

# Seizing the Violence of the Ethiopian Transition: Political Dialogue for Survivors Politics<sup>1</sup>

Yonas Ashine

## 1. Introduction

Ethiopia has experienced violent political processes at varying times in its history. Attempts at healing the ills employed violent means and this led to the recurrence of violence unabated. To seize and recast a violent political moment and start post-violence peace building in Ethiopia, a broader political praxis must be considered. This essay imagines possibilities of capturing the dehumanizing and destructive violence and envisions creative acts for conflict transformation. It also valorises ‘survivors’ politics’ as an imagined, desirable and feasible political project in Ethiopia to transcend the division of communities as victims and perpetrators, liberated and liberators. It acknowledges that political dialogue involving both the political elite and the wider political community is a credible road to peace. However, this multi-track political dialogue must be guided by a broader vision.

To discourage any actual and potential victims’ or victors’ political project, I argue that capturing this moment is essential to imagine new politics. Given the role the state played in the violence, the new politics shall involve a sovereign apology and recognition of all forms of violence inflicted against society in different historical periods. This hopefully will end the politics of victimhood and opens new possibilities for a political project of survivors by transecting the political identities of victims and perpetrators. Survivors’ political project is accommodative, inclusive and multicultural at national, regional and local levels. In the pages that follow I employ Mahmood Mamdani’s theory of survivors’ justice and the *hagiosophy* of saint Krastos Šámra as usable philosophy of peace.

## 2. The Context: The Violence of the Transition in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is experiencing violence almost for the last six years. It is not anti-colonial violence waged to return subjects to their humanity or to bring the ‘new man’ into history.<sup>2</sup> It rather is a post-social movement violence that spreads during political liberalization and reform (political transition). It is also a post-post-cold war violence produced as a result of the institutional crisis of the hegemonic ruling party, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). This crisis allowed historical

---

<sup>1</sup>A Discussion Paper prepared for a workshop Good Governance Africa-Eastern Africa organized under the theme “The Burden of Victory” held on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2022.

<sup>2</sup>Fanon Frantz (1963) *The Wretched of the Earth*. Penguin books, p.317.

political contradictions to produce violence. The contradictions are the legacies of many historical events such as the formation and consolidation of the modern Ethiopian state and consolidation, the student movement's articulation of the question of nationalities, and the subsequent response to the question in post-1991 Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup> The political openings of the transition only exposed the institutional crisis within the ruling party, EPRDF, and enabled violence to erupt. However, the root causes of the violence are rooted in the history of the country.

This institutional crisis can be seen from two locations, the ruling party, EPRDF, and the system of ethnic federalism instituted in the country. The party and the federal state colluded to respond to the nationalities question inherited from the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM).<sup>4</sup> The radicalized Ethiopian students of the 1960s articulated the nationalities questions without resolving the *substantive contradiction* that gave birth to the intrinsic contradiction between the nation and the subnational identities<sup>5</sup>, the minority and majority nationalities, the 'liberator' and 'liberated' political identities, the historical societal cleavage between 'victims' and 'perpetrators'.<sup>6</sup> Methodologically, civil politics, compromise, negotiation, and dialogue have not been experienced in Ethiopia for a long period. Instead, violence became the dominant means of doing politics and this appears to be a methodological legacy of the ESM.<sup>7</sup> Dialogical politics has been absent and violence became both the means and the end of politics in Ethiopia. As Bahru Zewde puts it, "a cult of violence has thus permeated and continues to permeate Ethiopian society."<sup>8</sup> The EPRDF and the federal state reproduced this trend in their institutional form. The current violence that has spread in the country worsened when the political liberalization necessitated recreation of the ruling party and other political institutions thereof in the context of deficit of dialogical politics.

---

<sup>3</sup>Mamdani Mahmood (2003) *Making Sense of Political Violence in Postcolonial Africa*, in **Socialist Register**, Vol. 39.

<sup>4</sup>Aregawi Berhe (2009) *A political history of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (1975- 1991)* Tsehai publishers and Distributors, Los Angeles, CA; Bahru Zewde (2014) *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement 1960-1974* Addis Ababa University Press, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Mulugeta Gebrehiwot (2019) *Laying the Past to Rest' -The EPRDF and the Challenges of Ethiopian State Building*. Hurst & Company, London.

<sup>5</sup>Kidane Mengistab (2019) *Federalism in Ethiopia's transformation* In: Fantu C, Christopher C and Oqubai A (eds.) **The Oxford Handbook of Ethiopian Economy**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 66–79.

<sup>6</sup>See Bereket Semon (2010) ትንሳኤ ዙሊትዮጵያ- ከመንታ መንገድ (The Renaissances of Ethiopia :In the Crossroads) in Amharic. Angkor Publisher, India; Lidetu Ayalew (2012) 27 ሲደመር 2 -አምባገነናዊ ስርዓት በማዋህድ ሂደት (27 Plus 2 - The Process of Making New Authoritarian System) In Amharic. Addis Ababa.

<sup>7</sup>See Bahru (2014).

<sup>8</sup>Bahru Zewde (2008). 'The Military And Militarism In Africa: The Case Of Ethiopia' in **Society, State and History :selected Essays**. Addis Ababa University Press, Addis Ababa 282-307, 295.

EPRDF was organized as a “national” vanguard party comprising ethnic organizations within it.<sup>9</sup> It operated as an ethnic and national party at the same time for three decades. It was a national party in which power is centralized through the vanguard role it gave to itself, and guided by democratic centralism, revolutionary democracy and developmentalism rhetoric and structure. The hegemonic construction necessitated an unholy asymmetric alliance between ethnic fronts and movements. EPRDF, therefore, comprised asymmetrically bonded four ethnic organizations; the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and three other organizations it created in its image.<sup>10</sup> The party was ethnicist, federalist, decentralist and at the same time centralist, national and developmental. The hegemonic formula worked and even enabled progressive achievement for about two decades. However, internal contradictions brewed into self-acclimated institutional decay within the party in the context of growing competition for power and the crisis faced by the hegemonic formula. The weaker organizations that constituted EPRDF began to compete with internally weakened and divided TPLF, particularly after the death of its strongman, Meles Zenawi, in August 2012.<sup>11</sup> This process exposed the crisis of hegemony and made reforming the coalition indispensable. Thus, reform unfolded since 2018 as a response to popular protests against the effects of the domineering party-state unholy fusion.

The federal state had a similar feature as that of EPRDF. EPRDF restructured the state in its mirror image, pregnant with the inherent paradox. Similar to the party, the regional states appear to be *de-facto* asymmetric. The state structure became a site of the same contradiction that the party carries. Against the claim of being an emancipatory project, the praxis silenced the quest for self-rule and autonomy. The national and the subnational contradiction arrested most of the potentials of the federal project including the promise of building one political-economic community. This contradiction limited possibilities of addressing the evolving questions proliferating from society. The system answers neither Ethiopia’s nor sub-national ethnic questions, because answering these requires resolving the grand contradiction in the inherited nationalities questions. The institutional decay within the party, combined with a lack of party discipline and extreme nationalism, incapacitated the party not to proactively

---

<sup>9</sup>Andargachew Tiruneh. (2015) *The Emergence and Proliferation of Political Organizations in Ethiopia*, Tsehai Publishers, Los Angeles and Addis Ababa and Gebru Asrat (2014) *ሉዓላዊነትና ዲሞክራሲ በኢትዮጵያ (Sovereignty and Democracy in Ethiopia)*, in Amharic. Signature Book Printing, USA.

<sup>10</sup>These four were TPLF, EPDM (Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement) or later ANDM (Amhara National Democratic Movement), Oromo People Democratic Organization (OPDO) & Southern Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement (SEPD) as well as the affiliated People’s Democratic Organizations (PDOs) were from peripheral regions: Somali, Afar, Gambella and Benishangule-Gumuz (Aregawi 2009 and Mulegta 2020)

<sup>11</sup>Berhane Tsegab (2011) የኢ.ህ.ዲ.ዲ ቁልቁለት ጉዞ (2005-2010) የስብሰባዎች ወጣ (The *Downward Journey of EPRDF (2012/13-2017/18 - The tradition of meetings)* in Amharic. Addis Ababa Farist trading.

address the broader political-economic crisis unfolding in the country.<sup>12</sup> Proactive response was possible only within a democratic dispensation and process, which has been absent in Ethiopian politics, particularly after the 2005 election. The substantive contradiction was contained and nurtured by a deficit of democracy, which is the methodological legacy of the students' movement. Had there been procedural democracy and adherence to democratic principles within the EPRDF, there could have been a room for reform at the right time.

The violence of the transition started when EPRDF was forced to implement political reforms, including reconfiguring and recreating itself and the state *modus operandi* since 2018. Multiple forms of violence spread in the body politics since then and reached their peak when the federal state and the Tigray Regional State entered into the yet unresolved war. The split of the EPRDF into TPLF and the newly reconfigured Prosperity Party (PP) can be seen as a failure to resolve the original contradiction at the party level. The EPRDF seemingly became the victim of the defect it carried out since its foundation in late 1980s. Its leaders failed to transcend this defect and path-dependent predicaments despite vowing to conduct deep renewal in 2018. This failure, among others, let the '*Jeannie out of the lamp*' and caused all forms of violence in the country. This is not, however, denying other explanatory factors such as international and regional contexts, the crisis in the opposition camp, and historical and structural factors.

Moreover, the model of the transition, which has unfolded as 'transition by transformation' further complicated the violence. In this model, the ruling party, that was in deep crisis, assumed the responsibility to lead the transition. However, leading a complex transition became very cumbersome for a party, which has been struggling to transcend intra-party crisis and power competition. The problem was further compounded by the lack of pact and increasing elite spilt even within the reformist group. On the other hand, most of the opposition parties, except few, were in a similar crisis and were not in a position to question the model. It is under this circumstance that the deepening crisis at a party level was transferred into a national political crisis in the country.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Bereket (2010)

<sup>13</sup>This conclusion is extracted from my on-going research project entitled *Players, Playing field and the Game in a Transition Moment: Electoral and Party Politics as Critical Sites of Transition in Ethiopia* supported by Africa Peace building Network(APN).

### 3. The Discursive Violence in Ethiopia

The war in the northern part of Ethiopia and political violence in other parts of the country exposed unarticulated binary entrenched in the body politics. The violence exposed the place of victimhood in our collective identity. As Mahmood Mamdani theorized, this must be a result of the gradual formation of political identities as a binary of victim-perpetrator.<sup>14</sup>

In this sense, Ethiopia is not only a land of contending ethno-nationalisms, but has also become a land of victimhood narration and psychology. The original sin that turned victimhood to a political ideology and ethno-national narrative is the formation of the modern state and its evolution to date, not to mention colonial discourses of the British and Italians.<sup>15</sup> Similar to many African states, subnational identity is constructed by mobilizing the memory of state violence.<sup>16</sup> The federal formula was designed to address the nationalities question and, as a result, encourages politicization of ethnic identity. Most ethnic nationalisms in the country retrospectively remember historic victimization and agony as resulting from the violent formation or evolution of the modern state. The latest addition to this claim of victimhood is mobilized by the Amhara nationalism.<sup>17</sup> Even Ethiopian nationalism today is full of stories of victimhood as a result of EPRDF rule. This makes respective political projects, including the federal system, schemes of permanent victims. For a long period, EPRDF articulated this problem merely as narrow nationalism, extreme chauvinism, as well as extremism standing against its democratic nationalism<sup>18</sup>. Hence, the party was unable to provide appropriate articulation and policy response.

Beyond the old Ethiopianism and ethno-nationalism binary, the major contending nationalisms today fight a discursive war based on oppressor-oppressed, victim-perpetrator binary. Many aspire for their own regional statehood as homeland. Mulugeta Gebre-Hiwot describes this as administrative nationalism.<sup>19</sup> This must have been motivated by the need to avoid future victimization, loneliness and insecurity. The problem, however, is the mode of creating such homeland as anchored in fixed identity to territory as well as homogenizing and essentializing culture. Bereket Simon, one of the top leaders of

---

<sup>14</sup>Mamdani (2003).

<sup>15</sup> Andargachew (2015)

<sup>16</sup> See Branch Adam (2012) *Displacing Human Rights: War and Intervention in Northern Uganda*, MISR Publishing.

<sup>17</sup> See Bantayhu C., J. Ishiyama (2021), *Political Transition and the Rise of Amhara Nationalism in Ethiopia*, in *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 56, n. 5; and Tezera T. (2021) *Amhara Nationalism: The Empire Strikes Back*, in *African Affairs*, Vol. 120, n. 479

<sup>18</sup> Bereket (2010)

<sup>19</sup>Mulegeta 2019

EPRDF, argues that the political crisis is not a question of nationality; rather it is a question of class. In this connection, he further portrays the contradiction as a result of the ascendancy of a rent seeking class that come out of the economic growth and instrumentalize identity politics for its interest.<sup>20</sup>

Any form of peace-building in Ethiopia should centre on this double binary of political identity formation so as to craft a better future. Ethiopia's response to violence can take lessons from indigenous peace building experiences of other African countries. The next section presents two philosophical guides to seize the on-going violence and to start a new political project in the country.

#### **4. Hagiosophy of Krastos Śāmra: Seizing Moment of violence**

Political violence with its different intensity and form has been one aspect of Ethiopia's political history. Violent moments are dehumanizing and destructive. However, they are not invincible social prisons that keep human society in abyss of dehumanization. Society can recast such moments as sites for moral imagination<sup>21</sup> and social creative acts, to transcend the dehumanizing and destructive elements. Violent moments can be used to mobilize social creative power<sup>22</sup> against instrumentalized political violence.

In Ethiopian hagiosophy<sup>23</sup> there is a powerful story of violence and the possibility of imagination to transcend it. We find it in the 15<sup>th</sup> century hagiographic text (*Gädlä Krastos Śāmra*) of Saint Krastos Śāmra, whose saintly imagination and reflection transcends to the metaphysical binary to find the root cause of sin, destruction and violence.<sup>24</sup> Her journey begins with violence she inflicted upon her slave. She grossly sent flames into the servant's mouth and killed her. She was seized by her capacity to unleash violence. She captured this moment, began to pray and imagine, and struggled for a new possibility to transcend this violence. She prayed to be reunited with the dead slave's body and soul. God answered her prayers and resurrected the victimized slave.

---

<sup>20</sup>Ibid: 267

<sup>21</sup>Moral imagination is term coined by Imagination John Paul Lederach in his insightful book *Moral imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* where he defined it as 'the capacity of individuals and communities to imagine themselves in a web of relationship even with their enemies' involving two tasks: taking personal responsibility and acknowledging relational mutuality (34-35)

<sup>22</sup>Schoenbrun, David (1998) *A Green Place, a Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the Fifteenth Century*. Heinemann.

<sup>23</sup> I use the term *Hagiosophy* to refer to mine and few colleagues struggle to read hagiography as site of philosophy. It is an on-going intellectual aspiration to extend Ethiopian written and oral sacred text from liturgy and historiography to philosophy mainly as one mode of decolonising political philosophy.

<sup>24</sup>*Gädlä Krastos Śāmra* No Author, Addis Ababa.

The new possibility began with this reconnection with the dead and she further kept praying to find the structural, root causes of violence, offence and sin in the world and the human condition. She articulated the human condition by saying, “there is no wood that does not smoke, and a human being that does not offend. If to be human is defined by the ability to sin, offence and violence; forgiveness is the response instead of criminalizing all humans”. Considering forgiveness as a foundational response to violence, she kept on searching for the original sin and the source of this human condition. To her, the conflict between God and Satan was the source of all sins and violence on earth. She prayed and was allowed to travel to the metaphysical world to ask forgiveness, to save the offenders and sinners, and to resolve the original conflict between God and Satan.

In this hagiography, we learn how one could seize a moment of violence; use it as a time of reflection, critique and soul searching to address immediate and structural sources of political violence. Such action is about taking responsibility at the individual and community levels, to transcend the violence and its destructive impacts. Her unending quest for forgiveness to the offenders, including her attempt to get the original offender Satan to be pardoned, teaches us the power of forgiveness to create possibilities for the surviving society: both the victims and the perpetrators. Moreover, the hagiography of Krastos Śámra enlightens us how to navigate and creatively act in search of addressing the structural and root causes of violence. Without this, violence remains intrinsic to humans and society’s condition.

Ethiopia needs similar creative responses to the on-going political violence. This will allow the community to recast and seize the moment by addressing the destructive trend in the transition and the root, structural and historical causes of violence. Ethiopia has already missed the opportunity to build a political community through dialogue, and there are many missed opportunities to re-new the existing state and rebuild the political realm through dialogue. The latest addition is the moment of political violence since the 2018 political openings. Capturing this moment is an indispensable task to transcend the dehumanizing and destructive effect of the spreading violence.

The ultimate goal of peace building is seizing the violent moment through moral imagination and the transformation of conflict into peaceful action by looking deeper into the causes of such conflicts.<sup>25</sup> The process of moral imagination requires being reflective of personal responsibility for political violence and acting towards transcending it. We do this by acknowledging the relational subjectivity we are in. As

---

<sup>25</sup>Barma Naazneen H. (2017) *The Peacebuilding Puzzle Political Order in Post-Conflict States*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge., 12

we have learnt from the hagiography of Krastos Šämra, capturing the moment requires accepting our agency in the making of violence and peace. Acknowledgment of the political violence occurs in relational mutuality, enabling us to mobilize our creative social power for transcending violence and its impact. The imaginative journeys of Krastos Šämra to transcend the human and social condition can teach us humans are not prisoners of their structural conditions.

## **5. Survivors' Politics for Ethiopia's Dialogical Politics**

In the contemporary peace building debate, survivors' justice has become a popular tool of peace-building in post-conflict societies, which passed through serious political violence. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has been seen as an inspirational model. TRC was guided by the popular ideals of truth and forgiveness that "perpetrators be forgiven of past crimes in return for acknowledging the past [truth]". For Mamdani "key to the post-apartheid transition was not an exchange of amnesty for truth, but amnesty for the willingness to reform". The reform was ending apartheid itself instead of creating a state for the victims or perpetrators. The core element in this process was the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA). Political reform was the second-best alternative. This led to defining the actors (both victims and perpetrators) as 'political adversaries,' the survivors and builders of a new political community in the realm of politics, not in the courtroom. It turned enemies into political adversaries. The process underlines both moral imagination and the transformational response to violence.

Similar to the hagiography of Krastos Šämra, survivors' model of peace-building does not valorise punishment, but political and social creative processes including taking personal responsibility, forgiveness and pardon for the political subject produced in the process as the offender, sinner and perpetrator. The model valorises political justice, instead of punishment. As a result, it was a new South Africa that unfolded after CODESA rather than Israel.

If we explore political dialogues that took place in different post-conflict societies, they appear similar to the CODESA model. Theoretically, peace-building theories and concepts also support the above prescription by Mamdani that CODESA could serve to end civil wars elsewhere and can be used to craft peace-building activities such as political dialogue, national dialogue and reconciliation through the truth and reconciliation model.

Any political dialogue in Ethiopia should navigate towards survivors' politics, transcending all forms of substantive contradiction and binaries of political identities which are formed historically: victims



and perpetrators, native and non-native, victors and vanquished as well as liberator and liberated subjects. Most of the political projects that have emerged in different historical times such as in 1991, 1974, 1916, were designed by victors excluding many who were considered the vanquished. Now is the time to employ this philosophy to transform Ethiopia's political crisis. Surviving is the thread that links all subjects together in relational mutuality. Thus, it has a potential for crafting a better future. Any political dialogue, therefore, should attempt to end the victim psychology and insecurity that dictate many of our political actions (and inactions). This journey is, however, long and very steep.

## **6. Silencing the Guns and Building the Negotiation Table**

Political dialogue in Ethiopia should begin with political forces' discussion to silence the guns and create a space for peace building. Silencing the gun and building the table is the ultimate goal of this initial political dialogue. It is the most difficult task of laying the foundation for a new horizon of peace and politics. Without silencing the gun and stopping the spread of violence, particularly in the northern part of Ethiopia, any attempt at dialogue cannot produce the desired transformation. The political dialogue should begin with the difficult task of disarming political radicalism both at the individual and societal levels and undoing valorisation of violence. This will then create enabling conditions for social creative power to evolve. Other conditions must be part of the substantive element in the discussion table. Methodologically, this may involve the inclusion of combating forces from all groups. Those who have stakes in the conflict, mainly neighbouring states, may be involved at the regional level later or simultaneously. Equal urgency must be given to humanitarian response to citizens in all areas affected by the conflict in Tigray, Amhara and Afar regional states.

## **7. Towards Re-building Multicultural State and Citizenship**

Once the instrumental violence is transformed, gradually social creative power may begin to reign. After the guns are silenced, relational mutuality of all survivors, remembering the dead, and taking personal responsibility at all levels would lay the foundation for building a new political community. Once the social power is reignited, the political process will likely unfold naturally. A political project of survivors, embracing diversity, and allowing and accommodating the difference in every locality, can be an energizing political philosophy. The political system built on a sense of insecurity and victimhood tends to homogenize, essentialize and fix identity. When a political project is built based on surviving, it cultivates the survival of all members. It embraces the survival of a member without discriminating based on language, religion, or any other social and cultural differences. In this enabling context, ethnicity as a cultural identity can be cultivated without producing ethnicity as a political identity.

Moreover, political dialogue may help to cultivate a multicultural state and statehood as well as society and political subjects. To this end, Ethiopia can learn much from the comparative praxis of political dialogues in Africa.

In the short term, this dialogue can fix elite level split and contradiction that are mainly observed among political parties. Political parties can be mobilized to involve in the process as survivors. Currently, many major political parties are in an internal crisis and elite split. The party system in general exhibits a crisis of institutionalization. Lack of a minimum elite pact is the foundation of a national political crisis in Ethiopia. Transforming intra-party and party system crises can serve as a building block for fixing the crisis within the party system in the country.

In the long term, Ethiopia's survivors' political dialogue may deal with the violence and the memory of violence that divided the people as 'victims' and 'perpetrators'. The violence inflicted against society belonged to the state, which is an abstract entity and the locus of social power produced by the political community. However, today, this violence is being remembered as ethnic violence since the heads of states came from a particular ethnic group. The violence was vertical but gradually remembered as horizontal with the politicisation of ethnic identity in the country. Therefore, both de-individualisation and de-horizontalization of memory of state violence are some of the key measures to start reconciliation and peace-building. This may begin by rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's and ensuring a possibility of state apology to transcend the binary. To transcend the legacy of all forms of state violence, sovereign apology and recognition are key foundations to peace building activities in Ethiopia. As Krastos Šämra requested pardon to Satan, the sovereign apology and social pardon to the state can heal the violence of the past. This gradually may replace the omnipresence of violence in body politics with dialogical politics that would empower all human political subjects.

## **8. Conclusion**

Peace-building must be seen primarily as a political project before it becomes the task of experts. As a political project, it should have a broader imaginative and desirable philosophical vision. I argue that this vision should transform the victims' political world into survivors' political realm where no one is left insecure and alone. Under this overarching philosophical guide, conflicting parties, the general public, and the political community may start the journey of dialogical politics. This dialogical moment shall begin from seizing the moment of violence and then gradually working towards building a political community of survivors. As Krastos Šämra captured the moment, Ethiopians can also capture this

moment to build a new political community. This can be followed by a long collective journey in relational mutuality and social web towards a political project which may enable building multicultural local, regional and national spaces where all survivors may continue to live and pursue a stable life.

#### **About the Author**



Yonas Ashine is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Addis Ababa University (AAU), Ethiopia. He earned his PhD in Interdisciplinary Social Studies (Political and Historical studies) from Makerere Institute of Social Studies, Makerere University, Uganda. He received his BED in History from Mekele University; BA and MA in Political Science and International Relations from AAU. His research interest includes political theory, and comparative politics of state-society relations in Africa and from Africa. His writings and research focus on power and resistance; formation of state and subjectivity at national and global realm across time.