

EXCERPTED FROM

The Puzzle of Ethiopian Politics

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1

The Puzzle of Ethiopian Politics

The TPLF started in February 1975 as a small guerrilla band in the northern region of Ethiopia and eventually grew to provide the core of the Ethiopian government.

—Aregawi Berhe, TPLF founding member¹

Down! Down! Woyane!

—Protesters at Irreecha celebrations in Bishoftu, October 2016²

The coming time in Ethiopia will be a time of love and forgiveness.

—Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's Inaugural Address, April 2018³

On April 2, 2018, Abiy Ahmed, gave his inaugural speech as only the third prime minister since the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power in 1991. Abiy came from the Oromo wing of the ruling party rather than the long-dominant Tigray leadership. He rose to power at a tumultuous time. The EPRDF and its affiliated parties won 100 percent of the seats in the 2015 elections and put in place development policies that created a period of sustained economic growth. By 2016, however, ongoing and sometimes violent protests resulted in tens of thousands of arrests and tensions that did not end with the proclamation of a state of emergency. In contrast to past patterns of mass arrests and condemnation of dissidents as “antipeace” elements working in league with ruling party enemies, the new prime minister emphasized the opposite in 2018: “The coming time in Ethiopia will be a time of love and forgiveness. We desire our country to be one of justice, peace and freedom and where its citizens are interconnected with the unbreakable chord of humanity and brotherhood.”⁴

Figure 1.1 Political Map of Ethiopia

On May 28, 1991, nearly thirty years before Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's inauguration, rebel soldiers from the northern Ethiopian region of Tigray entered Addis Ababa from four sides and, after a brief fight around the presidential palace, occupied the capital.⁵ Mengistu Haile Mariam, leader of the brutal military junta that had ruled since it deposed Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, had fled to Zimbabwe a week earlier, and his army had collapsed. As described by a Reuters correspondent who traveled with the rebels, the "piles of uniforms and boots dumped along the road" told the story of the breakdown of Mengistu's army and the rapid march of the insurgents.⁶ While negotiations with the rump government took place with US mediation in London, the insurgent force moved into the capital, waving the movement's red flag emblazoned with an AK-47 rifle. What had started as a small group of Tigrayan nationalist students in 1974 transformed into the EPRDF, a

battle-hardened, Marxist-Leninist, rebel movement that defeated one of Africa's largest militaries. But the EPRDF now faced the daunting challenges of ruling a war-torn country of extraordinary diversity.

In this book I connect these two moments in Ethiopian political history. I argue that the structures and contradictions within the EPRDF are key to understanding the puzzle of Ethiopian politics. This party—actually a coalition of four different parties, as we will see—operates and is structured in ways that reflect the legacies of the armed struggle and the imperatives of the war-to-peace transition. The institutions created in response to the challenges of the late 1980s and early 1990s continue to shape Ethiopian politics today; thus, understanding the EPRDF helps us to comprehend both the stability of the regime and the ways in which it faced crisis and rebalanced itself in 2018.

In the chapters that follow, I trace how the legacies of the protracted armed struggle and the exigencies of the war-to-peace transition shaped the postwar political order in Ethiopia. The militarily victorious EPRDF put in place a political system based upon two contradictory logics. On the one hand, the ruling party exemplified a disciplined, authoritarian, vanguard party organized around the principles of democratic centralism. At the same time, to expand beyond their Tigray base, the winning rebels built a ruling coalition from four diverse, ethnically based parties and wrote a constitution that emphasized ethno-federalism and consequently generated centrifugal force. From 1991 to 2016, this system remained steady because the center was sufficiently strong and the new regional states sufficiently weak to balance the ethno-federal institutions. The demonstrations in 2016 disrupted this balance and provided the opportunity for new leadership to emerge. The EPRDF as a powerful party, however, persisted and continued to dominate politics.

Ethiopia in a Comparative Context: The Importance of Institutions

The literature on Ethiopian politics is abundant, although perhaps less prolific than might be expected given the country's size and regional importance. Scholarship has often emphasized the importance of political culture and the historical process of state building in highland Ethiopia.⁷ Smith and others emphasize how citizenship, gender, and other categories contribute to hierarchical social structures that go beyond formal political organizations.⁸ Ethnicity and Ethiopian identity have an extensive scholarship and are key parts of contemporary Ethiopian politics, as I will explore in this book.⁹ Scholarship assessing the quality of democracy and advocacy work on human rights has received considerable attention.¹⁰

The historical role of longtime prime minister Meles Zenawi, leader of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) insurgency and founder of the EPRDF, has led some to emphasize his personal influence and worldview.¹¹ The borderlands and center-periphery relationships are another key theme in the literature.¹²

In this book I build on these insights but argue that Ethiopian politics is shaped by a fundamental tension at the core of the EPRDF. On the one hand, drawing from the party's origins as a Marxist insurgency, the EPRDF built a new order based on hierarchy, discipline, and top-down control. On the other hand, driven by the need to transform the Tigrayan rebel movement into a larger coalition to administer the entire state, the EPRDF created new institutions that emphasized ethno-federalism and institutionalized ethnically defined regional states and political parties. The contradictions between these two logics of governing remained in check until 2016, as a strong center checked the initially weak regions and ethnic parties.

In addition to arguments that help explain the puzzle of Ethiopian politics, in this book I contribute to a number of debates within the more general comparative politics and conflict resolution literatures. The scholarship by Staniland, Mampilly, and Arjona on rebel organizations and governance provide useful frames through which to understand the legacies of the Ethiopian civil wars.¹³ The Ethiopian regime is in many ways the epitome of an authoritarian system with a strong political party, as suggested by Levitsky and Way, along with electoral authoritarianism, as analyzed by Schedler.¹⁴ The ruling party has been in power since 1991, suggesting resilience and mechanisms to manage intraparty competition, as studied by Svoblik.¹⁵ It also provides an important case on the specific characteristics of war-to-peace transitions following rebel victory, as suggested by Lyons.¹⁶ The transformation of the TPLF rebel group into the EPRDF political party, which included constituencies not involved in the armed struggle, demonstrates an important mechanism in the war-to-peace transition that links the insurgency to the strong authoritarian party.

The Legacies of the War and Dynamics of Transition

Ethiopian politics for nearly thirty years have been shaped by how the TPLF won the protracted civil war in 1991 and how the legacies of that war were linked to the mechanisms through which the EPRDF ruled.¹⁷ Civil wars that end in rebel victory generally follow distinct war-to-peace transitions. The transition in Ethiopia, as well as in cases such as Uganda and Rwanda, emphasized power consolidation rather than power sharing and focused on transforming the armed insurgent group into an authoritarian political party.¹⁸ In Ethiopia, the EPRDF used the

war-to-peace transition to transform its armed insurgent movement into such a party and to consolidate power. These legacies continue to shape reform efforts in 2018.

The transition in Ethiopia began with military victory, not a negotiated peace settlement. The EPRDF, along with the insurgent Eritrean People's Liberation Front and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), met with the remnants of the old regime in London in May 1991, but military facts on the ground rather than negotiations or external powers determined the outcome. Instead of building the conditions for more democratic regimes, this kind of path dependency leads victorious insurgents to build on the successful models that contributed to their victory and to seize opportunities during the war-to-peace transition to consolidate power.¹⁹

In Ethiopia the legacies of war included high levels of solidarity and leadership coherence forged during the protracted armed struggle along with the precedents and organizational structures developed by the rebels to administer liberated territory. The mechanisms by which the TPLF as an insurgent movement organized and administered areas it occupied during the war were linked to how the TPLF-led EPRDF organized and governed as a ruling party. In addition, the imperative to broaden its political base and incorporate constituencies that had not participated in the armed struggle led the TPLF to create a multiethnic coalition and construct a series of ethnically defined regional states. Finally, transitional processes such as postconflict elections, transitional justice, and demobilization served as effective instruments of power consolidation.

During the protracted civil war, the TPLF developed a cohesive leadership and a disciplined, hierarchical organization that practiced decisionmaking through strict democratic centralism.²⁰ As I will explore in more detail in Chapter 2, the TPLF emerged out of the Ethiopian student movement in the early 1970s, and, according to its founding story, began with fewer than a hundred fighters.²¹ Meles and a small group in the leadership formed the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT) in the mid-1980s, a tightly integrated vanguard within the TPLF, and this coterie led the movement to victory. For much of the armed struggle, the TPLF fought in a relatively confined area in the highlands of Tigray, with relatively limited external support, which reinforced the consolidation of its leadership. The challenges of the protracted struggle resulted in a cohesive leadership, hierarchical lines of decisionmaking, and a disciplined core within the organization.

Although the insurgents developed connections in the countryside in northern Ethiopia, the war did not come to areas inhabited by Oromos and others in southern Ethiopia until the final months of the struggle.

The Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM), two other member parties in the ruling coalition, lacked coherence and experience comparable to those of the TPLF.²² The EPRDF therefore transitioned from a largely Tigrayan insurgency into a strong multiethnic coalition with a strong and coherent core but dissimilar constituent parties.

Victorious rebels are more likely to have experience in administering liberated territory. Therefore they develop trained, effective, and disciplined cadres with the capacity to govern civilians and with relationships with civilian constituencies and international actors.²³ In Ethiopia, this governance of liberated territory during the armed struggle often created nondemocratic norms and precedents that shaped how the party subsequently operated during peacetime. Wartime administration emphasized discipline and building connections so that the civilian population could support the military strategy. Civilians were not constituents to whom the military leadership must answer but rather auxiliaries who must be indoctrinated and mobilized by the insurgents to meet the goals of the rebellion. Relationship models developed during the civil war between rebel leadership and the population are sustained in postconflict authoritarian systems.

In northern Ethiopia, the TPLF saw itself as a classic, Maoist-style guerrilla army that would win by forging relationships with the peasants of Tigray. The rebels deployed political cadres with their military units and created local *baitos* (people's councils) to assist the TPLF in administering liberated zones. The movement had its own impressive humanitarian wing, the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), which coordinated large-scale operations with international assistance, and the Tigray Development Association (TDA), which raised significant money in the diaspora. The insurgent army played other state-like diplomatic roles, including having extensive (and often contentious) relationships with neighboring insurgents in Eritrea along with international actors and organizations.²⁴ The TPLF therefore had extensive local administrative structures and foreign relations in place prior to gaining power, and these models developed during wartime shaped the design of postwar institutions. The rebels began the transition in 1991 with not only a large and battle-hardened military but also cadres in nearly every village in Tigray, well integrated into a regionwide political network experienced in managing top-down relationships with the peasants.

Alongside the wartime legacies of organizational coherence and models of military administration, the imperatives of war-to-peace transitions following rebel victory help explain the Ethiopian transition. Victorious

rebels are more likely to derive significant legitimacy from the costs endured in defeating the old order and ending the violence—“We rule because we sacrificed!” Rebel tanks on the streets of Addis Ababa provided ample evidence of the effective transfer of power. The war-to-peace transition provides processes such as elections, transitional justice, and demobilization used by the rebel movement to strengthen its authoritarian power. However, victory often allows the winners to break with the past and launch a new vision. They take power with an extraordinary mandate and can use the fear of a return to the old order as a rationale to renounce or abnegate opposition. The EPRDF quickly established a transitional charter, helped establish new political parties in southern Ethiopia, challenged preexisting conceptions of Ethiopian nationalism, and redrew the political map of Ethiopia to create new ethnically defined regions.

In addition to the rebels’ specific claims of legitimacy born of sacrifice and victory, the process of transition from war to peace offered many opportunities to consolidate their power. The EPRDF quickly demobilized the Derg’s military and reorganized its own armed forces. As the insurgent army transformed itself into the postwar Ethiopian National Defense Forces, it sought to decrease the number of soldiers from Tigray, the core of the rebel movement, and recruit more soldiers from southern Ethiopia so that the national army more closely reflected the country’s diversity and looked less like an army of occupation. Although expanding membership among the rank and file, the TPLF’s experienced military leaders retained top positions and dominated the officer corps. Transitional justice mechanisms remained under the control of the victorious rebels as well, who organized special prosecutor trials that convicted many high officials of the old regime of war crimes and sentenced Mengistu, the defeated leader of the Derg, to death in absentia.²⁵

The legitimacy that comes from winning the war and the experiences of wartime governance are particularly powerful in the immediate aftermath of war termination. Over time, however, these claims and capacities begin to fade. Nearly thirty years after the transition, the majority of the population has no direct memories of the grim years under the Derg, the sacrifices and martyrs of the armed struggle, or the dramatic events of 1991. The ruling party, of course, takes measures to remind the population of its role as liberator. “Derg Downfall Day” is a national holiday celebrated every May 28.²⁶ But it is not surprising that over time the resonance of these events fades, and different forms of legitimacy are necessary. The protests of 2016 and the new leadership of 2018 are in part the outcome of this decline in the legitimacy earned through military victory.

War-to-Peace Transition: Creating a Ruling Coalition

Despite its military accomplishments, the EPRDF faced a significant challenge upon seizing power. Large national constituencies played little or no role in the armed struggle. The civil war was fought in the north, and numerous communities in the south knew little about the insurgents prior to the regime change in 1991. Some Amhara had direct experience in the armed struggle, but many of them prioritized a pan-Ethiopian identity. The OLF mobilized the key Oromo constituency, but the OLF and TPLF had generally contentious relations. Others in rural provinces in southern Ethiopia such as southern Omo, or Gamo-Gofa (today the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region, or SNNPR) were subject to the Derg's compulsory recruitment into military service but otherwise had limited roles in the civil war and never experienced living in liberated territory. Most Ethiopians had little contact with the rebel movement during the war. Because of this, the leadership of the EPRDF rapidly created local affiliates in these areas to serve as its interlocutors with populations outside of its wartime networks. These affiliated parties often emerged virtually overnight, and many had only tenuous links to the often quite isolated communities in question.

For the EPRDF, creating a national political party on the basis of an ethnonational rebel group that could make appeals across Ethiopia's many diverse communities was a fundamental challenge and an essential step to consolidating its power. In 1991, the organization was overwhelmingly Tigrayan, with some Amhara and few Oromo members. As the TPLF created the EPRDF, it formed a coalition of ethnonational parties so that, in the same way the TPLF ruled Tigray, the OPDO would rule Oromia, and similar parties would rule each group in the SNNPR. The insurgent national liberation organizational model was replicated in other regions regardless of whether they had the historical sense of identity or experience of wartime solidarity that characterized Tigray.

The EPRDF organized elections and in other ways used political processes to consolidate and sustain its rule. Political parties in authoritarian states can serve a bargaining function in that they broker relationships among elites and create systems for distributing power and authority across both individuals and constituencies. In Ethiopia, for example, intraparty processes rather than public campaigns or violence determined who would occupy the key decisionmaking positions in the EPRDF's Executive Committee, Council of Ministers, and regional state offices. The party used elections not to provide opportunities for meaningful competition but rather to demonstrate power, reshuffle lead-

ership, sometimes co-opt rivals, and, perhaps most importantly, create incentives for party loyalty, thus consolidating power.

Elections following rebel victory in Ethiopia therefore had little to do with determining who would rule but played key functions in power consolidation and the creation of the strong, authoritarian EPRDF party. These polls are typically noncompetitive, as was the case in Ethiopia's elections of 1995, 2000, 2010, and 2015. The exception, as I discuss in Chapter 6, was the contentious 2005 election. In the 2010 and 2015 national elections, however, the EPRDF and its affiliates won 99.6 and 100 percent of the seats, respectively. These overwhelming victories sent a message that the authoritarian party remained dominant and was not about to surrender power and that acquiescence to it was necessary for political survival. The question of whether the 2020 elections can provide an opportunity for Ethiopians to meaningfully participate in the selection of their leaders remains a matter of contention among key Ethiopian actors and analysts.

The successful transition from rebel victory to a postwar authoritarian political party was therefore related to the nature of the victorious insurgent group—its leadership cohesion and the legacies of its wartime administration—along with the imperatives of war-to-peace transitions. The exigencies of transforming an insurgent group based in a particular small community into a larger, multiethnic political party able to govern all of Ethiopia led to a coalition of diverse constituent members acting in coordination.

In this book I explain Ethiopian politics from 1991 to 2018 by tracing the legacies of the armed struggle and the war-to-peace transition of political institutions and the ruling party in particular. I argue that these two forces created a strong and centralized ruling party that held together a clamorous coalition built upon ethnically defined parties and autonomous regional states. These two contradictory logics balanced centrifugal forces with a strong center. In 2018, however, after a period of sustained protests indicated that the old balance had been disrupted, a new leader, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, seeks to realign power among the political elites and reconsolidate the EPRDF's power. Although the consequences of the leadership change are difficult to predict, the EPRDF remains the dominant party at this writing and seems likely to remain so.

A Note on Sources

This book builds on research that I have conducted since my first trip to Ethiopia in 1986 to carry out doctoral dissertation research. In the ensuing thirty-three years I have been back several dozen times for varying

lengths of time and in a variety of roles. In this book I draw on my experiences in observing elections in 1992, serving as the leader of the Donor Election Unit (DEU) in 1995, and serving as a senior adviser to the Carter Center's election observation mission in 2005.²⁷ I have also consulted with a range of international nongovernmental organizations regarding their programs in Ethiopia.²⁸ These occasions allowed me to travel throughout the country and to conduct hundreds of interviews with the diplomatic community, government officials, opposition party activists, civil society leaders, and Ethiopians in numerous small towns and rural villages in virtually every region.²⁹ I have engaged in hundreds of interviews and less formal conversations with a wide variety of Ethiopians over the decades, both in Ethiopia and in the diaspora.³⁰ I have participated in dozens of discussions and briefings convened by various research institutes.³¹ I have taught at Addis Ababa University and Bahir Dar University.

In this book I build on this prior research and on the work of many scholars and colleagues who have helped me gain a better understanding of Ethiopia and to make fewer mistakes. I cite secondary and primary sources throughout this book. Given uncertain conditions within Ethiopia, I cite only year and location to identify interviews.

Outline of the Book

In this book I explain the puzzle of contemporary postwar Ethiopian politics by highlighting the institutional legacies of the civil war and the mechanisms of transitioning from a regionally based national liberation movement into a diverse ruling party. In Chapter 1 I frame the mechanisms that link insurgent victory and strong authoritarian political party and the process of war-to-peace transition. In Chapter 2 I focus on the period of violent conflict and how the different actors engaged in contemporary Ethiopian politics experienced and were transformed by that period of struggle. In Chapter 3 I emphasize the logic behind a postconflict dispensation that organized politics around ethnically defined regions and noncompetitive elections. These two aspects of these new rules highlight the central contradiction of a political system with significant levels of federalism and a party simultaneously centralized and hierarchical.

In Chapter 4 I examine the EPRDF and the significant differences among the member parties that compose the ruling coalition. The legacies of the civil war in battle-scarred Tigray bear little resemblance to large areas of Oromia and the South in general, and the TPLF is not like the OPDO or the SEPDM. This variation is significant and helps explain many intraparty dynamics. In this chapter I also look at the degree to

which these four parties have put in place four distinct political systems in their respective regions. In Chapter 5 I shift the focus to the Ethiopian opposition. Understanding the limitations on political opposition is essential to comprehending how the ruling party operates as a strong authoritarian party. In Chapter 6 I trace political developments from the 2005 electoral crisis and subsequent crackdown to the 2015 election, in which the EPRDF and its affiliates won 100 percent of the seats, and I demonstrate how intraparty dynamics shaped Ethiopian politics. In that chapter I also analyze the different patterns of central committee appointments across the four member parties of the EPRDF to understand both the early dominance of the TPLF and the leadership change within the party in 2018. In Chapter 7 I emphasize the political implications of the regime's economic policies and its commitment to a "developmental state" model. In Chapter 8 I look at the 2016 demonstrations and how they challenged parts of the EPRDF's legitimacy but, at the same time, provided space for Oromo and Amhara reformers to align with the demands of the populace while seeking to consolidate power within the party. In Chapter 9 I examine patterns of behavior visible within the EPRDF over decades to explain how new leadership took power in 2018. In Chapter 10 I draw together the implications of the argument both for our understanding of Ethiopia and for the comparative literatures on authoritarian parties and war-to-peace transitions.

Notes

1. Aregawi Berhe, "The Origins of the Tigray People's Liberation Front," *African Affairs* 103, no. 413 (2004): 569.
2. *Woyane* is a reference to the TPLF guerrilla forces. The Irreecha celebration led to a deadly stampede following security forces' efforts to disperse a crowd of Oromos.
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17. For war-to-peace transitions in general, see Stephen John Stedman, Donald Rothchild, and Elizabeth M. Cousens, eds., *Ending Civil Wars: The Implementation of Peace Agreements* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002); Philip G. Roeder and Donald Rothchild, eds., *Sustainable Peace: Power and Democracy After Civil Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Anna K. Jarstad and Timothy D. Sisk, eds., *From War to Democracy: Dilemmas of Peacebuilding* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Charles T. Call, *Why Peace Fails: The Causes and Prevention of Civil War Recurrence* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012); Christoph Zürcher, Carrie Manning, Kristie D. Evenson, Rachel Hayman, Sarah Riese, and Nora Roehner, *Costly Democracy: Peacebuilding and Democratization After War* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

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26. On the twenty-fifth anniversary, in 2016, however, the young crowd that attended these celebrations in the Amhara regional capital of Bahir Dar was generally uninterested in the political speeches but happy about the dance music played between the testimonial speeches. Author's field notes, Bahir Dar, 2016.

27. See "The Transition Toward Democracy in Ethiopia: Observations on the Elections in Welega, June 1992," testimony before the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, September 17, 1992; "The Donor Election Unit's Leaked Report," *Ethiopian Register* 2, no. 5 (July 1995): 41–53; Carter Center, *Observing the 2005 Ethiopian National Elections: Carter Center Final Report* (Atlanta, GA: Carter Center, December 2009).

28. This report has not been released by the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

29. Given the nature of my research, most of my interviews have taken place in Addis Ababa, but I have also had the chance to conduct interviews in the Oromia, Amhara, SNNPR, Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambela, Harar, and Tigray National Regional States over the years.

30. For an account of one set of dialogues, see Terrence Lyons, Christopher Mitchell, Tamra Pearson d'Estrée, and Lulsegedd Abebe, *The Ethiopian Extended Dialogue: An Analytical Report, 2000–2003*, Report No. 4 (Fairfax, VA: Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, 2004), <http://activity.scar.gmu.edu/sites/default/files/ICAR%20Report%204-%20Lyons.pdf>.

31. US Congress, House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations, "Democracy Under Threat in Ethiopia," March 9, 2017, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA16/20170309/105673/HHRG-115-FA16-Wstate-LyonsT-20170309.pdf>. Policy papers include "The Political Economy of Ethiopia," Rift Valley Institute for UNICEF, March 2016, https://www.unicef.org/esaro/UNICEF_Ethiopia_--_2016_--_The_Political_Economy_of_Ethiopia.pdf; "Ethiopia: Assessing Risks to Stability." Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2011, <http://csis.org/publication/ethiopia>; *Avoiding Conflict in the Horn of Africa: U.S. Policy Toward Ethiopia and Eritrea*, Special Report no. 21 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, December 2006), <http://www.cfr.org/publication/12192/>; Terrence Lyons, "Ethiopia in 2005: The Beginning of a Transition?" *Africa Notes* No. 25 (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2006), 1–8, http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/anotes_0601.pdf; "The Transition in Ethiopia." *Africa Notes* No. 127 (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 1991), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/africa-notes-transition-ethiopia-august-1991>.