

PROSPERITY TO THE PERIPHERY?

THE POLITICS OF RESOURCE EXTRACTION
IN ETHIOPIA, POST-2018

Jonah Wedekind



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MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK



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THE ETHIOPIA PEACE RESEARCH FACILITY

This report was written for the Ethiopia Peace Research Facility (PRF). The PRF is an independent facility combining timely analysis on peace and conflict from Ethiopian experts with support for conflict-sensitive programming in the country. It is managed by the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) and funded by the UK government.

This report is part of the Knowledge for Peace (K4P) series on the Political Economy of Resources in Ethiopia's Peripheries (PEREP). It draws on four case studies conducted by Asebe Regassa and Damena Abebe; Dereje Feyissa and Abubeker Yasin; Juweria Ali; and Benedikt Kamski and Yohannes Yitbarek.

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DESIGN/LAYOUT

Designed by Maggie Dougherty.

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SUMMARY

- With the formation of the Prosperity Party (PP) in 2019, Abiy Ahmed's government set out to redress the relationship between the central government and 'peripheral' regional states. This included reforms to the governance of resource extraction and revenue distribution, thereby giving resource-rich but politically marginalized regions a fair share of 'prosperity'.
- Departing from the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)'s state-led, developmental economic policies, the PP government purportedly embraced market liberalization, vowing to privatize state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (e.g. sugar estates); enhance investments in the extractive sector (e.g. gold, gas/oil); and improve the productivity performance of underperforming sectors (e.g. salt, sugar).
- Redistributive reforms—including transferring (salt/gold) mining concessions to youths or a broader cross-section of society, and pledging a greater share of resource revenues to host regions—were often politically motivated, the aim being to co-opt and pacify certain sections of society, and create/capture regional business elites loyal to the government.
- The PP-fostered business elites—initially from Oromia and Amhara regions—moved to occupy strategic economic sectors (e.g. gold, sugar and salt) previously controlled by Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) affiliates or dominant regional endowment funds and SOEs. Whenever the political centre's regional/ethnic alliances shifted, this reopened struggles over the control of extractive resources in the peripheries.
- Economic defects continue to plague strategic extractive sectors under the PP. Issues include monopolization, hoarding and price manipulation of key resources (e.g. salt, sugar); an absence of community consultation and environmental impact assessments (e.g. gold and sugar); the cancellation of unproductive or speculative projects (e.g. oil/gas, gold); and incomplete privatization due to mismanagement, lack of productivity and mounting costs (e.g. sugar). These trends run counter to the PP's first Homegrown Economic Reform agenda and have had to be deferred to a second, upcoming agenda.
- Conflicts and violence related to resource extraction in peripheral regions remain common, encompassing various forms of local resistance that interact with increasingly ethnicized borderland and territorial conflicts, ethno-national insurgencies and

counterinsurgencies, as well as government-led disarmament, demobilization and rehabilitation campaigns.

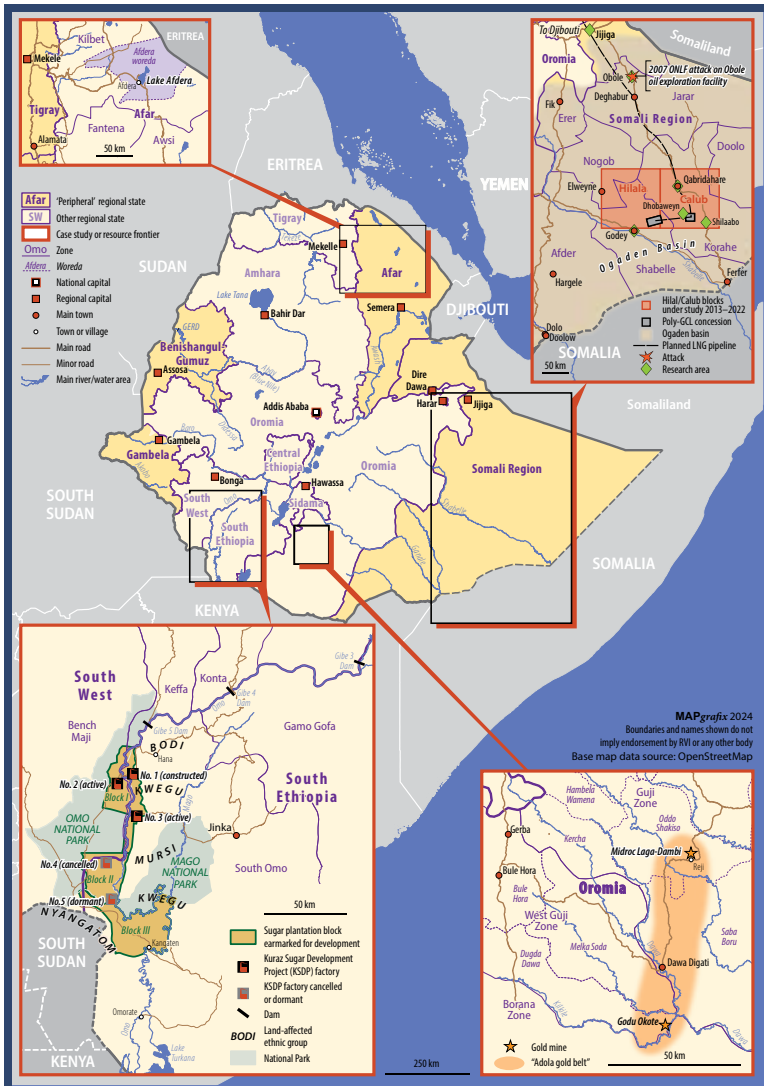
- The government holds that extractive investment projects can contribute to peacebuilding in conflict areas through development. Often, however, such projects are subject to distributive struggles and conflicts and are prone to failure. This is particularly true if prior consent and community consultation in the establishment and operation of projects is not pursued, or armed counterinsurgents and/or organized youths perceive them as exclusively serving the federal government or regional elites and their business affiliates.
- Despite the PP pledging to redress Ethiopia's centre-periphery model of politics, the balance of power vis-à-vis peripheral regions and the political centre has not shifted fundamentally. Top-down policymaking, project enforcement, centralization of political power and economic rents, and privileging some (ethnic) business elites with access to resources/revenues in the peripheries have all persisted under the PP, albeit as part of different alliance formations.

ABBREVIATIONS

ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Movement
APP	Amhara Prosperity Party
CER	Central Ethiopia Region
CoHA	Cessation of Hostilities Agreement
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defense Force
EPRDF	Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front
FDI	foreign direct investment
GTP	Growth and Transformation Plan (I & II)
HGER	Homegrown Economic Reform
IFI	international financial institution
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KSDP	Kuraz Sugar Development Project
MeTEC	Metals and Engineering Cooperation
MIDROC	Mohammed Int'l. Development Research & Organization Co.
MoMP	Ministry of Mines and Petroleum
NBE	National Bank of Ethiopia
OLA	Oromia Liberation Army
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
ONLF	Ogaden National Liberation Front
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organization
OPP	Oromia Prosperity Party
PM	Prime Minister
PMO	Prime Minister's Office
PP	Prosperity Party
SEPDM	Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement
SER	South Ethiopia Region
SNNPR	Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region
SOE	state-owned enterprise
SRS	Somali Regional State
SWEPR	South-West Ethiopia People's Region
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front

MAP

RESEARCH SITES AND RESOURCE EXTRACTION IN ETHIOPIA'S PERIPHERIES



INTRODUCTION

The historic relationship between the Ethiopian state's geographic centre of political power and the territories and peoples at its margins has been shaped by land appropriation and natural resources extraction, including revenues from their trade. This relationship formed the dynamo of Ethiopian state-building under past regimes and is often painted by observers as the modern state expanding its territorial reach into the lowland and highland peripheries, with the locus of power remaining entrenched in the Amhara-Tigray highland cores.¹ This core experienced a regional shift following the transition from the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) to the Prosperity Party (PP) under Prime Minister (PM) Abiy Ahmed. While peripheral regions remain central to Ethiopia's development, the political and economic marginalization of their people remains relatively constant, as this report will suggest.

With Abiy having completed the fifth year of his premiership in 2023, this report assesses his period in power in light of early narratives promising more 'prosperity to the periphery'. In doing so, it traces the policies, practices and players that—in the wake of the PP's reforms and amid a number of ethicized conflicts across the federation—reshaped the political economy of resource extraction in Ethiopia's peripheries.² Focusing on a set of strategic resources and their economic sectors, the report analyses the effects of the post-2018 reforms as they played out in 'peripheral' regional states and/or resource frontiers, and how this impacted access to and use of resources and their economic benefits. This includes a critical assessment of the extent to which the land and resource appropriation grievances that marred the EPRDF era have been addressed by the PP against the backdrop of pledges for economic redistribution, power devolution and peacebuilding.

Grievances among peripheral communities over their increasing alienation from access to land and its benefit streams mounted over the course of the EPRDF's 27-year-long rule, particularly from the 2000s onwards.³ Fashioning a developmental ideology, the EPRDF leveraged the state

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- 1 John Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, Oxford: James Currey, 2011. The 'centre-periphery' relationship has been a classic theme in Ethiopian historiography; see: Donald Donham, 'Old Abyssinia and the new Ethiopian empire: themes in social history', in *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*, eds. D. Donham and J. Wendy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
 - 2 Melaku Desta, Dereje Feyissa and Mamo Mihretu, eds., *Ethiopia in the Wake of Political Reforms*, Los Angeles, CA: Tsehai Publishers, 2020.
 - 3 Although the uprisings were triggered by the Addis Ababa Master Plan and thus has a strong peri-urban component, grievances related to land dispossession had long been brewing in peripheral rural areas.



to facilitate capital investment in large-scale plantation agriculture, agro-industrial estates and industrial parks established in peripheral regions deemed to have abundant ‘unused’ land and ‘untapped’ resources. The plan was to shift from a mainly rural, agrarian economy/society to one that was more diversified and industrialized. Despite strong economic growth and a growing urban middle class, however, ethnicized conflicts and social contestation arose over state-facilitated investment projects, which were often labelled ‘land grabs’ by government critics. Widespread opposition to the EPRDF’s authoritarian form of governance, top-down development-induced dispossession and the privileging of a ruling party-affiliated ethnic business elite—among other factors—fed into uprisings between 2015 and 2018. This in turn pushed demands for social, economic and political justice, as well as questions over access to land and resources, from the periphery to the centre of politics.

Abiy Ahmed’s ascent to power in 2018 raised hopes that the asymmetrical, top-down relationship between the central state and civil society—particularly in second-tier regions labelled as ‘peripheral’—would be reformed, allowing a fairer system of political representation and economic distribution of resource revenues to flourish. In his inaugural speech, Abiy Ahmed lamented that Ethiopia had become a multinational federation where one ethnic group was ‘busy taking away wealth that was created yesterday by another’. As such, he called for a break with the past and pledged ‘to move forward to a situation ... where there is a bigger pie, where everyone can work and become prosperous’.⁴

With the formation of the PP in late 2019, Abiy Ahmed promised to redress the relatively marginal status of peripheral regional states. Satellite parties that were not previously members of the EPRDF ruling coalition and represented so-called ‘emerging’ or ‘developing’ regions in the geographic peripheries, including Afar, Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambella, now became part of the unified ruling PP and were promised equal representation at the centre of the multinational federation. Meanwhile, a new Homegrown Economic Reform (HGER) agenda was released in early 2021, underscoring the PP’s intention of liberalizing the economy and attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) in the private sector.⁵ This was paired with promises of a greater economic redistribution of revenues and benefits to regions in less developed and fiscally weaker regions. The economic reform agenda thus pointed to a departure from the EPRDF’s state-led developmental model—which had a strongly regulated, agrarian and agro-industrial policy focus—including by expanding the extractive minerals sector.

Despite the stated intention to provide peripheral regional states with an equal seat at the

4 Hassen Hussein, ‘Full English Transcript of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s Inaugural Address’, OPride, 3 April 2018. www.opride.com/2018/04/03/english-partial-transcript-of-ethiopian-prime-minister-abi-ahmeds-inaugural-address.

5 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), ‘Ten Years Development Plan: A Pathway to Prosperity, 2021–2030’, Prime Minister’s Office, December 2020. https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/library/ethiopia-ten-years-development-plan-2021-2030-planning-and-development-commission-federal-democratic-republic-ethiopia-2020_en.

national table as members of the PP, however, top-down decision-making processes at the federal level, power centralization at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), and continued restrictions on regional autonomy—especially concerning strategic resource governance—have raised questions as to whether centre-periphery relations have truly been reconstituted. Moreover, doubts remain over the extent to which the PP's pledges to introduce policies improving resource governance by empowering regional decision-making, ensuring local consultation and increasing local benefit streams have actually materialized.

Thus, while the PP prides itself on having reconfigured the hitherto asymmetric centre-periphery relationship, the perception that strategic resources are still subject to top-down governance, with revenues mainly accruing at the centre, calls for investigation of the 'new' political economy of resource governance and extraction in peripheral regions and resource frontier zones. This prompts the following questions:

- How has resource extraction and governance in Ethiopia's resource-rich regions evolved since the reforms, and what impact has this had on the political settlement post-2018?
- To what extent have the PP's ostensibly liberal and redistributive political and economic reforms actually reshaped Ethiopia's centre-periphery relations? And what changes and continuities are discernible under the PP in Ethiopia's previously strongly state-controlled, highly centralized, top-down political economy of resource extraction?
- What are the policies and practices, and who are the players, shaping the governance of key economic sectors, the extraction of strategic resources, and the distribution of their benefits?
- How do the above factors vary between different peripheral regional states and frontier spaces?

In addressing these questions, the report synthesizes empirical and analytical insights from four multi-sited case studies focused on key resources, namely gold, gas/oil, salt and sugar, in so-called 'peripheral regional states'—including Afar and Somali regions—and what this report calls 'resource frontiers', including the Guji and West Guji zones in Oromia and South Omo in South Ethiopia Region (SER) (formerly Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region, SNNPR). The case studies shed light on how major extractive investment projects and business elite enterprises operate at the territorial margins of the state, where their activities often go unscrutinized. As will be shown, the cumulative side effects of coercively enforced extractive activities point to mounting social conflict and economic challenges that run counter to the PP's promises of redressing the exclusion of 'peripheral people'.⁶

6 Dena Freeman and Alula Pankhurst, *Peripheral People: The Excluded Minorities of Ethiopia*, Asmara: Red Sea Press, 2003.

RESEARCH METHODS

This report synthesizes the findings of four case studies, each looking at Ethiopia's political economy through the prism of a specific resource in a particular peripheral region or frontier zone: gold in the Adola belt of Oromia region; gas and oil in the Ogaden basin of Somali Regional State (SRS); salt from Lake Afdera of Afar region; and sugar in the Lower Omo Valley of the newly created SER (see Map).⁷ Table 1 provides a methodological summary of the regional and resource case study details, while Table 2 gives an analytical overview of the main political-economic dynamics and variations observed between cases (see Annex). The resources, and therefore the case study areas, were selected on the basis of the criteria/characteristics elaborated below, with the intention of capturing continuities, changes and variations in the policies, practices and players that have shaped Ethiopia's political economy over time—specifically, the political transition from the EPRDF to the PP—and across space, in different peripheral regions and frontier settings of the multinational federation.

All four resources are extractive in terms of how they are expropriated and traded. Gold, gas and oil are mineral resources that are physically mined (extracted), while sugar production processes—particularly at the agro-industrial and monocultural scale—and value chains involve the appropriation of value from the land on which this agricultural commodity is produced.⁸ All four resources are strategic in character, holding high potential value for local communities, regional state elites and the federal state alike. They are commodities for which the government seeks to ensure meeting national demand and generating foreign exchange through exports. Thus, it is in the interests of the state to expand extraction of these resources, accumulate their revenues, and uphold governmental control over the regional states and administrative localities from which they are sourced. At the same time, the relatively marginalized socioeconomic status of the areas where these resources are expropriated from make them highly contentious and politically significant.

The settings and resources included in this study reflect variations of key dynamics and potential defects within Ethiopia's political economy under the PP. This includes the socioeconomic effects arising from the reforms (privatization, redistribution, investments, etc.) initiated under the government's HGER agenda, as well as different forms of social resistance and territorial conflicts. Furthermore, extraction of the resources in these studies involves a variety of economic players, ranging from state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to regional party conglomerates, domestic business elites to foreign investors and corporations. Historically, the

7 See: Asebe Regassa and Damena Abebe, 'Gold Glitters, Grievances Grow: Contestation and uncertainty around MIDROC and GODU Gold Mines in Guji, Oromia', Rift Valley Institute, 2023; Juweria Ali, 'Squeezing the Ogaden Basin: Power and protracted oil and gas exploration in the Somali Region', Rift Valley Institute, August 2023; Dereje Feyissa and Abubeker Yasin, 'Afar's Salty Politics: Monopolization and marginalization in Afdera's Salt Business', Rift Valley Institute, 2023; Yohannes Yitbarek and Benedikt Kamski, 'Sugarcoating "homegrown" development in the periphery: The politics of privatizing Kuraz Sugar Development Project in South Omo', Rift Valley Institute, September 2023.

8 Ben McKay and Henry Veltmeyer, 'Industrial agriculture and agrarian extractivism', in *Handbook of Critical Agrarian Studies*, eds. Haroon Akram-Lodhi et al., Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2021.

four resources, amongst others, have long played important roles in shaping Ethiopia's imperial, socialist and federal state-building processes in the peripheries.⁹ In addition, extractive resource revenue-sharing was a critical factor in reshaping the political settlement in the lead-up to the transition from the EPRDF to the PP.¹⁰

The Afar and Somali regions were considered 'emerging' or 'developing' regional states of the Ethiopian federation. As a consequence, their representative parties were relegated to second-tier affiliates (known as *agar*) rather than recognized as members of the EPRDF ruling coalition. In late 2019, however, the representative party chapters of the new Somali and Afar regions were fully integrated into the PP, following the appointment of new regional presidents. With both regions seemingly in the ascendancy under the emerging political settlement, their new political leaderships could afford to make populist promises to their respective constituents (clans) regarding greater participation in and share of the value chains arising from the most lucrative resource sectors found in their regions: salt from Afdera in Afar, and oil/gas in the Ogaden basin of SRS. In both cases, the research critically assessed the extent to which the centring of previously peripheral regions and the improvement of their relatively marginalized economic status proceeded as promised, if at all.

The case study of gold in the Adola belt in the Guji zones of Oromia, meanwhile, highlights a resource frontier located within a region that has arguably benefitted from the rise of PM Abiy Ahmed (himself an Oromo), who was propelled to power by the *qeerroo* youth movement in 2018. Communities in Guji, located in the far south of Oromia, were displaced and dispossessed to make way for gold extraction under the imperial, Derg and EPRDF regimes. Protests against gold mining projects in Guji were also a component of the Oromo uprisings that challenged the EPRDF regime, resulting in the suspension of Ethiopia's largest gold mining project, Mohammed Int'l. Development Research & Organization Co. (MIDROC) Laga Dambi, in 2018. Similar protests against investment projects in various peripheral pockets of the Oromia region had signalled the potential political danger that unemployed and dispossessed youths posed to the state. The legitimacy of the new Oromo-led PP government would thus hinge on providing livelihoods and/or pacifying this social stratum. Similarly, while the Kuraz Sugar Development Project (KSDP) and its estates in South Omo, in the former SNNPR, were not strictly situated in a so-called 'peripheral regional state' under the EPRDF,¹¹ the Lower Omo Valley is described as Ethiopia's 'super-periphery' in the case study on KSDP. This emphasizes the extremely marginalized geographic location and permanently uncertain socioeconomic situation of its

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- 9 For example: Alessandro Triulzi, *Salt, Gold and Legitimacy: Prelude to the History of a No-man's Land Bela Shangul, Wallagga, Ethiopia (1800–98)*, Naples: Tipografia Don Bosco, 1981.
- 10 Fitsum S. Weldegiorgis, Berouk Mesfin and Kathryn Sturman, 'Looking for oil, gas and mineral development in Ethiopia: Prospects and risks for the political settlement', *Extractive Industries and Society* 4/1 (2017).
- 11 In fact, the SNNPR's ruling party, the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM), was a member of the EPRDF ruling coalition, with Hailemariam Desalegn, who hails from the south (Wolayta), serving as PM from 2012 to 2018.

around 16 ethnic minority groups, most of whom maintain agro-pastoral livelihoods and have faced forced sedentarization and displacement caused by the state enforced establishment of sugar cane plantations and agro-industrial irrigation and estates.¹²

Limitations in the selection of case studies include the fact that not all peripheral regional states—such as Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz, also referred to as Ethiopia’s ‘western frontier’—could be equally covered and compared. The same applies to strategic agricultural resources, chiefly coffee—Ethiopia’s most exported commodity—together with cut-flowers, khat and sesame (edible oil), and the country’s increasingly important mineral resources, including potash (fertilizer), copper, tantalum and more recently lithium.¹³ Moreover, not all areas or investment/development projects were accessible during the research period, with potential case study sites (e.g. gold mines in western Oromia and Tigray) inaccessible to researchers due to armed conflicts taking place at the end of 2022.¹⁴ Relatedly, research on strategic resources and associated social and environmental ills (land displacement, environmental destruction, health hazards) remains sensitive under the PP administration, which occasionally restricts researcher access.

Research for the case studies was conducted between October and December 2022, primarily involving interviews with government officials from all levels of the federal state, company representatives, community members, youth activists, local elders and experts. Complementing this, secondary sources, including government documents, letters, policies, speech transcripts and grey literature, were consulted. Online sources and social media content provided further points of reference on the narratives related to centre-periphery relations and resource extraction.

12 Yohannes and Kamski, ‘Sugarcoating “homegrown” development’, 17.

13 For example: Ashenafi Endale, ‘Investigation: Shadow fight for Ethiopia’s lithium bonanza’, *The Reporter*, 16 September 2023, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/36610/>.

14 But see: ‘Gold In Western Oromia - Opportunities And Costs’, PRF Monthly Bulletin, April-May 2023, Rift Valley Institute, 5.

MINERALS GALLERY, MoMPE, ADDIS ABABA



Research commenced with a field visit to the Ethiopian Mineral Gallery at the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum in Addis Ababa. The Gallery, inaugurated in June 2022 by former Minister Takele Uma, showcases Ethiopia's mineral wealth to potential investors. The Mineral Gallery reflects how the central state sees, visualizes and displays the periphery with a geological emphasis on untapped resource availability and abundance.

Photos by Jonah Wedekind, Juweria Ali and Abubeker Yasin.

REFORMING CENTRE-PERIPHERY RELATIONS

Contemporary centre-periphery relations in Ethiopia have two dimensions: historical-geographical and political-institutional. Geographically, we can distinguish between the highland core of political and economic power (*mahel ager*) and the lowland peripheries (*dar ager*)¹⁵ surrounding it that were gradually—often forcibly—integrated into the territorial and administrative dominions of the modern Ethiopian state. With their uneven demographic and geographic relations to the centre, the peripheries experienced divergent processes of integration, state-building and social contestation. Historically, peripheral social spaces also served as frontiers, with Donham noting that ‘the notion of frontier connects centre to periphery’.¹⁶ Frontiers constitute yet-to-be accessed zones of bounty, containing the cheap land, labour and natural resources needed to foster (finance and feed) further state-building and economic development. On the other hand, frontiers also serve as buffer or border zones demarcating Ethiopia’s national and sub-national territories (i.e. international and internal state borders). Perhaps paradoxically, it is useful to see frontiers as central to the logic and order of the Ethiopian polity. There is an ‘inclusive exclusionary’ character to Ethiopia’s political economy, whereby the centre’s power depends on administratively-territorially integrating, as well as politically-economically exploiting peripheral spaces rich in natural and human resources.¹⁷ Despite their geographical distance from historical centres of political power in the hegemonic highland core, Ethiopia’s frontiers have been the sites of pioneering commercial trade, investments and development projects, seen to represent ‘progress’ and ‘modernity’.

Institutionally, since the 1990s at least, Ethiopia’s ‘centre’ can be understood as the federal government, together with the regions that represent the core of its political power. The EPRDF coalition was made up of member parties that represented the predominantly highland regions of Tigray and Amhara—historically the locus of Ethiopian state formation and expansion—, while regional representatives from Oromia and SNNPR—the ‘southern’ areas that were historically incorporated into the imperial Ethiopian state—played junior roles in this political

15 Including some ‘highland peripheries’ as well, see: Markakis, ‘The Last Two Frontiers’.

16 Donham, ‘Old Abyssinia’.

17 Tobias Hagmann and Benedikt Korf, ‘Agamben in the Ogaden: Violence and sovereignty in the Ethiopian–Somali frontier’, *Political Geography* 31/4 (2012): 206.

arrangement.¹⁸ By contrast, geographically peripheral regional states—the ‘periphery’—particularly those in the lowlands, were labelled as ‘emerging’ or ‘developing’. This included Afar, Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambella regional states, whose representative parties only had affiliate status (*agar*) in the EPRDF ruling coalition. One of the EPRDF’s early endeavours to balance out the administrative capacities and economic development of centre and periphery was to institute a ‘twinning’ partnership between core and peripheral regions (Tigray and Afar; Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz; Oromia and Somali; SNNPR and Gambella). This, however, soon degenerated into a patrimonial command-and-control mechanism of partnering core members from the ruling coalition with satellite parties at the margins.¹⁹

Despite the EPRDF’s initial ethos of empowering peripheral regions in terms of representation and revenue distribution, the actual experience of the peripheries and their peoples was one of political exclusion and economic marginalization, which ultimately contributed to the resistance the regime came to face.²⁰ Subsequently, the 2019 dissolution of the EPRDF and formation of the PP involved integrating all the representative parties of the Ethiopian federation’s member regions into the ruling party, in an alleged effort to unify the country.

The centre–periphery model has had concrete impacts on Ethiopian state–society relations, entering the country’s civilizational discourse and shaping not only the narratives and policies but actual political projects and practices of successive Ethiopian governments and counter-movements, including several ethnic/national liberation fronts. Contending interpretations of the centre–periphery model have been deployed by competing centripetal and centrifugal forces, split along the fault-line of a unitarian state within a ‘greater Ethiopia’ versus increased self-determination within a multi-ethnic federation.²¹ The latter includes those leaning towards secession or more autonomy from what they see as the remnants of the Ethiopian Empire and internal forms of colonialism.²²

18 Donald Donham and Wendy James, *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

19 Tegegn Gebre-Egziabhere, ‘Emerging Regions in Ethiopia: Are they catching up with the rest of Ethiopia?’, *Eastern Africa Social Science Research Review* 34/1 (2018).

20 Dereje Feyissa, ‘Centering the periphery? The praxis of federalism at the margins of the Ethiopian state’, *Journal of Federal Studies* 1/1 (2013).

21 Dereje Feyissa, ‘Epistemological Debates and Ideological Fault-lines in Ethiopia’, Rift Valley Institute, 2023. <https://riftvalley.net/publication/epistemological-debates-and-ideological-fault-lines-ethiopia>; Donald Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974; Asebe Regassa, ‘Self-Determination, Multinational Federalism and an Emerging Threat in Ethiopia: A Decolonial Approach’, *Northeast African Studies* 21/2 (2021).

22 Ayantu Tibebo and J. Khadijah Abdurahman, ‘Tigray, Oromia, And the Ethiopian Empire’, *The Funambulist* 37 (2021). <https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/against-genocide/tigray-oromia-and-the-ethiopian-empire>; Bonnie Holcomb and Sissai Ibsa, *The Invention of Ethiopia: The Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa*, New Jersey: Red Sea Press, 1990.

CENTRE-PERIPHERY UNDER THE EPRDF

Under the EPRDF, a critical reading of centre-periphery relations played a crucial role in the abolition of unitarian nation-building and the establishment of federalism.²³ Initially, this was based on rebalancing the asymmetries between the highland centre and lowland peripheries in terms of ethnic territorial bordering, political representation and economic distribution. The 1995 Constitution thus appeared to offer a new horizon of possibility for Ethiopia's multinational society, particularly its peripheral peoples. On paper, the EPRDF's early political project of restructuring the old unitarian state system into a multinational federal one represented a radical break from the administrative centralism of the imperial and Derg regimes. In pledging to recognize the ethnic diversity and rights of Ethiopia's 'nations, nationalities and peoples', the new regime granted nine ethnic regional states²⁴ jurisdiction over the use of their land and resources. Alongside this, greater autonomy, equal political representation and nationally shared economic benefits were promised to 'emerging' or 'developing' regional states (i.e. peripheral regions) and their populations.

In practice, however, the EPRDF's early ethos of 'centering the periphery' was eroded by a continuation of centralized rule, experienced by repressed communities and resistant counterinsurgents as 'punishing the periphery'.²⁵ As numerous studies have shown, decentralization programmes in rural highlands were often regarded by its subjects as de facto centralization, micro-management and close observation of local administrative structures.²⁶ In the lowlands, large-scale development projects—including dams, plantations and industrial parks—were enforced in a top-down manner and coupled with regional-level disempowerment. This included upscaling the administrative powers for large-scale land deals from a regional to a federal level.²⁷ Moreover, there was criticism that the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) not only dominated the EPRDF coalition partners, as well as the state and military apparatuses, but its affiliated businesses and conglomerates effectively controlled most economic sectors. Similarly, fiscal decentralization under the EPRDF did not lead to greater economic self-determination for regional states, as they continued to depend on the federal government for three- to four-fifths of their revenue expenditures, tilting the balance of power in favour of the

23 Jean-Nicolas Bach, 'EPRDF's Nation-Building: Tinkering with Convictions and Pragmatism', *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos* 27 (2014).

24 And the two administrative councils of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa.

25 Dereje, 'Centering the Periphery'; Tobias Hagmann, 'Punishing the Periphery: legacies of state repression in the Ethiopian Ogaden', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8/4 (2014).

26 Teferi Abate, "'Decentralised There, Centralised Here": Local Governance and Paradoxes of Household Autonomy and Control in North-East Ethiopia, 1991-2001', *Africa* 74/4 (2004).

27 Assefa Fiseha, 'Federalism, development and the changing political dynamics in Ethiopia', *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 17/1 (2019).

centre.²⁸

The perception of federalism as a façade of fair (ethnic) representation dates back to the early sidelining of ‘authentic’ ethno-national liberation fronts, such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which had fought against the Derg alongside the TPLF and could count on relatively popular backing among their respective populations. During the transitional government (1991–1994), the TPLF dominated the newly formed EPRDF, which incorporated the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) and various TPLF-created political parties, including the Oromo Democratic Party (OPDO) and the Southern Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement (SEPDM).²⁹ The subsequent arrested political space for national liberation fronts such as the OLF or Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) prompted the resumption of several armed struggles in the peripheries.³⁰ From the late 1990s onwards, the EPRDF’s centralized management increasingly ran counter to the promises of greater regional representation and autonomy, as well as the democratic participation of opposition parties within the federal system.³¹

These factors contributed to the common notion of Ethiopian politics as driven by the centre dominating the periphery. As Bach notes:

the centralized regime of the EPRDF also partly explains why Ethiopian politics and Ethiopian studies have great difficulties in rethinking the political and mental map of Ethiopia out of the centre/periphery dichotomy. Precisely, this duality is still used to qualify the conflicts between the central government and its opponents in the regions, stressing the strong continuity between the past and present.³²

Critics see the EPRDF’s tendency towards centralization as a federalist façade and as part of

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- 28 See: Bizuneh Yimenu, ‘Measuring and explaining fiscal de/centralization: Empirical evidence from Ethiopia, 1995–2020’, *Public Administration and Development* 43/3 (2023). Although this situation has not fundamentally changed under the PP’s central allocation of regional budgets; see: Mistir Sew, ‘Central state’s fiscal control stunts Ethiopian federalism’, *Ethiopia Insight*, 21 April 2023. www.ethiopia-insight.com/2023/04/21/central-states-fiscal-control-stunts-ethiopian-federalism/.
- 29 The ANDM was initially called the Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement.
- 30 Berouk Mesfin, ‘Rebel movements in Ethiopia’, in *Violent Non-State Actors in Africa: Terrorists, Rebels and Warlords*, eds. Caroline Varin and Dauda Abubakar, Cham: Springer, 2017.
- 31 Siegfried Pausewang, Kjetil Tronvoll and Lovise Aalen, *Ethiopia Since the Derg: A Decade of Democratic Pretension and Performance*, Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2002.
- 32 Jean-Nicolas Bach, ‘New Trends, Old Views: The Ambivalent Centre/Periphery Paradigm in Ethiopian Studies’, in *Movements in Ethiopia: Ethiopia in Movement: Proceedings of the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, eds. Eloi Ficquet et al., Addis Ababa: Tsehai Press, 2015.

its vanguard political party ideology and developmental economic doctrine.³³ Culturalists see it as rooted in the state apparatus' inherited structures, which are deeply ingrained in Ethiopia's 'authoritarian political tradition' and hierarchical political culture.³⁴ Many observers thus subscribe to the view that Ethiopian politics is a preconditioned zero-sum game in which the winner takes the central state and rules the periphery. Donham, for instance, saw it as part of 'the nature of the Ethiopian state' to afford 'almost no means for demands at the periphery to be translated into action at the centre'. The only options, he claimed, were for peripheral people to assimilate, endure or rebel.³⁵ As under the imperial and Derg regimes, the last of these options—resistance—did eventually come to the fore in the latter days of the EPRDF regime. While mass protests were triggered against the planned expansion of Addis Ababa into its Oromo hinterlands, silent forms of contestation had long been brewing in the rural peripheries.³⁶ Now, these demands for greater political inclusion and economic distribution were becoming considerably louder. Thus, in the lead-up to the PP's formation, the new leadership was confronted with the need to address the centralizing tendencies of the state and the marginalized position of the peripheries.

CENTRE-PERIPHERY UNDER THE PP

The emerging post-2018 political settlement and transformation of the EPRDF into the PP under PM Abiy Ahmed's leadership initially raised hopes among Ethiopia's disenfranchised population. 'Abiymania'³⁷ took hold with promises of a more equitable distribution of resources and benefit streams, as well as a recalibration of administrative representation within Ethiopia's multinational federation—not least for those residing in peripheral regions and resource frontiers.

The formation of the PP in late 2019 was accompanied by efforts to remould centre-periphery relations in the image of a unitarian, pan-Ethiopian state and society, albeit within the cast

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- 33 René Lefort and William Davison, 'Federalist façade for centralist front', *Ethiopia Insight*, 18 August 2019. www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/08/18/federalist-facade-for-centralist-front/; Jean-Nicolas Bach, 'Abyotawi Democracy: neither revolutionary nor democratic, a critical review of EPRDF's conception of revolutionary democracy in post-1991 Ethiopia', *The Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5/4 (2011).
- 34 See debate on political culture between Tobias Hagmann, 'Ethiopian Political Culture Strikes Back: A Rejoinder to J. Abbink', *African Affairs* 105/421 (2006); and Jon Abbink, 'Discomfiture of democracy? The 2005 election crisis in Ethiopia and its aftermath', *African Affairs* 105/419 (2006).
- 35 Donham, 'Old Abyssinia'.
- 36 Tsegaye Moreda, 'Listening to their silence? The political reaction of affected communities to large-scale land acquisitions: insights from Ethiopia', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 42/3-4 (2015); Dessalegn Rahmato, 'Land deals, rural unrest and the crisis of state in Ethiopia', in *Ethiopia: Social and Political Issues*, ed. Logan Cochrane, New York: Nova.
- 37 Tom Gardner, 'Ethiopians are going wild for Abiy Ahmed', *The Economist*, 18 August 2018. www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/08/18/ethiopians-are-going-wild-for-abiy-ahmed.

of the existing federal constitution.³⁸ Integrating the peripheral regional states' parties and representatives as equal members of the ruling party thus became a core pillar of the reform agenda. Abiy's new administration vowed the PP would finally bring about 'true federalism', as a PMO press release put it.³⁹ Beyond this, such declarations reflected a nation-building strategy premised on 'synergy' under Abiy's mantra of *medemer*—a 'coming together' of the country's multi-ethnic society and its state structure.⁴⁰ As an all-encompassing ruling party philosophy, *medemer* emphasizes the potential of the nation's endowments and calls for the combined utilization of Ethiopia's human and physical capital to achieve peace and prosperity for all its citizens.⁴¹

In practical terms, the transition from the EPRDF to the PP meant that every regional state would be represented within the new ruling party. This was reflective of the 1995-established House of Federation, where, 'each Nation, Nationality and People shall be represented ... by at least one member [and] one additional representative for each one million of its population'.⁴² Thus, in December 2019, the PP sought to incorporate former *agar* affiliates, namely the ruling chapters of Somali, Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella and Harari regional states,⁴³ alongside the Oromo, Amhara and Southern parties,⁴⁴ which had previously been core members of the

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- 38 This unleashed a public debate about the defects of ethnic federalism and alternative federal/constitutional models based on geography or territory; see: Yonatan Fessha, 'Ethiopia's Ethnic Federalism: Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution', *Verfassungsblog*, 23 January 2019. <https://verfassungsblog.de/ethiopias-ethnic-federalism-part-of-the-problem-or-part-of-the-solution/>. Moreover, multiple surveys and studies sought to ascertain the popularity and feasibility of possible constitutional amendments to the federal structure; see: Afrobarometer, 'Federalism & the Constitution in Ethiopia: Findings from Round 8 Afrobarometer Survey in Ethiopia in 2020', 25 August 2020. www.afrobarometer.org/articles/afrobarometer-presentation-federalism-constitution/; Policy Studies Institute, 'FDRE Constitution after three decades: Inquiring into whether and what to amend', October 2022. www.lawethiopia.com/images/The_FDRE_Constitution_after_three_decades_a_complete_research_report__17.10.2022_.pdf.
- 39 FDRE, 'Context and Updates on Current Issues in Ethiopia', Prime Minister's Office, 8 July 2020. https://pmo.gov.et/media/documents/Context_and_Updates_on_Current_Issues_in_Ethiopia-.pdf.
- 40 Abiy Ahmed, 'መደመር' [Medemer], Addis Ababa: Tsehai Publishers, 2019.
- 41 *Medemer* can be read as fusing prosperity theology with social capital theory, the latter of which featured strongly in Abiy Ahmed's PhD thesis on 'Social Capital and Its Role in Traditional Conflict Resolution in Ethiopia: The Case of Inter-Religious Conflict in Jimma Zone State'. See also: Kebedu Mekonnen, 'Republican Renewal and Democratic Transition in Ethiopia: Medemer, a Lofty Mantra of Laïcité for Contemporary Ethiopia?', in *Ethiopia in the Wake of Political Reforms*, eds. Melaku Geboye, Dereje Feyissa Dori and Mamo Esmelealem, Los Angeles: Tsehai Publishers, 2020.
- 42 FDRE, 'Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia', 21 August 1995, Article 61:2
- 43 Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP); Afar National Democratic Party (ANDP); Benishangul Gumuz People Democratic Party (BGPDP); and Gambella People's Unity Democratic Movement (GPUDM).
- 44 Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) (renamed Oromo Democratic Party (ODP) in 2019); Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) (later renamed Amhara Democratic Party (ADP)); and Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM).

TPLF-dominated EPRDF. The TPLF however strongly objected to the dissolving of the EPRDF and refused to join the PP. The new ‘all-inclusive’ party was also intended to usher in a more egalitarian political party culture: whereas the EPRDF was based on a consociational party model in which the *agar* affiliates had no voting rights, the PP’s initial programme adopted the principle of proportional representation⁴⁵ and pledged a ‘fair distribution of representatives to groups of the society who have a smaller number population’.⁴⁶

Although former *agar* affiliates in SRS and Afar in particular now appeared to have a seat at the national table, a number of limitations and setbacks quickly emerged.⁴⁷ In practice, the PMO and figures from the larger regions dominated the PP’s structures in the years following the party’s formation,⁴⁸ with the political centre of power initially jointly occupied by the Oromo and Amhara PP (OPP/APP) wings, alongside—to a lesser extent—the Somali PP (SPP).⁴⁹ These ethnic-regional alliances and the new political fortunes that augmented the power status of the old peripheries would however not endure long, as the reports on SRS and Afar also indicate.⁵⁰ A common initial criticism of Abiy’s party unification was that it maintained the previous regionally divided chapters (APP, OPP, SPP, etc.) under a different name, albeit with affiliates now permitted to be members.⁵¹

Another critique asserted that ‘propelling the peripheral regions’ concerns and aspirations to

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- 45 Ethiopia has not conducted a census since 2007, with the intended 2020 census postponed indefinitely due to COVID-19 and multiple regional conflicts. This means proportional party representation and voting, federal budget allocations to the regions, as well as Ethiopia’s 2021 general election, have largely proceeded on the basis of the outdated census. See also: Hannah Akuiyibo, ‘Ethiopia’s Forgotten Census’, Wilson Centre, 30 September 2022. www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/ethiopias-forgotten-census.
- 46 Prosperity Party, የብልጽግና ፓርቲ ፕሮግራም [‘Prosperity Party Programme’]. www.lawethiopia.com/images/tools%20for%20political%20parties/Ethiopia%20prosperity%20party%20political%20program.pdf. For an unofficial English translation of the party bylaws, see: www.ethiopia-insight.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/PP-bylaws-2.pdf.
- 47 On SRS, see: Tobias Hagmann, ‘Fast politics, slow justice: Ethiopia’s Somali region two years after Abdi Iley’, LSE Conflict Research Programme, 11 September 2020. www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/Conflict-Research-Programme/crp-memos/Hagmann-Two-years-after-Iley-final.pdf. On Afar, see: Abubeker Yasin, ‘Afar people in Ethiopia: Between a wind of hope and discontent’, Global Research Network on Parliaments and People, 20 July 2020. <https://grnpp.org/afar-people-in-ethiopia-between-a-wind-of-hope-and-discontent/>.
- 48 Alexandra M. Dias and Yared Debebe, ‘Anatomies of Protest and the Trajectories of the Actors at Play: Ethiopia 2015–2018’, in *Popular Protest, Political Opportunities, and Change in Africa*, ed. Edalina Rodrigues Sanches, London/New York: Routledge, 2022.
- 49 Mohamed Olad, ‘Democratic reform must mean fair deal for long-suffering Somalis’, Ethiopia Insight, 21 January 2020. www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/01/21/democratic-reform-must-mean-fair-deal-for-long-suffering-somalis/.
- 50 Dereje and Abubeker, ‘Afar’s Salty Politics’; Juweria, ‘Squeezing the Ogaden’.
- 51 Terrence Lyons, ‘The Origins of the EPRDF and the Prospects for the Prosperity Party’, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 56/5 (2021).

the centre of a national discourse dominated by highlanders' (i.e. Amharas) was unlikely to occur within the PP 'straitjacket' if demands for representation through functional constitutionalism were not also addressed.⁵² Some of the PP's new regional elites appeared open to constitutional reforms that might further overcome centre-periphery divisions, with SRS president Mustafa M. Omer apparently willing to contemplate a federation divided along geographic rather than ethnic lines.⁵³ The federal government, however, was alert to the fact that constitutional upheaval could be even more controversial than dissolving the EPRDF, which itself caused a rift with the TPLF that ultimately led to civil war.⁵⁴ The question was thus deferred to public debate, thinktank studies and experimentation in the peripheral 'south'. The August 2023 dissolution of the SNNPR that came with the creation of the new SER and Central Ethiopia Region (CER),⁵⁵ for instance, together with the 'clustering' (*bizu maekelati*)⁵⁶ of their administrative offices, appears to be a means of testing out a compromise between ethnic and geographic federalism.⁵⁷ Another concern raised in the wake of the PP's formation was that the ultimate decision-making power to identify candidates for office in the regions, including presidents, rests with the party's head office, ratified only by the executive.⁵⁸ As such, the power to appoint regional elites rests largely with the PMO.

Just half a year after the PP's formation, discontent over the PM assuming de facto central command of the party was mounting, particularly among the Oromo opposition and the *qeerroo* movement.⁵⁹ Ethno-nationalist and federalist strands of the Oromo opposition, who view Abiy as empowering unitarist Amhara elites, criticized the PM's—at least temporary—adoption of a centralist, pan-Ethiopian (*Ethiopiawinet*) ideology. In response, the PMO issued a strongly worded rebuttal reminding Abiy's critics that:

the present political arrangement in the country establishes true federalism and empowers regional governments that were marginalized during the previous administration. For the first time in 30 years, the regional states of Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz, Afar and Gambella have moved from the periphery to the centre and can now fully take part in

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- 52 Mistir Sew, 'We need to come together – but not inside Prosperity Party's straitjacket', Ethiopia Insight, 20 February 2020. www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/02/20/we-need-to-come-together-but-not-inside-prosperity-partys-straitjacket/.
- 53 See: https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2551865191512972&id=184574221575426.
- 54 Martin Plaut and Sarah Vaughan, *Understanding Ethiopia's Tigray War*, London: Hurst, 2023.
- 55 Following Sidama in June 2020 and the South-West Ethiopia People's Region (SWEPR) in November 2021.
- 56 Interestingly, ብዙሃ ማዕከላት means 'multiple centres' when directly translated from Amharic, though it is officially referred to as 'clustering'.
- 57 See 'Carving up the South' in Yohannes and Kamski, 'Sugarcoating "homegrown" development', 14–17.
- 58 Mistir, 'We need to come together'.
- 59 Ermias Tesfaye, 'Chaos in the Rift—a microcosm of Ethiopia's brutal polarization', Ethiopia Insight, 5 January 2021. www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/01/05/chaos-in-the-rift-a-microcosm-of-ethiopias-brutal-polarization/.

political decisions that impact their respective regions.⁶⁰

Be that as it may, Abiy Ahmed's personal command over the PP has become increasingly conspicuous in the years since, not least through his frequent ministerial and cabinet reshuffles, which prohibit clandestine patron–client relationships forming that might one day pose a threat to him.⁶¹ Since 2023, the status of the Amhara wing of the PP has declined in relation to the Oromo wing, which—unlikely as it may have seemed given the animosities during the Tigray war (2020–2022)—briefly appeared to be courting Tigray's Interim Regional Government following the signing of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) ending the two-year war between the TPLF and the federal government.⁶² As a result, the PP's overall unitarist ideological disposition has become less pronounced, while Abiy's ethnic-regional alliances seem dispensable and continue to shift. Given Abiy's personal power over the PP, it is striking that his preferred claim to the party's legitimacy remains its supposed 'elimination' of the centre–periphery distinction (via the dissolution of the EPRDF). Speaking to members of the PP Central Committee in June 2023, he asserted:

It is important to implant multinationalism and to eliminate the centre and periphery politics. Some people ask, 'is there a difference between EPRDF and Prosperity Party?' ... The decision to create the PP is in itself a major achievement among all the changes. It has eliminated what used to be called *agar* parties. It is this affiliated force which is the real core of prosperity today—*medemer*—and it is this force which can transition this country tomorrow. It is this force which freed itself from ego. It was this force that the EPRDF excluded before.⁶³

60 FDRE, 'Context and Updates'.

61 Reqiq Insights, 'Decoding the Cabinet Reshuffles in Ethiopia A Necessary Means to an End?', 11 April 2023. <https://reqiq.co/decoding-the-cabinet-reshuffles-in-ethiopia/>.

62 Tigrayan activists in contrast argue that the region itself has become 'peripheralized' as a result of the war.

63 EBC, 'የብልጽግና ፓርቲ ፕሬዚዳንት ዐቢይ አሕመድ (ዶ/ር) ለፓርቲው ማዕከላዊ ኮሚቴ አባላት ያደረጉት ገለጻ ክፍል - 2', speech by Abiy Ahmed to members of the PP central committee (translated from Amharic), YouTube, 4 June 2023. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eisss58KAHE.



REGIONAL POWER SHIFTS UNDER THE PP

Since Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018 and the PP was created in 2019, Ethiopia's regions—both those traditionally at the centre of political power and those at the periphery—have experienced the post-EPRDF dispensation in different ways. Although this research project has dealt mainly with case studies in Ethiopia's peripheries, shifts in and alliances between other regions—particularly Oromia and Amhara—have also been significant and are explored here to highlight the fast paced alliance changes and related reconfiguration of centre-periphery relations under the PP government. The Oromo political and business elite has generally benefited from Abiy's ascent, while the initially politically influential and economically fortunate position of their Amhara counterparts is now in sharp decline, particularly following the end of the Tigray war and the flaring of the Fano insurgency from mid-2023.⁶⁴ For Afar and SRS—traditional peripheral regions—the rise of Abiy and the PP has provided political opportunities and relative peace and stability,⁶⁵ which both regions have attempted to profit from, albeit with disappointing outcomes, particularly with regards to regional ownership over strategic resources. In the southern regions, formerly the SNNPR, a push for greater autonomy via the creation of new states has had ambiguous results: despite some areas winning greater autonomy, the creation of new 'clusters' of zones packaged into smaller regions may ultimately reduce the 'new' south's bargaining power at the national level, while potentially profitable commodity production or extraction areas become sites of distributive struggles.

'OROMARA': FROM NEW CENTRE TO OLD RIFT

Despite its early hegemonic position within the PP, the Oromo–Amhara 'Oromara' alliance soon became fraught with political infighting and economic competition among the two regions' business elites. That the alliance held for as long as it did was largely due to the common position the regions held towards the TPLF, particularly regarding the war by the federal government's Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF)—supported by regional special forces (especially the Amhara Special Forces, the Fano militias, as well as Eritrean forces)—versus the TPLF's Tigrayan Defence Forces (2020–2022). By 2022, however, the relationship had deteriorated into

64 Mehdi Labzaé. 'The War in Tigray (2020–2021): Dictated truths, irredentism and déjà-vu', in Routledge Handbook of the Horn of Africa, edited by Jean-Nicholas Bach, 139–150. Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2022.

65 Except Afar-Issa feuds over kebeles in the borderlands of the Afar and Somali regional states.

a war of words between APP and OPP party representatives.⁶⁶ Temporary bans were put in place on the movement of people and goods across regional borders. Over the course of the following year, in the wake of the November 2022 signing of the Pretoria CoHA, the Amhara wing appeared increasingly weakened by cabinet reshuffles, including the dismissal of popular Amhara nationalist politicians. All this came on top of five changes in the regional president in five years.⁶⁷ Amhara ethnonationalism—initially among formal opposition parties such as the National Movement of Amhara, and subsequently among the clandestine and decentralized Fano resistance—has been on the rise in the Amhara region since the June 2019 coup attempt against the regional government.⁶⁸ This intensified during the Tigray war, in which Amhara regional forces and the Fanos annexed the West Tigray zone (Wolqayt-Tsegede and Setit-Humera).⁶⁹ Soon, however, a rift emerged between Abiy's central government and Amhara's constituents.⁷⁰ A crackdown on Fano leaders and fighters had been launched in April 2022.⁷¹ As a result, activists and politicians—both nationally and in the diaspora—have increasingly decried what they perceive as the 'peripheralization' of the Amhara region and people within the Ethiopian polity, and its subjection to a so-called 'Oromumma agenda'.⁷² Economically, Amhara business elites, some of whom struggled to compete as private economic actors with Tigrayan businesses under the EPRDF, particularly during the first half of Meles Zenawi's tenure, had begun to flourish under the PP administration.⁷³ Abiy was initially favourable towards Amhara business interests, particularly after former TPLF allies—including the head of the

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- 66 'Amhara & Oromia PP engage in war of words as relative peace returns to violence hit areas', *Addis Standard*, 24 March 2021. <https://addisstandard.com/news-amhara-oromia-pp-engage-in-war-of-words-as-relative-peace-returns-to-violence-hit-areas/>. OPP officials called the APP leadership 'inactive' and 'stagnant' (*kumo ker*) in the face of Fano resistance, and accused its constituents of clinging to 'the old system' of rule (*ye derow serat*) when Amharas dominated the state. This, however, was strongly refuted by APP officials. See: 'Comrades-in-arms at loggerheads', Borkena, 1 March 2023. <https://borkena.com/2023/03/01/comrades-in-arms-at-loggerheads/>; 'Amhara regional state swings to speaking truth power', Borkena, 20 February 2023. <https://borkena.com/2023/02/20/amhara-regional-state-swings-to-speaking-truth-power/>.
- 67 The exit of influential Amhara politicians from the PP's Central Committee in 2022, including Gedu Andargachew, former Amhara regional president (until 2019) and Abiy's security advisor during the Tigray war, foreshadowed a leadership crisis in the APP, with the OPP and Abiy Ahmed gaining increased control over the PP.
- 68 Tezera Tazebew, 'Amhara nationalism: The empire strikes back', *African Affairs* 120/479 (2021).
- 69 Mehdi Labzaé, 'Wolqayt, the Promised Land and its limits: Amhara nationalism, land, and bureaucracy in the Ethiopian Civil War (2016–2022)', *Critique internationale* 99/2 (2023): 109–130.
- 70 Tom Gardner, 'Ethiopia's new rift: Amhara vs Abiy', *The Africa Report*, 2 June 2022. www.theafricareport.com/210237/ethiopia-new-rift-amhara-vs-abiy/.
- 71 Despite the Fanos having previously fought with the ENDF against the TDF/TPLF during the war.
- 72 Oromumma refers to an integrative notion of 'being or becoming Oromo' and as a principle of 'bringing together' the dispersed and diverse Oromo people. Critics of Abiy and the OPP have tainted the term to refer to an expansionist agenda by the Oromo elites to dominate Ethiopia politically, militarily, culturally and economically.
- 73 Toni Weis, 'Vanguard Capitalism: Party, State, and Market in the EPRDF's Ethiopia', PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 246–251.

ANDM, Bereket Simon, and Tadesse Kassa of its regional conglomerate Tiret—were sidelined, having been arrested and charged with corruption.⁷⁴ The case of salt in Afar, for example, demonstrates the extent to which Amhara businesses, such as Abebaw Desta’s Star Business Group (SBG), not only assumed control of the previously Tigrayan-dominated salt trade, but effectively monopolized the sector by entering a joint venture with the Turkish-Ethiopia SVS Salt Production Plc and leveraging networks within the higher echelons of the Amhara and Afar wings of the PP.⁷⁵ Similar moves occurred in the edible oil and cement sectors under Amhara investor Worku Aytenew.⁷⁶ With the APP’s position appearing shaky in the wake of the Pretoria CoHA, however, influential Amhara business elites were seen as being favourable to or accused of financing the Fano movement, which increasingly challenged Abiy’s government. Thus, the Amharas’ briefly favourable business position (ca. 2018–2022) was reversed by a series of corruption crackdowns and asset freezes in mid-2023, following which many Amhara investors, including Abebaw Desta and Worku Aytenew, left the country.⁷⁷ This in turn, has given Oromo investors the chance to break into the business domains that Amhara tycoons have been forced to vacate across Ethiopia. In the Afar region, for example, Oromo investors seek to establish a foothold in the salt trade, spurred by the federal closure of operations and investigation into the monopolistic practices by the SVS Salt Production Company. Theoretically, the Afar regional government could now seize the moment to assert its own control over the salt trade, especially after a 2022 federal salt directive granted the region more rights in the sector.⁷⁸ However, central government actors have also pushed back, labelling Afar’s sluggish start to salt distribution across the country as restrictive ‘regional protectionism’ and contributing to illicit ‘contraband trade’.⁷⁹

Amhara’s decline increasingly left the OPP, along with the PM—who has held the presidency

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- 74 Fasika Tadesse, ‘Regional Court Sentences Ex-Tiret Board Chair, Executive’. *Addis Fortune*, 9 May 2020. <https://addisfortune.news/regional-court-sentences-ex-tiret-board-chair-executive/>.
- 75 Dereje and Abubeker, ‘Afar’s Salty Politics’, 24–27.
- 76 Selamawit Mengesha, ‘Worku Aytenew to build \$1 bln worth cement plant’, *The Reporter*, 20 August 2022., www.thereporterethiopia.com/25880/; ‘PM Abiy, High Officials Inaugurate 5.2bln Birr Edible Oil Factors in Debre Markos Town’, Fana B.C., 7 June 2021., www.fanabc.com/english/pm-abiy-high-officials-inaugurate-5-2bln-birr-wa-edible-oil-factory-in-debre-markos-town/.
- 77 Ashenafi Endale, ‘Ethiopia’s latest anti-corruption campaign: genuine or political weed-out?’, *The Reporter*, 10 December 2022. www.thereporterethiopia.com/28411/; Fana Television, ‘በህገ ወጥ መገንዳ የተሰማቹ የጨው ምርት ተያዘ’ (Transl. [‘Illegally stored salt produce seized’]), Fana Television, YouTube, 18 April 2023., www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGnD6gCwRps&ab_channel=FanaTelevision; Hailegebriel Endeshaw, ‘Ethiopian government freezes bank accounts of investors’, *Borkena*, 26 April 2023., <https://borkena.com/2023/04/26/ethiopian-government-freezes-bank-accounts-of-investors/>; Anchor Media, ‘ገለሀብቱ አቶ ወርቁ አይተነው ከሀገር ወጡ’ (Transl. [‘Investor Worku Aytenew left the country’]), Anchor Media, YouTube, 19 September 2023., www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oyx7asTGxk.
- 78 Selamawit Mengesha. Parliament, Industry Ministry call for end on Afar Mining monopoly on salt’. *The Reporter*. 3 February 2023. <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/38526/>.
- 79 Nardos Yoseph, ‘Afar Mining Corp hits back at Industry Ministry’s salt monopoly allegations’. *The Reporter*. 24 February 2024. <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/38836/>.

of the PP since 2022—in a de facto monopoly position over the party’s central and executive committees. Prior to this, the OPP’s power had been relatively constant and cemented around Shimelis Abdissa, who took on the position as President of the Oromia region in early 2019. Five years into Abiy’s premiership, therefore, the OPP has assumed dominance in formal politics on the basis of shifting alliances with other regional wings.⁸⁰ To entrench its newfound dominance over the centre, the OPP has applied a strategy of both coercion and consent to the Oromo populace, which is strongly divided along secessionist, federalist and unitarist political lines.⁸¹ But nationalist forces increasingly hold sway over the OPP, and the party has moved to coopt the *qeerroo* youth, raise a loyal local business elite (see below), and politically neutralize other parties and their political figures—including the Oromo Federalist Council’s Jawaar Mohammed and Bekele Gerba, and the old guard centred around the OLF’s Dawud Ibsa.⁸²

Much of the Oromo opposition does not perceive itself to be at the new political centre or to have been economically empowered by the new OPP elite, despite the OPP’s pledge to reverse past Oromo cultural, political and economic marginalization. The most radical, politically disaffected and economically precarious elements of the *qeerroo* generation have joined the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), which in 2019 broke away from the OLF and subsequently began fighting an armed insurgency in Oromia.⁸³ The OLA claims to be fighting for self-determination, economic sovereignty and socio-cultural rights against the PP government, which it says ‘snatched political power, put forth a nostalgic vision of a unitary state with a centralized power structure’.⁸⁴

Between 2020–2022, the regionally splintered group engaged in attacks on the properties of large-scale investment projects (e.g. on sugar estates and gold mines) and kidnappings of company staff in western and southern Oromia.⁸⁵ In public statements the OLA legitimized these actions as measures against ‘state sanctioned exploitation of natural resources at the cost

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- 80 Abel Tesfaye, ‘As Ethiopian alliances shift, Abiy’s anniversary met by Amhara protests and violence’, *Ethiopia Insight*, 2 April 2023. www.ethiopia-insight.com/2023/04/07/as-ethiopian-alliances-shift-abiy-s-anniversary-met-by-amhara-protests-and-violence/.
- 81 Terje Østebø, ‘Analysis: The Role of the Qeerroo in Future Oromo Politics’, *Addis Standard*, 26 May 2020. <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-the-role-of-the-qeerroo-in-future-oromo-politics/>.
- 82 Terje Østebø and Kjetil Tronvoll, ‘Interpreting contemporary Oromo politics in Ethiopia: an ethnographic approach’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 14/4 (2020).
- 83 Tatek Abebe, ‘Lost futures? Educated youth precarity and protests in the Oromia region, Ethiopia’, *Children’s Geographies* 18/6 (2020). For an analysis of OLA activities during the second half of 2022 and early 2023, see: Damena Abebe, ‘Conflict Trend Analysis: Western Oromia’, Rift Valley Institute, March 2023.
- 84 OLF-OLA High Command, ‘A Brief Political Manifesto: From Armed Struggle to the Prospects for Peace’, 23 January 2023. www.olf-olahq.org/post/announcing-the-oromo-liberation-army-s-brief-political-manifesto.
- 85 Yohannes and Kamski, ‘Sugarcoating “homegrown” development’, 36; Asebe and Damena, ‘Gold Glitters, Grievances Grow’, 17.

of local communities in Oromia.⁸⁶ It further held mining companies as ‘responsible for the displacement of many farming communities’ and called on them to ‘cease their operations’ or would ‘enforce a ban’ in areas under OLA control.⁸⁷ The narrative employed by OLF/OLA High Command on mining is comparable to that of the ONLF concerning mineral exploration (oil/gas) in the Ogaden basin of the SRS and is tied to demands for ‘genuine self-determination’ under the post-2018 political settlement in Ethiopia.⁸⁸

Regarding the economy, three of the four case studies highlight that OPP members routinely occupy key positions in government with leverage over strategic economic sectors and geographic spaces. This has allowed the OPP to cement its control over the economy—enabling favourable access when it comes to Oromo frontier investment opportunities (e.g. the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum under Takele Uma, August 2020–January 2023)—and over the geographic centre of power in the capital (e.g. the Mayor of Addis Ababa under Adenech Abiebe). Moreover, OPP-affiliated conglomerates (e.g. Tumsa), and Oromo businesses and elites, are now in pole position to attempt take control of key industries as state-owned assets and enterprises (e.g. in the gold and sugar sector) come up for privatization under the PP’s new economic liberalization drive.

Local companies, such as GODU General Trading S.C., to which the OPP awarded a stake in the Okote gold mine, located in Guji—previously held by MIDROC—is just one of many cases across Oromia, where dysfunctional investment projects are transferred to new Oromo investors via the conglomerate Tumsa. This is partly an attempt to co-opt youths and create/capture local loyal business elites, at the same time diffusing local tensions, in a frontier area of southern Oromia where the OLA has also been active since 2018.⁸⁹

Similarly, the newly formed Ethio-Sugar Manufacturing Industry S.C. was amongst the first of the local companies bidding to acquire stakes in Ethiopia sugar industry not just in Oromia’s old sugar estates (Wonji/Shoa and Metahara), but also in other regions including SER’s Kuraz sugar estates. Shortly before the government announced in early 2019 that it would privatize—initially six of—its eight sugar estates, Ethio-Sugar was set up. Its predominantly Oromo management and board quickly sought to finance its endeavours by appealing to OPP politicians, business groups and diaspora funds to buy company shares and thus make it a major national player in the Ethiopian sugar sector.⁹⁰ While the chances that it will acquire stakes in the ailing sugar industry remain slim, it is one of many Oromo start-up companies that now feel

86 See: <https://twitter.com/OdaaTarbiiWBO/status/1405226970116505602/photo/1>.

87 See: <https://twitter.com/OdaaTarbiiWBO/status/1393606770539573251/photo/1>.

88 Juweria, ‘Squeezing the Ogaden’, 35–36.

89 Asebe and Damena, ‘Gold Glitters, Grievances Grow’, 15–19.

90 Muluken Yewondwossen, ‘Upstart, local sugar company in privatization push’, *Capital*, 8 July 2019, <https://www.capitalethiopia.com/2019/07/08/upstart-local-sugar-company-in-privatization-push/>.

privileged to make bold bids for private ownership over state-owned assets.⁹¹ Moreover, older Oromo business groups such as Biftu Adugna S.C, established in 1994 but stunted under the EPRDF, are now strategically supported by the OPP and its regional conglomerate, Tumsa.⁹² Biftu Adugna is aggressively seeking to gain control over key economic sectors and strategic resources across Ethiopia. This includes edible oil crop production and processing, previously dominated by Amhara and Tigrayan investors; and the khat export trade across the Oromia-Somali regional borderlands, historically occupied by Somali traders from the SRS.⁹³ It remains to be seen whether Oromo businesses will shore up the salt trade in Afar, which was left in tatters following the freeze of assets by Amhara businesses there at the end of 2023.⁹⁴

AFAR AND SOMALI: CENTRING THE EAST?

The 2018–2019 run-up to the official PP merger had already been complicated by the inclusion of regional chapters with leaders previously propped up by the TPLF, who only grudgingly and belatedly pledged their allegiance to Abiy's new administration. A year prior to the official party merger, the process of centring the peripheral parties had not run as smoothly as had first been anticipated. This was particularly the case in the eastern periphery.⁹⁵ In both Somali and Afar regional states, the TPLF had maintained patron–client relations with loyalist regional presidents: respectively, Haji Seyum and Abdi Mohamoud Omar (Abdi Iley). Both these recalcitrant regional leaders were removed from their positions by Abiy Ahmed's new administration in 2018. From there, however, the trajectories of installing their replacements and incorporating the two regions into the PP's administrative framework diverged.

In the Afar region, which had previously been 'twinned' with Tigray under the EPRDF's Emerging Region Development Programme,⁹⁶ Haji Seyum—along with his regional administration of northern Afar elites—was formally dismissed by Abiy in December 2019. By replacing him with former deputy Awol Arba and so empowering his circle of mainly southern Afar elites, Abiy roped the Afar region's administration into his remit of central power. This was seen as a bold move that could potentially reignite long-simmering animosities between northern and southern Afar groups, who were vying for political power and control of economic resources in a region previously regarded as relatively stable under the auspices of its TPLF patrons. Nevertheless, it provided Abiy Ahmed with a more solid support base in Afar. Added to this,

91 Yohannes and Kamski, 'Sugarcoating "homegrown" development', 31–32.

92 Ashenafi Endale, 'New breed regional conglomerates replicating EFFORT', *The Reporter*, 12 March 2022. www.thereporterethiopia.com/22566/.

93 Mustafe M. Abdi, 'Fixing the Price: The Politics of the Khat Trade Between Ethiopia and Somaliland', Rift Valley Institute, 3 November 2022. <https://riftvalley.net/publication/fixing-the-price-the-politics-of-the-khat-trade-between-ethiopia-and-somaliland/>.

94 Dereje and Abubeker, 'Afar's Salty Politics', 41–42.

95 See: Juwera, 'Squeezing the Ogaden'; Dereje and Abubeker, 'Afar's Salty Politics'.

96 FDRE, 'Emerging Region Development Programme'.

both the new federal administration and Afar elites promised greater control over Afar's natural resources and a bigger share of their benefit streams—particularly from the salt sector, which had previously been controlled by TPLF-associated companies. These promises and the subsequent distribution of salt lands to a cross-section of Afar society raised hopes that Afar's subordinate regional representation and marginalized economic status as a mere affiliate of the EPRDF would finally change for the better as an equal member within the PP.⁹⁷

In SRS—commonly regarded by past Ethiopian central governments and rulers as a 'peripheral problem', 'rebellious' and 'clannish'—Abdi Iley, who had failed to convincingly align himself with Abiy's new administration, was forcibly removed from power.⁹⁸ Having previously pitted Somali regional forces against those of Oromia region during border skirmishes in 2017–2018, and imposed a trade ban on 'Oromo products' (mainly khat) through SRS, Abdi was arrested following a stand-off between the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and Somali regional forces in Jijiga in August 2018.⁹⁹ Abdi Iley was eventually replaced with long-time government critic and human rights worker Mustafe M. Omer. The new regional president was also delegated responsibility for making peace with the ONLF following the Asmara peace accord between the federal government and the former insurgency group, which had fought for greater autonomy from the EPRDF.¹⁰⁰ Mustafe Omer's regional presidency at first appeared to be the 'antithesis' of Abdi Iley's TPLF-sanctioned rule, which had been characterized by violence and human rights atrocities at the hands of regional Liyu police forces, through which Abdi Iley controlled SRS.¹⁰¹ Abdi Iley had thus ensured fief-like federal access for the TPLF/EPRDF, allowing it to cash in on the region's resources, particularly oil and gas in the Ogaden basin and the khat trade via Jijiga.¹⁰²

Less than a year after Mustafe Omer assumed the regional presidency, the federal government introduced a new revenue-sharing formula, according to which oil and gas incomes were to be

97 Dereje and Abubeker, 'Afar's Salty Politics', 21–22.

98 As Juwera Ali notes, the centre historically labelled 'Somalis as "defiant" and "unruly"' and the Somali region 'as a "peripheral problem" when it comes to state integration'; Juwera, 'Squeezing the Ogaden Basin', [13–16. See also: Tobias Haggmann, 'Can the Somali region speak?', *Ethiopia Insight*, 5 March 2021. www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/03/05/can-the-somali-region-speak/; Tobias Haggmann, 'Beyond Clannishness and Colonialism: Understanding Political Disorder in Ethiopia's Somali Region, 1991–2004', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 43/4 (2005).

99 Tobias Haggmann, 'Fast politics, slow justice'; Aden Abdi, 'One year on: moving from war to peace in Ethiopia', Conciliation Resources, 21 October 2019. www.c-r.org/news-and-insight/one-year-moving-war-peace-ethiopia.

100 The federal government's move to 'relegate interactions with the ONLF to President Mustafa's regional government', however, dashed ONLF hopes that the process was a federal priority; see: Haggmann, 'Fast politics, slow justice'.

101 Tobias Haggmann, 'Talking Peace in the Ogaden: The search for an end to conflict in the Somali Regional State in Ethiopia', Rift Valley Institute, 2014.

102 On oil and gas, see: Juwera, 'Squeezing the Ogaden Basin', 19–20. On khat, see: Mustafe M. Abdi, 'Fixing the Price'.

divided equally between the host region and the federal government (previously 70 per cent of revenues went to the federal government and 30 per cent to the region).¹⁰³ Moreover, formerly second-tier Somali politicians were given elevated positions in Abiy's government: Ahmed Shide, for example, became Minister of Finance, tasked with overseeing the economic liberalization laid out in the HGER agenda. The newly empowered Somali political elite felt vindicated. At the first Congress of the PP—held in March 2022 under the banner 'From Challenge to Elevation'—the SPP's Adem Farah was elected as the national party's vice-president. In response, Mustafe Omer tweeted: 'Our "claiming the center" politics is paying off! We are now the mainstream. We are the center!'¹⁰⁴ Having received important cabinet and ministerial positions, the Somali wing of the PP appeared to be a particular winner among former *agar*. Mustafe Omer was briefly even talked-up as a potential kingmaker amid shifting regional alliances over who should occupy the centre of politics and dictate the federal government's ideological position and economic policy orientations.

SPLITTING THE SOUTHERN REGIONS

While Afar and Somali politicians gained a seat at the national table with the formation of the PP, deeply ingrained attitudes among national elites towards peripheral communities—such as pastoralists and ethnic minorities in Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz and South Omo of the former SNNPR (now SER), as well as those in the southern lowlands of Oromia (e.g. Guji and Borana)—are not easily changed. In the south, for example, the lowland territories inhabited by pastoralists hold huge potential for the federal government and investors in terms of land access, resource extraction and surplus revenue streams. The relative distance of SNNPR pastoralist groups from administrative political centres has historically translated into a lack of political representation, despite the multi-ethnic SEPDM having been one of the four core members of the EPRDF.¹⁰⁵ It was partly to counteract this that Abiy elevated former SEPDM member Muferiat Kamil to be the first female Speaker of the House of People's Representatives in April 2018. Shortly thereafter, in October 2018, she was appointed head of the powerful, newly created, federal Ministry of Peace, which initially also had responsibility for Pastoral Affairs.¹⁰⁶ Such ministerial appointments at the centre failed, however, to address the vexed question of how to adequately represent the SNNPR's at least 56 ethnicities—essentially, a southern microcosm

103 FDRE, 'Macro-Fiscal Performance in Ethiopia and Recent Fiscal Policy Developments', Ministry of Finance, October 2021, www.mofed.gov.et/media/filer_public/44/33/44336247-02d5-499b-91f1-3427f8db22ed/final_macro-fiscal_performance.pdf#page=63.

104 Mustafe Omer, X (formerly Twitter), 15 March 2022. https://twitter.com/Mustafe_M_Omer/status/150372599577576966.

105 Sarah Lister, 'The Processes and Dynamics of Pastoralist Representation in Ethiopia', IDS Working Paper 220, Institute of Development Studies, March 2004.

106 FDRE, 'Proclamation No.1097/2018: Definition of Powers and Duties of the Executive Organs of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia', *Federal Negarit Gazette*, 29 November 2018. www.lawethiopia.com/index.php/volume-3/6741-proclamation-no-1097-2018-definition-of-powers-and-duties-of-the-executive-organs-of-the-federal-democratic-republic-of-ethiopia.

of Ethiopia's broader multi-ethnic federalism. Given the PP's new ideology of 'coming together', the southern periphery threw up tensions when it came to upholding constitutional provisions concerning the territorial autonomy of a multitude of peripheral peoples and nationalities.¹⁰⁷ Under the PP, Sidama gained regional statehood through a 2019 referendum, splitting from the SNNPR in June 2020. Up to 11 zones in the SNNPR, representing different ethnicities, also demanded regional status, but to date only a further three regional states have been created: South-West Ethiopia People's Region (SWEPR) in October 2021, and the aforementioned SER and CER in August 2023.¹⁰⁸ In total, there are now 12 regional states and two city states (Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa) in the federation. The southern splits resulted in representatives of newly created regional parties, along with their officials, further populating the ranks of the PP. Whether—as has been suggested—this will lead to more effective representation at the centre of party politics is, however, questionable in light of the fact that the federal government not only pushed through the creation of SER and CER—the latter without a referendum being held at all—but appears increasingly driven by a culture of PP centralism and dominance by larger ethnic groups.¹⁰⁹

In the case of the two most recently created regional states, the government adopted a 'clustering' approach to administrative offices, capitals and presidency seats at zone levels. As such, SER and CER represent a testing ground for a compromise model that falls between the geographic and ethnic-federal models. This has been referred to by SER's new president as the creation of 'multiple centres' in Ethiopia's southernmost region.¹¹⁰ As Yohannes Yitbarek and Benedikt Kamski note in 'Sugarcoating Homegrown Development in the Periphery', which focuses on the Lower Omo valley, the South Omo Zone has also ceased to exist.¹¹¹ Instead, it is being transformed into a 'pastoralist zone' hosting the Hamar, Nyangatom, Maale, Bena-Tsemay and Selamago indigenous agro-pastoralist groups, and separated from the Aari, a largely

107 Ermias Tasfaye and Kulle Kursha, 'Southern comfort on the rocks', *Ethiopia Insight*, 20 November 2019. www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/11/20/southern-comfort-on-the-rocks/.

108 Kjetil Tronvoll, 'The Sidama Quest for Self-Rule: The Referendum on Regional Statehood Under the Ethiopian Federation', *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 29/2 (2021); Chalachew Tadesse, 'Referendum in Ethiopia's Southern Region', Rift Valley Institute, March 2023, <https://riftvalley.net/publication/referendum-in-ethiopias-southern-region/>.

109 Bereket Eshetu Messele, 'Splitting Southern Nations region into four can promote peace', *Ethiopia Insight*, 10 October 2020. www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/10/10/splitting-southern-nations-region-into-four-can-promote-peace/; 'Despite visible red flags, gov't goes ahead with birthing a new region. Time to pause and reevaluate plans!', *Addis Standard*, 18 August 2023. <https://addisstandard.com/news-allocation-of-administrative-offices-between-cities-in-newly-established-cluster-regions-in-southern-ethiopia-raises-discontent/>.

110 'Tilahun Kebede – what he has to say about the new regional state, resentment in the region', Borkena, 1 September 2023. <https://borkena.com/2023/09/01/tilahun-kebede-what-he-has-to-say-about-the-new-regional-state/>.

111 Yohannes and Kamski, 'Sugarcoating "homegrown" development', 15–17.

sedentary group that strongly lobbied for administrative upscaling.¹¹² While there has been discontent elsewhere in SER,¹¹³ officials in the largely pastoralist-inhabited South Omo Zone appeared to welcome the clustering, which endows Jinka town with multiple regional bureaux, including the locally relevant Pastoralist Affairs Bureau.

Whether the approach is practical as a form of governance in the south more generally remains to be seen, considering the fierce distributive struggles that have emerged among the more populous sedentary ethnic groups in the four new southern regional states. Rather than creating federated unity and representative justice, the southern splits have so far intensified competitive conflicts between ethnic neighbours over ‘who gets what’.¹¹⁴ This includes questions over which group receives the regional capital city or presidential seat, and regional, zonal or special *woreda* status. Questions over ‘who gets how much’ are equally tense, with dwindling federal budgets having to be reallocated to a growing number of regions and the share of revenues from resource-rich production sites renegotiated.¹¹⁵ The latter includes taxes from sugar estates that are to be privatized in SER and revenues derived from coffee areas in SWEPR.¹¹⁶ In all these matters, the stakes remain high, given that administrative responsibility over big investment and development projects is yet to be settled.¹¹⁷

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- 112 Asres Adimi Gikay, ‘Commentary: Marginalization, anger and protest in South Omo Zone: What Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Should Know’, *Addis Standard*, 23 August 2018. <https://addisstandard.com/commentary-marginalization-anger-and-protest-in-south-omo-zone-what-prime-minister-abi-yahmed-should-know/>; Yohannes and Kamski, ‘Sugarcoating “homegrown” development’, 17.
- 113 ‘Allocation of administrative offices between cities in newly established cluster regions in Southern Ethiopia raises discontent’, *Addis Standard*, 9 August 2023, <https://addisstandard.com/news-allocation-of-administrative-offices-between-cities-in-newly-established-cluster-regions-in-southern-ethiopia-raises-discontent/>.
- 114 Yohannes and Kamski, ‘Sugarcoating “homegrown” development’, 16.
- 115 Mistir Sew, ‘Central state’s fiscal control’; UNICEF, ‘Highlights of the 2022/23 Federal Government Budget Proclamation’, 2022. www.unicef.org/ethiopia/media/6846/file/Highlights%20of%20federal%20budget%20proclamation%202022-23.pdf.
- 116 Yohannes and Kamski, ‘Sugarcoating “homegrown” development’, 16; 33; Yared Tsegaye, ‘In federal Ethiopia’s diverse South West, it’s time to wake up and smell the coffee’, *Ethiopia Insight*, 23 January 2023. www.ethiopia-insight.com/2023/01/23/in-federal-ethiopias-diverse-south-west-its-time-to-wake-up-and-smell-the-coffee/.
- 117 Administrators in the newly created southern regions have publicly acknowledged the challenges to work out distributive struggles over resources and revenues peacefully. See for example: Addis Walta, ‘We are made to be enemies: Interview with Tilahun Kebedde’, YouTube, 21 August 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=yw5hcwgsrfM.

SHIFTING ECONOMIC POLICY AND MANAGEMENT

Under Abiy and the PP, it was anticipated that economic policy would shift towards a more 'liberal' agenda, building on trends that began towards the end of the EPRDF era. The structural transformation of the economy under the developmental state of the EPRDF—which created a 'surplus' population of landless and unemployed youths—also, however, contributed to the protest movements that ultimately led to the regime's downfall and the emergence of the PP. Despite Abiy riding to power on the back of the youth protests, addressing the underlying grievances that caused them has proven challenging. At the same time, Abiy has sought to break TPLF-connected Tigrayan elites' domination of key economic sectors—a move that ultimately culminated in the Tigray war. Departing from the TPLF/EPRDF's developmental doctrine, the PP has moreover instituted a broad economic reform agenda, including a strong push towards privatization and attempts to expand the previously relatively marginal and neglected extractive mineral sector. The privatization process has, however, been complicated and contradictory, often creating or capturing a new crop of PP-affiliated ethnic business elites and providing no guarantees for productive investment projects, a stable investment environment, or local community safeguarding and benefits.

THE LIBERALIZATION AGENDA

Driven by the PP's policies, new players and practices have emerged to reshape Ethiopia's political economy. Alongside the opening of the country's political space in 2018, the new government launched a programme of market liberalization. This was a departure from the EPRDF's developmental growth model in which the state planned development, controlled key economic assets, and limited the involvement of private actors in certain sectors.¹¹⁸ Following Abiy's inauguration, the announcement that Ethiopia would privatize SOEs and other public assets attracted attention. Given the ideological preference for developmentalism among Ethiopia's intelligentsia, this ostensibly liberal turn was criticized as a 'shock doctrine' by Ethiopian economists and observers.¹¹⁹ On the other hand, it was regarded favourably by international financial institution (IFI) representatives, foreign investors and the national business community. In fact, economic liberalization had already gained momentum under

118 Asrat Seyoum, 'Departure from developmental state', *The Reporter*, 17 November 2018. www.thereporterethiopia.com/6835/.

119 Tebeje Molla, 'Neoliberal Shock Therapy', *Review of African Political Economy*, 25 April 2019. <https://roape.net/2019/06/25/neoliberal-shock-therapy-in-ethiopia/>.

the EPRDF's Growth and Transformation Plan II (2015–2020), which promoted cooperation between the public and private sectors, especially in export-oriented agro-industries.¹²⁰ This policy shift had already been subtly introduced during Hailemariam Desalegn's tenure, which saw a set of strategic sectors selectively opened for privatization within the parameters of the developmental approach.¹²¹ The main impetus for privatization, however, was mounting macroeconomic imbalances and political pressures from 2014/15 onwards.¹²² EPRDF ideologues had long feared political-economic pressures could derail the process of structural change from a mainly agrarian society/economy to a diversified one.¹²³

Coming in the wake of protest uprisings that began in 2014/15 as a response to the controversial Addis Ababa Master Plan—which proposed expanding the capital into Oromo Special Zone—Ethiopia's macroeconomic imbalances became increasingly apparent in the transition years of 2017 and 2018. For over a decade, export expenditures had been five times larger than import earnings, despite government efforts to counterbalance the exchange deficit with export-oriented policies. This was compounded, among other factors, by debts incurred from external loans financing mega development projects (e.g. hydroelectric dams, sugar estates, industrial parks);¹²⁴ non-performing or unrecovered loans provided by Ethiopia's two main banks (DBE and CBE) to often speculative investors;¹²⁵ and ineffective tax collection in the face of illicit financial outflows.¹²⁶ These problems were reflected in the economic figures not least since the 2017/18 fiscal year, when Abiy came to power. Although the negative foreign exchange deficit improved around this period (halving from around -20 in 2014/15 to -10 in 2019/20), total debt (67.5 per cent of GDP in 2017/18) and inflation rates (rising from 8.8 per cent in 2016/17 to 16.6 in 2017/18) began to balloon. At the same time, GDP growth rates dipped below the infamous

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- 120 Netsanet Gebremichael, 'PPPs in Ethiopia: The New Frontier', Discussion Paper No. 28, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era, September 2020; Arkebe Oqubay, *Made in Africa: Industrial Policy in Ethiopia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- 121 Fadil Eloheid, 'Ethiopia: new cabinet, new plan, new direction?', African Arguments, 21 October 2015. <https://africanarguments.org/2015/10/ethiopia-new-cabinet-new-plan-new-direction/>; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 'A Review of Competition Policy in Ethiopia', March 2018; Mulu Gebreyesus, 'The private sector in Ethiopia's transformation', in *The Oxford Handbook of The Ethiopian Economy*, eds. Fantu Cheru, Christopher Cramer and Arkebe Oqubay, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- 122 Mekonnen Manyazewal and Admasu Shiferaw, 'Economic policy and structural transformation in Ethiopia', in *The Oxford Handbook of The Ethiopian Economy*, eds. Fantu Cheru, Christopher Cramer and Arkebe Oqubay, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- 123 Fana Gebresenbet, 'Securitisation of development in Ethiopia: the discourse and politics of developmentalism', *Review of African Political Economy* 41/143 (2014).
- 124 Mekonnen Manyazewal, 'Financing Growth and Development', in *The Oxford Handbook of The Ethiopian Economy*, eds. Fantu Cheru, Christopher Cramer and Arkebe Oqubay, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- 125 Dereje Teklemariam et al., 'Dynamics of the North–South Capital Flows or Rise of South–South Land Deals? Features of Land Acquisition in Ethiopia', *Land Degradation & Development* 28/8 (2017).
- 126 Roberto Kukutschka, 'Illicit financial flows in Ethiopia', Transparency International, 21 September 2018.

‘double-digit’ mark (from 10.1 per cent in 2016/17 to 7.7 in 2018/19). International Monetary Fund (IMF) reports from 2017/18 asserted growth rates were unlikely to improve without economic reforms, and as long as Ethiopia faced debt distress.¹²⁷ Combined, these factors amounted to what can be called a ‘polycrisis’ that put the narrative of Ethiopia’s ‘renaissance’ in jeopardy.¹²⁸ Selling off state assets, privatizing SOEs, and reviving the largely nascent minerals sector by attracting investments appeared to be a way to ease the debt trap, though full liberalization, the new leadership knew, would also invariably reduce the newfound leverage that it would have over key economic sectors vis-à-vis foreign investors and IFIs.¹²⁹ Therefore, coupling economic reforms at the centre with distributive demands would prove to be a delicate balancing act. This is the case both with respect to the assertive quest for greater control over strategic resources in the regions (see Economic Unity), as well as the expectations of a politically charged class of unemployed and dispossessed youths (see Catering to the Youth).

CATERING TO THE YOUTH

Another structural challenge that the EPRDF struggled to contain was urban and youth unemployment. One side-effect of the structural transformation process was that it produced a landless, jobless labour force. Large numbers of this group were leaving rural areas but could not be fully absorbed by Ethiopia’s industry or service sectors.¹³⁰ This was despite the EPRDF’s awareness of the political risks posed by the youth bulge, and the government’s efforts to pursue labour-intensive development and social protection programmes.¹³¹ The large numbers of unemployed, disenfranchised youths fed into the uprisings that ultimately forced a change in leadership and contributed to a nationwide security situation that negatively impacted investor

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- 127 International Monetary Fund (IMF), ‘IMF Staff Completes 2017 Article IV Visit to The Federal Republic of Ethiopia’, 26 September 2017. www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2017/09/26/pr17371-imf-staff-concludes-2017-visit-to-the-federal-republic-of-ethiopia.
- 128 Adam Tooze describes the ‘poly-crisis’ as ‘not just a situation where you face multiple crises, [but] ... where the whole is even more dangerous than the sum of the parts’: Adam Tooze, ‘Chartbook #130 Defining polycrisis - from crisis pictures to the crisis matrix’, Chartbook, 24 June 2022. <https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-130-defining-polycrisis>.
- 129 ‘Abiy Ahmed Ali to pay off debts of Meles and Hailemariam’, *Africa Intelligence*, 23 August 2018. <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2019/08/23/abiy-ahmed-ali-to-pay-offdebts-of-meles-and-hailemariam,108369293-art>; ‘The currency crisis finds its way into the new PM’s in tray’, *Africa Intelligence*, 13 April 2018. <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2018/04/13/the-currency-crisis-finds-its-way-into-the-new-pm-s-in-tray,108306942-bre>.
- 130 Pedro Martin, ‘Structural Change in Ethiopia: An Employment Perspective’, Policy Research Working Paper 6749, The World Bank, 2014. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/7add6606-6f8f-5640-b9d0-b1e85be235c9/content>; Fantu Cheru, ‘Structural Transformation in Ethiopia: The Urban Dimension’, UN-HABITAT, 2014.
- 131 Jonah Wedekind and Davide Chinigò, ‘Contract and Control: Agrarian labour mobilisation and resistance under large-scale land investments for biofuel crop production in Ethiopia’, *Annales d’Éthiopie* 33 (2020); Asnake Kefale, Lovise Aalen and Mohammed Dejen, ‘Jobs for Youth in Fragile Transitions: Ethiopia’s Youth Revolving Fund’, CMI Report No. 31, Chr. Michelsen Institute, May 2023. <https://open.cmi.no/cmi-xmloi/handle/11250/3067831>.

confidence and FDI flows into Ethiopia.¹³² Abiy, having become PM on the back of the protest wave, was immediately confronted with these inherited pressures and expectations. At the same time, he asked for time ‘to take organized action’ in support of their interests.¹³³ Thus, prior to the unveiling of the new government’s much-anticipated privatization agenda, officials stressed the need to provide jobs and equal opportunities.¹³⁴ The first two years of Abiy’s tenure arguably marked a populist phase, during which the OPDO—briefly renamed the Oromia Democratic Party (ODP) in September 2018—catered to Oromo youths and local elites, pledging transfers of previously dysfunctional investment farms and mining concessions (e.g. coal, gold) across Oromia to organized youth groups.

Similar processes took place in Afar region, where—under the rallying cry of ‘Afar’s salt to Afar people’—salt lands and mining concessions were to be redistributed to a cross-section of Afar society, including the *duko hina* youth movement.¹³⁵ In both the case of gold mining in southern Oromia and the salt trade in Afar, well organized youth group members have been frustrated in their attempts to gain a fair share from their respective extractive sectors and decry the lack of transparency around resource governance at the regional level. Nevertheless, some ‘former *duko hina* members have moved beyond protest to institution building by escalating the issue of Afdera’s salt to the federal level.’¹³⁶ They have sought to point out the economic and social drawbacks of salt monopolization in Afar, including salt hoarding, which is inflating local market prices and draining foreign currency reserves as salt must be imported; and the closure of iodization facilities – contributing towards de-industrialization in the region, risking a public health crisis if iodine deficiency rises. Through a new producers’ association, these youths sought to mount pressure on Awol Arba’s regional government to make good on its initial promise to distribute salt concessions among Afar people, rather than maintain patron-client relationships (*mantelityaw salt naw*) with salt companies that are operated by businessmen with ties to federal political power.¹³⁷

In the SRS, which attained a better share of extractive royalties with the 2019 revenue-sharing

132 Global Risk Insights, ‘Under the Radar: Foreign investors under attack in Ethiopia’, October 2016. <https://globalriskinsights.com/2016/10/radar-foreign-investors-attack-ethiopia/>.

133 Chris Stein, ‘Ethiopia PM asks protesters for patience as he seeks change’, AFP News, 11 April 2018. <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/ethiopia-pm-asks-protesters-patience-seeks-change-155241803.html>.

134 René Lefort, ‘Twofold crisis in Ethiopia: the elites and the street’, openDemocracy, 12 April 2018. www.opendemocracy.net/en/twofold-crisis-in-ethiopia-elites-and-street/.

135 *Duko-Hina*, meaning ‘defy subjugation’ in Afar language, is an Afar youth movement that emerged in the 2010s and centred its campaigning around Afar exclusion from the salt sector. See: Dereje and Abubeker, ‘Afar’s Salty Politics’, 15, 20–28.

136 Dereje and Abubeker, ‘Afar’s Salty Politics’, 40

137 Dereje and Abubeker, ‘Afar’s Salty Politics’, 36–40

bill,¹³⁸ the regional government nevertheless appears to have only limited leverage vis-à-vis the federal government in governing access to the oil and gas resources found in the Ogaden basin. While the federal government—via the MoMP—manages the licensing agreements with foreign oil and gas exploration companies, the SRS government appears to have been ‘circumvented rather than co-opted by the central government in the governance of the oil and gas sector’.¹³⁹ This raises fears that the EPRDF’s patronage system in the SRS has simply been reproduced under the PP. Given the continued lack of transparency in the oil and gas sector, which remains stuck in the exploratory phase, public concern among SRS civil society, and demands for scrutiny in the Ogaden basin, have been on the rise. While it is not anti-development per se, the ONLF has long maintained a critical stance on oil/gas exploration and has publicly reiterated this during the political transition in 2018, emphasizing the need for reparatory justice for past human rights atrocities and human and environmental health hazards, and calling for genuine regional self-administration of resources. However, a generational divide has become discernible between youth activists and the old guard of the ONLF. Juweria Ali points out in the report *Squeezing the ‘Ogaden Basin’*:

The younger generation’s call to ensure the benefits of these currently underutilized resources are equitably distributed represents a significant departure from traditional discourses surrounding oil and gas, which until recently were dominated by the ONLF’s demands for ‘no extraction’. ... Regardless of which perspective one holds—increased rights around strategic resources or a complete cessation of resource extraction—such public engagement regarding oil and gas issues illustrates how natural resources have become integral to the cultural imagination and collective worldview of the Somali populace. Rather than acting as a unifying material element, however, the subject of natural resources has become deeply divisive in SRS.¹⁴⁰

CENTRALIZING ECONOMIC CONTROL

Perhaps the most vexing question for Abiy was how to ‘disentangle key economic sectors, policies and assets from ruling party structures’ and place them within the federal government’s domain.¹⁴¹ In other words, to redistribute or privatize key economic sectors, the federal government first needed to gain control over them. Standing in the way of this was the TPLF and its affiliate network of conglomerates/businesses, as well as the proxy parties and rulers in

138 According to which revenues are divided ‘equally’ between the federal government and the resource-hosting regional state. However, of the federal government’s 50 per cent share, 25 per cent is to be distributed to other regions, while 10 per cent of the regional state’s share is to be allocated to the specific area where the resource is found. See: Juweria Ali, ‘Squeezing the Ogaden Basin’, 27–28.

139 Juweria Ali, ‘Squeezing the Ogaden Basin’, 42.

140 Juweria Ali, ‘Squeezing the Ogaden Basin’, 36–41.

141 Jos Meester, Guido Lanfranchi and Tefera Negash Gebregziabher, ‘A clash of nationalisms and the remaking of the Ethiopian State: The political economy of Ethiopia’s transition’, Clingendael, April 2022, www.clingendael.org/pub/2022/the-remaking-of-the-ethiopian-state/.

other regions who maintained indirect hegemony over key economic sectors, resources and assets (for example, in SRS and Afar).¹⁴² The operation to dissolve the TPLF's control over parts of the economy would see the new federal government applying extra-economic force to wrest control from Tigrayan party officials and businesses elites in the two years before the Tigray war commenced.¹⁴³

Over the course of 2018 and 2019, a crackdown on the EPRDF-linked military-industrial complex Metals and Engineering Cooperation (MeTEC) saw its Tigrayan leadership arrested on corruption charges,¹⁴⁴ as well as several major public construction contracts rescinded—purportedly due to delays in mega projects such as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation's sugar factories.¹⁴⁵ Alongside a move to purge Tigrayan officials from the military,¹⁴⁶ the PMO ordered MeTEC be split up and restructured, paving the way for a new reverse-engineered PP version of it.¹⁴⁷ In the run-up to the war between the central government and the TPLF in November 2020, the Endowment Fund for Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT)—Tigray's regional conglomerate—and its subsidiaries had their accounts frozen, contracts cancelled and assets stripped, allowing their businesses to be redistributed to prospective bidders across Ethiopia.¹⁴⁸ This chain of events also played out across the salt, gold and sugar sectors, with regional conglomerates or private companies from other regional states scrambling for control over the newly vacated assets. For example, when the EPRDF's reign came to an end, four companies dominated Afdera's salt business, the largest among them Ezana Development Mining Plc, a subsidiary of EFFORT, lost their concessions as salt lands were redistributed by the new regional government with support from Abiy. As Dereje and Abubeker note in the report on the salt sector:

142 See, respectively: Juweria, 'Squeezing the Ogaden Basin', 19–22; Dereje and Abubeker, 'Afar's Salty Politics', 18–20.

143 Nebiyu Sihul Mikael, 'Is Tigray really a drop in the bucket for Abiy's administration?', *Ethiopia Insight*, 17 January 2019. www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/01/17/is-tigray-really-a-drop-in-the-bucket-for-abiy-administration/; 'Rounding Up the Suspects', *Africa Confidential*, 28 November 2018, www.africa-confidential.com/article-preview/id/12491/Rounding_up_the_suspects.

144 'Analysis: Inside Ethiopia's trial of grand corruption. Who is accused of what?', *Addis Standard*, 11 December 2018, <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-inside-ethiopias-trial-of-grand-corruption-who-is-accused-of-what/>.

145 Yohannes and Kamski, 'Sugarcoating "homegrown" development', 27–34.

146 'Push-ups and makeovers', *Africa Confidential*, 26 October 2018. www.africa-confidential.com/article-preview/id/12463/Push-ups_and_makeovers.

147 'MeTEC to start afresh with new name', *Addis Fortune*, October 2018. <https://addisfortune.net/articles/metec-to-start-afresh-with-new-name/>. Despite MeTEC initially coming under the axe of the Ministry of Public Enterprises and thus primed for privatization, in 2023 Abiy revealed that MeTEC would be revamped in similar format under a different name; see: Sissay Sahlu, 'PM unveils vision to see construction giant born from GERD', *The Reporter*, 16 September 2023. www.thereporterethiopia.com/36593/?feed_id=515&_unique_id=650888365a71f.

148 'Central bank suspends accounts opened in Tigray state', *Addis Fortune*, 1 September 2023. <https://addisfortune.news/central-bank-suspends-accounts-opened-in-tigray-state/>.

There was an added political incentive for taking this action given that Afdera's salt sector was dominated by Tigrayan business and political elites. This placed it squarely within the broader power struggle between PM Abiy and the TPLF.¹⁴⁹

Having made Tigray dependent on federal revenues, the central government withheld the 2020 budget grant to Tigray region—a fiscal move that provoked confrontations between the two sides.¹⁵⁰ The situation was compounded by the central government's introduction of new Birr-currency banknotes in September 2020, to 'curb financing of illegal activities, corruption and contraband', as Abiy Ahmed tweeted.¹⁵¹ This likely further choked the hoarded cash reserves held by the TPLF and its affiliated businesses.¹⁵² With the Tigray region and affiliated business elites largely marginalized, exiled or confined to the war-torn and besieged Tigray region, the central government was now 'free' to reconfigure the national economy's federal and regional hierarchies, primarily through fiscal policy reforms and redistributing strategic assets, resources and businesses.¹⁵³

ECONOMIC UNITY

The early populist phase of Abiy's tenure, which involved catering to the youth and wresting control of much of the economy from Tigrayan elites, foreshadowed the raft of economic reforms introduced under his notion of *medemer*, as well as the underlying 'prosperity theology' that infused the ruling party formation¹⁵⁴—that is, to 'unify the economy by ending exclusionary

149 Dereje and Abubeker, 'Afar's Salty Politics', 21.

150 'Tigray Region Accuses Federal Government of Freezing World Bank's Safetynet Budget', Ezega News, 24 October 2020. www.ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/8197/Tigray-Region-Accuses-Federal-Government-of-Freezing-World-Bank-s-Safetynet-Budget; 'ትግራይ: የፌዴራሽን ምክር ቤት ውሳኔ 'ክልሉን ከፌዴራሽን አንዲወጣ የሚገባ ነው: የትግራይ ምክትል ፕሬዝዳንት' ['Tigray: The decision of the Federation Council "will push the region to leave the federation": Vice President of Tigray'], BBC News, 8 October 2020, www.bbc.com/amharic/news-54437957?at_medium=custom7&at_custom3=BBC+News+Amharic&at_custom4=92C8D99C-098D-11EB-A965-DB3D16F31EAE&at_custom1=%5Bpost+type%5D&at_custom2=facebook_page&at_campaign=64&fbclid=IwAR1jShSseCxZ6nzWmugfbUsFCNZEbVWUusW8TlzRiosUsmYXwMe4C_xWK5M-.

151 Abiy Ahmed, 'X' (formerly Twitter), 14 September 2020. <https://twitter.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1305392810204561408>.

152 Wossenseged Assefa, 'Ethiopia's Demonetization – Possible Causes and Effects', *The Ethiopian Herald*, 24 September 2020. <https://allafrica.com/stories/202009240666.html>. In fact, Tigray was cut off from circulating the new banknotes, as local banks were closed during the war, meaning the old banknotes remained in circulation locally during the war.

153 Jos Meester and Guido Lanfranchi, 'The Struggle Over Political Finance in Ethiopia's Transition', *Clingendael Magazine*, 3 February 2021. www.clingendael.org/publication/struggle-over-political-finance-ethiopias-transition.

154 Jörg Hausteijn and Emma Tormalin, 'Religion, Populism, and the Politics of the Sustainable Development Goals', *Social Policy and Society* 20/2 (2021).

ethnic-party control over specific sectors and policies'.¹⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the PP's purported wish to 'build a single socio-economic society and to ensure fair and inclusive economic development and equal benefit'¹⁵⁶ cloaked the fact that the protests that brought Abiy to power were also 'anti-privatization protests'. Protestors had not only demanded equal benefits but directly targeted private investment enterprises. While their demands were pacified with promises of inclusive development, the protests were effectively inverted by the PP leadership as 'the primary vehicle for an unprecedented program of economic liberalization'.¹⁵⁷

Faced with growth slowdown, currency inflation, a foreign exchange deficit and debt distress, Abiy's professionalized cabinet of bank directors and finance ministers were forced to heed the IMF's call to 'strike the appropriate balance between boosting private sector participation and minimizing fiscal risks' and 'improve the business climate, promote financial inclusion, and improve governance'.¹⁵⁸ Accordingly, the government announced deep economic reforms, including an unprecedented privatization programme that would see the partial sale of various SOEs, including the crown jewel aviation (Ethiopian Airlines) and telecom (Ethio Telecom) industries, along with the national energy grid (Ethiopia Electric Utility) and sugar industries (Ethiopian Sugar Corporation).¹⁵⁹ The three-year HGER agenda was finally unveiled by Abiy in September 2019, shortly before the release of his book *Medemer* the following month and the formation of the PP in December—all of which exhibited the ideological orientation of his tenure. On paper, the HGER agenda represented an economically liberal turning away from the 'dead ends' of the free-market approach to development identified by Meles Zenawi. Instead, Abiy embraced the 'new horizons' offered by the private sector.¹⁶⁰ In this vein, he proclaimed, 'my model is capitalism'.¹⁶¹

The HGER agenda concretized the government's privatization plans and programme, the governance of which was to be overseen by an advisory committee of public professionals.

155 Jos Meester, Lanfranchi and Tefera, 'A clash of nationalisms'.

156 'Prosperity Party By-laws [Unofficial translation]', The Prosperity Party, *Ethiopia Insight*, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/PP-by-laws-2.pdf>.

157 Eleni Zeleke calls this a 'passive revolution'—a counter-revolutionary pacification of the protesters' demands by the new power-holders empowered by them; see: Eleni Zeleke, *Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964–2016*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019.

158 IMF, 'IMF Country Report No. 18/18, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia', 24 January 2018. www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/CR/2018/cr1818.ashx.

159 Matina Stevis-Gridneff, 'Ethiopia Opens Door to the World With Unprecedented Privatization Plan', *Wall Street Journal*, 6 June 2018. www.wsj.com/articles/ethiopia-opens-door-to-the-world-with-unprecedented-privatization-plan-1528275922.

160 William Davison, 'From Meles' "Dead End" to Abiy's "New Horizon"', *Ethiopia Insight*, 10 June 2019. www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/06/10/from-meles-dead-end-to-abiy-s-new-horizon/.

161 Lionel Barber and David Pilling, 'My model is capitalism': Ethiopia's prime minister plans telecom privatisation, *Financial Times*, 24 February 2019. www.ft.com/content/433dfa88-36d0-11e9-bb0c-42459962a812.

The agenda's immediate aim was to reduce the public sector deficit and cut the debt burden, rebranding Ethiopia as an attractive destination for much-needed FDI. Furthermore, it acknowledged the need to provide employment opportunities across all sectors. The reforms were thus branded as multi-sectoral, involving a shift away from the past agrarian bias towards a more diversified approach (agriculture, industry, services). This new approach included a renewed emphasis on the underdeveloped extractive mining sector.¹⁶² Critics saw the HGER agenda as offering anything but 'homegrown' solutions, claiming the proposed economic policies failed to address Ethiopia's particular structural problems and social needs. Instead, the HGER agenda mainly applied IFI prescriptions focused on cost-saving measures aimed at driving down debt; governance and reducing state bureaucracy; advocacy for private market access and competition; and the sale of public assets to investors.¹⁶³

Presenting the HGER agenda to the IMF in a letter of intent, Ethiopia's new finance minister and central bank director wrote that its aim was 'promoting equity across regions to narrow spatial inequality', and that it would 'shift the centre-periphery approach, by bringing lowland areas at the centre of the economic transformation'.¹⁶⁴ This was in tune with the PP's proclaimed 'economic unity'—an extension of Abiy's notion of *medemer*. Other than a renewed emphasis on improving the livelihoods of pastoral and agro-pastoral communities, and privatizing dysfunctional state-owned development projects such as the Ethiopia Sugar Industry Group's KSDP in the Lower Omo valley, HGER remains vague on how the peripheral regions and their lowland areas would come to form a more prominent part of PP's economic agenda.¹⁶⁵ It is also yet to outline exactly how the 'perpetual' exploration of oil/gas will finally move to actual extraction and export activities in the Ogaden basin. 'Although the PP's 2020 Homegrown Economic Reform agenda (HGER) restates the importance of developing the mining sector for the economy and acknowledges that the sector's institutional capacities need to be enhanced, it falls short of providing the details of how this might be achieved.'¹⁶⁶ In both cases, furthermore, the question of how the kick-starting of both sectors will safeguard and benefit local communities in the future is also not addressed by the government. HGER remained vague on how exactly the peripheral regions and their lowland areas would come to form a more prominent part of PP's economic agenda.

162 FDRE, 'A Homegrown Economic Reform Agenda: A Pathway to Prosperity', Ministry of Finance, March 2020, www.mofed.gov.et/media/filer_public/38/78/3878265a-1565-4be4-8ac9-dee9ea1f4f1a/a_homegrown_economic_reform_agenda-a_pathway_to_prosperity_-_public_version_-_march_2020-.pdf.

163 Alemayehu Geda, 'Ethiopia's "Homegrown" Reform: If the diagnosis is not right, it may end up a Wish List', September 2019. www.researchgate.net/publication/335972270_Critique_of_Ethiopia's_PM_Abiy's_new_Homegrown_Policy_2019.

164 FDRE, 'Letter of Intent', Ministry of Finance and National Bank of Ethiopia, 11 December 2019.

165 See Yohannes and Kamski, 'Sugarcoating "homegrown" development', 29–34.

166 Juweria Ali, 'Squeezing the Ogaden Basin', 28.

EXPANDING EXTRACTIVISM

The extractive sector in particular has been identified as a priority sector, with the government announcing its intention to ramp up mineral resource extraction. Kick-starting previously dysfunctional state-owned agro-industries through privatization also remains key. The HGER agenda aimed to raise the national export revenue share from 6.9 per cent to 11.3 per cent within ten years.¹⁶⁷ While acknowledging the growth rates and poverty reduction achieved during the previous government's Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) I (2010–15) and GTP II (2015–20) phases, the PP's plan identifies the main 'bottlenecks' hindering structural transformation of the economy. One of the main points raised is the previous bias towards the agrarian sector, which neglected the mining sector in favour of public investments in smallholder productivity programmes (ADLI in the late 1990s and early 2000s). This was later complemented by FDI in land for large-scale agricultural production (ca. 2007/08–2015). Thus, according to the HGER agenda, attempts to tap into the nation's 'vast and diverse mineral resources' were 'traditionally limited'.¹⁶⁸ As a compendium document to the HGER agenda asserts, the mining sector 'in its own right' holds 'unexploited growth potentials' and will not only 'raise foreign exchange revenue' but 'induce structural change', potentially making Ethiopia 'an African beacon of prosperity'.¹⁶⁹ Moreover, the PP's 'Ten Years Development Plan' similarly puts the extractive sector on an equal footing with the 'productive sectors' of agriculture and manufacturing.¹⁷⁰ According to the most recent Ethiopian Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) Report, and relying on National Bank of Ethiopia (NBE) data, in the first fiscal year of the political transition (2018/19), the extractive sector contributed a mere 0.1 per cent to Ethiopia's overall GDP and 1.05 per cent to export earnings (USD 27.9 million).¹⁷¹ Meanwhile, extractive revenues collected by the Ethiopian government (taxes, royalties, etc.) accounted for just 0.59 per cent of the national total.¹⁷² In terms of results, a preliminary draft of the HGER 2.0 agenda

167 Muluken Yewondwossen, 'The ten year development plan breakdown', Capital, 21 December 2020. www.capitalethiopia.com/2020/12/21/the-ten-year-development-plan-breakdown/.

168 FDRE, 'A Homegrown Economic Reform'.

169 FDRE, 'Ethiopia 2030: The Pathway to Prosperity, Ten Years Perspective Development Plan (2021–2030)', Planning and Development Commission, Ministry of Finance, December 2020, https://eubfe.eu/images/10_year_plan_english_final.pdf.

170 FDRE, 'Ten Years Development Plan'. The HGER agenda lists the following key reform measures for the mining sector: formalizing and supporting small-scale, artisanal mining and enhancing local community engagement; promoting large-scale mining through investments; inhibiting the contraband trade of extracted resources; reforming the policies and institutional capacities for the governance of the mining sector; and strengthening geological information accessibility.

171 Asebe and Damena, 'Gold Glitters, Grievances Grow', 8–9. FDRE, 'EITI Final Report for year ended 7 July 2019', Ethiopian Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, January 2021. Between FYs 2015/16 and 2017/18, the contribution of gold for export declined from 7 per cent to 4 per cent, and in FY 2018/19 stood at 1 per cent, largely due to the suspension of MIDROC Gold Mine and the consequent reliance solely on artisanal and small-scale miners. Salt contributed to 1 per cent of total national revenues, oil and gas 3 per cent, and gold 15 per cent in FY 2018/19.

172 FDRE, 'EITI Final Report'.

claims mining sector exports underwent a four-fold increase in the financial year 2018/2019.¹⁷³

In his first press conference as PM, Abiy was asked about the future role of the mining sector. The question was posed in reference to Ethiopia's only commercial gold mine, MIDROC Laga Dambi Gold Mine in Oromia's Guji zone, which the new government—in response to local protests against ecological injustices—shut down in May 2018 prior to undergoing an impact assessment.¹⁷⁴ Abiy responded:

The mining sector is one of the resources that we aim to utilize. We have to use it to solve the unemployment problem and to generate income as well. The approach we have been following in the mining sector [under EPRDF] was not right. The local communities were not beneficiaries from the sector ... So we have to get the investors and the local community to work together on the basis of mutual benefit.¹⁷⁵

Accordingly, the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum (MoMP) was tasked with elevating Ethiopia's mining industry. The MoMP rose to prominence under the tenure of OPP member Takele Uma (August 2020– January 2023), who was surprisingly dismissed 'with honours' and replaced by the less charismatic, more technocratic Habtamu Tegegne in January 2023.¹⁷⁶ As a rising OPDO cadre in charge of Oromia's Land Administration Bureau, Takele Uma had sided with the Oromo contestation of the Addis Ababa Master Plan in 2017.¹⁷⁷ He was thus primed to assume the role of acting Mayor of Addis Ababa in Abiy's initial cabinet (July 2018–August 2020), before being awarded the role of Minister of Mines. In criticizing the EPRDF's development plans, Takele

173 FDRE, 'Home Grown Economic Reforms 2.0: Next Phase of Reforms to Unlock New Growth Potential', Unpublished draft, Ministry of Finance, November 2022.

174 Asebe and Damena, 'Gold Glitters, Grievances Grow', 13–15.

175 Negash Haile, 'Abiy Ahmed in his words. Full translation of first press conference', Ethiopia Insight, 7 September 2018. www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/09/07/abiy-ahmed-in-his-words-full-translation-of-first-press-conference.

176 It is unclear why Takele Uma was dismissed from his position, having overseen an overhaul of the MoMP. While some point to a 59 per cent drop in gold export rates in 2022, he was perceived as a popular rival to Abiy among the Oromo wing in the PP. Generally, frequent ministerial and cabinet position reshuffles have helped ensure Abiy's strong position by inhibiting the rise of popular internal rivals; see: Reqiq Insights, 'Decoding the Cabinet'. The move to appoint Habtamu Tegegne was questioned by parliamentarians given his relative lack of experience in the sector; see: Emmanuel Jorge, 'Parliamentarians grill chief whip over ministerial confirmations', *Addis Fortune*, 28 January 2023. <https://addisfortune.news/parliamentarians-grill-chief-whip-over-ministerial-confirmations/>. The move in early 2023 may also be regarded as an attempt to appease the Amhara PP, granting them a prominent position at a time when some Amhara investors, who had supported the Fano movement, and whose business privileges across Ethiopia (e.g. in the cement and salt industries) were increasingly revoked since 2022.

177 Following the generational replacement policy (*metekakat*) introduced by the EPRDF in 2008, the OPDO, especially under veteran Oromo politician Abadulla Gemeda, produced a new generation of cadres. 'Team Lemma', which included Lemma Megersa, Abiy Ahmed and Takele Uma, rose through the ranks of the EPRDF and gained popularity among the Oromo constituency between 2015 and 2018.

underlined the MoMP's newfound importance:

The past government concentrated on reforming and developing agriculture by overlooking the mining industry's ability to grow and eventually provide capital for agriculture. It did not develop an economically functioning mining sector prior to the recent economic and political reform. Before the political reform, there was a flawed perception of the mining sector. It was seen as a major source of conflict and instability. However, after the reform, we have realized its growth potential and consider it as a crucial source of capital.¹⁷⁸

In line with the PP's ideology, Takele emphasized that mining would contribute to national unity rather than conflict: 'Our main focus should be on how we can effectively utilize mineral resources and redistribute its revenue to our citizens. This on its own is national unity from an economic perspective. People expect conflicts because we did not have the right policies and regulations.'¹⁷⁹

PRIVATIZATION PROBLEMS

The limited extent to which the PP facilitated the declared privatization drive in the peripheries—where demands for regional control over and local benefits from resource governance had been voiced—only became evident as the HGER agenda's three-year period progressed. As all the case studies produced by this research indicate, the purported scale of the market-led reforms is not matched by the extent to which state-controlled economic sectors, assets and enterprises have actually been put up for privatization. In practice, the economic liberalization programme set out in the HGER agenda has proven to be ambivalent and multifaceted in terms of government strategy, and protracted when it comes to implementation.¹⁸⁰ From an international community-facing perspective, the new policy narrative serves to appease IFIs such as the World Bank and IMF, while attracting a new wave of FDI, not least in the nascent mining sector. Internally, however, a 'new breed' of regional party-affiliated conglomerates regulates the privatization drive, playing a key role in facilitating access to strategic resources and assets to create a new class of party-loyal ethnic businesses and capture locally influential elites,¹⁸¹ as well as co-opt organized youth groups through granting them concessions. Whether this newly privileged spectrum of economic actors can turn the strategically redistributed assets (land agreements, investment licences, mining concessions, etc.) to productive use, is another question. As all case studies show, moving from exploration to extraction or privatization to production continues to be a major hurdle in Ethiopia.

178 'Ethiopia's Mineral Resources and Policy: Interview with Takele Uma' [translated from Amharic], Fana B.C., 7 September 2022. www.fanabc.com/archives/154225.

179 'Ethiopia's Mineral Resources and Policy', Fana B.C.

180 Christina Collins, 'The Meaning and Uses of Privatization: The Case of the Ethiopian Developmental State', *Africa* 92/4 (2022).

181 Ashenafi Endale, 'New breed regional conglomerates'.

The case of Poly-GCL, detailed by Juweria Ali in ‘Squeezing the Ogaden Basin’, is a high-profile example of an unproductive investment corporation having its contract cancelled.¹⁸² According to Takele Uma, Poly-GCL is ‘not a company which has enough capital, technology and knowledge of the sector, that’s why we have ... terminated its licence’.¹⁸³ The precise reasons behind the cancellation are, however, likely to extend beyond a lack of oil/gas extraction, with strategic geopolitical and international diplomatic relations also playing a role.¹⁸⁴ It is worth noting that the Ethiopian government’s regulatory emphasis on ensuring investors contribute to productivity and act in accordance with their land rent agreements or investment licences is by no means a new trend, but rather a ‘developmental’ legacy. A crackdown on ‘tardy’ private investors commenced under the EPRDF around 2014, when a moratorium on large-scale agricultural land investments singled out unproductive corporations for licence cancellation.¹⁸⁵ This was preceded by divisive government rhetoric around weeding out ‘anti-developmental’ (*lemat madenakef*) actors and supporting ‘developmental investors’ (*lematawi balehabt*) in line with the ‘strategy of attempting to pick the winners of the private sector development race’.¹⁸⁶

Shortly before the power transition, as deputy president of Oromia region, Abiy Ahmed applied the same logic to private investors in the mining sector, vowing to ‘distinguish the genuine investors from the professing ones’ and moralizing that ‘it is proper that they return the lands and give the chance [to] those who are capable enough to use the land’.¹⁸⁷ At the same time, Oromia region issued a proclamation aimed at easing the path to nationalizing and seizing mining properties, and potentially reallocating them to local youths. Shortly thereafter, Oromia’s Regional Investment and Land Management Bureau revoked the licences of hundreds of investors that had failed to commence their projects in time. As Asebe and Damena’s case study of gold in Guji shows, MIDROC’s Lega Dembi gold mine would be one of the first high-profile mining projects to be temporarily suspended.¹⁸⁸ The OPDO leadership was at that point catering to

182 Juweria, ‘Squeezing the Ogaden Basin’, 25–27.

183 ‘Interview: Mining for Ethiopia’s success’, *Capital*, 14 January 2023. www.capitalethiopia.com/2023/01/14/mining-for-ethiopias-success/.

184 Muluken Yewondwossen, ‘Mines Ministry debunks “natural gas field transfer to US firms” as false rumors’, *Capital*, 23 January 2023. www.capitalethiopia.com/2023/01/23/mines-ministry-debunks-natural-gas-field-transfer-to-us-firms-as-false-rumors/.

185 Jonah Wedekind, ‘Anatomy of a White Elephant: Investment Failure and Land Conflicts on Ethiopia’s Oromia–Somali Frontier’, in *Lands of the Future: Anthropological Perspectives on Pastoralism, Land Deals and Tropes of Modernity in Eastern Africa*, edited by Echi Christina Gabbert, et al., 309–3017, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2021.

186 Fana, ‘Securitisisation of Development’; Renee Lefort, ‘The Ethiopian Economy: The Developmental State vs. the Free Market’, in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*, eds. Gerard Prunier and É. Ficquet, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

187 Wakuma Kudama, ‘Exciting Opportunity for Investors in Oromia State’, *The Ethiopian Herald*, 3 May 2017. <https://allafrica.com/stories/201705030591.html>; Abebech Terefe, ‘Ethiopia’s Oromia State scares away investors, forcefully nationalise mines’, *Secret Reporters*, 14 March 2017. <https://secretreporter.com/ethiopias-oromia-state-scares-away-investors-forcefully-nationalise-mines/>.

188 Asebe and Damena, ‘Gold Glitters’, 13–15.

Oromo *qeerroo* youths who had taken to the streets, often attacking investor properties in order to protest against economic injustices, including land appropriation and underemployment. OPDO's new generation of leaders thus added a fresh slant to the productivist ethic, which later became PP policy under the rubric of community or youth engagement. The case study of gold in Guji suggests that both trends—on one hand attracting new gold mining investors, including concessions to local elites and youths, and, on the other, ejecting unproductive ones—are true across the mining sector more broadly.¹⁸⁹

Regional states, located at the geographical margins of Ethiopia's national territory, as well as administrators (including customary elders) situated at lower levels of government, have often been politically marginalized when it comes to the centralized planning processes underlying such investments and interventions. This remains the case under the current PP-led government. The late 2021 creation of the federal Ministry of Lowlands and Irrigation illustrates the continuity of state-led development, which aims to 'modernize' the peripheries through centrally planned interventions—particularly irrigated agriculture.¹⁹⁰ A distrust of pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities has long been part of the Ethiopian state's vision of and policies towards its peripheral lowlands. Relatedly, the federal government's 2020 Pastoral Development Strategy and Policy came under the jurisdiction of the newly established Ministry of Peace.¹⁹¹ This institutional change highlights the conflict potential central government continues to perceive among (agro-)pastoral ethnic groups, and the consequent need to pacify the peripheries they inhabit in order to improve the investment climate there.¹⁹² Such policies, however, fail to acknowledge that these conflicts are often the result of state-enforced displacement practices. A case in point is the 'peace meetings' (disarmament campaigns) that took place in the vicinities of South Omo Zone's sugar estates, which resulted in violent conflict between government forces and local pastoralists.¹⁹³

189 Asebe and Damena, 'All that Glitters', 16–19.

190 FDRE, 'Proclamation No. 1263/33: Establishment of Ministry of Irrigation and Lowland', *Federal Negarit Gazette* 4 (25 January 2022): 13815–13817.

191 FDRE, 'Pastoral Development Policy and Strategy', Ministry of Peace, March 2019; released at the 18th Ethiopian Pastoralist Day held in Jinka, South Omo, SNNPR; CELEP, 'NEP — Navigating Ethiopia's Pastoral Development Policy'. www.celep.info/fdre-policies.

192 Echi Christina Gabbert, Fana Gebresenbet and Jonah Wedekind, 'Conclusion: Pastoralists for Future', in *Lands of the Future: Anthropological Perspectives on Pastoralism, Land Deals and Tropes of Modernity in Eastern Africa*, eds. Echi Christina Gabbert et al., Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2021.

193 Concerned Scholars Ethiopia, 'Memo on violence in South Omo areas, SNNPRS, Ethiopia: a call for preventative action and rule of law', 25 October 2019. www.canr.msu.edu/news/concerned-scholars-for-ethiopia-issue-urgent-call-for-action-to-end-violence-in-south-omo-zone. Yohannes and Kamski, 'Sugarcoating "homegrown" development', 36–40.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

The synthesis of findings from the four case studies indicates that the potential of strategic resources to contribute to Ethiopia's economic development and benefit previously marginalized peripheral regions remains marred by violent conflict, hampered by productivity and privatization delays, and driven by monopolistic business tendencies, ethnic bias, elite capture and top-down governance. These longstanding issues are not only a drain on potential foreign exchange and local development, but previously already played into the legitimacy crisis and social uprisings faced by the former EPRDF government and its developmental state approach. Coming to power on the back of this, the PP government initially vowed to embark on a reform agenda that tackled the defects marking Ethiopia's political economy of resource extraction in the peripheries.

On one hand, the formation of the PP promised to redress the largely extractive relationship between central government and the peripheral regional states and their commodity frontiers. This included reforms to the governance of resource extraction and revenue distribution, which would give resource-rich but politically marginalized regional states a fairer share of economic prosperity and a seat at the national table as members of the PP (i.e. centring the periphery). On the other hand, the introduction of the HGER agenda indicated a departure from a strongly state-regulated developmental approach to the economy towards a more deregulated approach. This latter stance involved being more open to privatization and a significant redistribution of resource control and revenue streams to the regional states hosting strategic resources and investment projects (i.e. prosperity to the periphery). Added to this, the PP gave particular attention to the extractive sector, counterbalancing the agrarian bias that had historically been in evidence.

While regional states such as Afar and SRS have gone on to play a more prominent role under the new political settlement, expectations that regional representatives and constituents would gain greater control over and benefits from the resources they host, produce and extract have not been fully met. For instance, although salt lands in Afdera were redistributed to a cross-section of Afar society, the salt sector—previously controlled by Tigrayan companies affiliated with the TPLF ruling coalition party—has remained subject to struggles between business affiliates of Amhara and Oromo regions seeking to monopolize the salt value chain. Afar society and businesses have been at the losing end of these struggles, with monopolistic tendencies giving rise to artificial salt shortages, inflated prices and the consequent draining of foreign exchange, and public health risks arising from the circumvention of standard iodization practices. Similarly, while the federal government granted SRS greater tax revenues and royalties from oil

and gas exploration and extraction concessions from foreign companies, it continues to control the sector. This includes—via the MoMP—deciding which companies can explore for oil and gas in the region’s Ogaden basin. Moreover, the oil and gas sector has remained largely stuck in an exploratory phase under the PP government, with no crude oil yet exported or extracted to substitute for imports. Meanwhile, contracts with high-profile companies are often subject to cancellation due to a lack of productive performance. In both the salt and oil/gas sectors, revenues have primarily been generated through rents derived from contracts granting control over resource concessions, rather than prioritizing productive outputs.

The same is true for the gold sector, which has largely relied on the productive outputs of MIDROC’s Laga Dambi gold mine in Guji, south Oromia. While gold rose to become the second most exported commodity after coffee in the fiscal year 2022/23, extractive revenues from other new gold investment projects—some of which were concessions made to co-opt local Oromo elites or *qeerroo* youths (e.g. GODU’s gold mines in Guji)—remain meagre, often hampered by conflicts between government forces and the OLA. The sector continues to rely largely on artisanal gold mining, which is subject to smuggling and capital flight. Despite some gold concessions—and the potential rents derived from propertied access to these—having been transferred to local elites and youths, prior community consent, employment safety and proper environmental impact assessments remain superficial processes. This was demonstrated by the top-down enforced re-opening of the Laga Dambi gold mine in March 2021, three years after it had been shut down due to local protests. Other mega projects, such as the KSDP in South Omo—which was not only economically dysfunctional under the previous government, but caused the forced dispossession and displacement of agro-pastoral communities—were revamped under the PP through a reform and privatization programme. Given the prior mismanagement of the KSDP (the mismatch between its projected scale and actual functionality) and the costs incurred by this, however, the Ethiopian government has so far struggled to find willing buyers or private investors capable of reanimating the sugar sector. Meanwhile, the lack of productivity when it comes to sugar—as is the case with salt—has not only proven a drain on foreign exchange, but means promises of local development and employment generation have not been fulfilled. The latter, at least, would have gone some way to mitigating the land and livelihoods lost by local communities through the enclosure of sugar estates.

The PP government’s redistributive reforms, such as transferring mining concessions and promising greater resource revenues to host regions, have often been politically motivated. This has led to the creation of business elites aligned with the government, initially from Oromia and Amhara regions, who have gained privileged access to strategic economic sectors. Persistent economic challenges—including monopolization, hoarding, price manipulation, lack of community consultation, and environmental concerns—plague key sectors. Such issues contradict the PP’s HGER agenda, necessitating deferral to a second, upcoming agenda.

Overall, the promised redress of the centre-periphery model in Ethiopian politics has not materialized under the PP. Instead, there is a continued tendency towards top-down policymaking, centralized power and favouritism of ethnic business elites in peripheral regions.

As such, conflicts related to resource extraction persist in peripheral regions, encompassing local resistance, ethnicized borderland disputes and territorial conflicts. State enforcement of extractive projects as a peacebuilding strategy often fails without local civil society involvement, prior consent and community consultation, while armed groups view such investments as serving federal interests rather than local development.

Even though violent conflict trends and dysfunctional economic developments are particularly acute in peripheral regions and commodity frontiers, they often appear to take place under the radar of the media, analysts and even the state itself. Partly due to an analytical bias towards the politics of the centre in Ethiopian affairs, as well as a lack of transparency surrounding resource investment projects and extraction processes, both national and international policymakers/advisors risk overlooking these resource conflict dynamics in the peripheries. This potential information gap is significant, as the economic activities and conflicts in the peripheries have consequences not only for Ethiopia's national political economy of development and social welfare, but the currently very precarious political settlement. Thus, scrutinizing the social, economic and ecological defects of Ethiopia's approach to resource extraction is imperative when it comes to seeking entry points for resource-related conflict mitigation and peacebuilding initiatives in the peripheries.

Bearing all the above in mind, the continuities of past modes of governance—co-shaped by inherited ethnic-federal structures, geographies of power and the centralizing tendencies of the state—need to be identified in the wake of the PP's reform agenda. In Ethiopia, such tendencies have historically included top-down modes of governing civil society and natural resources in peripheral regions and frontier spaces. This is not to say, of course, that the subordination of peripheral regions, the subjugation of their peoples, and the sapping of resource revenue flows (in the form of rents) by the central state has been historically and geographically constant or cannot be redressed.

As the second HGER agenda is taking shape, during the next phase it is vital to closely monitor and engage stakeholders that shape policies and practices of resource extraction in Ethiopia's peripheral regions and commodity frontiers. While the extractive sector gains in importance in the diversification of Ethiopia's economy, an investment boom in resource frontiers may drive the government and investors to neglect the social and environmental standards, which their representatives may see as costly and time-consuming hindrances to launching or expanding extractive investment projects. However, all case studies suggest that ignoring the potential socio-economic and environmental side effects of state-enforced and socially contested extractive investment projects is likely to be detrimental not only to community well-being and social cohesion but also to broader peace and economic stability.

It is to be recalled that grievances and conflicts related to top-down, coercive and violent forms of resource extraction in the peripheries have resulted in social uprisings and economic disruptions in Ethiopia's recent past. This has not only resulted in the hardening of ethnic identities and territorial conflict but also undermined the legitimacy—and ultimately

the power—of the previous EPRDF regime. Similar trends have emerged again under the PP incumbent. This is not only the case in regional states that were previously regarded as ‘peripheral’, such as Afar and SRS, but also in the northern Amhara and Tigray regions that historically constituted the ‘core’ of political power and economic prosperity. They have now arguably become subject to ‘peripheralization’ themselves because of regional insurgencies and counterinsurgencies by federal and regional government forces, followed by the de jure or de facto imposition of regional states of emergency or command post rule. Equally, the security situation in resource frontiers (e.g. in southern and western Oromia) has remained dire, as sporadic or ongoing conflicts play into the disruption or failure of commodity production and resource extraction and trade.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Reading across from the key findings identified by the case studies, it is worth reiterating that each of the studied resource commodities/sectors operates under specific regulatory economic frameworks and policies. Similarly, the political relations between regional representatives from peripheral regions and the central government are administratively unevenly constituted, depending on the current balance of power and shifting ethno-regional alliances. Nevertheless, the four case study reports (gold, gas/oil, salt and sugar) share a great number of commonalities and crossovers and have yielded local knowledge that may be considered by international and local actors engaged in policy- and peace-making in resource governance processes.

- **ESTABLISHING ACCOUNTABILITY AND ENABLING REPARATORY JUSTICE** in cases where resource extraction/exploration caused livelihood, environmental and economic injustices in the past, is the first step to restoring inter-communal and state-society trust. The case studies insights suggest the need for reparatory justice processes in the vicinities of mineral resource exploration and extraction sites. The same applies to cases of past dispossession and displacement of agro-pastoralists during the establishment of large-scale investment projects . While evidence for social, economic and environmental injustices is in many cases well documented, adequate compensations and livelihood restorations did not proceed following the 2018 political transition which promised a re-focusing on the peripheral regions and frontier spaces, as well as addressing the historical plight of their marginalized inhabitants. Public acknowledgement and accountability are the first steps to reparations and compensations which may lay the ground for inter-communal and state-society trust to engage in more socially and ecologically integrative and economically just resource access and distribution in the future.
- **SUPPORTING INDEPENDENT AND EVIDENCE-BASED INVESTIGATIONS INTO SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL INJUSTICES** related to resource governance and extraction is crucial to ensuring that reparatory justice can proceed in the first place

and that local complaints of transgressions can be accounted for. This includes the need for institutions to consider concerns, claims and counterclaims over forced dispossession and displacement, environmental degradation and livelihood/health damages. Genuinely addressing these issues could be facilitated by stronger civil society organizations tasked with independently researching and reporting cases and complaints of resource-related injustices and conflicts. The point is to create and cultivate institutions that enable local communities to communicate and challenge past and present resource extraction-related injustices by the state or companies. It is also important to account for claims and counterclaims between different groups that are interlocked in distributive—often violent—conflicts over resource ownership and benefits.

- **ENSURING PRIOR CONSENT AND COMMUNITY CONSULTATION** in processes of establishing or recommencing resource extraction are critical to ensuring not only that extractive investment projects are socially and environmentally integrative, but that the aforementioned injustices are avoided in the first place. There are already legally binding mechanisms in place, including the need for investors to commit to community development and social and environmental impact assessments. However, these are not seriously enforced, particularly if the government prioritizes a particular investment project or strategic resource. Independent mediations and negotiations between companies and local civil society organizations or trade unions could ensure more comprehensive community consultation processes to address local concerns (land dispossession, environmental degradation, division of labour and labour rights, etc.) and agree on the types and terms of local inclusivity (e.g. employment opportunities, knowledge and skills transfer). Beyond merely profiting from investments, therefore, different stakeholders (government, companies, communities) must be engaged to work towards meeting local development needs.
- **FACILITATING THE INCLUSION OF ORGANIZED YOUTHS AND PARTICIPATORY INSTITUTION-BUILDING** can furthermore provide meaningful integration and occupation of youths in managing and extracting resources. The case studies have noted the need for an economic inclusion agenda by the government that places unemployed but skilled youths at its centre and ensures that they can also play a role in the value chains of strategic resources. Youth groups across the country are already relatively well organized. Rather than being co-opted or mobilized by their regional governments for short-term political purposes, they could be given future-oriented vocational support and incentives to establish and build formal producer associations, trade unions and civil society organizations. Fostering youth-oriented institutions can enable them to articulate their perspectives and interests in constructive, negotiated and non-violent ways, for example by flagging damaging economic and non-productive practices, such as monopolization and speculation.

- **ENCOURAGING THE GOVERNMENT TO PRIORITIZE REDISTRIBUTION AND DECENTRALIZATION** related to the governance of resources and regionally fair and equitable distribution of their benefit streams is key to re-establishing trust and cooperation between different regional states and the federal government. This is no simple task, as previously core regions (e.g. Amhara and Tigray) have become relatively peripheralized, while traditional peripheral regions (e.g. Somali and Afar) are yet to effectively utilize their strategic resources to the benefits of their regions. Public coffers are ailing under the foreign exchange crisis, rising debts and inflation, while regional budgets are shrinking due to the pressures to reduce government costs. Reduced regional budgets and underpaid government employees, increase the incentives for corruption and hinder the type of local institution-building suggested above. In such a situation, the government will be more likely to prioritize attracting FDI in resource exploration and extraction, over ensuring social, environmental and economic justice and local community well-being. It is therefore crucial to hold the government to account on its pledge to ensure equitable political and economic participation at the national table. This includes exploring avenues for decentralizing political and economic power and reducing dependency on the central government. In other words, ‘centering the periphery’—not just rhetorically and symbolically, but in practice.

ANNEX

TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF CASE STUDIES

	COMMODITY	LOCATION	COMPANIES
1.	GOLD	Adola gold belt, in Shakiso district of the Guji and West Guji zones, Oromia Regional State.	MIDROC (Laga Dambi) Gold Mine Plc (operated since 1997 under the Ethiopian-Saudi MIDROC Investment Group); GODU General Trading S.C. (operated since 2018 under national ownership, with a licence from Oromia regional state).
2.	GAS AND OIL (HYDROCARBONS)	Ogaden basin, in the Calub and Hilal districts of the Somali Regional State.	Poly-GCL Petroleum Group Holdings Ltd. (operated since 2013 under transnational ownership in a Chinese and Hong-Kong based joint venture; licence cancelled by Ethiopian government in October 2022).
3.	SALT	Afdera salt lake, Afdera district of the Afar Regional State.	SVS Salt Production Plc (operated since 2017 under an Ethiopian-Turkish joint venture with stakes by TTR Salt Production Plc and Star Business Group Plc; project suspended in April 2023).
4.	SUGAR	Lower Omo valley, South Omo of South Ethiopia Region (formerly part of SNNPR).	Kuraz Sugar Development Project (KSDP) (operated since 2011 by the state-owned Ethiopian Sugar Corporation, renamed Ethiopian Sugar Industry Group in March 2022; KSDP has been up for privatization bids since August 2022).

TABLE 2: KEY DYNAMICS AND VARIATIONS					
RESOURCE	REGION	DISTRICT	AREA	PROJECT	KEY DYNAMICS
GOLD	Oromia	Guji, West Guji	Adola gold belt	MIDROC; GODU	<p>Enclave gold economy; youth co-optation; party-local elite creation and capture; health concerns (toxic run-off recorded in 2018); land dispossession; social resistance.</p> <p>Reforms: gold concessions transferred to local elites and youths (e.g. GODU) in 2018; temporary MIDROC project suspension in 2018.</p>
GAS AND OIL	Somali	Hilal, Calub	Ogaden basin	Poly-GCL	<p>Enclave extractive economy, intransparent investment process; protracted exploration, unproductive, top-down enforcement, health concerns (toxic run-off recorded in 2020), land dispossession.</p> <p>Reforms: revenue/royalty redistribution in 2017; Poly-GCL project cancellation in 2022.</p>
SALT	Afar	Afdera	Lake Afdera	SVS/TTR	<p>Monopolisation of salt trade; creation of artificial salt scarcity and price hikes; health concerns (potential for non-iodized salt distribution); youth cooptation; regional rent economy and elite capture.</p> <p>Reforms: land redistribution in 2018; SVS assets frozen in April 2023; salt bill to regulate salt sector introduced in May 2023.</p>

SUGAR	South Ethiopia	South Omo	Lower Omo Valley	KSDP	<p>Unproductive sugar plantations and estates, top-down enforcement, land dispossession, forced displacement of agro-pastoralists; violent disarmament campaigns.</p> <p>Reforms: project size reduction; Ethiopian Sugar Corporation reformed into Ethiopian Sugar Industry Group; privatization process under Ethiopian Investment Holding (since August 2022); stalled privatization due to lack of private bidders.</p>
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