

IDEOLOGY AND POWER IN TPLF'S ETHIOPIA: A HISTORIC REVERSAL IN THE MAKING?

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ABSTRACT

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has led Ethiopia for close to three decades as a core party within the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition. Various ideological claims permeated the consolidation of power by the TPLF, which now seems to be questioned by the new leadership in the EPRDF. This article locates the critical junctures in the history of the party and analyses how those junctures relate to power concentration rather than to ideological shifts as purported by the party. It argues that the circumstances surrounding the 'shifts' in ideologies by the TPLF show that ideologies were used to consolidate power within the party and later impose domination at the state level. A thorough investigation of the ideological history of the TPLF is crucial as Ethiopia seems to be standing at a critical ideological crossroad. Through a deep hermeneutic interpretation, the article concludes that leftist ideological threads such as a focus on vanguard rule, party-directed economy, and Stalinist understandings of ethnicity run throughout the ideological shifts of the TPLF. The article synthesizes the cosmetic ideological shifts in the context of a pragmatic party that has been applying market socialism.

THE HISTORY OF IDEOLOGICAL CHANGES in the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) is interesting for various reasons. First and foremost, the TPLF exhibited a sequence of ideological claims from its emergence in the 1970s to the present. The party's ideological positions began from ethno-nationalist fervours that later picked 'Albanian socialism' and then alluded to 'revolutionary democracy' after the fall of the Berlin wall. Today the party is the champion of the 'democratic developmental state'. Roughly, four ideological allegiances occurred in five decades.

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For some scholars, the most recent ideological project in Ethiopia (i.e. the developmental state) has so far been successful via ‘a top-down and autocratic state’ but at the same time faces the twin challenges of a lack of private initiative in the economy and accountability in its political system.¹ More broadly, the works of Elsje Fourie, for example, explores the history and politics of emulation of ‘foreign’ development models by Ethiopian elites in general and the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime (the core of which is the TPLF) in particular, as they applied the ‘Chinese model’.² The developmental success of such emulation is contested, but that is not the focus of this article. Instead, I argue that an investigation of the circumstances of the ‘shifts’ in ideologies by the TPLF shows that ideologies are used to consolidate power within the party and later impose domination at the state level. In other words, ideologies were used just for purposes of consolidating power and projecting domination, not necessarily for serving the people. This should be viewed in the context of how the TPLF and its elites managed to cling to political power and economic prominence.

The article explores the ideological turns and twists and the role of the TPLF leadership, and traces the persistence of certain semi-ideological constant factors that are directly related to control of power and thus domination in the process. These constant factors range from the Stalinist definition of ethnicity and its unfitting application to the Tigray historical context, to the emphasis on democratic centralism in the context of leftist ideologies, to vanguard party-led economic development. The TPLF has been a pragmatic party that selectively applied such specific themes from its ideological toolkit to fit its purposes of power concentration. This pragmatism has to be viewed outside of the unidimensional insistence of viewing the party just as leftist per se.

Some of the semi-ideological factors that persisted for close to three decades of TPLF rule apparently have been challenged very recently within the EPRDF coalition, which could add a new dimension to the ‘ideological history’ of the party-state and the TPLF. It is still unclear whether the long held cherished ideological givens of the coalition in general and the TPLF in particular will be given up altogether. The new leadership in the front, and specifically from the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO), is presenting an alternative to the hitherto held ideological positions, carrying out a ‘soft revolution’ within the coalition.

1. Christopher Clapham, ‘The Ethiopian developmental state’, *Third World Quarterly* 39, (2017), pp. 1–15, p. 12.

2. Elsje Fourie, ‘China’s example for Meles’ Ethiopia: When development “models” land’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 53, 3 (2015), pp. 289–316; Elsje Fourie, *New maps for Africa? Contextualising the ‘Chinese Model’ within Ethiopian and Kenyan paradigms of development* (University of Trento, unpublished PhD dissertation, 2013).

Abiy Ahmed, the new chairman of the EPRDF and prime minister since April 2018, championed what he dubbed the 'politics of addition', that calls for the unity of Ethiopians from all walks of life and opening up the political space. In his inaugural speech, the Prime Minister proclaimed: 'we are Ethiopians while alive and Ethiopia when we die',³ in stark contrast to the previous emphasis of the party-state on group rights and the ethnicization of politics.⁴ This emphasis on the unity of Ethiopians and on individual liberty rather than group rights began to appear in the rhetoric of the EPRDF following the peak of more than two years of protests by the Oromo youth, followed by the Amhara and Gurage youth. For Jonathan Fisher and Meressa Gebrewahd, these protests and the ensuing political dynamics in Ethiopia, emanated from 'two long-term phenomena' which are—first, 'the maturing and consolidation of the EPRDF's ethnic federalism project, and the federal government's blunt engagement with this process' and second, the 'disintegration of the TPLF into factionalism and self-criticism since the death of Meles'.⁵ Meles Zenawi was the TPLF ideologue who led Ethiopia as Prime Minister between 1995 and 2012.

In this article, I follow the Gramscian conception of ideology that posits ideology as 'pre-eminently serving as safeguard of the power of the dominant class over the masses and among other things as fashioned by the intellectual elite'.⁶ The intellectuals of the party mainly built upon the contributions of its late leader Meles Zenawi. I do not engage in a theoretical treatment of the ideologies of the ruling party but rather analyse the critical junctures and processes that led to these changes.

In the face of countless studies that have dealt with Ethiopia's political history of the past five decades, several observations prompted this investigation. There has been an incessant recitation of certain ideologies by the party at some point and then a claim to others at later moments. This makes one wonder what lies behind the shifts in the 'ideological catchphrases' cited by the party cadres.⁷ There is no existing study of the links

3. Prime Minister Abiy alleges that when Ethiopians die, as the generation before did defending the motherland, they return back to the soil and constitute the territory that is called Ethiopia.

4. Hassen Hussein, 'Full English transcript of Ethiopian prime minister Abiy's inaugural address', *O Pride*, 3 April 2018, <<https://www.opride.com/2018/04/03/english-partial-transcript-of-ethiopian-prime-minister-abiy-ahmeds-inaugural-address/>> (1 July 2018).

5. Jonathan Fisher and Meressa T. Gebrewahd, "'Game over'? Abiy Ahmed, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front and Ethiopia's political crisis', *African Affairs*, ady056 (2018), pp 1–13, pp. 2–3.

6. See Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and political theory: A conceptual approach* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996), pp. 19–20.

7. These phrases, borrowed from the various ideological positions taken by the party elites, are often confusing and sometimes are historically unfounded explanations of Ethiopian politics.

between the ideological positions that have perpetuated the TPLF's power.⁸ Investigating ideology or ideologies in the context of the TPLF's Ethiopia is crucial for the reason that the regime has almost always given ideological answers for its failures or successes. The disparity between rhetoric and practice observed in TPLF's Ethiopia also merits a sober analysis. A rhetoric of respect and equality of all ethnic and national groups has been, for example, the emblematic motto of the party but the practice is quite different. There is sufficient evidence that the 'ethnic card' has been used for divide and rule. This could be seen not only in the context of the ensuing protest of the Amhara and Oromo groups in the past few years but also in the systemic capture of business and economy by political elites.⁹

In an attempt to critique and make sense of the role of ideology in Ethiopia's political economy, this article traces the ideological threads, agency and junctures in a context where a single political party emerged as a dominant force. To do so, I will first briefly present the conceptual and methodological basis of the article followed by a background discussion of the emergence of the TPLF and its ideological starting point. Then, I will analyse the ideological turns and twists of the party corresponding to critical junctures of significant politico-historical high points. In this way, I locate the persistence of quasi-ideological threads—democratic centralism, ethnocentrism and the statist economy—which have sustained and concentrated political and economic power in the hands of the party-state and its elites.

Conceptual and methodological note

In the complex and long history of the study of ideology, this article situates itself in acknowledging the ubiquity of ideology and how that significantly shapes politics.¹⁰ As Gramsci argued, there should be a distinction between 'historically organic ideologies, those, that is, which are necessary to a given structure, and ideologies that are arbitrary, rationalistic, or

8. Some scholars exclusively emphasize one ideology or the other but not necessarily the continuities that sustained domination. On revolutionary democracy, see Jean-Nicolas Bach, 'Abyotawi democracy: Neither revolutionary nor democratic, a critical review of EPRDF's conception of revolutionary democracy in post-1991 Ethiopia', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, 4 (2011), pp. 641–663. On the developmental state, see Clapham, 'The Ethiopian developmental state', and Alex de Waal, *The real politics of the horn of Africa: Money, war and the business of power* (Polity, Cambridge, 2015).

9. The domains and mechanisms of the wealth concentration by the party is discussed in Tefera N. Gebregziabher and Wil Hout, 'The rise of oligarchy in Ethiopia: The case of wealth creation since 1991', *Review of African Political Economy* 45, 157 (2018), pp. 501–510.

10. See for example Michael Freedman, 'Ideology and political theory', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 11, 1 (2006), pp. 3–22.

“willed””.¹¹ Indeed, as Jan Rehmann pointed out, Gramsci combined elements of the critical concepts of Marxism with his concept of hegemony and thus ‘Gramsci’s critique of common sense’ is ‘an ideology-critique’.¹² Whether they are historically necessary or arbitrary, ideologies are fundamental to the world of politics. As Michael Freeden put it, ‘ideologies are the thought-products par excellence of the political sphere: they are necessary, normal, and they facilitate (and reflect) political action’.¹³ More importantly, ‘ideologies are imaginative maps drawing together facts that themselves may be disputed’.¹⁴ It is along this line of argument that I challenge some of the themes that run through the ideological history of the ruling party and why they have been used—namely the use of ideology to concentrate political and economic power.

The relationship between ideology and power has been one of the central discussions in the literature on ideology. For example, John Thompson argues that, ‘the study of ideology is inseparable from the social-historical analysis of the forms of domination which meaning serves to sustain’. He goes on to argue that ‘to study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning (signification) serves to sustain relations of domination’.¹⁵ He suggests that the study of ideology should be viewed as a study of how meaning serves power/domination and the number of ways that it operates, out of which three—legitimation, dissimulation, and reification—are crucial. As Thompson points out, legitimation refers to Max Weber’s claim that every system seeks to cultivate a belief in its legitimacy by appealing to rational, traditional or charismatic grounds, which is expressed in language. Dissimulation refers to the fact that relations of domination that serve the interest of some at the expense of others may be concealed, denied or ‘blocked’ in various ways. Reification here refers to in ways ideology operates by presenting a transitory, historical state of affairs as if it were permanent, neutral, outside of time.¹⁶ In search for legitimacy, the TPLF advocated its ideological rhetoric and silenced credible alternative media sources through the monopoly over education and other state institutions.

The methodology that can be used to unpack the interrelationship of a given interplay between ideology and domination is a deep hermeneutic

11. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (International Publishers, London, 1971), pp. 376–377.

12. Jan Rehmann, ‘Ideology-critique with the conceptual hinterland of a theory of the ideological’, *Critical Sociology* 41, 3 (2015), pp. 433–448, p. 442.

13. Freeden, ‘Ideology and political theory’.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

15. John B. Thompson, *Studies in the theory of ideology* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984), pp. 129–35.

16. Thompson, *Studies in the theory of ideology*, p. 131.

analysis. For Thompson, this methodology integrates ‘explanation and understanding into a comprehensive interpretive theory’ that involves a three-phase procedure.¹⁷ In short, the interpretation of ideology can be conceived as ‘a depth hermeneutic assisted by discursive analysis and a social analysis of the conditions in which discourse is produced and received’.¹⁸ A deep hermeneutical methodology of the social-historical level among other things depicts institutions as vital instruments through which discourses are transmitted as well as structured. Through the establishment of an ethnic federal system ruled by a party-state, the TPLF managed to disseminate and perpetuate discursive and material domination. Various scholars have studied the structure and experiment of Ethiopian ethnic federalism and have shown how power is centralized by the party in power.¹⁹

In addition to the considerations of the social-historical and discursive analysis embedded in deep hermeneutic methodology, this article borrows the idea of ‘critical juncture’ from historical institutionalism. In critical junctures, the exercise of human agency (in this sense the ideological choices made by political actors) is analytically important. As Giovanni Capoccia and Daniel Kelemen point out, critical junctures are the starting points for many path-dependent processes because they put institutions on a certain path that is difficult to reverse.²⁰ That is why James Mahoney argues that ‘to explain critical junctures, therefore, path-dependent analysts often must focus on small events, human agency, or historical peculiarities that lie outside of available theoretical frameworks’.²¹ To do so, the article synthesizes materials such as party manifestos and other party documents, autobiographies, political memoirs of the relevant actors and interviews.

17. According to Thompson (*ibid.*, p. 199) these phrases are, (i) A ‘social analysis’ phase that deals with the ‘social-historical conditions within which agents act and interact’ because ‘we cannot study ideology without studying relations of domination’. (ii) A ‘discursive analysis’ that calls for the study of ‘linguistic construction’ which ‘must be complemented and completed by a third phase of analysis’—(iii) interpretation. Thompson argues, ‘to study the structure of the discourse in which ideology is expressed may mediate the process of interpreting ideology, which is the process of explicating the connection between the meaning (signification) of discourse and the relations of domination which that meaning serves to sustain’.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

19. See for example Merera Gudina, ‘Elections and democratization in Ethiopia, 1991–2010’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, 4 (2011), pp. 664–680; Berhanu Balcha, *Restructuring state and society: Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia* (Aalborg Universitet, unpublished PhD dissertation, 2006); Sarah Vaughan and Kjetil Tronvoll, *The culture of power in contemporary Ethiopian political life* (Sida studies, Number 10, Stockholm, 2003).

20. Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, ‘The study of critical junctures: Theory, narrative, and counterfactuals in historical institutionalism’, *World Politics* 59, 3 (2007), pp. 341–369.

21. James Mahoney, ‘Path-dependent explanations of regime change: Central America in comparative perspective’, *Studies in Comparative International Development* 36, 1 (2001), pp. 111–141, p. 113.

Ethnonationalism and the emergence of the TPLF

The ruling party TPLF had its intellectual and organizational antecedents in the student movement of the 1960s. The ideological orientation of most of the students of the then Haile Selassie I University was 'nationalist',²² and the shift from nationalism to Marxism–Leninism may have happened in the late 1960s.²³ This student movement nurtured the revolution which eventually overthrew Haile Selassie's government in 1974. Mesay Kebede argues that Marxism–Leninism 'would not have had such an influence were it not arousing and legitimizing the political ambition of educated circles' in the country.²⁴

The students in the various study groups they established were extensively reading leftist literature that included works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, and Fanon.²⁵ These study groups furnished the basis of leftist organizations which in turn gave birth to political parties such as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON). It was this historical context that produced the party that is still in power in Ethiopia. First, a university students' association, the Tigray University Student Association, was established. From this association, a leftist organization by the name Tigrayan National Organization was founded in 1974 by progressive students, and this organization became the springboard for the TPLF, which came into being as a party in February 1975.²⁶

Those organized in the Tigray University Student Association were from the Tigray ethnic group, and they made ethnonationalism the primary ideological orientation of the TPLF, even though class-based ideological discussions were prevalent before and during the party's inception.²⁷ Ethnonationalism is by far the most basic foundation (or the first ideological layer) pursued by the party since its inception and has persisted until today. Jan Abbink argues that this ideology resulted in 'utterly changing the face of the country' and 'leading to redefinition of Ethiopian nationhood'.²⁸ In practice, it led to the institutionalization of ethnic federalism as a political system, based on the Stalinist definition of peoples,

22. Rather than ethnonationalists, who focused on the discrimination of one ethnic group by another.

23. Bahru Zewde, *The quest for socialist utopia: The Ethiopian student movement, c. 1960–1974* (Boydell & Brewer Ltd, New York, 2014).

24. Mesay Kebede, *Ideology and elite conflicts: Autopsy of the Ethiopian revolution* (Lexington Books, New York, 2011), p. 147.

25. See for example Gebru Asrat, *Sovereignty and democracy in Ethiopia* (political memoir published in Amharic, Addis Ababa, 2015).

26. Aregawi Berhe, 'The origins of The Tigray People's Liberation Front', *African Affairs* 103, 413 (2004), pp. 569–592; Zewde, *The quest for socialist utopia*.

27. Berhe, 'The origins of the Tigray People's Liberation Front'.

28. Jan Abbink, 'The Ethiopian revolution after 40 years (1974–2014): Plan B in progress?' *Journal of Developing Societies* 31, 3 (2015), pp. 333–357, pp. 341–344.

nations and nationalities.²⁹ This became a straightjacket for Ethiopia. One of the founding leaders of the TPLF presents a detailed discussion of how the TPLF was inspired from the very beginning by Stalin's theory on the national question. Stalin's definition of the nation as 'a historically evolved, stable community of language, and territory, economic life and psychological makeup manifested in a community of culture' was applied to the situation of the Tigre ethnic group.³⁰

During the university days of the TPLF leadership, the 'infamous paper' by university student Walleigne Makonnen on the 'question of nationalities' in Ethiopia in 1969 claimed that Ethiopia was a collection of nationalities ruled by an Amhara ethnic group that superimposed its culture and language.³¹ This was no doubt inspired by Lenin and Stalin's explanation of the issue of ethnicity in Russia.³² One of the founders of the TPLF asserted that the position that TPLF took later on the nationality question and self-determination was based on Marx's stand on the Irish national question.³³ Thus, the first manifesto of the party stipulated:

Disagreement and suspicion among the nations of Ethiopia have resulted from the worsening of the oppression by the Amhara ethnic group over the oppressed nations of Ethiopia and especially over the Tigray ethnic group. Therefore, we now reached a stage where all the oppressed nations of Ethiopia can no more undertake a common class struggle.³⁴

The manifesto emphasized the issue of national oppression and asserted that the Tigray ethnic group in particular had been oppressed. It called for an independent republic. The idea of the Tigray republic and secession was later abandoned in 1978 but 'remained for some time a source of subsequent splits and defections from, the [TPLF] organization'.³⁵ Though secession was abandoned, ethnonationalism continued to be the

29. See for example Christophe Van der Beken, 'Federalism and the accommodation of ethnic diversity: The case of Ethiopia', in *Proceedings of the 3rd European Conference on African Studies*, 2009, pp. 8–10.

30. Aregawi Berhe, *A political history of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (1975–1991): Revolt, ideology and mobilization in Ethiopia* (Free University Amsterdam, unpublished PhD dissertation, 2008), pp. 5–9.

31. This paper spearheaded the discussion on ethnonationalism during the student movement. It is blamed by many and taken as a sacred outcry of the discriminated by others. In his recent memoir, Fiker-Selassie Wogderes, who was a leader in the Derg military regime and at the time a fellow student, dismissed it as the Eritreans' political strategy to inflict issues of ethnicity in the discussions of the student body with a purpose of advancing their cause. Fiker-Selassie Wogderes, *Egnana Abyotu* (Tshai Publishers, Los Angeles, CA, 2013). For Abbink, the paper was unhistorical and superficial and was just an ideological position. See, Abbink, 'The Ethiopian revolution after 40 years'.

32. Randi Ronning Balsvik, *Haile Selassie's students: The intellectual and social background to the revolution, 1952–1974* (Addis Ababa University Press, Addis Ababa, 2005), pp. 33–34.

33. Berhe, 'The origins of the Tigray People's Liberation Front', p. 591.

34. TPLF, Manifesto of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (Unpublished manifesto, NA, February 1976). Author's translation.

35. Berhe, 'The origins of the Tigray People's Liberation Front', p. 591.

ideological foundation of the front. Some scholars have argued that the national question raised by the leftist intelligentsia of Ethiopia was a huge mistake, pointing out that even if there was an ethnic discrimination by one against the other, it was not inflicted on the Tigray ethnic group. The Tigrian nationalism that was instigated by the TPLF was 'a compound of aspiration for hegemony and struggle against Amharic linguistic oppression', and 'as in anywhere is the invention of modern educated elite'.³⁶ In summary, ethnonationalism was central to the claim by the TPLF that national oppression characterized the imperial regime of Haile Selassie in which the Amhara ethnic group had politically and culturally dominated the rest, and thus an armed struggle was necessary to reverse the 'ethnic oppression'.

In the political history of the TPLF, critical junctures can be traced to the periods when the party claimed ideological turns. The concept of a critical juncture refers to '*relatively* short periods of time during which there is a *substantially* heightened probability that agents' choices will affect the outcome of interest'.³⁷ The choices made by some members of the leadership at such politico-historical junctures have changed the power configuration in the TPLF. In the following sections, the article locates the critical junctures and how these junctures are related to the claimed ideological metamorphosis, which in turn was used to consolidate power by the few.

The Marxist–Leninist turn

The historical context of the late 1970s paved the way for the first critical juncture where a few members of the party leadership established a 'communist core' within the TPLF and proclaimed Marxism–Leninism as the party's guiding ideology. So, the first ideological shift happened when the communist core within the TPLF came together under a secessionist guise (separation of the Tigray region from Ethiopia) and were able to establish the Marxist–Leninist league of Tigray (MLLT) in June 1985, a Marxist party within the front that would control its leadership. The motivation for the establishment of MLLT was a wish to have full control of the front through abandoning the idea of being a front with various ideological and political orientations and replacing it with a strict single party logic.³⁸ It was at this juncture that ideology was first used to purge prominent party members by accusing them of 'pragmatism, empiricism

36. Teshale Tibebu, *The making of modern Ethiopia: 1896–1974* (The Red Sea Press, NJ, 1995), pp. 172–175.

37. Capoccia and Kelemen, 'The study of critical junctures', p. 348 (emphasis in the original).

38. Berhe, *A political history of the Tigray People's Liberation Front*.

or revisionism'.³⁹ Political power was thus concentrated in the hands of a few TPLF leaders under the guise of MLLT. This period marks the official shift from a mere ethnonationalism to Marxism–Leninism, but ethnonationalism did not fade away from the party rhetoric even though Marxism–Leninism took over the language of the TPLF.

The origin of the first critical juncture goes back to the period before and after the establishment of MLLT in which two party-leaders, Meles Zenawi and Abay Tsehaye, played a significant role. The TPLF had established a political department within one year of starting the armed struggle against the Derg military regime. This political department, headed by Abay Tsehaye, had established a cadre school that would contribute to the ascendance of Meles Zenawi, especially after Meles was given the responsibility of preparing the establishment of MLLT.⁴⁰ Meles 'was able to overtly recruit MLLT members and, covertly, create loyal cadres for his own power base' while others in the TPLF were busy conducting and leading the war against the military regime.⁴¹

Theoretically, there have been various interpretations of Marxism–Leninism and the post-cold war historiography of Soviet Marxism is still polarized.⁴² David Priestland argues more work needs to be done on 'the problem of ideology in the Soviet history'.⁴³ He points out that the primary concern of Soviet Marxism 'was to show how the Soviet Union could move towards a society... that would be both extraordinarily productive and completely egalitarian'.⁴⁴ For Jan Rehmann, 'Marxism–Leninism was the result of a canonization-process designed to establish a new state-philosophy, which was, in turn, an integral part of the fusion of a centralized communist party and a despotic-autocratic state-apparatus'.⁴⁵ Yet, for Marx ideology is 'a theoretical concept, an epistemological category designed to conceptualize a specific form of thought'.⁴⁶

The application of this ideology in Ethiopia by different actors in general and the TPLF in particular as discussed in this paper shows how some of Marxist–Leninist assumptions continued for so long. According to Aregawi Berhe the ideological position of the TPLF 'boiled down to

39. Bach, 'Abyotawi democracy'.

40. For a detailed discussion of the period see the dissertation written by one of the founding members of the front itself, Berhe, 'A political history of the Tigray People's Liberation Front'.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

42. For the summary of the main interpretive categories see David Priestland, 'Marx and the Kremlin: Writing on Marxism–Leninism and Soviet politics after the fall of communism', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 5, 3 (2000), pp. 377–390.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 387.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 389.

45. Jan Rehmann, *Theories of ideology: The powers of alienation and subjection* (Brill, Leiden, 2013), pp. 69–70.

46. Bhikhu Parekh, *Marx's theory of ideology* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, 1982), p. i.

embarking on a national democratic revolution to establish a planned socialist economy free of exploitation of man by man'.⁴⁷ The main principles and assumptions that the TPLF took from Marxism–Leninism include dictatorship of the proletariat, vanguard party with its discipline and centralism, self-determination up to secession, as well as Statist and self-reliant economy. For the TPLF, the recognition of the importance of ideology in politics and state governance goes back to this juncture when the party adopted Marxist–Leninist ideology.

Indeed, Marxism–Leninism was the ideological position borrowed by many of the political actors of the time in Ethiopia—the '*generational efferescence*', as Abbink called it.⁴⁸ There are many scholarly works that have described the adoption of Marxism by TPLF and other political actors in the 1960s and 1970s Ethiopia.⁴⁹ For Abbink, 'obviously, that era was the heyday of Marxist–Socialist critique and revolt', and 'there were deep concerns among the students and emerging educated classes about social injustice, class contradictions, inequality, and poverty in Ethiopia'.⁵⁰ From among these political actors the Dergue, a military committee that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie, took radical measures such as the nationalization of land and industry and the declaration of Ethiopian socialism.⁵¹

At the time, the TPLF leadership admired and were affiliated with the most famous socialist parties in the international system, which included the Soviet Union, China and Albania, in that order. The TPLF had to abandon its admiration for the Soviet Union due to the latter's alliance with the military government in Addis Ababa and had to turn to the Chinese model of new democratic revolution. The TPLF later dismissed the ideological position of the Chinese communist party, pointing out that it cooperates with 'the national bourgeoisie'. Finally the front adopted the Albanian communist model of Enver Hoxha that espoused a particular form of Stalinism.⁵² The Albanian model was taken as an example of a self-reliant development independent of the Soviet Union.⁵³ For Kassahun Berhanu, 'during its formative years, the ideological orientation of the TPLF had been an admixture of militant local nationalism and

47. Berhe, *A political history of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (1975–1991)*, p. 213.

48. Abbink, 'The Ethiopian revolution after 40 years (1974–2014)', p. 337.

49. Bahru Zewde, 'The quest for socialist utopia'; Abbink, 'The Ethiopian revolution after 40 years (1974–2014)'; Berhe, 'The origin of The Tigray People's Liberation Front', Paulos Milkias, 'Ethiopia, the TPLF, and the roots of the 2001 political tremor', *Northeast African Studies* 10, 2 (2003), pp. 13–66.

50. Abbink, 'The Ethiopian Revolution after 40 years (1974–2014)', p. 336.

51. See for example Messay Kebede, 'The civilian left and the radicalisation of the Dergue', *Journal of Developing Societies* 24, 2 (2008), pp. 159–82.

52. Berhe, 'A political history of the Tigray People's Liberation Front'.

53. Clapham, 'The Ethiopian developmental state'.

radical Marxism–Leninism’.⁵⁴ Though the Marxist ideology of the party advocated that workers and the peasantry were the social forces that should take the lead, in practice it was the few TPLF elites who assumed the leadership that used the ideology and party machinery to control the peasantry down to the village level.⁵⁵ The adoption of Marxist–Leninist ideology by a few elements in the TPLF was used to consolidate power and purge others from the leadership.

The revolutionary democratic turn

The second critical juncture was the period between 1989 and 1991 when the party witnessed an ideological shift from Marxism–Leninism to Revolutionary Democracy. This period was accompanied by domestic and global changes. At home the TPLF was preparing to take over state power after 17 years of protracted civil war, and globally the West had won the Cold War. The party adjusted itself to the international system mainly to please the Cold War winning West, by telling Western powers that it had abandoned its Marxist ideological stand. The epitome of this juncture was the journey of Meles Zenawi to Washington DC in 1990, where he gave his speech on the change of the Marxist ideology of the party to Revolutionary democracy.⁵⁶ In the following year, the TPLF issued a liberal political and economic programme, which was given the name Revolutionary Democracy in the next year.

Adopting the ideological jargon of ‘revolutionary democracy’, the party leadership managed to come up with an ideology to maintain its power position in the party, not necessarily changing its core socialist values. Unlike the first juncture, this was an attempt of power concentration at the state level. At best, this ideological claim served to convince the West and confuse the TPLF cadres. Gebru Asrat, a TPLF veteran, revealed in his political memoir that the TPLF told the world that Revolutionary Democracy is ‘not basically different from the typical liberal democracy’ but just a political orientation that emphasized group-based rights given the Ethiopian context.⁵⁷ At the same time Meles told the majority of its cadres at home that it was a political orientation that continues the status quo without altering the original Marxist–Leninist inspiration.⁵⁸ Though the TPLF trained its cadres on issues of Revolutionary Democracy and

54. Kassahun Berhanu, *Returnees, resettlement and power relations: The making of a political constituency in Humera, Ethiopia* (Free University Amsterdam, unpublished PhD dissertation, 2000).

55. Berhe, ‘A political history of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front’.

56. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian revolution 1974–1987: A transformation from an aristocratic to a totalitarian autocracy* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993), p. 362.

57. Asrat, *Sovereignty and democracy in Ethiopia*, p. 124.

58. *Ibid.*

the challenges deriving from imperialism, at the same time it was dealing with the IMF and World Bank, which were understood as imperialist institutions by the party.

According to the Revolutionary Democracy ideology, the party leadership and the party's cadres should direct all aspects of society because of the knowledge they claimed to have about the nature of social development in the country. For Theodore Vestal, Revolutionary Democracy divided Ethiopian society into four traditional communist classes: 'the peasantry, the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, and the comprador class', with a claim that its social foundation is the peasantry.⁵⁹ A veteran of the party underlined that Revolutionary Democracy is 'intrinsically linked to both the ethno-nationalist and ultra-leftist stances of the faction led by Meles Zenawi' in the party.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Revolutionary Democracy called for the market to function but also required strong intervention by the state. The TPLF claimed that the crucial actors that serve the purpose of accomplishing the economic goals of the front were the state and revolutionary democratic forces. The state controls 'key industrial and agricultural enterprises that affect export earnings or the livelihood of large numbers of people', which include 'rail, air, and sea transport, electricity, telephone, and water supply services, the textile industry, engineering works, the chemical industry, metal foundries, and mining'.⁶¹

At the same time, the party accepted some of the policy prescriptions of the international financial institutions and implemented structural reforms including partial privatization, liberalization and deregulation and at the same time pursuing 'liberal market-oriented policies'.⁶² The TPLF managed to negotiate and often convince donors and international financial institutions, though its relations with them were not always cordial. This is demonstrated by Joseph Stiglitz's criticism of the lack of understanding of the Ethiopian economy by the IMF.⁶³ Stiglitz pointed out that 'Ethiopia resisted the IMF's demand that it "opens" its banking system, for good reason', because it has seen the devastating effects of financial market liberalization pushed by IMF in neighboring Kenya that resulted in the failure of 14 local banks, and 'committed to improving the living standards of its citizens in the rural sector'.⁶⁴ In the end, the 'intellectual

59. Theodore M. Vestal, *Ethiopia: A post-cold war African state* (Praeger, London, 1999), p. 64.

60. Berhe, 'The origins of the Tigray People's Liberation Front', pp. 519–592.

61. Vestal, *Ethiopia: A post-cold war African state*, p. 70.

62. See Kassahun Berhanu, 'Ethiopia: The quest for transformation under EPRDF', in Redie Bereketeab (ed.), *National liberation movements as government in Africa* (Routledge, London, 2018), p. 208.

63. Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and its discontents revisited: Anti-globalization in the era of Trump* (W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 2018), pp. 122–133.

64. *Ibid.*, pp. 128–129

lobbying' by Joseph Stiglitz and his colleagues helped solve the estranged relationship between Ethiopia and the IMF and managed to channel more lending and assistance both from IMF and the World Bank.⁶⁵ International backing such as this as well as the reputation of people like Meles Zenawi, heralded as part of a new breed of African leaders, played a significant role in enabling the TPLF to gain access to international resources while not necessarily restricting the control of the state in many sectors of the economy.

According to another veteran of the TPLF, Revolutionary Democracy borrowed from Lenin's 1919 thesis, which in the Ethiopian context was taken as 'a top-down rule by a vanguard party that develops guidelines and dictates those "correct policies"'.⁶⁶ The party believed that Revolutionary Democracy was an effective ideology and political orientation that served as a basis for accelerated economic growth and democracy in Ethiopia for more than two decades.⁶⁷ For Jean-Nicolas Bach, the central strategy of Revolutionary Democracy was democratization from above, where the party recruited members who disseminated the views of the party after being shaped by its ideals and served as vanguards.⁶⁸ In short, Revolutionary Democracy was an orientation inherently leftist with its advancement of a vanguard party, state economic management and group rights. On the last point, Abbink underlines that the 'revolutionary thing' in the party's Revolutionary democracy is an ethnic-based approach to politics where Ethiopians are understood primarily as ethnic subjects, not citizens.⁶⁹ It can be deduced that Revolutionary Democracy was an ideology based on 'Marxist-Leninist-Maoist principles' devised to serve as a bridge towards transforming the Ethiopian political economy to market socialism in the hands of the party.

The turn to the democratic developmental state

The developmental state rhetoric began to appear in the Ethiopian political landscape following the 2001 split within the TPLF and was augmented after the 2005 election.⁷⁰ In yet another creative borrowing, the TPLF

65. *Ibid*, p. 129.

66. Berhe, *A political history of the Tigray People's Liberation Front*.

67. New Vision, 'The TPLF and the people of Tigray in the 40 years of struggle, scarifies and victory', special issue, February 2015. New vision (known in its Amharic name as Addis Ra'ey) is the paper of the EPRDF.

68. Bach, 'Abyotawi democracy', pp. 641–663.

69. Abbink, 'The Ethiopian revolution after 40 years (1974–2014)'.

70. This split was one of the most important rifts that occurred within the leadership of TPLF, which resulted in the 'great purge' of notable leaders from the party. The split had its roots on the position taken by Zenawi on the Eritrean invasion of Ethiopia in 1998. For a detailed discussion, see Milkias, 'Ethiopia, the TPLF, and the roots of the 2001 political tremor'.

became one of the champions of the developmental state, abandoning its claim to Revolutionary Democracy. The ruling party—the EPRDF—at least since 2007 followed what it called a ‘democratic developmental state’ model. In the words of the TPLF/EPRDF ideologue Meles Zenawi, it is the nexus between the ideological and structural components of the developmental state that distinguishes it from other states.⁷¹ Ideologically, the mission of the developmental state project was accelerated development, which served as a source of legitimacy. Its structural component referred to the ‘capacity to implement policy effectively, which is the result of various political, institutional, and technical factors, which in turn are based on the autonomy of the state’.⁷²

In this incarnation, the regime presented poverty as an existential threat, while the answer to this threat was found in developmental state ideology.⁷³ Presenting poverty as an existential threat, for Fana Gebresenbet, is just ‘securitization of development’ that ‘gives credence to the immediate need for wider state powers and the aggressive mobilization of (natural, financial and human) resources’.⁷⁴ In essence, ‘the securitization of development is rationalizing the drive to aggressively extract and mobilize resources as well as increasing the power and stature of the ruling coalition’.⁷⁵ The party-state on the other hand claims that pursuing the democratic developmental state is the only way that may prevent the disintegration of the Ethiopian state. This centralization of decision-making and mobilization of resources by the state goes against the previous decentralization attempts envisaged in establishing a federal system in the country since 1991.⁷⁶ At the local level, the mid-rank and lower officials strictly follow a top-down approach.⁷⁷ In the developmental state rhetoric in general and the Ethiopian version of ‘developmental democracy’ in particular, poverty was taken as an existential threat to the state of Ethiopia and put forward as a justification to an unprecedented economic

71. Meles Zenawi, ‘States and markets: Neoliberal limitations and the case for a developmental state’, in Akbar Noman *et al.* (eds), *Good growth and governance in Africa: Rethinking development strategies* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012), pp. 141–174.

72. *Ibid.* p. 167.

73. See for example Asnake Kefale, ‘Narratives of developmentalism and development in Ethiopia: Some preliminary explorations’ (Paper presented at the European Conference on African Studies, Uppsala, Sweden, 2011).

74. See for example Fana Gebresenbet, ‘Securitisation of development in Ethiopia: The discourse and politics of developmentalism’, *Review of African Political Economy*, 41, s1 (2014), pp. s64–74, p. s66.

75. *Ibid.* p. s64.

76. Aalen and Asnake cited in Fana Gebresenbet, ‘Securitisation of development in Ethiopia’.

77. Rene Lefort, ‘Powers—mengist—and peasants in rural Ethiopia: The May 2005 elections’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 45, 2(2007), pp. 253–273. The article presents a very good summary of and insight into the implementation of the developmental state at farmers’ level and how the party-state is involved in inculcating its development rhetoric.

management by the state through the ruling party. This discursive mutation 'may be a search for a new basis of state/party democracy'.⁷⁸

In this third critical juncture, which was necessitated by the notable split within the TPLF in 2001 following the Ethio-Eritrean war of 1998–2000, ideological discussions once again took centre-stage. Christopher Clapham argues that the Ethio-Eritrean war, other than prompting the split within the TPLF, resulted in 'revealing a common Ethiopian nationalism' and 'drew attention to the need for a national project, transcending ethnic federalism'.⁷⁹ During and following the split in the party, its chairman once again used ideology and other discursive languages such as Bonapartism, to purge dissidents and put himself at the centre of power.⁸⁰ The party underscored that:

EPRDF [the core of which is the TPLF] is different from other developmental states because it combines democracy with developmentalism. That is why the EPRDF line is not only developmental but also 'for the people', revolutionary and democratic. When EPRDF commenced implementing developmentalism in a revolutionary democratic manner, it had easily learned from the vast experience of developmental states concerning economic policy planning (...) Further, the policies of EPRDF very much look like the developmental strategies that countries such as Taiwan followed. As far as democratization is concerned, it is difficult to take up the experiences of the majority of developmental states as they were undemocratic. In this regard, EPRDF has done its homework. Thus, our renewal has played a key role for that. It has presented the strong link between development and democracy.⁸¹

Therefore, as the document portrayed, the party claimed to have chosen a 'developmental line', while the dissenters in the 2001 split of the party were accused of rent-seeking and parasitism. This party document divided its members into a developmental revolutionary democratic camp on one side and a destructive rent-seeking and parasitic camp on the other.⁸² The latter camp was eventually purged from the party.

For Bach, before the 2001 split in the party the ideological machinery centered around Meles Zenawi, Bereket Simon and a few government agencies (such as the Ethiopian News or Press Agencies and the Office of Government Communication Affairs). Following the split, it concentrated in the person of one man.⁸³ Similarly, René Lefort argues that,

Meles and Meles alone devised and relentlessly imposed what became the country's intellectual orthodoxy, preventing the emergence of any independent thinking. He

78. Abbink, 'The Ethiopian Revolution after 40 years (1974–2014)'.

79. Clapham, 'The Ethiopian developmental state', p. 5.

80. For the TPLF, Bonapartism, with its roots in the French history of the nineteenth century, 'meant not following the original revolutionary democratic line'. See Bach, 'Abyotawi democracy', p. 655.

81. EPRDF, 'Development, democracy and revolutionary democracy', p. 113.

82. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

83. Bach, 'Abyotawi democracy'.

transformed the Front into a multi-tentacled channel for the communication of orders from above—penetrating the remotest hamlet—and into an organ of control of the population.⁸⁴

This command and control down to the lowest level of the administration seemed to concentrate power in the hands of the premier who sat at the helm of the party-state. The justification to stay in power (this time around) was the developmental state project. The party argued that the developmental state requires regime stability to oversee the implementation of the developmental state project for a minimum of a few decades. Such strong intervention by the party-state, especially in the economy, has not been welcomed by many Ethiopian observers. For example, Medhane Tadesse points out that ‘at his best, Meles inserted the rudiments of the developmental state in Ethiopia, but at his worst he made it intimidating and suffocating’.⁸⁵ This is especially suffocating because many of the beneficiaries of state development projects are in one way or another related to the political party.⁸⁶

Just as Marxist–Leninist–Maoist ideas were at the heart of revolutionary democracy, Revolutionary Democracy ideas were also at the heart of the developmental state rhetoric in the country. In other words, certain fundamental principles persisted and were instrumental for the continued concentration of power in the hands of the few, as the next section shows.

The semi-ideological threads

In all three critical junctures, it is clear that power tended to concentrate in the hands of the late premier and his cronies, and was supported and legitimized through the ideological manipulation that Meles Zenawi applied throughout the party’s history. As such, it is important to locate some of the constant factors or semi-ideological threads that persisted in the affairs of the party and the party-state, which sustained pragmatic politics disguised with ideological claims.

Since its inception in 1975, some concepts have remained constant for the TPLF. These include ethnicity, vanguard leadership, and a statist

84. Rene Lefort, ‘Ethiopia after its electoral drama: second “renewal” imminent?’, *OpenDemocracy*, 7 July 2015, <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/ren%C3%A9-lefort/ethiopia-after-its-electoral-drama-second-%E2%80%9Crenewal%E2%80%9D-imminent>> (2 August 2018).

85. Medhane Tadesse, ‘Meles Zenawi and the Ethiopian State’, *ethiopiafirst.info*, 24 October 2012, <<http://www.ethiopiafirst.info/news/Documents/Meles-Zenawi-and-the-Ethiopian-State.pdf>> (9 July 2018).

86. For party affiliated companies see Berhanu Abegaz, ‘Political parties in business: Rent seekers, developmentalists, or both?’ *Journal of Development Studies* 49, 11 (2013), pp. 1467–1483; for the party’s role in creating rural vanguard elites in Ethiopia see René Lefort, ‘Free market economy, “developmental state” and party-state hegemony in Ethiopia: The case of the “model farmers”’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 50, 4 (2012), pp. 681–706.

economy. The idea of ethnicity was tied to the claims that national oppression has existed in Ethiopia and that the Tigrean ethnic group was discriminated against. The political solution to address this 'ethnic question' made the party take the ideological position of advocating group rights over individual rights. The implication of this was the resurgence of the 'lost prestige' of the Tigrean ethnic group, politically and economically. Undeniably, ethnonationalism was used for group mobilization during the 17 years of civil war that the front waged against the military regime.

The idea of vanguard leadership, informed by Marxist–Leninism, in practice involved power being controlled by the vanguard party and the top echelon of the party and the party-state, who often smartly played within the party framework.⁸⁷ One of the central principles applied by the TPLF, and later by EPRDF, was democratic centralism, which remains instrumental to the emergence of ideas and their dissemination from the centre. According to John Markakis, though the purpose of democratic centralism in theory was preventing factionalism, in practice it served the TPLF/EPRDF leadership to discipline members from any challenge within the party.⁸⁸ To ensure party discipline, 'self-criticism' sessions in which members criticized themselves and others were used periodically. This mechanism of control was an important tool to purge dissident party and government officials. These 'criticism and self-criticism sessions' would suggest a level of internal openness of the party.⁸⁹ In any case, the implication of vanguard leadership for domination is obvious: a party that wants to rule forever, unhindered by any political processes.

The idea of a statist economy was present throughout the ideological shifts. The continuous claim to an anti-liberal view in ideological rhetoric or the concealed application of liberal policies had far-fetched implications for both policy and practice. The rhetoric of the TPLF, especially since assuming state power in 1991 (i.e. under the Revolutionary Democracy and Democratic Developmental State ideologies), has been half-hearted acceptance of liberal views in the economic sphere and not so much in politics. According to Dagnachew Assefa, the contradiction and incoherence inherent in these cosmetic ideological shifts relate to the syncretism of various ideologies with local beliefs observable in the party's rhetoric, which for him has three dimensions.

First, it has a Marxian colour, and their [party elites'] ideological claims have some traces of Marxism. Secondly, it also takes politics as a distinction between friend and foe, as in

87. The real politics amongst the top leadership includes manipulation of allegiances based on blood ties and marriage as well as using state institutions and influence in the country.

88. John Markakis, *Ethiopia: The last two frontiers* (Boydell & Brewer Ltd., London, 2011), p. 244.

89. I owe this addition to one of the anonymous reviewers of this article.

Carl Schmitt's axiom. The party leadership and members create friend and foe along the way—it is a mindset and metaphysical as such. If they don't have anyone to call an enemy, they are calling poverty an enemy. Third, for them, there is one correct question and one correct answer. So, this has a very serious implication—it prohibits any other narrative. These are the pillars of TPLF ideologies, I would say.⁹⁰

Thus, it seems that the ideas borrowed from these ideologies have been syncretized with the values of the party leadership and its cadres. Dagnachew argues that syncretism captures the pragmatic nature of the party embedded within the context of 'Africanist and [even] Tigrean' beliefs.⁹¹

For the late premier Meles Zenawi, the last ideological claim, of the Democratic Developmental State, can be applied in a way that Ethiopia will be a developmental state and at the same time democratic. As part of a democratic developmental state project, Meles and his party claimed that Ethiopia would be developmental like South Korea and Taiwan, and incorporated a form of democratic governance that was not quite like the experience of other developmental states. Given the records of the party, the usage of democracy in both revolutionary democracy and democratic developmental state is an oxymoron. Claiming to be democratic and revolutionary at the same time looks like claiming to be democratic and developmental at the same time especially when viewed from the history of the political economy of Ethiopia under TPLF. In terms of governance, the authoritarian nature of the regime starting from its emergence has been repeatedly documented by researchers and human rights organizations. In terms of political economy, in 'revolutionary democratic years', the party-state undertook some liberalization and deregulation attempts but not in any meaningful way. The sectors that were not liberalized include telecommunications, finance, and utilities, among others.

Furthermore, as Abbink points out, the EPRDF regime continued the 'policy of state ownership of all land' of its predecessor Dergue regime.⁹² For Tom Lavers, though state ownership of land is still the predominant form, in reality the land tenure system is ambiguous due to competing rationales in Ethiopia's ethnic federalism.⁹³ For Abbink, the regime has even recently extended state ownership to urban land as stipulated in the urban land lease holding proclamation of 2011.⁹⁴ Now private plots will become the property of the state upon the sale of a house 'which is

90. Interview, Dagnachew Assefa, public intellectual in Ethiopia, 25 February 2016, Addis Ababa.

91. *Ibid.*

92. Abbink, 'The Ethiopian revolution after 40 years (1974–2014)', p. 345.

93. Tom Lavers, 'Responding to land-based conflict in Ethiopia: The land rights of ethnic minorities under federalism', *African Affairs* 117, 468 (2018), pp. 462–484.

94. Abbink, 'The Ethiopian revolution after 40 years (1974–2014)'.

unprecedented in Africa'.⁹⁵ The regime thus advocated and led an economy where the state and the party controlled the commanding heights of the economy. In the democratic developmental state years, Meles Zenawi argued that 'a developmental state should monopolize rents and allocate them strategically for value creation over the long-term'.⁹⁶ However in practice, it is the so-called revolutionary democratic forces and more specifically party and military enterprises as well as 'developmental capitalists' that have been monopolizing rents with unreserved support by the party-state as the fundamental players in the economy.⁹⁷

In sum, the persistence of left-leaning political principles that range from a Stalinist definition of self-determination of nations and nationalities to a strong allegiance to the developmental state explains the nature and characteristics of TPLF's policies and practices. Here, left-leaning principles are understood as the socialist ideals that are identifiable in ethnonationalism, Marxism–Leninism, and revolutionary democracy. The last ideological claim, the democratic developmental state, has served as a rhetorical tool to strengthen the state-led and party-dominated economic and business environment. For Toni Weis, the nature of EPRDF's political economy can be characterized as 'vanguard capitalism', since the emerging capitalist system of the country is 'distinct from the free-market capitalism promoted under structural adjustment and from the crony capitalism that was its result in other African countries, but also from the bureaucratic state capitalism of the East Asian economies'.⁹⁸ For him, this form of capitalism 'focuses on the monopolization of state–society relations by a revolutionary movement party and the creation, capture, and strategic use of rents by the administration it leads'.⁹⁹

The various shades of leftist ideological claims facilitated the concentration of power in the hands of party leadership and its cadres, democratic-centralist principles of governance, and the close administration of the economy. The semi-ideological constant factors have so far been the instruments of power concentration, and the most recent ideological turn to the democratic developmental state is not any different but only adds to the same old vision of the party-state. These threads that continued throughout the life of the TPLF and EPRDF are the most important

95. *Ibid.*

96. Waal, *The real politics of the horn in Africa*, p. 164.

97. For a discussion of party and business elites, see Gebregziabher and Hout, 'The rise of oligarchy in Ethiopia'. For a discussion of military business in Ethiopia, see Tefera N. Gebregziabher, 'Soldiers in business: The pitfalls of METEC's projects in the context of Ethiopia's civil-military relations', *Review of African Political Economy*, forthcoming.

98. Toni Weis, *Vanguard capitalism: Party, state and market in the EPRDF's Ethiopia* (University of Oxford, unpublished PhD dissertation, 2016), p. 77.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

notions that persisted under the cosmetic shifts of ideologies, which underlined power and domination in TPLF's Ethiopia.

Conclusion

Through an investigation of the ideological sedimentation of the TPLF, this article has located the agency, the turning points and the ideas that lingered in the history of the party. It concludes that the ideological kernel has remained ethnonationalism groomed with Marxism–Leninism. The article also showed that the four ideologies of the party played a significant role in consolidating power both within the party and the party-state, yet they never managed to be hegemonic. It was only a very few party cadres at the top of party leadership who could convincingly explain the ideologies and their changes, and the rest of the party membership and the society at large had little knowledge or interest in them. The party that advocated state intervention in the economy, reciting leftist ideologies and then the 'democratic developmental state', remained an ethnic vanguard party, and Ethiopia an ethnic vanguard party-state.

This situation may be changing. The death of the TPLF ideologue Meles Zenawi, and more crucially the unprecedented protest by the Ethiopian youth (mainly from Oromo, Amhara and Gurage ethnic groups), the 'in-party' fighting that the Oromos and Amharas are winning within the EPRDF coalition, and the ascendance of Abiy Ahmed, pushed the EPRDF and perhaps the TPLF to yet another critical juncture. It is not yet clear if Abiy is after all a 'painkiller, placebo or cure' for the ensuing political crisis in the country.¹⁰⁰ In any case a new form of politics and ideological shift appears to be emerging under the leadership of Abiy Ahmed, but it is too early to see a clearly articulated ideological position other than the 'vague vision of medemer (Ahmaric for summation, or addition)'.¹⁰¹

Yet, as for TPLF's Ethiopia, what is new is not the use of ideology to win an internal power struggle per se but the consistent attempt to capture the national economy. Ethnic oppression was used to mobilize the people of Tigray during the armed struggle by the party in the guise of ethnonationalism, and later it was the 'eradication of poverty' in the name of the developmental state project. The full consequences of capitalizing on ethnic victimhood by the TPLF and the haphazard institutionalization of ethnic federalism are yet to be assessed in their full dimensions. Indeed, post-1991 Ethiopia is replete with ethnic conflict in parts of the country. Ideological alternatives may be emerging, as the political space seems to

100. Fisher and Gebrewahd, "Game over?" pp. 12–13.

101. *Ibid.*

be amenable to open political debates. The outcome of the open political space that Abiy's leadership has offered will depend on how the various political forces genuinely come forth, debate and forge a new form of politics in the country.

For now, two ideological givens have lingered. The first is the ethnicization of politics that created and perpetuated deep divisions in Ethiopian society. The most recent political developments in the country at the beginning of 2018 and the ascendance of the new prime minister from the OPDO might reverse the politics of ethnicity, which would be a daunting task in a regime that sponsored ethnicization for close to three decades. The second semi-ideological given that lingered is the vanguard party-state that created the economic muscle of the TPLF through its party-businesses and those 'developmental capitalists' favoured throughout its reign. However, this may be challenged from within the ruling coalition as Abiy Ahmed seeks a more liberalized economy. The recent central committee decision to privatize critical public enterprises and public projects is a clear indication of this challenge. A shift in the economic management of the country will very much depend on how much it will be shaped by both the reformists headed by Abiy and other political and economic actors as well as the populace at large. The major structural economic issues such as unemployment, inefficient public investment and opportunistic private investment, huge problems in the tax regime, as well as issues related to competitiveness and productivity that shackled the EPRDF regime are still around and need to be tackled.¹⁰² A fourth critical juncture, from 2015 to 2018, is emerging within the EPRDF and the TPLF, as important changes are observable in the rhetoric and some decisions of the EPRDF since the change of its leadership.

102. Getachew T. Alemu, 'How to address the five structural economic issues a transitioning Ethiopia', *Addis Standard*, 2 February 2019, <<https://addisstandard.com/economic-commentary-how-to-address-the-five-structural-economic-issues-confronting-a-transitioning-ethiopia>> (1 February 2019).