



Discussing the 2018/19 Changes in Ethiopia: Hone Mandefro

Logan Cochrane^{1,2} and Hone Mandefro^{3,4}

¹ Hawassa University, Ethiopia

² Carleton University, Canada

³ Concordia University, Canada

⁴ University of Gondar, Ethiopia

The Nokoko journal is committed to a world where people are free from all forms of oppression and exploitation, where respect for individuals' varied differences is maintained, and where everyone can realise their full potentials. NokokoPod is a companion to the journal, covering current African issues. It aims to bring forth new perspectives that broaden, trouble, complicate and enrich current discourses. Edited and annotated versions of the conversations will be made available on the journal website.

This is the second podcast, of three,¹ in a series that discusses the changes that have taken place in Ethiopia since 2018; changes which have raised many hopes as being transformational, while also many questions. This conversation occurred over Skype on March 2, 2019, with Logan Cochrane based in Ottawa and Hone Mandefro in Montreal. The podcast for this discussion is available on the Nokoko journal website. This version of the PDF has been reviewed by Logan Cochrane and Hone Mandefro. In addition to the conversation, a set of annotations have been added as

¹ The other two podcasts are:

Cochrane, L. and Bahru Zewde (2018) Discussing the 2018/19 Changes in Ethiopia: Bahru Zewde. NokokoPod 2019 (1): 1-16.

Cochrane, L. and Asnake Kefale (2018) Discussing the 2018/19 Changes in Ethiopia: Asnake Kefale. NokokoPod 2019 (3): 1-16.

footnotes so as to strengthen the value of these publications and enable them to act as a resource for listeners and readers who want to have additional context and/or find additional resources on the topics discussed.

Logan: Many people are interested in what is happening in Ethiopia given all the changes that are taking place in the last year. This discussion is part of a series that explores these changes from different perspectives. Welcome to our second discussion on the changes occurring in Ethiopia Today, Hone Mandefro has joined us. Our first guest brought us a historical perspective. Hone comes with a much different background. Academically, his origins are in social work and development studies. While he is faculty at the University of Gondar, he utilizes his knowledge and skills beyond the university as an advocate for social change and community engagement. I'm also looking forward to speaking with Hone as he brings perspectives from the youth, having recently held some discussions with youth² and being actively engaged with them, as this brings out important perspectives, particularly regarding how the changes occurred in Ethiopia over the last few years. I am very glad you could be with us here today. Thank you for joining us.

Hone: Thank you for having me.

Logan: Let me open with a recent quote from The Financial Times that was published on February 20th, 2019.³ It describes that in less than a year, Prime Minister Abiy has “overseen the swiftest political liberalisation in Ethiopia’s more than 2,000-year history. He has made peace with Eritrea; freed 60,000 political prisoners, including every journalist previously detained; unbanned opposition groups once deemed terrorist organisations; and appointed women to half his cabinet. He has pledged free elections in 2020 and made a prominent opposition activist head of the electoral commission. In a country where government spies were ubiquitous, people feel free to express opinions that a year ago would have had them clapped in jail.” Before we discuss the changes of 2018/19, could you speak to

2 Amharic version of talk available here:

<https://www.facebook.com/AddisMieraffForum/videos/vb.516809071763053/624533294652859/?type=2&theater>

3 “Ethiopia’s Abiy Ahmed: Africa’s New Talisman” by David Pilling and Lionel Barber, Financial Times (20 Feb 2019) <https://www.ft.com/content/abe678b6-346f-11e9-bb0c-42459962a812>

what has led us to all of these changes that the Financial Times just described?

Hone: I think there were a number of factors that ultimately resulted in the change. Some of them structural, some of them more related to events that happened right before Abiy came to power.

On a broader structural sense, the EPRDF⁴ has been advocating for both ethnic federalism policy and lately, especially after the Ethiopian Millennium (2008), a developmental state policy. In my understanding, those two ideologies, as much as both are important to the party, they were not in agreement with each other and required a different set of policy actions, which made the party and the government vulnerable. An example could be, for instance, ethnic federalism requires the regional state⁵ bodies to be in control of their own affairs while a developmental state requires the central government to be very prominent in directing policy and program actions all over the country. An important element of self-administration and ethnic federalism, for instance, is the issue of land where the ownership of land is considered as an integral part of exercising the right to self-govern, but also if there is a need for secession.⁶ In that case, there has to be a boundary mark so land should be owned by the nations, nationalities and peoples (not the federal government). That is how the government has been advocating in its earlier days,⁷ but later on when the government wanted to have more say in distributing land for investment, they required regional state governments and lawmakers to give delegation of land administration from their regional state to the federal government. Thereafter, a whole institutional set-up was developed at the federal government level to distribute land. This has been an issue of contention for some regional states, like Oromia and Gambella (see Figure 1), where there has been resentment regarding how the land was distributed and how both local investors and investors from abroad were grabbing land and displacing

4 EPRDF: Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front, ruling coalition of Ethiopia since 1991.

5 Ethiopia is a federal government. The regional states that are referred to exist within the federal structure, which were (at least to a degree) divided based on ethno-linguistic lines (as discussed below).

6 The constitution grants the nations, nationalities and peoples of the country the right to self-administration, up to and including the right to secession.

7 Meaning in the post-1991 period after taking power, and throughout the 1990s.

community members.⁸ This is one demonstration of the tension between the requirement of having a strong, centralized developmental state viz-a-viz an ethnic federalism structure, where, by the law, government power is divided between regional states and a central federal government.

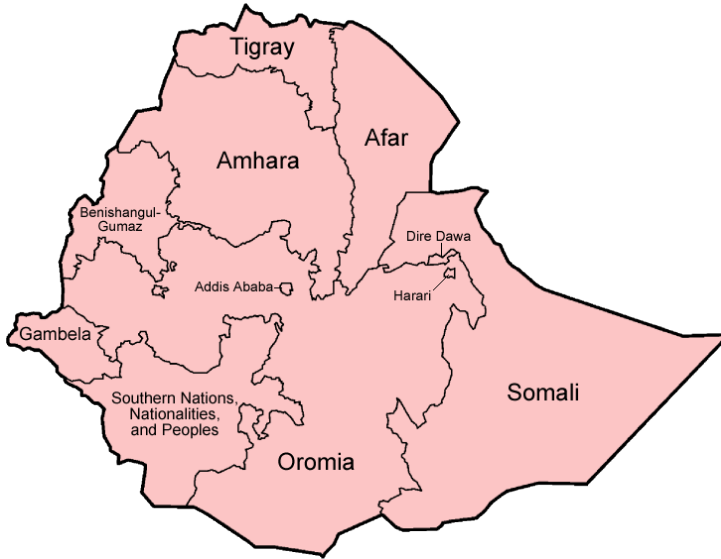


Figure 1: Regional States and City Administrations of Ethiopia

8 See, for example (chronologically):

Rahmato, D. 2011. Land to Investors: Large-scale land transfers in Ethiopia.

Abbink, J. 2011. 'Land to the Foreigners': Economic, Legal, and Socio-Cultural Aspects of New Land Acquisitions Schemes in Ethiopia. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 29: 513-535.

Lavers, T. 2012. 'Land Grab' as Development Strategy? The Political Economy of Agricultural Investment in Ethiopia. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39: 105-132.

Makki, F. 2014. Development by Dispossession: Terra Nullius and the Socio-Ecology of New Enclosures in Ethiopia. *Rural Sociology* 79: 79-103.

Cochrane, L. and Skjerdal, T. (2015). Reading the Narratives: Resettlement, Investment and Development in Ethiopia. *Forum for Development Studies*. 42(3): 467-487.

Moreda, T. 2016. Large-Scale Land Acquisitions, State Authority and Indigenous Local Communities: Insights from Ethiopia. *Third World Quarterly* 38: 698-716.

Within the party line there has also been contention. For instance, in the developmental state narrative the focus is on delivering, and forging partnerships to deliver development outcomes, while within ethnic federalism the parties (of the regional states) were supposed to advocate for their own nations, nationalities and peoples. Sometimes these two ideologies do not line up with each other. Another example of this is the Addis Ababa Master Plan case,⁹ where technically, from the developmental state ideology perspective, the integration between Addis Ababa and the surrounding Zones in Oromia regional state is beneficial for both. The Master Plan proposed an integrated development project, co-planning and co-implementing these development projects and infrastructure projects, which, as long as it was done properly and in consultation with the surrounding communities, is a good plan. However, there was already an issue of mistrust with the federal government in the earlier dealings about land where the community members in Oromia regional state accused the federal government of taking land and distributing it, and also pushing the boundaries of Addis Ababa (taking land from Oromia regional state and putting it under the control of the federally-administered city administration of Addis Ababa). Thus, the federal government was never trusted when it proposed to have this integrated development project, but instead it was presented as a way of taking more land from the Oromia regional state and annexing it into Addis Ababa. In the end, it led to a discussion where the then OPDO, now ODP, was accused of selling the interest of the people of Oromia regional state to the federal government and others.¹⁰ The Oromo protests then erupted, which basically resulted in the cancellation of the Master Plan, but it also went beyond that to demanding political power change, and eventually a call for overthrowing the government.

While that was on-going (issues related to the Addis Ababa Master Plan, and resulting protests), the Amhara regional state also had a long history of resentment and marginalization from the federal government. It also had issues with border boundaries, and specifically some areas in Wollo and North Gondar, as well as border

9 See: Chala, E. 2016. Ethiopia Scraps Addis Ababa 'Master Plan' After Protests Kill 140. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/14/ethiopia-addis-master-plan-abandoned>

10 OPDO: Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (founded in 1990)

ODP: Oromo Democratic Party (new party name, as of September 2018)

areas in Tigray regional state (e.g. Welkait).¹¹ There was also sentiment that the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), which is now the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP), was not representing and advocating the interests of the Amhara people. This led to what is now described as the 'Amhara resistance', which started in Gondar and called for proper representation of Amhara in the federal power structure and also a re-drawing of the boundaries between Amhara regional state and Tigray regional state. Due to these ethno-linguistic identity questions, people felt they had been continuously subjected to oppression. This struggle overlapped with the later part of the Oromo protest movement, which coupled with the other protests (including in the Southern regional state), led to the realization within the EPRDF that they could not crush the growing protests as they used to do in the past, and that there had to be a change within the party.

The idea that change was needed was not new per se, there were some discussions within the party for some time. For example, some have said that Bereket Simon,¹² who was a prominent ideological source for the party, had been warning the party that there is a growing dissatisfaction among the people and that the party needed to reverse their direction and stop disregarding the questions being raised. By 2016/17, within EPRDF there was a realization that things could not proceed as they were, and that there had to be a new approach. This led to weeks of discussion within the party, which resulted in a change of leadership with the EPRDF where the then Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigned and Abiy came to

11 Welkait was historically changed administrative boundaries and within which greater administrative area it existed. The dominant narrative is that the area was historically been home to Tigray people and that was included within the Tigray regional state when borders were drawn on ethno-linguistic lines. This has been an issue of great contention, both on historical grounds of administrative control, and on demographic grounds.

12 Bereket Simon resigned in October 2017, amidst the protests and heavy-handed government crackdown. In 2019, Bereket was arrested on charges related to corruption.

power.¹³ I think an important element in this whole history is that before Meles Zenawi died, whenever protests emerged or when resistance happened, Meles was very effective in articulating strategies to attack and silence the population.¹⁴ However, once Meles passed away there was a power vacuum and the party was thereafter in disorientation. The four member parties, which were the coalition of the EPRDF, were in competition with each other and there was no unifying figure, as Meles was (who could control the party structure).

Some party members, like the OPDO, felt that this was a moment – the vacuum of power – a point in history where they could be more assertive and challenge the TPLF.¹⁵ As a result, they would be able to change the EPRDF as a party and as a government. The OPDO eventually took over the questions from the protesters, and endorsed those questions, such as calling for the cancellation of the Addis Ababa Master Plan. OPDO members took that questions and presented themselves as change agents and advocated for change. That is how Abiy came to power, because they were perceived as change agents within EPRDF. Furthermore, there was widespread agreement that there was no one else who could be in charge, other than the EPRDF, because the opposition had been very much weakened and they did not have any significant base to build their government. I think there was qualified support for a change agent within the EPRDF, and that enabled Abiy to launch those kinds of reforms that you just described as soon as he came to

13 Dr. Hailemariam Desalegn was the Prime Minister from 2012 to 2018, he followed Meles Zenawi, who had (effectively) ruled the country since 1991. Dr. Hailemariam resigned on February 15th, 2018. Dr. Abiy Ahmed Ali formally took the role of Prime Minister on April 2nd, 2018. There was much discussion and debate during the interim period, and great uncertainty amongst the general population, about who would take the leadership of the country following the resignation of Dr. Hailemariam. The rise of Dr. Abiy as Prime Minister was not a foregone conclusion at the time of the resignation of Dr. Hailemariam.

14 Meles Zenawi died on August 20th, 2012. He had effectively been ruling the country since 1991, first as head of the EPRDF since 1991, as President of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia from 1991 to 1995, and then as Prime Minister from 1995 until his unexpected death in 2012.

15 TPLF: The Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front was the leading party of the EPRDF ruling coalition. The TPLF has long been accused of prioritizing their own people and region, as they held a disproportionate number of positions in federal government. Part of the resentment that was expressed during the protest movements (and afterward) was directed at the TPLF, and at times more broadly of all Tigray people.

power.

Logan: As you have been speaking, it sounds as though two of the roots underneath these changes is the tension between ethnic federalism and the developmental state. Could you start by telling us a bit more about ethnic-federalism?

Hone: Ethnic-federalism in the Ethiopian context means that ethnic groups are given a right to administer themselves. They have collective rights of self-determination. When the EPRDF came to power in 1991, which was later codified in the constitutions of 1995, the borders were re-drawn along ethno-linguistic lines to establish the ethno-linguistic regional states. This does not mean that every ethno-linguistic group was granted its own regional state, however most of the dominant ethnic groups were granted their own regional state, such as the Amhara, Oromo, Tigray and Somali. Ethnic federalism entails regional governments within the federal state, and within Ethiopia these regions are established along ethno-linguistic groups. Secondly, the federalism element means that the regional state governments are co-governing Ethiopia. In a sense, there is a power sharing system between the regional state governments and the federal government. The regional state governments have their own police, their own parliament, their own justice system and they have the freedom to decide on their own language; some regional states use Amharic (federal language) but others use their own languages. Such as in Oromia, the working language is Oromiffa, in Tigray it is Tigrinya, and in Somali it is Somali.

Thus, ethnic federalism is a federal arrangement as is practiced in many other countries, but what is unique in the Ethiopian context is that the elements of the state are ethno-linguistic regional states. This means that people who live in a particular region are dominated by a particular ethno-linguistic group. For instance, the Amhara are dominant in the Amhara regional state, the Tigray in the Tigray regional state, the Oromo in the Oromia regional state, and therefore the parties that rule in those regions are expected to advocate for the interests of the people of that region. As a result, it is a dual role of advocating for their own regional state, while also still serving as part of the federal government and advocating for the whole country. These two roles are not always in line. Sometimes, as was the case with the question of land, there is competition among ethnic groups, which resulted in competition at the federal level for resources and power. This has been a source of conflict within the

EPRDF party and also in the broader Ethiopian society.

Logan: You also mentioned the Ethiopian developmental state. Can you summarize what that is?¹⁶

Hone: The Ethiopian developmental state is still an aspiration, but historically the EPRDF was a leftist party that only adopted capitalism when it came to power in 1991 – not by choice, but by necessity, as documented by their own party publications. When the EPRDF came to power, they realized that the socialist block that they were apart of (as a supporter of and being supported by) was dismantled. The West, led by the United States of America, had won the Cold War. As a result, the EPRDF could no longer advocate for the socialist policies and receive aid from western countries. At this time, aid was crucial because the Ethiopian economy was weak and there was no way to govern the country without substantial aid from external countries. To receive that necessary aid, they had to align themselves ideologically, and therefore they started to adopt capitalist or liberal policies. However, the party structure was still left wing, and in fact, some elements of the party opposed the move to right wing policies or liberal policies. This was a part of the

16 For additional readings on the Ethiopian developmental state, see:

Vaughan, S. (2011). Revolutionary democratic state-building: Party, state and people in the EPRDF's Ethiopia. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5(4), 619-640.

de Waal, A. (2012). The theory and practice of Meles Zenawi. *African Affairs*, 112(446), 148-155.

Lefort, R. (2013). The theory and practice of Meles Zenawi: A response to Alex de Waal. *African Affairs*, 112(448), 460-470.

Fantini, E. (2013). Developmental state, economic transformation and social diversification in Ethiopia. ISPI Analysis No. 163. Milan: ISPI.

Panel, S. (2014). A view of a bureaucratic developmental state: Local governance and agricultural extension in rural Ethiopia. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 8(3), 420-437.

Clapham, C. (2017). The Ethiopian developmental state. *Third World Quarterly*, 39, 1151-1165 <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1328982>

Dejene, M. and Cochrane, L. (2019) Ethiopia's Developmental State: A Building Stability Framework Assessment. *Development Policy Review*.

disagreement within the TPLF when Siye Abraha¹⁷ and his supporters accused the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of abandoning the cause they fought for, which was building a socialist Ethiopia. In either case, Meles himself was a leftist advocator and that led him to be attracted to the Chinese and other East Asian countries economic development model, which was the developmental state model. Thus, part of the reason the EPRDF adopted the developmental state narrative was that it gave them a chance to emphasize some of the leftist policy inclinations they held.

In terms of policy, the developmental state aims to transform the economy from an agricultural-based economy to an industrial one, and in the process the state plays a critical role in guiding the market. The developmental state in terms of policy and practice is about the state playing a crucial role in governing the market and supporting investment. An important element is the state's crucial role in supporting investments that are of national significance and providing protection for some sectors, such as banking and manufacturing. This is so sectors and investors can be protected from competition from Western companies until they develop competitive capacity. In the experience of the developmental state, its implementation and influence has varied over the years. As such, it is very difficult to characterize the developmental state in terms of what it has been doing. However, firstly, what it should be doing is a crucial component, and what that entails is protecting infant industries until they develop competition power and, secondly, continuously supporting investors so that they invest in strategic sectors, such as manufacturing (as opposed to sectors that might only offer short-term benefits and profit making while not altering the structural composition of the economy over the long-term). I think Meles was advocating for this structural transformation, and there were a series of plans, such as the Growth and Transformation Plans,¹⁸ where the main focus of the government was to transform the country from an agrarian based one into an industrial one. To support this, there were efforts to develop industrial parks and large

17 Siye Abraha was one of the founders of the TPFL. Siye later went on to found the Forum for Democratic Dialogue, which would become a member party of the opposition coalition Unity for Democracy and Justice Party.

18 The first Growth and Transformation Plan (2011-2015) and the second Growth and Transformation Plan (2016-2020) outlined detailed plans for how this economic transformation would be enabled. In both, the state has played a strong role in facilitating the desired changes.

investments in infrastructure, as well as efforts to expand human capital by investing heavily in the education sector. These are some of the characteristics of the Ethiopian developmental state. In these regards, the Ethiopian developmental state is not particularly unique, but akin to other developmental state models, such as in East Asia. And in the case of the EPRDF, emulating them and adopting the practices have proven effective.

Logan: In a recent talk that you gave with youth,¹⁹ you spoke about some of the potential tensions between these two orientations; between a decentralized ethnic federalism and a more centralized developmental state. Could you elaborate on that for us?

Hone: The developmental state requires that the federal government should play a strong role in guiding the market, and for that to happen the federal government needs to have strong policy and programmatic power. Whereas, ethnic federalism requires those powers to be shared and decentralized to the regional state governments. These two approaches are sometimes contradictory. In the early days, the EPRDF advocated primarily for ethnic federalism, so there was not much of a problem. However, later on (after 2008), the EPRDF appears to have become much more inclined to the developmental state and that is how the party structure moved away from the discourse of nations, nationalities and peoples and toward a developmental state narrative. This shift resulted in some policy changes, such as Meles (then Prime Minister) becoming a more central figure, in terms of ideology as well as power. Thereafter, the federal government became more heavily involved in regional state affairs, to the extent of appointing regional state Presidents, such as in Gambella and Afar (see Figure 1). As outlined already, this included the federal government (re)taking more power to facilitate investment decisions in some areas, such as in distributing and administering land. This led to resentment among some parties.²⁰ The federal government was accused of interfering with regional state affairs, which is how the Addis Ababa Master Plan was presented.

19 Amharic version of talk available here:
<https://www.facebook.com/AddisMierafForum/videos/vb.516809071763053/624533294652859/?type=2&theater>

20 Meaning member parties of regional state governments.

In summary, there are a number of elements that demonstrate the tension between ethnic federalism and the developmental state. The first was the Addis Ababa Master Plan, where the developmental state approached the issue as Addis Ababa, and the Zones from the regional state were supposed to integrate and facilitate investment and development in a broader sense. While, from the ethnic federalism approach, the Oromia regional state needs to be in greater control regarding the decisions about the land. For me, the Oromo protests that erupted out of the Addis Ababa Master Plan is a clear indication of the tension between ethnic federalism and the developmental state. The developmental state required broader integration whereas ethnic federalism requires more decentralization of power and autonomy. The resentment that emerged out of the Addis Ababa Master Plan was due to a contradiction between the two policy prescriptions.

However, there were also other elements, such as METEC,²¹ which was a military wing that was established in 2010, to be an agency for overseeing the process of transforming, and establishing an industrial base for the economy. METEC was supposed to serve as a federal agency that oversaw the industrialization process of the economy. It played a big role in starting some initiatives, such as manufacturing electronic equipment and also machines that were meant to transform the electric power sector. It has also worked on fabricating drones and other technologies. However, historically, the military was under the heavy influence of the Tigray military generals, and METEC fell into practices of ethnic patronage. The generals, as we learned recently,²² were involved in systematic corruption. What enabled this high-level of corruption was that it was dominated by one particular ethnic group. In this case, as there was competition amongst the ethnic groups, the Tigray strategy of gaining power was through control of the military, and thereafter negotiating with the other ethnic groups.

On the one hand (and informally), METEC was used to ensure Tigrayans were competitive in the resource competition, while on the other hand it was expected to be an agency that would oversee the

21 The Metals and Engineering Corporation (METEC) is a military-run corporation.

22 Since the coming of Prime Minister Abiy, METEC contracts have been cancelled and a number of its employees have been arrested on charges of corruption. For more information, see: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-metec-factbox/factbox-what-is-ethiopia-metec-idUSKCN1NJ2C2>

industrialization of the economy, as per the developmental state model. Again, we see the aspirations of turning the economy into an industrial power, through METEC, fall into ethnic patronage because of the existing power competition that came out of ethnic federalism, and resulting ethnic competition among different groups in Ethiopia. The Oromo protest that erupted out of the Addis Ababa Master Plan, and the fact that METEC fell into ethnic patronage (for making and redistributing wealth),²³ are indications that there were contradictions between the two ideologies.

The assumption in the case of the developmental state is that the federal and regional state parties are committed to national development, whereas within ethnic federalism the regional state parties are expected to make sure that the interests of a particular ethnic group are maintained and advanced through the party structure and the federal government structure. Imagine if I go to Ethiopia as an investor and start to deal with the government. The developmental state model would assume that the federal government would decide where I invest based on the efficiency regarding where the investment would be more helpful for the national economy. Whereas, the ethnic federalism model assumes that the particular individual official I am dealing with as an external investor is supposed to, and expected to, work to bring more investment to that particular region that they are from. As a result, such an official will advocate for investment in the regional state where that official is from. This is exactly what has happened in some cases where external investors were told to go to some regional states where the investment was not feasible, but politically it was attractive for the people who were dealing with investors because it would give them more legitimacy in promoting a narrative that they were bringing more investment to that particular regional state. As a result, there are many ways when these contradictions emerge we look at the decision making process regarding investment. For the developmental state, the primary criteria are feasibility and efficiency, whereas in the ethnic federalism model, the regional state parties are competing to bring more investors to their own particular region.

23 There are allegations that in addition to corruption, there was also ethnic favoritism in that investment was directed to the Tigray regional state disproportionately.

We have also seen this contradiction in the issue of hiring and promotion with the government system. The developmental state requires a meritocracy in the bureaucracy. Essentially, the best and most qualified should lead the bureaucracy. Whereas, within ethnic federalism, talks of re-balancing the ethnic composition of the federal bureaucracy (e.g. ensuring proper representation of all ethnic groups). There was a project to do just this, where some people were expelled from the federal government for the sake of proper representation and re-balancing. This runs against the assumption within the developmental state that the best, those with the greatest expertise, should lead and play a crucial role in the government. In fact, they say that the politicians' role, within the developmental state model, is to protect the experts and give them freedom so that they can pilot and implement policies that will help the economy develop. In this case we see that not only is the bureaucracy not merit-based, but it is actively being influenced to reflect ethnic representation of the different nations, nationalities and peoples of the country. In this process, merit is a secondary concern. As these examples demonstrate, there are instances where the developmental state ideology and ethnic federalism offer contradictory prescriptions, and I think the continued vulnerability that the EPRDF has experienced is partly because of this. At some point, the party was sandwiched between having the best bureaucracy and having proper representation. It has been a pendulum; sometimes toward the developmental state prescription, and sometimes toward ethnic federalism. What has led to the reforms, in my opinion, is the tension between the two. It seems now the ethnic federalism discourse is becoming the preferred of the two, but we will come back to that later on.

Logan: In the Financial Times quote that I opened with, it covered many of the very positive changes that have taken place in the last year. What is missing from that narrative? What else has been changing?

Hone: What has changed is people's perception toward the government. Prime Minister Abiy has tried to be a unifying figure – aside from the national level changes that have occurred, people were expecting change to happen at the local level, but this has been limited. The media has been liberalized, but the media is primarily based in Addis Ababa (with limited operations outside of Addis Ababa). Political parties are still operating. I would say that 'yes, those changes are real, but we have to put them in context' because

these are primarily at the national level while not much has changed in terms of the government structure. At the local level, the same people are still in charge. However, those local elites are becoming weaker as people are becoming more demanding, and it is unclear who is in charge (effectively there is no one dictating the narrative, so there is a scenario of a power vacuum). Factually, the Financial Times quotes are not wrong, but they tend to portray Abiy as the big man, that he is in charge, which I do not agree with. I think Abiy is primarily a balancing figure and those reported changes are not a reflection of changes at the local level. On the one hand, yes, it is a discourse of change. However, I think there has not been that much change. For instance, a former opposition party member is leading the National Board of Elections, but we have not seen any fundamental changes in the election procedures.²⁴ That remains an unknown area, and we do not know what is going to happen next year as we have not seen reform in the election procedures (for the election in 2020). In terms of the broader changes, yes, that is happening, but I would like to talk more about what has not changed.

Logan: Could you give us some examples of where there are new frustrations or old frustrations reemerging today?

Hone: When Abiy came to power he launched an aggressive public relations stand, where he promised to change everything. He did manage to do the things quoted earlier in the Financial Times article. The result of those changes was that people were very optimistic. There were very high expectations and there was a lot of hope. Now, I think people are starting to become frustrated because despite all the changes, the local structure is still the same. Those people who were misgoverning and who were involved in corruption are still in charge at regional state, zonal, *woreda* (district) and local (*kebele*) levels. At these levels, there is not a lot of change happening in terms of policy and programs. As a result, people are becoming frustrated and resentment is developing. One source of this is that the structure is the same, but weakened in terms of action and legitimacy, while not much reform is taking place at these lower levels of governance. This is a source of discontent. Second, within

24 Birtukan Mideksa, who was previously living in exile, was chosen to lead the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia. Birtukan is a former judge. Following the disputed election results of 2005, she was jailed and left for the US in 2010. For more: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/ethiopia-opposition-leader-named-election-body-chief-181122102121402.html>

the EPRDF the TPFLF was the dominant party; a kind of husband controlling everything in the house.

When Abiy came to power, being an Oromo, and the Oromos historically complaining of being marginalized by the federal government, it seems the Oromos are actively pursuing an exclusionary form of politics. For example, a disproportionate claim to federal power and dictating the policy in terms of reforms (e.g. what should be changed, and what the reform agenda should be). There is a growing concern that in the past it was the TPLF dominating the EPRDF and federal politics and now it seems the ODP is engaging in exclusionary politics. This includes promoting their own people within the federal structure as well as in the Addis Ababa Administration and are trying to push change that is in the favor of Oromo interests. This is an on-going discussion among Ethiopians, to what extent Abiy is committed to having an inclusive reform process as well as building an inclusive Ethiopia. Since he came to power, the Oromo have taken a disproportionately significant role in the power distribution at the federal government level and in government portfolios. This has been a significant concern.

In terms of 'being in charge', conflict is a big issue. Close to 3 million people have been displaced due to inter-ethnic conflict, including in the Southern, Oromo and Amhara areas.²⁵ All of this conflict that is happening, all over the country, has resulted in the displacement of large numbers of people. Displacement has never been as high as we see now, so that has been a concern and a growing source of discontentment with Abiy's administration. There is also the issue of Addis Ababa, where historically the Oromo were claiming the city to be a part of its land, and therefore should be under its jurisdiction. However, the constitution does not say that, and Addis Ababa is a very diverse city, where every ethnic group has a claim to it (as a federal city administration). There is an on-going negotiation where, in a special interest proclamation, it outlines the interests of Oromia regional state over Addis Ababa City

25 An estimated 2.7 million people have been displaced internally. The causes include flooding and ethnic conflict. For additional information see: <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/crs-steps-up-as-millions-in-ethiopia-displaced-by-flooding-ethnic-violence-83151> Also: <https://www.irinnews.org/news-feature/2019/02/28/ethiopia-s-neglected-crisis-no-easy-way-home-doubly-displaced-gedeos>

Administration²⁶ This has been a concerning discussion for most ethnic groups. It remains unclear what that 'special interest' entails and what it means, whether that means Addis Ababa is going to be under Oromia regional state administration, and what all that means for non-Oromos living in Addis Ababa (particularly given that the population of Addis Ababa is predominantly not Oromo, but Amhara followed by ethnic groups in the south).²⁷ The answers to these questions will have implications for the rights of all residents of Addis Ababa, which is not only a concern for its residents but also for Ethiopians generally.

An on-going reform issue is to what extent Abiy can neutralize those radical Oromo claims and make sure that an inclusive reform process is launched and that the reform will be inclusive of all parties. This is a concern for most people, and I think that is where Ethiopian politics is warming up, and it could lead to another round of protest. This is partly because Abiy is a very ambitious person and he has been talking about the presidential system where he could be the president and voted for by all Ethiopians. He is now trying to balance his ambition to be a popular person all over the country. To do that, he first has to be supported by the Oromos, and therefore he cannot go after the most radical claims of Oromos, and as a result he is in a pendulum. In the media, he says he is pro-Ethiopian and Addis Ababa belongs to Ethiopia, and that the country needs to be unified. However, the Oromo politics has always been based on claim making, and one of those claims is on Addis Ababa. How will he manage the contradictions between the Oromos claiming control of Addis Ababa and to be in charge of Addis Ababa, and yet all other Ethiopian people believe that Addis Ababa belongs to all and therefore should be a federal city administration? No one should have a unilateral decision regarding the jurisdiction over Addis Ababa. How Abiy will balance those demands is a big issue. Recently, there has been a growing discontent that Abiy is not what he claimed to be when he came to power. Rather, that he is a cover for those radical Oromo claims, and that the reform process has been hijacked by radical Oromos.

26 A draft of this proclamation is available here: <https://chilot.me/2018/01/draft-proclamation-determine-special-interest-state-oromia-addis-ababa-city/>

27 The last census, in 2007, found the order as: Amhara, Oromo then Gurage. Available here: <http://www.csa.gov.et/census-report/census-tables/category/301-census-tables#> A census is planned for 2019 and the demographic changes are contested.

Logan: What do you hear from the youth? A lot of these conversations are heavily connected with political leaders. Either on social media or speaking to the youth in person, particularly outside of Addis Ababa, what do you hear from the youth?

Hone: The Oromo protest and the Amhara protest, which are the crucial components of the movement and led to Abiy's coming to power, were primarily youth-led movements. Among those youth are people who were not employed. This segment of the population has their own economic concerns, particularly unemployment among the youth. Unemployment is a huge issue. On the one hand, for the broader Ethiopian youth, there is rising discontent because they feel that they helped Abiy come to power and he is now disregarding them – politically and economically. As a result, there is growing talk along the lines of 'if Abiy and the reform team are not committed to making sure that the political and economic questions that we raised are answered, then we will continue to challenge you'. In a broader sense, that is the message from the youth. There have been attempts to organize demonstrations in Addis Ababa, which have all thus far been denied. Recently, following the displacement of thousands of people from Legetafo, residents in Addis Ababa, and especially the youth, felt that this was unfair and exclusionary as Ethiopians should be able to live anywhere.²⁸ The people in Legetafo were targeted because they were non-Oromo and therefore they wanted to protest, demonstrate against, and denounce that. However, they were denied permission to demonstrate and it did not happen. This was also the case with instances in the past where demonstrations against Abiy were denied the permit to do so.²⁹

I think, amongst the youth, there is growing discontent for other reasons too. The main questions are, first of all, a call for inclusive political reform. That would mean a fair distribution of political power. This includes the people who were assigned by Abiy (including some in the election board, even though Birtukan Mideksa was a former opposition party member, by ethnic

28 For more background, see: <https://addisstandard.com/news-demolition-of-houses-leaves-hundreds-in-legetafo-leggedadi-homeless-city-mayor-insists-houses-are-illegal/>

29 Some major events have occurred, including a major Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) demonstration in Addis Ababa, where an estimated 4 million people participated. The OLF were an armed opposition group based in Eritrea before returning to Ethiopia in 2018. See: <https://addisstandard.com/news-demolition-of-houses-leaves-hundreds-in-legetafo-leggedadi-homeless-city-mayor-insists-houses-are-illegal/>

background she is an Oromo, as is the new communication advisor to the National Election Board of Ethiopia, amongst other new appointments where there is a feeling that Abiy is primarily appointing Oromos and sidelining other ethnicities). That is the first question: the fair distribution of political parties.

The second issue is of the economy, including questions of job creation and inclusive economic development. I think these are tough questions. Abiy really cannot answer them in a single year. However, the people are very optimistic, and Abiy is somehow setting them up to be very optimistic. Overly optimistic, I would say. The growing discontent is regarding what has actually changed in this regard.

Third, in Tigray regional state there is something we have not discussed. Since the beginning, there has been criticism of Abiy from Tigray regional state, including attempts that appear to sandwich the Tigray regional state between the center of Ethiopia and Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea.³⁰ The young people in Tigray regional state, including the majority of the population, are critical of Abiy as they see him as selling the national interest of the country, such as when he deals with the Arab countries and launches a strong diplomatic relationship with them. Historically, these relationships have been seen suspiciously in Ethiopia, primarily because of Ethiopia-Egypt competition over the Nile River, while Middle East countries generally tend to side with Egypt, or at least are supposed to support that side. In Tigray regional state people have been very critical of Abiy's foreign relations policy and the narrative that somehow discredits Meles Zenawi and his legacy.³¹

In Sidama, there is the question of Sidama being a new regional state.³² The Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' (SNNP) regional state ruling party approved the request for Sidama to potentially become a regional state. Abiy has set up a commission to

30 In July of 2018 the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea signed a joint declaration that would end the border conflict. This was a landmark peace agreement restoring diplomatic relations and opening borders for movement and trade.

31 Meles Zewnawi was born in Tigray regional state and led the TPLF when it fought the military government.

32 In July of 2018, the Sidama Zone approved a request to obtain regional state status. A referendum must be held within 12 months of that date, which had not been held as of March, 2019. For more information: <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/01/12/sidama-referendum-should-proceed-without-further-delay/>

assess the feasibility of that, which was interpreted as a retreat of the initial promise of Sidama being an independent regional state, and the others to follow.³³ That is another issue of concern, from the SNNP regional state against Abiy. Some of the people in other regions are also claiming that the reform process is not inclusive. In summary, there are many sources of discontent. Some of these sources are reasonable and some are unreasonable. On the latter, the economic source is an unrealistic over-expectation that people have built following the ascendancy of Abiy to power.

Logan: From the youth perspective, do you see any particular inclination on the pendulum between the developmental state – centrist, strong approach – and the decentralized, ethnic federalism approach?

Hone: That is an interesting question. I do not have empirical evidence to substantiate, but there are a couple of trends. One, within ethnic federalism, what has been one of the strategies of mobilizing their base by party leaders was a narrative of their particular ethnic group being oppressed and its interests not being maintained. This narrative of oppression – I would call it an Olympics of Oppression – results in everyone talking about how their ethnic group is oppressed, and therefore, there is a need to advocate for change. That has been a typical strategy of mobilizing and galvanizing support among the young people particularly. As a result, because of these strategies, young people over the past decades, have become more ethnic conscious in their day-to-day life. This also influences their political stand. Most young people, I would say, favor ethnicity, ethnic identity and therefore ethnic federalism. They know a lot about ethnic politics, more so than the ideology of the developmental state. The latter was often misinterpreted as EPRDF's intention to suppress regional state parties, and it was one way of making sure that the EPRDF has more power. As a result, the ideology has not been taken as a serious attempt by the EPRDF to transform the economy – it was taken as propaganda, as a means to get support from people. For this reason, most people opposed the development state ideology before even critically reading what it entails and whether it was beneficial for the country or not.

33 Other ethnicities in SNNP has expressed their interest to also become regional states, including Wolaita and Gurage. See: <https://borkena.com/2019/02/21/hundreds-of-thousands-ethnic-sidama-demonstrate-to-push-for-statehood/>

Unfortunately, it was caricatured or misinterpreted. Whereas, when it comes to ethnic politics, it is easy to explain (more so than the developmental state ideology). Also, it has been around since the 1960s and has been a primary mode of conduct in Ethiopian politics. As a result, the youth are oriented to ethnic federalism

In a sense, that is a challenge for Abiy, and for anyone, to govern Ethiopia now, because people have been very ethnic conscious and ethnic competition has intensified. Further, some of the ethnic competitions are very hard to manage. Whether it is Abiy or anyone else, it is very hard to have a policy response to some of these questions. Therefore, I think the only way the young people would be tolerant of any government is if the economic questions are answered. Part of the reason why youth were active in leading the protests, other than the ethnic consciousness, was because they were not economically benefiting. The economy was growing, but it was not benefiting them; not inclusive, not equitable, particularly for the young people. Creating job opportunities has been – and continues to be – a main challenge for the Ethiopian state. The young people were largely unemployed, and even if they were employed, they were in a precarious economic condition. As a result, they were largely dissatisfied and had little to lose. By leading the protests, being at the front of the struggle, and seeing that the economic situation has not changed yet, the young people are still very critical of the government and they might continue to be critical of the government for economic reasons; for their own joblessness; for their unemployment. But, partly also because they have been sort of ethnically radicalized and they continue to push for policies that they think are in the interest of their ethnic group. In a way, ethnic federalism has an element of deadlock. Everyone is advocating for their own ethnic interests, including the young people, and it is very hard to reconcile those interests.

Logan: As you've been explaining, there is much cause for optimism and enthusiasm as well as many looming questions and challenges being faced. As you look forward to the coming weeks and months, are there particular moments that you will be watching carefully to see if that will provide direction between fulfilling that optimism and a new positive way forward or potentially a revival of resistance and mass mobilization?

Hone: The first thing is how the economy will fare. That, I think, is a crucial thing and I would strongly encourage Abiy to focus on the economy. It is about job creation and making the economy

revive again. The growth has been slowed already.³⁴ The economy needs not only to grow, but grow in an inclusive way. Creating job opportunities for youth in the short term is crucial. In terms of the economy, that is the main issue.

Politically, there are a couple of things. The first thing is the issue of Addis Ababa. There is a draft proclamation about the special interest of Addis Ababa, and how that special interest proclamation will be negotiated and eventually endorsed by the parliament. That process could be a make or break in Ethiopian politics. For instance, the people in the south are very much in favor of federalism and if Addis Ababa is to be included into, or become a part of Oromia regional state, that may put federalism in danger. Sooner or later, the people in the south will realize this and will react fiercely. That is one source of vulnerability for the Abiy administration. Historically, the Amhara and the Oromo were in competition, and recently we have seen growing discontent among the Amhara Democratic Party over some of the actors and policy decisions of the Oromo Democratic Party. In fact, a couple of days ago,³⁵ there was a meeting in Addis Ababa where the members of the ADP openly stated that the reform that Abiy is leading came because of their alliance between the ADP and the ODP. That alliance is now in danger because the ODP is becoming selfish in its power distribution and appointing people, as well as over the issue of Addis Ababa. If this competition between ADP and ODP continues, we might go back to the pre-reform days where there will be another round of protest. The question is how the ADP and ODP will manage this issue and how they will resolve the growing differences between the two parties, to make sure that they still stand together and act as a guardian for the reform. This is a crucial component. The political events will depend on how the relationship between the ADP and the ODP continues to evolve. Other than that, there is talk of the

34 National economic growth projections have been reduced – albeit still at high levels in a global context – lower than what was expected and what has been the norm for more than a decade. These growth figures have been contested. See:

Mandefro, H. (2016). Politics by numbers: poverty reduction discourse, contestations and regime legitimacy in Ethiopia. *International Review of Sociology*, 26(3), 386-406.

Cochrane, L., & Bekele, Y. W. (2018). Contextualizing Narratives of Economic Growth and Navigating Problematic Data: Economic Trends in Ethiopia (1999–2017). *Economies*, 6(4), 64.

35 This interview was held on 2 March 2019.

EPRDF merging into a single party. That is not a new idea. However, Abiy is ambitious and is seeking to be the single unifying person within EPRDF, just as Meles was 10 or 15 years ago. In a way, he is pushing for that now, by eliminating the four member parties and relaunching a new unified party, which will no longer identify as EPRDF, and will include what are called partner-parties now (those parties that are ruling in areas other than the four main party coalition members, such as Afar, Benishgul Gumuz, Gambella, Somali regional states). This would mean there is going to be a new party, a unified party. That is something to watch for because this is a new dynamic and it has important implications for ethnic federalism and the relationship among what we know now as members of EPRDF. I think the plan is for this party to be launched over the coming months, by the end of this Ethiopian year,³⁶ and it is going to be open for opposition parties as long as they follow, and they accept, the historical legacies and ideologies of EPRDF. There is talk that some opposition parties might join this new party. That is a crucial development that we need to follow and need to watch in order to understand the politics of Ethiopia over the coming years.

Logan: Some commentators have pointed to the Sidama referendum, which will have to take place in the coming months, as one of the critical moments that will show the direction. Will it be one rooted in ethnic federalism and a more decentralized state or one that has a stronger central state. How do you see that pending decision?

Hone: I think the Sidama issue (becoming a regional state) is a yes answer. It has been around for a long time. It is supported by the Oromos, for a number of reasons. And, it is very hard to say 'no' to that question now because it has been endorsed. It has been accepted by the ruling regional state party of SNNP regional state. It is very hard now to justify any decision that refuses the regional state status for the Sidama at this point. What will be interesting to see is how the remaining ethnic groups in the south will react following that. For instance, it is obvious that Wolaita will ask for regional state status as well. The Gurages will ask and then, what will be the answer for those requests? I think that will be the crucial sign in terms of how the future Ethiopian state will look like. For Sidama, it is more of a procedural thing. It has enough support, politically and legally,

³⁶ The Ethiopian year ends on September 10 in the Gregorian calendar, the new year begins on September 11.

and was endorsed by the regional parliament. It is very hard to say 'no' to that question. Although there is the broader question; there is the boundary commission that Abiy set up. It is an expert group, providing technical and expert analysis of pros and cons of allowing these questions – or what could be the best regional arrangement in the southern region. The decision will still be made by the politicians, and the politicians have already decided on the Sidama case. They might use the border and boundary commission, or the new study group that has been set up by the southern region, as a way of legitimizing any refusal to the questions of regional state status, by Wolaita and others. However, it is hard to say that, or use that commission, as a way of justifying a refusal for regional state status for the Sidama. For me, the regional status of Sidama is an already-made decision. It is too late to see that as a signal for any coming political trend. But, what will be interesting is what could be the precedent of the regional state status of Sidama for the others, and how the government will answer the question of regional state status for other ethnic groups. That will be a sign about where we are heading with more central or decentralized power structure. The majority are for decentralization. The question is, should we follow these strict ethno-linguistic lines? Or, should we come up with new innovative ways of federalism?

Logan: It seems, following the potential approval of Sidama, those that you mentioned – Wolaita, Gurage and others – will make a similar claim. This may have implications beyond the south. Potentially other regional states that are also ethnically diverse, such as Gambella and Benishangul Gumuz. It may potentially signal what the future looks like in terms of governance structures and where power lies.

Hone: Definitely it does.

It does suggest where the country is heading in terms of its politics. There are an increasing number of questions that lead to increasing dissatisfaction about ethnic federalism and people might ask for a reconsideration of the policy. Or, they might further build support for similar cases in other regions. Thereafter, we might see increasing decentralization and the redrawing of the boundaries as we have seen in South Sudan, for instance. It is not new in the region. This could lead to a redrawing of boundaries all over Ethiopia. The impact will be much broader than the south, and will lead to other questions in other regions as well as having the same diversity. There is hardly a single regional state that is not ethnically

diverse in Ethiopia. Potentially, the question of self-administration can be asked in any region, including in Tigray; which people do not often realize, but in Tigray there are other ethnics groups as well. It is definitely worth watching to see how it will evolve.

Logan: Thank you very much. We will be watching. And we appreciate your time.

Hone: Thanks so much Logan. Thanks for having me.