

# Ethiopian Opposition Political Parties and Rebel Fronts: Past and Present

Wondwosen Teshome B.

**Abstract**—In a representative democracy political parties promote vital competition on different policy issues and play essential roles by offering ideological alternatives. They also give channels for citizens' participation in government decision-making processes and they are significant conduits and interpreters of information about government. This paper attempts to examine how opposition political parties and rebel fronts emerged in Ethiopia, and examines their present conditions. In this paper, selected case studies of political parties and rebel fronts are included to highlight the status and the role of opposition groups in the country in the three successive administrations: Haile Selassie (1930-1974), *Derg* (1974-1991), and EPRDF (1991-Present).

**Keywords**— Ethiopia, Hybrid regime, Incumbent, Multi-Party election, Opposition Party, Political Party, Rebel fronts.

## I. INTRODUCTION

AS Schmitz [1, p.2] argued, "*The division between government and opposition is as old as political democracy itself.*"

In democratic countries, government rotates among different political parties, and "*the minority could seek to persuade a majority of its point of view by peaceful, political means*" [1]. In a liberal-democratic society, government should rest on the consent of the governed, and the minority accepts the rights of the majority (i.e. incumbents) to make decisions. At the same time, the majority respects the minority's right to dissent from the decision set by the incumbents [1]. The role of an opposition party in a democracy is to criticize, check, offer alternative policies, and replace the incumbent party. In established democracies, opposition parties are "government-in-the waiting" [2, p.57] or they are "alternative government" [3, p. 2]. Therefore, "*the notion of a loyal opposition is central to any democracy*" [4]. Opposition and ruling parties are expected to entertain the values of tolerance, cooperation and compromise [4]-[5]. According to LeBas [6, p. 2], "*a strong opposition may be the most effective means of creating checks and accountability in hybrid regimes and, therefore, the most important prerequisite for democratic deepening.*"

In this paper, the following research questions are posed:

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(1) In what ways opposition groups in Ethiopia expressed their opposition to the Imperial (1930-1974), *Derg* (1975-1991), and EPRDF (1991-Present) governments?

(2) What are the impacts of the introduction of a multi-party system in 1991 on opposition parties and rebel fronts in Ethiopia?

(3) How do we categorize opposition groups in contemporary Ethiopia?

## II. THE POLITICS OF OPPOSITION IN IMPERIAL ETHIOPIA (1930-1974)

According to DOS [7], during the reign of Haile Selassie there were no legitimate political parties in Ethiopia. Since political parties were not allowed to function in the country, opposition forces established ethnic-based rebel fronts<sup>1</sup> in the neighboring countries and waged guerilla warfare against the imperial government. The major rebel fronts include: the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front), ENLF (The Ethiopian National Liberation Front), and the SALF (The Somali Abo Liberation Front)<sup>2</sup>. Sudan and Somalia were very active in supporting these rebel organizations, with the aim of weakening the Ethiopian central government. Arab and Islamic countries such as Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Algeria, Egypt, and Libya were also giving support to these ethnic-based rebel organizations [7]-[8]. The East bloc countries mainly the Soviet Union, China, East Germany and Cuba were also important supporters of these rebel groups [8]. In the following section, I will briefly describe one of the major ethnic-based rebel fronts that waged armed struggle against the imperial government as a case study.

*Case Study 1: The Ethiopian National Liberation Front (ENLF)*

The Ethiopian National Liberation Front (ENLF)<sup>3</sup> was an ethnic-based front established in 1971 in the Middle East by Sheikh Hussein Sora<sup>4</sup> (a merchant from Bale province) to address the national oppression of the Oromo people [9, p. 82]. Sheikh Hussein, by incorporating the largely Oromo

<sup>1</sup>However, according to Andargachew [39, p. 9], the earliest political organization in the history of Ethiopia was non-ethnic organization called "Ethiopian People's Council".

<sup>2</sup>The SALF was established in 1961. Its aim was merging the Ogaden and Bale provinces of Ethiopia with the Republic of Somalia.

<sup>3</sup>Earlier, it was called LFSW (Liberation Front of Somali West).

<sup>4</sup>His proper name was Hussein Mohammad Ali. He had been an active member of the Macha-Tuuluma Welfare Association (MTWA), which was banned in 1967 by the Ethiopian Imperial government. He was also the general secretary of the LFSW in 1970.

followers of Wako Gutu<sup>5</sup>, led a rebellion against Emperor Haile Selassie's government. Sheikh Hussein started his movement in the highlands of Hararghe in the mid 1960s, but in 1971 he changed his movement to the ENLF. The activities of the ENLF, however, were confined only in Hararge and Bale administrative regions. Though Sheik Hussien's movement was an ethnic-based (Oromo), he named his organization "Ethiopian National Liberation Front." According to Kiflu [9, p.106], this was because another name "would be opposed by the Somali Republic," which wanted a party that would have a potential to mobilize the entire Ethiopian people against the imperial government. Somalia gave priority to its own interest, rather than fighting for the agenda of the ENLF. As the result, the Oromo intellectuals were disappointed and later on decided to form another rebel front known as the OLF (Oromo Liberation Front). In 1973, the ENLF was able to control few areas in Bale and Hararge before it was militarily defeated and wiped out by the government forces.

### III. THE POLITICS OF OPPOSITION UNDER THE DERG REGIME (1975-1991)

Following the eruption of the popular revolution in Ethiopia in 1974, few military officers formed a committee ("Derg") and overthrew the imperial government. The Derg government outlawed all political parties and rebel fronts and established its own party, the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE), and made the country a one party state. During the Derg's rule (1975-1991) all types of ethnic parties, multi-ethnic parties, and non-ethnic parties were persecuted. In fact, as I have already mentioned, long before the establishment of the WPE in 1984, there were few rebel fronts that were created during the imperial time (i.e. ELF, ENLF, SALF etc) and other non-ethnic political organizations that were established or flourished in the early years of the revolution in the 1970s. But soon, all were either banned by the Derg government when they challenged its political domination or disbanded when they outlived their usefulness. Those non-ethnic political organizations which were banned include: "The Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party" (EPRP), established in 1972; the "All Ethiopian Socialist Movement" (AESM) (its Amharic acronym, Meison) established in 1968; the Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Organization (MLRO) (its Amharic acronym, "Malerid"); the Workers' League (WL) (its Amharic acronym, "Wez lig"); "Echat", and "Abyotawi Seded" "Revolutionary Flame".

The military government (Derg) theoretically accepted the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the right to self-determination of all ethnic groups and nationalities. However, it failed to implement it and Ethiopia remained a centralized state. As the result, illegal ethnic -based rebel fronts such as the EPLF

<sup>5</sup>Wako Gutu led a failed Oromo insurrection in highland Bale approximately from 1962 to 1970 supported by the neighbouring country, Somalia. His organization was known as the OLF (Oromo Liberation Front) [40, p. 513].

(Eritrean People's Liberation Front), TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front), OLF (Oromo Liberation Front), WSLF (Western Somali Liberation Front) etc flared up in the country, particularly in the provinces inhabited by ethnic Eritreans, Tigreans, Oromos, and Somalis [10, p. 4]. In the following section, I will briefly discuss two case studies: WSLF and OLF.

#### *Case Study 2: The Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF)*

The Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) was an ethnic party formed by ethnic Somalis at the end of Haile Selassie's government, but it became active during the *Derg* administration. The forerunner of the WSLF was the "Ogaden Liberation Front", which was established as early as 1960 when Somalia got its independence from European colonialists. The Ogaden Liberation Front was created by the newly emerged Somalia to snatch the *Ogaden* region of Ethiopia, which was regarded by the Somalia's government as "Western Somalia" in its dream of creating the so-called "Greater Somalia."<sup>6</sup> This ethnic party and the revolt it instigated in the Ogaden area (1963-1964) were crushed by the imperial army of Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup> Later on, as Merera [11, p.106] noted, citing I.M. Lewis [12, p.410], the WSLF was created in the first half of the 1975 and continued its movement by getting support from Somalia. The WSLF served as an instrument for Somalia's expansionist policy in its attempt to annex the Ogaden province of Ethiopia, particularly starting from February 1977. By exploiting the *Derg* government's internal problems and its battles with other secessionist rebel fronts such as the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front) and the EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front) in Eritrea, Somalia encouraged the WSLF to launch an uprising and supported it with arms and logistics. In 1978, Somalia directly invaded the Ogaden area and other parts of Ethiopia in the east by sending its troops [13, p. 279], [14, p. 614]. After few months fighting, however, the invading army of Somalia and its collaborator, the WSLF, were crushed. In 1981, the WSLF held a conference, transformed itself and changed its course. The resolutions of the conference and the new course of the WSLF angered its patron, the Government of Somalia. In retaliation, the Somali government suspended its financial support to the WSLF.<sup>8</sup> In 1984, another rebel organization, the ONLF (Ogaden National Liberation Front), emerged out of the womb of the WSLF<sup>9</sup>.

#### *Case Study 3: The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)*

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was established by

<sup>6</sup>The creation of "Greater Somalia" originally was the plan of the British colonialists who wanted to merge all ethnic Somalis of Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti and proper Somalia [41, p. 74-76].

<sup>7</sup> See [42].

<sup>8</sup> See [43].

<sup>9</sup> Despite its defeat, the WSLF continued its sporadic resistance. After the fall of the Derg it had participated in the July 1991 peace and reconciliation conference.

ethnic Oromos and fought for the self-determination of the Oromo people. According to Keller [15, p. 99-100], "*The OLF was dedicated to the 'liberation of the entire Oromo Nation from Ethiopian colonialism'.*" The establishment of the OLF was the end-result of various factors and influences. The various situations and groups that contributed for the creation of the OLF include: the German missionary activities in the western Ethiopia, the European colonial adventurers in the area, the Somali Abo movement, the support from Somalia, the *Macha-Tuuluma* Welfare Association, and the Ethiopian students' movement and through it, the intervention of the socialist countries. According to the official OLF declaration, the organization was formally established in 1973<sup>10</sup>, to exercise the Oromo people's right to national self-determination.<sup>11</sup> Immediately, they were joined by defectors from the defunct ENLF and the original OLF that was led by Waqo Gutu.<sup>12</sup> The nascent OLF started a scattered guerrilla type movement against the forces of the *Derg* government. The OLF operated, according to Merera [11, p. 86], in western, southern and eastern parts of Ethiopia during the *Derg* administration. It is said that the *Derg* government and the OLF engaged in an informal and secret negotiations through the *Meison*, whose top leaders were Oromo elites<sup>13</sup> and who allied with the *Derg* at the early years of the revolution. However, these negotiations were not fruitful and were discontinued when *Meison* itself was purged by the *Derg*.<sup>14</sup> After the fall of the *Derg* in 1991, the OLF joined the EPRDF and other political organizations and formed a transitional government. However, in 1992, it withdrew from the transitional government and continued armed struggle.<sup>15</sup>

#### IV. THE EPRDF GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION PARTIES (1991-PRESENT)

The *Derg* government was militarily overthrown in 1991 by the combined forces of many ethnic-based rebel fronts. However, the main ones were: the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), The Ethiopian Peoples

<sup>10</sup>Various sources have given different dates for the establishment of the OLF. Keller [15, p. 100] claimed that politically active Oromo elites started armed opposition in 1974 in Hararge province and established the OLF. However, according to the HRW/Africa [44, p. 8], the OLF was established in 1972.

<sup>11</sup>See [45].

<sup>12</sup>There are two organizations bearing the same name, Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). The first was the one that was led by Waqo Gutu who led an uprising during the reign of Haile Selassie. For the sake of clarity I call it the first Oromo Liberation Front. The second OLF is the most formal and influential one which still exists today.

For further detail, see [42].

<sup>13</sup>The notable politician, Merera Gudina, has different version. According to Merera [11, p.169, 198], most of the leaders of the *Meison* were not Oromos as it is commonly believed, but Amharas. He claimed that out of the 25 founding members of the *MEISON* more than 50 percent of them were Amhara elites.

<sup>14</sup>See [42].

<sup>15</sup>At present, the most active ethnic-based rebel fronts in Ethiopia that are battling the current government are the OLF and the ONLF (Ogaden National Liberation Front).

Revolutionary Democratic Party (EPRDF)<sup>16</sup>, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). As soon as it assumed political power, the EPRDF<sup>17</sup> made Ethiopia a federal state and reorganized the country in to largely ethnically-based regional states [16, p. 22], [46]. After the coming to power of the EPRDF in 1991 a number of ethnic-based political parties mushroomed in Ethiopia. The EPRDF, as an ethnic-based party coalition, encouraged the formation of political parties along ethnic lines and tacitly discouraged non-ethnic parties or other pan-Ethiopian parties.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4.1. Political Parties Registration Proclamation (No. 46/1993)

In 1993, the EPRDF government issued a proclamation regarding the role and the status of political parties in federal Ethiopia. The proclamation announced that in order to function legally all political parties (except the Workers Party of Ethiopia, WPE<sup>19</sup>) and organizations have to be registered. According to Political Parties Registration Proclamation [17], as amended by Proclamation (No. 82/1994)[18]<sup>20</sup>, Ethiopians above the age of 18 years have the right to establish a political party by drawing up a political programme and drafting internal regulations (Article 4.1). According to the Proclamation, a political party can be either a country-wide organization or a regional party confined to a particular region. In order to be a country-wide party, the party should at least have 1500 founding members; the founding members who are residents of one region should not be more than 40% (Article 4.2a, b); the founding members should come at least from four regions in the country (Article 4.2c); and the founding members in each region should constitute at least 15% of the total founding members (Article 4.2d). On the other hand, the Proclamation stipulated that in order to be recognized as a regional party, a party should have at least 750 founding members; and more than 40% of its founding members have to be residents of one region (Article 4.3a, b). Furthermore, the Proclamation stated that parties whose objective is "*to foment conflict and war by preaching hatred and animosity*" among the people along the lines of race,

<sup>16</sup>EPRDF is a coalition of: (1) TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) (2) EPDM (The Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement). This political group was composed of EPRDF defectors. At present it is called ANDM (Amhara National Democratic Movement) (3) EDORM (Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement), which was composed war prisoners who were captured by the TPLF in its fight against the *Derg* (4) OPDO (Oromo People's Democratic Organization), which comprised former Oromo soldiers of the *Derg* army who were captured by the TPLF (5) SEPDM (South Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Movement) [47, pp. 780-809].

<sup>17</sup>Though the EPRDF is composed of five ethnic based parties, as Chege et al [38, p. 36] pointed out, "*the EPRDF is .....essentially the TPLF in power, a minority regional party*". Because, "*Apart from the TPLF, none of these parties commands support in its ethnic homelands or in the capital.*"

<sup>18</sup>According to Wondwosen [47, pp. 780-809], the government's policy of ethnic federalism created an ample situation for the establishment of ethnic-based parties at the expense of the pan-Ethiopian and non-ethnic parties.

<sup>19</sup>The WPE which was the only legitimate political party during the *Derg*'s administration was officially banned and ceased its existence in 1991.

<sup>20</sup>Political Parties Registration Amendment Proclamation No. 82/1994.

religion, *etc* are banned from registration (Article 5.1).<sup>21</sup> Political organizations that try to advance their objectives by force of arms and attempt to snatch power by overthrowing the government by force (Article 5.3), and recruit foreign nationals as party members would not be registered (Article 5.4). According to the Proclamation, the followings can not be registered as political party: commercial organizations, associations formed for industrial activities, any association or organization formed under the Commercial Code or the Civil Code, non-profit and welfare associations, trade unions and other professional associations, religious organizations, mutual help associations, and other traditional social associations like *idir*<sup>22</sup> and *iqub*<sup>23</sup> (Article 6). The Proclamation also forbade political parties from involving (directly or indirectly) in commercial and industrial activities. A party can collect money from the state (public funding), from its members as membership fee, subsidy, and donations from local supporters (Article 28). However, a political party is not allowed to collect or receive money from foreign nationals<sup>24</sup>, foreign political parties, foreign governments, welfare organizations, religious organizations and from prisoners of law (Article 29). In the following paragraphs, I will examine one of the legitimate political organizations established in the post-1991 period as a case study.

#### *Case Study 4: The All Amhara People's Organization (AAPO)*

The AAPO was established in 1992. Its founder and its first president was the renowned physician, Prof. Asrat Woldeyes, who happened to be the private physician of Emperor Haile Selassie. As an ethnic party, the AAPO was formed to defend the rights of the Amhara people who became the targets of indiscriminate killings after the EPRDF government restructured the country along ethnic lines. After 1991, the Tigrean-dominated new government unleashed anti-Amhara propaganda portraying them as the oppressors of Ethiopia's "nations and nationalities." Therefore, many innocent Amhara people were routinely massacred in various places such as *Arbagugu* [11, p. 124], [19]-[20], [21, pp. 122], and *Bedeno* [19]-[20], [22, p. 149], [21, p. 122], [11, p. 124], [23, p.26]. Furthermore, many Amharas were expelled from the various regions, particularly from the Oromia region.

These persecutions and killings necessitated the formation of the AAPO whose declared aim was the protection of the rights of the Amhara people. The major problem in the early years of the AAPO was to convince the Amhara elite to

organize themselves along ethnic line. This is because, at that time, most of the Amhara elite despised the idea of forming an organization along ethnic line due to their belief that ethnicity is a very backward concept. As traditional rulers of Ethiopia who intermingled with many ethnic groups through inter-ethnic marriages they felt that they have passed a tribal or ethnic stage and consider themselves primarily as "Ethiopians."<sup>25</sup>

In August 2002, the AAPO transformed itself from an ethnic party to a non-ethnic party, the AEUP (All Ethiopia Unity Party). According to the party's declaration, the need for its transformation arose due to globalization, the negative effects of ethnic-based politics<sup>26</sup>, and to build consensus among the various groups in Ethiopia.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, according to Hailu Shawel, the leader of the party, at the beginning of the EPRDF's rule in Ethiopia the government's policy was very hostile particularly to the Amhara people and this oppression led to the formation of AAPO with the aim of defending the rights of the Amhara people. Through time, however, the rule of the EPRDF started to antagonize other ethnic groups in the country, paving a way for the transformation of AAPO into AEUP that would be a non-ethnic party<sup>28</sup>, open to all people of Ethiopia irrespective of their ethnic origins.<sup>29</sup> On the eve of the 2005 election, the AEUP formed the CUD (Coalition for Unity and Democracy) together with other political parties<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>25</sup>For many Amhara elites, the people of Ethiopia should not be classified by ethnic or tribal tags due to the frequent intermarriages among ethnic groups and the usage of Amharic as a national language. They argue that dividing the country along ethnic lines is a "re-tribalization" of the country, which pushes the country backward and in the final analysis, as Merera [11, p. 195] indicated, a very dangerous scheme that might shatter the unity of the country.

<sup>26</sup>To understand the destructive effects of ethnic-based politics in Ethiopia, see [46, pp. 1-39].

<sup>27</sup>See [49].

<sup>28</sup>The transformation of the AAPO into the AEUP had met considerable resistance from its own rank led by Kegnazmach Nekatibeb and Ali Indris. This group wanted to preserve the AAPO as the defender of the Amhara people (50). Later on, this faction separated itself from the AEUP and continued its activity as AAPO. All in all, however, the transformation was largely successful.

<sup>29</sup>See [51].

<sup>30</sup>The Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) was a coalition party of four non-ethnic opposition parties, namely: the All Ethiopia Unity Party (AEUP), the United Ethiopians Democratic Party-Medhin (UEDP-Medhin), the Ethiopian Democratic League (EDL), and the Rainbow Ethiopia-Movement for Social Justice and Democracy (Rainbow). The AEUP's decision to join the CUD met a stiff resistance from its own members. In the post-election period in 2005 an open rebellion against the leaders of the AEUP broke out. A group of people calling itself, the Coordinating Committee for Salvaging All Ethiopia Unity Party accused the leadership of the party for its arrogance and dictatorial ways of administration. The dissidents blamed the leadership for harassing nationalist scholars, putting the party in a crisis and disintegration, harboring backward out looks and attitudes, appointing inefficient individuals due to personal loyalty, concentrating power in the hands of few individuals, pushing loyal party members to leave the party etc. The new committee then suspended some party officials, namely, Major Getachew Mengiste and Abayneh Birhanu until final decision is reached. It temporarily allowed the AEUP chairman, Hailu Shawel, to retain his post by considering the fact that he was also the leader of the CUD, but prohibited him from taking any action that affects the AEUP with out consulting the executive and coordinating committee of the AEUP [52]. The committee

<sup>21</sup>The new proclamation unequivocally made it clear that political organizations and parties must renounce the use of arms, religious intolerance, fomenting conflicts, racism *etc* in order to get a legal recognition [15, p. 104]

<sup>22</sup>*Idir*: A traditional funeral association.

<sup>23</sup>*Iqub*: A traditional business association.

<sup>24</sup>This particular article is not strictly implemented still now. In fact, most of the opposition parties in the country have been dependent on the financial and material support of the Diaspora Ethiopians [see 21, pp. 279-283], [48, p. 45].

## V. DISCUSSION

The occupation of Addis Ababa on May 28, 1991 by the EPRDF militia marked the end of the *Derg* government and the beginning of the EPRDF-led government. In July 1991, a National Conference of Peace and Reconciliation was held in Addis Ababa. For the first time in the history of Ethiopia, many opposition parties and rebel fronts held a peace conference with the new ruling party that held power through armed struggle. In this conference, selected individuals and 27 political organizations discussed the details of the transitional period and agreed to establish a transitional government<sup>31</sup> [24, p. 8].

When we examine the composition, nature and the history of these 27 political groups it becomes clear that most of them including the EPRDF were ethnic-based parties. Surprisingly, some of them were created just for the purpose of attending the conference and did not have sizable membership and history. As Merera [11, p. 121] said, *"The EPRDF leaders, keen on the consolidation of their hard-won victory, made sure to selectively invite weak parties most of which were created overnight, and selectively excluded the actual or potential real power contenders from the process."* The only rebel fronts that had long history and sizable membership which contributed for the downfall of the *Derg* regime were: the EPRDF, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF),<sup>32</sup> the Afar Liberation Front (ALF), and the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF). Individuals and parties which were identified with the former ruling party, i.e. the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE), and those parties that "refused" to "renounce war and violence" were not allowed to participate in the conference [25]. Therefore EPRP, *Meison* and other pan-Ethiopian and non-ethnic political parties were not allowed to participate in the conference. According to Merera [11, p. 88], *Meison* and EPRP which were the strong rivals of the EPRDF were sidelined in order to sabotage their mobilizing capacity. Harbeson [25] noted that in the conference *"Prominent Amhara attended as individuals, though the major party*

*formed to represent Amhara interests came into being only after the conference. Thus, the Amhara communities lacked an organized voice at this crucial conference to press their prevalent opposition to the EPRDF's vision of an ethnically decentralized, confederal vision of the post-imperial Ethiopian state."* The major objectives of the national conference were: to elect a transitional government, establish a legislative body (the Council of Representatives), draft a constitution, and arrange local and national parliamentary elections. The national conference adopted a Charter (transitional constitution) and decided to hold national parliamentary elections in a short time, establish a secular state, support the idea of regional or ethnic self-government, and acknowledge the right of self-determination of population groups who decided to form separate states through referendum [26]. As mentioned above, the major result of the conference was the adoption of the Transitional Period Charter of Ethiopia, which would *"serve as the supreme law of the land for the duration of the transitional period"* (Article 18 of the Charter) [27].

The transitional conference also decided (perhaps the most controversial issue in the contemporary Ethiopia) to acknowledge the right of the Eritrean people to self-determination. The Transitional Charter also dealt with the ethnic problems in the country. For instance, the preamble says that the Charter heralded a new chapter in the history of Ethiopia, *"in which freedom, equal rights and self-determination of all the peoples shall be the governing principles of political, economic and social life and there by contributing to the welfare of the Ethiopian peoples and rescuing them from centuries of subjugation and backwardness."*

Furthermore, Article 2 of the Charter says,

*"The right of nationals, nationalities and peoples to self-determination is affirmed. To this end, each nation, nationality and people is guaranteed the right to: (a) Preserve its identity and have it respected, promote its culture and history and use and develop its language; (b) Administer its own affairs within its own defined territory and effectively participate in the central government on the basis of freedom, and fair and proper representation (c) Exercise its right to self-determination of independence, when the concerned nation / nationality and people is convinced that the above rights are denied, abridged or abrogated."*

The Transitional Charter also introduced ethnic representations in the government administrative and political structure. The tolerant relationship between the EPRDF and other political parties and rebel fronts did not last long. After consolidating itself the EPRDF started harassing opposition parties, and this policy continued unabated and at present this hostile policy of the ruling party is the major cause for the

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blamed Hailu Shawel for the failure of the AEUP to win more votes in the May 15, 2005 election. According to the dissidents, Hailu Shawel and his group unfairly controlled the party's finance and administration. The dissidents argued that due to Hailu Shawel's erroneous leadership other party leaders such as Dr. Mekonnen Bishaw decided to remain abroad. Moreover, according to the dissidents, another executive committee member, Girma Shumye, resigned and Wondayehu Kassa who contributed a lot for the party had been dismissed from the party. The dissidents accused Hailu Shawel of sacrificing the benefits of AEUP, to help the CUD [53]. However, the dissident group failed to unseat the AEUP top officials and with in a short time the movement was crushed.

<sup>31</sup>Earlier, the US government had insisted the formation of a transitional government. According to the US recommendation, the goals of the transitional government would be [44, p. 11]: "(1) Assumption of legal and political responsibility for Ethiopia (2) Use of existing civil administrative structures to form a society broadly representative of diverse political groupings (3) Free elections with in 12 months, (4) Establishment of a Constituent Assembly to create a new Constitution (5) And, the guarantee of due process of law to persons accuse of offence (including the possibility of amnesty)."

<sup>32</sup>As HRW/Africa [44, p.11] noted, to facilitate the conference *"the OLF pledged to drop their demand for independence in the interest of forming a multi-Ethiopia organized as a federation"*.

country's constant instability.

### 5.1. Category of Ethiopian Opposition Groups

In terms of their political program and activities we can categorize the current Ethiopian opposition forces in to seven groups:

The first group of opposition parties is composed of individuals and organizations that are ex-members of the government of Haile Selassie (r.1930 – 1974). At present, most of them are living in Europe and America. As soon as Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown in 1975, these monarchists established a political party known as the EDU (Ethiopian Democratic Union), which was based in Sudan [28, p. 13]. For sometime, EDU conducted a guerilla war from Sudan and battled the *Derg* government. With in few years, however, the forces of EDU were defeated by the *Derg* and their leaders fled to the US and Europe. In July 1991, EDU participated in the national Conference of Peace and Reconciliation and stopped its armed struggle. At present, EDU is a legally registered loyal opposition. In general, though the monarchists are not politically strong, financially they are formidable and can create an impact if they join other opposition groups.

The second group comprises ex-leftist groups such as the former members of the *Derg* government (1974-1991) namely ex-members of the WPE, ex-members of the *Derg* army, and other individuals who served the *Derg* in various capacities. Currently, some of them are living in the USA, Europe and in some African countries like Kenya, and Sudan. At present, except those individuals who served the *Derg* as top officials, the rest have joined various opposition groups (on individual basis) such as the CUD, AEUP, OLF, UDJ and so on.

The third group is made up of former left-wing, non-ethnic parties such as the EPRP, *Meison*, *Malerid*, and the *Echat* whose top officials at present are living in Europe, America, Australia and in some African countries such as Sudan and Kenya. This group is the most vocal and very dominant among the Diaspora opposition groups. Relatively speaking, the most active parties in this group are EPRP and *Meison*. Due to their potential power and mobilizing capacity the incumbent party does not allow these two parties to function in Ethiopia [11, p. 110].<sup>33</sup> However, they can still play a very important role in the country's political atmosphere by joining hands with loyal oppositions in the country as was observed in the 2005 election when they joined the UEDF (United Ethiopia Democratic Front), an opposition coalition.

The fourth group includes rebel fronts that are conducting armed struggle against the EPRDF-led government. This group can be divided into two sub-groups:

(a) Secessionist rebel fronts: This sub-group is composed of

<sup>33</sup>According to Gandhi and Reuter [54, p. 6], incumbent parties may selectively ban some opposition political parties.

rebel fronts that fight to secede from Ethiopia. They include: the OLF, ONLF, IFLO (Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia) and the SLF (Sidama Liberation Front)<sup>34</sup>. These fronts were the allies of the incumbent party, EPRDF, during its guerrilla war against the *Derg* government. As I stated elsewhere in this paper, the OLF, ONLF, and the SLF formed a transitional government with the incumbent party in 1991, but withdrew after few years. Since then, they have continued armed struggle against the EPRDF government from 1975 to 1991. Moreover, due to their determination to use force the EPRDF government condemns the OLF<sup>35</sup> and the ONLF<sup>36</sup> as illegal and terrorist organizations. They are also blamed for various terrorist activities in Ethiopia including the planting of bombs in Addis Ababa and other towns. At present, the government alleges that they are supported by Eritrea, the arch enemy of Ethiopia.<sup>37</sup>

(b) Non-ethnic rebel fronts that fight for a regime change in Ethiopia. This group includes the EPPF (Ethiopian People's Patriotic Front) whose aim is to overthrow the government by armed struggle. As the result, it is branded as "illegal" or "illegitimate" opposition by the Ethiopian government. The EPPF is largely supported by Eritrea, the arch enemy of Ethiopia. At present, the EPPF's relationship with Eritrea is very controversial issue. For some, its association with Eritrea is a liability, and for others it is an asset. But, the most accepted theory is that Eritrea is using this organization on use-and-throw basis.

The fifth group includes the "loyal oppositions," which are legally registered and have been participating in elections. This group can be divided into two sub-groups:

a) Ethnic parties<sup>38</sup> (regional parties) and ethnic-based

<sup>34</sup>Though the ulterior objective of these rebel fronts is secession from Ethiopia, these days various factors such as the lack of popular support, military defeats, internal squabbles, continuous defections, international situations etc have forced them to tone down their demands. Therefore, these days, they say that they are fighting for "the rights to self-determination."

<sup>35</sup>See [30], [31], [80, p. 8], [55], [56], [81], [57, p. 30].

<sup>36</sup>See [31], [57, p. 30], [58], [80, p.8], [81].

<sup>37</sup>See [31], [58]-[60].

<sup>38</sup>These include: Alaba People's Democratic Organization (APDO), All-Amhara People's Organization (AAPO), Afar Democratic Union (ADU), Afar Liberation Front (ALF), Arguba National Unity Organization (ANUO), Alaba People's Democratic Movement (APDM), Afar People's Democratic Organization (APDO), Afar Revolutionary Democratic Union (ARDU), Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF), Benishangul-Gumuz People's Democratic United Front (BGPDUF), Burgi People's Democratic Organization (BPDO), Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM), Bench People's Unity Democratic Movement (BPUDM), Derita Dibamo Kechenchila People's Democratic Organization (DDKPDO), Derassa People's Democratic Organization (DPDO), Dei People's Unity Democratic Organization (DPUDO), Ethiopian Somali Democratic League (ESDL), Ethiopian Somali Democratic Movement (ESDM), Gamo Democratic Union (GDU), Gurage People's Democratic Front (GPDF), Gambella People's Democratic Front (GPDF), Gambella People's Democratic Movement (GPDm), Gedeo People's Democratic Movement (GPDm), Gurage People's Democratic Organization (GPDO), Gambella People's Democratic Unity Party (GPDUP), Gambella People's Liberation Movement (GPLM), Gumuz People's Liberation Movement (GPLM), Gurage People's Revolutionary Democratic Movement (GPRDM), Harari Democratic Unity Party (HDUP), Harari National League (HNL), Hadia People's Democratic Organization (HPDO), Issa Gurgura Liberation Front (IGLF), Kore Nationalities



political organizations<sup>39</sup>.

b) Non-ethnic parties or pan-Ethiopian parties. The most important parties in this group are the CUD (Coalition for Unity and Democracy), UDJ (Unity for Democracy and Justice), AEUP (All Ethiopia Unity Party), the UEDP-Medhin and so on. This category of “loyal opposition”<sup>40</sup> in Ethiopia is very fluid, because as we have seen in the last two decades, today’s loyal opposition could be “illegal” or “illegitimate” opposition tomorrow. The best examples in this regard are the OLF, ALF (Afar Liberation Front) and the ONLF. At present, even loyal oppositions such as the OFDM (Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement) and the OPC (Oromo People’s Congress) are accused by the government of secretly collaborating with the outlawed OLF.<sup>41</sup> Recently, many of their leaders and members are imprisoned [29]—[34].

The six category is composed of the so-called “phony oppositions” that are allegedly created or supported by the incumbent party.<sup>42</sup> It is alleged that such parties have special and secret relationships with the incumbent party, and in return for their services they are awarded financially or materially. Moreover, it is said that the government uses these types of “opposition parties” to discredit and embarrass the entire opposition camp. The special assignments of the phony oppositions include spying for the government, and making unsubstantiated or embarrassing criticisms against the incumbent party (i.e., to create an impression both locally and internationally that there are no matured opposition parties in

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Democratic Organization (KNDO), Kembata People's Congress (KPC), Kembata People's Democratic Organization (KPDO), Keficho People's Unity Democratic Organization (KPUDO), Mareko People's Democratic Organization (MPDO), Meanit People's Unity Democratic Organization (MPUDO) Oromo Abo Liberation Front (OALF), Oromo National Congress (ONC), Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), Omo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), Oromo People's Congress (OPC), Silti Azernet Berbere Meskan/WeleniGedebano People's Democratic Movement (SABM/WGPDM), Sodo Gordena People's Democratic Organization (SGPDO), Southern Omo People's Democratic Movement (SOPDM), Shekecho People's Democratic Movement (SPDM), Sidama People's Democratic Organization (SPDO), Tembaro People's Democratic Organization (TPDO), Tigri-Worji Union (TWU), United Oromo Democratic Organization (UODO), United Oromo People's Liberation Front (UOPLF), Wolaita People's Democratic Front (WPDF), Wolaita People's Democratic Organization (WPDO), etc.

<sup>39</sup>To understand the conceptual differences between an ethnic party, multi-ethnic party, non-ethnic party see [47, pp. 780-809].

<sup>40</sup>There is a misconception in Ethiopia regarding the “loyal oppositions” [61]. Many people wrongly assume that the “loyal opposition” is a “phony opposition”. In established democracies, however, “loyal opposition” is a political phrase, which is given to those opposition parties that are legally registered in line with the country’s constitution, and fight to change a government constitutionally, i.e. through election.

<sup>41</sup>Merera Gudina, the leader of OPC denied the charges. According to him, “*The Ethiopian government security services plant infiltrators in the opposition who they would later ‘expose’ and arrest as insurgents*” [33]. It is true that in the last few years some members of the OFDM have fled the country and joined the OLF [62, p. 14]. On the other hand, it should be noted that even many members of the ruling OPDO-EPRDF involving army generals, MPs, etc have defected and joined the OLF [63]—[72].

<sup>42</sup>Though the Ethiopian government claims that there are about 70 to 80 political parties in the country, according to Merera Gudina many of them are phony or fake oppositions [73]

the country that could replace the incumbent party). Moreover, it is alleged that the incumbent party has started dismantling the genuine opposition parties in connivance with the NEBE and the courts, and re-creating “phony opposition” parties. For instance, it is reported that the ruling party dismantled the genuine CUD party and created a forged party, or a “phony opposition” under the same name, CUD<sup>43</sup>. The ONC (Oromo National Congress), which was led by Merera Gudina was another victim. As Merera himself disclosed, the ruling party coalition, particularly the OPDO-EPRDF, instigated a revolt against the ONC leadership in collaboration with the NEBE (National Electoral Board of Ethiopia). This revolt that was orchestrated by Tolossa Tesfaye and which was supported by the ruling party culminated by removing Merera Gudina from the party’s leadership.<sup>44</sup> For Merera, the current ONC which is led by Tolossa Tefaye is a phony opposition [35]. Another “phony opposition”, according to some critics, is the UEDP-Medhin, which formerly was part of the CUD, but separated itself from the coalition in the post-2005 period under the alleged machination of few of its leaders led by Lidetu Ayallew<sup>45</sup> [36]—[37].

The seventh category includes ex-members of the ruling TPLF-EPRDF who either resigned or expelled from the ruling party due to various reasons. Some of them have established new ethnic parties known as the *Arena Tigray* for Democracy and Sovereignty<sup>46</sup>, TAND<sup>47</sup> (Tigrean Alliance for National Democracy), and the TPDM (Tigray People’s Democratic Movement). These parties are facing serious challenges not only from the ruling party, but also from the other opposition parties. Many people in the country and in the opposition camp have reservation on these parties due to the members’ past association with the ruling party. Furthermore, they are accused of their past policy failures such as making the country land locked by allowing Eritrea to secede, and for conducting a bloody civil war in Ethiopia in collaboration with the Eritrean secessionist fronts during the *Derg*

<sup>43</sup>The original CUD (which was led by Hailu Shawel) that nearly defeated the ruling party in the 2005 election was dismantled in the post-2005 period. Its leaders were imprisoned, sentenced, and later on “pardoned”. While the legal leaders were behind bars, the ruling party used the Trojan horses in creating another CUD, a phony opposition under the leadership of Ayele Chamiso [74]—[75].

<sup>44</sup>Finally, Merera Gudina and his supporters established a new legally registered party, Oromo People’s Congress (OPC) [35].

<sup>45</sup>One of the most controversial opposition figures in Ethiopia at present is Lidetu Ayallew. Despite his popularity, he is also suspected of spying for the government, an accusation which he vehemently denies. see [21, pp.228-230], [48, pp. 49, 51, 56, 65, 154-155]. For some critics, even the newly-established UDJ is a “phony opposition” [78]—[79]. UDJ’s submissive policy vis-à-vis the EPRDF, and some of its leaders’ controversial political background and the alleged appointment of some individuals who played a role in dismantling the former CUD in leadership position (in its branch offices in the provinces) [76] have reinforced this accusation.

<sup>46</sup>Arena Tigray is a legally registered opposition party led by Gebru Asrat, the former governor of Tigray, and Aregash Adane, the deputy governor of Tigray state.

<sup>47</sup>TAND is a Diaspora Tigreans party led by Aregawi Berhe.

administration.<sup>48</sup>

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

Ethiopia's democratization and party development have passed three main stages: the no-party parliamentary elections of the imperial period, the one-party parliamentary election of the *Derg* military government, and the multi-party parliamentary elections of the EPRDF administration. From 1995 to 2004, despite the mushrooming of political parties in the country, the freedom of opposition parties to operate had been so circumscribed that none of them even had the slightest chance of competing with the EPRDF [38]. In the 2005 parliamentary election, however, for the first time, the ruling party opened the political space in the country allowing opposition parties to freely campaign and compete for political power. In this election opposition parties openly challenged the incumbent party and scored high electoral results<sup>49</sup>. Alarmed by the election results and the success of the opposition parties, the incumbent party flexed its military muscle to squash the opposition electoral victories. After crushing the pro-democracy movement that engulfed the country by killing, arresting and intimidating many opposition leaders and their supporters, the government deliberately narrowed the political space. At present, almost all opposition parties are unable to conduct their activities even if they are legally registered parties. For all practical purposes, as Chege et al [38, pp. 35-36] noted, contemporary Ethiopia can be accurately described as a one party dominated state.

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<sup>48</sup>According to critics, these ethnic parties are struggling only to make cosmetic changes in the political leadership by removing Meles Zenawi and his close associates from power, and allowing the Tigray-dominated government to continue ruling the country.

<sup>49</sup>Though it is still very controversial issue, according to Gebru Asrat [77], the incumbent party was defeated in the 2005 election.



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