



Medemer, Oromummaa and Red-Sea Sovereignty

Is Abiy Making Ethiopia an Island of Enemies?

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Preamble: The Ideology, the Isolation, and the Red-Sea

The preceding article [69] showed what Abiy Ahmed's government does: it bombs its own villages, and that record — compiled first by Yihenew Ewnetu [13], corroborated by Human Rights Watch and the wire services [36, 16] — belongs before the International Criminal Court when the road opens [109]. This article asks the harder question: what is this government *for*, and what has it done to Ethiopia's place in the world? The answer stands on two pillars, and the article is built on them: **national unity**, which this government has dismantled at home (Sections 2–3), and **Red-Sea sovereignty**, a just claim it has squandered abroad (Section 4). The one cannot be had without the other, and the title's question is answered in Section 3.

Four answers follow. **First**, the charge made across the opposition — that behind the civic language of *Medemer* lies an ethno-national project whose end is Oromummaa ascendancy and whose casualty is the historical soul of the Ethiopian state. I examine it against the literature rather than chant it, because the scholarship cuts both ways, and show why the remedy is the same whichever reading is right. **Second**, how this government actually works: a cabinet assembled by purging the established OPDO and ANDM interests and promoting those with no base from which to resist; an inner circle holding no portfolio; and a Prime Minister — formed in military intelligence, underestimated at his opponents' cost — who told Parliament this month that his own ministers had been under classified surveillance [89]. No single leader's quirk, but the shadow chain of command the ethnic-based **Constitution** requires, built by the TPLF before him and waiting for whoever removes him. Hence this article's conclusion: institutions first, democracy as their capstone [6]. **Third**, that this government is a lead perpetrator of instability in the Horn and has made Ethiopia an *island of enemies* — nine fronts at once, war with Tigray resumed on 23 September 2026, relations severed with Asmara and an Egyptian diplomat expelled in one week [65, 66, 67]. **Fourth**, the sea: the record from Aksum to 1890, the Eritrean counter-case taken from its own most serious authors and answered, and why a leased shore sixty kilometres from our border is a runway pointed at us.

My order of priorities has not changed and will not [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12]: *national unity*, *Red-Sea sovereignty*, *development anchored in democracy*, and the *GERD* as the engine of urbanisation and industrialisation — in that order. Measured against all four, this government has damaged every one.

A government that will not abandon the monkey habit of ethnic entrepreneurship, will not tear up the ethnic-based **Constitution** — the source of this evil and of the next — and will not unite the nation behind sovereign access to the sea must be resisted with the resolve our grandfathers brought to Adwa. The resolve, not the method: the enemy is a constitutional order and the class that farms it [11], defeated by unity, law, evidence and a new **Constitution** — not by Ethiopians killing Ethiopians. If we must ever fight with weapons, it is for the sea. And we are proud of our diversity and will not trade it away; but diversity cannot be bought at the price of individual freedom, national unity and economic progress, and a **Constitution** that makes the group sovereign protects neither the diversity nor the person.

The method. *Gulicha biqeyayer wet ayatafitim* — change the hearthstones as often as you like, the stew will not taste better. We have changed them four times since 1974 and served the same dish, because a stew is decided by two things and the stones are neither. The *ingredients*: whether a state is built from citizens, law and land or from groups, quotas and grievance — and it is the **Constitution** that chooses. The *process*: how power, money and force move through the system and who is burned when they move — and it is the racket of four estates that works it. Changing the ruler changes a stone. So judge every proposal in these pages, and everyone else's, by one question: *does it change the ingredients and the process, or only who stands at the fire?*

What this article covers, by section: 1, why intent matters; *first pillar* — 2, *Medemer* and Oromummaa, the state as owner of culture, the cabinet purge and the shadow chain of command, and institutions before the ballot, and 3, the island of enemies and who gains from permanent war; *second pillar* — 4, the Doumeira-Rehyto-Beilul-Tio Corridor: the claim from Aksum to 1890, the Eritrean counter-case answered, and the Article 51 trigger; then 5, why a divided house cannot hold the coast; 6, what resistance means and must never mean; 7, the strongest objections laid to rest; 8, the conclusion.

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1 Why This Article

In the preceding article [69] I argued that the drones, the armed alliance and Mekelle changing hands for the third time in six years are all symptoms; the disease is a **Constitution** that makes ethnicity the title to power, land and security. That argument invites three further questions.

The first is *intent*. Is this government merely incompetent and violent, or programmatic — an ethno-national project using the civic language of *Medemer* as cover? The opposition says the latter with increasing confidence. The honest answer is more uncomfortable than either camp allows.

Beneath intent lies *method*, which our politics almost never asks about: how does this government actually work, and who takes the decisions? The Prime Minister answered part of it himself this month, telling the House of Peoples' Representatives that his own ministers had been under classified surveillance [89]. I take that seriously, and argue that it describes a structure rather than a temperament — one the TPLF built before him, which the **Constitution** obliges every Ethiopian ruler to rebuild, and which will be waiting for whoever removes him.

The second is *consequence*. Whatever the intent, what has this leadership done to Ethiopia's standing in its neighbourhood? The evidence is not in dispute and worsened while this article was written: in ten days Ethiopia fought a new northern war, severed relations with Eritrea, expelled an Egyptian diplomat and accused three neighbours of arming its rebels [63, 65, 66, 67]. A landlocked nation of 130 million has contrived to be at odds with nearly everyone at once.

The third follows from the first two: if the sea is self-defence, what exactly is Ethiopia's claim, and can it survive the Eritrean counter-case? That is the longest part of this article, because it is the part most often asserted and least often argued.

The first two questions belong to the first pillar, national unity; the third is the second pillar, Red-Sea sovereignty. Neither pillar stands without the other, and that is the whole of the argument that follows.

2 The First Pillar: National Unity and the Soul of the State

A charge is now made across the Ethiopian opposition that goes beyond the drones: that this government is not merely brutal but programmatic — that behind the civic language of *Medemer* lies an ethno-national project whose end is Oromummaa domination, and whose casualty is the historical soul of the Ethiopian state. The charge deserves to be examined, not chanted, because the literature on it is contradictory and the stakes could not be higher.

2.1 The case as its advocates make it

Medemer — “coming together” — was published as a philosophy of synergy, servant leadership and an inclusive civic nationalism meant to replace both forced assimilation and a federalism that deepens division [50, 51]. Its unionist critics argue that the civic vocabulary is a screen. They point to the capture of the federal centre by one regional machine after the EPRDF was dissolved; to the quiet advance of the capital's “special interest” and the renaming and resettlement around Finfinne; to the 2023 attempt to split the Orthodox synod along regional lines; to regional forces armed and shielded in Oromia while Amhara regional forces were dissolved; and to massacres of Amhara and Somali communities inside Oromia that went unpunished year after year [36]. Read against that record, *Medemer* looks less like civic nationalism than like a solvent: a doctrine that dissolves the older Ethiopian state — its church, its army, its language of common citizenship, its memory — while one ethno-national machine occupies what is left. Commentators in this camp speak of an Oromummaa cult around the Prime Minister's circle rather than a philosophy of synergy, and trace its imagery to the sixteenth-century expansion chronicled by the monk Bahrey [54].

The supporting inference runs through this series. A government that genuinely held unity and Red-Sea sovereignty as its first interests would pursue them where they can only be won — at home, by consent. It would have settled with Amhara and Tigray rather than bombing both, built a consensus before raising a claim on the sea, and kept its drones for the frontier. The failure to pursue both Foundations peacefully, year after year, is evidence of an end game that is not the nation's.



2.2 Where the narrative came from: the making of Oromummaa

Oromummaa did not arrive from nowhere, and a critic who cannot say where it came from has no business pronouncing on it. Three bodies of work built it.

The anthropology. Asmarom Legesse, an Eritrean-born, Harvard-trained anthropologist, supplied the academic foundation with *Gada* (1973) and *Oromo Democracy* (2000) [75, 76]. The achievement was real: he showed a Western audience an indigenous African constitutional order of age-grades, fixed terms and assemblies at a time when such systems were dismissed. His critics argue the work has since functioned as an anthropological whitewash — generalising the Borana model to all Oromo, suppressing the system’s expansionist side, and crediting Menelik with abolishing Gadaa when historians date its political decline across most Oromo regions to roughly 1650–1800, long before his campaigns [78]. The sharpest point comes from Legesse’s own pages: incorporated communities, the *gabbaro*, occupied the lower rungs of the ritual hierarchy, were settled apart, and were managed through a *Yaa’a Gabbaro* that allowed local self-government while barring them from the sovereign councils [76, 79]. Whatever that is, it is not a democracy of equals.

The history. The strongest corrective comes from inside Oromo scholarship. Mohammed Hassen’s *The Oromo of Ethiopia* documents the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century expansion in detail: the campaigns, the incorporation of conquered populations, *moggaasaa* and *gudifachaa*, and the tributary status of those absorbed but not assimilated [73]. Negaso Gidada’s thesis on south-western Wallaga records the same processes at local level [74]. Neither author is hostile to Oromo nationalism. That is exactly why their record matters: the conquest is documented by the people best placed to deny it.

The popular narrative. What scholarship could not do, fiction did. Tesfaye Gebreab, an Amharic-language journalist and novelist born in Ethiopia to Eritrean parents, carried the grievance story to a mass readership with *Yeburqa Zimmita* (1999) [77], fixing the modern narrative of Oromo marginalisation in the public mind more firmly than any academic work — the Anole episode, now a national monument, among it. The historical evidence for that episode remains contested and unsettled by documentary scholarship; the political work the story has done is not. A nation’s memory was reshaped by a novel.

In fairness, Oromo scholars reply that Biru is neither historian nor anthropologist, reads episodes out of context, and that identity is not a proposition to be prosecuted [80]. Some of that lands. But two of his points rest on sources his critics themselves rely upon — the *gabbaro* hierarchy in Legesse’s own text and the dating of Gadaa’s decline — and those are not answered by questioning credentials. The honest position is that the romantic version of Gadaa was a political construction, as Gemechu Megersa and Terje Østebø have each argued in different words [79], and that it has been enormously effective.

2.3 Grievance as an engine, not an accident

Here is the mechanism that matters more than any text. The movement’s strength has never depended on winning the historical argument but on *never closing it*. A settled grievance stops mobilising; one renewed each year — a monument, a commemoration, a fresh atrocity for the ledger — organises people indefinitely, funds organisations, and converts every reform into a down payment on the next demand. Which is why no concession has ever been enough, and each is pocketed and succeeded by another.

I say this without malice, and with one essential qualification: *this is not an Oromo peculiarity*. Amhara and Tigrayan politics now run on exactly the same engine, with their own monuments, their own martyr-lists and their own entrepreneurs, because the **Constitution** rewards whoever can keep a grievance warm. A rule-book that distributes land, office and security by group converts memory into a resource. Our quarrel is therefore not with any people’s memory — every one of these communities has real dead to remember — but with a system that pays a dividend for refusing to let the dead rest.

2.4 The case against the charge, which must be stated

Here honesty requires something the charge’s advocates rarely admit. The most developed literature on Oromummaa argues the exact opposite. Asafa Jalata — who did more than anyone to define Oromummaa as an ideology of Oromo history, culture and nationalism, and whose critics regard him as an activist writing in scholarly form rather than a disinterested analyst — holds that Abiy Ahmed has waged ideological warfare on Oromummaa, consolidated what he calls a neo-*neftegna* order and failed the Oromo people [52]. Oromo



nationalist writers describe him as a counter-revolutionary who betrayed the *Qeerroo* movement that carried him to office. Analysts noted as early as 2019 that his break with Team Lemma over the Prosperity Party signalled to Oromo elites that he stood for a unitarist *Ethiopiawinet* rather than for Oromummaa [53]. And the hard facts point the same way: his army has fought the Oromo Liberation Army since 2018, has bombed Oromo farmers in Wollega, and has imprisoned Oromo leaders. If this is a project of Oromo domination, it is one that a large part of Oromo nationalism regards as its enemy.

Both readings cannot be literally true. What can be true — and what the evidence supports — is something less tidy and more dangerous: a leader without a constituency of principle, using the vocabulary of unity before unionists, the vocabulary of nationhood before his own base, and force against whoever objects. The common factor is not an ethnic programme but a personal one, in which every community, including the Oromo, is material.

2.5 The elites are not the people

One line must never be blurred, and I will state it as plainly as I can. The political entrepreneurs who trade in Oromummaa are not the Oromo people, and the Oromo people are not their property. Oromo farmers in Wollega have been bombed by this government's drones; Oromo leaders have been imprisoned by it; the Oromo Liberation Army has fought it since 2018; and Oromo parents bury children killed by the same aircraft that kill children in Gojjam and Hintalo. A peasant in Dembi Dollo has no more say over Arat Kilo than a peasant in Gondar, and he pays the same price for its wars.

Anyone who moves from “this machine governs through an Oromo political network” to “the Oromo are the problem” has abandoned the argument of this series and joined the other side of the racket. The indictment here is of a party-state and a **Constitution** — not of a language, a people or a heritage.

2.6 Why it matters less than it appears

Suppose the harshest reading is right. The remedy does not change. Suppose the gentler one is right. The remedy does not change. So long as the **Constitution** makes the group sovereign and ethnicity the key to land, office and security, whoever holds Arat Kilo will be accused of ethnic domination and will have every incentive to practise it. The dispute between these readings is a dispute about which tribe is capturing the machine; the machine is the problem. That is also why the soul of the Ethiopian state cannot be defended by an ethnic counter-mobilisation: a state whose church, army and common citizenship are being hollowed out is not restored by another group seizing the same instruments, but by a **Constitution** in which no group can own them.

2.7 The state as owner of culture: flags, Gadaa and official memory

One consequence of an ethnic-based **Constitution** touches every Ethiopian daily and is rarely examined: when the group is sovereign, the state becomes the patron of one group's symbols and the policeman of another's.

The complaint now circulating in the opposition press is concrete. Writing in *Borkena*, Yirga Alem Adisu records that each Meskerem the public purse funds the promotion of the Gadaa system and the display of its emblem in streets, on vehicles and on private houses, while the green, yellow and red national flag is treated as a provocation — questioned when its colours appear on clothing or a *netela* at a religious festival, with mothers harassed and young people detained [72].

Here I am not relying on another man's reporting; I spend about half of each year in Ethiopia and have seen both halves myself. I have watched the elaborate official promotion of Oromo cultural and religious celebration, and the celebrations themselves are a good: Irreecha and the ceremonies of Gadaa belong to a diversity that is all of ours, as do Timkat, Mawlid and Ashenda. What is not a good is the bill. In a country where barely three in five adults can read [49], where four million children in one region are out of school [38], and where debt service and defence crowd out education and health [47], financing spectacle on this scale is a choice made at the expense of the poor — the Oromo farmer's children among them.

And I have seen the other half. At Adwa Square I watched young Ethiopians harassed for carrying the green, yellow and red flag and for marking a national day with it. There is no reasoning with the security forces in



such moments, because they are not weighing a right against a public-order concern: in their rule-book the citizen holds no such right to weigh. The **Constitution** vests sovereignty in “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” and leaves the individual with whatever his group’s standing earns him that year [111]. A young man under the national flag is not a rights holder making a claim; he is a faction making a statement. That is impunity by design, and those whose symbols are currently in favour should condemn it loudest — the favour is temporary and the precedent is not.

A state has no business owning a culture. Religion, language, custom and memory are rights of citizens, held individually and exercised in community; government protects everyone’s exercise of them rather than appointing itself guardian, financier and master of ceremonies to one. Funding one people’s symbolism from general taxation while treating another’s as suspect is not cultural policy. It is the allocation of dignity by descent, which is what Articles 8 and 46 authorise [111].

Two further things must be said, and the second is harder.

First, Gadaa belongs in the museum, the university and the community — not in the ministry. As a historical institution it had real merits: age-grades, fixed eight-year terms, assemblies and an orderly transfer of office, which is why UNESCO inscribed it as intangible heritage in 2016. It also had limits its official promoters never mention: it governed a pastoral society of the sixteenth century, excluded women from office, depended on an expanding frontier for its spoils, and did not survive contact with the modern state, its political functions displaced almost everywhere by the nineteenth century. It is heritage, not a constitution. A state of 130 million cannot be governed by age-sets any more than by the Fetha Nagast, and financing that pretence from the national budget is not respect for a tradition but a political project dressed as culture — as objectionable as the old state’s making one church and one language the condition of belonging.

Second, history must be open to scholarship, including the parts that are uncomfortable. The sixteenth-century Oromo expansion, which filled the vacuum left by the Christian–Adal war of 1529–43, reshaped the Horn: the Solomonic state lost Bali, Dawaro, Fatagar and much of Shewa and withdrew northwards, settling its capital at Gondar in 1636; the Adal sultanate collapsed into Harar; and peoples such as the Damot, Bizamo, Gafat, Ennarya and Hadiya were displaced, absorbed or extinguished, the Gafat language disappearing entirely. Assimilation worked through *moggaasaa* and *gudifachaa*, and those who were neither absorbed nor expelled were often reduced to tributary status — the *giri* of the Oromo proverb that nine of ten are tributaries and one a *balabbat*. This is not polemic: it is the account given by Bahrey in 1593, by modern Oromo historians, and in the standard scholarship on the period [54, 73, 74]. The same record shows the traffic running both ways — settled agriculture, Christianity and Islam adopted by Oromo communities, Gadaa and Afaan Oromo adopted by others, and Oromo lords becoming central actors in imperial politics and marrying into the Solomonic house by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Moggaasaa must be described precisely, because this is where the apologists and the polemicists both go wrong. In the textbook account it is benign: a ceremony before the *Abbaa Gadaa* by which outsiders were adopted *en masse* into a *gosa*, giving the weak protection and the adopted a lineage. That version is not false — there are documented cases, down to the twentieth century, of Gumuz and other communities entering Oromo clans through *moggaasaa* and *kooluu galaa* [84]. But it is a fraction of the record, and it is the fraction that gets taught.

The fuller record, set out by the leading Oromo historian of the expansion in his own thesis and book, is a sequence of assimilation, domination and elimination [81, 73]. Groups that submitted were adopted and then held as *gabbaro* — *dhalatta* to the Tulama and Barentu, *yahabata* to the Macha — clients and serfs on land they had owned, obliged to take Oromo clan names, Oromo law and Oromo language [81]. Those who resisted were displaced, scattered into marginal country, or destroyed: Damot, Bizamo and Gafat were broken, Ennarya fought for a century before falling to Limmu in about 1710, and whole peoples simply end at that point in the record. The Gafat language is extinct. The Gaturi, a Semitic-speaking people of Kundudo, Babile and Dawaro, are gone as a people and survive only as an entry in Mohammed Hassen’s pages [81]. Women and children of defeated communities were absorbed into Oromo lineages and their descendants became Oromo regardless of origin. That is not a migration. It is assimilation enforced by conquest, and the modern name for the deliberate extinction of peoples as peoples — language, lineage, memory — is *ethnocide*.



Some Ethiopian writers argue this exceeded the twentieth century's worst in completeness, because the communities it erased left no survivors to claim the name. I do not need that comparison and will not rest on it. But the distinction drawn to dismiss the charge — that absorption is not annihilation — is worth less than it sounds: a people whose language, lineage and name are gone has been destroyed as a people, whatever became of the bodies. Done in the twentieth century it would be prosecuted as forced transfer, forcible assimilation and persecution, and destruction of a group “as such” is the hinge of the Genocide Convention [109].

Two further facts complete the picture, and they are the reason this history is a weapon rather than a subject. First, the same vocabulary is deployed in the opposite direction: Mohammed Hassen titled a later study *Conquest, Tyranny and Ethnocide against the Oromo* [82], and Mekuria Bulcha writes of genocidal violence in the making of the Ethiopian state [83]. Second, both sets of claims are mobilised today by living political machines with budgets and militias. Everybody's ancestors are victims; everybody's ancestors are perpetrators; and under this **Constitution** every one of those graves earns a dividend.

The useful demand is legal and prospective, and it should be written into the citizens' **Constitution**: *forced assimilation, ethnic cleansing and the incitement of either are crimes*, whoever commits them and whichever people they are committed against — the Gafat in the seventeenth century, the Amhara and Somali of Wollega in ours. Germany's laws do not criminalise German culture; they criminalise a political programme and its propaganda. The Ethiopian equivalent is not a law against Gadaa or against any people's heritage. It is a law against the conduct: the forced change of a community's language, faith or name; the clearing of a district by descent; and the public incitement of either. That law would be enforced against ministers, generals and militia commanders of every ethnicity, and it would make the next *moggaasaa*, by whatever name and whoever attempts it, a matter for a court rather than for a chronicle.

I set that out not to indict a people for the sixteenth century but to show what the ethnic-based **Constitution** does to history itself. Where the group is sovereign, every century becomes a title deed: one side curates pure victimhood and another pure dispossession, each funded or policed by whoever holds Arat Kilo, and neither available for honest examination. A citizens' **Constitution** takes history out of the ministry and returns it to the universities, where Bahrey, Negaso Gidada and Mohammed Hassen can be read and corrected, and where no Ethiopian's standing depends on which version wins.

That is the test to apply to this government's cultural politics, and it fails: it has not made the state neutral between Ethiopians. It has merely changed which flag is official and which is suspect.

2.8 The intelligence officer: why his opponents keep losing to him

At the opening of his second term the Prime Minister told the House of Peoples' Representatives something no Ethiopian head of government has said aloud before: that for a year his own ministers had been under classified, intelligence-backed surveillance [89]. It passed almost in passing, and the country spent days speculating about who had been watched. The interesting question is the other one.

In one sentence he told us three things: that he does not trust his cabinet, that he has the means to watch it, and that he will say so in public, to their faces, in the chamber meant to hold him to account rather than the reverse.

Two facts about him are on the record and routinely ignored by those who oppose him. He is a technologist, and he comes from intelligence — the armed forces in 1991 in radio communications, military intelligence, an intelligence team during the war with Eritrea, and the building and directorship of the state's information-security institution before he entered elective politics [90]. He learned how information is gathered, withheld and deployed long before he learned how a parliamentary majority is assembled.

That formation explains a pattern his critics keep walking into. They treat him as an ordinary politician and argue against the public figure — the speeches, the slogans, the parables — while he operates with an intelligence officer's instincts: patient, quiet, holding information rather than spending it, showing part of the hand and never the whole, and several moves ahead of an opposition that announces its intentions on satellite television.

The closest comparison is not Ethiopian, and I offer it as a point about formation rather than ideology. Vladimir Putin rose from the same world and governs as it teaches: patiently, quietly, with a grip on



information and a preference for leverage over argument [91]. Whatever one thinks of the man or his wars — and I think little of either — almost everyone who underestimated him paid for it. The same error is being made about Abiy, in Asmara and in the diaspora studios where he is discussed as a provincial party boss who got lucky. So let me say it to those who oppose him, including the many whose objections I share: *you cannot beat a man you have not studied*.

Note the move itself, because it is characteristic. The surveillance was not leaked but announced, from the despatch box, on the record. That act disciplines every minister in the chamber, signals to the four estates that the centre sees them, and costs nothing — no names, no charges, no evidence anyone can test. Tradecraft performed in public, and it worked: the country argued about who had been watched instead of asking why a cabinet must be.

None of this is a compliment or a counsel of despair. I have laid the heaviest guilt for the killing of Ethiopian citizens on this government and withdraw nothing [69]. The observation cuts against him far harder than it flatters him. *A head of government who must place his own ministers under classified surveillance has told us, without intending to, that his cabinet is not his government*. If the formal chain carried authority he would instruct it and dismiss those who failed to comply. Surveillance of ministers is what a ruler resorts to when ministries answer to something other than their ministers — which is the subject of the next subsection, and not a feature of this government alone.

2.9 The shadow chain of command: who actually decides

Ask a plain question about any Ethiopian ministry of the last thirty-five years: who takes the decision that matters? The answer has rarely been the person whose name is on the door.

Under the EPRDF the arrangement was systematic and well documented. Offices were distributed among the front's member parties by ethnic register, so a ministry was visibly held by an Amhara, an Oromo or a southern figure; behind that figure sat a party structure — a deputy, a state minister, a cell inside the bureau — whose line of authority ran to the front's core rather than through the cabinet. Scholars described it precisely: a parallel party apparatus shadowing every level of the formal administration, so that the organigram and the actual decision tree were two different documents, the second never published [92, 93, 94]. The minister represented a people. Another man governed.

What changed after 2018 is the register, not the architecture. The cabinet is again a careful representation — now of loyalists rather than partner parties — and consequential decisions are again reported to be taken in an inner circle holding no portfolio and appearing on no organigram. I state that as judgement, not finding: the available evidence is circumstantial — ministers visibly not consulted, policy arriving fully formed, appointments following no departmental logic, and a Prime Minister who tells Parliament he has been watching his own cabinet. On that evidence my judgement is that the circle outweighs the ministers, and that its cohesion is factional rather than institutional.

What matters more than anyone's identity in that circle — and the reason this belongs in an article about *Medemer* rather than in palace gossip — is that *the ethnic-based Constitution requires the arrangement*. It is neither a Tigrayan vice nor an Oromo one. It is what the document produces, and will produce again under whoever comes next.

Follow the logic. Where offices are allocated by ethnic register, a minister's title is a *representation* before it is an *appointment*: he occupies the chair because his people must be seen to occupy it. Symbolic authority cannot run a ministry, because it cannot be relied on to execute an instruction that damages the constituency it exists to signal. The ruler, needing an executive instrument, must build one outside the cabinet from people bound to him by the one thing the **Constitution** does not distribute by quota — trust, history, kinship, shared war, shared faction. The visible cabinet becomes a census; the invisible circle becomes the government.

That single mechanism explains a great deal that Ethiopian commentary attributes to personality.

- It explains why our ministries change leaders without changing behaviour, and why every incoming minister discovers that the department was never his to direct.



- It explains why reform announced at the top dies three levels down: the instruction travels along the formal chain, and the formal chain is not where the authority is.
- It explains the durability of the four estates [11]. A racket cannot survive inside a merit-based administration with a reviewable record; it thrives in an informal one, because informality is its operating environment.
- It explains why the security services have been so easily turned on citizens. An organisation answerable to a circle rather than to a statute has nothing in its chain of command capable of refusing an unlawful order.
- And it explains the surveillance. A ruler who cannot see into his own administration through the formal channel — because the formal channel was built for display — will build an informal one out of intelligence. That is not paranoia. Within this structure, it is rational.

The cost is not merely inefficiency. A state governed through an informal circle has no institutional memory, no reviewable record, no orderly succession and no accountability: when the circle changes the policy changes, and nobody can be held responsible for a decision nobody is recorded as taking. That is why Ethiopian governments appear to begin from zero every decade, and why each new leader can honestly say he inherited chaos — he did, because his predecessor's government was never written down.

2.10 How the cabinet was assembled: a purge in the clothes of inclusion

If the cabinet is a representation rather than an executive, who was chosen to represent, and why? The unionist charge is that this is an Oromo cabinet; the Oromo nationalist charge is that he has betrayed the Oromo cause and jailed its leaders. Both are made with conviction and cannot both be right. The personnel record suggests a third reading, less comfortable than either.

He arrived in 2018 on an OPDO–ANDM axis, carried by the front's two largest partners. In 2019 the front was dissolved into a single Prosperity Party and its member organisations lost their separate legal existence and bargaining power; the TPLF refused and was left outside. Then the heavyweights of his *own* base went. The Defence Minister — whose decision had made his rise possible — was dismissed in the August 2020 reshuffle and suspended from the party leadership [100]. The long-serving ANDM deputy prime minister was replaced in February 2024 by the director of the national intelligence service [101]. And the southern bloc was broken up — Sidama in 2019, South West Ethiopia in 2021, South Ethiopia and Central Ethiopia in 2023 — each a new regional state without accumulated weight, each led by people whose standing came from federal recognition rather than from any movement of their own [102]. In every case what was removed was an *established* interest with a base; what was promoted had none.

My reading, offered as judgement because motive is never documented. The criterion was neither ethnicity nor faith but *dependence*. A minister who owes his standing entirely to the man who appointed him cannot become a rival; one who arrives with a constituency, a history and a machine of his own can, and in this system eventually must. So the major OPDO and ANDM figures had to go *precisely because they were major*, and the beneficiaries came from wherever resistance was least likely: small regional units without weight, and individuals whose networks were personal or confessional rather than territorial. That is why both standard charges miss. It was never an ethnic project in the sense its critics mean. It was a project against anyone, of any ethnicity, who could say no.

The ANDM purge then follows as symmetry rather than animus. I do not think the Amhara organisation was the target; it was the price. A Prime Minister dismantling the established figures of his own Oromo base could not be seen to leave the other large partner standing, and the OPDO heavyweights he was removing would not have worn it. Cutting the ANDM made the Oromo purge survivable, and cost little, because the organisation had long since ceased to be effective — two decades as a junior partner in somebody else's front, with no independent programme to defend and no habit of defending one. It was purged because it was cheap, not because it was dangerous.

What is sinister is not the ruthlessness — every leader consolidates, and one who could not would not last a year here. It is the *consequence*: a government from which every actor capable of refusing an instruction has been deliberately removed. That is not a cabinet that governs badly but one that cannot govern at all, because governing requires officials who can say no — to a bad order, an unlawful one, a war that will not work. Remove them and the state has no internal brake, and what a state without brakes does is what has been done since 2020 in Tigray, Amhara and Oromia. It also explains the surveillance



(Section 2.8): having removed everyone with a base, he must watch those who have none, because dependence buys compliance and compliance is not loyalty. He knows the difference better than his critics do.

One qualification, which I insist on because this series has condemned the state's entry into the business of culture and faith and cannot now make a sectarian inference of its own. It is said often that the promotions followed a confessional line. Whether or not any appointee's faith correlates with his advancement, the load-bearing fact is the *absence of an independent base*, not the content of anybody's belief. A Pentecostal with a power base would have gone like everyone else; an Orthodox or Muslim appointee without one was eligible on the same terms. Reading a cabinet as a religious project performs the move this article warns against elsewhere, and hands the racket another grievance to farm.

And here the deepest charge against our politics belongs. Nothing above is a modern political operation. No doctrine, no programme, no theory of the state, no argument about what Ethiopia should become or how 130 million people should be governed — only manoeuvres about who sits where: which organisation, which district, which congregation, which cousin. Ethiopian politics at the summit is what it has always been in the village: petty and local, a politics of *placement* rather than of principle, conducted by tacticians of the committee room who are strangers to political philosophy — and the few who had one imported it whole and applied it with a rifle. That is why every transition since 1974 has produced a new set of names and the same state, and why the exit is an institution rather than a better man.

2.11 Therefore institutions first — and democracy as the capstone

If the diagnosis is right, the prescription follows, and it is not the one either camp is selling.

It is not *remove the man*. A state governed through a circle produces rulers of this type the way standing water produces mosquitoes. Replace him with a general, a tribune or an alliance of seven armed movements, and the new occupant inherits the same cabinet of representations, the same unreliable formal chain, and the same need of a private instrument to govern through. He will build one, and then he too will watch his ministers.

It is not *hold an election*. We have held them in 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2021 and 2026. The one genuinely competitive contest ended in mass arrests; the rest returned supermajorities of ninety-odd per cent. An election held over a shadow chain of command does not transfer power, because power is not in the offices being contested.

The prescription is *institutions*, and they come first. I set that out at length before the June vote [6], and since the diagnosis above rests on it, it is worth restating properly. It begins with the comparative question Niall Ferguson puts in *Civilization: The West and the Rest* [97]: why did British America converge with the modern world while Iberian America did not? His answer is not climate, not geography, not capital, and not the religion of the conquerors. It is [an idea about how people govern themselves](#) — and he is precise on the point that the idea is *not simply democracy*. [Democracy was the capstone of an edifice whose foundations were laid long before any election was held](#). The building has three storeys, and the order of them is the whole argument.

The foundation — the rule of law. The individual secure against arbitrary power, and private property secure against arbitrary expropriation. The English-Whig tradition stated this with unusual precision, but the principle is not its property.

The architecture — representative constitutional government. Parliaments that controlled taxation, courts that constrained executives, and statutes whose generality bound ruler and subject alike.

The capstone — the franchise. Extended progressively over generations, and becoming democracy in the substantive sense only once it rested on the two storeys beneath it.

Confuse the capstone with the building, Ferguson warns, and you construct nothing at all: you merely hold elections in countries that are not yet republics [97, 6].

One qualification matters more here than anywhere: the rule-of-law principle is *content, not container*. It travels in very different administrative shapes — the United Kingdom devolves legislative power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; Switzerland entrusts education, taxation and policing to twenty-six cantons of four official languages — provided the unit of sovereignty remains the person rather than the group. In both,



the constitution defends the citizen *also against the group she belongs to*, and each group's cultural standing survives precisely because its members are protected as individuals first. Nothing here is an argument against regional self-government; a reader who takes it as one has read the container and missed the content [6].

Which makes the 1995 settlement unusual rather than merely disputed. Christopher Clapham records that it is *novel* in the comparative-federal record: no successful federation has been built on ethnicity as the foundational unit of political sovereignty with secession entrenched as a group right [86, 98, 99]. That novelty is not innovation but an experiment on structurally suicidal terms, because the architecture rewards every ethnic political class for maximising its own group's standing inside the federation rather than defending the federation against the next group's claim.

Let me be exact about what I am *not* saying, because this argument is routinely stolen by people who want a strongman. I am not saying *development first, democracy later*. That is the formula of every dictator who ever postponed a vote, and it has been used in this country three times. Development anchored in democracy remains one of the four singular interests of this series and it is not negotiable [7, 6]. What I am saying is that democracy is a *process with a sequence*, and the sequence starts at the foundations. A franchise laid over a state with no rule of law, no secure property and no neutral administration does not produce a republic. It produces a census taken with ballots — which is precisely what Ethiopian elections have been, and precisely why losing one has always meant reaching for a rifle. The rotation of 2018 changed the apex and not the architecture [6]; whatever rotation follows the present war will do the same, unless the architecture is what changes.

What counts as an institution? The usable test is Huntington's: an organisation is institutionalised to the degree that it is adaptable, complex, autonomous and coherent [95] — or, in plainer words, *to the degree that it produces the same outcome when the people inside it change*. By that test Ethiopia has very few. Ethiopian Airlines is one, which is why it is the most successful thing this country has built in half a century. Most of the rest of the state is a set of buildings containing whoever the current circle has placed in them.

And the shortage is not a shortage of laws. Ethiopia has a **Constitution**, a parliament, a judiciary, an auditor-general, a statistics agency, an electoral board and a central bank, every one of them established in statute and most of them housed in a handsome building. What they lack is the second term in Huntington's test: *autonomy*. Each was created by the executive, is funded at the executive's discretion, is staffed by people the executive can move, and has not once in thirty-five years produced a finding the executive did not want. An organisation that cannot survive displeasing the man who funds it is not an institution; it is a department with a letterhead. So the commitments below propose almost no new bodies — we have more of those than we can staff. They propose to make the existing ones capable of refusing.

Six commitments that would change more than any election

1. **A cabinet that is the government.** Ministers appointed for competence and removable for failure; no parallel channel of authority of any kind — no party cell, no shadow deputy, no circle — and a published rule that every executive instruction to a ministry passes through its minister and is recorded.
2. **A civil service on merit and tenure.** Entry by examination, promotion on performance, protection against dismissal for political reasons, and no post at any level allocated by descent. This is the single reform that would most quickly make a ministry outlive its minister.
3. **Security and intelligence under statute.** A statutory mandate, a parliamentary oversight committee with budget visibility and the power to compel testimony, and surveillance of any citizen — a minister included — only on judicial warrant. If ministers must be watched, let them be watched by law and not at the discretion of the man they serve, and let the warrant be reviewable by a judge who can refuse it.
4. **Courts that can rule against the state.** Security of tenure for judges, a judicial budget fixed by statute rather than granted annually by the executive, and standing for any citizen whose rights are abridged by a federal or regional authority.
5. **Property that cannot be taken by administrative decision.** Registered, transferable and



inheritable rights in land, compensation at market value with judicial appeal, and a prohibition on reallocating land for political purpose. A farmer who can be evicted is a voter who can be instructed.

6. Numbers that nobody in office compiles. An independent statistics agency, an Auditor-General reporting to Parliament with a duty to publish, and a central bank with a statutory mandate. A government that marks its own homework will always report progress.

Not one of those six requires the next leader to be a virtuous man. That is the entire point of an institution: it is a machine for extracting acceptable outcomes from ordinary and occasionally bad people, which is the only kind of people any country ever has [96]. Ethiopia has spent fifty years searching for a good man and finding, every time, a man shaped by the structure that produced him — in 1974, in 1991, in 2018, and in whatever is being prepared for us now.

And the structure begins with the document, which is where this article began. An ethnic-based **Constitution** cannot produce a merit-based civil service, because it defines merit's rival as a right. It cannot produce a cabinet that governs, because it makes the cabinet a representation. It cannot produce a neutral security service, because it gives every officer a people before it gives him a state. It cannot even produce an honest ministry of history, as the preceding subsection showed. Institutions first, then — and the first institution is a **Constitution** of citizens.

2.12 A lead perpetrator in the Horn

Regional destabilisation is usually blamed on armed movements, and Fano, the TPLF and the OLA have all fought wars that killed civilians and drew in foreign patrons. But the largest single destabilising actor in the Horn over six years has been the Ethiopian federal government, and the evidence is not in dispute. It invited a foreign army into a domestic war. It normalised armed drones against civilian areas, in three regions, over five years [36, 14]. It signed a memorandum with Somaliland in January 2024 that pushed Mogadishu towards Cairo and Asmara, the tripartite summit following that October [22]. It raised a sea claim in the language of inevitability while unable to unite its own regions behind it, bringing two states to the edge of war [27, 26]. It fuelled an arms race in one of the most militarised corridors on earth, with Turkish, Chinese, Iranian, Emirati and Russian systems in one arsenal [14, 15, 37]. And its wars displaced millions and emptied schools and clinics, exporting instability to neighbours who cannot absorb it [38, 39].

The last ten days compressed six years of that into a week. On 23 September federal forces and the TPLF went back to war; by 1 October Ethiopia had expelled ten Eritrean diplomats and closed its embassy in Asmara, and Eritrea had severed relations [65]; hours later an Egyptian diplomat was declared persona non grata and Cairo reciprocated [66]; and the Chief of General Staff accused Eritrea, Egypt and Sudan together, all three denying it [67]. Meanwhile the drone war this government pioneered against its own villages has been learned by its opponents, with alliance-linked strikes on airports in Oromia and Amhara, a rebel campaign reaching Addis Ababa, and drone flights banned over the capital [64, 68].

The destabilisation runs outward as well as inward. Clingendael records that Ethiopia has been credibly accused of supporting Sudan's Rapid Support Forces — facilitating arms shipments and allowing ground offensives and drone strikes from Ethiopian soil — and of backing Eritrean opposition groups; Sudan has sheltered Tigrayan forces, and Eritrea is accused of supporting the Amhara movement and building ties with the TPLF [71]. This is not a government besieged by meddling neighbours but a full participant in the Horn's oldest racket: each state renting the other's rebels and calling it national security.

Read it as a regional foreign ministry would. A state that cannot keep order at home is in open rupture with two neighbours, accusing a third, and fighting an alliance that strikes its capital from the air. Nothing destabilises a region faster than a large, armed, cornered government with no diplomatic exits. Ethiopia is the pivot of this region, and when the pivot sets its own house on fire every neighbour smells smoke — and some bring fuel.

3 An Island of Enemies

Set the ideology aside and look only at the statecraft. What kind of leadership antagonises Amhara, Tigray, much of Oromia, Eritrea, Egypt, and factions in Sudan and Somalia at the same time, while landlocked?



Table 1 lists the fronts open as this article goes to press.

Table 1: Fronts open simultaneously, 3 October 2026.

Front	Since	Status	Source
Oromia (OLA)	2018	Insurgency unresolved; drone strikes on Wollega	[15, 14]
Tigray (TPLF)	2020	War resumed 23 September, coordinated with Amhara and Afar movements; Mekelle abandoned on 3 October; guerrilla war signalled	[63, 71]
Amhara (Fano)	2023	102 drone strikes since April 2023; schools and clinics closed	[14, 38]
Armed alliance	2026	Seven movements; coordinated insurgency now possible across four regions holding nearly two-thirds of the population; blasts at the defence headquarters in Addis Ababa	[48, 71]
Eritrea	2023–	Diplomatic relations severed, 1 October; ten diplomats expelled; accused of arming the TPLF	[65, 67]
Egypt	2011–	GERD dispute; diplomat expelled and reciprocated, 1–2 October; accused of backing the rebels	[66, 67]
Somalia	2024	Somaliland memorandum; Mogadishu turns to Cairo and Asmara	[22]
Sudan	2020–	Al-Fashaga dispute; Addis accuses Khartoum of backing the rebels while being itself credibly accused of arming the RSF from Ethiopian soil	[67, 71]
Djibouti	—	Sole trade corridor, now a point of leverage rather than partnership	[14]

Nine fronts, five of them armed, three turned into open diplomatic ruptures within a week. In the first week of this round some 150,000 people were displaced in Afar, telecommunications and banking were cut, and fighting spread into districts already short of food after delayed rains [71]. No government in Ethiopia’s modern history has contrived to be at odds with every neighbour and every large community of its own citizens at once. That is not strength but the arithmetic of encirclement — and a landlocked state that manufactures its own encirclement has made itself an island of enemies.

3.1 The chaotic-equilibrium thesis has now been tested — and it failed

In *Can Abiy Govern in Chaotic Equilibrium?* I took the cleverest defence of this government seriously [9]: that Ethiopia is a turbulent but bounded system — a strange attractor — and the Prime Minister the operator who keeps it inside the basin. I answered that the thesis holds only on three conditions: that the parameters stay inside the basin, since the operator does not decide where its walls are; that sensitive dependence does not turn one miscalculation into a divergent path; and that remaining inside an attractor is not mistaken for a destination, since permanent low-grade civil war is also an equilibrium. September and October 2026 settled all three.

The parameters moved. The method rested on fighting the insurgencies one at a time — Oromia, then Tigray, then Amhara — so that no two burned at full intensity together. On 20 September seven movements merged those wars into one, and three days later the northern front reopened in coordination with Amhara and Afar forces [48, 71]. That is a bifurcation, not a fluctuation: the system that was bounded while the fires were separate is not the system that exists now.

The sensitivity cut the other way. In seven days the government lost its embassy in Asmara, expelled and was expelled by Cairo, accused a third neighbour of arming its rebels, and saw drones reach its own defence headquarters [65, 66, 67, 64]. Each step was a reaction; none was a plan; and the compounding is exactly what the mathematics predicts when an operator mistakes improvisation for control.

And the orbit was never a destination. Measure by what a state is for. This government cannot protect its citizens from its own air force or from the militias burning their villages; cannot keep four million children in school in one region [38]; cannot hold a currency, which lost most of its value in a year [85]; cannot implement a peace agreement it signed; cannot run a national dialogue including the people fighting it; cannot keep an embassy open in the one capital with which it must negotiate its outlet to the sea; and cannot fund schools and clinics, because debt service and defence consume the budget [47]. Those are not



fluctuations of a bounded system under a skilled operator but the signature of a government that has lost the capacity to govern.

So the question is answered on the record. The method did not master chaos; it manufactured chaos and was overtaken by it. The judgement I withheld then I state now: this leadership cannot govern — not in the sense of winning a battlefield for a season, which it can still do, but in the only sense that matters, the orderly production of security, services and law for 130 million people.

3.2 The strategy that does not exist

A serious bid for sovereign access would look like something. It would begin with a domestic settlement, because no neighbour negotiates seriously with a government that cannot speak for its own regions. It would build a legal case and publish it. It would assemble partners — the African Union, riparian and littoral states, the Gulf, the maritime powers whose shipping depends on the Bab-el-Mandeb — and present sovereign Ethiopian access as a contribution to the corridor's stability rather than a threat to it. With Asmara it would offer what good neighbours owe each other and nothing more: security guarantees in both directions, open trade, an end to the proxy wars, normal relations. It would not offer rent. Ethiopia is not buying access or leasing a corridor but recovering sovereignty over a shore disposed of without the consent of the nation it belonged to, and a state does not pay a fee for the return of its own right. The sequence: settle at home, publish the claim, negotiate — and if negotiation is refused, pursue it by the other means a state retains. Peaceful priority is not peaceful exclusivity, and the claim does not change with the method.

What exists instead is rhetoric: a claim announced as historical correction, with no published framework, no agreed mediation structure and no regional partner willing to carry it [23, 27]. Asmara reads it as a pretext for invasion, Cairo recruits on it, Mogadishu and Djibouti hear a neighbour who may come for a port, and even states that might have accepted that a nation of 130 million needs an outlet now treat the demand as a threat. Ethiopia's partners have made this easier rather than harder: Washington lifted its arms embargo and sanctioned TPLF leaders, Western statements blamed this round on the TPLF alone, and the African Union — guarantor of Pretoria — never oversaw implementation and is distrusted by the opposition as too close to the government [71]. A government whose friends never tell it the truth learns nothing from its defeats. In one year it has converted a legitimate national interest into a regional alarm: the cause is legitimate, the custodian has discredited it — and a state that has just closed its embassy in Asmara has closed the only channel through which Assab could ever have been negotiated [65].

3.3 The Constitution it will not touch

The same incapacity governs the other Foundation. The fault that produces the wars is constitutional, and this government has never attempted to remove it. The national dialogue it convened excluded every armed movement and, by most accounts, avoided the sovereignty question at the core of the **Constitution**. Article 39 remains. Article 46 remains. Article 8 remains [111]. The one reform that would dissolve the quarrel it is fighting on three internal fronts is the one reform it will not contemplate — because that **Constitution** is also the instrument through which power is held.

So we have a government that will not make peace at home, cannot make friends abroad, will not change the rule-book, and will not stop bombing. Every Foundation it claims to serve it has damaged.

3.4 Who gains from permanent war

This is where incompetence stops being a sufficient explanation. Incompetence is random; this pattern is consistent. War suspends ordinary politics and normalises emergency powers. It justifies secret procurement and a defence budget that no parliament audits [47]. It keeps rivals — Fano, the TPLF, the OLA — fighting the state and, often, each other, so that no unified opposition can form in peacetime. It converts a contested election into a question of national survival. It gives the leadership a permanent emergency in which it is indispensable.

I state the inference as an inference: I cannot prove intent, and no independent inquiry has established it. But the observable record is that this government has profited politically from every war it has fought, while the nation has lost by each of them — its children's schooling, its currency, its standing, its young people,



its coast and its friends. A leadership that benefits from the condition it refuses to end should be judged by that pattern, not by its speeches.

And here the question on the title page can be answered. Is this government making Ethiopia an island of enemies? On the record of these eight years, yes — but the formulation is too generous to it, because it puts the enemies outside. A state dismembered by its own government is more dangerous to its citizens than any neighbour. Ethiopia is not merely being surrounded by enemies; its own government has become the first of them.

Pillar 1. The nation is one, and the Constitution is what denies it. The objective is a state of citizens. *Medemer* supplies the grammar in which objection cannot be stated, Oromummaa supplies the content, and beneath both sits an ethnic-based **Constitution** that makes the group sovereign and the person its tenant. The machine this produces — a cabinet purged of everyone able to refuse, a chain of command on no organigram, and a leadership that has profited from every war it has fought — cannot be repaired by changing the man who operates it. The rule-book must be replaced: institutions first, democracy as their capstone, and one citizenship from Gondar to Jijiga.

4 The Second Pillar: The Legitimacy of Red-Sea Sovereignty

I have argued since March that Ethiopia's return to the sea is a matter of survival before it is a matter of economics [1, 5, 7]. Here I set out why the claim is legitimate. It rests on two grounds: how the coast was lost, and what the coast has become. *However, let me state my frustration first, because it bears on how this argument is received. No subject in our public life attracts more confident commentary from people without a dime of understanding of the four things it actually turns on: Ethiopia's maritime history [55, 58, 59]; international law [107, 108, 110, 106]; the military geopolitics of the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb [2, 3, 4]; and the monkey habit of ethnic entrepreneurship [10, 11].* I have written on each of them at length, and the pages that follow set out the first three again [1, 5, 8]. An objection that engages any one of the four I will take seriously, and answer. An objection that engages none of them is not an objection; it is a position in search of a reason.

4.1 A coast surrendered without the nation's consent

The standard account — a people fought thirty years for freedom, voted for it, and the world recognised the result — is not false. It is incomplete. Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia under United Nations resolution in 1952, and opinion inside *Eritrea was genuinely divided; the Unionist Party had wide support, especially in the highlands* [32]. Haile Selassie's dissolution of the federation in 1962 was a grave error. But the armed movement it galvanised was cultivated, financed and championed from outside, with Egypt under Nasser as its first patron and other Arab states following, for a transparent purpose: a landlocked Ethiopia is a weaker Ethiopia in every Nile negotiation [35, 33].

In 1991 the question of the coast was settled not by the Ethiopian people but by a faction. The TPLF and the EPLF had fought the Derg as allies; the transitional arrangements that followed the London conference, dominated by the TPLF, accepted an Eritrean referendum without conditioning it on any Ethiopian access to the sea [34]. No Ethiopian voted on the loss of the coast. No elected parliament ratified it. No negotiation was held over Assab, whose port had long carried much of Ethiopia's trade and whose hinterland is the Afar homeland shared across the border. The party that surrendered the coast was allied to the party that received it.

That is what I mean by conspiracy. The legal forms were observed and the referendum of April 1993 was monitored and recognised; my claim is not that the paperwork was forged, but that one side of the bargain — the Ethiopian nation — was never at the table, and *legality without consent is not legitimacy*. None of this denies Eritreans their statehood, which I accept; what I deny is that it carried an exclusive title to the whole shore on which a nation of 130 million depends.



4.2 The record, in sequence

Two tables carry the record. Table 2 sets out the long history from Aksum to the Italian colony, because the Eritrean case rests on the claim that Ethiopia's link to the sea is recent and opportunistic; Table 3 sets out how the coast was lost in the modern era and became a security question. Each entry is public record, and the right-hand column states what it means for the argument.

One line of that table is the hinge. Why would Istanbul give away a Red Sea port it had held since 1557?

Because it had never really held it. Ottoman authority on that shore ran through the *naibs* of Hergigo — hereditary Balaw deputies installed in 1589 after the Ottomans failed to take the highlands, answering to Ethiopian authority about as often as to the Porte — and every push inland had been defeated [58]. The *Habesh* eyalet was a line on a map and a charge on a treasury. Egypt wanted it: Khedive Isma'il's declared ambition was the whole African coast of the Red Sea and the Nile to its sources, pursued by annexation — Bogos and Keren in 1872, Darfur in 1874, the Somali coast to Ras Hafun and inland to Harar [31]. As an Ottoman vassal he cost the Porte nothing in form: the territory stayed inside the empire on paper while the expense of holding it moved to Cairo. And his dealings with Istanbul were transactional — in 1867 he obtained the Khedival title and a change in the law of succession in return for increased tribute and service, and the Red Sea cession belongs to that pattern of concessions bought from a financially pressed Porte [57]. The Suez Canal, open in 1869, was meanwhile making the shore worth holding to everyone except the power that had held it longest on paper.

Note what is absent from every line of that transaction. Ethiopia — whose highlands were the hinterland the port existed to serve, and whose emperors had administered the littoral through a *bahr negash* for four centuries — was not consulted, not compensated and not informed. Ten years later Egypt used Massawa

Table 2: The long record: Ethiopian states and the Red Sea coast, first century to 1890.

Period	Event	Significance
1st–3rd c.	The <i>Periplus of the Erythraean Sea</i> describes Adulis, on the Gulf of Zula, as the port of the Aksumite state	The earliest written record of this coast names it as the outlet of an Ethiopian kingdom [55]
4th c.	Ezana's inscriptions; Aksum coins in gold, silver and bronze; the coast and its trade are Aksumite	A Red-Sea power, not a landlocked one [56]
c. 520–525	King Kaleb crosses the Red Sea with a fleet and defeats Himyar in present-day Yemen	A state without ports, ships and a coast cannot mount an overseas expedition [55]
7th–11th c.	Islamic expansion shifts trade; Adulis declines; the Dahlak islands pass to a Muslim sultanate	Ethiopian <i>use</i> of the coast is interrupted; Ethiopian <i>claim</i> is not abandoned [58]
12th–15th c.	Medri Bahri, governed for the Ethiopian crown by the <i>bahr negash</i> , “ruler of the sea”, holds the coastal territories including Arkiko and Massawa	A standing Ethiopian administration of the coast, named for the sea itself [58]
1320s	Amda Seyon establishes hegemony on the Massawa coast; in 1328 he appoints a governor of the maritime provinces, <i>Ma'ikele Bahr</i>	Direct imperial administration of the littoral in the fourteenth century [31]
15th c.	Zara Yaqob formalises the office of <i>bahr negash</i> ; Ethiopian embassies to Europe sail from Massawa	The port functions as Ethiopia's door to the world [58]
1541	A Portuguese expedition lands at Massawa at the Ethiopian emperor's request to fight Imam Ahmad	In the sixteenth century the port is still entered on Ethiopia's invitation [31]
1557	Ottoman forces take Massawa and Arkiko; the <i>Habesh</i> province is created	Foreign control begins — and is confined to the shore, not the highlands [58]
1570s–1700s	Ottoman attempts to push inland are defeated; the <i>naibs</i> of Hergigo hold the port as intermediaries between Ottoman governors and Ethiopian authority	Occupation of a strip, contested continuously from the interior [58]
1769	James Bruce enters Ethiopia through Massawa with imperial authorisation	The route is still administered as Ethiopia's [58]
1846–1849	The Porte grants Massawa and Suakin to Muhammad Ali of Egypt; the grant lapses on his death in 1849 and the ports revert to Istanbul	Even the occupying power treats the shore as a leasehold to be handed about [57, 58]
1865–1866	The Porte cedes the African portion of the <i>Habesh</i> eyalet — Massawa and Suakin — to Khedive Isma'il of Egypt; it is formally incorporated into Egypt the following year	The coast passes between empires without Ethiopian consent, and within a decade is the base for an invasion of Ethiopia [57, 31]
1875–1876	Egyptian invasions are crushed by Emperor Yohannes at Gundet and Gura	Ethiopia fights for the coast, and wins, in living memory of the colonial partition [31]
1884	The Hewett Treaty with Britain and Egypt guarantees Ethiopia free transit through Massawa	Two foreign powers recognise an Ethiopian right of access
1885–1890	Italy occupies Massawa and proclaims the colony of Eritrea	The colonial entity is created; the claim it extinguishes is Ethiopia's



to invade her and was broken at Gundet and Gura [31]. The shore has changed hands repeatedly by arrangement among foreigners and not once by agreement with the nation whose hinterland it serves. 1993 is merely the latest instance.

That is also the answer to the argument now made in Asmara, which deserves an answer rather than a dismissal. The claim is that the eyalet settles the matter: three centuries administered from Istanbul and then Cairo, so the Italian colony of 1890 merely inherited a territory already separate. Separate history, therefore separate country, therefore the whole coast.

Concede what is true — Massawa and Arkiko were genuinely Ottoman from 1557 and genuinely Egyptian after 1865, a documented foreign administration of real duration [57] — and then look again at what was held. A customs strip at the water's edge; never the hinterland; run by intermediaries. Behind it lay Medri Bahri, governed for the Ethiopian crown by the *bahr negash*, “ruler of the sea”, an office filled by appointees of Ethiopian emperors for four centuries [58, 31]. An enclave on the shore and a province of the empire behind it are not the same fact, and the first cannot be made to stand for the second.

The southern coast is not even the same case. Assab and the Danakil formed no part of the eyalet, and whatever Egypt's brief reach there in the 1870s, Italy's title at Assab came from a shipping company that bought the bay in 1869 from local Afar chiefs [59]. Whatever the eyalet proves, it proves nothing about the coast from Doumeira to Tio.

So here is the concession, and it is not rhetorical. *Ethiopia need not claim Massawa*. The corridor demanded here stops at Tio — 190 km short of Massawa, its centre at Assab 457 km away — and stops there precisely because Massawa is where the case for a separate history is strongest. Let the enclave with the genuine pedigree keep it; I would sign that tomorrow.

Then answer the question. If the title rests on the eyalet, why does the eyalet deliver the rest of the sea? Why should an Ottoman customs post on one island harbour carry sovereign title to a littoral more than a thousand kilometres long, most of which Istanbul never administered and whose southern half is Afar country continuous with Ethiopia's own? An argument that establishes an enclave has been used to take a coastline. That is not history but a pedigree found afterwards for a possession acquired by other means — a European proclamation in 1890 and an Ethiopian faction in 1993.

4.3 The Doumeira–Rehyto–Beilul–Tio Corridor: the historical claim

The objective: the Doumeira–Rehyto–Beilul–Tio Corridor, with Assab at its centre. A sovereign coast running northward from the Doumeira Mountains at the Djibouti border through Rehyto, Assab and Beilul to Tio — some 325 km measured point to point and appreciably more along its indentations. This stretch commands the southern approaches to the Bab-el-Mandeb, connects directly to the Afar region and the Danakil, and has at its centre Assab, its only working deep-water port and the heart of its economic life. It would end single-corridor dependence on Djibouti, give Ethiopia deep-water port capacity and a maritime economic zone, and allow the nation to defend its own approaches. It is the minimum maritime geography that a state of Ethiopia's size requires [1].

Ethiopia's link to the sea is not a modern invention. The Axumite state traded through Adulis on the Gulf of Zula, one of the great ports of the ancient world, and commanded the Red Sea trade for centuries [31]. The southern coast — the Dankalia shore from the Doumeira Mountains at the Djibouti border through Rehyto, Assab and Beilul to Tio — is Afar country, continuous with Ethiopia's own Afar region and the Danakil hinterland [1]. Italy acquired Assab in the nineteenth century by purchase from local rulers, and a colonial treaty later fixed the boundary inland of that shore. A colonial bill of sale is a thin foundation on which to deny an African nation its outlet to the sea.

The three-hundred-year argument, and why it fails

Asmara's standard reply is that the coast was not in Ethiopian hands for three centuries: Massawa was Ottoman from the sixteenth century, then Egyptian, then Italian, and therefore never Ethiopia's to lose. The dates are broadly right. The conclusion does not follow, for four reasons.



First, the coast was Ethiopian before it was anyone else's. Aksum's power ran to Adulis on the Gulf of Zula. After Aksum, the coastal highlands were governed for the Ethiopian crown by an official whose very title was "ruler of the sea" — the *bahr negash* — attested from the twelfth century and formalised under Zara Yaqob in the fifteenth. The province he governed, Medri Bahri, held the coastal territories including Arkiko and Massawa until they were lost to the Ottomans in 1557. Emperor Amda Seyon established his hegemony on the Massawa coast in the 1320s and in 1328 appointed a governor of the maritime provinces under the title *Ma'ikele Bahr*, the lands between the seas. Ethiopia did not wander down to the Red Sea in 1952. It was pushed off a shore it had administered for centuries (basis: standard historical record).

Second, occupation does not extinguish title — and the occupiers themselves knew it. Ottoman and later Egyptian control of the ports was contested continuously from the interior: the wars of the sixteenth century, the blockades of the eighteenth, the Egyptian invasions crushed by Emperor Yohannes at Gundet in 1875 and Gura in 1876. When the Khedive took Massawa in the 1860s, his administration invented the title *naib al-bahr*, "deputy of the sea", modelled directly on the Ethiopian *bahr negash* — an occupying power borrowing the vocabulary of the sovereign it was displacing. Britain and Egypt themselves acknowledged Ethiopia's stake in the Hewett Treaty of 1884, which guaranteed Ethiopia free transit through Massawa. A claim that is fought for, negotiated over and imitated by its occupiers for three hundred years is not an abandoned claim. It is a suppressed one.

Third, there has never been an independent Eritrean state. Before 1890 the territory was a patchwork: Ethiopian highland provinces under the *bahr negash*, Ottoman and Egyptian garrisons on the shore, Afar sultanates in the south. "Eritrea" is the name Italy gave its colony in 1890, drawn from the Latin for the Red Sea. Every Eritrean claim to the whole littoral therefore rests on the colonial boundary — which is precisely the boundary an anti-colonial argument cannot consecrate.

Fourth, the law of decolonisation placed that coast inside Ethiopia. When the Italian colonies were disposed of, the United Nations did not create an Eritrean state. By General Assembly resolution 390 A (V) of 2 December 1950, Eritrea was constituted an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown, and the federation took effect in 1952. That was Eritrea's decolonisation, and its outcome was union. The Organisation of African Unity's Charter of 1963 then bound its members to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each state, and its Cairo resolution of 1964 froze the borders existing at independence — which, for Ethiopia, meant a state that included the coast. What happened in 1993 was therefore not the belated decolonisation of an Italian possession. It was the secession of a province from an independent African state, accomplished after a faction had taken Addis Ababa.

The Eritrean case at its strongest — in its own authors' words

It is fair to take the Eritrean claim from its most serious advocates rather than from slogans. The standard scholarly account holds that Eritrea is a modern political nation produced by fifty years of Italian rule, which assembled nine language groups into one administrative entity, created an urban working class and an elite, and gave them a common experience distinct from the Ethiopian interior [59, 60]. On this reading, the 1950 federation was imposed on an emerging nation, the 1962 annexation destroyed it, and the thirty-year war and the referendum of 1993 completed a decolonisation that the United Nations had interrupted. Bereket Habte Selassie, the principal legal architect of independent Eritrea, puts the foundation plainly: Eritrean nationalism rests on the creation of the territory as an Italian colonial state, and its identity as a nation was defined by the boundaries Italy drew when it declared the colony in January 1890 [62, 61].

That sentence is the whole case, and it is also its weakness. Three facts follow from it.

One. The claim is colonial in origin, by its own account. A title to 1,150 kilometres of African coast that begins with an Italian proclamation in 1890 is not an anti-colonial title. It is the colonial boundary itself, promoted to a birthright. Ethiopia's claim is older than the colony that interrupted it, as Table 2 shows.

Two. The separate national consciousness is contested by the same literature. Tekeste Negash, the most cited historian of Italian rule, concludes that colonialism produced no Eritrean nationalism but at most an inchoate sense of separateness, and that the open political debate of 1946–49 revealed the absence of a settled national consciousness [59]. Alemseged Abbay describes a staggering towards nationhood full of



linguistic, religious and ethnic ambiguities [60]. Ruth Iyob records that the Unionist Party commanded wide support, particularly in the highlands [32]. A nation genuinely formed by 1950 would not have needed to argue with itself about whether it existed.

Three. The interruption argument cuts the other way. If three centuries of Ottoman and Egyptian occupation did not extinguish Ethiopia’s title — and no one argues that occupation created an Ottoman nation on that shore — then fifty years of Italian rule cannot have created a permanent and exclusive one either. Occupation transfers control; it does not manufacture title.

None of this denies that Eritreans today constitute a people with a state. It denies the leap from a colonial boundary to an exclusive and permanent title over the entire littoral of the Horn’s largest nation.

Two conclusions follow, and I want to be exact about both. The first is that Eritrean statehood as such is not what I contest; my quarrel is with the proposition that a state of some three and a half million people holds exclusive title to roughly 1,150 kilometres of mainland coast — more than two thousand counting its islands — while its neighbour of 130 million is left with none. The second is that this outcome was avoidable. Had the question been settled by a legitimate, elected Ethiopian government negotiating with the EPLF, Eritrean independence and Ethiopian sovereign access to the sea could have been agreed together, as the two halves of one settlement. Instead an unelected transitional administration, dominated by the faction that had fought alongside the beneficiary, conceded the whole coast and asked for nothing. That is the specific wrong this article asks to be reopened — by negotiation, and with Eritreans as neighbours rather than enemies.

Table 3: How the coast was lost and how it became a security question.

Year	Event	Significance
1890	Italy proclaims the colony of Eritrea, having acquired Assab earlier by purchase and treaty	The coast becomes a colonial holding, not an Ethiopian cession by consent
1908	Italo-Ethiopian convention fixes the Dankalia boundary inland of the coast	The colonial line later relied upon to deny Ethiopia the shore
1952	Eritrea federated with Ethiopia under United Nations resolution	The coast re-enters the Ethiopian state through an international process
1961–62	Armed struggle begins with external Arab patronage; the federation is dissolved	A grave imperial error meets an externally sponsored insurgency [32, 33]
1991	EPLF and TPLF, wartime allies, take Asmara and Addis Ababa; the transitional arrangements accept an Eritrean referendum	The nation’s coast is disposed of by a faction, with no Ethiopian vote and no terms on access [34]
1993	Referendum; independence; UN membership	Formal legality secured; Ethiopian consent never sought
1998–2000	Border war; Ethiopian trade shifts from Assab to Djibouti	Dependence on a single foreign corridor begins
2015	UAE builds a base at Assab on a 30-year lease and uses it for the Yemen war	The coast becomes a foreign launching pad [20]
2024	Somaliland memorandum (January); Egypt–Eritrea–Somalia summit in Asmara (October)	A regional alignment against Ethiopia takes formal shape [22]
2025–26	Abiy calls the loss of Assab a mistake to be corrected, then seeks mediation; Eritrea calls the claim a pretext	The claim is revived by a government that cannot unite the nation behind it [23, 27, 26]

4.4 Self-defence before commerce: the launching pad

The second ground is stronger than the first, because it concerns the future rather than the past. Eritrea is small, and nobody — Asmara included — knows how small. It has never conducted a national census: not as a colony, not as a federated unit, not in thirty-three years of independence. Every figure is a projection resting on a projection, and the spread is the point: the United Nations says about 3.5 million, COMESA about 6.7 million [18, 17]. More telling still, in one revision the UN cut its own Eritrean estimate by some 1.8 million, about 34 per cent, with no count having taken place in the interval [18]. Lower figures circulate in the diaspora press; I cannot verify them and the argument does not need them.



The direction of travel is not in dispute. Roughly half a million Eritreans were registered refugees by end-2018 [19], and the UN's own series records net outflows of some 246,000 between 2010 and 2015 and 199,000 between 2015 and 2020 [18] — extraordinary proportions against any of the competing estimates, for a country at peace, and the cause is uncontested: indefinite national service, which the young escape by leaving. A regime that cannot count its citizens is losing the generation that would be asked to defend it.

That is the vulnerability, and it is Ethiopia's problem before anyone else's. A state with a thousand kilometres of coast, a hollowing population and no count of its own people cannot hold that shore alone. It must rent it — and the emptier it grows, the cheaper the rent and the smaller its say in who the tenant is. A hollow state on a strategic shore does not stay neutral; it becomes somebody's platform. Ethiopia's adversaries worked that out a decade ago. From September 2015 the United Arab Emirates built a port facility and expanded the airfield at Assab under a thirty-year lease, using the base to move heavy weapons and troops into the Yemen war [20]; satellite imagery showed shelters there for long-endurance drones [21]. Assab lies roughly 70 kilometres from Yemen [20] and only some 60–70 from the Ethiopian border [26, 27]. A base that projected air power across the sea can project it across the land.

Nor is the alignment in doubt; it has been formalised and then enlarged. On 10 October 2024 the presidents of Egypt, Eritrea and Somalia met in Asmara to deepen security cooperation, a summit analysts read as formalising an anti-Ethiopian alliance [22]; Egypt has since reinforced both and insisted that only littoral states should control Red-Sea access [30].

Then, on 4 October 2026 — one day after Mekelle changed hands and three days after Ethiopia severed relations with Asmara and expelled an Egyptian diplomat — the trilateral became a quadrilateral. Sisi received Isaias Afwerki, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and General al-Burhan at New Alamein, and the four issued a joint declaration [28, 29]. Sudan had been added. Setting Djibouti and Kenya aside, every neighbour that matters to the sea was in one room.

Read what they agreed, and note that Ethiopia is not named once. Governance of the Red Sea, the four declared, is the exclusive responsibility of its littoral states [28, 29]. They rejected unilateral measures harming downstream Nile water quotas — the dam unnamed. They rejected recognition of, or security arrangements with, Somaliland — the 2024 memorandum unnamed. They affirmed Sudan's sovereignty against foreign support for mercenaries — the accusation against Addis Ababa unnamed. Four clauses, four Ethiopian interests, no mention of Ethiopia. And they agreed on periodic summits and an executive mechanism to monitor implementation [28]: a standing institution, not a communiqué.

That is the most important sentence written about the Red Sea in a decade, and Ethiopians have barely noticed it. A state is not being argued out of the Red Sea; it is being *defined* out of it. The littoral formula accuses Ethiopia of nothing, has no case to prove, and cannot be answered by any speech, grievance or appeal to history, because it is not a claim about conduct but about geography — and on geography as it stands Ethiopia loses automatically. There is one reply to a definitional exclusion: stop satisfying the definition. A nation standing between Doumeira and Tio is a littoral state and the El Alamein sentence then includes it. A nation that is not there will be governed by that sentence for a generation, and will have agreed to it by absence.

Note the company it keeps, because that measures the achievement. Sudan's army accuses Ethiopia of hosting the paramilitaries it fights; Eritrea is accused of arming Ethiopia's rebels; Somalia was in open rupture over Somaliland. States with little in common and several quarrels among themselves — and the one interest that assembled them was Ethiopia. Asmara, for its part, rejects the charge and calls the sea claim a pretext [25, 26], while analysts judge full war unlikely but escalating proxy clashes more likely [24]. While Ethiopia fought itself at Mekelle, four of its neighbours spent the following afternoon drafting the rule that locks it out of the water.

Now set that beside the drone arithmetic. Through the Afar region run the road and the electrified railway that carry the nation's trade to Djibouti — in a crisis, its only lifeline. A hostile air base on the Dankalia shore would sit minutes of flight from both. Such a coast is not a neighbour's beach; it is a runway pointed at us. That is why the sea is self-defence before it is commerce: a nation whose lifeline runs through one foreign corridor, and whose nearest coast can be leased to its adversaries, does not control its own fate.



4.5 The trigger has already been pulled: Eritrea's armed attack and Article 51

Ethiopians discuss self-defence as a future question: *if* Eritrea attacks, *then* Ethiopia may lawfully respond. That framing is years out of date. The attack has occurred, it is continuing, and the right it creates has already accrued.

Four facts, each on the record and none denied by anyone who matters. Eritrean regular forces entered Ethiopian territory in 2020 and elements remain on Ethiopian soil in north-eastern Tigray in defiance of Pretoria, Ethiopia's own foreign ministry having demanded a withdrawal that has not happened. The Prime Minister told Parliament in February 2026 that Eritrean forces committed mass killings of Ethiopian citizens during the Tigray war, the massacres at Axum among them — the head of the Ethiopian government, in the Ethiopian Parliament, describing an armed attack on Ethiopian nationals by a neighbouring state's army. Addis Ababa told the United Nations in October 2025 that Asmara finances and directs an Ethiopian armed movement, and accuses it of coordinating the seven-party alliance now in the field [88, 71]. And on 1 October 2026 Ethiopia expelled ten Eritrean diplomats, Eritrea severed relations outright, and the Chief of General Staff named Eritrea among the states arming the rebels [65, 67].

Now the law, and it is more favourable to Ethiopia than our diplomats behave as though it were — but only if the two grounds are kept apart, because Ethiopian commentary habitually argues the weaker one and leaves the stronger unused.

The primary ground requires no attribution at all. Article 51 preserves “the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member” [110]. Another state's regular army on Ethiopian soil, against the will of the Ethiopian government, is not an inference or an allegation: it is an armed attack by a state, conducted by its own uniformed forces, continuing today and admitted on all sides. Nothing need be proved about anyone's intentions. The trigger is not something Ethiopia awaits; it is something Ethiopia has lived under for five years while protesting in communiqués.

The secondary ground concerns the proxies, and it is the one that carries a burden of proof. The General Assembly's Definition of Aggression counts among acts of aggression “the sending by or on behalf of a State of armed bands, groups, irregulars or mercenaries” which carry out armed force of such gravity as to amount to a regular armed attack [103], and the International Court of Justice in *Nicaragua* treated that formulation as declaratory of customary law. The same judgment, however, set a demanding standard for attributing the acts of irregulars to a foreign state [106]. That cuts both ways and Ethiopians should understand which way it cuts: the customary status of Article 3(g) helps us, and the attribution threshold is a burden on us. Meeting it requires a published dossier — documents, intercepts, prisoners' testimony, financial trails — laid before the African Union and the Security Council.

So the two grounds must be argued in the right order, and Addis Ababa has been arguing them in the wrong one. Lead with the occupation, which is uncontested and needs no dossier. Let the proxy case follow as aggravation, supported by evidence, and let it carry no weight the primary ground does not already bear. An advocate who leads with the harder argument has chosen to be refuted.

This is also the answer to the charge that Ethiopia would be repeating Badme. In 1998 the party that moved had a map and no grievance, and the Claims Commission said so. Ethiopia today has a foreign army on its territory, a documented proxy campaign against its government, and a sea claim with a foundation in the United Nations' own 1950 disposition of the Italian colony. The two cases are not comparable, and Ethiopia should stop arguing as though they were.

So here is the sequence, stated plainly, because evasion on this point has cost us thirty years. Self-defence lawfully permits Ethiopia to strike the force attacking it and to take and hold the ground from which that attack is sustained and supplied. That ground is the Doumeira–Rehyto–Beilul–Tio Corridor. Ethiopia should therefore *secure* the corridor; *hold* it; *negotiate* from it — offering from the first day a treaty with a demarcated border, an end to proxy war, compensation for Axum and the ordinary goods of neighbourliness; and, if Asmara will not sign, *incorporate* it.

Be exact about the legal footing, because the objection is coming. Ethiopia's title to that coast does not derive from the use of force and must never be argued as though it did: force alone confers no title, as the Declaration on Friendly Relations states and as Ethiopia itself has relied upon [108]. The title derives



from a right that was never lawfully surrendered. The United Nations recognised Ethiopia's legitimate need for adequate access to the sea when it disposed of Italy's colony in 1950; it federated the territory under the Ethiopian Crown in 1952; that federation was destroyed in 1962; and in 1993 an unelected transitional authority accepted a partition on which the Ethiopian people were never consulted. *Self-defence supplies the lawful occasion to recover possession. The pre-existing right supplies the title. A treaty would supply the recognition* — and if recognition is withheld, Ethiopia holds what is hers and says so.

The world will call the final step annexation. Ethiopia's answer should be that a nation does not annex its own coast; it recovers it — and that it accepts the diplomatic consequences, because the alternative is to remain the only country of a hundred and thirty million people on earth that consented to permanent dependence on a neighbour's goodwill for its access to the sea. The cost of the consequences is finite and it can be paid. The cost of the dependence has been paid already, for thirty years, in corridor fees, in strategic impotence, and in the blood of a proxy war fought on Ethiopian soil by an adversary who knows Ethiopia will not reach him.

4.6 There is no number to call: self-help, and who decides

Suppose every proposition above is sound. Who enforces it? To whom does a landlocked state of 130 million apply when a neighbour occupies its territory, arms its rebels and signs a declaration shutting it out of the sea? **There is no number to call.** No emergency service, no bailiff, no duty officer: the states system has courts without constables and a Council with a veto, and no state has recovered anything of consequence by waiting for it.

That is not cynicism; it is in the Charter. Article 51 calls the right *inherent* — existing before the Charter and independently of it — and preserves it “until the Security Council has taken the measures necessary” [110]. The clause is an admission: the drafters knew the Council might be vetoed or take years, and declined to make a nation's survival wait on it. The right is not a licence the Council issues but one its failure leaves standing.

And judgement, when it comes, arrives late and tracks interest rather than merit. The scholarship records that the norm against acquiring territory by force has genuinely hardened since 1945 [104]; the practice records selective enforcement. Kuwait was liberated in 1991 because a coalition with its own reasons chose to liberate it. Northern Cyprus has been held since 1974 by a NATO member at little cost. Western Sahara has been held since 1975, and since 2020 the occupier's claim has gathered recognition rather than lost it. The Golan annexation of 1981 was condemned and then recognised by the principal power of the age in 2019. Goa was taken by force in 1961 and is unremarkable today. Law is not irrelevant; it is the language in which outcomes are ratified, and the outcomes are decided elsewhere.

But the same honesty cuts at us. In every case where a territorial change stuck, the actor held what Ethiopia does not: a great-power shield, a veto, or an alliance making reversal costlier than acceptance. Ethiopia has one contingent partner and four neighbours who met at New Alamein. So the realist argument does not conclude “law is weak, therefore act”. It concludes something harder: *law will not decide this. Capability, cohesion and patronage will* — which is an argument for building all three first, and the reason the settlement in Section 5 is a military precondition and not a moral preface.

Set out the preconditions, then, and mark the one we lack.

- *A lawful trigger.* Present, continuing, and uncontested — a foreign army on Ethiopian soil (Section 4.5).
- *A defined and limited objective.* The Doumeira–Rehyto–Beilul–Tio Corridor, stopping at Tio, with Mas-sawa expressly not claimed. Bounded, publishable, and verifiable by anyone with a map.
- *A perishable regional window.* The patrons who would restrain Ethiopia are consumed by their own wars, and that will not last.
- *Capability in the one domain that decides a coastal campaign.* Ethiopia holds a decisive advantage in the air over any Horn state.
- *Hinterland and population continuity.* The corridor is Afar country whose people and hinterland lie overwhelmingly inside Ethiopia, which is what distinguishes recovery from conquest.



• *A settled house. We do not have it.* Four internal fronts, a seven-party alliance in the field, a currency that has lost most of its value and a cabinet that cannot refuse an instruction. This series has argued from its first article that a divided house cannot hold a coast, and that argument does not suspend itself when the prize is in view.

Five of six is not a plan; it is a temptation. A state that moves on the sixth unmet does not recover a corridor — it opens a fifth front and hands the Alliance for Survival the recruiting argument of a generation. The right has accrued and the window is open. The instrument is not ready, and making it ready is the most urgent military task Ethiopia has, not a separate civilian one.

4.7 Why Ethiopians do not believe in collective security

Our scepticism of the international community is not theoretical. It is the founding Ethiopian experience of the twentieth century, and no Ethiopian argument about sovereignty is intelligible without it.

On 3 October 1935 Italy invaded a founding member of the League of Nations. The League voted sanctions, exempted oil and abandoned them by July 1936; while Ethiopians were bombed and gassed, the foreign ministers of Britain and France negotiated the Hoare–Laval pact to hand Italy the greater part of the country, and it collapsed only because it leaked. On 30 June 1936 the Emperor stood before the Assembly at Geneva and told the organisation what it had done to itself: *it is us today; it will be you tomorrow* [105]. Three years later it was them.

Then came a United Nations which recognised Ethiopia’s legitimate need for the sea in 1950, watched the federation it built destroyed in 1962 and did nothing, and in 1993 treated the partition of a member state as the completion of a decolonisation it had already concluded. A nation taught three times that the system will not protect it is not reckless to decline a fourth. It is empirical.

So let me state my own position without hedging, since it is mine and not the law’s. I accept the Eritrean state and do not take it back. What I do not accept is that it holds valid sovereign title to the Doumeira–Rehyto–Beilul–Tio Corridor. That title was never lawfully surrendered, because the Ethiopian nation was never asked. A coast detached from its hinterland by an Italian proclamation, confirmed by a European map and ratified by a faction with no Ethiopian mandate is not Eritrean by right. It is Eritrean by possession — and possession is a fact, which facts can change, while right is a different matter on which Ethiopia’s is the better claim. I would rather see it recovered by treaty, and have said on every page what Ethiopia should offer for one. But a nation that lets others decide whether it may reach the sea is not being prudent; it is being governed from abroad, as we have been on this question since 1993, by consent we never gave.

4.8 Peace, and how the claim must be pursued

Unity and sovereignty are the Foundations because they are the surest guarantors of peace: a nation at one with itself and secure on its coast gives its neighbours no opening and its adversaries no lever. Peace is not a separate interest but what the Foundations produce. So Ethiopians should never again take up arms against one another — no region, people or party is an enemy to be defeated — and if Ethiopians must ever fight, it must be for the sovereignty of the nation and above all its outlet to the sea.

Legitimacy must then be matched by discipline. The order of priority is clear: first, a portfolio of maritime outlets so that no single corridor is decisive; second, negotiated sovereign access on the Doumeira–Rehyto–Beilul–Tio Corridor, with Assab at its centre, through the international mediation Ethiopia has itself requested [27]; and third — the trigger for which has already been pulled (Section 4.5) — the nation’s inherent right of self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter [110], exercised to secure and hold the corridor, to negotiate from it, and to incorporate it if no treaty is signed. Ethiopia should exhaust every peaceful means. But peaceful priority is not peaceful exclusivity [1]: a nation that renounces force in advance has already surrendered the negotiation. Force remains the last resort of national self-defence — never the first instrument, never aimed at Eritreans as a people, and never at our own citizens. What it must never be is a bargaining chip traded away for a transit fee: Ethiopia owes Eritrea nothing in exchange for an outlet it never lawfully surrendered.



Pillar 2. The sea is legitimate, and it is self-defence. The objective is the Doumeira–Rehyto–Beilul–Tio Corridor, with Assab at its centre. The coast was surrendered without the nation’s consent, and it now sits in the hands of a state whose army stands on Ethiopian soil and whose proxies are in the field against Ethiopia — a continuing armed attack that has already triggered Ethiopia’s right under Article 51. Ethiopia must recover sovereign access: peacefully first, though peaceful priority is not peaceful exclusivity; and failing a treaty, by securing the corridor, holding it, negotiating from it and incorporating it.

5 Why a Divided House Cannot Hold the Coast

Consider Ethiopia’s position as an adversary would. North-east, Eritrea holds Assab close to the border and has hosted foreign forces. East, Djibouti carries the bulk of Ethiopian trade through a single corridor. South-east, Somalia has aligned with Egypt and Eritrea since the Somaliland memorandum. West, Sudan’s war spills over; north, Egypt contests the Nile and courts every neighbour; across the water the Gulf powers and Turkey compete for ports and bases [30].

Every one of those pressures enters by the same door: Ethiopia’s internal fault-line. Egypt need not fight over the GERD if Ethiopians fight each other; Asmara need not defeat the Ethiopian army if it can keep Tigray and Amhara aflame; the Gulf’s bidders need not choose Ethiopia’s rulers if its regions choose patrons of their own. Permissive disorder is the cheapest weapon in the corridor [3].

This is where the two pillars meet. A government that bombs its own villages cannot ask those villages to march for the coast, and a party that speaks for a fraction cannot negotiate for the whole. Four trajectories follow: the present order drifts on, with the sea hostage to Djibouti and Asmara; or internal wars link up with external patrons and refugees flow towards the Gulf and Europe; or the secession clause is invoked in practice and the Horn’s largest state becomes its largest vacuum; or Ethiopians replace the **Constitution**, form a government beyond ethnic parties and pursue the coast as one nation. Only the last is a choice.

Warning. The drone has shortened every timeline. A fracture that once took a decade of attrition can now be forced in a season. The command centres that the enemies of Adwa never reached are within reach of a few thousand dollars of airframe. A divided house will not be given the time it had in 1896, in 1941 or in 1991.

6 Resist It as We Resisted Italy

A government that will not abandon ethnic entrepreneurship, will not replace the ethnic-based **Constitution** and will not unite the nation behind sovereign access to the sea must be resisted with the resolve our grandfathers brought to Adwa. That sentence needs unpacking, because it is doing two different jobs and only one of them is a call to action.

6.1 What Adwa actually was

Adwa was not won by numbers or better weapons. It was won because a fractured country decided, for one season, to behave as one. Menelik called the levy and the regions answered — Shewa, Gojjam, Tigray, Wello, Harar, Oromo and Amhara contingents, Orthodox and Muslim, under one command. The campaign was financed at home, the intelligence was Ethiopian, and the political objective was defined before the first shot: not plunder, not the destruction of Italy, but the annulment of a treaty that would have made Ethiopia a protectorate. Victory was followed within months by a negotiation and a recognised border.

Four things made that work, and each of them translates.

One, a single national purpose. Nobody marched for a region’s claim. If the opposition today marches for Amhara interests, Tigrayan interests or Oromo interests, it has already lost the argument that matters, because the thing it claims to be fighting — a **Constitution** that allocates everything by group — will simply be inherited and re-used by the winner.



Two, legitimacy before force. Menelik spent years exhausting the diplomatic route, and when war came the world could see who had broken the agreement. An Ethiopian movement today that cannot show it tried every political and legal route first will be read, at home and abroad, as one more faction seeking the palace.

Three, a defined political objective. Adwa had one: tear up the Treaty of Wuchale. The modern equivalent is equally concrete: tear up the ethnic-based **Constitution** and replace it with a **Constitution** of citizens. “Remove Abiy” is not an objective; it is a vacancy.

Four, a settlement after the victory. Adwa ended in a treaty, not in a permanent emergency. Any Ethiopian resistance worth supporting must publish, in advance, what it will sign.

6.2 What it does not mean

Menelik’s army faced an invading foreign power. What must be defeated now is a constitutional order and the class that farms it, and that enemy has no front line. You cannot shoot a **Constitution**. Such orders are destroyed by methods that leave a country standing: refusing to organise or fund anything by ethnicity; documenting every crime by every party, so no community can be told it alone has suffered; building a cross-regional movement that offers citizens more than their cadres do; drafting the replacement **Constitution** in public, before power changes hands; and making the racket’s beneficiaries visible to their own people. These are not soft instruments. They are the only ones that have ever retired a political order without installing a worse one.

So the resistance I am calling for has three rules, and the implications of each should be stated plainly.

It is national, not ethnic. In practice: no ethnic party deserves a vote, a birr or a platform — including the ones that claim to speak for my own community. A movement organised by group is the **Constitution** wearing opposition colours.

It is lawful and evidential. In practice: the case file matters more than the brigade. A record of crimes kept scrupulously on all sides, carried to the African Commission, the United Nations and eventually the International Criminal Court [109], is what strips a government of its last defence — that its opponents are no better than it is.

It takes no side among the ethnic entrepreneurs. Abiy Ahmed, Zemene Kassie, Debretsion Gebremichael, Jal Marro and whoever succeeds them are variations of a single type: each holds a constituency defined by descent, each claims a territory in a people’s name, each finances himself from that claim, and each needs an enemy of another descent to keep his place. They differ in uniform, vocabulary and foreign patron, not in kind, because they compete for the same prize under the same rule-book. In practice: retire the trade rather than crown a better practitioner of it — remove these men from political life by lawful means, try those against whom there is evidence of crimes, and rehabilitate the rest as ordinary citizens under a **Constitution** that gives no one a people to own.

It keeps one exception for arms. In practice: the defence of the nation and of its outlet to the sea. Against our own people, never. That rule disqualifies a great deal of what is currently being done in Ethiopia’s name, by the government and by its armed opponents alike, and it is meant to.

The implication is uncomfortable but simple. If you are Ethiopian and want this order ended, the most useful things you can do are not martial: withhold money and legitimacy from every ethnic entrepreneur, insist that the **Constitution** — not the man — is the target, and support the one cause for which Ethiopians may lawfully take up arms, the nation’s defence and its sovereign access to the sea.

6.3 Proud of our diversity — and not at that price

Ethiopia’s diversity is not a problem to be managed. It is one of the oldest and richest in the world, and no serious Ethiopian wants it flattened. The question is what guarantees it.

The 1995 answer was to make each group a sovereign unit with a territory, a language of administration and a right to leave. Thirty years on, the result is not flourishing diversity but diversity weaponised: a Gumuz or Somali or Amhara farmer’s safety now depends on which region he stands in and which cadre runs it, and a child’s schooling depends on the politics of a regional bureau, in a country where barely three in five adults can read [49]. Group sovereignty has protected elites, not cultures.



A citizens' **Constitution** protects both better. Language and faith become individual rights, exercisable anywhere in the country, and local self-government handles local affairs without owning the people who live there. The Oromo farmer in Gondar and the Amhara trader in Jimma hold the same rights as at home. Diversity survives; the licence to own land, office and fear in a people's name does not.

That is the trade on offer, and it is not a trade against diversity. It is a trade against the racket that sells diversity to us at the price of our freedom, our unity and our economy.

7 The Strongest Objections, Laid to Rest

An argument is only as strong as the objections it survives. I state each at its strongest, concede what is true, and show where it fails. If any holds, this article falls with it. Each has been worked through across the thirteen articles that precede this one [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 69], and I cite them as a record the reader can check rather than as authority.

A note on the author, since it will be raised

Every article in this series produces the same postbag, and the two halves are identical in temperature. To one camp I am pro-Abiy for crediting the dam, the releases of 2018 and the fact that drones stopped a march on the capital in 2021. To the other I am an enemy of the state for calling the strikes on villages crimes and asking that the chain of command answer in law [69]. Few letters engage a citation; they assign a side, then abuse it.

The abuse is bearable — a writer who cannot take it should choose another trade. The waste is not: a reader who rejects one paragraph discards the other twenty, and the reasoning goes out with them. That reflex is the racket's cheapest defence, costing the government and its armed opponents nothing while sparing both the only thing either fears, which is an argument conducted on evidence. Both charges come from one method applied without a side: state the claim, cite a checkable source, concede the opposing case, and let the conclusion fall where the evidence puts it. I have condemned the alliance's strikes on airports and the capital in the same breath as the government's [64], and recorded Fano's abuses alongside the state's [36]. My loyalty is to Ethiopia and to Ethiopians — all of them, whatever their ethnicity, religion, gender or politics — and to the proposition that the citizen is sovereign and the group is not.

7.1 “The Oromummaa charge is ethnic slander dressed as analysis”

At full strength. The most developed scholarship says the opposite of what the unionist opposition says. Asafa Jalata, who defined Oromummaa, argues that Abiy has waged ideological warfare *on* it and built a neo-*neftegna* order [52]; his break with Team Lemma signalled a unitarist *Ethiopiawinet* to Oromo elites [53]. His army has fought the OLA since 2018, bombed Oromo farmers in Wollega and jailed Oromo leaders. On that evidence the charge is inverted — and inverted charges against a people are how pogroms begin.

What is true. All of it, as a description of what Oromo nationalists believe and of what has been done to them. Any version of my argument that treats “Oromo” and “this government” as interchangeable is false and dangerous, and I reject it.

Why it fails to rescue the government. It refutes a claim I do not make. I do not say this government serves the Oromo people; I say it was built on one regional machine, governs through it, and is licensed by the **Constitution** — all of which is compatible with every fact Jalata cites. A party-state can persecute the nationalists of the community whose cadres it promotes, and must, because armed nationalists are its only rivals for that community's loyalty. The test is not the ruler's ethnicity but the structure: does the system reward whoever captures the centre with power to distribute land, office and security by group? Under Articles 8, 39, 46 and 49 it does [111]. That is why this article indicts a machine, and why the Oromo farmer in Wollega, the Amhara farmer in Gojjam and the Tigrayan child in Hintalo stand on the same side of it [11, 69].

7.2 “Eritrean independence was lawful, and the matter is closed”

At full strength. A serious legal position with three legs. The 1950 federation was imposed on a people never asked, and the 1962 annexation destroyed even that. Thirty years of war and the referendum of April 1993



— monitored, carried by over 99 per cent — supplied the consent the 1950s denied. And Ethiopia’s own government recognised the result, the UN admitted Eritrea, a hundred states followed, and the African rule of inherited colonial borders fixes the boundary where Italy drew it. Eritrean scholarship adds that fifty years of Italian rule produced a distinct nation, defined by the colonial boundaries of January 1890 [62, 61].

What is true. The 1962 annexation was unlawful and foolish, and manufactured the war it meant to prevent. The referendum happened and its result was not in doubt. Recognition is real, and Eritreans owe nobody an apology for their statehood.

Why it fails. Each leg carries a hidden step.

Decolonisation assumes Eritrea entered the post-war era undisposed. It did not: resolution 390 A (V) federated the territory with Ethiopia under the Crown, and that *was* the decolonisation of the Italian colony in law [107]. The 1962 annexation breached that settlement — and the remedy for a breached federation is restoration, not partition of the state. By 1993 the boundary Ethiopia carried into African independence already included the coast, so the inherited-borders rule, properly applied, protects Ethiopia’s 1952 boundary at least as much as Italy’s 1890 line.

Consent proves less than it claims. The referendum asked Eritrean residents only. No Ethiopian was asked whether the nation should surrender its entire coastline, and no elected Ethiopian body ratified it: the decision was taken by a transitional administration formed in July 1991 and dominated by the wartime ally of the beneficiary [34]. Two parties had an interest; one voted; and the one that voted conceded nothing in return — no port, no transit regime, nothing.

Colonial identity is self-defeating. If Eritrean nationhood rests on boundaries Italy proclaimed in 1890 [62], the title to the littoral is a colonial title, not an anti-colonial one. The same literature undercuts the premise: Tekeste Negash finds no Eritrean nationalism under Italian rule but at most an inchoate separateness [59]; Alemseged Abbay describes a staggering towards nationhood full of ambiguities [60]; Ruth Iyob records the Unionist Party’s wide highland support [32]. And the interruption argument cuts both ways — as Section 4.3 shows at length, if three centuries of Ottoman and Egyptian presence created no title on that shore, fifty years of Italian rule cannot have created a permanent and exclusive one.

What follows is set out in Sections 4.5–4.8 and not repeated here. In one line: Ethiopia owes Eritrea nothing for an outlet it never lawfully surrendered, and those who say the matter is closed should explain why a bargain struck by an unelected faction binds a hundred and thirty million people in perpetuity.

7.3 “This is Amhara nationalism with a citizen’s vocabulary”

At full strength. Calls for a unitary citizen state have historically served one community’s language, church and administrative class; “Ethiopiawinet” has meant Amharisation before. When a writer attacks ethnic federalism, invokes Adwa and demands the coast, the suspicion is not unreasonable.

What is true. Amharic was the sole language of administration, courts and schools, and that burdened every child who did not grow up speaking it. Publishing and liturgy in other languages were restricted in various periods. The memory of that burden is one reason the 1995 settlement was accepted, and anyone proposing to replace it must answer that memory rather than dismiss it.

What is not true, and should stop being conceded. That the imperial state set out to extinguish its peoples’ cultures. Their music, dance, dress and religious calendars were performed, broadcast and carried into the national repertoire, and state radio broadcast in several major languages as the means allowed. Nor was advancement closed by descent: Tafari Makonnen School and its successors recruited promising children from every province, and their graduates became ministers, ambassadors, generals and senior civil servants from every corner of the country. A state intending cultural extinction does not train the sons of the periphery to run it.

Nor was that government an ethnic monolith, and the names are on the record. The Emperor was born at Ejersa Goro in Harerghe with Oromo ancestry through his mother; Yilma Deressa, of the Wellega Oromo nobility, was his finance minister and an architect of the modern fiscal state; Fitawrari Habte Giorgis Dinagde, an Oromo, had been minister of war and the strongest man of the preceding reign; General Jagama Kello rose to the top of the army, as did the Eritrean General Aman Mikael Andom. The scholarship describes



a class recruited by patronage, service and marriage into the Shewan aristocracy rather than by ethnic exclusion — assimilationist in culture, but not closed by descent [86, 87]. Two different charges, and only the first survives.

The same correction applies to the Derg, now routinely called an “Amhara government”. It was a Marxist junta: its first chairman an Eritrean, Aman Mikael Andom; its second Brigadier General Tafari Benti, an Oromo officer; and Mengistu Haile Mariam, whose origins are given variously as Wolayita or Konso, was no product of the Shewan nobility. It killed Amhara students by the thousand in the Red Terror, starved Wollo and Tigray alike, and executed sixty of the imperial officials now posthumously enlisted as proof of Amhara rule.

None of which absolves the Amhara elite. The nobility, the landed church and the Shewan political class ran a state that kept their own peasantry illiterate and hungry, and defended their privileges as fiercely as any cadre defends a quota. The charge against them is this series’ charge against every elite: they traded on a people’s name and delivered that people nothing. What is false is the inherited guilt — that an Amhara farmer in Gojjam owes a debt for a court he never entered, drawn up by men who taxed him too. The grievance is elite-led and always was: he gained nothing from “Amhara rule”, was taxed, conscripted and left as destitute as the Oromo tenant, and in Wollo starved by the tens of thousands in 1973 while the court he supposedly ruled through sat in Addis Ababa.

What there was, rather, was an unfinished job in language policy. Amharic was the one language already standardised, printed and widely understood, the natural working language of a poor administration, and behind it Ge’ez is among the few indigenous African literary traditions with its own script and a corpus of centuries. Had other Ethiopian languages reached that stage sooner, more should have been done with them, and that failure is fair criticism. Discarding Ge’ez and Amharic as badges of oppression is not a correction of it: it throws away an African achievement that a continent colonised into borrowed scripts never had the chance to build.

Why it fails. Test the proposal, not the author. A citizens’ **Constitution** dissolves *all* ethnic parties, Amhara ones included; refuses every land claim settled by force in every direction, Welkait included; makes language and faith portable individual rights exercisable in any region rather than privileges attached to a titular group; abolishes the capital’s “special interest” clause rather than transferring it to another claimant; and opens public service to merit rather than quota. Each provision costs the Amhara elite exactly what it costs the Oromo and Tigrayan elites: the licence to own land and office in a people’s name. A programme designed to enthrone one group would not begin by disarming that group’s own entrepreneurs.

7.4 “The Constitution is not the cause — bad implementation is”

At full strength. The 1995 text promises rights, elections and accountable government; what Ethiopia suffered is authoritarian practice, not the document. Federalism works in India, Nigeria and Switzerland. Fix the democracy and the federation will be fine.

What is true. Implementation has been dreadful, and no **Constitution** survives a party-state. Federations elsewhere do manage diversity.

Why it fails. Structurally, the federations that work do not make the ethnic group the sovereign unit, do not draw every internal boundary by identity, and do not grant an unconditional right of secession. Ethiopia’s does all three [111], which turns every local dispute — a district, a city, a language of instruction — into a question of who owns a people’s homeland, and makes capture of the centre the only reliable protection against capture by someone else. Empirically, the same text has produced the same results under a disciplined ideologue and an improvising populist, a Tigrayan-led front and an Oromo-based machine, three decades apart. When the operator changes and the output does not, the fault is in the machine.

7.5 “Calling for resistance in the language of Adwa is a call to civil war”

At full strength. Ethiopia already has four armed fronts and a seven-party alliance; martial rhetoric from the diaspora supplies moral cover for men burning villages, and its author bears some responsibility for what it licenses.



What is true. Words do license. Anyone invoking Adwa while a civil war runs is obliged to say precisely what he is and is not calling for.

Why it fails. I have said it precisely, and the rules are testable. Resistance must be national, not ethnic — which disqualifies every armed movement now in the field, since all organise by group. It must be lawful and evidential, which makes the case file, not the brigade, the central instrument. And arms are reserved for one purpose: the defence of the nation and its outlet to the sea, never against our own people. By those rules this article condemns the government’s drone campaign and the alliance’s strikes on airports and the capital in the same breath [64]. A call to civil war does not begin by disarming every party to the civil war [1].

7.6 “Pressing the sea question now will bring on a war”

At full strength. Asmara already reads Ethiopian sea rhetoric as preparation for invasion; Cairo recruits on it; raising the claim during an internal war is reckless and may trigger the interstate conflict this article warns against.

What is true. Timing and tone matter enormously, and this government’s handling has been the worst available: a claim framed as historical correction, with no published legal framework and no mediation structure agreed in advance [23, 27].

Why it fails. First, the premise is wrong. I have never argued that Ethiopia must avoid a war for the sea. The war I want avoided is the one we are fighting now, against each other, in which every victory is paid for in Ethiopian dead and every gain is a district taken from our own people. The sea is the opposite case: if this nation must ever fight, that is the cause worth fighting for, because it is the defence of the whole against an outcome imposed without its consent.

Second, handled properly the claim is the one argument in Ethiopian politics that belongs to every region at once — the Afar whose shore it is, the Tigrayan and Amhara whose trade it carries, the Oromo whose exports leave through it, the Somali whose ports compete for it. Pressed by a legitimate government it is the strongest available solvent for ethnic politics, because it gives Ethiopians something to want together. Pressed by this one it is a diversion, which is the fault of the custodian and not of the cause.

Third, the sequence is the argument, and it is set out in full in the conclusion: the **Constitution** first, then peace at home, then the end of the ethnic trade, then an accounting for the crimes of all sides, then codification of the sea, and only then the claim itself. Reverse that order and the result is the one we have had four times already.

Finally, the question is provoked in any case. Relations with Asmara were severed on 1 October, ten diplomats expelled, an Egyptian diplomat following within hours [65, 66, 67], and four neighbours declared the sea closed to us three days later [28]. A vulnerability being exploited is not made safer by silence; it is left to whoever is least careful. The responsible course is the opposite of silence: state the claim in law, publish the terms, say plainly what Ethiopia offers — security, trade, an end to proxy war — and what it will never offer, which is rent for its own sovereignty.

7.7 “You call Abiy a symptom and a lead perpetrator; which is it?”

Both, and the pair is not a contradiction. The **Constitution** creates the prize and the incentive; the man decides how brutally to pursue it, and his choices — three internal wars, a drone campaign against civilians, a rupture with two neighbours in a week — are his own, and he must answer for them in law [109]. Remove the man and keep the **Constitution**, and the next captor inherits the prize, from whichever community. Change the **Constitution** and keep the man, and he is left ruling a country in which his instruments no longer work. Both are required.

Let there be no mistake about the first half, because it is the half my readers on both sides refuse to hear. Abiy did not write this **Constitution**; he inherited it and has manoeuvred inside it, and nobody who holds Arat Kilo under this rule-book governs as he might wish. The four estates are a pack: a leader who moves against the cadres, the oligarchs, the pulpits or the pens finds the other three waiting. Hence a record containing both an unambiguous achievement and an unambiguous crime — the dam completed and the prisoners released; the villages bombed and the wars unended. I will not pretend the ledger is simpler than



it is, and I will not join either camp's demand that one column be struck out. He is also formidable, which is a different question from whether he is right (Section 2.8).

Nor is his removal self-evidently an improvement. In 2018 the same unionist voices now calling for his overthrow greeted him as a deliverer — some reached for the language of Moses — and within three years transferred the same hopes to other men, first to a prisoner-turned-tribune and then to a commander whose alliance depends on precisely the foreign patrons they spent a decade denouncing [88]. Every time we have followed a change as a herd rather than as citizens we have been worse off the morning after: 1974 produced the Derg, 1991 produced the **Constitution** we are dying under, and 2018 produced this.

And there is a hard commercial fact nobody says aloud. Since the fall of the Emperor, leading an armed movement has been the most reliable route in this country to money, prominence and power. It requires no mandate, no audit and no manifesto — only a constituency defined by descent, a grievance kept warm and other people's sons. The men who emerge from it rarely resemble the fighters whose deaths financed their standing; they arrive in fatigues and travel in convoys. A people that keeps crowning them is not choosing liberation but renewing a franchise. Abiy, Zemene Kassie, Debretsion Gebremichael, Getachew Reda, Jal Marro: the uniforms differ, the patrons differ, the business model does not.

So my answer is neither a defence nor an endorsement. It is a refusal of the transaction on offer. Judge the man by law for what he has done, and judge the next man by the same standard before you crown him — but understand that while the **Constitution** stands you are choosing the next operator of the same machine, and the machine is what is killing us.

8 Conclusion: The Cost to the Soul of the Nation

Two words have governed Ethiopia for eight years, and they are not two things but one machine. *Medemer* is the solvent; Oromummaa is the content. The solvent dissolves objection: any question of right — who owns the state, who may be displaced, who carries the cost — is reframed as a failure to add up, and the man who presses it is not answered but diagnosed. What the solvent clears, the content fills. A doctrine of synthesis that never says what is being synthesised, or by whose measure, will take the identity of whoever operates it; poured into the space where citizenship should have stood, it produced a state fluent in the language of unity and governed by the arithmetic of one nation's advancement.

That is the mechanism. Judge it now not by its promises but against the four interests it claimed to serve [11].

National unity. Three internal wars in five years, a seven-party alliance formed for the single purpose of removing the government, and a second city taken and retaken. The test of a doctrine of addition is simple: can a citizen in Gondar, Jimma, Jijiga and Mekelle each say *my government* and mean the same thing by it? Eight years in, fewer Ethiopians can say it than at any time since 1991. Whatever the intent, the doctrine of addition subtracted — and it subtracted in the one place that cannot be rebuilt by decree, which is the belief among ordinary people that the state is theirs.

Red-Sea sovereignty. Here the cost is the most galling, because the claim is sound. Ethiopia has a case in history, in law and in necessity for the Doumeira–Rehyto–Beilul–Tio Corridor (Sections 4.3, 4.5). That case was put into the mouth of a government that cannot unite its own regions, raised in the grammar of inevitability rather than of right, and thereby converted from a cause with foundations into a regional alarm. The damage is specific and measurable: the claim is harder to advance in 2026 than it was in 2018, not because the history changed but because the claimant did. Asmara, Cairo, Mogadishu and Khartoum now coordinate in the open, and a future Ethiopian government with clean hands will spend years undoing what this one did to the case in eight. To squander a just claim is a graver failure than never to have made one.

Development anchored in democracy. An election held while the north burned and an opposition stood in arms; and beneath it an economy whose record is set out below, because it is the part of this government's defence that is most often accepted without examination.

The GERD as engine. The dam stands. It is the one unambiguous achievement of these years and it should be said plainly [12]. But an engine must turn something. Its power runs into a country too fractured to



industrialise, and the exports that industry would generate need a corridor held by the very states this government has stopped speaking to. We have built the engine and lost the road.

8.1 The reform is real. The development is theatre.

The government's strongest defence is economic, and it must be met on its own ground rather than waved away. There *has* been reform, and it is not trivial. The birr was floated on 29 July 2024; the IMF approved a four-year Extended Credit Facility of about USD 3.4 billion the same month and had disbursed roughly USD 2.65 billion by its fifth review in July 2026; the World Bank pledged some USD 16.6 billion over three years and put USD 1.5 billion of budget support in within weeks [40, 41]. Headline inflation fell from about 26.6 per cent in 2023/24 to a projected 11.9 per cent in 2025/26, and the gap between the official and parallel exchange rates narrowed from nearly 40 per cent to about 11 [41]. A commentator who denies all of this forfeits the argument.

So ask the question this series has always asked: *cui bono*. Reform is not an end; it is a transfer, and the test of one is who received it. These measures were designed for two audiences, and the Ethiopian citizen is in neither. The first is external — the Fund, the Bank and the bondholders, for whom a float, a narrowed spread and a disinflation path are the required signals, and who lend against signals rather than against living standards. The second is domestic: the four estates [11]. A liberalisation administered by a state with no institution capable of refusing an instruction (Section 2.10) does not distribute opportunity at random. It delivers foreign exchange, licences, land and contracts to those positioned at the counter, and the political cadre, the economic oligarch, the religious entrepreneur and the intellectual who narrates the whole as a miracle are all at the counter. Macroeconomic stabilisation has been the price of the racket's refinancing.

Measured where it should be measured, the record inverts. A dollar that cost 57 birr in July 2024 costs about 158 today; in two years the currency has lost roughly three-fifths of its external value, and a wage denominated in birr lost it too [41]. Poverty at the USD 3-a-day line stood at 33 per cent in 2016, 39 per cent in 2021, and is projected by the World Bank at 43 per cent in 2025 [42]. On the multidimensional measure the share rose from 68 per cent in 2019 to 72 per cent in 2024 — about 86 million people out of 120 million, half of them children [43]. Disinflation from 26 per cent to 12 per cent does not restore what the first number destroyed; it merely slows the rate at which the rest is taken. A programme can be a success in Washington and a famine of ordinary life in Woldiya at the same time, and ours is.

And set beside that the thing this government calls development. The federal budget tabled for the coming year totals about 2.34 trillion birr, of which 542 billion — 43 per cent of all recurrent spending — goes to debt service, against 158 billion for education: debt service is nearly three and a half times the entire education allocation of a nation of 130 million [44]. In that fiscal setting the state's visible priorities have been corridors, boulevards, a palace complex and resort destinations. The Corridor Development Project now runs in at least 58 cities; Amnesty International documented at least 872 people forcibly evicted from Bole and Lemi Kura in November 2024 on twenty-four to seventy-two hours' oral notice, 29 hectares cleared, and no compensation at all for households holding *sened alba* properties, with the Prime Minister himself reported as saying that 15,000 evictees in Jimma had not asked for any [45]. The Chaka project in the Yeka hills covers 503 hectares and its cost has been reported at around 500 billion birr — published estimates vary widely and no audited figure has been released, which is itself the fact worth noting [46].

This is the smoke and the mirrors. Not that nothing is being built — things are visibly being built, and that is precisely the mechanism — but that *what* is built is the category of thing a visitor photographs rather than the category a farmer uses. Asphalt in the capital rather than feeder roads to the surplus-growing woredas; a lakeside resort rather than fertiliser at a price a smallholder can pay; a boulevard rather than a classroom in a region where four million children are out of school [38]; a palace rather than a clinic. And the method of building it is the method of everything else in this article: clear the ground, notify nobody, compensate nobody, and call the result transformation. A development model that manufactures displaced persons is not development. It is the **Constitution's** logic applied to concrete — the state taking what it wants from people who have no institution to say no — and it earns the same verdict.



8.2 The cost that appears on no ledger

Beneath all four, and the condition of each, lies a cost nobody has entered. After eight years this government has no institution it can hand to a successor: a cabinet that is a representation rather than an executive, decisions taken in a circle that appears on no organigram, a head of government who tells Parliament he keeps his own ministers under surveillance (Sections 2.8–2.9), and that cabinet assembled by removing every established interest in his own coalition and promoting those with no base from which to refuse (Section 2.10). That is why nobody in the building can stop anything — not a bad order, not an unlawful one, not a war that will not work. And it is not a scandal about one man. It is the ethnic-based **Constitution** working exactly as designed, and it will do the same to whoever comes next.

It is also the summary of our political life. For fifty years Ethiopian politics has been a contest over placement — which organisation, which district, which congregation, which cousin — conducted by tacticians of the committee room who never troubled themselves with a theory of the state. Petty and local, and the reason four transitions produced four sets of names and one unchanged machine. Hence the order of the remedy: build the institutions first and let democracy be their capstone rather than their foundation (Section 2.11) [6].

8.3 What was actually taken

What has been taken is not finally a currency, a province or a coastline. Those can be recovered; nations have recovered worse. What has been taken is the thing this conclusion is named for — the understanding, older than any of our constitutions, that an Ethiopian is an Ethiopian before he is anything else, and that the state is the common property of all of them. That understanding survived Adwa, the occupation, the Derg and the famine. It is not surviving *Medemer* and Oromummaa, because unlike every earlier assault this one does not attack the belief from outside. It teaches each new generation, from the classroom and the kebele upward, that the belief was always a fiction and that the only real unit is the group. A nation can be invaded and remain itself. It cannot be taught that it never existed and remain itself. That is the cost, and it is why the remedy cannot be a better man in the same chair.

8.4 What must replace it

The remedy is the one this series has argued from the first article, and it is a dispensation rather than a change of ruler: a **Constitution** of citizens in place of the ethnic-based one; national unity and Red-Sea sovereignty as the Foundations; development anchored in democracy as the Means; and the GERD as the Engine of urbanisation and industrialisation — all of it resting on the individual Ethiopian, who is treated the same in Gondar, Jimma, Jijiga and Mekelle, and whose rights no cadre may ration.

That is the destination. The road to it — the sequence, the institutions, the political economy of getting there, and what Ethiopians must demand of whoever governs next — is the business of the final article of this series. Fourteen articles have now examined the parts: the Abraham Accords and the architecture they are building around us, the GERD, Assab and the corridor, the drones and the men who sell them, the racket and its four estates, the June election, and in this article the ideology that holds the whole together. The fifteenth gathers them, answers the strongest objections that have been put to the series as a whole, and sets out what is to be done — not as a manifesto for a party, because no party deserves one, but as a set of demands any Ethiopian may make of any government [70].

*A people proud of its diversity does not need a **Constitution** that divides it. A nation that wants the sea does not need a government at war with its own villages. A country does not need boulevards it cannot eat. We have been given all three, and told they are the same thing. They are not.*

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