

Cui Bono?

The Racket vs Ethiopia's Four Singular Interests

Mefkereseb G. Hailu (PhD)*

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Preamble : A simple but incisive question for the *paradox of Ethiopianism*

Across this series I have argued a single proposition in many forms: that the survival and the flourishing of Ethiopia rest on four singular interests arranged in three layers — the *Foundations* of *National Unity* and *Red-Sea Sovereignty*; the *Means* for broad-based *Economic Development* anchored in democracy; and, driving both, the *Engine* in the form of *GERD* that is meant to power the urbanisation and industrial transformation [1, 7, 8, 10]. I have traced how the transactional geopolitics of our age — the Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Horn re-ordered around energy and leverage — presses on those interests from without [2, 3, 4, 5], and asked whether a government can secure any of them while it rules, as ours does, in a permanent and managed chaotic equilibrium [9, 6].

This article gathers those threads into one, because our situation now demands a single, clear-eyed assessment and a single, unifying answer. A hundred and twenty million people are being steered toward a war among themselves. If that war comes in full, it will not stay within our borders: a collapsing Ethiopia would send a tsunami of the displaced across the Red Sea into the Gulf and up through Sudan and Libya toward Europe, and would pull the whole of the Horn and East Africa down with it. The stakes could not be higher, and they are not only ours.

Recently, a powerful idea has entered our reconstruction discourse: the *paradox of Ethiopianism* — that in an ethnicised order the peoples who most love the nation may first be driven to the very ethnic self-organisation the nation was meant to transcend [11]. It is a serious proposition, and I take it here at its strongest, not to contest a colleague but to carry the idea one step past where it halts, by asking the oldest question in politics:

Cui Bono? — to whose benefit?

Ask it, and the paradox ceases to be a tragedy that merely befalls us and reveals itself as a *racket* that profits someone. And once the racket is named, everything I have written fuses into one finding. There is a single machine beneath our every failure, run for the benefit of a single elite — political, economic, religious, and intellectual — and it is the common adversary of all the *Four Singular Interests* at once. It corrodes unity; it forecloses the coast; it starves development; it hollows democracy; it throttles the engine; and beneath all of these it steals *our unity and individual freedom* without which none of them can be built: the political, economic, and religious freedom of ordinary Ethiopians, held hostage to the elite's desire to dominate one group over another. This machine has a seat of ultimate power — a *chair* — and different elites have held it at different times: the Tigray People's Liberation Front for twenty-seven years, and today the Prosperity Party of Abiy Ahmed. Whoever holds the chair commands the state and its only army, and is thereby, at any given moment, the principal author of the killing and the maiming. I develop this below; the reader should carry it from the outset, for it is the difference between blaming a people and naming a machine.

Here, in brief, is what this article tells you. Ethiopia's four interests share a single enemy, and it is internal. The true fault-line is not Amhara against Oromo against Tigrayan; it is the peoples against the *elite* that farms them all. That elite runs a *racket* by its operating rule, *ethnic entrepreneurship*: the reward of a group's claim over a person's competence — at once our deepest injustice and the engine of our incompetence. No accident of culture but a *creature of law: the 1995 constitution is its charter that legalises ethnic entrepreneurship* and holds the *nation at the precipice of disintegration*. *No war among ourselves can cure it*; the rifle turned inward only feeds it. *Force is justified for one cause alone*, if peaceful means fail: *to defend and retrieve our historical Red-Sea Sovereignty*. *The rest is built, not fought*. Dismantle the machine. Unite the peoples. Feed them, free them, and school them. *Then give them one great thing to raise together — Red Sea Sovereignty*, a lawful and corruption-free economy powered by the Renaissance Dam, and *a nation at last united in its diversity and at peace with itself*. What follows argues all of this in plain prose, because the argument is now grave enough, and clear enough, to stand on it.

*The author, aka MGH, is a global technical expert trained at the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom. The views expressed are his own and do not represent any institutional position. The article is written in *LaTeX Script*, which could be provided to editors in preference to the compiled PDF. MGH can be reached via mefkereseb.hailu1990@gmail.com.

1 The standpoint, and the instrument

Let me be plain about where I stand, for it governs all that follows. I write as a nationalist, not as any faction's partisan. My loyalty is to the Ethiopian nation entire, and to its citizens of every language and faith. It is to no party, region, church, mosque, or office. That has one consequence the reader should carry throughout: I owe nothing to any elite, my own group's included. So I can ask of them all the question none of them wishes asked. I praise any group or individual when praise is due, and I shred them to the ground when their actions defecate on my country and my people.

The question is *cui bono*, and it is the instrument of political economy. It differs from moral philosophy in one decisive way. Philosophy asks what "the community" needs. It reasons about dignity, recognition, and justice, and it reasons well. But it carries a blind spot, and in our case the blind spot is everything. A community is not an actor. It does not decide, arm, tax, or negotiate. Its *elites* do, in its name. And their private interest is not the same as its welfare. Political economy begins there, with the ruder question: inside this people, who is paid by this people's fear? Switch to that question and our whole predicament changes shape — from a tragedy with no author into a business with beneficiaries.

And when I say the elite, I mean the whole of it. Our racket is not run by politicians alone. It is run by four estates in concert. The *political* cadre holds the offices and the guns. The *economic* oligarch turns proximity to power into contracts, land, and money. The *religious* authority blesses the extraction, or declines to condemn it. And the *intellectual* — the writer, the academic, the online prophet — supplies the story that makes robbery feel like destiny. These estates often prey on one another. But they share an interest in the system that raises them all, and that shared interest makes them a single elite.

So far I have named two of the three things this article turns on. Let me set all three before the reader at once, plainly and unmistakably, for they recur on every page: *the racket* — which I will also call *the machine* — is the *system*: the ethnic-federal order run to pump fear, votes, land, and money upward; *ethnic entrepreneurship* is the *operating rule* by which that machine runs; and *the elite* of four estates (the *political* cadre, the *economic* oligarch, the *religious* authority, and the *intellectual*) are the *operators* — those who work the machine by that rule and divide its takings. It is the middle of the three, the *operating rule*, that is the hinge on which the other two turn, and I must fix it precisely, for everything after this depends on it. By ethnic entrepreneurship I mean this: a person's claim to office, resource, land, and protection rests not on his character or competence, but on the ethnic or language group he was born into. It is the accident of lineage put in place of the achievement of the person. In a healthy polity a citizen is weighed by what he is and can do. Under ethnic entrepreneurship he is weighed by whose name he can shout, and the louder he shouts it the higher he rises — whether or not he can build a road or tell the truth. This is why the racket is not merely unjust but ruinous. A system that rewards the group's claim over the person's competence will, like a law of nature, be led by its shoutiest men and not its ablest. And a nation so led cannot feed itself, cannot defend itself, and cannot hold itself together. Ethnic entrepreneurship is thus both the deepest injustice of our order and the engine of its incompetence.

I will use plain language about this elite throughout, and the bluntness serves unity, not against it. It is no insult to a people to say its grief is farmed by ethnic entrepreneurs who wear its colours. It is the opposite. It says the people are the racket's victims, not its authors. And the peoples of every group are victims of the same racket — run by different men, in different colours, who are, in the only sense that matters, colleagues.

2 The conversation this article joins

This article does not arrive in a vacuum. It joins a serious conversation, and two contributions deserve honour, for this argument is built on ground they cleared.

The first is the recent paper *Amhara Unity, Survival, and National Reorganization* [12]. Its service is diagnostic and, on its own terms, courageous. It sets out, more fully than anyone had, the predicament

of the Amhara: cast as the nation's designated villain, yet denied the ethnic self-organisation the order granted, even demanded, of others. A people so encircled, it argues, must unify to survive, as its neighbours long since did. I take the diagnosis seriously. I do not flinch from Amhara vulnerability, written this month in displacements and graves. I part from it only on the cure. A programme of one people's disciplined unity, however justified, still accepts the board the game is played on. It answers ethnic mobilisation with ethnic mobilisation. It does not yet ask the question that overturns the board: who profits from setting the peoples against one another?

The second is *The Paradox of Ethiopianism*, in two parts [11]. It is the finest reconstruction blueprint our discourse has produced. Its first part recasts Amhara self-organisation not as chauvinism but as defensive adaptation to an ethnicised order — each people's shield becoming its neighbour's threat. Its second part turns from diagnosis to design. It lays down the institutions of renewal: a citizenship that travels with the person, not the province; forces loyal to law, not party or people; defeat made *survivable* before anyone is asked to lose; and a pact agreed *before* any rupture — the roof raised before the storm, not after the walls fall. I adopt much of this, and gratefully.

My argument begins where both of these halt, and they halt at the same place. Both reason about *communities* — what the Amhara need, what reciprocity requires. In doing so, both inherit the fiction that a community is a single actor with a single interest.

At its strongest, the shared premise runs thus. In an order that has ethnicised the state — that makes language and lineage the keys to office, land, and protection — a people that declines to organise ethnically does not rise above the game. It merely disarms itself, and is preyed on for its restraint. Self-organisation, on this view, is not chauvinism but defence. The tragedy is that each people's shield is every other's threat, so mutual fear deepens with every rational act of self-defence.

All of this is true, and I adopt it. Yet it halts at a threshold, and the threshold is this article's question. Grant the fiction of the unitary community — that a people is one actor with one interest — and the security dilemma looks like weather: a misfortune that simply falls on innocent peoples. Drop it. Insist that within each people an elite and a mass have divergent interests. Now the same dilemma looks wholly different. It is not merely suffered. It is *farmed*. A frightened people is loyal, mobilisable, and extractable, and the men who live off that loyalty have every reason to keep the fear at a profitable simmer. The paradox is thus real as an experience and false as a necessity. The incentives that make the ethnic patron feel indispensable were manufactured — built by an order that hollowed every alternative on purpose. A manufactured scarcity is not a law of nature. It is a business, and businesses can be closed.

3 The racket, named and decomposed

To call the ethnic-federal order a racket is a serious analytic claim, not a slur. Four established ideas, assembled, produce the Ethiopian machine with unsettling precision.

The first: our order is, in the technical sense, a *limited-access order* [51]. A coalition of elites restricts access to office and enterprise. The scarcity yields rents, and the rents are parcelled among elites to buy their loyalty and keep them from fighting. The ingenuity of the 1995 settlement was to make *ethnicity* the instrument of restriction. To command a region is to command who may hold office there, who may trade, and who allocates the land. The single key that turns all these locks is the ethnic label. Article 39, with its promise of secession, is the lock that keeps the licence exclusive [48].

The second is blunter: the line between a government and a protection racket is thin [50]. Both sell protection. The racketeer's genius is to sell protection against a danger he creates. Watch the regional elite do exactly this. It ethnicises the police and hollows the courts. Then it offers itself as the community's only shield against the insecurity it just manufactured. The insecurity is not the racket's failure. It is its stock-in-trade.

The third explains why we miss it: grievance is the wrapper, and rent is the product [52]. Almost every insurgency speaks the language of grievance, sincerely felt at the base. What sustains it, once

running, is often the capture of some lootable rent. Fanon said the same two generations ago, and every Ethiopian should read him on it [53]. The tragedy of the freed nation, he warned, is the native bourgeoisie. It captures the liberation for itself. It swaps real emancipation for ethnic chauvinism. And it turns “the people” from the purpose of the struggle into its raw material.

The fourth reveals the structure whole: ethnic politics decays through *outbidding* [54]. Within each group the moderate is outflanked by the zealot who offers a purer militancy. The centre hollows; the market rewards the ethnic entrepreneur of fear. Run this in every group at once and a strange figure appears. The Amhara, Oromo, and Tigrayan ethnic entrepreneurs are mortal enemies in their rhetoric. Yet look at what they *jointly* defend: the ethnic-federal rent-system itself, without which not one of them would hold an office. They are rivals in the shop window and partners in the back room. That is a cartel. They are allied not by conspiracy, which could be exposed, but by incentive, which is stronger.

Here, though, I must refine the cartel, for our case is crueller than mere collusion. The estates do not only cooperate. They also devour one another, and the strongest makes a speciality of it. The record is documented and long, and it wears real names. The TPLF, which ruled Ethiopia for twenty-seven years, was trained and armed by Eritrea’s EPLF — then fought it in a war that killed near a hundred thousand. It welcomed the OLF into the 1991 transition, then arrested its candidates, drove it into exile, and jailed its followers by the thousand. It built its own “partners” — the OPDO, the ANDM, the southern SEPDM — as satellites, and kept them junior for a generation. And it liquidated its rival Tigrayan movements outright [13]. In fifty years it never once sustained a partnership it did not control, subordinate, or destroy.

This is not a point about one region’s villainy. It is a point about the nature of the machine. The racket is not a club of equals. It is a predatory hierarchy where each racketeer aspires to eat the others, and today’s ally is tomorrow’s hollowed shell. Through every phase — the collusion and the cannibalism alike — one party pays without pause. It is never the racketeers who are consumed by their wars. It is the people whose colours they wear. The “paradox of Ethiopianism” is this machine’s ideology — the story it tells the peoples so their extraction feels like their protection.

4 It is the constitution, stupid!

I have so far described the racket as if it were a habit. It is worse than a habit. It is the law. Everything I have named — the ethnic key to office and land, the licence to a rent, the patron made indispensable — is not a corruption of our constitutional order. It is that order, working exactly as written. The root of every ill traced in these pages is a single document: the constitution of 1995. I have argued this before, and bluntly: it is the constitution, stupid.

Read what it actually says. Article 8 vests sovereignty not in the citizen, nor in the Ethiopian nation as a whole, but in its “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” [48]. The ethnic group is made the sovereign unit; the individual is a member of one before he is a citizen of the whole. Article 46 then draws the internal borders themselves by language and identity, so the land is parcelled by ethnicity. Article 39 hands each of these ethnic units the unconditional right to secede, up to a separate state. And Article 49 writes one group’s “special interest” over the national capital into the founding text. This is not a neutral frame within which ethnic entrepreneurship happens to flourish. It is the charter that *legalises* it. The document does not merely permit the racket. It constitutes it.

The consequence is a country built on a fault-line and told to call it a foundation. A constitution that makes ethnicity the unit of sovereignty, carves the land by tribe, and promises each tribe the exit does not hold a diverse nation together. It teaches every group to see itself as a state-in-waiting, and every neighbour as a rival claimant. It keeps the whole edifice permanently one grievance from dissolution. This is why Ethiopia lives at the precipice of disintegration. It was designed to live there. The threat of coming apart is not the system failing; it is the system’s central promise, written into Article 39 and brandished, in every crisis, as both a right and a threat.

So let me say plainly what this whole article has been circling. You cannot dismantle the racket

while leaving its charter in force. Professionalise the police, and an ethnic constitution will re-ethnicise them. Open the market, and an ethnic constitution will re-close it. Every reform I propose below is provisional until the document that legalises the racket is replaced — not amended at its edges, but remade at its core, upon the one word the present text so carefully avoids: the citizen. Until it is the citizen’s constitution, we are only rearranging the furniture in a house built on a fault.

And how it is remade matters as much as that it is remade, for the wrong method would hand the next racketeer a blank page. I have set out the full, article-by-article case elsewhere [7]; but the reader deserves its substance here, not merely a signpost to it. Six changes carry the weight, and not one of them is obscure. *First*, vest sovereignty in the citizen. The 1995 text opens “We, the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” and makes the group sovereign and the person derived from it (Article 8); every settled democracy makes the people sovereign as a body of equal citizens, and Ethiopia must join them — each group’s language and culture protected *within* that sovereignty, never placed above it. *Second*, remove the unconditional right of secession (Article 39): no other federal democracy in the world writes an automatic right of break-up into its supreme law, and the clause is a standing reward to any ethnic entrepreneur who can drag a grievance to the exit — self-government kept, the exit closed, as Canada, India, Spain, and the United States all keep it closed. *Third*, write the sea into the constitution (Article 2), which at present records only the loss of the coast: affirm the inherent right of self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter, declare sovereign access to the sea a vital national interest, and require a two-thirds vote of parliament before any government may sign that access further away. *Fourth*, free the land and guard the engine (Articles 40, 51, and 89): permit a secured private leasehold so a farmer’s plot can back a loan, place the dam and the national grid under federal protection against regional sabotage, and make the constitution’s economic promises enforceable rather than ornamental. *Fifth*, open the ethnic map to lawful review (Article 47) — not torn up by decree, but referred to a standing commission empowered to weigh civic, geographic, and hybrid alternatives and put them to the people. And *sixth*, break the veto on change itself (Article 105): today the ethnically organised upper house can block any reform of the ethnic provisions, so that the people may never correct the document that governs them; let amendment turn instead on a supermajority of parliament and a national referendum, so the citizen, not the cartel, holds the pen.

The route is as citizen-made as the aim. Let every party be asked, before the ballot, to pledge in writing that the House to come will legislate this citizen’s charter; let the electorate vote on that pledge rather than on the personalities offering it; and let the change be ratified, as the supreme law itself requires, by the people in a referendum. A charter founded on the tribe cannot be un-founded by a tribe. Only the citizen, voting as a citizen, can remake it into his own.

A word, finally, on the process the government now offers in place of this, lest the two be confused. The National Dialogue is not a constituent assembly, and its findings are not law: by the commission’s own account they are *recommendations*, to be archived and handed on to “those who will revise the constitution” [17]. That is the tell. A true re-founding puts the pen in the citizen’s hand, through the ballot and the referendum; this process seats four thousand hand-picked participants, excludes the very armed movements whose war a settlement must end — the OLA, Fano, the Tigrayan front — and leaves the revising to the incumbent and his House. A dialogue that recommends while the ruler disposes is not the citizen remaking his charter. It is the chair consulting itself.

And it is fair to ask what the chair may want from it. Among the eight agendas is the structure of government itself, with a turn from the parliamentary system toward a presidential or dual-executive one openly on the table [18]. A leader term-limited as prime minister, in a system rebuilt around a strong presidency, is a leader who may lawfully begin again. I do not claim to read the Prime Minister’s mind; I only observe that a constitutional restructuring designed, staffed, and ratified by the man it stands to empower is the oldest device by which rulers turn a season of reform into a lease on power — and that the one guard against it is the guard this article has already named: let no remaking of the supreme law count as legitimate unless the citizen, and not the cadre, holds the pen.

5 The customer: the racket cannot stand on thin air

I have described the supply side. Honesty demands the demand side too, for a market has two halves. No seller survives without a buyer. The TPLF, the OLF and its armed OLA, the several Fano formations, the ANDM and OPDO now folded into the Prosperity Party, Eritrea's PFDJ across the border — none commands a soldier or wins a seat on slogans alone. Each needs a *customer*: ordinary people willing to buy what it sells. Strip that custom away and the fiercest ethnic entrepreneur is a general without an army. The racket does not stand on thin air. It stands on us.

This is the hardest thing I must say to my own people, and I say it because flattery would betray them. We are not only the racket's victims. A part of us is its market. Someone casts the ethnic vote. Someone wires the diaspora dollar that buys the drone. Someone shelters the militia and feeds it. Someone cheers online when the next village burns. Someone hands over his son. And it is worth naming who that part is. It is not, in the main, the starving farmer or the conscripted boy, who buy nothing and are merely spent. It is more often the comfortable and the distant — the salaried, the online, the diaspora patriot fifty years from the smoke — who purchase the thrill of ethnic triumph with other people's blood, and never see the bill. The customer and the corpse are rarely the same person. That is the quiet obscenity at the heart of it.

The market has a darker aisle still, and a fellow scholar has named it. He asks why a people so often turns its fiercest fire on its own [19]. Its ablest leaders, its promising organisers, its independent voices — picked apart, one by one, by people wearing the same colours, until the movement has finished the adversary's work for him. Apply the one question. Who gains when a people devours its own builders? The racket gains, every time. It need only supply the poisoned medium — the feed that rewards the loudest accusation — and a frightened people turns on itself. To protect one's own honest critics from the mob of one's own group is as much a withdrawal of custom as refusing the war.

I do not say this to spread the racketeer's guilt evenly over his victims. The man who sells the war is not level with the man who buys a flag. I say it because it locates the one lever the people actually hold. We cannot vote the cartel out; it owns the count. We cannot out-gun it; it owns the guns. But we can stop buying. The demand is the one part of the machine that sits in the people's own hands, and no army can defend it. A racket dies not when its sellers repent — they never do — but when its customers walk away. To withdraw one's custom from the ethnic entrepreneur of one's own group — the vote, the dollar, the shelter, the cheer, the son — is not treachery to one's people. It is the first and only sufficient act of loyalty to them.

6 The scientific verdict: ethnic politics breeds division, not peace

None of this is merely my polemic. That organising a state around ethnicity leads to division, not peace, is close to the settled finding of the comparative study of divided societies. In Ethiopia the case against ethnic politics is too often dismissed as Amhara nostalgia. It should be heard as social science.

Begin with the foundations. Donald Horowitz showed that where ethnicity is the currency of politics, parties census-count rather than persuade, and moderates are outbid by extremists until the centre collapses [55]. The record of ethnic federations is starker. Valerie Bunce showed that the ethno-federal designs of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia did not merely fail to contain their nations; they *manufactured* the units and elites that tore all three apart [56]. Philip Roeder found that ethnofederalism systematically mismanages conflict by handing regional elites a state-in-waiting [61]. Henry Hale isolated the mechanism: a federation built around a core ethnic region breeds "secession-ready" elites [60]. Svante Cornell showed that autonomy drawn on ethnic lines tends to fund and arm separatism rather than satisfy it [59]. Rogers Brubaker supplied the deeper logic: a state that codes its citizens by nationality does not record identities so much as *produce* them [57]. And Jack Snyder gave the warning that fits us most: it is during transitions that elite-driven ethnic nationalism turns to war [58].

The Ethiopia-specific scholarship reaches the same place by a shorter road. Jon Abbink traced how

ethno-regional federalism converted cultural difference into territorial conflict and wrote land disputes into the constitution itself [63]. Alem Habtu observed that the 1995 order made ethnic groups the fundamental constituents of the state, sharply distinct from any shared citizenship — the inversion of a nation [64].

I will not pretend the literature is unanimous, for that is the point of citing it. Liam Anderson has argued, ably, that ethnofederalism succeeds more often than its critics admit [62]. And it is true that Ethiopia's ethnonationalist fronts predate 1995, so the order did not invent them. But note what even the defence concedes: the design is safe only where power is dispersed, interdependence is fostered, and secession is *not* constitutionalised. That is the exact opposite of Article 39. The enduring federations — Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, India — are the ones that refused to make ethnicity the sole axis of the state and refused to write an exit clause. On the configuration Ethiopia chose — ethnicity the master key, territory carved by nation, secession promised in the text — the evidence is not balanced. It is damning.

7 The capture of mind: memory, faith, and the myth of invincibility

A racket that worked on interests alone could be resisted by anyone who could count. Ours is more durable, because it works first on meaning — and it is protected by the very condition of the people it feeds on. This is the hardest thing I must say, and I say it in grief, not contempt. Much of our people is poor, unlettered, and devout. For a racket, that is ideal raw material. Such a people can be moved by myth where it cannot be reached by argument, and kept from the arithmetic that would expose the theft. The tragedy is not that our people are faithful and proud. Faith and pride are goods. The tragedy is that both have been captured, hollowed of dignity, and refilled with a mobilising charge.

Consider the capture of memory. Every people carries a true history of grandeur and of grievance. The racket does not invent these; it *curates* them. To one people it tells only the history of its dispossession, never its share in dispossessing. To another only its dominion, never its own poor who ruled no one. History stops being a shared, complicated inheritance and becomes a set of sealed grievances, each pointed at a neighbour. The scholar who complicates the story is the enemy of every camp, for a shared and honest memory is the solvent of the grievances the machine runs on.

Consider, too, the capture of number. Where power is rationed by ethnic share, the census becomes a weapon. Ethiopia has held no census since 2007, yet the circulating figures pass as settled fact. One economist has shown that the 2007 count appears to have mislaid some three million Amhara, and that the Amhara — dispersed, reclassified, blurred by the mixed marriages a national people accumulates — are chronically undercounted [67]. I raise this not to crown a new majority; the hunt for a “largest people” is itself the racket's game. I raise it because the claim that any one group is the natural majority — first inflated under the Derg and the TPLF to diminish the Amhara as a rival — is not a fact politics should start from. It is a manufactured artefact of the politics one is trying to explain. When even the numbers are captured, the citizen cannot trust the ground beneath his feet.

Consider, too, the capture of *origins*, for in Ethiopia even the question of who is ancient and who is recent has been made a weapon. The record is not seriously in doubt, and it comforts no camp. The Oromo are an ancient Cushitic people, indigenous to the Horn, whose great expansion of the sixteenth century — recorded by the monk Abba Bahrey in 1593, and set off by the devastation of the wars with Adal — carried them from the southern highlands deep into the centre and the north, assimilating and intermarrying as they advanced [65, 66]. The Semitic-speaking civilisation of Aksum is older still in its own northern highlands. And the conquests of Tewodros and Menelik, in the nineteenth century, bound the regions to the centre by force. Every one of these is true; not one of them settles who “belongs,” because all of Ethiopia's peoples are, by turns, migrants, conquerors, and hosts, mingled now beyond any unbraiding.

Yet the racket needs the question kept open and bleeding, and so it is worked from both ends at once. From one side comes the old slander, revived whenever it is useful, that the Oromo are foreign

latecomers — even, absurdly, that they sailed from Madagascar — a tale pressed by a few highland chroniclers a century ago to deny a people its home, and refuted by the very evidence of language, faith, and custom that marks the Oromo as indigenous Africans of this region. From the other side comes the mirror overreach, pressed now through the state’s own broadcasters: the pageant that stretches the Oromo footprint to the Eritrean border and declares, in effect, that everything is *keñña* — ours. Both are false, and both are the identical move: history conscripted to inflate one people’s claim and shrink another’s. The first would rob the Oromo of their country; the second would rob every other people of theirs.

And no people has been more relentlessly conscripted into this theatre than the Amhara, cast for a generation as the author of every historical wrong, the villain in whose name all grievance is licensed. It is a libel, and it has a birthday. The Amhara have not held the commanding heights of the Ethiopian state since the monarchy fell more than half a century ago; the architect of *institutionalised* ethnic division — the draughtsman of the very constitution that made lineage the key to power — was the TPLF under Meles Zenawi. Even the government’s own broadcasters now concede as much. To indict a whole people for a machine designed by a party is not history. It is the racket at its favourite work: hunting a fall guy, so the true author may labour on unwatched.

Consider the capture of faith. Our churches and mosques still reach across the lines the constitution drew. They gather the citizen as a believer, not as a nationality, and command an authority no party can manufacture. For that reason they are targets — to be captured, split, or discredited. A cadre who drapes his extraction in a people’s faith has armoured it: to question the racket is made to feel like questioning God. And a clergy split along ethnic seams loses its one dangerous power — to call the citizen out of his ethnic cell into a wider communion.

Consider, last, the myth of invincibility. We are taught from the cradle, and in the diaspora, that we are exceptional and unconquerable. The root is real and glorious: Adwa was a true victory, an African nation humbling a European empire, and no Ethiopian should cease to honour it. But a captured memory turns even a glory into a chain. The myth of Adwa is made to do work Adwa never asked of it. It tells a hungry people that its greatness is a fact of nature, not a task to be earned afresh — so a nation that cannot feed itself recites its invincibility while it queues for aid. I have met Ethiopians fifty years resident in the West who still recite the old exceptionalism as though it were an argument. It is not an argument. It is an anaesthetic. Adwa was magnificent; but one cannot eat Adwa, and a musket that broke an empire in 1896 will not plough a field in 2026. The priority of a serious people is to feed itself and to live at peace. A myth that tells the poor their poverty hides a secret greatness — and that their true business is settling ethnic scores — is the most useful instrument the racket owns. It turns the machine’s victims into its most passionate defenders.

8 Religion — playing with unquenchable fire

There is one fault-line more dangerous than all the rest the racket plays upon, one that could bury the nation outright, and it must be named without flinching: religion. I have written before that Abiy may survive the revolt of Fano, the insurgency of the OLA, and even the return of the TPLF — but that he may not survive *Arsi*. By Arsi I do not mean an ethnic heartland. I mean the targeted killing of Orthodox Tewahedo Christians in the East Arsi zone, and his government’s trivialising of it. Since 2025, in districts such as Shirka, Merti, and Aseko, armed men have singled out Orthodox households, killed civilians by the score, and burned churches — among them the century-old Telata Saint Gabriel [43, 44]. Responsibility is contested: the state points to OLA/OLF-Shene, which denies it; and, to its credit, the country’s own Islamic Supreme Council has condemned the killings as representing no religion. What is not contested is that the faithful pleaded for protection for months, that promised forces did not arrive, and that the government named the toll only belatedly.

And let no one imagine this a wound to one faith alone, for the same fire has scorched the other. At a funeral in Gondar in 2022, gunmen fell upon Muslim mourners and killed some twenty of them,

burning the mosque and the Qur'an [47]. In 2023 the Oromia authorities demolished mosques in the new Sheger city on the capital's edge; when Muslims gathered at the Grand Anwar mosque to protest, government forces opened fire and shot worshippers dead in the street — a killing the state's own task force afterwards admitted [46]. Church and mosque have both been burned; Christian and Muslim blood has both been spilt; and each atrocity breeds its answer, a torched mosque in one town repaid with a torched church in the next. This is the seed of the one war a divided Ethiopia cannot survive.

For consider what such a war would be. Our ethnic quarrel, terrible as it is, at least has a map: it parts the country into regions, and a region can in principle be governed, compensated, or brought to a table. A war of religion has no map. It runs through every region, every city, every village, and often through a single household; it knows no federal boundary and no lease-book, and it yields to no compromise, for men do not bargain over God as they bargain over land. Where the ethnic racket turns a people against its neighbours, a religious war would turn it against its own kin. A nation may perhaps survive a fight over a border. It cannot survive a fight over heaven.

That is why the state's conduct here is the gravest charge in these pages. A government slow to shield Christians at prayer in Arsi, and quick to raze mosques and fire on Muslims in Sheger, is no longer the keeper of the peace between the faiths but a party to their collision — playing, from calculation or from mere negligence, with the one match that can burn the whole house down. The Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the country's Muslims each bind tens of millions across every ethnic line; a ruler who forfeits the trust of either at the altar forfeits a legitimacy no dam and no ballot can restore. The seed is already in the ground. To pull it up before it germinates — to guard every house of worship without fear or favour, to punish the killers of Christian and Muslim alike, and to let no cadre profit by setting the cross against the crescent — is not one task among many. It is the condition of there being a nation at all. Fano, the OLA, and the TPLF are rivals a government may outlast; a war of religion is the verdict on whether Ethiopia survives at all.

9 Addis Ababa: the keystone of the keystone

If the machine has a capital, it is the capital itself. Everything I have described meets in Addis Ababa in its most concentrated and dangerous form. The city is at once the country's economic heart and its hottest ethnic flashpoint. The two facts are one, and they are detonating now in the very forum meant to defuse them.

Take the economic face first [14]. Addis is awash with money: record exports the government trumps, gold at all-time highs, a construction boom, a golden-visa scheme for millionaires. Yet the wealth will not descend. The same city that raises glass towers holds a biblical destitution beneath them. The wage-earner surrenders more than half his pay in rent. The fresh graduate survives on a dry, salted potato and a relative's remittance. The manufacturer, in a city of thirty-per-cent youth unemployment, cannot find hands — because the wage will not buy a life. This is not a market failing by accident. It is a limited-access order: a wheelbarrow of money that buys no cart of groceries, because the surplus is captured and laundered, not invested.

Now take the ownership face, where the logic becomes a fuse. Let me first be fair to the man at its centre, for I have praised this government where it earned praise and condemned it where it earned condemnation. The Prime Minister has real achievements. He opened a closed society. He drove the Renaissance Dam to completion. He has spoken of the Oromo contribution with a generosity both true and overdue. That is why what follows is a tragedy, not merely a crime. In flirting with designating Addis Ababa an Oromo possession, he makes the single most stupid strategic move available to him. It cannot succeed. It unites all of non-Oromo Ethiopia against him at a stroke, and delivers nothing to the ordinary Oromo, for the Arsi farmer does not eat the lease-book. A leader who alienates the great majority outside his base, to hand a prize to a narrow elite within it, has not strengthened his position. He has surrounded himself.

The capital's status has dominated the National Dialogue, and the process has produced the very

crisis it was meant to prevent. From four options the commission tabled — Addis as an autonomous city-state, a region in its own right, a component of the federal government, or the seat of Oromia — facilitators pressed a late and unvetted directive to make it the capital of Oromia; delegates walked out group after group, and the ruling party leaned on its own members who resisted [16, 15]. Then, in August 2026, after the walkouts, the commission announced “consensus”: the federal-cities group is reported to have settled on the very answer the machine wanted all along — Addis as *both* the seat of the federal government *and* the seat of Oromia [17]. That the ruling party’s own delegates had split over it, and that constitutional lawyers warn the move bypasses the procedure the charter itself lays down for creating a region under Article 47, did not stay the result [17]. Beneath the language of Article 49 lies the only question the racket ever asks: who allocates the rent? Addis is the largest concentration of land, contract, and revenue in the nation. To fix its “ownership” on one ethnic label is to hand that label the country’s richest lease-book in perpetuity.

I must be scrupulous here, for this is the most combustible ground in Ethiopia. Grant at once what can be granted. Oromia’s interest in the city it embraces is real, and part of it is legitimate. Addis draws its water from the Oromo highlands, is fed by the farms that ring it, and imposes on its hinterland the burdens of sprawl. These are genuine interests of an adjacent region, and a just settlement must honour them — with fair compensation for the farmers displaced at the city’s edge, whose dispossession was real. But a neighbourhood is one thing; ownership is another. There is no historical warrant for the claim that the city belongs to any single people. Addis was founded scarcely more than a century ago on ground that knew Gurage, Harla, and Amhara as well as Oromo. For its whole life it has been the meeting-house of every Ethiopian nation, its population overwhelmingly not of any one group. Cities are not owned by title deeds of blood. They are owned by the people who build and inhabit them.

Here again is the machine’s alchemy. A real dignity, a real dispossession, and a real interest in water and land are converted, through the frame of ethnic *ownership*, into an elite monopoly over the richest allocation in the country. The ordinary Oromo farmer receives the slogan; the connected cadre receives the deeds. Reports of demographic engineering to reconfigure the city, if true, are not the redress of a grievance but the manufacture of a claim. The just answer is neither to erase the Oromo bond with Finfinne nor to award the city to an elite as a prize. It is to recognise Addis for what it is: a city belonging first to its residents of every origin, who alone should govern it; then to all Ethiopians, whose common capital it has always been; and, as the seat of the African Union, to all Africa. Such a city cannot be made the estate of one ethnic elite without shaming the whole nation — and because it belongs to citizens, not patrons, its just settlement is the one the racket cannot permit.

10 The Tsimdo: the racket’s war

If Addis is the machine’s richest joint, the *Tsimdo* is its deadliest war, and I will not diminish it: it is the gravest danger our generation may face. Understand what it is and who assembles it. The Tigray People’s Liberation Front ran the racket for twenty-seven years, and its record of crime — the northern war and its hundreds of thousands of dead, the killings the ledger below sets down — is written in blood. Unseated in 2018 and cornered since, it now seeks to retake the chair by force. The *Tsimdo* is that bid: a coordinated pact gathering Eritrea’s ruling front, actors in Sudan, the Tigrayan front, elements of Fano, and the Oromo insurgency, against the government in Addis, with Asmara’s design and Cairo’s money behind it [13, 29, 30]. Ethiopia’s own former foreign-ministry spokesman has set the pact out on the record — Eritrea the senior partner, the TPLF and Fano the junior ones, Sudan the rear base and sanctuary — a union of former arch-enemies bound by nothing but the wish to see Ethiopia undone [27]. It would set Ethiopian against Ethiopian across the north and the centre at once. It fails the test of the four interests absolutely, for it serves none and threatens all.

The context is a peace that was never quite made. The Pretoria truce of November 2022 stopped a war that had killed on the order of six hundred thousand, but it settled almost nothing. The western territories, the Eritrean withdrawal, the disarmament, the reckoning for atrocities — all were deferred

[20]. By mid-2026 the truce had unravelled step by step: the electoral board deregistered the TPLF; the front reinstated its wartime council; a federal drone struck near the Eritrean border; and, in July, the Prime Minister offered his image of an axe — the TPLF the iron blade, Eritrea the wooden handle, foreign hands the arm [20]. As one peace scholar observed, the 2022 accord ended the fighting but never touched the roots [20]. Those roots are the racket, and a settlement that leaves the machine intact merely schedules the next war.

The instrument of *cui bono* exposes the pact at a glance, and the exposure is doubly damning, for it is aimed not only at the people but at its own partners. The strongest party has a fifty-year record of consuming allies. And the pact holds a contradiction that guarantees betrayal. Fano's founding cause is the return of the western lands — Welkait and its neighbours — to Amhara administration. The Tigrayan front's fixed aim is to retake those same lands. Both cannot be satisfied. The record leaves no doubt which partner intends to be: the stronger will use the weaker to overstretch the army, then turn on it. A movement seven months old, with no economic base and no diplomacy, is walking open-eyed into a hierarchy that has mastered absorbing and discarding partners [13]. The gamble is not merely reckless. It is suicidal.

But the deepest point is not one movement's folly. It is that the *Tsimdo* is the racket's masterpiece: the youth of three peoples made to kill one another, so that three sets of elites keep their rents and three foreign patrons keep the giant divided. Every young Amhara, Oromo, and Tigrayan fed into that fire is a victim from the costly column. When the alliance is over, it will not be the men who signed it who lie in the fields. It will be the people of Amhara, as the people of Tigray before them. To refuse the *Tsimdo* is the first concrete act of the vertical solidarity this article commends.

11 Who pays, and who is paid

Let me make the central claim undeniable by reading the account aloud, symmetrically, across every camp. In each community the same division holds: the people bear the costs, the elite banks the gains.

The proof is not abstract. It has names, dates, and death-tolls, and its perpetrators wear every colour. I set it down not to accuse a people but to let the people see, for every entry here is corroborated by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the United Nations, or the state's own human-rights commission. In November 2020, at Mai Kadra, some six hundred day-labourers, most of them Amhara, were hacked to death; Amnesty, the UN human-rights office, and Ethiopia's own commission attributed the killing to retreating Tigrayan forces and the Samri militia, though the TPLF denies it [39]. That same month, in the holy city of Axum, Eritrean troops executed several hundred Tigrayan civilians, house to house — a likely crime against humanity [40]. In June 2022, at Tole in West Wollega, Amnesty and Human Rights Watch found the Oromo Liberation Army had killed more than four hundred Amhara villagers in a single morning, while federal forces nearby did not come; the OLA denies it [41]. At Gida Kiremu the killing ran both ways: OLA fighters slaughtered Amhara civilians, and Amhara Fano militia answered by killing Oromo ones. In January 2024, at Merawi, it was the federal army itself that executed dozens of Amhara civilians after a clash with Fano — one of many such incidents, alongside drone strikes that have killed civilians by the score, a school among the targets [42, 45]. And since 2025, in East Arsi, armed men have hunted Orthodox Christians from their homes, killing scores and burning churches, while the state that should have shielded them looked away [43, 44]. Over all of it hangs the northern war of 2020 to 2022, with its mass rapes, its engineered famine, and its dead in the hundreds of thousands. Read the roll-call and the lesson is plain. The banners differ. The victims are always the poor of some people. The killers are always the armed men of some elite. Every colour's hands are bloodied, and no colour's people are spared.

Yet symmetry of suffering is not symmetry of power, and I will not flatten the difference. The insurgent kills where he can reach; the state kills with the only army, at the greatest scale, and in breach of the one duty it alone carries — to protect. Merawi was the state's soldiers. The drones are the state's aircraft. Arsi was the state's watch, abandoned. So while every colour's hands are bloodied, the reddest

hands today are the ruling party's, for it holds the guns of a hundred and twenty million and answers to no one for them.

Now read the ledger down its columns, not across its rows. To the Amhara people: displacement, conscription, thousands of schools destroyed, the unhealed wound of the western lands. To the Amhara elite: diaspora funds, command rank, and contested land to allocate. To the Tigrayan people: several hundred thousand dead and a region thereafter strangled. To the Tigrayan elite: restored standing, seats, and a monopoly on “defending Tigray.” To the Oromo people: farmers dispossessed, villages caught between insurgent and federal guns. To the Oromo elite: the premiership, command of the federal centre, and the lease-book of an expanding capital. To the smaller peoples: raids, displacement, neglect; to their elites, a junior seat at the table. And to the labouring poor of the capital, of every origin: half their wages to a landlord and a salted potato for supper. Behind them all stand the external patrons — Cairo, Asmara, the Gulf — who buy Ethiopian violence cheaply and never bury a son [30, 29].

One fact runs down the first column: in every community, the people receive the graves. Its mirror runs down the second: in every community, the elite receives the rent. The horizontal quarrels are real; I do not pretend the blood is imaginary. But they are the surface. The vertical extraction is the structure. The Amhara farmer, the Oromo farmer, and the Tigrayan mother are not one another's enemies. They stand in the same column of the same ledger, and their common predator wears four colours and speaks always in the voice of their own grief.

The verdict is severe. If the order were a system of communal protection, then after thirty years at least one people would be measurably safer for it. Name that people. There is none. Every people is poorer, more frightened, and more heavily armed than the covenant promised — and yet the order is defended to the death by a specific elite. A machine that fails all its supposed beneficiaries for three decades, and is preserved with such ferocity, has not failed. It has been misdescribed. It is not a protection system that fails the people. It is an extraction system that serves the elite. By that measure — the only one that explains its survival — it is not a failure at all. It is a triumph.

12 Fish rots from the head

The racket is a system, not a man; it predates this Prime Minister and, untouched, will outlast him. But a system has a head, and the head sets the temperature of the body. Fish rots from the head, and honesty requires that I name the driver as plainly as the machine.

Let me place him precisely, for the racket has a chair. The chair is the seat of the state itself — its treasury, its courts, and its only army — and whoever sits in it can kill on a scale no faction can match. It belongs to no ideology and to no single people; it belongs to whichever elite holds power, and it has changed hands before. The Tigray People's Liberation Front sat in it for twenty-seven years and ran the racket from it. In 2018 the front was unseated, and the chair passed to the Prosperity Party and to Abiy Ahmed — a party risen from the old Oromo satellite of the TPLF, governing now with an unmistakable Oromo-nationalist — *Oromummaa* — tilt, most visible in its bid to make the national capital an Oromo possession. The colours draped over the chair have changed; the chair, and the racket run from it, have not. I say this with no quarrel whatever with the Oromo people, who are farmed by this elite exactly as every people is farmed by its own. But it must be said without flinching, and the corroborated record below will show it: the party now in the chair is the principal author of the killing and the maiming. It does not kill only where it can reach, as the insurgents do; it kills with the nation's own army, and answers to no one.

Abiy Ahmed inherited a clean choice. He could have spent his early authority — the goodwill, the Nobel, the real opening of a closed society — on dismantling the machine. He chose to master it. Rather than take the rent off the ethnic label, he learned to drive the racket better than any predecessor. That is the deeper tragedy of the man, because the alternative was so plainly within reach.

Watch the method; it is Machiavellian in the technical sense. He governs by telling each audience what it most wishes to hear. He tours the regional broadcasters — the Oromia network, the Amhara

stations, the friendly interview [31, 32, 23] — and offers each people a flattering, expansive story of itself, calibrated to placate the base. Critics have fairly read his set-piece appearances as exercises in managing opinion to preserve a failing regime, not in telling hard truths [23]. This is the historical-revisionist danger in its purest form: a leader who does not correct captured memories but *feeds* them, each in its own register, because a nation that agreed on its past might notice who is looting its present. The National Dialogue belongs to the same method. It was permitted not to dismantle the machine but, quite possibly, to re-engineer the order toward a presidency for its author — reform as a route to power, not power spent on reform.

Now, in fairness, the other side of the ledger, for it is real and not small. This government has done genuinely developmental things. It drove the Renaissance Dam to completion and lit it. It has backed Ethiopian Airlines — the one African champion that already flies with the best — and staked it to a new intercontinental hub. It has opened telecoms and built a sovereign holding company. And it has drawn in the largest industrial investment in the nation's history: a fertiliser complex at Gode that, if built, would move Ethiopia from importing fertiliser to making it, and lift the productivity of the very farmers the racket has bled [35]. These are not beautification. They are capacity-building moves, and it would be dishonest to pretend otherwise.

Why, then, do I withhold the developmental crown? Because a developmental state is not a portfolio of megaprojects. It is a system, and the system fails at three joints no ribbon-cutting can mend. First, the contracts and credit still flow by proximity, not performance. The discipline that made Korea's subsidies productive is what a loyalty-machine cannot impose [69, 70]. So even the real projects double as patronage. Second, the bureaucracy that must steer them is chosen for ethnicity and loyalty, not competence — embedded, but not autonomous; captured, not capable [68]. Third, and above all, no developmental state was ever built in a burning house. The one input every project needs — the security that lets a farmer plant and an investor stay — is the thing the government destroys with its other hand. Peter Evans drew the distinction that matters: the *developmental* state, whose capable apparatus delivers transformation, against the *predatory* state — his case was Mobutu's Zaire — whose elite feeds on the country and builds nothing that lasts [71]. Ethiopia is neither, cleanly. It is a would-be developmental state being dragged toward the predatory by the machine its own driver will not dismantle. The test, as ever, is the poor; until they rise, the dams and airports are promises, not proof.

Here let me step out of the seminar room, for I have not only studied this system; I have lived inside it. My life is, by design, a largely anonymous one; but for the sake of what I am urging, I will venture a few words about who is speaking. By profession I am a designer and maker of high-technology weapon systems — instruments whose purpose, in democratic hands, is to guard a nation's sovereignty and help keep the peace. It is precisely because I know that trade that I have argued, throughout this series, for peace: the single exception being the retrieval of our Red-Sea sovereignty, and even there with peaceful means as the priority. But to preach peace and contribute nothing to it is hypocrisy. So I have chosen to spend my own capital in Ethiopia on a peaceful, high-technology family enterprise — one I am still, and humbly, learning to build from the inside. I set this down not as a credential but as a small instance of the very conversion this article pleads for at the scale of a nation: competence turned from the instruments of war to the work of development, hands that could forge arms choosing instead to make what a country needs. If I argue for building over fighting, I do so from the workshop floor, not the lectern.

And from that floor the view is bracing. The state makes the diaspora a generous-sounding offer: bring twenty per cent of an approved project in your own foreign currency, and the banks will lend the rest. I have never taken it, and I never will. To accept that leash is to surrender your timetable to a system where everything takes longer than it should and corruption is rife. Where a project's schedule is not your own, delay is money poured down the drain. So I release my funds only when an activity is genuinely approved and actionable, with no bank dripping its endless letters upon my back. I have watched others, who trusted the process, ruined by it.

That freedom is the privilege of a man who already holds capital. Consider the one who does not — the able young Ethiopian with a good idea and an empty pocket, who must borrow to begin. His routes

are few, and they narrow to a cruel choice: be honest and fail, be corrupt and perish, or wager everything on succeeding before either fate arrives. That is not a market. It is a filter that selects connection over competence and punishes the honest for their honesty. This is where the grand machinery of the racket touches an ordinary life. The absence of a systemic fairness — one that rewards competence rather than the ethnic proximity I call ethnic entrepreneurship — is no abstraction I read in a book. It is what I have felt, in every stalled permit and every solicited bribe. The racket does not stop at the massacre and the lease-book. It reaches down to the loan officer's desk, and it taxes the honest builder his time, his money, and too often his hope. And yet I keep building, deliberately, for the moral of this testimony is not despair but its opposite. The honest, competent, peaceful enterprise is possible even now. A country that cleared the racket from the loan officer's desk — that rewarded the builder for his competence, not the cadre for his connections — would unlock the energy of a whole people who want only to make, to trade, and to be left in peace to prosper.

There is, too, a question of trajectory the genuine projects do not settle, and an honest friend of this government would press it hardest. Alongside the productive investment runs a second emphasis: the repaving of the capital through the Corridor project, and a declared tourism-first road to prosperity. Tourism is a fine thing, and a real earner of the foreign currency the nation lacks; a country of Ethiopia's beauty should develop it. But can it *lead*? For a nation of a hundred and twenty million, with a young workforce pouring off the land, the comparative record answers plainly: no. No large, populous country has ever developed on tourism as its lead sector. Those that lifted such numbers from poverty — China, Korea, and Taiwan; and, in our own weight class, Bangladesh on its garments and Vietnam on its factories — did it by moving surplus rural labour into labour-intensive manufacturing. That requires the unglamorous base Meles Zenawi spent a decade laying: power, roads, rail, ports, and industrial parks, married to an agricultural transformation [72]. Tourism complements that base; it cannot replace it. It employs thousands where manufacturing employs millions, and it dies at the first gunshot. Herein lies the contradiction: the tourism-first bet is placed by a government whose own wars and drone strikes make the country unsellable as a destination. One cannot invite the world to a house one is busy burning. A nation of this size prospers by making what its people and the world need — food, fertiliser, textiles, power — not chiefly by inviting visitors to admire it. To let the base Meles nearly perfected decay while the capital is gilded for the tourist is to mistake the shop window for the shop.

This, then, is the material verdict, and it is more painful than a simple indictment. It is not that the driver builds nothing. It is that he builds with one hand what he burns with the other, and lets the racket capture whatever survives. A country does not become a nation by minting a caste of oligarchs atop a sea of the destitute, nor by gilding a capital above a countryside in flames. It becomes a powder keg.

Let me be exact about what this does and does not license, for the point is easy to abuse. To say the head rots is not to say that removing the head heals the fish. Here I part sharply from those who would simply swap this driver for another. The armed oppositions that gather to unseat him — Fano, the OLA, the TPLF — offer not the dismantling of the machine but new hands on its wheel. The catalyst must go, yes, and be judged; a leader who presided over Merawi, over the drone strikes, over the slow abandonment of the Orthodox faithful of Arsi, has forfeited the moral authority to lead a plural nation. But he must be succeeded by the dismantling of the machine itself, not by the coronation of the next racketeer in a different colour. Fish rots from the head — and the remedy is not a fresh head on the same rotten body, but a body remade so that no head can rot it again.

13 The boom the people cannot eat

The government has one reply to all of this, and it is its strongest: the numbers. Whatever the killing and the capture, it can say, the economy is booming — and on the macroeconomic dashboard it is right. Ethiopia grew by about nine per cent in 2024/25; industry expanded, exports rose, foreign-exchange reserves recovered, and the fierce inflation of recent years eased from its peaks. The numbers are sound.

That is exactly the trap. Now set two of them side by side, as one Ethiopian economist does, and the story turns over: growth of 9.2 per cent, and poverty of nearly 42 per cent [36]. GDP is not welfare. A nation can pile up output for years while the ordinary household grows no better off — and that, not the growth rate, is Ethiopia’s true economic story.

An economy racing at nine per cent while four in ten of its people are poor, the economist observes, “does not have a growth problem” [36]. It has a problem of transmission — and, beneath that, one this article has a blunter word for: *capture*. The question the whole piece asks belongs here as much as anywhere, and the same economist reaches it by his own road: *cui bono*? Growing for whom?

The shape of the growth answers that. Output can leap because gold is dug and shipped — gold is now the country’s single largest export, ahead even of coffee — because construction booms, because a good year for commodity prices flatters the export column, because the state pours capital into megaprojects [36, 37]. A mine enriches a balance sheet with a handful of workers; a building site inflates GDP and leaves no durable jobs behind; a price spike lifts earnings without lifting the productivity of a single farm. These are precisely the rent-rich, connection-gated sectors the racket knows best how to farm — the mine, the megaproject, the import licence, the bank — and they create almost none of the jobs a country adding some 1.8 million working-age citizens a year must find [37]. Meanwhile agriculture, where most of the poor actually work, is left in low productivity, weakly tied to finance, markets, and irrigation, so that rural poverty stays far above urban [36]. It is growth that flows *up*, not *out*.

Inflation completes the theft. To the economist it is an index; to a poor household it is a tax with nowhere to hide. The rich move their money into property, foreign currency, and assets; the poor hold only their labour and a little cash, and spend it as fast as it arrives. And falling inflation is not falling prices: when a loaf climbs from a hundred birr to a hundred and thirty and the *rate* then eases, the loaf does not fall back to a hundred; it merely rises more slowly from the higher shelf. So the macroeconomy can be stabilising while the family feels poorer than ever — reserves recovering, the birr floated, the parallel market still gaping at a hundred and eighty to the dollar and more [38], and every devalued birr a cut in the labourer’s wage and the pensioner’s savings. Many of the 2024 reforms were genuinely necessary; the old rationed-forex order was rotten. But necessary is not sufficient, and the question the racket never has to answer is who is made to pay for the transition. To ask the poorest to finance the nation’s stabilisation through a collapsed real wage, on a promise that growth will one day repay them, is not a development strategy. It is a gamble — and the elite hedged out of it in advance.

Here, then, is the racket’s economic signature, and the answer to anyone who imagines the machine is dangerous only in war, in freedom, and in unity. A rent-extraction system need not fail at growth to betray a nation; it can preside over a boom and still starve the many, because it turns even growth into rent. A developmental state, I argued earlier, is vindicated only where the masses rise; so judge Ethiopia’s boom by that one honest test — whether the worker’s wage buys more food, housing, and medicine five years on, whether the poorest households consume more, whether the young move from low to high productivity work — and it fails, which is why 9.2 per cent growth and nearly 42 per cent poverty belong in a single sentence. The first number says how fast the machine is moving; the second, how many it is leaving behind. This is the economic face of the one machine: it corrodes unity, forecloses the coast, hollows freedom — and captures the very prosperity it advertises, leaving the country statistically richer and its people hungrier. What is boasted of as a miracle is an unfinished transformation sold as a finished one. Development, if the word is to mean anything, is the boom the people can eat.

14 On paper, and on the ground

Let me be fair to this government in a way its enemies rarely are, for fairness is the whole discipline of this article. On paper, it preaches peace and unity as eloquently as anyone alive. Its own broadcasters describe three decades in which the country’s diversity was turned into a weapon of political survival, in which a narrow network captured the nation’s resources, and in which — their analysis, not only mine — a divided citizenry proved easier to control and a captured state easier to exploit [33]. On the sea, the

same broadcasters argue, rightly, that Ethiopia’s landlocked plight need not be “a zero-sum contest” but can become a shared corridor that enriches its coastal neighbours too [34]. On unity, they insist — and they are correct — that the fight against a divisive party is not a fight against the people it claimed to speak for, and that Ethiopia’s children deserve “schools instead of trenches.”

Read those words and you will find the argument of this article restated by the state itself. The government has named the machine. It has described the racket — division plus capture — with real precision. It has even arrived at this article’s central distinction: separate the people from the party that farms them.

So where is the quarrel? It is in a single word the government cannot bring itself to say: *ourselves*. In its telling, the machine was built by one party, the now-defunct TPLF, and died with it; the present government is merely the healer tearing the walls down. The same silence runs through its account of the northern crisis: its diplomats lay out Eritrea’s destabilisation and the Tsimdo’s crimes with forensic precision, and catalogue the government’s restraint and its dams and airports at length [27], while the names Merawi, Arsi, and the drone never appear. The government sees every hand that bleeds Ethiopia except its own. But the machine did not die in 2018. It changed hands. The constitution that legalises the racket still stands, unamended. The chair still commands the army. And the deeds of the party now in the chair — Merawi, the drones, the abandoned watch over Arsi, the bid to make the capital one group’s possession — are not the dismantling of the machine but its continuation in new colours. A government that can compose the “Breaking the Walls” commentary and then preside over these things has diagnosed the disease and declined the cure.

This is not a counsel of despair. It is, if the government will hear it, the plainest road to peace on offer. Where the words are right, hold the state to them. Its non-zero-sum vision of the sea is the very policy this article urges; let it be pursued in deed, and the coast becomes a shared gateway and not a battlefield. Its call for shared citizenship over permanent grievance is the exact antidote to the racket; let it be written into a new constitution and not merely into a press release. The test of a government is never its publications. It is the distance between its publications and its provinces. Close that distance — govern as you preach — and the government will have done more for Ethiopia than any wall-breaking commentary ever could.

15 One machine against four interests — and against freedom

Now I can marry this argument to the whole body of work that precedes it. For years I have set out Ethiopia’s needs as four singular interests in three layers, and treated our failure as a sum of separate difficulties — a sovereignty problem here, a development problem there. The instrument of *cui bono* reveals they are not separate at all. One machine lies beneath them, and it is the adversary of every layer at once. The racket is not one item on a list of national problems. It is the keystone that holds the whole arch of our failure in place.

Take the first Foundation, *National Unity*. Unity is not sameness. Its true content is the vertical solidarity of the peoples against the elite that extracts from them all. The racket’s survival depends on preventing that recognition — on persuading the Amhara farmer that his enemy is the Oromo farmer. The horizontal quarrel is not a failure of unity the racket regrets. It is the product the racket manufactures. To confront the ethnic stupidity and to build unity are therefore one task, not two. You do not unite Ethiopians by asking them to love one another while the machine that sets them at each other’s throats runs on. You unite them by naming the machine.

Take the second Foundation, *Red-Sea Sovereignty*. It is a matter of national self-defence before it is ever a matter of trade [2, 3, 4, 5, 7]. Here the racket does its least examined damage, for a divided giant cannot will a coastline. The weight and consent that securing the sea requires are exactly what the racket dissolves, because it turns every national question into a factional one. The machine within meets its mirror without. Cairo need not defeat Ethiopia on the Nile if our own ethnic entrepreneurs keep us too divided to defend the dam. Asmara need not conquer if it can rent a faction to bleed the centre.

The extraction within and the siege without are one system, and the racket is the hinge. To break it is the precondition of ever securing the coast.

The Western powers have compounded the trap. As one analyst argues, London, Brussels, and Washington have long propped up the incumbent for Horn “stability,” averting their eyes from atrocities because a managed disorder they know feels safer than an alternative they cannot predict [22]. The calculation is wrong on its own terms. A state hollowed by a racket is not stable; it is quiet until it is not, and each year of impunity buys a larger detonation later. The same failure shows inside the ruling party, where the abler and more conciliatory were pushed aside by the harder and less able — the predictable yield of a system that promotes the faction over the person.

Take the Means — first, broad *Development*. A limited-access order and a developmental state are opposites at the root [6, 9]. A developmental state invests its surplus and disciplines its elite to the national purpose. A racket distributes the surplus to elites as the price of loyalty. That is why the boom the people cannot eat is possible at all — why three decades of growth leave the ledger unmoved, and Addis can be awash with money while its labourers go hungry. “Chaotic equilibrium” is this racket at the scale of the whole state — enough disorder to keep every faction dependent, never so much as to bring the edifice down.

Take the Means’ second half, *democracy* — and let me be exact about what democracy is, and is not, for. It is not, strictly, the price of development. China lifted more people from poverty than any state in history without it, and the disciplined states of East Asia grew hard for a generation before ever they liberalised. So I do not rest the case for the ballot on economics; a firm hand bent to the nation’s purpose can build. I rest it elsewhere: democracy is the arrangement in which losing an election is survivable. The racket makes defeat unsurvivable on purpose, for a people whose safety hangs on regional power cannot afford to lose, and so cannot let another win. Every contest then migrates from the ballot to the rifle. A landslide won without genuine competition, across a country where whole regions could not vote, is not the exception to this analysis but its confirmation [6]. And here is the point that matters most: what Ethiopia suffers is not even the hard, developmental authoritarianism of a Beijing or a Seoul, which at least disciplined its elite to the national purpose and delivered growth its people could feel. It is a racket, which disciplines no one and delivers to none but itself — neither the freedom of a democracy nor the development of a strong state, but the negation of both. A people may reasonably prefer democracy, as I do, in the faith that even China will in time arrive there without forfeiting the stability its leadership built. No people can prefer a racket, for it forecloses every road at once.

And take the Engine — *GERD*, the dam, and the urban-industrial transformation it was built to drive. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam should be the beating heart of a national economy: the power that lights the classroom and the clinic, turns the factory and the pump, and carries tens of millions from the field into real work. Its measure is not the ribbon cut at its wall, but the services it delivers to the many — schools, hospitals, electricity, and jobs. Development earns the name only when it is broad-based and equitably shared; a prosperity that raises a connected few above a nation queuing for bread is not development, but the racket in a hard hat. Each part needs what the racket destroys. The dam must be financed and defended, which demands unity and security. Urbanisation, which should be the great engine of productivity, is perverted — the fight over Addis is urbanisation captured as rent rather than realised as growth. Industrialisation needs a single national market, a predictable rule of law, and a state that invests. The racket denies all three. The engine is not idling for want of a plan. It is throttled, lest a prospering, united people discover it never needed its patrons.

Beneath all four interests lies the good the racket steals first: *freedom* — political, economic, and religious. Political freedom dies where the vote and the office are assigned by lineage. Economic freedom dies where the ethnic label is the key to the land and the contract. Religious freedom dies where faith is captured and set to bless one camp against another. The engine of all this denial is a single ancient appetite: the desire of each elite to *dominate* — to place its group above the others, and itself above its group. That appetite must end. Not the love of one’s people, which is good, but the desire to rule another, which is the poison.

Set these findings side by side and the synthesis is complete. The racket corrodes unity, forecloses the coast, starves development, hollows democracy, throttles the engine, and steals the freedom beneath them all — from one point, for one elite, at the price of a hundred and twenty million people and the peace of a region. The fight against ethnic entrepreneurship is not a distraction from the great national projects. It *is* those projects, pursued at their root. There is no securing the four interests around the racket. There is only securing them by dismantling it.

16 What breaks a racket — and frees a nation

You do not break a racket by inviting the racketeers to understand one another better. They understand the machine perfectly, and their non-agreement is exactly what pays them. You break a racket by removing the rent, opening the access, freeing the person, and protecting the victim. Only then does the patient rebuilding of trust have solid ground. Seven movements compose the remedy.

First, take the rent off the ethnic label. De-ethnicise the three things the label now unlocks. Land allocation must be made portable, individual, and adjudicable, so no cadre can monopolise the lease-book — above all the lease-book of Addis — by controlling a region. The security forces must be made professional and national, loyal to law, with the regional paramilitaries dissolved into one salaried national service. And the regional fisc must be made transparent and rule-bound, not a patronage fund keyed to ethnicity.

Second, make citizenship pay, so the patron becomes unnecessary. Let citizenship travel with the person, not the province — identical rights of residence, property, participation, and protection in every region. A people that can get justice from a neutral court and safety from a national police needs no ethnic patron. Equal citizenship demolishes the racket's monopoly by removing its custom.

Third, restore the three freedoms, and forbid domination. Political freedom, so office is earned by citizenship, not lineage. Economic freedom, so the market is open to any Ethiopian whatever his label. Religious freedom, so faith is neither captured by the state nor set against a neighbour. At the centre stands the direct antidote to ethnic entrepreneurship: a person rises by character and competence, never by the mere claim of the group he was born to. Reward the able over the shouty, and you drain the swamp the ethnic entrepreneur breeds in. And around all three, one non-negotiable rule: no people may dominate another, and no elite may dominate its own people.

Fourth, settle Addis as a city of its residents. Let its status be set by the voice of those who live in it, of every origin, as citizens — neither erasing the Oromo bond nor awarding the city to an elite as a prize. Meet the dispossessed farmer's grievance with restitution and law, not a slogan. To answer the ownership question in the currency of citizenship is to strike the racket at its richest joint.

Fifth, free the mind. A people kept poor and unlettered is kept extractable. So the long remedy is the unglamorous one: schools, literacy, honest history, and an economy that feeds the labourer. Retire the anaesthetic of invincibility and put in its place the harder self-respect of a people that honours Adwa by feeding its children and keeping its peace.

Sixth, carry this into a Dialogue that deserves the name. A process controlled by the incumbent, seating the ethnic parties while the peoples look on — or issuing directives by night to pre-decide the capital — cannot break a racket. It *is* the racket, holding a conference about itself. The Dialogue can end the machine only if it is genuinely independent and seats the constituencies of the costly column: the farmers, the women, the displaced, the young, the labourers, the professionals. Seat the people, and the Dialogue becomes the machine's off-switch. Seat only the racketeers, and it becomes its alibi.

Seventh, heal the memory, for the racket's deepest fuel is a weaponised past. As one writer argues, history here has been made a permanent trial, the living prosecuted for the deeds of the dead [21]. The remedy is neither to forget the wounds nor to crown one people's memory as official truth. It is an independent process of truth, memory, and reconciliation that records every community's suffering without becoming a tribunal of one against another. Its governing principle can be law in a single line: no community's dignity requires the erasure of another's memory.

Do these seven, and the four interests cease to be slogans and become achievable in fact: a unity built on the peoples' common front; a sovereignty a united nation can project; a development that invests its surplus instead of laundering it; a democracy in which defeat is survivable; a memory that instructs rather than conscripts; and an engine free to run. Together they amount to one thing, and it is the thing the racket most fears: a new constitutional order founded on the citizen, in place of the 1995 charter founded on the tribe. That is the true work of the Dialogue — not to adjust the ethnic settlement, but to replace it. Leave the charter in force, and no summit and no census of the dead will save us.

17 If we must fight

Let me not be misread as a pacifist; I am not one. But let me be exact about force, for the abuse of this passage would be lethal. Against our own people, there is no just war. The racket cannot be broken by the rifle, and the rifle turned inward only feeds it. Whoever tells you to take up arms against the Amhara farmer, the Oromo farmer, or the Tigrayan mother is selling you the machine's own product. The war against the racket is fought with citizenship, with courts, with schooling, and with the ballot. It is never fought with the gun the machine is pressing into your son's hands. Every internal war we have waged has enriched the racketeers of all sides and buried the poor of all sides. We must refuse them. We must refuse, above all, the *Tsimdo* — the war Ethiopian against Ethiopian, with Asmara's design and Cairo's money behind it.

There remains one cause, and one only, for which force may finally be justified once every peaceful means is spent. It is not an internal quarrel. It is the retrieval and defence of our *Red-Sea sovereignty*, on which the survival of the nation depends. This is self-defence in the plainest sense, and the law names it. Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations preserves "the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence" [49]. That right belongs to all the peoples at once, and it enriches no ethnic elite. For it, peaceful priority — but not peaceful exclusivity, for no nation can promise never to defend its own survival.

18 The sea, and Eritrea's choice

I have saved the sea for last, for it is the cause that could unite all the rest. Red-Sea sovereignty belongs to no single people and to all of them. It enriches no elite; it threatens no group's dignity. It lies above the quarrel, not inside it.

And it stands on right, not need — and a right is not for bargaining. I have set the full record out elsewhere [4, 5]; here is its spine. Ethiopia's access to the sea was never Eritrea's to keep, because it was never Italy's to give. From the Antonelli treaty of 1887 to the peace of 1947, by which Italy surrendered every colonial title to the United Nations, Italy never held the absolute sovereignty its successors claim to have inherited. When the UN disposed of the territory in 1950, Resolution 390(V) preserved Ethiopia's access to the sea *irrespective of Eritrea's status*. That access was a right older than the federation, and independent of it.

How was it lost? Not by law, but by betrayal: an illegitimate transitional government under Meles Zenawi, and a spineless OAU that looked away while a founding member was dismembered. Why a leader would landlock his own country baffles most Ethiopians, yet the answer is not obscure. Meles's TPLF and the Eritrean front had fought the Derg as brothers-in-arms, bound by a creed that raised a group's right to secede above the unity of the state — the doctrine Meles would soon enshrine as Article 39. Eritrea's exit was a debt paid to a fellow front, and it suited a deeper design: a northern pole of Tigray and Eritrea trading through Eritrean ports, for which the wider nation's landlockedness was a price the TPLF would let others pay, since Tigray itself would breathe through a fraternal coast [4]. The OAU, for its part, had no answer, because its rule bars secession imposed from *without*, not one the host government itself blesses; once Meles consented, the principle was disarmed, and a referendum recording ninety-nine per cent for independence lent the act a democratic mask. Behind that mask stood powers

long content to see Ethiopia small — for a landlocked, divided nation cannot press its claim on the Nile, and Cairo above all had cause to applaud.

The legal record, though, is unmoved by these motives. The OAU was founded in Addis in 1963 with Eritrea already Ethiopia's fourteenth province, so its own cardinal rule — *uti possidetis* — locks Eritrea in as Ethiopian land, and the 1993 secession was that rule's abandonment, not its application. The junta that abandoned it, unelected and ratified by no national vote, staged a referendum barring every Ethiopian beyond Eritrea and signed away twelve hundred kilometres of coast — an act *ultra vires*, beyond its authority, which the lawful authority may contest. Algiers, in 2000, drew a land border and left the sea untouched; sovereign access remains *juridically live*, unsettled and never lawfully surrendered. So Ethiopia comes not as a supplicant begging to redraw a settled map, but as a claimant exposing a settlement that was never lawful; and the African Union, which watched a founding member dismembered against its own charter, owes Ethiopia not a veto but an apology. The aim is not to swallow Eritrea, whose separate existence should survive any settlement. It is to recover one thing: a sovereign door to the sea.

The right is no abstraction. A nation of a hundred and twenty million cannot route nine-tenths of its trade through one foreign corridor and call itself secure. A landlocked state can be denied, at another's word, the fuel, the medicine, the grain, and the very arms with which it defends itself. A country that can be cut off from the world at another's whim is not, in the strict sense, sovereign; it is a tenant of its neighbours' goodwill. The sea is not one interest among four. It is the floor beneath the other three.

The first road to it is peaceful: not one port but a portfolio, negotiated and commercial, geography monetised rather than militarised [24]. A Red Sea run as a shared corridor would enrich every state along it — Eritrea not least. But let me be plainer about force than the government will be. Peaceful access is the preference, not a vow never to act; a nation of this size does not accept permanent strangulation as its fate. And the trigger, if it comes, will not be ours. Asmara and its *Tsimdo* are massing for the very war these pages describe — assets into Tigray, an offensive readied in Raya and Alamata. Should they launch it, Ethiopia's answer is self-defence in the fullest sense; and a war forced upon us may justly end where aggressors' wars end — the aggressor disarmed, the regime that has bled the Horn for forty years gone, and sovereign access to our own sea at last secured: the coast from Dumeira to Beilul, Assab among its ports, restored to the nation whose right to it never lapsed. That is not conquest but recovery.

And when the guns fall silent, the aim is not a conquered province but a new neighbourliness: the dam's power lighting Eritrean towns, Massawa and Assab busy with Ethiopian cargo, the endless conscription ended, Eritrea's exiled young at last coming home. This is the truth Asmara's rulers most need to hear, and it is Addis's own reading: the regime believes "its interests are safeguarded if Ethiopia bleeds or fails" [27]. That is exactly why a stable, united Ethiopia is the outcome it cannot survive — and why moderation, not war, would save it. Another war would not threaten Ethiopia's existence; it would threaten Eritrea's. The service that fills its barracks empties its country [24]. Eritrea's gravest danger is not defeat but irrelevance — spending its people to stay a frontier when it might have become a coast. The same sea that is Ethiopia's survival could be Eritrea's future.

Nor will the neighbourhood wait. The Horn is being re-carved: Somalia fractured into Somaliland, Puntland, Jubaland [26]; a Saudi-led coalition of some fifty states now polices the Red Sea, Egypt and Djibouti and Somalia inside it and Ethiopia — the giant whose lifeline runs through those waters — shut out [28]; a new Turkey–Saudi–Pakistan pact scrambling for the Bab el-Mandeb [25]. This is the water Ethiopia must swim, and it drowns the divided. United, a hundred and twenty million help shape such a region; set against themselves, they are merely its richest prize.

None of this is available to a nation at war with itself. A divided giant cannot will a coastline; the outer siege feeds on the inner fracture. So the sea is not a separate cause from breaking the machine — it is the same cause, seen from the coast. The crimes in these pages are real, and I have softened none: Merawi, Arsi, the drone, the burning village demand their reckoning. But the answer is not the rifle, for the rifle turned inward is how the racket keeps the giant too broken to reach the sea. The answer is dialogue, law, and a citizen's constitution. Hold the nation together; win, together, the one prize that

makes all the rest sovereign. Break the racket, and a united people can do what no faction can: reach the sea, and stand as a nation among nations, denied by no one.

19 Two messages, a cure for all, and a conclusion

To the peoples of every group, in the costly column, I say this in love, not scorn. You have been told, in every language and from every pulpit, that safety lies in fearing your neighbour and following your patron. It is not so, and thirty years of graves prove it. Your neighbour of the other group is not your enemy; he is your fellow payer. Your patron is not your shield; he manufactures the danger he then charges you to survive. Adwa was your glory, but you cannot eat it. Refuse the rifle aimed at your fellow victim. Withhold the one thing the machine cannot run without — your belief that the poor man across the river is the one to fear. And ask of every politician who waves your flag the question that unmans him: *cui bono*?

To the elites of every estate — political, economic, religious, intellectual, the head of government not excepted — I say something shorter. All rackets have an expiry date: they end when the marks stop believing, and the marks are learning to read. You may still choose which side of the ledger you are remembered on. Carry Addis and land into an honest Dialogue as questions of citizenship, not allocation; professionalise the forces; take the rent off the label; make defeat survivable. That is the work of founders, and history keeps a place for them. The alternative is to be remembered as the beneficiary of a machine that ground the very peoples you claimed.

And the heart of it: the cure takes from no people and gives to all — every group's release from the same captor. The Amhara gain the security they are dying for through citizenship, not a militia a stronger predator will devour. The Oromo gain a capital that honours their bond to Finfinne, not a lease-book only their elite will open. The Tigrayan gain a survivable peace and a way home, not a patron who spends their blood and calls it defence. The smaller peoples gain a citizenship that at last sees them; the honest elite gain a country worth leading. No people loses; only the machine loses, and it alone deserves to.

Who will deliver us? Not a strong man on horseback — the hunger for a single saviour is itself the disease, and it has produced, every time, another concentration of power and another disappointment. The deliverer must be collective: the scholar, the cleric, the honest politician, the judge, the soldier — each serving the citizen, not the faction — and, above all, the ordinary person who withdraws his custom and extends his hand across the river. Ethiopia heals on the day its people stop waiting for a saviour and start building the institutions that make one unnecessary.

So the paradox dissolves — real as an experience, false as a necessity. Ask of that order the one question, *cui bono*, and the fog of grievance lifts to a plain vertical fact: an elite of four estates, rivals in the shop window and partners in the back room, farming fear and votes and bodies and rents upward from the peoples. To name the racket is to defend all four interests at their root, to confront the ethnic stupidity, and to unite the peoples — three tasks that are one.

Picture, then, the alternative to the graveyard. A people that has withdrawn its custom. A constitution that opens with the citizen. A capital governed by its residents. Forces that serve the citizen. The dam lighting the factory and the city. And, above the old quarrel, one project vast enough to hold every people at once — Ethiopia's place on the sea. Give the peoples that to build, and the ethnic entrepreneurs of fear will find their market gone.

So wake. The demand is made of everyone who preaches a better Ethiopia and must now live by it: the state, to govern as it speaks; the priest and the sheikh, to bless no man's war; the scholar and the journalist, to arm the people with truth, not grievance; the merchant and the diaspora, to fund the building, not the burning; and every citizen, to refuse the belief that the poor man across the river is his enemy. A people that lives by what it preaches cannot be farmed.

And the prize is not mere survival but a greatness the world is the poorer for lacking. Ethiopia is old enough to have given humanity a script, a faith, a calendar, and the world's coffee, and young enough,

in its millions under thirty, to give the coming century its engineers, artists, and philosophers — and a living proof that many peoples may be one free nation. That nation is within reach. It asks only that we cease to feed the machine, and begin to build the country.

It was never Amhara against Oromo against Tigrayan. It never was. It is the peoples against the racket that farms them — and the peoples are the many. To ask cui bono in every language, until the banner and the ledger are forced to agree, is the whole of unity, the whole of sovereignty, the beginning of freedom — and the first step toward a coast, a country, and a peace worth leaving to our children.

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