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Ethnic versus national identity in Ethiopia: Is ethnic identity growing and among whom?

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine the growth of ethnopolitical divisions in Ethiopia. Using recently released Afrobarometer data and comparing current levels of ethnonational identity with previous data released in 2013, we find an erosion in support for a national Ethiopian identity, and rapidly growing ethnonational identities among Oromo and Tigrayan respondents, but not Amhara. This suggests that the attempts by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to promote ‘Ethiopianess’ as a unifying principle for the country will face great challenges. In addition, although it is tempting to lay the blame for this growing ethnonationalism at the ‘feet’ of the ethnofederal system in Ethiopia (as many scholars have) this study cannot directly address the connection between ethnic federalism and ethnic conflict and instability. However, what is clear is that there is a growing sense of ethnonationalism (or the idea that ethnic identity is now more important than a national Ethiopian identity) for a significant part of the population and this is consistent with the expectations of the critics of ethnofederalism. This also suggests greater challenges to Ethiopian unity in the near future.

KEYWORDS

Ethiopia; ethnic politics; ethnic federalism; national versus ethnic identity; ethnic conflict

Introduction

Since 2018 there have been significant changes that have occurred in Ethiopia. The Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, introduced a series of reforms that were supposed to herald a new era of political ‘openness’. Indeed, there was great optimism that the changes that were introduced, both domestically and internationally (particularly the normalisation of relations with neighboring Eritrea after decades of tensions), would bring a new era of peace and democratisation to Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. As Michael Woldemariam noted in 2018, Ethiopia had a ‘chance not only to reinvent itself but also to bring a wave of reform and perhaps even democratization to the wider region.’¹

However, despite the optimism about the country’s future, these changes appear to have unleashed a wave of ethnic unrest and violence. As Peter Kagwanja noted

“far from transforming Ethiopia from a brutal autocracy run by a tiny elite to a true liberal democracy and entrenching the “Third Wave” of democracy in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia’s uncertain revolution risks delivering anarchy within its borders and across the region. Perilously, Ethiopia is a huge dam, which if it bursts will drown the entire region.”²

Simon Marks points out that the wave of ethnic clashes emerged because of the ‘openings’ that Abiy introduced – that the

“unbanning of Ethiopian opposition and rebel groups has stoked political fragmentation and long-suppressed rivalries among ethnic communities, leading regional groups to intensify calls for greater independence. Reforms have also faced mounting opposition from anti-government groups and within the ruling party.”³

As many point out this dynamic is reminiscent of the unraveling of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.⁴

Several scholars, both international and Ethiopian, have suggested that a key factor in explaining this ‘unraveling’ is the existence of ‘ethnic federalism.’ When combined with the relaxation of the control of a one-party state, this has led to internal ethnically based conflicts in the country.⁵ Several scholars have pointed to previous experiments with ethnic federalism, which often resulted in the dissolution of the federation, sometimes violently.⁶ Many critics of ethnic federalism point to the cases of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union as exemplars of the centrifugal forces generated by ethnically based federal arrangements.⁷ From this perspective, when the all-powerful party state liberalised, the ‘glue’ that held the ethnofederal state together eroded, leading ultimately to the disintegration of the country. Is something similar happening in Ethiopia? Since 2014, after the death of the longtime leader of the EPRDF (Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front, the effective governing party in the one-party state) regime, Meles Zenawi in 2012, there emerged considerable political turmoil.⁸ Recent events, particularly the war in Tigray suggest this process of disintegration may be accelerating.

In this paper, however, we do not address the purported centrifugal effects of ethnic federalism on the potential unraveling of the country. Rather we address two smaller but related questions. First, since several scholars, particularly those critical of ethnofederalism, argue that what precedes the disintegration of ethnofederal states is a significant decline in a unified national identity (and the rise of particularistic ethnic identities) our first question is a simple descriptive one: has ethnic identity increased at the expense of an Ethiopian national identity in recent years as the country has undergone a significant political transformation?⁹ Our second question is more analytical – who is currently more likely to express greater affinity for an ethnic identity as opposed to a national one?

As to the first question, unfortunately, much of the current work on the ethnification of Ethiopian politics has been based on conjecture with relatively little empirical work done to assess whether ethnonationalism (or the preference for ethnic identity at the expense of a national identity) is growing in the population – and among whom. This is largely because there has been a general lack of reliable survey data about the Ethiopian population, particularly about issues related to ethnicity and national identities. However, with the recent release of the 8th wave of Afrobarometer data on Ethiopia in March 2021, coupled with the earlier release of the 2013 5th wave, now allows for the examination of changing mass attitudes about ethnic versus national identity over time.¹⁰ The release of the 2021 data provides an excellent opportunity to address both the descriptive and analytical questions we posed above, regarding whether ethnic identity has increased, and who is more likely to express an ethnic as opposed to a national identity currently in Ethiopia.

In the following sections, we provide a brief background of ethnopolitics in Ethiopia and discuss the relevant literature upon which we develop the framework that acts as a ‘road map’ to address the two research questions we posed above.

Liberalisation, ethnopolitics and political dissolution

It is important to note that ethnic politics is not new in Ethiopia, and its expression is not simply the result of recent events. As Keller and Omwami point out, until the 1990s Ethiopia's modern history has been 'characterised by the ethnic chauvinism of the politically dominant Amhara ethnic or nationality group.'¹¹ During the imperial period (1855-1974) and Marxist-Leninist (1974-1991) Derg regime, ethnicity was politicised. However, the imperial regime repressed these sentiments and attempted to

"impose in the population at large a sense of belonging and allegiance to a multi-ethnic nation. Some, but not all, came to strongly believe in this ideology, particularly among the Amhara nationality group and the elites of other ethnic groups who had embraced the Amhara cultural ideology."¹²

However, in the end this approach failed and the imperial system was overthrown in 1974. It was replaced by a new Marxist Leninist regime that sought to make ethnic identities irrelevant via a 'scientific socialist' strategy of emphasising class struggle.¹³ However, this strategy also proved ineffective, and ethnic tensions and conflicts eventually brought down the Derg regime in 1991

After ascending to power following the overthrow of the Derg regime in 1991, the EPRDF promoted the development of ethnic federalism. It defined post-Cold-War Ethiopia as an ethnic confederation where ethnic groups can secede. Further, many powers were 'devolved' to the regions, and the right to use the local language (such as Tigrayna and Oromifa) in official dealings was guaranteed. According to EPRDF and the former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, it was only through such constitutional guarantees for ethnic autonomy that the country could be held together.

There however have been many critics of the ethnofederal system, with some arguing that the adoption of such an institutional arrangements has contributed to the growing centrifugal ethnonationalism in the country. Further, critics argue that this has accelerated over the past few years, especially with the openings created by the Abiy Ahmed regime.¹⁴ As Jon Abbink noted a decade ago, ethnically based federalism has caused ethnicity to permeate 'daily life and has overtaken democratic decision-making and shared issue-politics.'¹⁵ Further, Abbink noted

"ethnic federalism as an institutional set-up privileges ethnicity as one marker of identity over many others (economic, citizenship, occupation, religion, class, or gender) and, in a sense, freezes this one marker of identity, or rather encourages people to identify in ethnic terms."¹⁶

For Abbink and others this ethnification was also accompanied by increased authoritarianism, which contained ethnic tensions.

This concern over how ethnofederalism leads to the ethnification politics is shared by much of the existing international scholarly literature. For Phillip Roeder the 'imprudence' of ethnofederal arrangements is beyond dispute.¹⁷ He argues that ethnofederalism is a flawed arrangement because it leads to the development of ethnic rather than national identities, and in this way 'increases the likelihood of escalation of conflict into acute nation-state crises.'¹⁸ For Paul Brass ethnic federalism encourages separatism, because ethnifying politics provides the incentive for ethnically based politicians to take power by emphasising ethnic rather than national identity, and then using the capture of local power as a springboard for contending for national power or separatism.¹⁹

On the other hand, some scholars have argued that ethnic federalism does not necessarily lead to conflict and collapse.²⁰ For instance, David Turton, and Will Klymicka, suggest that ethnically based federalism can work to maintain the unity of a country, and point to the cases of Belgium, Canada and devolution in the United Kingdom as examples.²¹ However, they note that these examples of ethnic federalism have succeeded because there has been a ‘desecuritization’ of ethnic relations in the West, or that ruling elites need not fear that national minorities will collaborate with external enemies to undermine their rule. Further, there is widespread consensus on liberal democratic values that cut across ethnic divisions in these countries. However, the absence of these conditions in Ethiopia means that ethnic federalism was forced in Ethiopia as opposed to evolve naturally from democratic politics. Thus, once authoritarianism is relaxed, John Ishiyama suggests that this would unleash pressures that had been heretofore contained by the authoritarian regime.²²

In part, to counter the centrifugal pressures of the ethnification of politics some have argued for the institution of ‘Ethiopianess’ or ‘Ethiopiawinet’.²³ This refers to the cultivation of a sense of a transcendent Ethiopian identity that subsumes ethnic identities. However, for many other ethnic groups (such as the Oromo and Tigrayans) Ethiopiawinet is equivalent to the Amhara political dominance of the state, and the subjugation of other groups.²⁴

The strengthening of this sense of a transcendent Ethiopianess appears to be at the core of Abiy Ahmed’s approach to lessen the centrifugal pressures of ethnic politics. He has advocated this in his *Medemer* (Synergy) political philosophy, which he introduced in 2019. Abiy has forwarded a vision of ‘Ethiopiawinet’ and what he has referred to as the ‘politics of addition.’ Indeed, in his inaugural speech as Prime Minister, he proclaimed that ‘we are Ethiopians while alive and Ethiopia when we die’.²⁵ His embrace of ‘Ethiopianess’ put him at odds with the historic emphasis by the EPRDF regime on ethnic federalism and ethnic group rights. Further he suggested that although he did not favor altering the existing federal system ‘we (should not) confuse regional arrangements with ethnic identity’.²⁶

There, however, appears to be little appetite for *Ethiopiawinet* among some elites in the ethnic regions. Some Oromo leaders have called for greater devolution and the deepening of ethnic federalism.²⁷ Others have been starker in their resistance. In July 2018, the former deputy prime minister and TPLF chairman and the then Tigray regional state president, Debretsion Gebremichael, suggested in a speech at a rally that Tigrayan secession was a possibility in the future if the current trends continued.²⁸ The TPLF consolidated its hold on the Tigray region ‘preparing its constituents for a scenario in which the region pushes for at least greater autonomy’.²⁹ In other regions too, ethnic nationalism appears to be increasing, at least among the political elites.³⁰ Thus, at least judging from recent events, it is not clear that Abiy’s embrace of Ethiopians, nor his widely touted *Medemer* philosophy has been embraced by members of the regional elites..

Who is more likely to identify with their ethnic group as opposed to the national identity?

Before addressing the descriptive and analytical questions posed above, it is important to identify other factors that affect whether an individual identifies more with their ethnic group than with a national identity. It has long been held by modernisation theorists that political economic and social modernisation would lead to greater national integration.³¹ Focusing on the European experience, early modernisation theorists argued that urbanisation, universal education, access to mass media and the development of wage labor led to a

reduction in the attachment to a variety of traditional identities, include ethnic identities. This created the basis for a greater identification with a national state, and ultimately leading to the further lessening of ethnic differences and greater cultural homogenisation. From this perspective modernisation would promote greater national identification and reduce attachment with subnational groups.³² Indeed, classical modernisation theory contends that individuals who are involved in the formal economic sector (meaning employed in modern sectors of the economy) and who have received greater formal education should exhibit increased national identification at the expense of ethnic identification.³³ For Ernst Gellner, the development of a national identity is attributable to modernisation, particularly through education and an individual's engagement with industrial society (as opposed to agrarian society).³⁴ Education helps overcome racial and ethnic fragmentation by (1) propagating the idea of a national identity (2) making individuals aware of bonds they share that transcend local divisions. Further engagement in industrial society (or for Gellner the modern sector) creates ties that transcend local communities and puts individuals in contact with each other beyond their localities. Thus, individuals who are engaged in the modern economic sector are more likely to develop a national sense of identity, as opposed to an 'ethnic' one. In short, classic modernisation theory suggests that individual engagement with society's modern sectors will increase national identification at the expense of ethnic group identification.

On the other hand, scholars of African politics later questioned the notion that modernisation would lead to national integration. Many argued that, in fact, modernisation would lead to more intense ethnic divisions within African states.³⁵ These 'second-generation' modernisation theorists argued that current ethnic identities were not 'primordial' but were themselves a product of increased modernisation in Africa. Urbanisation and the creation of new patterns of economic relations brought people of different backgrounds together, making them aware of their ethnic differences. But rather than leading to integration this led to competition over the wealth created by modernisation. Further disagreements over language to be used and debates over education meant that issues of language and education became ethnic battlegrounds. Thus, modernisation created new issue areas for competition, intensifying ethnic differences rather than ameliorating them. Thus Eifert, Miguel and Posner provided empirical support for the proposition that modernisation leads to greater ethnic identification. They demonstrated that individuals working in the 'modern sector' (i.e. wage earners in skilled profession) were much more likely to identify with their ethnicity than other forms of identity (although they did not consider national identity).³⁶ In sum, from the perspective of second-generation modernisation theorists, modernisation will lead to greater ethnic identification instead of national identification.

Another consideration is offered by Daniel Posner who suggests that members of larger and more politically relevant groups should express higher levels of ethnic identification than members of smaller and less politically relevant groups.³⁷ This is because larger and/or more politically relevant groups have an incentive to mobilise members based on ethnicity, to gain a larger share of political power. Thus, we would expect that members of larger ethnic groups would be more inclined to identify ethnically than members of other groups.

However, there is also a considerable amount of literature that suggests that modernisation can cause both increases in national AND ethnic identification, that these processes are not mutually exclusive. Thus, for instance Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi using data from the Afrobarometer project suggest that ethnic identities and national identities are not mutually exclusive.³⁸ Rather they suggest that ethnic identity is conditional depending

on the context and issue area. Indeed, they found that ‘many types of group loyalty-including ethnic identity-readily coexist with nationalism [meaning acceptance of citizenship within the larger state entity]’.³⁹ Keller and Omwami, in a limited study of Ethiopian respondents, also found that respondents in 2002–2003 did not see contradictions between their ethnic group identity and their identity as Ethiopians.⁴⁰

Although it may be the case that individuals can both identify with their ethnic group and their national identity, the above studies did not employ data that could assess the impact of modernisation and group size on ethnic identification *relative to* national identification. As Robinson notes while strong ethnic identification is not incompatible with national identification, ‘national integration requires that loyalty to the territorial nation supersede subnational ethnic loyalties.’⁴¹

In addition, there are other factors suggested in the literature that may also affect individual responses to questions of identity. For instance, age is generally considered as affecting perceptions of national identity. The Pew Research Center notes that globally older adults tend to value national (as opposed to localist identities) more so than younger people.⁴² Other research suggests that there are gender differences as well, with males more likely to embrace a national identity than women.⁴³ However, Keller and Omwami suggest that in Africa, women are more likely to profess an ethnic identity than a national one.⁴⁴ Still other literature points to the effects of experiences as affecting identity. For instance, experiences with discrimination or the sense that one’s identity group is subject to discrimination also affects individual identity formation.⁴⁵ More proximal economic effects, such as whether an individual feels their livelihood is improving under a current government, leads to some degree of ‘performance’ legitimacy for the state, which may translate into greater support for a national identity among individuals in a multiethnic state. At a minimum, although these factors are not central to addressing the two questions expressed above, they must be considered at least as control variable in any multivariate analysis.

Data and methodology

As mentioned above we address two primary research questions in this paper, one descriptive and one analytical: First, has there been an increase in ethnic identity as opposed to a national (or Ethiopian identity) among respondents from the three politically most important groups in the country, namely, the Amhara, the Oromo, and the Tigrayans since the introduction of the reforms of 2018? Second, what factors explain who is more likely to embrace an ethnic identity as opposed to a national one? Is one ethnic group more or less likely to embrace an ethnic identity, and are there any mitigating factors such as level of education and whether the individual is employed in the modern sector that affect the relative level of affinity for ethnic versus national identity? Although there have been very few public opinion surveys conducted in Ethiopia that can ascertain changes in ethnic versus national identities, the recent release in 2021 of the Wave 8 Afrobarometer survey for Ethiopia (coupled with the previous fifth wave released in 2013) provides researchers with the opportunity to address the research questions posed above.⁴⁶

To address the descriptive question posed above, we employed data from two survey waves from the *Afrobarometer* surveys for Ethiopia (from Round 5, 2013 and Round 8, 2021). The use of these data includes a wave from before the advent of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and a wave after.. The data for 2013 included 2386 respondents, and for 2021 included 2378 respondents.. All questions were conducted in the language of choice for

the respondent (i.e. Amharic, Oromifa, Tigrayan, etc). The 2021 wave was based on data collected from 2018-to early 2020, i.e. before the outbreak of hostilities in the Tigray region, but after the ascendancy of Abiy Ahmed to the prime ministership. Thus, by comparing the responses across the two waves we can derive a general sense of how the changes introduced by Abiy Ahmed may have affected the ethnification of identity in the country.

To assess whether the respondent saw themselves as identifying more as ethnic or national, we employ the variable 85b from the Afrobarometer 5th wave and variable q82b from the 8th wave. Both are identically worded and asks 'Let us suppose that you had to choose between being Ethiopian and being a _____ [R's Ethnic Group]'. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings? The response values were 1=I feel only (R's ethnic group), 2=I feel more (R's ethnic group) than Ethiopian, 3=I feel equally Ethiopian and (R's ethnic group), 4=I feel more Ethiopian than (R's ethnic group), 5=I feel only Ethiopian. These were recoded into two categories where the value '1' was assigned to responses 1 and 2 (i.e. the respondent indicates they feel more ethnic than Ethiopian) and '0' was assigned to the other response categories.

To address the analytical question of identifying the correlates of ethnic identity, we take our dichotomous identity variable above and regress this against a number of independent variables. This analysis is not specifically designed to test a series of hypotheses, but as an empirical plausibility probe, using the existing literature as a roadmap to explore the existing data. The independent variables include dummy variables used to identify whether the individual respondent identified their ethnic group as Amhara, Oromo, or Tigrayan (the three most politically important ethnic groups in Ethiopia currently). Further we included variables that measure whether the respondent was part of modernised society (level of education and formal sector employment). Education was self-reported on a nine-point scale, from no formal schooling to postgraduate education. Formal sector employment was determined by dividing the occupational categories into formal (military/police, clerical worker, businessperson, professional worker, civil servant, teacher, etc) and informal (subsistence farmer, informal manual laborer, herder, housewife, etc). In addition, we also considered questions about the respondent's evaluation of the regime, especially examining whether individuals most disaffected and dissatisfied with the regime's performance will more likely embrace ethnic identity as protest to the performance of the Abiy regime. This includes asking the individual if she believes that her ethnic group is treated unfairly by the government, and their assessment of their own economic condition and the country's current economic conditions. We also examined the age and the gender of the respondent, in part to test whether 'ethnification' occurred more with the older population and males as suggested by the general literature (or women as suggested by Keller and Omwami).⁴⁷ The descriptive statistics for the variables from the 8th wave we include in our logistic regression analysis for Table 2 below is reported in Table 1 below, and the list of the actual Afrobarometer questions we used are listed in Appendix 1.

Empirical analysis

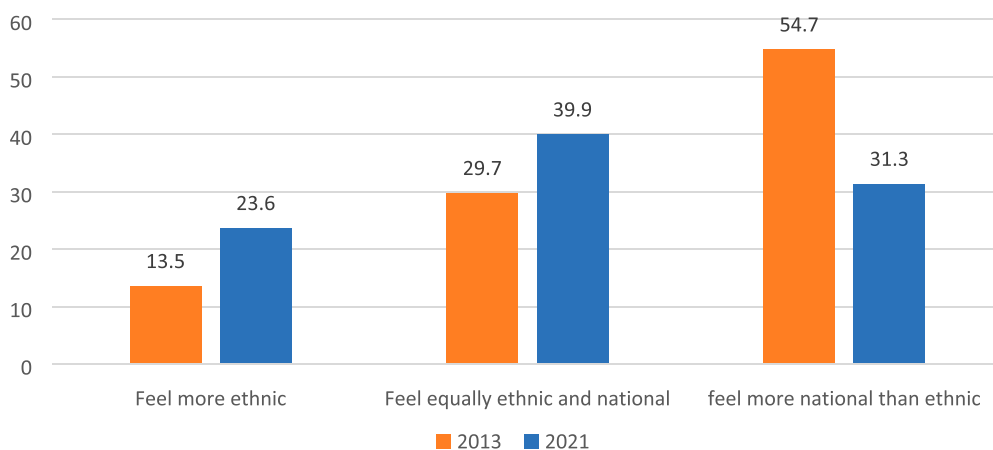
To assess whether ethnic identity has surpassed Ethiopian identity, we begin with an earlier study conducted by Keller and Omwami.⁴⁸ Their study was based on a limited survey of non-randomly selected respondents in the regional states of Oromia, Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Regional State (SNNPR), Tigray, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Ethiopia's capital city, Addis Ababa. Data were collected over a two-year period from 2002 to 2003.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics (from 8th wave).

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Respondent feels more ethnic than national	2314	.00	1.00	.2424	.42865
Oromo	2378	.00	1.00	.3326	.47126
Amhara	2378	.00	1.00	.2578	.43750
Tigrayan	2378	.00	1.00	.0534	.22489
Occupation in formal sector	2194	.00	1.00	.0789	.26957
Education of respondent	2364	0	8	2.25	2.226
Age	2375	18	120	35.81	13.791
Gender of respondent	2378	1 (male)	2 (female)	1.50	.500
Respondent's present living conditions	2375	1	5	3.04	1.247
How respondent views country's present economic condition	2362	1	5	2.80	1.302
Does Respondent believe that their ethnic group is treated unfairly by government	2164	0	3	.92	1.014

The asked the question ‘Do you feel stronger ties to your own nationality group than to other Ethiopians?’ (Agree/ Disagree). Although not identical to the Afrobarometer question that asked respondents to choose between ethnic versus national identities, this nonetheless was one of the first surveys to ask respondents to compare ethnic identification *relative* to national identification. In their study they found no differences in terms of ethnic groups, i.e. that Oromo and Tigrayan were not more or less likely to identify more with their ethnic group than other ethnic groups (such as the Amhara). The found that women were more likely to express relatively more attachment to their ethnic identity, and older respondents were more likely to identify with their ethnic group than with being Ethiopian. Education was unrelated to expressing a preference for an ethnic identity. Although limited in scope, this early study suggested that there was still considerable support for ‘Ethiopianess’ in the earlier part of this century, among not only the Amhara but Oromo and Tigrayans as well.

However, when comparing the data from both the 2013 and 2021 Afrobarometers for Ethiopia, it is quite clear that a preference for ethnic identity has grown significantly over time. In [Figure 1](#) below, overall, the percent respondents reporting a preference for ethnic identity over an Ethiopian identity increased from 13.6% in 2013 to 23.6% in 2021. Further those reporting feeling more Ethiopian declined significantly from 54.7% in 2013 to only

**Figure 1.** Percent respondents reporting ethnic versus national identity over time (2013-2021).

31.3% in 2021. Notably the percent reporting 'I only feel Ethiopian' declined from 44% in 2013 to only 24.6% of respondents from 2013 to 2021.

Figure 2 provides further detail by comparing the three major ethnic groups in the country: the Oromo, Amhara, and Tigrayans (the latter being numerically smaller, but were very politically relevant during the period when the TPLF dominated Ethiopian politics).

What is quite clearly illustrated by Figure 2 is that there are stark differences between the ethnic groups in terms of who is moving towards a more ethnically exclusivist position. There have been dramatic increases in Tigrayan respondents reporting feeling more ethnic than national over time (moving from 13.8% in 2013 to 54.7% in 2021). Further, there was a significant decline in those Tigrayan respondents feeling more national (from 40% in 2013 to only 13.4% in 2021). Also, Oromo respondents are now much more likely to report feeling more ethnic than national, and much less likely to report more national allegiances than ethnic ones. Only among the Amhara respondents is there significant support for a national Ethiopian identity. These results suggest that outside of the Amhara community, Abiy Ahmed's call for *Ethiopiawinet* may fall on deaf ears.

Although we cannot eliminate alternative explanations for the rapid increases in ethnic identity as opposed to a national identity among Oromo and Tigrayan communities since 2013, the rise in the importance of ethnic identity during the period 2013–2021 suggests a connection between the rise of ethnic identity with the political changes that have occurred since the death of Meles Zenawi. Indeed, given that the country has faced neither an international crisis nor economic decline during this period (in fact the country has been one of the fastest growing economies in the world since 2013) suggests that the political changes that have occurred may be associated with the rise in the importance of ethnic identity. However, the results above are only suggestive of such a connection.

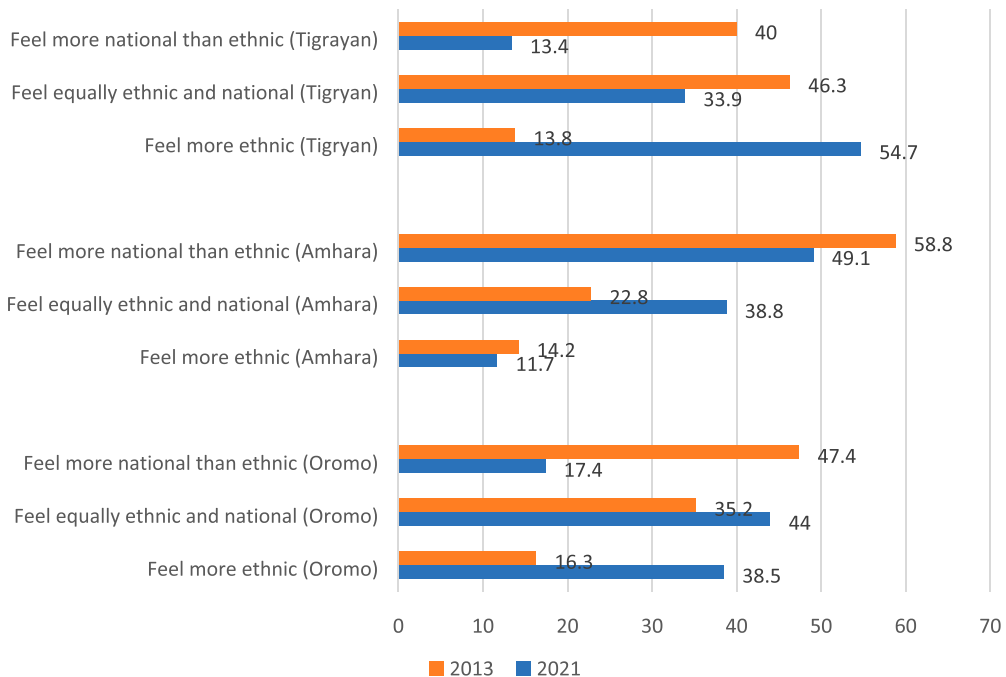


Figure 2. National Identity by Ethnic Group, in Percentage of Respondents by Group (2013-2021).

Turning to the analytical question posed above regarding who is more likely to express a greater sense of ethnic versus national identity, [Table 2](#) (based only on the 2020–21 wave) reports the results of a logistic regression analysis with the dependent variable defined as whether the respondent reports feeling more ethnic than Ethiopian. Odds ratios are reported along with standard errors. Odds ratios are interpreted differently than general coefficients. When an odds ratio is larger than 1, this indicates the percent *increase* in the dependent variable; when the odds ratio is below 1, this indicates the percent *decrease* in the dependent variable. In addition to check for potential problems with multicollinearity we also ran variance inflation factor (VIF) tests for each variable. As reported in [Table 2](#) all the VIF scores are under 2, indicating that there are no problems with collinearity in our statistical model.

As indicated by the results in [Table 2](#), the best predictors of preferring an ethnic identity are being Oromo or Tigrayan. In factor Oromos are 3.5 times more likely to prefer their ethnic identity over a national identity when compared to other groups, and Tigrayans are almost 7 times more likely than members of other groups to prefer an ethnic identity over and Ethiopian one. These results support Posner's argument that larger and more politically relevant groups are likely to express ethnic identities as a way to politically mobilise the group. Clearly this is happening with the Tigrayans and Oromo. However, Amhara respondents are slightly less likely (about 28%) to identify with their ethnic identity and not the national identity than other groups, but this relationship is not statistically significant. Thus, the Amhara appear to be the one group that retains some support for Ethiopianess, whereas other groups appear to be moving towards a greater ethnonational identity.

Table 2. Logistic regression results dependent variable: Ethnic identity more important than national identity. (2020-21 Wave Only).

Variable	Odds Ratio (Standard Error)	Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)
Oromo	3.562**** (.131)	1.375
Amhara	.730 (.164)	1.375
Tigrayan	6.934**** (.215)	1.133
Occupation in formal sector	.787 (.244)	1.060
Age	.998 (.004)	1.057
Education of Respondent	.961 (.027)	1.012
Gender of Respondent	.970 (.109)	1.018
Respondent's current living conditions	1.005 (.050)	1.419
Respondent's assessment of Country's Present Economic Conditions	1.073 (.045)	1.462
Is ethnic group treated unfairly by government?	1.015 (.037)	1.039
Constant	Coefficient= .136*** (.040)	
Cox and Snell R-square=.11		

$N = 2378$.

* = $P \leq .10$.

** = $P \leq .05$.

*** = $P \leq .01$.

**** = $P \leq .001$.

Turning to other individual factors that may mitigate the rise of ethnonational sentiment, such as whether the respondent is part of the 'modern' sector in society, and other demographic factors (that Keller and Omwami investigated), education level and being employed in the formal economy was unrelated to preferences for ethnic identity relative to a national identity. Although the direction of the relationships is in the predicted direction, with individuals employed in the formal sector less likely to express a preference for an ethnic identity (by about 22%) this relationship is not statistically significant. Further, although the level of education appears slightly and inversely related to a preference for an ethnic identity, this relationship is also not statistically significant.

In addition, contrary to Keller and Omwami who found that age was positively related to the preference for an ethnic identity, older people are slightly less likely (2% less so) to favor an ethnic identity over a national one. Women were also slightly less likely to prefer an ethnic identity than men. However, neither of these relationships were statistically significant.

Finally, a preference for ethnic identity is unrelated to the perceived performance of the regime, either in terms of economic performance or discriminatory actions against a respondent's ethnic group. In sum, then, it appears that the only factors that predict a preference for an ethnic as opposed to national identity is being Oromo or Tigrayan. This suggests that perhaps now more than ever, ethnicity is the single most important factor driving politics in the country. It is little wonder, given the empirical results reported above, the highest levels of tension and violence involve the Oromo and Tigrayan ethnic groups. It also suggests that an emphasis on Ethiopianess to restore unity to the country is likely to fail to appeal to these groups.

Conclusion

Although many have claimed that the root of Ethiopia's current woes and instability is related to ethnic federalism, there has been very little evidence to support this claim. The above paper has sought to employ the most recent survey data from Ethiopia to address the question of whether there has been a growing sense of ethnonational identity in Ethiopia since 2018, and if so, among whom is this ethnonational identity increasing? Further, is there some reservoir of public support for Ethiopianess, which will impact whether Abiy Ahmed's approach to promoting *Ethiopiawinet* will work to promote the unity of the country? As to the first question, it is very clear that ethnonationalism, or the idea that ethnicity is more important as identity than being Ethiopian, has grown dramatically in the country, but especially among the Tigrayans and the Oromo. It appears, however, that there remains some degree of support for and Ethiopian identity, but that appears limited largely to the Amhara group. What is clear is that affiliation with ethnic groups (particularly the Oromo and Tigrayans) is the best predictor of identity, and that other factors such as education, and incorporation into the modern sectors of the economy do not mitigate the powerful pull of ethnonationalism.

Although it is tempting to lay the blame for this growing ethnonationalism at the 'feet' of the ethnofederal system in Ethiopia, this study cannot directly address the connection between ethnic federalism and ethnic conflict and instability. However, what is clear is that there is a growing sense of ethnonationalism or that ethnic identity is now more important than a national Ethiopian identity for a significant part of the population (particular among Oromo and Tigrayans), and this is consistent with the expectations of the critics of ethnofederalism. There is also a growing gap between how Oromo and Tigrayans on the one hand, and the Amhara on the other, view ethnic versus national identity, and the nature of

the state. Although the latter may be receptive to calls for *Ethiopiawinet*, it is likely not to resonate with Oromo or Tigrayans. Given the current conflict in the north, and the ongoing ethnic tensions in Oromiya, it is likely that they will become even less receptive to pleas for a common national identity over time. In many ways this is reminiscent of the collapse of other ethnofederal states, such as the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Whether Ethiopia follows the same path will depend on whether Abiy can maintain control over the party state, and that the party state elite remains unified and committed to the unity of the country (particularly the Oromo political elite). If not, then this will have very large negative implications for the future unity of the country, and therefore for peace and security more broadly in the Horn of Africa.

Notes

1. Woldemariam, 'Can Ethiopia's Reforms Succeed?', 1.
2. Kagwanja, 'Abiy's Ethiopia Democratic Revolution is Unravelling', 1. See also Nezar Manik 'Abiy Ahmed's Reforms Have Unleashed Forces He Can No Longer Control'.
3. Marks, 'Ethiopia Claims Victory in Tigray Conflict ...', 1.
4. For a discussion see Ishiyama, 'Is Ethnonationalism Growing in Ethiopia ...'.
5. Ibid.; Aalen, 'Ethnic Federalism and Self-determination'; Abbink, 'Ethnicity and Conflict Generation in Ethiopia'.
6. Roeder, 'Ethnofederalism and the Mismanagement of Conflicting Nationalism'; Roeder 'Where Nation-States Come From'; Cornell, 'Autonomy as a Source of Conflict'; Bunce *Subversive Institutions*; Bunce et al., 'Managing Diversity and Sustaining Democracy'; for a counter argument see Anderson, *Federal Solutions To Ethnic Problems*; Anderson, 'Ethnofederalism: The Worst Form of Institutional Arrangement?'
7. Roeder 'Ethnofederalism and the Mismanagement of Conflicting Nationalism'; Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*.
8. The EPRDF was an umbrella political organisation made up of five ethnically based parties, and dominated at its core by the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF).
9. See Abbink, 'Ethnicity and Conflict Generation in Ethiopia'; Roeder, 'Ethnofederalism and the mismanagement of conflicting nationalism'; Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*.
10. Afrobarometer, Wave 5 and Wave 8
11. Keller and Omwami, 'Federalism, Citizenship and National Identity in Ethiopia', 39–40.
12. Ibid., 39; Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multi-ethnic Society*.
13. Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People's Republic*.
14. Mamdani, 'The Trouble with Ethiopia's Ethnic Federalism'; Fiseha, 'Federalism, Development and the Changing Political Dynamics'; Mehretu, 'Ethnic Federalism and its Potential to Dismember the Ethiopian state'; Abbink, 'Ethnicity and Conflict Generation in Ethiopia'.
15. Abbink, 'Ethnicity and Conflict Generation in Ethiopia', 596.
16. Ibid., 612.
17. Roeder, 'Ethnofederalism and the Mismanagement of Conflicting Nationalism'; see also Bunce et al., 'Managing Diversity and Sustaining Democracy'.
18. Roeder, *Where Nation-States Come From*.
19. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*; Liam Anderson (*Federal solutions to ethnic problems*) on the other hand, defends ethnic federalism as a potential workable solution in ethnically divided countries and is critical of the critics of ethnic federalism. First he notes that critics like Roeder only focus on cases where ethnic federalism did not work such as the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. More importantly if there are no plausible alternatives to ethnofederalism in a given case, or the alternatives are demonstrably inferior, then the argument that ethnofederalism is a poor institutional choice may be true, but it is also, in his view, irrelevant.
20. Anderson, 'Ethnofederalism: The Worst Form of Institutional Arrangement?'
21. Turton, *Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective*; Klymicka 'Emerging Western Models of Multinational Federalism'

22. Ishiyama, 'The Politics of Appeasement?'; Tronvoll, 'Briefing: The Ethiopian 2010 Federal and Regional Elections.'
23. Woldeyohannes, 'Ethiopia: Why Deny Ethiopian National Identity?'
24. Borago, 'What is the Point of Amhara Nationalism'; Tadesse, 'Do the Amhara Exist as a Distinct Ethnic Group?'
25. Hussein, 'Full English Transcript of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy's Inaugural Address.'
26. International Crisis Group (ICG), *Managing Ethiopia's Unsettled Transition*, 24.
27. Ibid, 25.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Parsons, *Structure and Process in Modern Societies*; Gellner, *Thought and Change*; Apter *Politics of Modernization*; Bendix, *Nation-Building and Citizenship*; Deutsch *Nationalism and Social Communication*.
32. Conner, 'Nation-Building or Nation-Destroying?'; Coleman, 'Nationalism in Tropical Africa', 405.
33. Robinson, 'National versus Ethnic Identification in Africa', 713.
34. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*.
35. Eifert, Miguel, and Posner 'Political Competition and Ethnic Identification in Africa'; Bates 'Modernization, Ethnic Competition'; Connor, 'Nation-Building or Nation-Destroying?'
36. Eifert, Miguel, and Posner, 'Political Competition and Ethnic Identification in Africa'.
37. Posner, 'The Political Salience of Cultural Difference'.
38. Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi, *Public Opinion, Democratization and Market Reform in Africa*.
39. Ibid., 187.
40. Keller and Omwami, 'Federalism, Citizenship and National Identity in Ethiopia'.
41. Robinson, 'National versus Ethnic Identification in Africa', 714.
42. Stokes, 'What it Takes to Truly be One of us'.
43. Berkel, Molina and Mukherjee, 'Gender Asymmetry in the Construction of American National Identity'; Wickes, Smith and Phillips, 'Gender and National Identity'.
44. Keller and Omwami, 'Federalism, Citizenship and National Identity in Ethiopia'.
45. Meca et al., 'Discrimination and Ethnic Identity'.
46. Although the World Values Survey has conducted two survey studies in Ethiopia, one in 2011 and one in 2020, neither included questions that directly asked respondents whether they identified more with their ethnic identity than with their national (Ethiopian) identity.
47. Keller and Omwami, 'Federalism, Citizenship and National Identity in Ethiopia.'
48. Ibid.

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Appendix 1

Question Number: Q81

Question: Let's go back to talking about you. What is your ethnic community, cultural group or tribe?

Question Number: Q82A

Question: How often, if ever, are _____s [R's Ethnic Group] treated unfairly by the government?

Value Labels: 0=Never, 1=Sometimes, 2=Often, 3=Always

Question Number: Q82B

Question: Let us suppose that you had to choose between being Ethiopian and being a _____ [R's Ethnic Group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?

Value Labels: 1=I feel only (R's ethnic group), 2=I feel more (R's ethnic group) than Ethiopian, 3=I feel equally Ethiopian and (R's ethnic group), 4=I feel more Ethiopian than (R's ethnic group), 5=I feel only Ethiopian,

Question Number: Q97

Question: What is your highest level of education?

Value Labels: 0=No formal schooling, 1=Informal schooling only (including Koranic schooling), 2=Some primary schooling, 3=Primary school completed, 4=Intermediate school or some secondary school/high school, 5=Secondary school/high school completed, 6=Post-secondary qualifications, other than university, 7=Some university, 8=University completed, 9=Post-graduate

Question Number: Q95C

Question: What is your main occupation? [If unemployed, retired, or disabled, ask:] What was your last main occupation?

Value Labels: 0=Never had a job, 1=Student, 2=Housewife/homemaker, 3=Agriculture/farming/fishing/forestry, 4=Trader/hawker/vendor, 5=Retail/shop, 6=Unskilled manual worker, 7=Artisan or skilled manual worker, 8=Clerical or secretarial, 9=Supervisor/foreman/senior manager, 10=Security services, 11=Mid-level professional, 12=Upper-level professional,

Question Number: Q101

Question: Respondent's gender

Value Labels: 1=Male, 2=Female

Question Number: Q4B

Question: In general, how would you describe: Your own present living conditions?

Value Labels: 1=Very bad, 2=Fairly bad, 3=Neither good nor bad, 4=Fairly good, 5=Very good,

Question Number: Q4A

Question: In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country?

Value Labels: 1=Very bad, 2=Fairly bad, 3=Neither good nor bad, 4=Fairly good, 5=Very good

Question Number: Q82A

Question: How often, if ever, are _____s [R's Ethnic Group] treated unfairly by the government?

Value Labels: 0=Never, 1=Sometimes, 2=Often, 3=Always