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ARTICLE



Ethnic federalism, conflict, and displacement in Ethiopia's Metekel Zone

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine conflict and displacement in one of Ethiopia's conflict hotspot areas, namely Metekel. The authors examine if ethnic federalism has negatively contributed to these conflicts and if so how. By examining the conflict and displacement events between April 2018 when Ethiopia under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed started its latest political reform and August 2021 when data collection for this article ended, the authors argue that those conflict events are embedded into the nature of the federal system. The design of the federal system divides communities into 'indigenous' and 'non-indigenous', which creates a fertile ground for conflicts. Divergent political forces manipulate such divisions in society. Such internal factor for conflict is also manipulated by inter-state insurgencies and regional power players. Taming the conflict in Metekel or the country at large may require taming the political system itself because it is based on divisive and exploitative ethnic federalism that fosters conflict among ethnic groups. To develop this article, we collected data through desk reviews and interviews between April 2018 and August 2021.

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Introduction

The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) that replaced the Derg in 1991 created 'ethnic federalism', as scholars working on it often call, as an alternative to the previous centralist governance approach in Ethiopia. Article 46 (2) of the Federal Constitution (FDRE, 1995b), which is still in place, requires units of the federation, which are called 'states', to 'be structured on the basis of settlement patterns, language, identity and consent of the people'. In line with these requirements, article 47 (1) of the same constitution created nine member states (now, 11, after Sidama state was created in 2019 and Southwest Ethiopia Peoples Region in 2021) of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE). In principle, each of over 80 ethnic groups of Ethiopia would have a self-administering territory either as a unit or sub-unit of the federation. Also, Article 39 (1) of the Federal Constitution granted that 'Every Nation, Nationality and People', as the Constitution calls ethnic groups in Ethiopia, has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession.

But, the design of Ethiopian federalism has neither logic nor consistency, at least for three reasons. First, it created titular administrative units for ethnic groups at the state, zone, *woreda* (district), or *kebele* levels, from the highest level to the lowest. However, no administrative unit is entirely homogenous to be solely designated to a single ethnic group, especially at region and zone levels. As Assefa (2006, p. 135) also observes, a significant number of Ethiopians are intermingled culturally and territorially through voluntary migration in search of better opportunities or government programmed resettlements from drought-prone land-scarce areas to the lowlands. Second, it was not clear why some ethnic groups smaller in number were granted state-level autonomy, while numerically larger ethnic groups were not. For example, according to the latest census of the country (CSA, 2008), Sidama had 2,893,947 territorially concentrated population in Southern Ethiopia. They were given only a zonal-level administration (administration level next to a regional state), while Harari people who were 15,863 based on CSA (2008) were granted Harari Regional State where most of the 183,000 populations were Oromo and Amhara combined. Third, Aalen (2002, p. 59) states that article 39 (1) of the Constitution, which gives ethnic groups the right up to secession, is an anomaly that does not have any parallels in other federal systems today. A government that is concerned with the well-being of a nation does not constitutionally encourage each of ethnically grouped people to break away from the country. The constitution divided Ethiopians along ethnic lines and institutionalized their division.

Besides these problems of design, implementation is another factor for ethnic division and conflicts. The EPRDF's government has sought to govern by playing upon animosities between Ethiopia's different ethnic groups (Vestal, 1999, p. 184). For example, the Oakland Institute's field research (2014, p. 16) shows that the Ethiopian government was manipulating existing tensions between the Dizi and Suri ethnic groups. Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC, 2015, p. 7) in a press release stated that in every ethnic conflict, the hidden hands of government officials were observed trying to get political and economic advantages.

The literature on ethnicity and ethnic politics in Africa shows how ethnicity has been instrumentalised over the years for political events by various political actors in some countries including the colonialists themselves who used this ethnic identity as a divide and rule strategy. In a recent article, Koter (2023) makes an important review of publications that have made theoretical and empirical contributions to ethnic politics in Africa, including definitions, measures, explanations, consequences, variation, and relationship to other social identities. Besides a number of studies provide country case studies for the ethnic politics such as Mombeshora (1990) for Zimbabwe, Nnoli (1978) for Nigeria, Orvis (2001) for Kenya, Brukum (2000) for Ghana and the like. Studies in ethnicity, ethnic politics and conflict in Africa in fact are too many to exhaust them here. It can be summarized that these studies discuss how ethnicity has been instrumentalized in African politics in various ways and how this has contributed to ethnic conflicts. Politicians use ethnicity as a tool to gain power and influence, which can lead to marginalization of certain ethnic groups and exclusion of their interests from the political process. This can create divisions and tensions within society, leading to conflicts and even violence in some cases. The literature suggests that it is important to promote inclusive and equitable political systems that prioritize the interests of all citizens, regardless of their ethnic background. Ethiopia's federal system is however a 'pioneering' and 'radical' ethnicity policy. It is

radical in the sense that it is completely different from the country's policies prior to 1991, and it is pioneering in the sense that the country's constitution confers such extensive ethnic rights that it allows unconditional secession – a provision unique among African constitutions (Turton, 2006, p. 1).

As many scholars agree, ethnic-based federalism, even without going so far as to provide unconditional secession to the ethnic groups like in the Ethiopian case, is a recipe for conflict. The 'remapping' of Ethiopia along ethnic lines has led to an increase rather than a decrease in inter-ethnic conflict (Turton, 2006, p. 14; Abbink, 2006). Groups that were not recognized (e.g. Kimant) or felt they were not adequately treated (e.g. Sidama) have organized protests and experienced bloody conflicts with the state forces suppressing requests or launching attacks on other ethnic group members in the area as they seek to put pressure on the government to respond to their demands. Taking this political structure into fertile ground, some groups, such as the Oromo People Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogden National Liberation Front (ONLF), have fought against the federal government claiming the right to self-determination up to secession. Worse, elite manipulation of divisions already adds fuel to the fire. Several scholars have written on Ethiopian ethnic federalism, some of them advocating while others taking middle position. Previous studies, Assefa (2012) and Abbink (2011), summarize a 'balance sheet' of the pros and cons of implementing Ethiopia's federal system.

In this article, we aim to interpret the surge of ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia between April 2018 and August 2021 within the above briefly described context of ethnic federalism. By taking the case of Metekel, we will show how the design of federalism has become a recipe for conflicts and how political actors exacerbate and manipulate the division. Throughout the last three decades, Ethiopia has experienced a large number of interethnic conflicts, but after the coming to power of Abiy Ahmed as a new Prime Minister in April 2018, there is a surge in those conflicts (Ministry of Peace [MoP], 2023). One possible explanation maybe that before 2018, the ruling party used a strong grass-roots surveillance mechanism (see Brechebmacher, 2017) so that have suppressed much of the conflicts before they emerge or spread. This mechanism seems to have loosened following the transition in April 2018 hence dissenting political forces using the loophole.

To build on our argument, we will first summarize conflict and displacement events in the country between April 2018 and August 2021. Then, we will give a chronological overview of events of conflict and displacement in Metekel for the same period. We developed the article based on data collected through a desk review of reports and through interviews with Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), communities, and government officials both at Benishangul Gumuz Region and the Ministry of Peace. We conducted fieldwork in Assosa, the capital city of Benishangul Gumuz region, in June and July 2018 a couple of months after what is called the political reform had been embarked in April 2018. We also did another fieldwork a year later, in August 2019, in the same place. In both fieldworks, we did interviews with senior government officials and experts at regional bureaus. The officials we discussed with include the Speaker of the Regional Parliament and the head of the office of the regional administration. Experts with whom we did in-depth interviews were from the regional peace and security bureau and from the regional disaster risk management bureau. In both fieldworks, we also made interviews with residents who represent Amhara, Oromo, and Beni Shangul (otherwise, Benishangul, or Berta). We conducted follow-up fieldwork in December 2020, when we

interviewed displaced people sheltered in Chagni, who claimed to be members of Amhara or Agaw (otherwise known as Awi or Agaw-Awi) ethnic communities. Finally, we also interviewed officials at the Ministry of Peace in 2021. Unfortunately, none of the fieldwork was conducted in Metekel itself because of the insecurity situation. However, we discussed with informants who directly deal with the problem of Metekel. The authors also followed up on events from the media and government and non-governmental organization outlets. Working on ongoing conflict and displacement events is hard for a researcher, but we believe we have got the necessary data.

An overview of ethnic conflicts and displacement in Ethiopia (April 2018 – August 2021)

Conflicts and displacement that are clearly structured along ethnic lines have, if not they began, been more common in Ethiopia since the early 1990s when the current federal system came into effect. However, such events perhaps have yet become most obstructive following April 2018, when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his government has pledged to work to reform the government from the previous comprehensive fallouts that ranged from ethnic conflicts to corruption. In 2018, the country produced the largest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world (IDMC, 2019, p. 6) because of ethnic conflicts in several places of the country. To mention some, deadly conflicts have occurred between Gedeo and Guji, Somali and Oromia, Allé and Konso. Attacks that have targeted members of Amhara ethnic group have occurred once or many times in Guraferda, Tepei, Benishangul Gumuz Region, Arsi and Shashemene. According to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED)'s Ethiopia Peace Observatory (EPO) database, there were 2121 conflict events all over the country from April 2018 to 31 August 2021 (See Figure 1 below).

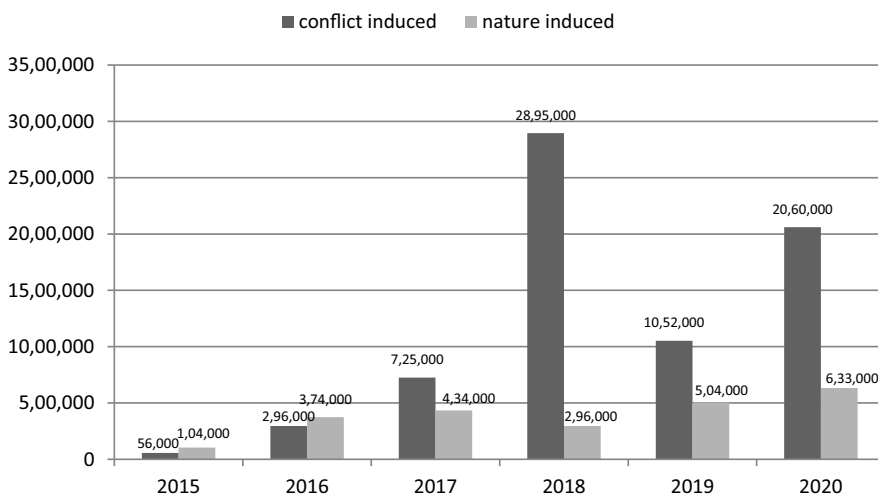


Figure 1. Ethiopia displacement trends (2015–2020).

Source: Computed from IDMC-GRID (Global Report on Displacement) reports (2016–2021).

Due to these violent conflict events, millions of people were displaced and thousandshave lost their lives even if it is not possible to know the figure for the latter. In terms of displacement, the figure above computed from IDMC (2016), IDMC (2017), IDMC (2018), IDMC (2019), IDMC (2020), and IDMC (2021) reports illustrates that the number of IDPs has continuously climbed since 2015, peaking in 2018. Natural disaster-induced displacement outnumbered conflict-induced displacement in 2015 and 2016. However, since 2017, the number of IDPs caused by conflict has increased dramatically.

Application of ethnic federalism in Metekel

Benishangul Gumuz Region is found in the western and southwestern part of the country with the size of 50,000 square kilometers. EPRDF created the region in 1991 from the previous Gojjam and Wellega provinces. The region is divided into three zones: Assosa, Kemashi, and Metekel. Central Statistical Agency (CSA, 2013) projected that the population of Benishangul Gumuz Region in 2021 was 1,188,000. In terms of religion, 44.98% of the population is Muslim, 33.3% Orthodox Christians, 13.53% Protestant, and 7.09% practice ‘traditional’ beliefs (CSA, 2008). There are several ethnic communities in the region, but the figure below shows the major ones (Figure 2).

The anomaly in the constitutional design that we previously discussed in relation to the federal constitution is also observed in the regional constitution of the Benishangul Gumuz region. Despite ethnic diversity in the region, the 2002 Revised Constitution of the Benishangul Gumuz Region recognizes only five ethnic groups are ‘indigenous’ to the region. Article 2 of the constitution states that ‘Notwithstanding the recognition of other peoples living in the region, the indigenous nation nationalities of the region are Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao, and Komo’ (Benishangul Gumuz Regional State [BGRS], 2002). For the specific location of Metekel Zone, CSA (2008) reported that the major ethnic group in

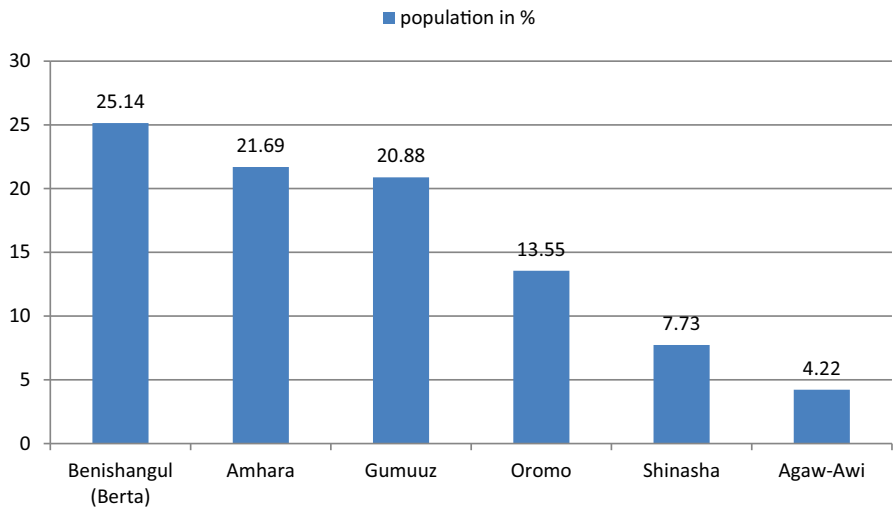


Figure 2. Major ethnic groups and respective population numbers in Benishangul Gumuz (CSA, 2008). Source: CSA (2008).

the Zone are the Gumuz (36.7%), Shinasha (21.6%), Amhara (17.3%), Agaw-Awi (also called Agaw) (11.3%), and Oromo (11%). However, Gumuz and Shinasha are the only communities designated 'indigenous' to Metekel.

In Metekel, this constitutional entrenchment of the division between 'indigenous' and otherwise non-indigenous peoples inverted the power dynamic between the two major communities: Amhara and Agaw-Awi on one side, and the Gumuz on the other. The Gumuz were neglected for a long time, according to historical literature (e.g. Abdussamad, 1995, 1999; Alemayehu, 2015; Asnake, 2009), and the state and adjacent highlanders were the major participants in the slave raid. The Gumuz, like other communities, experienced the Amhara kings' efforts for territorial integration of the previously independent chiefdoms into the Ethiopian state. The historical literature, such as mentioned above, stated that before ethnic federalism in 1995, the Gumuz were dominated by the Amhara rulers and their Agaw allies. Since 1991, political actors have used this historical narrative of past inequality to foment conflict and divide between the Gumuz and the rest of the communities in the area.

This separation of indigenous from non-indigenous expressed itself in Metekel through differing levels of political and socio-economic participation by the two categories of populations. Inequality in political participation was witnessed by the fact that the 'non-indigenous' communities were not allowed to participate as candidates to be elected. Regardless of how long the candidates had lived in the region, the Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) forbade members of non-indigenous ethnic groups from participating in Metekel general elections for regional council elections in 2000. Although Amharic is the working language of the regional parliament and administration, non-indigenous community members were forbidden from standing for office because of the need that they speak the language of an indigenous group. Article 38 (1) (b) of the Ethiopian Electoral Proclamation (Proc. No. 111/1995) (FDRE, 1995a) additionally requires anybody seeking registration for candidacy to be fluent in (at least one) of Ethiopia's indigenous languages of the region the candidates run for. Metekel's Amhara and Agaw community members challenged the legality of both the NEBE's verdict and Proc. 111/1995 in the House of Federation (HoF). They then brought the matter to the Council of Constitutional Inquiry (CCI) for advice. The CCI then submitted its Recommendation to the HoF, concluding that Article 38 (1) (b) of Proc 11/1995 and the NEBE's judgment were unlawful (by a six-to-two majority vote). The HoF agreed with the CCI's conclusion, underlining that the NEBE's decision and the challenged section of Proclamation 111/1995 violate the equality principle as it pertains to ethnicities. While the legal component of this issue has been resolved and the non-indigenous community is allowed nominal representation, regional power holders have used different political tactics to continue to exclude them from political participation.

The federal system also set ramifications for the differential socio-economic treatment. For example, land became one site of contention. The non-indigenous communities are considered as 'settlers' to the Metekel who have taken advantage of the previous centralist regimes to spread into the Gumuz region and occupy their land. Besides, in 1986, the Derg regime (1974 – 1991) had resettled over 100,000 people in Metekel (Wolde Selassie, 2004), which had taken a significant size of land from the members of the Gumuz community. This triggered several conflicts between the host Gumuz community and the newcomers, who were largely Amhara from

drought-afflicted areas of Wollo. Labzaé (2015) argued that the Ethiopian government elites since the 1990s used ethnic federalism as a systematic way of freeing Amhara or Oromo-occupied lands in Benishangul Gumuz and Gambella regions for 'investors'. According to Labzaé, the government provoked indigenous communities against others so that in conflict, the latter would abandon their land. Many scholars have written that there have been frequent conflict due to claims over land since the time of resettlement in Metekel; however, the conflict handling mechanisms were relatively effective previously and mostly the parties in conflict were mediated locally (Amsalu, 2016; Berihun, 2004; Gebre, 2003; Tsega, 2006; Wolde Selassie, 2004). Yet, conflicts that involved state actors become increasingly too complicated to handle by parties directly in dispute.

Conflict and displacement events in Metekel (April 2018–August 31, 2021)

Metekel has become a significant contributor to the national figure of conflicts and IDPs in Ethiopia since 2018. According to EPO's database, 73 violent conflict events most of them attacks on civilians were recorded for Metekel from April 2018 to 31 August. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in its bi-monthly report showed, as of August 2020, there were 538, 000 people displaced from Benishangul Gumuz Region of which 71% were within Metekel (Figure 3).

As previously stated, the Gumuz interaction with so-called non-indigenous populations of 'brown-skinned' or 'qey' (meaning 'red') people has a deeper historical base that extends back to the early twentieth century. Depending on the historical conditions, their relationship has been more tranquil at times and more contentious at others (Amsalu, 2016; Tsega, 2006). Confrontations characterized the interaction between the two groups following the formation of ethnic federalism. The political transition which started in April 2018 fueled their conflict even further. This section will cover conflict events

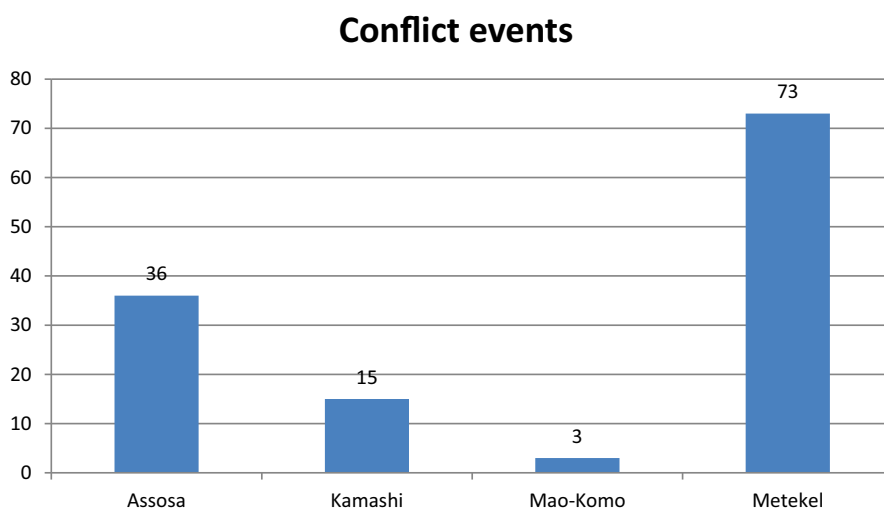


Figure 3. Conflict events in Benishangul Gumuz Region (April 2018 to 31 August 2021).

Source: Processed from EPO database (<https://epo.acleddata.com/data/>).

between April 2018 and August 2021 in chronological order to show that ethnic politics institutionalized by the ethnic federalism is entrenched into the conflicts.

Events in 2018

In October 2017, which is months before the political reform that had started in April 2018, a brutal attack had occurred in Kemashi Zone of Benishangul-Gumuz region, a nearby zone to Metekel (Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia [AHRE], 2018). Over 530 Amhara community members were displaced as a result of this incident. This fighting spread to Metekel, where 13 ethnic Amhara people were murdered and at least 50 others were injured till the end of April 2018.

Metekel witnessed several attacks within weeks following the proclaimed political reform. Several news outlets reported that on 13 May 2018, a car accident killed a teen, possibly a Gumuz, in the Mambuk Woreda village in Kublak Kebele. Gumuz members violently beat the driver. Besides, unknown criminals attacked a 14-year-old youth called Abtir Worku and popped out his right eyeball on 14 May 2018. The offenders allegedly pushed the victim into a bush and left him in a life-threatening state, while the Gumuz police and militia allegedly assisted them in fleeing. At the same time, an Amhara or Agaw-Awi couple was slain in a bush.

The conflict between the Gumuz and other communities continued in September 2018. Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2021), in its flash update on 29 January 2021, reported that after a brief interruption, the violence between the Amhara and Agaw on the one hand and the Gumuz erupted in Metekel in September 2018, generating over 21,000 IDPs. EPO has also recorded on its data base (<https://epo.acleddata.com/data/>) that on 13 September 2018, at least seven Amhara people were reportedly killed in Benishangul by Gumuz militia (Guba) and riots erupted followed the killing however no fatalities reported following the riots.

New narratives against the supposed political reform that had begun in April 2018 were already circulating, generating and exacerbating the disputes. The authors conducted fieldwork in Asossa in August 2018. In an interview, an informant, who was a senior Benishangul Gumuz region government official and an 'indigenous' community member, stated:

NaMA just opened an office in Metekel. This became big news among the Gumuz. Rumors spread swiftly. According to speculations, there would be no more federalism, and Benishangul Gumuz will revert to the administrative position before the ethnic federalism, which was a province under an Amhara or Oromo administration. The inauguration of the NaMA office was cited by the Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) and its sympathizers as an indication that Amhara will retake Metekel as it was before the existing federal system. The Gumuz youth accepted this message. Even prominent government officials in the Benishagul Gumuz area bought this narrative and opposed the reform. Now, I guess many of us have realized the TPLF's plot. (August, 2018)

Events in 2019

In Metekel, the year 2019 also saw fateful occurrences of conflict and displacement between the Gumuz and 'non-indigenous' communities. On 25 April 2019, a new

conflict erupted in Metekel Zone's Dangur Woreda. According to Mistir (2021), the immediate cause of the conflict was a passenger refusing to pay 10 Ethiopian birr because he believed it was an excessive fee. When the passenger, a member of the 'indigenous' group, refused to pay the fare demanded by the driver, the former summoned a federal police officer who was nearby. However, the passenger attempted to snatch a gun from the police officer. Subsequently, the officer killed the passenger. Rumors quickly spread after the incident was viewed as a communal disagreement between Amhara and Gumuz ethnic communities. The death of the person triggered Gumuz retaliation assaults against members of the Amhara and Agaw communities. According to Mistir (2021), the Amhara also carried out revenge assaults against the Gumuz who lived in the Amhara Region territory next to Metekel. According to Dawit (2019), 17 individuals died in this incident. Besides, the Ethiopian Red Cross Society (2020) reported 31,237 people were displaced in April 2019. The IDPs were hosted in 12 camps in Metekel and three in border areas of Amhara region. On 9 May 2019, an Executive Committee of Benishangul Gumuz Peoples Democratic Party, the ruling party of the region before it was dissolved into Prosperity Party, issued a statement condemning attacks by the Amhara community members targeting the Gumuz in Jawi Woreda. We translate an excerpt of the statement in Amharic into English as below:

Based on our investigation, we concluded that many women, children, and adults, the exact number of whom we do not know, were massacred. This is quite unfortunate. It is an assault on the coexistence of communities and the unity of the country. It was carried out by extreme ethnic-nationalists and is a ruse used by activists with secret goals to get a political advantage through the deaths of people. (*The Reporter*, 12 May 2019)

The above-quoted message expresses sympathy solely for the Gumuz victims who were assaulted in the nearby Amhara area, but not vice versa. The statement also blasted activists who advocate Metekel's purported plot for Amhara area annexation. The statement emphasized that this measure violates the principles of federalism on autonomy and is a plot to disrupt the political reform that had begun in April 2018.

Several state media outlets claimed that, on 8 July 2019, a dispute resolution meeting was organized between the Gumuz and other groups in conflict to resolve ongoing tensions between the two. The resolution was held in public, mediated by federal government authorities. Participants in the meeting regularly denounced local or regional officials for not only failing to respond to recurrent confrontations on time but also for engaging or encouraging violence. However, just a few days after the conflict settlement conference, new violence broke out in Mandura Woreda between the Gumuz and 'other' populations. According to Amhara Mass Media Agency, the new wave of violence began the same month when a lady from the Gumuz community was struck by a car and unknown persons attacked another Gumuz man in his own home. In this disaster, about 8,500 families were displaced from all groups.

Following the alleged coup d'état attempt on 22 June 2019 in Amhara region and the consequential assassination of three of the regional leaders, i.e. General Asaminew Tsige, head of regional security bureau; Ambachew Mekonnen, president of the Amhara region; and Megbaru Kebede, Amhara Region Attorney General, early on the morning of

23 June 2019, many news outlets reported the death of several people, *Associated Press*, for example, reported that the armed men killed 37 people and wounded 18 in the Metekel Zone – the victims targeted based on their ethnic identity.

Events in 2020

EPO record shows that on 24 January 2020, Kebele-level government officials accused the Gumuz People Democratic Party (GPDR) of orchestrating an attack on residents in Kong Kabele, Wenbera woreda, killing at least eight people considered non-indigenous. The next month, on 25 February 2020, a conflict erupted in Metekel Zone's Dangur Woreda. According to Abay Media (26 February 2020), citing Amhara Media Center, Gumuz community members began blowing trumpets at 4:00 p.m. to initiate an onslaught against Amhara or Agaw community members in Mambuk town in Dangur Woreda. The military intervened to quell the situation, but a member of the military and an Amhara named Ato Meles Ayalew were killed in a firefight. Other unnamed persons died in the tragedy, including members of the Gumuz community.

Unidentified gunmen attacked a village near Guba Woreda on 27 July 2020. According to a statement published by the Amhara region, 14 Amhara ethnic group members were slain. Six people were injured in this 'premeditated incident aiming at sparking ethnic violence,' according to an Amhara Region official (United States Department of State, 2021). EPO has also recorded this event showing that unidentified armed men attacked Amhara ethnic civilians in Guba Woreda of Metekel zone in Benishangul Gumuz regional state, killing 14 people.

Attacks that began in July 2020 continued into August 6, 7, and 13 the same year. The violence included cattle raids, road ambushes, assaults, and church robberies, resulting in around 160 deaths. National defense forces were dispatched to restore order (United States Department of State, 2021). Because of the August attack by unidentified gunmen, 150,000 people were displaced in the woredas of Bullen, Dangur, Dibate, Guba, Mandura, and Wombera, accounting for more than 30% of the total population of the Metekel Zone (OCHA, 2021).

According to EHRC (2020a), gunmen murdered civilians and displaced over 300 persons in two sets of assaults in Bulan Woreda Metekel Zone on September 6 and September 7 – 13. On 25 September 2020, gunmen killed at least 15 residents in the Metekel Zone of the Benishangul-Gumuz Region in a pre-dawn attack, the last in a string of targeted killings of civilians in September. The incident occurred in Metekel Zone's Dangur Woreda, near Mambuk, in a riverbank settlement. Women made up four of the victims.

Another confrontation erupted in Metekel on October 12–40, 2020. The altercation occurred due to a personal quarrel over a stolen pistol, according to Benishangul Gumuz Region Chief of Security, who talked to Fana Broadcasting Corporate. Amhara politicians alleged it was a Gumuz militia attack on members of the Amhara ethnic community. According to Alfreds (2020), at least 12 people were confirmed killed.

As the conflict dragged on month after month, a mass shooting on a bus happened on the night of 14 November 2020, killing at least 34 people when the vehicle was traveling between the cities of Wonbera and Chagni (EHRC, 2020c). The anticipated number of

victims was expected to climb due to reports of similar assaults in neighboring woredas (Wubgish, Yamp, and Kidoh) of the region, as well as people fleeing for safety.

During a discussion with IDPs in Guangua Woreda of Awi Zone and government representatives, Gungua Woreda Communication Affairs Office quoted an IDP saying in November 2020 'The atrocity in Metekel is not the atrocity of the Gumuz people. It is the atrocity of evil people in the government structure'.

In the series of events throughout the year of 2020, the worst was yet to come in December 2020. *News Business Ethiopia* (8 December 2020) report cited Benishangul Gumuz communications office, which quoted the head of the command post in the area as saying the command post has killed 23 insurgents linked to TPLF in Dangur. But on 15 December 2020, an unknown number of civilians, who were ethnic Amhara, were killed in Dangur and Dibate woredas (Siyanne, 2020a). The worst attack in this month occurred during the night from December 22 – 23, 2020 in Bikuji *kebele* in Metekel Zone. Siyanne (2020b) reported citing eyewitnesses that about 500 gunmen surrounded the residents. Then, the gunmen burned down houses and indiscriminately massacred several people. EHRC (2020b) disclosed at least estimated 100 people were dead which was also reported by several international media such as AP (2020). According to Gerth-Niculescu (2021), the victims were mostly Amhara, Oromo, and Shinasha while EHRC (2020b) showed that the victims were mostly Shinasha, one of the two 'indigenous' communities in Metekel. OCHA (2021) reported, in the previous five months from December 2020, in Metekel, over 4,400 houses have been burned in three *woredas*, 169 in Bullen, 184 in Wombera and 76 in Dibate. Moreover, 30% of the people of Metekel were displaced to Awi Zone of Amhara regional state. In response to this, the government and military sources have claimed they were 'annihilating' 'anti-peace forces', arresting them, and confiscating firearms" (Siyanne, 2020b). On 21 December 2020, the Benishangul-Gumuz Command Post stated that it was carrying out a 'door-to-door hunt' of suspected perpetrators of the violence. On 22 December 2020, Abiy Ahmed with his senior military and government officials, including the Prime Minister, held talks with Metekel Zone residents (Siyanne, 2020c). The Gumuz representative addressing the Prime Minister spoke several things. We excerpted the following as an example as cited by Nyssen (2021, p. 8):

... . Now, the situation is that one tries to mobilize the other to kill others, others again mobilize to kill another community. The starting point is a junta state of mind. Few groups adopted this junta point of view, and the government knows that; if we tell the truth, the government knows it too! There are such junta groups. Such groups just want to destroy the others. From the beginning, this is no peaceful speech, what they say. They don't talk about building the country. What the leaders from this party, this organization say when we meet them is that they have to keep power. 'Like it or not, we will be elected!' this is what they were saying. Now, they see their own end ... I see it With money, with other stuff, they know that with the level of poverty over here, this will not ask them lot of money. This is what happened. They bought the group with money! They told the youth 'there is no work; no work has been created for you ...'

Events during the first eight months of 2021

The first eight months of 2021 when data collection for this article was completed also witnessed worsening situations of conflict and displacement in Metekel. EPO database

(<https://epo.acleddata.com/data/>) shows that on 11 January 2021, 11 Amhara civilians were killed in an attack by ethnic militias in Guba, Metekel. The same database shows that On 12 January 2021, unidentified armed attackers killed about 80 ethnic Amhara civilians in Dilletti village, near Dibate Kebele of Metekel zone. According to the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHR-Council, 2021), because of this attack starting from the morning of 12 January 2021, at least 100 civilians were killed and at least 80,000 people displaced in Daletti area of the Metekel Zone. On 21 January 2021, the Federal Government of Ethiopia declared a State of Emergency in Metekel Zone (OCHA, 2021).

Even if the victims, as mentioned above are largely Amhara ethnic members, informants argued:

You might think that Amhara and Agaw are the only victims in the conflict. It started as a war against the so-called non-indigenous communities. However, gradually, the latter also defended themselves and fought against the other group. When things become worse, it is likely that those attackers who purport to represent 'indigenous' people may also attack their own people to make some politics out of it – to say that the non-indigenous peoples are killing the indigenous and then intensify their assault on the former. You know, most of the Gumuz [indigenous] people run away into the bushes when the conflicts start. They are even scared for themselves. When I see this situation, I believe that the ordinary Gumuz people are not perpetrators. (Interview: December 2020, Chagni)

On 20 February 2021, upper and mid-level leaders of the Benishangul Gumuz Region Prosperity Party convened and criticized and apologized for the Metekel killings. Metekel Zone Communication Department (8 February 2021) cited meeting participants who stated that the conflicts were being driven by those who pursue their interests by employing a false narrative that accuses the Prosperity Party of shifting to a 'centralist' party that opposes the existing federal system and as if it will deny the rights of nations, nationalities, and peoples guaranteed by the Constitution.

It should be highlighted that the casualties eventually come from all ethnic groups, including people from Gumuz. A senior official from the Ministry of Peace stated that 70% of the Gumuz were once in the bush fleeing the fighting. He believed that the condition for non-indigenous people was even better than that of the Gumuz. Nobody saw the latter since they concealed them in the bush, and they do not receive the humanitarian assistance that others do in the IDP camps. Some Gumuz also enter Sudan. According to an OCHA report (January 29, 2021), 1256 ethnic Gumuz arrived in Sudan's Blue Nile Province to seek refuge on 24 January 2021. According to informants, even though the initial targets are non-indigenous populations, the conflict swings back to the so-called indigenous as one resists the other.

Continuing with our discussion of events, EHRC (2021) reported that armed groups in Emanji Kebele of Bulen Woreda killed at least 16 residents between July 9 and 10, 2021. According to the report, 15 residents were killed in what were reportedly retaliatory attacks of 10 July 2021 during a funeral of a resident of the *kebele* purportedly killed by the armed group the previous day. Following reports on 15 July 2021 an additional eight residents were killed by an armed group in Denbe Kebele, around 4000 residents of the *kebele* have fled to seek shelter elsewhere. Siyanne (2021a) cited eyewitnesses that the revenge attack was made against the killing of an elderly man in the Emanji Kebele of Metekel Zone on Friday, 9 July 2021. An informant by phone to Siyanne (2021a), who lost his 15-year-old cousin, said that 'gunfire was launched against the people who were

gathered at the market. It took over an hour before it was quelled by the arrival of members of the command post.’ The whereabouts of about 30 people was unknown, Gemir said, recalling how several people scrambled to flee the attacks while some hid in the houses of residents they knew in the Kebele. Gembir also hinted at the involvement of *woreda*-level officials in the attack. He expressed his frustrations with the federal government. ‘The government should break the silence on the attacks and put a stop to it. All Ethiopians should condemn the repeated attacks on our community. It is adding to our grievances. We have no one to speak on our behalf.’ EHRC (2021) and Siyanne (2021a) contradict on the incident of the place which the former says had occurred in a funeral while the latter reported the event occurred in the market.

The above attack came days after the Benishangul Gumuz regional government-appointed 25 former members of an armed group in zonal and *woreda* leadership positions. According to Metekel Zone Communication Department’s (4 July 2020) statement, the regional government announced on 4 July 2021, that it has given two regional, three zonal and 16 *woreda* level leadership positions to 25 former members of an armed group that operates in the region. Metekel Zone Communication Department also mentioned that earlier in May, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Benishangul Gumuz regional state and an unnamed ‘armed group’ to bring a lasting solution to the security crisis in the region. The agreement includes making available leadership positions to the disarmed group in the region, granting urban and rural land, as well as accessing credit facilities. The regional government promised the provision of two regional, three zonal and four *Woreda* level positions to the members of the armed group. The regional government has been providing training for the members of the unnamed armed group and holding reconciliation ceremonies with the community (Metekel Zone Communication Department 7, 2021). Siyanne (2021b) (7 July 2021) cited Brigadier General Alemayehu Wolde, a member of the command post who confirmed 1633 members of the armed group graduated in the second round of rehabilitative training provided by the federal and regional governments. The training covered topics ranging from the constitution, multinationalism, national security to crime prevention, job creation, the demands of Gumuz people and the values of Gumuz people, the General said. Getahun Abdisa, the deputy president of the region, also added that preparations are underway to provide 530 ha of land to 106 of the former members of the armed group who graduated from the rehabilitative training.

Egypt and Sudan manipulating ethnic divisions?

The problems in maintaining peace appeared to be a fertile ground for Egypt and Sudan, which utilized or threatened to use ethnic differences to press their cause for disagreement with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). ‘With its self-centered view on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) dam problem, Egypt is known to be using threat and intimidation, as well as training and assistance to select groups, to destabilize Ethiopia’ (Abbink, 2021). The Benishangul Gumuz People’s Liberation Movement (BPLM) was a rebel group headquartered in Sudan that established operating zones in the Benishangul Gumuz Region surrounding isolated portions of the Assosa zone. When they made the peace agreement with the Ethiopian government, the leaders and members of the rebel organization stated that

both Sudan and Egypt supplied significant financial support as well as military training. They said that both nations accompanied them throughout the region's military effort to destabilize the region and disrupt the construction of the GERD. Similarly, recently over 3,000 fully equipped Gumuz rebel groups laid their arms and surrender to the government on February 2021. And these rebel groups have witnessed the military training and weapons from both Sudan and Egyptians. They have also notified that the Egyptians and Sudanese assigned them with a mission to destabilize the region by killing civilians, burning houses, distracting public infrastructure and destroying transportation systems including the one that leads to the GERD construction site. Egyptian lawmakers also openly threatened with the ethnic divisions in Ethiopia. They provoked and swore to support any rebel organizations or security challenges to the country. An Egyptian political analyst speaking for a state-affiliated national television (translated by Suleiman Abdela and posted on his Twitter page, 2 June 2021) stated:

They cannot build hundred new dams. They are ten regions. Two of them will be independent countries in the coming years. Henceforth, Benishangul and Tigray regions will not live as part of Ethiopia. Now we cannot quarrel against building 100 new dams. We should support more than before in the Oromia Region; we should support the force that is fighting for independent Benishangul State; we should support the Tigrean forces fighting for the independent state, and we should support Ogden secessions force the forces which seems to be not weaker to coordinate with us. We can break Ethiopia into pieces if we could do this. Don't think these regions cannot form independent states. The *country's constitution allows that every region can be an independent state* (emphasis added). There is no Ethiopia that will live henceforth.

Ethiopia's House of Peoples Representatives established a special committee chaired by Abdullahi Hamu to investigate the problem in Metekel. The committee's findings showed that Sudan and Egypt were behind many of the recent ethnically motivated attacks in Metekel zone. The chairperson of the committee showed that the two countries have supplied tools and weapons for armed groups by which they sought to disrupt GERD construction (Melakmu, 2021).

Conclusion

Metekel has been a mirror of Ethiopia's ethnic politics since 1991 and more so for the period since 2018. Ethnic federalism, even though it is acclaimed for recognition of local minorities, has failed to address the situation of those 'non-indigenous' communities that are equally large. Hence, it has created a favorable condition for conflicts among the groups that are differentiated by the constitution, and then local and international opponents of Ethiopia or the Ethiopian government use vagaries of ethnicity, the use of such divisions exacerbated during political crises at home such as reforms since 2018 or international disputes such as over the GERD dam. The consequence is that the civilian people on either side of allegiance face countless sufferings. Ultimately, the federal system, at least in its current model, solves neither the plight of the indigenous Gumuz in Metekel nor that of the so-called settlers. The ethno-federal system that elevates ethnicity does not give full security to the minorities which are called 'indigenous' or addressed conditions of inequality, contains the threat of powerful actors, including

neighbors, who take advantage of weaknesses – as they intersect with excruciating effect. Ethiopia may need to reconsider some limitations of the federal system which are incentives for conflict. One such option would be first and for most, introducing negotiated power-sharing mechanisms at the local level through consociationalism. Second, the legal and institutionalized division of people into indigenous and non-indigenous needs to be addressed.

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