

Topic: Conflict in Wolkait, Ethiopia: Actors' Motivations, Interests, and Strategies

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Abstract

Previous studies explain the 'nationality question', parochial political culture, and ethnic federalism as central to the prevalence of conflicts in Ethiopia. However, this study aims to draw attention to the agency of conflict actors behind the onset and persistence of conflicts. It specifically sheds light on the divergent motivations, interests, and strategies of the TPLF and the *Fanno* in the context of Wolkait, one of the conflict hotspots in the country since the 1970s. Using a qualitative case study design, which allows investigation of conflict in context, the study found out that the conflict in the area has its origin with the formation of the TPLF in 1975. Espousing the claim of the 'nationality question', the TPLF launched an ethnic-based insurgency, and annexed Wolkait and Raya from Gondar and Wollo, territories formerly part of the Amhara. It toppled the Dergue regime, and championed the adoption of ethnic federalism in 1991 as a culmination of its struggle for self-determination. Yet, the policy of ethnic federalism turned out to be a political strategy for the TPLF to entrench its hegemony, loot economic resources, and above all, aggrandize its home base by redrawing territories. With the annexation of Wolkait, the TPLF envisaged to wreak vengeance against the Amhara, expand deeper into new territories, resettle Tigrayans, and establish 'Greater Tigray'. In response to the TPLF's territorial annexation, an armed resistance called *Kefagni Fanno* emerged among the Amhara in Wolkait in 1979. The resistance evolved for decades through the use of a mix of peaceful and violent strategies in pursuit of the assertion of Amhara identity. The spread of the *Fanno* resistance throughout the Amhara Region in 2016 precipitated the ouster of the TPLF from power in 2018. In the war that broke out in 2021 between the TPLF and the federal government, Wolkait fell into the hands of the *Fanno*. However, the issue of Wolkait has continued to be a bone of contention. The study suggests, as a way out, the need for both actors to develop empathy, renounce use of force and ethnic mobilization, reconstruct their self-serving narrative, and push for changes to the existing ethnic federal order.