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Between Regime Security and State Security: Elite Survival Strategies and the Erosion of Institutional Order in Ethiopia

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Research Article

Keywords: regime security, state security, coup-proofing, authoritarian legality, Ethiopia, Prosperity Party, federalism, insecurity dilemma

Posted Date: November 13th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11477347/v1

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

This paper argues that Ethiopia's state has become fragile since 2018, and that its political instability stems from confusion between regime and state security. Amid internal political fragmentation, multiple armed groups loyal to regions rather than the centre, and ethnic division, leaders have consistently chosen to ensure their own survival before everything else. Drawing on examples of Third World insecurity paradoxes, coup-proofing, personal rule, and authoritarian legalism, this paper discusses three mechanisms driving institutional turmoil. First, restructuring the security apparatus has led to an overstretched security apparatus that, although politically loyal, can easily be challenged along ethnic lines. Second, the state increasingly uses legal and electoral institutions to manage and keep power in check through courts, election commissions, states of emergency, and media control. Third, the central government has turned federalism into a security tool by arming or disarming regional armed forces when necessary.

1. Introduction

As early as April 2018, Ethiopia seemed to be moving toward a democratic opening. Thousands of political prisoners were freed by the newly elected Prime Minister, a call for exiled opposition parties and militias to come back home, media and websites that were banned were unbanned, an opposition figure was appointed to be the head of the elections committee, and free elections were promised (ICG, 2019; Lyons, 2019). In just three years' time, the country was embroiled in one of the most violent wars in the twenty-first century in Tigray, and by 2023 was facing simultaneous insurgency in Amhara and Oromia regions (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023; Gardner, 2024). The Pretoria agreement, which had ended the Tigray war was hanging by the thread, Tigray Interim Regional Administration was dissolved, Tigray had been barred from taking part in the June 2026 general election, and the ruling Prosperity Party won 438 out of 501 contested parliamentary seats due to insecurity in Amhara and Oromia (Rift Valley Institute, 2026; SWP, 2026; Dawan Africa, 2026).

Common readings of the above story focus on the instability of the Ethiopian state and the contradictions associated with ethnic federalism. The former suggests that Ethiopia is a fragile state unable to contain the centrifugal forces created by economic liberalisation (Clapham, 2017). On the other hand, the latter argues that the crisis stems from a political system in which ethnicity has been institutionalised as a means of conflict and territorial struggle, making violence a structural imperative (Abbink, 2011; Semir Yusuf, 2019). Although both readings are grounded in the realities of the crisis, they ignore state agency by treating the state as a passive agent of external forces.

In contrast, this article presents another perspective. Namely, it states that the crisis in Ethiopia should be understood as a result of continuous confusion of regime security, which means the survival of the ruling coalition and its leaders in power, and state security, which implies the unity and effectiveness of the governance institutions and the means by which the state provides security for itself. Distinguishing these concepts is crucial for analysing security in post-colonial countries because researchers long

suggested that the major threat to rulers is internal; hence, they always organise security institutions to protect themselves from potential domestic rivals (Ayoob, 1995; Job, 1992). In particular, it is claimed that Ethiopian elites from 2018 onwards, just as their ancestors, have been prioritising regime security over state security in all situations, and that is why the result of it has been the destruction of the very institutions that ensure the regime's long-term existence.

First, it relates to the coercive machinery. Rivalry among coup-prone rulers involves restructuring their armed forces and coercive machinery to ensure loyalty, but in the process, it lowers combat capability and professionalism (Quinlivan, 1999; Talmadge, 2015; De Bruin, 2020). In Ethiopia, the purging of the Tigray leadership, the recruitment of loyalists, and frequent leadership changes have created a politicised, overstretched army continuously engaged in conflict. The second reason is law-related.

Authoritarian states often rule by law, not under the law, using the court system, emergency powers, and regulators to control adversaries while maintaining a facade of legality (Ginsburg & Moustafa, 2008). In Ethiopia, legal reforms that began after 2018 were followed by their selective application against political adversaries, journalists, and rebellious groups. Third is related to federalism. The country's federal structures were treated as tools to use as long as they were useful and to dissolve when they became threatening.

Contributions include three points. First, empirically, it offers an integrated explanation of the crisis after 2018, incorporating military changes and developments in the legal regime and the federal system rather than examining each separately. Second, theoretically, it uses the regime security/state security dichotomy in a novel context, where there is a new party in power, a dominant leader, and a country waging several internal wars at the same time, adding to a body of research that has been mostly limited to the Middle Eastern countries and one-party systems (Quinlivan, 1999; Svolik, 2012). Third, it introduces the idea of the insecurity trap, an equilibrium self-reinforced by the fact that every security measure for the regime undermines the state, and every undermining of the state creates another threat that necessitates additional security measures for the regime. Section 2 discusses the theory. Section 3 presents the methodology. Sections 4 to 6 explore the three mechanisms empirically.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Insecurity Dilemma- Politics of Survival

As Weber defines, "the state is the human community that successfully lays claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory" (Weber, 1946). According to Tilly (1985, 1990), the monopolisation of the legitimate use of physical force in early modern Europe occurred as a consequence of war–making: as the rulers needed money and armed forces for warfare with other rulers, they created their bureaucracies and negotiated with social forces, gradually depriving their domestic opponents of their coercive power. Mann (1984) distinguished "the despotic power of rulers," which allows them to act without negotiating with civil society, from the "infrastructural power of the

state," its ability to penetrate society and implement decisions. A key point for this discussion is that despotic and infrastructural power do not have to be linked.

Scholars who have studied postcolonial states have argued that Africa and Asia did not follow the European sequence. According to Jackson (1990), most African states were quasi-states, where the international community, not internal consolidation, assured state sovereignty. Similarly, according to Herbst (2000), in states with low population densities and secure boundaries, the incentive for the establishment of infrastructural power was missing because the power was centered in capitals and was dispersed only to peripheral areas. Ayoob (1995) and the other authors who contributed to the book edited by Job (1992) introduced the idea of the insecurity dilemma. According to the insecurity dilemma, in states where rulers lack absolute legitimacy, threats are internal, and regimes use the security apparatus to protect themselves from their subjects. This leads to situations where regime security means society's insecurity, and the state, as an impersonal institution, suffers as well. According to Migdal (1988), the rulers of states which have strong societies with multiple centers of social control indulge in the politics of survival.

The literature comparing authoritarian politics explains how this works more concretely. Svolik (2012) defined two basic dilemmas facing authoritarian rulers: the dilemma of power-sharing within an elite group in the case of authoritarianism, and the dilemma of ruling the mass population in the case of authoritarianism, which entails using force against the masses and thereby empowering the instruments of repression that pose a danger to the ruler. According to Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003), rulers who use small-size winning coalitions to stay in power provide private goods to their clients rather than public goods to citizens, so survival and good governance are incompatible. Roessler (2011, 2016) found that African rulers who practice sharing power with their ethnic competitors run the risk of a coup while those who refuse to share with their competitors run the risk of a civil war, and the latter often prefer the former due to a fact that the risk of a coup poses more danger to the ruler himself than a rebellion in the periphery.

The coup-proofing literature offers the most sophisticated explanation of this balancing act for the military. Quinlivan (1999) enumerated typical methods: mobilising loyal ethnic groups for critical military jobs, establishing alternative military organisations to offset the conventional military, maintaining multiple intelligence services, and limiting the scope of skills in the conventional military. More recent literature shows that while counterbalancing reduces the chances of coups, it also undermines military efficiency (Powell, 2012; De Bruin, 2020). In particular, Talmadge (2015) found out that states under high internal threats use promotion policies, training and command practices, and information policies, leading to poor battlefield efficiency. Harkness (2018) showed that, in Africa, ethnic stacking in armies, known since Enloe (1980), creates instability when rulers try to alter the officer corps' ethnicity, as those being replaced object to the change. Sudduth (2017) suggested that purge policies in the security services are typical of rulers who enjoy temporary superiority over their rivals and may provoke them.

Legal scholarship on authoritarian legality examines how law becomes a tool of governance. Ginsburg and Moustafa (2008) maintained that among the responsibilities of the courts in authoritarian states are the following: social control, legitimation, administrative discipline, and conflict management within the elite. The term "brown areas" was used by O'Donnell (1993) to refer to places where law does not reach and where citizenship takes a low-intensity form in states where law is selectively enforced. Levitsky and Way (2010) define competitive authoritarianism as a situation in which formal democratic institutions are regarded as legitimate vehicles for gaining power, but incumbents misuse state resources, the media, and the judiciary to ensure they win. In his theory of the state of exception, Agamben (2005) describes the state of exception as a form of governmentality in which the suspension of the law becomes the norm. Securitisation theory also holds that political actors construct threats that require extra-political responses and therefore go beyond normal politics (Buzan et al., 1998).

This literature review results in a theoretical framework with three hypotheses. First, elite divisions and internal military rivalry among rulers lead them to restructure the coercive machinery to enhance loyalty, which reduces professionalism and efficiency and increases the risk of involving the military in internal wars and performing poorly. Secondly, rulers with fragmented elites will employ legal and electoral mechanisms for instrumental purposes, which will maintain their formal legitimacy but weaken these mechanisms in terms of resolving conflicts and channeling conflicts into violence. Third, if the country has a federated system, such rulers will treat subnational units and their coercive abilities as tools of survival for the centre, undermining the credibility of federative commitments and turning allies into rivals.Consequently, a vicious circle of insecurity emerges: each regime's survival effort reduces state power, while each weakening of the state creates new sources of danger and new regime-survival efforts. North et al. (2009) explain this vicious circle. For limited access orders, the way elites reduce violence is through a rental arrangement amongst themselves, based on their violence capacity. Changes in violence capacity lead to a breakdown in such rental arrangements and a return to violence.

3. Method and Sources

This paper uses a single case study design based on a theory-informed approach and process tracing methodology (George & Bennett, 2005). As the case, the Ethiopian federal state is chosen for the period of April 2018 to October 2026, although some references to the EPRDF times will be made to establish the continuity. As a unit of analysis, the decision is chosen, namely, elite decision-making processes concerning the security system, legal/electoral system, and central vs. local state interactions. For each mechanism, the analysis asks whether the decision was made to maintain the incumbent regime and state capacity, and whether the results match theoretical expectations. The distinction between regime security and state security is analytical and not moral. The article argues that most actions aimed at regime security were necessary for the state, and it does not make any claims about officials' benevolence.

Evidence in this study is secondary and involves academic peer-reviewed studies on politics of Ethiopia, reports from human rights groups and international organizations, policy analyses by think tanks, and

news coverage from reliable sources both local and international. Legal documents from Ethiopia, such as the 1995 Constitution and other proclamations, serve as primary sources. Because Ethiopia's security institutions are closed and independent media is limited, claims about military decisions can be made only on events confirmed by multiple sources.

4. Securing the Ruler, Weakening the Army: The Reorganisation of Coercion

Firstly, the coercive apparatus. As explained in this section, the reorganisation of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) and the intelligence agencies since 2018 followed a regime-protection logic, ensuring short-term loyalty at the cost of professionalism, experience, and efficiency. This trend characterises not only the government since 2018 but also the state-building process in Ethiopia as a whole.

The EPRDF's security architecture provides the basic point of departure. The ENDF was created after 1991 by the guerrilla army of the Tigray People's Liberation Front. Although other groups served in the ENDF, Tigrayans dominated its upper echelons and intelligence services for most of the next two decades (Tronvoll, 2009; Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003). As Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe (2020) argues, the EPRDF leadership saw combining the party, the army, and the state as vital to revolutionary state-building, and party loyalty was a basis for promotion within the army. In Enloe's (1980) terms, these are ethnic security maps, in which ruling elites use their own ethnic groups as the main building blocks of the military. This system of ethnic stacking worked well to preclude coups in Ethiopia, but it also made the army seem partisan rather than the army of all citizens.

This is exactly what the 2018 change precipitated. Within days, the new leadership began working to remove the chief of staff and head of national intelligence services and to retire or redeploy high-ranking Tigrayans (Fisher & Gebrewahd, 2019; Lyons, 2019). This is exactly what Sudduth (2017) calls the exploitation of a temporary advantage, in which the incoming leader seeks to remove competitors to consolidate his rule, given popular support for the reform agenda and the fragmentation of the previous elite. In terms of regime security, the logic was clear: the incoming administration could not govern if its security forces were controlled by a political faction that no longer held political power. But from the point of view of state security, the new purge led to the removal of experienced military commanders at the very time when the state was facing increasing communal violence, displacement of masses of people and growing autonomy of the TPLF in Mekelle (ICG, 2019; Semir Yusuf, 2019). This is precisely the effect Harkness (2018) anticipated: attempts to dismantle an ethnically based officer corps destabilise because they pose a mortal threat to those being removed who still hold some coercive power.

The outbreak of hostilities in November 2020 proved the prediction. The strike against the ENDF's Northern Command by Tigrayans, portrayed by the TPLF as a pre-emptive strike, brought to the fore the politicisation of the military through its composition (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). The regime's response

further exacerbated the problem. Tigrayan soldiers were stripped of their duties, disarmed and imprisoned in some cases, transforming a political dispute into an ethnic cleansing of the armed forces (HRW, 2021a; Gardner, 2024). The government allowed, or aat least tolerated, the presence of foreign troops in Tigray, along with its heavy reliance on regional Amhara forces and militias (ICHREE, 2023; Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). All three strategies helped ensure regime security by using the forces most motivated to defeat the TPLF. However, all three actions undermined the state security. Using a foreign army in a domestic conflict broke the principle of the sovereign monopoly on force, and relying on regional forces with territorial ambitions created future commitment problems.

This also undermined the army's effectiveness. In June 2021, Tigray forces took control of Mekelle again, and in November 2021, they entered Amhara territory and came close to Addis Ababa, prompting the state to declare a nationwide state of emergency (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). As Talmadge (2015) states, regime-protecting armies work inefficiently against competent enemies because they reward loyalty, lack communication, and are decentralised, which makes them work worse. This holds true for the ENDF in 2021, although the shock of the November 2020 attack and the destruction of Northern Command also contributed to this result. The federal government managed to reclaim the lost ground without any professional reorganisation of the army but using the mobilization of local forces and civilians, as well as buying armed drones in other countries (Gardner, 2024). However, although these measures helped Ethiopia to win the war, they have resulted in the use of irregular troops and distant violence, which harmed civilians (ICHREE, 2023).

Following Pretoria, the trend continued as the ENDF grew quickly and was used against the Oromo Liberation Army in Oromia, against Fano in Amhara, and on the borders of Tigray and Eritrea. The government also spent money on elite troops directly controlled by the executive, namely by expanding the Republican Guard, a standard counterbalancing strategy, according to Quinlivan (1999), as outlined in Gardner (2024). Counterbalancing keeps the leader safe from a coup by the regular army but creates division within the security sector and signals to regular officers that their loyalty is suspect. As De Bruin (2020) argues, this strategy lowers the chances of a coup while raising the likelihood that the security sector will fracture in the process. In Ethiopia, there seems to be less of this kind of fracturing in the form of coups, and more of defection, namely of the thousands of Amhara special force members moving to Fano in 2023 and of the splinter groups formed in Tigray such as the Tigray Peace Force, tacitly supported by the federal government (ICG, 2023; Rift Valley Institute, 2026).

Likewise, the intelligence agencies followed suit. The National Intelligence and Security Service was one of the EPRDF regime's most powerful tools of control, and its leadership had already changed early in the transition (Lyons, 2019). From the restructuring process that has taken place so far, it is apparent that what has been taking place seems to be geared towards protecting the interests of the executive and watching out for the opposition and media houses, judging from the large number of politically motivated detentions reported by human rights organisations (HRW, 2024; Amnesty International, 2023). In Svolik's (2012) words, using repression to solve the problem of mass control empowers repressive agencies, creating moral hazard and leaving the ruler at the mercy of those agencies.

This combination results in a coercive structure that is loyal at the top, overstretched in the field, and distrusted by broad sections of the population. This is exactly what the coup-civil war trap theory predicted. Ethiopia has not seen a successful coup since 2018, and the one attempted in Bahir Dar in June 2019 failed. However, it has fought three civil wars simultaneously, all against forces that at some point were allied with the state or even belonged to its coercive structure. The regime's security is guaranteed. The state's security has been undermined.

5. Law as Instrument: Courts, Elections, Emergency Rule and the Media

The second strategy relates to the legal and electoral system. This part of the paper shows how the post-2018 government undertook institutional changes that at first helped expand political space through law, but after that utilised the very same institutions in selective ways against its rivals, leading to the situation in which the role of law as an unbiased mechanism for resolving conflicts is no longer possible. If institutions designed to resolve conflicts are viewed as biased, conflicts will move from courts and ballots to the battlefield. This does not mean Ethiopia lacked laws; it refers to the notion explained by Ginsburg & Moustafa (2008).

The reforms were significant. The government introduced a new law in 2020, replacing the 2009 anti-terrorism proclamation used to target journalists and political opponents; it also changed the restrictive charities and societies law in 2019 and introduced a new electoral and political parties law in 2019 (Proclamation No. 1162/2019). In addition, the government nominated respected, independent people as chairpersons of the electoral board, the Supreme Court, and the human rights commission (ICG, 2019; Lyons, 2019). These reforms indicated genuine liberalisation and received support both domestically and internationally. At the same time, these reforms were important for the regime. Using Levitsky and Way's (2010) terminology, the liberalisation helped the new regime differentiate itself from the EPRDF.

The crucial point comes down to the question of elections. The general elections in 2020 were postponed because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Parliament and the House of Federation extended the mandate of the incumbent institutions under their interpretation of the constitution (Gardner, 2024). The TPLF did not accept this postponement and organised regional elections in September 2020, which the federal parliament viewed as an unconstitutional step by the TPLF (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). The constitution contains no provisions for extending the mandate of incumbent institutions without elections, so this decision can be made only for public health reasons, not for constitutional ones. From a political viewpoint, this step matters because those institutions, belonging to the ruling party, resolved the constitution's ambiguity in the latter's interest.

This became evident from the 2021 elections as well. Conducted in June 2021 during the Tigray war and insecurity in other areas including Oromia, the elections saw a clean sweep by the Prosperity Party as the latter captured an overwhelming number of the contested seats (Gardner, 2024). The leading Oromo opposition parties boycotted the polls because of the arrest of their leaders such as Jawar Mohammed

who was detained in July 2020 following protests in the wake of the murder of the singer Hachalu Hundessa, as well as the closing down of the party offices (HRW, 2021b; Lyons, 2021). Tigray did not take part in the voting process. This happened once again in June 2026 when Tigray remained unrepresented, polling stations could not be opened in the insecure parts of Amhara and Oromia, and the opposition was fractured, with candidates not put up in several constituencies (AFP, 2026; Dawan Africa, 2026). Earlier, in May 2025, the national election commission had deregistered the TPLF (Rift Valley Institute, 2026).

According to Arriola and Lyons (2016), the EPRDF's 2015 electoral success was dubbed the 100 per cent election because total domination signals a lack of competition rather than support. Elections after 2018 were more diverse than in 2015; however, they shared one feature: they reinforced incumbency while failing to address the underlying disputes that elections are expected to resolve. Elections that boycott or exclude parties whose supporters are in arms cannot fulfil this task.

The main legal mechanism is the emergency law. Article 93 of the 1995 Constitution (FDRE, 1995) states that "a state of emergency shall be declared with the consent of the Parliament and subject to the scrutiny of the Iwereard". Emergency laws have operated in Ethiopia under 17 and 2018 and, now, the nethe country was placed under emergency rule in November 2021 in the country as a whole and in Amhara in August 2023, with extensions (HRW, 2024). The emergency law allows arrests without legal plegal processes to be suspended, communications to be cut off, and power to be cut off.

Regarding the case of the emergency law, however, it seems like there is another variation, which is the use of the state of emergency as an episodic strategy in all situations when the regime is faced with serious military threats from the opposition armed forces, which in both cases included extending the executive and military control over the civilian institutions. The securitisation perspective on politics explains that situation (Buzan et al., 1998). By identifying opponents and civilians who support them as existential threats to the state, the government has legitimised actions that neither the courts nor parliament could control. This is extremely dangerous for state security. All states of emergency have shown citizens that legal guarantees are temporary, that they are suspicious because of the people's ethnic background, and that the state's legal obligations are reversible. This has been confirmed by mass arrests of ethnic Tigrayans in 2021 and ethnic Amharas in 2023 and 2024 (HRW, 2021a; Amnesty International, 2023).

Media management becomes an added factor. The early onset of events in 2018 was combined with the return of widespread arrests of journalists, particularly those reporting on the fighting in Amhara and Tigray, and thus making Ethiopia one of the top imprisoners of journalists in sub-Saharan Africa (CPJ, 2024; Freedom House, 2025). The internet shutdown in the Tigray and Amhara regions made it hard to report independently on the nature of the war (Access Now, 2024). Controlling the flow of information helps the regime to feel secure since it helps limit the spread of any reports of abuses and construct the country's story about the war. Nevertheless, it also makes the government feel insecure because it may lack enough information to base its actions on, and because rumours spread, and diaspora activism on

social mediacan undermine it. As arguLyall & Wilson (2009) note, in a counter-insurgency setting, “the government that does not know what is happening cannot govern” effectively.

While capturing the judiciary and oversight institutions is not disputable, the condition of these institutions was more complicated. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission was conducting legitimate investigations, including an investigation together with the UN regarding the atrocities committed in Tigray (EHRC & OHCHR, 2021). Moreover, sometimes the court issued decisions against the government. The creation of the new National Dialogue Commission and the transition justice policy of 2024 is also considered an institutional innovation in Ethiopia (Proclamation No. 1265/2021; Ministry of Justice, 2024). Nevertheless, the influence of these institutions was weakened by the executive branch's possession of emergency powers, the absence of some key armed groups in the dialogue process, and no accountability for the committed atrocities (ICHREE, 2023). According to Helmke and Levitsky (2004), informal institutions are institutions that oppose formal institutions because they produce outputs that contradict formal rules. An example of an informal institution in Ethiopia is the notion that the executive's security needs outweigh formal legal restraints. At times, this informal institution outweighed formal institutions.

6. Arming and Disarming the Regions: Federalism as an Instrument of Survival

Thirdly, it relates to the system of federalism. According to federal theory, federalism is capable of accommodating territorially concentrated diversity through the credible promise of subnational autonomy, but the stability of such arrangements rests on the commitment of the center to honor the promises and lack of incentives for either of them to renege on the deal (Riker, 1964; Stepan, 1999). Special problems arise with ethnofederal systems. As Bunce (1999) and Roeder (1991) note, socialist ethnofederal systems created opportunities for mobilisation along nationalist lines, leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Hale (2004) found that ethnofederal states are particularly prone to instability when one ethnic region dominates, and regional institutions have coercive power. This chapter suggests that the Ethiopian federal system has become unstable not only because of its ethnic character but also because the centre has used it for regime survival.

The EPRDF era balanced ethnic federalism with central party rule. While the regions were formally autonomous, EPRDF members and affiliates led the leadership, and democratic centralism dictated that decisions from the centre had to prevail (Aalen, 2011; Vaughan, 2011; Hagmann & Abbink, 2011). Special regional police forces emerged at this time, including the Liyu Police in the Somali region who were used by the centre to suppress the insurgents in the Ogaden despite committing numerous atrocities (Markakis, 2011). The precedent was set early: it suited the centre to delegate coercive functions to regional forces, and their constitutional status was never clearly defined (Fiseha, 2006).

However, with the demise of the EPRDF and the formation of the Prosperity Party at the end of 2019, the party lost the mechanism to maintain the federation's cohesion. The TPLF did not want to become a part

of the Prosperity Party, thus making the Tigray regional state, under the rule of the TPLF, the first region after 1991 whose administration belonged to a political party opposed to the ruling party in the federal level (Fisher & Gebrewahd, 2019; Lyons, 2021). The federal system now had to operate without the party mechanism. In this new setting, regions with large special forces, such as Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, and Somali, became autonomous centres of coercion.

This was not a process aimed at developing a constitutional arrangement to secure regional forces. On the contrary, during the Tigray conflict, the centre used Amhara and Afar forces, and even militias, as indispensable auxiliaries while implicitly supporting, if not endorsing, Amhara control over Western Tigray (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). While using such forces ensured the regime's highest probability of victory against the TPLF, it placed disputed territories under the jurisdiction of one region in a way the centre could not undo or sustain. Unlike Pretoria, in April 2023, the centre went in the opposite direction by ordering the integration of all regional special forces into federal institutions (ICG, 2023). Ideally, the decision was solving a real security issue faced by the state, but in reality, it was designed with regime security in mind rather than state security. The decision came without negotiation; it was made after signing the peace accord, without involving regional stakeholders whose security was affected; and it was implemented amid ongoing territorial disputes. Naturally, the outcome was the defection of a large part of Amhara’s special forces to Fano and the Amhara insurgency.

In the Tigray case, too, one can see the logic working backwards. The region had an interim administration created under the Pretoria Agreement framework, and the federal government interfered in the intra-party conflict within the TPLF by backing a more compliant faction, then extended the interim administration through a federal decree. In 2025, when the dominant faction of the TPLF ousted the interim president, and again in 2026, when the newly elected regional parliament selected the chairman of the TPLF as regional president, the federal government came to be confronted with a regional administration that refused to recognise its legitimacy (Rift Valley Institute, 2026; SWP, 2026). The federal government even tolerated or supported the activities of the Tigray Peace Force, which was an armed splinter group whose attacks initiated intra-Tigrayan fights (Rift Valley Institute, 2026). Promoting factions within a region against the dominant party in that region is a standard strategy of divide-and-rule. While it might weaken the rival in the short run, it undermines the logic that regional authorities derive their power from constitutional processes rather than federal favourss.

Oromia provides another example. The Oromo Liberation Front came back from exile in 2018 through a peace process where the disarmament provisions remained unclear, and the armed wing of the front, the Oromo Liberation Army, took up the arms again, as the government counterinsurgency operations in western and southern Oromia involved numerous violations by both sides (Semir Yusuf, 2019; HRW, 2024). Talks held in Tanzania in 2023 produced no agreement. In Oromia, the centre's key concern was to ensure that the Oromo component of the Prosperity Party became the leading political force among the Oromo population. This aim has been achieved, but at a high cost.

These examples show that the federal government has committed itself to regional actors to meet its immediate requirements for regime survival. The regional friends were armed and disarmed as needed, while the regional enemies were militarily confronted, bargained with, and neutralised by supporting rival forces. As Fearon (1995) and Walter (2002) point out, credible commitment underpins any long-term agreement. A centre that can revoke its commitments at any time cannot make credible promises, and regional actors, acting rationally, will keep their arms, seek foreign allies, and even rebel in the face of threats. The development in 2026 of a united Amhara insurgency that cooperates with armed actors elsewhere, as well as the news of reconciliation between the TPLF and Eritrea, are natural consequences of this process (Addis Standard, 2026; Rift Valley Institute, 2026). Federalism, which was meant to be a guarantee of safety for various communities, has turned into a system where every community protects itself with weapons.

This is aggravated by the Prosperity Party's own centralising policy. In trying to transcend ethnic politics and appeal to a pan-Ethiopian idea, the Prosperity Party pursues large urban construction projects and reforms that, through performance, help it gain legitimacy (Gardner, 2024). Nevertheless, the party is heavily reliant on regional parties and their leaders who should address ethnic interests, and it fails to solve the territorial conflicts that are the roots of the ongoing wars. According to Riker (1964), the party system maintains the federal bargain by connecting the elites of the centre and the regions. Ethiopia has such a party system, but it does not bargain and hierarchically controls regional leaders, which makes the latter incapable of making any credible promises to their constituencies. As a result, regional governments are neither powerful enough to contain local insurgencies nor autonomous enough to earn local loyalty.

7. Conclusion-Escaping the Insecurity Trap

This essay argues that Ethiopia's political crisis since 2018 resulted from persistent confusion between regime security and state security. Three techniques were outlined. Restructuring the coercive apparatus through loyalty ensured the army would protect the ruler's position, but it was overextended, ethnically threatened, and involved in constant civil wars. Using the legal mechanisms, including court, elections, emergencies and media control, guaranteed legitimacy on paper but denied the necessary legitimacy of the institutions needed to settle disputes peacefully. Using federalism as a survival mechanism destroyed the credibility of the government’s intentions and ensured each region would remain interested in maintaining its co-power. Overall, the regime's survival strategies were successful; the party continues to consolidate power, having won two national elections in an unambiguous manner and avoiding a coup, which in comparative politics is considered the main danger to personalist regimes.

The idea of an insecurity trap captures the dynamic linking these events. The regime's efforts to secure itself produce more threats and thus require more security to address them. The purge of the commanders from Tigray helped create the conditions for a war in Tigray. In Tigray, the war required help from the Amhara army, which led to territorial commitments the centre failed to uphold. Disarming these troops led to the Amhara rebellion, which in turn made it necessary to impose emergency rule and mass

arrests, increasing Amhara alienation. Each step seemed locally sensible for a regime that feared for its survival, and each step limited the next. This is not unique to Ethiopia either. The coup-civil war trap developed by Roessler (2016), along with the broader Third World security dilemma discussed by scholars such as Ayoob (1995), reflects the same dynamic in Africa and the Middle East. However, in Ethiopia, the transition to liberalism turned into multiple wars much more quickly, and the instruments of liberalisation turned into tools of oppression.

Theoretically, this means the analysis of the state's fragility needs to more clearly account for the state's incapacity and the will of the people controlling it. Ethiopia is not a state which does not have the infrastructure; it has a large army, an elaborate bureaucratic apparatus, a ruling party, and a comprehensive legal system. It suffers instead from the domination of these structures by the interests of a ruling coalition seeking survival in an environment of divided elites and armed, rival regions. The distinction between "despotic" and "infrastructural" power in Mann (1984) becomes clear here: Ethiopian rulers have substantial despotic power, while their infrastructural power has been declining.

Escaping the insecurity trap would require changes that make regime survival depend not on coercive power but on state performance. Three paths emerge from the above analysis. The first is security sector reform that emphasises professional solidarity and national representation over loyalty, and involves negotiation rather than imposing the integration of regional security forces. The second path is rebuilding the credibility of legal and electoral institutions through inclusive processes that involve participation by armed groups and marginalised parties in national dialogue, an independent electoral board and judiciary, and accountability for any abuses committed by both parties. The third path is a constitutional agreement on the centre-region relationship, including the status of regional security forces and disputed areas, that is credible because the centre cannot unilaterally revise it. None of the three paths is realistic in the short term because none involves accepting constraints that immediately undermine regime security. That is the insecurity trap. What Ethiopia has been experiencing since 2018, however, is that the alternative to the trap, an insecure state presided over by a regime secure in office, is unsustainable.

Declarations

Author Contribution

The first author crafted the initial idea 2nd Author Revised and edited the first idea to make it more meangful

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