable, interviewee #5, October 2022, p. 7).

Secondly, against their will, Wolkait was re-named Western Tigray zone, whose seat was Shire, which is 500 kms from Humera. Wolkait has many towns (e.g., Humera and

Dansha) that could serve as a seat of the zonal administration if the intention of the TPLF was to serve the people (personal communication with a member of Wolkait Committee, interviewee #1, October 2022, p. 6). Mekele City, the capital of Tigray Region is even further, more than 700 kms from Wolkait. It was a hassle and costly for the people to go as far as such cities in Tigray for court appeals, investment, or whatever. They would rather come to Gondar city, 250 kms from their homes for market, schools, and official purposes. They would rather go even to Sudan for various purposes than to Shire or Mekelle in Tigray (personal communication with a member of Wolkait Committee, interviewee #1, October 2022, p. 6).

6.2.3. Petitions

At the outset, questions were raised during the Transitional Period (1991-1994) by various political stakeholders on the merits of the redrawing of Wolkait into the Tigray Regional State. For instance, the former governor of Gondar province, Dagnaw Wolde-Selassie, and his friend, Fitaye Assegu, wrote a three-page letter of appeal to the late Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, with a copy to the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) in protest of the annexation of Wolkait by the TPLF. They highlighted the historical solidarity and peaceful co-existence between the Amhara and Tigrayans, also warning that the new territorial annexation would invite mutual hatred, atrocities, and antagonisms between the two population groups (Alebachew, 2020).

Leveraging its dominant position in the federal government, the TPLF prevented the issue from being raised and deliberated in the parliament, media, courts, etc. The TPLF was not willing to solve the issue even by any means. At the time, it did not have the political will to entertain such kinds of cases; it was a transitional period, an important historical juncture when the TPLF was grappling to consolidate its power. It was also aware that the hearts and minds of Wolkaites were Gonder, Amhara, and not Tigray. It would lose the case even if it willed to engage the issue by all means except brute force. Once it consolidated its grip on power, the TPLF remained steadfast in maintaining the *status quo* of annexation of Wolkait (Fitaye, 2021).

6.2.4. Protest Marches

On many occasions, the people of Gondar staged protests in the form of peaceful demonstrations and strikes. A case in point is the one organized in Gondar City on 16 July 2016, making the Wolkait question a rallying agenda of the whole Amhara people. The popular protest was sparked by the TPLF's attempt to arrest members of the Wolkait Amhara Identity Committee (henceforth, the Committee) in Gondar City on 16 July 2016. The Committee was formed in Gondar city in 2015 among the Wolkait Amharas displaced by the TPLF. Its avowed goal was to reclaim the Amhara identity of the people and their land of Wolkait through legal or constitutional avenues (personal communication

with a member of Wolkait Identity Committee, interviewee #1, October 2022, p. 3). The Committee came to the scene after the *Kefagni* armed movement fizzled out in the early 1990s under the TPLF's brute force. The TPLF dispatched a military squad tasked with arresting the Committee members from their homes in Gondar city. In the exchange of fire that followed, many of the TPLF forces were killed by Colonel Demeke Zewdu, the leader of the Committee, and the *Fanno* forces led by Gobbie Melkie and Dejenie Maru (Alebachew, 2020).

Apart from the annexation of Wolkait, the protesters raised deep-rooted grievances against the excesses of the TPLF. The popular protest spread to other cities and towns of the Amhara region, sparking the Amhara protest against the TPLF hegemony in national politics. The demonstrators chanted the Amhara grievances: annexation of Wolkait by the TPLF, national oppression of the Amhara under the TPLF minority rule, and ethnic cleansing of the Amhara in other parts of the country, among others (Alebachew, 2020). The popular protests in Amhara coincided with another popular protest in Oromia region, emboldening the ANDM and the OPDO to protest in defiance of the hegemony of the TPLF within the EPRDF. The internal power struggle among the coalition members of the EPRDF led to the shift of power to the OPDO thereby ending the hegemony of the TPLF in national politics (personal communication with a political analyst, interviewee #2, October 2022, p. 7).

The coming of the new leadership under Abiy Ahmed in 2018 appeared a beacon of hope for the Committee. His discourse in favor of unity and forgiveness raised the hopes of many Ethiopians including the people of Wolkait. He alluded to ethnic federalism as the mother of all ills in the country, pledging that it would be reformed. Lemma Megersa, from the OPDO, denounced the prevailing 'national oppression' discourse of the EPRDF, saying: "There is no oppressor nation, and had never been before" (Alebachew, 2020, p. 337). The speech came as a new glimmer of hope for Ethiopians who were frustrated with ethnic federalism, which hinged on antagonism between the Oromo and the Amhara- the two largest ethnic groups in the country.

The Committee seized the opportunity and met Abiy Ahmed on the sidelines of public meetings he made with the residents of Gondar at Goha Hotel in Gondar, on 19 April 2018. They highlighted to him the issues at the heart of their quest: the experience they had gone through: the persecution they suffered, lack of political will to solve the issue by the TPLF and federal institutions. They urged him to stop the TPLF from its heinous crimes and expedite a peaceful way of addressing their identity question. He pledged to them that the issue would be resolved in line with the FDRE constitution, and till then he advised them to cool the heat. Despite the prevailing optimism, the brutalities of the TPLF got worse. Almost three years passed without his promises coming true (personal communication with a member of the Wolkait Committee, interviewee #1, October 2022, p. 10).

7. Interests of the *Fanno*

7.1. Recognition of Amhara Identity

The Wolkait Identity Committee stresses that their question is nothing but regaining their Amhara identity. Their struggle has been aimed at restoring the Amhara identity denied and downtrodden by the TPLF for the last four decades. They assert that contrary to their wishes, they were subjected to forceful incorporation to the Tigray Regional State in 1991. The issue of Wolkait is thus as a showcase of the weaknesses of the much-vaunted ethnic federalism to adequately and practically accommodate the demands for ethnic self-determination. The Committee claim that border delimitations run contrary to the provisions of Proclamation no. 7/1992 providing for the delimitations of borders of the 14 national self-governments. Ar. 4 of the proclamation provides that delimitations of borders shall take into consideration a set of factors including adjacency of the territory, previous borders of Woredas pending detailed studies, settlement pattern, and interests of the people.

In view of the provisions spelled out above, Wolkait should have remained part of the adjacent districts of Gondar within the Amhara Region. Contrary to these provisions, Wolkait was severed from the adjacent Gondar districts and lumped into Tigray. Still worse, when the borders of regional states were redrawn upon the ratification of the FDRE constitution in 1994, Wolkait was retained as part of the Tigray Region. According to the Committee, despite the clear provision of Ar. 46 (2) of the FDRE constitution—"States shall be delimited on the basis of the settlement patterns, language, identity and consent of the peoples concerned", the delimitation process was undertaken solely based on the political and economic motives of the TPLF. As Vaughan (2003) confirms despite the criteria set forth in Ar. 46 of the FDRE constitution, the Border Commission, in charge of the administrative divisions, relied predominantly on current language use as an effective criterion, shrugging off other markers of identity such as settlement patterns, consent of the people, or history.

In pursuit of recognition of Amhara identity, the Committee invoked Ar. 39 of the FDRE constitution in support of their claim- any nation, nationality, or people has the right to self-determination up to secession. Ar. 39 (2) specifically provides ethnic groups with the right to speak, write and develop one's own language; express, develop and promote one's own culture; and preserve one's own history.

7.2. Reintegration with the Amhara Region

Apart from demands for recognition of their Amhara identity as per Ar. 39 (2), the Wolkait Committee requested the House of the Federation to pass a decision in favor of redrawing the border so as to incorporate them within the Amhara Regional State. The Committee claimed to have already presented its requests to all hierarchies, exhausting all avenues within

the Tigray Regional State, but to no avail. They lodged their request on 17 December 2015 to the State Council of the Tigray Region, with a copy to the EPRDF parties, the House of the Federation, and the Office of the Prime Minister. In their request letter, they urged the House of the Federation to render its decision on the basis of Ar. 46 of the FDRE constitution (personal communication with a member of Wolkait Committee, interviewee #1, October 2022, p. 4). The Committee also invoked Ar. 48 of the FDRE constitution, which provides the House of the Federation with the jurisdiction to settle such disputes on the basis of settlement patterns, or the wishes of the people concerned. Yet, which avenue should be applied is a matter of contention.

For the Wolkait Committee, the use of a referendum (as an expression of the wishes of the people) to settle the issue is not welcome for various reasons. At the outset, the issue of Wolkait is a clear case of annexation; the TPLF had already annexed and incorporated the area before the current constitution was adopted. The people were not consulted either. As such, the area should be restored to the Gondar, Amhara without any legal altercation. Moreover, the TPLF had deliberately undertaken demographic engineering aimed at overwhelming the area with Tigrayan settlers. In such a situation, who is going to vote: the Tigrayan settlers, or the indigenous Wolkait Amharas? The use of a referendum is also a zero-sum game that does not accommodate the interest of all interested parties. So far, it has been tried in other parts of the country, yet with limited effectiveness. Other innovative options should be sought such as "power sharing, joint administration, and bringing disputed territories under federal jurisdiction" (Kefale, 2019, p. 2).

If the issue is to be settled amicably, the best option lies in revising or dismantling the existing ethnic-based federal system. Before the annexation by the TPLF, the area was peaceful allowing not only Amharas and Tigrayans but also Eritreans to co-exist. No ethnic group was the exclusive owner of a particular territory. There is no scope to solve the issue of Wolkait within the framework of the existing constitution that associates a particular territory with a particular ethnic group. It is either for Tigray or Amhara- no middle way. If it is for the Amhara, Tigrayans will be minorities-second class citizens. If it is for Tigray, Wolkait Amharas will be minorities, facing once again the brunt of being a minority within Tigray.

Referendum is not also a preferable option for the people of Wolkait. As provided in Ar. 47 of the FDRE constitution, the referendum is used only for establishing a separate *woreda*, zone, or regional state. Yet, this is not part of their demand. What they are asking is a self-determination right to reunite with their kindred—the Amhara people within the Amhara Regional State. They claim to be ethnic Amhara forced to live in Tigray as a minority. It is for this reason that the Wolkait question has been viewed by the TPLF as an irredentist claim. The TPLF has denounced the request of the Wolkait Committee as an instance of an irredentist claim by the Amhara elites to snatch Tigray's territory. As an identity issue, the TPLF claims, Wolkait is Tigray, which had already been settled in 1991. The issue is merely a political pursuit by Amhara elites to aggrandize territory by claiming territory that belongs to Tigray. The people living in the area are Tigrayans. Thus, the issue is a

boundary claim instigated and spearheaded by the Amhara expansionist elites who desire to bring back the old order of Amhara domination. If anything, the Wolkait issue has to do with governance issues such as corruption, embezzlement, discrimination or lack of infrastructure and facilities, lack of public participation, etc. (personal communication with a veteran of the TPLF, interviewee #1, October 2022, p. 9).

The TPLF holds that the right to self-determination is supposed to be exercised only by the nations, nationalities, and people found in one of the established regional states as specified in Ar. 39 (4) and Ar. 47 (3). As such, the right to self-rule is entertained within the host state (Tigray Region) and the jurisdiction lies in the Regional Council concerned. As such, if there is a need to address the issue, the request should be presented to the Regional State's Council (personal communication with a veteran of the TPLF, interviewee #1, October 2022, p. 9). Yet, this way of addressing such self-determination quests by the Regional States where the issue has arisen begs the question: how can the host regional state be expected to be fair and impartial on the issue in which it has a vested interest? The Tigray regional State is by no means expected to make a decision that risks losing out a huge land.

For the Wolkait Committee, there are also practical precedents available in support of their claim for redrawing of the border. The case of Waghimra is a case in point. As with Wolkait, it was annexed by the TPLF during its insurgency and delimited to Tigray in 1991. It was later restored to the Wollo province of the Amhara region. Although the TPLF did not provide justifications for its decision to return the territory to the Amhara Region, the possible reasons surmised at the time were: the people of Waghimra fought the Dergue along with the EPDM/ANDM- a party claiming to represent the Amhara; the land was ecologically degraded and as such irrelevant for Tigray; and the area was not deemed strategically important for the TPLF. The Wolkait Committee argues that, by the same token, the TPLF should return Wolkait to the Amhara Region (personal communication with a member of Wolkait Committee, interviewee #1, October 2022, p. 4).

Following the loss of its hegemony in the wake of the ascendancy of Abiy Ahmed in 2018, the TPLF was contemplating either reclaiming the national power or failing this, secession. It attacked the Northern Command of the National Army stationed in Tigray on the 4th of November 2021. This was soon followed by the federal government launching what it termed as 'law enforcement operations' against the TPLF (Tedla & Kelklie, 2021). The *Fanno* joined forces with the federal army and the Amhara Special Forces in the fight against the TPLF security forces. Having suffered defeat on the battle lines, the TPLF left Wolkait within two weeks of the start of the full-blown war. Subsequently, the Committee took over the interim administrative responsibility of Wolkait. For them, Tekeze is re-established as the natural frontier between Tigray and Amhara. Currently, Wolkait with four of its woredas, Kabtia-Humera, Wolkait, Tegede, and Awra have been *de facto* under Amhara Regional State Administration constituting a new administrative zone (personal communication with a member of Wolkait Committee, interviewee #1, October 2022, p. 9). For now, Amharas regained what they claim as their 'ancestral land' forcefully annexed by the TPLF without their consent.

Meanwhile, the federal government led by the Oromo Prosperity Party (OPP) and the TPLF signed a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities (CoHA) in Pretoria, South Africa on 2 November 2022 to put an end to their military confrontation. Yet, the prospect of the peace deal ensuring lasting peace is suspect due to many sticking points. The peace deal excluded the *Fanno* or the Wolkait Amhara Identity Committee. While it was intended to settle the power struggle between the TPLF and the OPP, the main issue that pits Tigray and Amhara-Wolkait was left unaddressed. The OPP has a vested interest in perpetuating the status quo of ethnic federalism. The PM has made the position of his party clear in stating that the amendment of the constitutional order is out of the frame (Shiferaw & Ishiyama, 2021). The OPP and the TPLF renewed a shared commitment to keep ethnic federalism. In view of this, resolving the Wolkait issue through constitutional amendment seems an impossible reality. It remains a zero-sum issue between Tigray and Amhara over its ownership. It belongs either to Amhara or Tigray, not to both.

Wolkait remains bait for the Abiy-led Prosperity Party (PP), which does not want to give Wolkait to the Amhara, as it will create trouble for ethnic federalism, by creating an unfavorable precedent for future territorial claims. Thus, they object to Wolkait being restored to the Amhara. It has also implications for budget allocation. The Amhara—viewed as a historical foe among the Oromo elites, will get more budget and territory. That is why the Oromo-dominated federal government led by Abiy Ahmed refused to allocate a budget to the area. The PP insists that the area should be under the control of the federal government. Wolkait is one of the most important strategic places that could shape the political dynamics in the country. If it falls into the hands of the TPLF, it will invite a threat to the hegemony of the PP or even the survival of the country itself. Yet, the Wolkait Committee does not trust the PP-led federal government dominated by Oromos, viewing federal control of the area as a ploy for the TPLF take-over, which will subject the people to yet another round of subjugation (personal communication with a member of Wolkait Committee, interviewee #1, October 2022, p. 9).

7.3. Indemnity and Compensation

As reiterated already, the people of Wolkait have endured unspeakable abuses that amount to genocide at the hands of the TPLF. They were forcefully incorporated into the Tigray Region thereby losing their Amhara identity and their ancestral lands. They became minorities in their own ancestral land, facing atrocities and brutalities such as gang rape, killings, looting, abduction, subjugation, torture, incarceration, displacement, abortion, and sterilization. All these acts were part of the grand strategy of 'Tigrayanization' of the area. Apart from the systematic homogenization policy, the TPLF orchestrated ethnic cleansing that involved door-to-door killings of the Amhara in Mai-Kadra town on the eve of its military showdown with the federal government in November 2020. The TPLF vowed to leave no stone unturned to settle a score with the Amhara, 'their historical foe'. In the desperate attacks that followed, close to 1600 civilians, most of them Amharas, were mercilessly murdered in Mai Kadera town, Wolkait (Tedla & Kelklie, 2021). Thus,

they stand in need of indemnity and legal justice whereby the TPLF is held accountable (personal communication with a member of the Wolkait Committee, interviewee #1, October 2022, p. 9).

8. Conclusion and the Way Forward

The paper has demonstrated that the issue of Wolkait is not a mere ethnic conflict between Amhara and Tigray ethnic groups. The conflict has its roots in the formation of the TPLF, the motive of which was the establishment of 'Greater Tigray' by carving out territories from Amhara and present-day Eritrea. The TPLF had annexed the area in the 1970s and later lumped to the Tigray Region in the wake of the adoption of ethnic federalism in 1991. Far from being a solution, the new political dispensation and the attendant redrawing of boundaries putatively along ethnicity added fuel to the conflict. In the bitter struggle lasting for four decades, the Wolkait people have endured unspeakable atrocities that amount to genocide. Since November 2020, they have regained their freedom and land after having dislodged the TPLF militarily. Yet, their struggle is yet to be legally/constitutionally settled. They are still pursuing their struggle on two fronts. They are doing the necessary by arming themselves to face up to a potential invasion from the TPLF. They are appealing for constitutional settlement of their quest for self-determination. There is a growing concern that the issue has been complicated due to vested interests among competing political actors in the country. Unless the situation is solved amicably, it may spark a civil war that even puts the country's survival in danger.

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