Ethiopian Reforms and the Resolution of Uncertainty in the Horn of Africa State System

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Abstract : *This article investigates the potential impact of the reforms sweeping across Ethiopia on the Horn of Africa state system. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia is currently undergoing significant reforms that will have regional implications. Two announcements stand out: the normalization of relations with the northern neighbor Eritrea and the signing of a peace deal with the domestically based Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). This article foregrounds territorial contestation as one of the historical causes of uncertainty in the Horn of Africa. The article argues that the current wave of reforms has the potential to transcend the uncertainty that has previously characterized the region. However, for uncertainty to be minimized, the transformation has to extend beyond Ethiopia. In examining the thawing of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea and the ONLF, the article seeks to historicizes and contextualize the current wave of changes and to underscore their significance.*

Keywords- Ethiopia; reforms; Horn of Africa; uncertainty; state system; territoriality

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to historicizes and contextualize the reforms that are currently sweeping across Ethiopia. Historically Ethiopia has been at the center of contestations in the region wherein the country was seen as actively infringing on the sovereignty of some of its neighbors. This resulted in uncertainty in the region. This uncertainty has contributed to the instability that has come to characterize the region, often underlined by con- tested territoriality.

Spearheaded by Ethiopia's new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the current wave of reforms has sought to address some of these historical tensions and to resolve the uncertainty that characterizes the region. The peace deal signed in 2018 normalizing relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea will not only affect internal political dynamics within Ethiopia; it is also likely to signify a new chapter in the politics of the region. Eritrea and Ethiopia had been in a stalemate since the end of the 1998–2000 war. This war was sparked by a border dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia, yet commentators believe that the border was merely a pretext for more complex political, social and economic issues.

For its part, the peace accord with the ONLF will end a long-standing conflict between this separatist movements that has sought self-determination for the Somali region of Ethiopia and the government in Addis Ababa. The Somali region of Ethiopia is one of nine regional states under the current ethnic federal system and is mostly inhabited by Somali- speaking people. This conflict with the ONLF has shaped Ethiopia's relationship with its Somali region, as well as its relationship with the Republic of Somalia.

Although the current wave of transformations within Ethiopia has the potential to transcend the long-standing territorial disputes in the region, this study finds that it is unlikely to be sufficient to bring peace without a change in the rules of engagement. Such trans- formation was recently given impetus when Abiy was awarded the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize. According to the Nobel committee, the prize is in recognition of 'his efforts to achieve peace and international cooperation, and in particular for his decisive initiative to resolve the border conflict with neighboring Eritrea'.2 In addition, the transformation will need to be region-wide; neighboring countries must also commit to some form of internal renewal similar to what can be seen in Ethiopia, and also in nascent form in Sudan.

The Horn of Africa has for a long time been associated with perpetual conflict and crises. Contested nationalisms and territoriality, competing political ideologies and ethnicity have invariably contributed to the volatile nature of the state system in the Horn. Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia once noted that

... if we are to redraw the map of Africa on the basis of religion, race or language, I fear many states will cease to exist. It is in the interest of all Africans today to respect the frontiers drawn on maps, even though they were drawn by colonialists.

When the emperor addressed the assembled African heads of state and government at the inaugural meeting of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963, he was speaking within the context of an emerging African consensus on territorial boundaries. The emperor was at the time aware of the potential dangers of going against the territorial status quo. The agendas of summits leading up to the 1963 meeting already had featured boundary and territorial questions involving Congo, Cameroon, Guinea and Mauritania.6 Mindful of the distinct identity of the Ethiopian state, the emperor jumped on the band- wagon of the emergent African state system and its corresponding 'post-colonial' territorial discourse. The emperor was among the key architects of the new African territorial consensus and one of its most vocal supporters. However, the extent to which Ethiopia would adapt to the 'post-colonial' territorial framework remained to be seen.

Territoriality as the basis of power and authority can be seen as one of the more basic measures of statehood. In particular, the use of territory for political, social and economic ends is widely seen as a successful strategy for establishing the exclusive jurisdiction implied by state sovereignty.7 This understanding of statehood has for the most part been unproblematic elsewhere on the African continent since the adoption of the OAU Charter in 1963. The geographic limits of the majority of states have been largely uncontested. This is with the exception of a few notable cases such as the Biafran war in Nigeria and to some extent the case of Western Sahara.9 Territoriality – 'the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence or control people, phenomena, and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area' – has found limited resistance, despite the compromised ability of African states to defend their borders.

In the Horn of Africa there is evident tension between this inability of states to defend their borders and the need to abide by the norm of territorial integrity. This tension manifests itself when conflict within individual states acquires a distinct cross-border element often underlined by what appears to be deep-rooted local conceptions of territory and its limits, as well as various aspects of identification. The consequences of this have been high levels of uncertainty that have seen the Horn engaged in deadly inter- state conflicts.

This represents a notable departure from conflict found in other sub regions on the continent. Elsewhere on the continent are found varying degrees of domestic conflict, but these do not have such an 'inevitable' cross-border dimension, with the capacity to transform the territorial map of the region. Yet, it is not clear why or how   this tension manifests itself in the Horn, nor is it clear how and where these 'localized' understandings of territory and identification emerge. Overall, the saliency of territorial boundaries in processes of state formation distinguishes the Horn of Africa from other African sub regions.

This is evident in the nature of political development in the region since 1991. These developments feature a strong element of redefining the national territory. In 1991, the northern region of Somalia unilaterally declared its independence and became Somaliland– reverting to its colonial boundaries as a British Protectorate prior to its merger with the former Italian Somaliland territory in 1960. Eritrea became a sovereign state in 1993 follow- ing a protracted conflict with Ethiopia. And more recently, in 2011, the Republic of South Sudan was established. On the other hand, although the Republic of Somalia has provided the clearest example of disintegration since 1991, it has persisted as a political entity that enjoys international legitimacy; various non-state entities have occasionally stepped in to fill the power vacuum.14 These variegated forms of statehood have led to the emergence of 'pathological categories' of statehood, in an attempt to make sense of these develop- ments in the Horn. However, this author finds such characterisations neither useful nor adequate. Rather, to bring deeper understanding of the state system in the Horn of Africa and to make sense of the regional implications of the Ethiopian reforms, this article will contextualize and historicizes current developments.

The article begins with a section that conceptualizes African statehood. This section problematizes the dominant understanding of African statehood by juxtaposing it with empirical evidence from the Horn of Africa. The latter has exposed some of the shortcomings of the dominant frameworks for understanding the African state system, which has led to failure in understanding the nature of political conflict in the Horn. The next section explores the historical role of the Ethiopian state in engendering the condition of uncertainty that characterizes the Horn of Africa. This section reveals the constitutive role of peripheries in Ethiopian conceptions of statehood. The next section foregrounds contested national and territorial statehood in order to contextualize the relationship between the Ethiopian government and Ethiopia's Somali region,

and also Ethiopia's relationship with Eritrea. Finally, the article offers an analysis of what the current changes portend for the region.

Conceptualizing African territorial statehood

Literature that examines African state formation has struggled to grasp and make sense of dynamic, if not 'peculiar', forms of statehood that we see in the Horn of Africa. Approaches to state formation in Africa have been dominated by analyses that are rooted in Webern notions of the state and statehood. This has led to the categorization of all manifestations of statehood that do not conform to this model as instances of state failure, collapse or weakness. This literature has struggled to make sense of political development outside the confines of state capitals and has been equally unsuccessful in explaining inter-state relations in Africa. The inability of the literature and analysts to imagine African statehood beyond the confining category of the nation-state has been the main challenge. The pre- occupation with internal state 'disorder' means that the legitimacy of African cases of secession, for instance, is questioned and met with contempt, as demonstrated by how Zartman assesses the case of Somaliland. The fixation on internal 'collapse' or 'disorder' has led others to argue that there is, in fact, logic behind the seeming disorder that is found within African polities. While Chabal and Daloz's main claims can be debated, their approach nevertheless demonstrates that in Africa there are political dynamics and practices that do not conform to ideal-type forms of political organization. What then seems like a more useful approach is to analyses empirical political development in Africa in a manner that emphasizes context and history.

Contemporary African statehood is informed by the decision that was reached by the newly independent African countries in 1963 in Addis Ababa and in 1964 in Cairo – to retain the territorial boundaries inherited from colonial rule. Consequently, there has been general acknowledgement of the absence of inter-state conflict on the continent, regardless of the persistence of states that emerged from seemingly arbitrary boundaries
– leading to what is known as 'the paradox of African boundaries'. There is consensus on some of the reasons why this paradox has persisted. A number of commentators such as Clapham and Herbst note that the nature of the international state system supports this 'paradox',17 particularly the popular idea of the 'nation-state'.18 Others, such as Pierre Engle Bert, have gone a step further by attempting to demonstrate how the international system supports this 'paradox'.19 The overall consensus is that African countries have largely remained viable and peaceful towards each other, regardless of internal turmoil, because the international system 'rewards' them for remaining intact. The key assertion is that African norms of statehood find institutionalized legitimacy in the international system.

However, the African territorial consensus and its popular understandings are challenged in the Horn of Africa. In most analyses, the Horn is acknowledged for its exceptional nature, but the discussion moves promptly to focus on the remarkable achievement of peacefully retaining 'artificial' boundaries elsewhere on the continent. For example, Craw- ford Young acknowledges that 'Ethiopia and Sudan cry out for creative imagination and careful study',21 but does not offer ways to go about this. Similarly, Englebert does not adequately address why in the Horn the seemingly low odds of international recognition for breakaway states does not seem to deter secessionist states from emerging. Nor does Englebert explain why, unlike elsewhere on the continent, actors in the Horn appear not to be interested in the 'domestic power of command' that is afforded by the legalities of the international system.23 Although some of this literature has attempted to challenge the state weakness/failure discourse, it has not provided the necessary tools to take the analyses to a new level; it has not historicized and contextualized the diverse forms of empirical statehood that continue to emerge in the Horn of Africa.

The consequences, as Member observes, have been the development of hypotheses of stability and rupture that assimilate all non-linear phenomena into chaos. For instance, Jackson and Roseburg argued that between 1962 and 1982 Ethiopia was an unstable community, without explaining what the conditions were before 1962, the nature of this instability, or why the change came in that particular year. Herbst in 1997 listed Ethiopia as collapsed, alongside Somalia, Liberia and Zaire, thus, overlooking the highly distinct political and social histories of these countries. These approaches are, to a large extent, influenced by the erroneous assumption that Africa south of the Sahara has a relatively homogenous history that can be neatly encapsulated by the colonial narrative.

To successfully challenge these assumptions, we must focus on history and context. Ian Spears notes that the Horn – Somaliland in particular – raises significant questions about Africa's territorial order.27 Others have suggested a number of possible explanations for the contrary expressions of statehood that we find in the Horn. For instance, Markus Kornprobst argues that 'there is no consensus on who constitutes a colonial power in the Horn', unlike in other African sub regions where European countries historically fit this imagery. Kornprobst suggests that some states may perceive Ethiopia as a colonial power in the Horn. Although this premise might be correct, it is contentious and requires further investigation. To establish the veracity of such a premise we would need to take into account the formation of the contemporary state in Ethiopia in the late 19th century. This is a necessary exercise because Ethiopia features prominently in 19th-century history of the colonial conquest in the Horn of Africa, a fact that later contributed to the uncertainty that has characterized the region.

Ethiopian statehood and uncertainty in the Horn of Africa

The formation of the contemporary state in Ethiopia in the late 19th century – the empire state – was shaped by the absorption of territories located south, east and west of the political center. The incorporation of these territories contributed to the emergence of the idea of the 'Ethiopian state'. Subsequently, the peripheries shaped the evolution of state bureaucracy and the definition of the national territory. Central to these processes was the extension of state power over a particular territory, which instituted the use of territory as a means of asserting imperial state power and authority. However, the territorialisation of state power in Ethiopia was not a straightforward process. It was highly contested as it faced major resistance in the peripheries and subsequently from neighboring states. This morphed into a condition where the political fate of each state in the region became inextricably linked with that of neighboring states, thus creating a highly uncertain regional environment.

The security dilemma is a foundational concept in international relations because it engages with what Booth and Wheeler call 'the existential condition of uncertainty'. By describing uncertainty as existential, the authors underline the reality of its inherent and inescapable nature. It is not passing or occasional. The concept of uncertainty encapsulates the nature of the state system in the Horn of Africa since the 1960s. For the most part, at least until 2018, this uncertainty could be defined as unresolvable. The causes of unresolvable uncertainty, according to Booth and Wheeler, can be reduced to mainly material or mainly psychological drivers. Discussion will return to these later in the article.

In the post-colonial period, the security dilemma that led to uncertainty in the Horn was perpetuated by the broader international context of that period – the Cold War. For the duration of the latter, both Ethiopia and Somalia found themselves as proxies of either the US or the Soviet Union. This condition saw the escalation of tensions resulting in the 1977–1978 war between Ethiopia and Somalia – the most mobile and technologically advanced of the numerous conflicts to have taken place in Africa since the Second World War. The security complex in the region also included Sudan, which became involved in the internal conflicts of its neighbors. Lionel Cliffe calls these patterns of 'mutual intervention' in the Horn of Africa. This systemic pattern leads to any one conflict between states or across borders fuelling and amplifying other conflicts; conflicts at local, national and inter-state levels interact with each other. In addition, there is an element of a 'spillover effect' of these conflicts that sometimes spreads to neighboring regions, such as the Great Lakes.

Cursory comparison between the Horn and Southern Africa reveals the extent of the regional differences in ideas of statehood. The most apparent difference that we note in the 'post-colonial' era lies in how this period is understood in the two regions, and how the meanings attached to the idea of independence differ. In Southern Africa, the existence of apartheid South Africa was the greatest threat to regional stability and presented the rest of the region with a single enemy to unite against. In the Horn, there has not been a clearly defined enemy or even traces of the kind of unity demonstrated by the frontline states in Southern Africa. In the Horn, loyalties have been mostly fluid and superficial; internal political change can be successfully manipulated by external forces. Another difference arises in the definition of independence. For the states in Southern Africa, independence was from white minority rule, whereas in the Horn it is less clear, except in the case of Eritrea which was fighting for independence from Ethiopia. Overall, in the Horn, there exists a continuum of overlapping claims to independence, variously articulated as secession or irredentism.

This examination of uncertainty suggests that the success and regional impact of the current wave of reforms in Ethiopia are dependent on fundamental shifts in how the region's states view each other. The recent

shuttle diplomacy of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the recent developments in Sudan suggest that the ground is fertile for the region to overcome some of the historical drivers of uncertainty.

Contested territorial and national statehood in the Horn

This section examines what is a clear case of regional interconnectedness in the Horn of Africa, one that has played a key role in regional political developments, specifically in   the uncertainty that characterizes the region. The section pays specific attention to Ethiopia's relationship with neighboring Somalia and Eritrea, in order to contextualize the recent peace deal with Eritrea as well as the armistice with the ONLF. A nuanced and his- topically informed interpretation assists in reaching a better understanding of the relation- ship between these two countries and between Ethiopia and the ONLF.

At the core of the enmity between Ethiopia and Somalia is believed to be divergent conceptions of national territory and national identity. Diametrically opposed in conceptions of territorial boundaries and national identity, the two countries appear to have been destined to be hostile neighbors. This is the dominant perception that also appears to be supported by empirical evidence. Cliffe cites three key features that ought to be central to analyses of state formation and statehood in the Horn. The first is the ethnically homogenous state of Somalia, whose nationalism embraces neighboring Somali minorities; second is Ethiopia, with a territory that resulted from resistance to European colonialism but also from its becoming an empire; and finally is Sudan, straddling the cultural divide between sub-Saharan Africa and the north. These are all important fault lines that capture the most important areas of divergence in the region.

Immediately following Somali independence and the unification of the former Italian and British Somali territories in 1960, the territorial boundary took centre stage in intra- state and inter-state politics in the Horn of Africa. Soon after, the government of the Somali Republic tabled significant claims on Kenyan, Ethiopian and French Somaliland ter- ritories at the newly established OAU. By late 1963 and early 1964, Ethiopia and Somalia were engaged in their first military confrontation where Ethiopia asserted its military superiority.38 The dispute was referred to the OAU for arbitration. However, both Ethiopia and Kenya were in a strong position to occupy the legal high ground and to successfully argue that Somali claims contravened the OAU Charter. This marked the beginning of a protracted conflict of Somali irredentism and Ethiopia's defense of its territorial integrity. The 1963–1964 conflict initiated what would become a practice of 'dramatizing sovereignty' in the Horn of Africa – a practice not seen in other parts of the continent, during and after the decolonization period. Subsequent claims of territorial sovereignty in the region would become more forceful and violent as seen in the 1977–1978 inter-state war between Ethiopia and the Republic of Somalia and in the 1998–2000 war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. These conflicts were extraordinary because they were based on claims that threatened the basic existence of the confronted states. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Ethiopia and the Republic of Somalia pursued widely divergent con- ceptions of statehood that exemplified '… a peculiar contradiction that lay at the heart of the post-colonial consensus: the fragile balance of state sovereignty (territorial integrity) and the right of peoples to self-determination'. Ethiopia's decision to engage in a military confrontation with Somalia in 1963 and again in 1977 was in both cases motivated by the strong desire to maintain its territorial integrity. Conversely, the decision of the Somali Republic to engage in the same confrontations was driven by its ambition to establish an ethnically unified nation-state. Indeed, post-independence Somali discourses have been dominated by the 'nationalist account'. Both countries appear to have been pursuing valid claims that were at once supported and opposed by the international state system.

Social identities have long been recognized as some of the key factors that render the state system particularly complex in the Horn of Africa.43 It has been argued that the interconnectedness of state entities in this region can be attributed to what appears to be 'ethnic zones of confederation' where partially separate groups of people are unified under a common identity or language. This conceptualization particularly applies to the Eritrean experience with Ethiopia. This interconnectedness has often manifested itself in the border regions of the various states in the Horn, and Ethiopian peripheries   are good exemplars of this phenomenon. However, the term 'identity', which has been called 'ambiguous, contradictory, confusing and … characterized by reifying connotations' is problematic for this article. The challenges in using the term multiply when it is used in the context of a dynamic and often contested political space such as the Horn of Africa. Nonetheless, in all its ambiguity, 'identity' looms large in political discourses in the Horn, not least in Ethiopia. We are told that at the core of identity-related processes are perceptions of self-understanding, self-interest, collective-interest, social and political action. It is thus evident that the term

'identity' is impractical as an analytical tool, for it is capable of denoting a range of heterogeneous and sometimes contrary meanings.

This article, therefore, opts for the alternative; identification. This term is put forward by Brubaker and Cooper, who argue that the term 'identification' is processual and seeks further clarification on the agents doing the identifying and the purposes for such an exer- cise. This disaggregation reveals a possible distinction between self-identification and external identification and allows for further investigation into the interplay between external identification and self-identification in a particular context. In most cases, the state tends to be the most important, although not the only agent of categorisation. Identification, therefore, allows us to observe the historical progression of relations between and among key actors in the Horn. Historical sources indicate that the term 'iden- tity', on the other hand, obscures our understanding of regional undercurrents. The inherent complexity found in the politics of the region suggests that the decisions that actors make at any given time are not absolute. Alliances and political relations are ever-shifting, and it would be a gross simplification to believe that 'identity' alone can explain the uncertainty observed in the region. For instance, 'identity' can hardly explain the emergence of a strong Eritrean national consciousness.

The controversial inclusion by the federation of Eritrea into Ethiopia in 1952 set in motion a series of events that would pave the way for the beginning of the Eritrean struggle for independence from Ethiopia. This gave way to the foundation of a number of Eritrean liberation fronts who led the way in the nearly three decades' long conflict with Ethiopia. During the course of this conflict, the Ethiopian state maintained a strained relationship with its northern Tigray region that borders Eritrea, because of its alliance with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF).

The Tigrayans of northern Ethiopia later emerged as ardent advocates of a reconsti- tuted Ethiopian national consciousness, which ultimately gave way to the full expression of an Eritrean national imagination. Tronvoll argues that, ideologically, the Ethiopian gov- ernment, led by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), came to power in 1991 with a 'non-nationalist' vision of Ethiopia, where the state would comprise several supposedly equal 'nations'. Yet, there remained a fundamental dialectic in the conceptualization of national and territorial statehood by those who came to power in both Ethiopia and Eritrea. This resulted in what seemed like a repeat of the 1977–1978 Ethiopia-Somalia war when, in 1998, tensions erupted over conflicting ideas of statehood between Ethiopia and Eritrea, in a war that has been described as 'very personal'.51 Quite similar to the Somalis in 1977, Eritrean intentions in this war were motivated by sentiments of a strongly envisioned national imaginary.

In short, to analyses the key features of these conflicts through the lenses of the ambiguous term 'identity' provides only limited understanding, telling the observer that these are cases of competing social identities such as religion or ethnicity. Rather, what is actually at play is bigger than social identities; this is a case of people with a history of internal and external sources of identification. For instance, the Eritreans developed a distinct self- image that emerged out of their differential treatment under Italian colonial rule. According to Tekeste Negash, the Italian colonial experience of racial policies, wage- labour, and participation on the Italian side in the conquering and pacification of Ethiopia contributed to the development of an Eritrean national consciousness. Despite the divisions and conflict that plagued the initial stages of the nascent Eritrean struggle for liberation, it later emerged as a formidable movement against Ethiopian imperial rule. Indeed, the triumph of the EPLF in championing 'Eritreanness' unfolded within a larger context of the recognition of the Eritrean struggle. Ruth Iyob notes that the success of the EPLF in shaping Eritrean self-image was an outcome of a concerted and sustained struggle for local, regional and international legitimacy.

The eventual secession and independence of Eritrea generated untold resentment in Ethiopia, despite the clear evidence of a separate Eritrean nationality, or perhaps because of it. The bitterness of the Ethiopians was evident in the determination with which they fought in the 1998–2000 war, where the war was perceived as a 'second Adwa'. This war raised a number of questions about the nature of post-1991 politics of identification in Ethiopia, with some analysts of the region struggling to make sense of the popular support for this war. The war proved once again the centrality of territory in the conceptualisation of statehood in the region, as seen in the determination with which many ordinary Ethiopians participated in the war to defend their country's territorial integrity. Territory remains at the centre of the Ethiopian national imagination. Tronvoll posits that the near unanimous support of the war in Ethiopia can be explained by 'historical conceptions of state and power in Ethiopia and not because of primordial identities such as ethnicity or nationalism'. Tronvoll suggests that the 'retrieval of lost territories'

– Badme and Eritrea – and internal power-plays in Ethiopia, contributed to the support of this war by political elites from across the political spectrum, regardless of misgivings they might have had about the TPLF-led government. Also seeking to make sense of the war, Iyob argues that the EPLF enjoyed a paradoxical relationship with the TPLF of Ethiopia because of what each signified – a diasporic state and a regional hegemon, respectively. Iyob's analysis suggests that at the root of the war lay competing conceptions of national self-image and national territory.

Iyob and Tronvoll suggest existing tensions over conceptions of territory and identification within Ethiopian and Eritrean national discourses following Eritrean independence in 1993. This tension was evident when the elation of Eritrean independence immediately gave way to a cooling of relations. Many observers were mystified by these develop- ments, especially when taking into account the success of the EPLF-TPLF alliance in the preceding decade. The TPLF was expected to relate much better to the new EPLF-led gov- ernment in Eritrea because of its own history under previous Ethiopian state regimes. The Ethiopian Tigrayans had been subjected to a marginal existence of discrimination that left their province one of the poorest and least developed in Ethiopia. This explains the role of their province in the overthrow of the Dergue regime in 1991 – through the TPLF – EPLF coalition. Furthermore, the leadership and membership of the two fronts were bound by ethnic and cultural links. Yet, the two sides envisaged conflicting notions of statehood in a post-liberation context because of the historically divergent trajectories of their respective national self-images.

The interplay between national territory and identification in the Horn suggests original and dynamic processes of state formation – it also makes for a strong argument that differentiates the Horn from other sub regions in Africa. Whereas Somalia came into existence as a 'nation in search of a state',64 the pursuit of an Eritrean state underpinned the formation of a formidable national image. Ethiopia, on the other hand, presents a classic case of state formation where a nation-state is forged through war and territorial conquest.

To return to the central thesis of this article, the challenge for the states and leaders in the Horn is to overcome the condition of uncertainty that has nearly paralyzed the region over the past few decades. Since 2000, Ethiopia and Eritrea have been central to the uncertainty that prevails in this African sub region. The stalemate between the two countries has had repercussions that have proven costly to the entire Horn of Africa. As previously men- tioned in this article, unresolvable uncertainty has two main sources – material and psychological. For Booth and Wheeler, at the base of material sources is the 'ambiguous symbolism' of weapons and their deployment, and at the base of psychological sources is what philosophers call the 'other minds problem'.66 We have seen the effects of ambig- uous symbolism in how Ethiopia and Eritrea have been highly suspicious of each other's military movements; this also extends to suspicion between Ethiopia and Sudan. On the other hand, the other minds problem has contributed to a great deal of mistrust in the region; leaders have a very limited understanding of the thoughts, fears and intentions of their counterparts. To overcome this seemingly unresolvable uncertainty the first thing to do is to build trust and goodwill, and this appears to be what Abiy has sought to do since he came into office.

The window of opportunity for the current wave of change came with the 2015 anti- government demonstrations that challenged the leadership of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn. Ethiopia had been struggling with the delivery of a truly decentralized federal government that affords genuine autonomy in the regions. Widespread repression in some of the regions and increasing limitations on democratic practices led to dissatis- faction, especially among the youth. This led to the resignation of Hailemariam in February 2018. Abiy was elected from within the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition, as a member of the Oromo Democratic Party. Within no time following his swearing in on 2 April 2018, Abiy initiated some of the most significant reforms Ethiopia had witnessed since 1991. As much as there is cause for optimism over the peace deals with Eritrea and the ONLF, the success of both rests on fundamental transformation within the ranks of all the concerned parties. From the side of the Ethiopian state – argu- ably the main actor – genuine transformation is possible and a transformed Ethiopia is good for the region.

Ethiopia has been on a path of reform since 1991, following the overthrow of the Dergue regime by the EPRDF. These reforms have been spearheaded by the ruling EPRDF, which is dominated by the TPLF. In the intervening years, the country has become the most economically dominant in the region. This has contributed to the country's rising leadership position. The current political reforms can be seen as part of a process of redefining Ethiopia's role in the broader East African region – and the continent. The TPLF had, in 1991, joined forces with other Ethiopian political entities (mostly liberation fronts) and established the EPRDF coalition. The TPLF rebels came with an agenda and moved swiftly to implement it, and in the

process, they reconfigured the Ethiopian state. The main rhetoric of the EPRDF was on democracy and constitutionalism. These developments notwithstanding, the boldest policy proposals that were discussed and adopted by the EPRDF's Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) centered on the conceptualization of the new state. The adoption of ethnic federalism provides us with clues on how the new rulers conceptualized Ethiopian statehood. The rebels from Tigray were more than familiar with marginalization and were well vested in an existence as a 'peripheral' people. Although they are culturally and historically part of the traditional political 'core' in Ethiopia, there had been a century-long hiatus during which the Tigrayans were systematically excluded from the Ethiopian political establishment under imperial rule and the Dergue regime, both of which elevated Amhara culture. Clapham notes that as far as the TPLF were concerned, 'national unity' was no more than a pretext for suppression, as they themselves recalled the negative effects of previous nationalist rhetoric during the imperial state and under the Dergue. Rather, the TPLF has used national identity not to promote the 'nation' per se, but to legitimize their political objectives. Indeed, both territorial statehood and identification have taken on different meanings for the EPRDF. Statehood is envisioned in a decentralized fashion in the form of federal regions that comprise 'Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia'. Regardless of this ambiguous conceptualization, the territorialisation of the state and centralization of political power has remained central to the TPLF's vision of the Ethiopian state. Although presented in a veneer of devolved political power, federalism along ethnic lines has introduced new undercurrents of territoriality in Ethiopia.

Yet, it is not only internal Ethiopian politics that have brought changes to the border- lands. The collapse of the Somali Republic in 1991 and the 'rebirth' of Somaliland through its unilateral declaration of independence the same year have contributed to a re- imagination of statehood in the Horn. Under the leadership of the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, Ethiopia carved out a new identity as a trailblazing developmental state. The focus of the new rulers centred on the country's economic transformation and the establishment of a modern and corresponding foreign policy. However, there remained fundamental issues that promised to remain a thorn in the side of the EPRDF government: contested national and territorial statehood in the form of the separatist ONLF in the Somali region and the tensions that began to brew with the new neighbor Eritrea in the late 1990s.

Resolving uncertainty: Peace with the ONLF and Eritrea

It is not by chance that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's first major decisions involved Eritrea and the ONLF, as these issues are deeply interconnected. These are some of the seemingly intractable foreign policy issues that have preoccupied the Ethiopian government in the past few decades.72 The stalemate and hostility with Eritrea since the end of the Eritrea- Ethiopian war of 1998–2000 had been fuelled by Eritrea's support of the ONLF against the Ethiopian government and the latter's support of opposition groups against the Eritrean government. Although this is a common pattern in the relations of states in the Horn, the current context is vastly different from 10 years ago. The historical moment of 2018 was ripe for a leader from the region to take a bold and decisive stand and acknowledge that the prevailing circumstances needed to change as it was not sustainable for the long-term stability of the region.

The governing EPRDF and the ONLF had been in peace talks since the mid-1990s. The talks had mostly been unsuccessful due to a zero-sum approach by both sides. At the outset of political (re)negotiation in 1991 the lines were drawn between two loose ONLF factions – the 'hardliners' who supported separatism, and those who were more Accommodating and willing to negotiate the new political landscape of the post Dergue period. The details of the intense power struggles that ensued in the pursuit of political power have been explored sufficiently elsewhere. Throughout this period the Somali region of Ethiopia was plagued by a low-intensity conflict that had left the region one of the least developed in the country. In August 2018 the ONLF announced a unilateral ceasefire and in September it was announced that they would begin peace talks with the Ethiopian government. The resultant peace deal warrants optimism as it has taken place during a period of significant shifts within the Ethiopian political centre.

In September of 2018, the ONLF's foreign secretary intimated that they might push for a referendum for self-determination. This would not necessarily be a bad idea as it would finally test the vigour of the Ethiopian Constitution which allows for regional autonomy up to and including self-determination. To date, Ethiopia has yet to create and maintain an enabling environment for the federal experiment to thrive. The main obstacle has been the inability of the center to ease its strong grip on power over the supposedly autonomous regions. This has been a major cause of instability in the Somali National Regional State

(SNRS) since 1993, when Addis Ababa unilaterally dismissed the first elected president of the region.77
A referendum, however, might reveal that the ONLF does not enjoy as much support as it once did, thus finally settling the question of whether separatism is still a viable option for the Somali region. The ONLF and the EPRDF government have never agreed on Article 39 of the Ethiopian Constitution, which promises self-determination. The ONLF claimed that the Somalis of Ethiopia were never involved in the drafting of the constitution; the government, on the other hand, has refused to hold a referendum on Somali self-determi- nation.78 The 2018 peace deal suggests that the current Ethiopian government is willing to have a dialogue on this point, something that the TPLF-led EPRDF resisted for nearly two decades. In October 2013, five years prior to the peace deal, this author had the privilege of facilitating a public interview with two ONLF leaders under the auspices of the Edinburgh Peace Initiative. The conference sought to tackle difficult questions such as secession in different parts of the world. The two leaders that took part in the interview were clear that they did not want to fight with the Ethiopian government and that they wanted to resolve the conflict. The key point that they made was that they wanted to engage in an atmosphere of goodwill and that this was lacking. The 2018 peace deal suggests that a notable level of goodwill was subsequently established on both sides of this conflict.

The fact that the peace deal with the ONLF was signed in Asmara under the auspices of the Eritrean government is a major talking point. The tensions with Eritrea and the conflict with the ONLF were overlapping, as noted earlier. Since the end of the war in 2000 and the stalemate that ensued, Eritrea and Ethiopia had allegedly supported each other's armed opposition groups, to the detriment of regional stability. The involvement of Eritrea in the ONLF deal with the Ethiopian government signals that the peace deal with Eritrea also extends to the proxy wars that they have been fighting, particularly through the ONLF. The wars by proxy between Ethiopia and Eritrea since the end of the war in 2000 have been a major stumbling block in moving the region forward. Regional integration has taken a back seat with many regional initiatives stumbling because of the uncertainty that had come to define the region. This shift portends well for a new chapter in the poli- tics of the region.

However, Eritrea remains an undeniable challenge to Abiy's ambitions in the Horn of Africa. The 2019 Human Rights Watch report describes Eritrea as a 'one-man dictatorship under President Isaias Afewerki'. Eritrea has featured consistently on the lists of some of the most repressive regimes in the world. This raises concerns because as a state actor, Eritrea carries more weight than a liberation movement would, in terms of its contributions to regional transformation. In May 2019 Eritrea marked 28 years of independence. This pre- sented as a particularly poignant celebration as it happened against the backdrop of the recent peace agreement with Ethiopia, but also within the continued environment of a repressive political landscape. Still true is the statement by Reid; when reflecting on the first decade of Eritrean independence, he noted that one of the key challenges facing the country was the achievement of a 'stable, if not exactly pluralistic political system'. It can be argued that this particular challenge has not been resolved in the past decade, in fact, it has worsened: Eritrea has become one of the leading refugee-sending countries in the world.

Not long after signing the Algiers Agreement which brought about a ceasefire between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2000, Eritrea began a notable decline into outright authoritarian rule. A 2001 crackdown on those calling for democracy, including students and opposition politicians, heralded a new era of highly paranoid Eritrean government, increasingly repressive and isolationist. Young people began leaving Eritrea in large numbers, dissat- isfied with growing economic inequalities, prolonged conflicts and repressive political conditions. The issue of compulsory military service has also contributed to the great exodus of young people from Eritrea.

With this continuing situation in Eritrea, it is going to be difficult to achieve the aims of the new and energetic leader of Ethiopia. Ethiopia has reached a particularly important moment in its recent history; the country is on a path of recovery from what was also becoming an increasingly repressive state. Based on the decisions that Prime Minister Abiy has taken, there is cause for cautious optimism. However, at a regional level, the changes will be difficult to effect if the other players have not embarked on their own internal processes of change and renewal. The current reforms within Ethiopia may amount to naught if there are no notable structural changes in the neighbouring states. The litmus test for the extent of Eritrean goodwill in the recently struck peace agreement with Ethiopia will be how the two countries approach the border question. No amount of shuttle diplomacy or symbolic gestures can settle the border issue. This article centers territorial contestation as one of the historical causes of uncertainty in the Horn of Africa. Indeed,

for the current changes to have a lasting impact, Ethiopia   and Eritrea must address the outstanding issue of the border. This is not going to be an easy task. Plaut suggests that the first task should be making sure that the border is fully and officially demarcated and that this should ideally be done under the auspices of the international community. Mulugeta further notes that there is a precedent for settling such a border issue, that of the disputed Bakassi peninsula between Nigeria and Cameroon.

On the other hand, some observers believe that Eritrea might be doing a significant rethink of its stance vis-à-vis Ethiopia in the current context of realignment in the region, and indeed, in the wider Red Sea region.89 This suggests that there is great poten- tial for the initiatives of the Ethiopian prime minister to yield results. The foreign policies of the countries in the Horn are more assertive; this is observable in the way Ethiopia and other countries in the region are managing their relations with some of the Arab countries. The Ethiopian prime minister has also made an effort to renew relations with all the countries in the Horn of Africa. He has met with the leaders of Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, Somaliland, and in mid-2019, was involved as a mediator in the crisis in Sudan.91 This demonstrates his intentions for a reformed Ethiopia that promotes regional peace and stability. It also demonstrates an awareness of the historical patterns of regional instability and uncertainty.

Ethiopia faces a general election in 2020. This will most likely be the most important election for Ethiopia since 1991. It will decide the future of Ethiopia. Abiy Ahmed will face many challenges on the way; he has already survived an attempt on his life and   in June 2019 an attempted coup. Nonetheless, the prime minister has vowed that this year's scheduled elections will be free and fair. Most Ethiopian politicians are conscious of the regional leadership potential of their country, but they are also aware of some of the potential pitfalls of such, based on the political history of the region and Ethiopia's role therein. If there is a new leader after the elections they will have to continue with the current path of reform and renewal in order to ensure not just internal stability within Ethiopia but to minimise the condition of uncertainty at the regional level.

Conclusion

This article investigates the potential implications of Ethiopian reforms on the Horn of Africa state system. Since 2018 Ethiopia has had a new leader in the form of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, whose ascension to the top political office has seen a significant transform action within the state but also within the wider region.

The article has attempted to historicizes and contextualize the reforms that are currently sweeping across Ethiopia. The article focuses on territorial contestation as one of the historical causes of uncertainty in the Horn of Africa. It argues that the current transformations have the potential to transcend the uncertainty that has previously characterized the region. However, for uncertainty to be minimized, the transformation has to extend beyond Ethiopia. Historically, the country has been at the center of contestations in the region wherein it has sometimes played a role in infringing the sovereignty of some of its neighbors. The current reforms have sought to address some of these historical tensions with neighboring states. The peace deal brokered between Ethiopia and Eritrea will not only affect internal tensions within Ethiopia, it is also likely to signify a new chapter in the politics of the region. Eritrea and Ethiopia had been in a stalemate since the end of the 1998–2000 war. In addition, the peace accord with the ONLF will end a long-standing conflict between the Somali region of Ethiopia and the Ethiopian state. However, in as much these changes are significant, with the potential to transcend long-standing territorial disagreements in the region, this will not be sufficient. The transformation needs to be region-wide. In order for the changes to truly have a transformative effect, each individual country in the region must buy into the idea of transcending the condition of uncertainty. A potential stumbling block at the regional level is Eritrea. The tiny Horn of Africa country currently has one of the most oppressive regimes in the world. Eritreans are leaving home in great numbers. Even as Eritreans celebrated 28 years of independence   in 2019, it was clear that there is much that needs to be done in order for Eritreans to truly enjoy and celebrate their hard-won independence. This means that until a process of internal renewal and transformation takes place within Eritrea, it will be difficult to see a truly transformed region. Yet, there is hope, as some observers believe that the Ethiopian initiatives have come at an opportune moment and that the government in Asmara is ready to make significant concessions due to a combination of international and domestic pressures.

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