

HEGEMONY AND COUNTER-HEGEMONY IN ETHIOPIA: IMAGINING A POST-TPLF ORDER

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Abstract: This article examines the discursive strategies, the ideological dominations and interrelated material tools employed by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in maintaining its rule. It also unravels the hegemonic crisis it has encountered, and the counter-hegemony it has confronted since 2015. Gramscian novelties of historical bloc, hegemony, organic crisis, counter-hegemony, and interregnum, are deployed in order to understand the continuities, ruptures and crises witnessed in Ethiopia's politics for the past thirty years. The article interprets the crisis of the TPLF since the 2015 protests through the prism of organic crises and analyses the counter-hegemonic contestations, the interregnum and the ongoing war since 4 November 2020. The article adds to the recent resurgence of interest in Gramscian perspectives by demonstrating the relevance of Gramscian concepts to the understanding of politics in the states of the global south.

Keywords: *Gramsci, historical bloc, interregnum, organic crisis, war of position*

Introduction

The interest in Antonio Gramsci's philosophy has steadily increased over the past two decades, encouraging the revitalisation of Marxism throughout global south scholarship. His key themes of hegemony, counter-hegemony, passive revolution, and organic crisis are adapted to examine socio-economic transformations, power relations globally, media issues, and hydro-political topics. As a radical philosopher Gramsci had a strong zeal to make subalterns conscious of their precarious socio-political circumstances so that they strive for a better order. Recognising his fecundity, academics stress the need to interpret Gramsci flexibly so that he can now be grasped in a realistic way (Filippini 2017: xi). The lasting pertinence of Gramsci stems from the heterodox Marxist view that validates the usage of concepts across different contexts (Krause and Bressan 2017: 36). For instance, Morton (2007: 211)

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suggests that the discussion on Gramscian concepts should not be limited to class but rather to “a broad array of subaltern identities that have points of common convergence within the logic of exploitation.” Similarly, Fontana (2009: 81) underlined Gramsci’s continuing relevance in a post-socialist setting, emphasising the validity of his theoretical stances to situations other than those inspiring Gramsci and revolutionary Marxists. In the same vein, Holub (1992: 21) advocates altering, adjusting, and negotiating Gramsci pragmatically in order to analyse hegemonic dynamics in different expanse. Espousing such appropriations, the present article aims to adopt some of Gramsci’s constructs in order to analyse Ethiopian politics.

Gramsci is valuable to study Ethiopian politics in several respects. First, by providing the framework of hegemony and its infrastructures Gramsci gives us analytical lenses to understand the nature of ideological domination that the TPLF has sustained in Ethiopia’s politics for more than a quarter of a century. Probing the insights of common sense and the subversion of civil society could explain how the TPLF has naturalised ethnic federalism in the mind of the public.

Second, it is appropriate to use Gramsci’s work, partly because of the complicated nature of Ethiopian politics and partly because of Gramsci’s versatility in understanding political changes in the context of important historical turns.

Third, ethnicity as a level of analysis takes centre stage in Ethiopian scholarship by expunging other forms of power relations. Taking a detour, the Gramscian account offers us discursive and material elements of analysis, so that we can analyse complex fissures of Ethiopian politics syncretically. Utilising Gramscian novelties such as the historical bloc and the organic crisis also helps us to clarify the reasons behind the resilience of TPLF and the 2015 crisis, respectively. Moreover, by offering the framework of interregnum Gramsci makes it easier to understand the political and economic crisis that is taking place in Ethiopia and the ensuing public scepticism during the past three years. Similarly, Gramsci’s curiosity in language is of great help in throwing light on counter-hegemonic discourses in Ethiopia’s politics. Furthermore, his understanding of the impact of transnational capital on local politics offers us a glimpse to explain the onset of neo-liberal hegemony and the latent resistance to it.

Hegemony, organic crisis, counter-hegemony, historical bloc, and interregnum are the key concepts that bind our article together. We use such concepts and other cues by relying on scholars who have used Gramscian theories in order to arrive at more nuanced interpretations of politics in the global south. In so doing, we try to draw on the works of Chalcraft and Noorani (2007); De Smet (2017); Morton (2007); Thomas (2009) and others in our efforts to examine Ethiopian politics.

The first objective of this research is to cast a look backwards to the hegemonic periods of the TPLF. We specifically focus on the discursive strategies, the ideological dominations and interrelated material tools employed by the TPLF to maintain its rule. The second objective is to examine the crisis of TPLF hegemony since the 2015 protests. Finally, the research aims to analyse the counter-hegemony of the new ruling group in decentering the TPLF and tries to chart the prospects. Methodologically, the article uses in-depth analysis of scholarly works, reports of organisations, and digital sources in order to interpret each topic. We relied on secondary data believing that this will provide us with limitless opportunities to interpret Ethiopian politics through the Gramscian theories and perspectives. We placed the TPLF at the centre of our analysis because of its core position in governing Ethiopia for more than twenty-five years.

The article begins by outlining the conceptual tropes that inform our research. We then analyse the prelude to TPLF's ascendancy by focusing on the formations of a historical bloc. Next, we examine the period of the TPLF in two sections by interlacing ideational and material aspects of hegemony. We then analyse the crisis of TPLF hegemony by utilising organic crisis as a conceptual cue. Subsequently, we proceed to reflect on the rise of counter-hegemonic forces by demonstrating the new ruptures and contradictions in Ethiopia's politics.

Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony: Theoretical Reflections

The analytical structure of this research is informed by the Gramscian understanding of the state as an "entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules" (Hoare and Smith 1992: 24). Such an understanding of the state and the power relations within it recognises the duality of power, coercion,

and consent. It is at this point that Gramsci has introduced his concept of hegemony. He views hegemony as a consent-based mode of rule. Consent is voluntary allegiance of the masses with the sanctioned actions and behaviour of the ruling class (Fillipini 2017: 18). To generate consent, the ruling class must work on the development of cognitive and affective structures that habituate the common sense of the mass in favour of “the established order and class interest” (Boggs 1976: 39). Common sense is a pattern of uncritical consciousness in which people interpret and experience the world around them. It is nurtured by ideology, education, law, religion, media and other institutions so that the ruling group sustains “spontaneous” consent by presenting a ruling idea as immutable and natural (Hoare and Smith 1992: 412–413). In that way, hegemony is the exercise of moral and intellectual rule under the terms of the consensus of the subaltern with the ruling class. A crucial issue for many academics at this stage of conceptualisation is to strike a balance between consent and coercion. For instance, Femia (1981: 46–47) argued that hegemony built by brute force and deceit is either “decadent hegemony” or “minimal hegemony.” However, Thomas (2009: 164–165) uses a striking expression “coercion by consent” to illustrate the dialectical constitution of coercion with consent. Therefore, for Thomas, the ruling class may use excessive coercion if it is grounded in popular consent. Thus, force as one component can create hegemony, but not in a way that exceeds consent.

Scholars pose a caveat toward a half-sighted conception of hegemony that views hegemony as a project of political legitimacy per se (Im 1991: 123–156; James 1997: 37–56; Moufe 1979: 18). Taken by itself, the most important task of hegemony is to permeate a particular vision of reality into popular consciousness, but practical hegemony requires the ruling class to exercise leadership in the economy.

Hegemony is a process in flux, and Gramsci insists on the ruling bloc to reproduce hegemony continuously. In order to do so, the ruling bloc must constantly launch consent generating mechanisms, namely, inculcation of acquiescence, propaganda, allowing reasonable concessions to opponents, economic co-optation of adversaries, nationalism, corruption, and divide and rule (Hal 1971: 81–109 cited in De Smet 2016: 232).

Hegemony is a relationship process that functions dialectically. In other words, consent to or opposition against hegemonic rule cannot arise in

a moment and vanish. Accordingly, consent is not always flawless and there is always the opportunity to refuse; Gramsci calls this non-compliance counter-hegemony. One of the definitive truncations for counter-hegemony is organic crisis, or the failure of the hegemonic class to gain consent (Hoare and Smith 1992: 210). Organic crisis is the crisis of hegemonic authority, rooted in fundamental political and economic problems. Organic crises represent real fractures at the core of a system and are in no way similar to crises that occur in everyday life (ibid. 210).

If hegemony is all about a mode of rule, counter-hegemony is about resistance against that rule (Chalcraft 2007: 180). Counter-hegemony is not a direct war on the hegemon, rather it is a multi-dimensional attack on the dominant ideology, perception, culture, and discourse of the hegemon. For Chalcraft (2007: 181) counter-hegemony comprises “any practice that diminishes the number of sites of hegemonic articulation, reduces their range of application and makes them disarticulate and breakup.” Therefore, counter-hegemony or war of position, is more than a frontal assault; it is the widespread criticism of the old hegemon by delivering critical consciousness contrary to the granted common senses. A successful war of position has the potential to generate alternative hegemony by consolidating a new historical bloc. A historical bloc is an alliance of different social forces aimed at supplanting the dying order by maintaining hegemony in the spheres of production and civil society (Morton 2007: 97). With this in mind, we can say that hegemony is an integral process that constitutes the preponderance of a ruling bloc in the entire spheres of the state. The present article understands hegemony as a process of preserving rule without overt dominance. In states like Ethiopia, hegemony is neither a benevolent nor a malevolent process, but the run of things in the interest of a ruling group.

Prelude to TPLF-hegemony: The Formation of a Historical Bloc and the Way to Transition

The Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) started its movement as a guerrilla-armed group in 1975. As one of the descendants of the Ethiopian student movement, TPLF viewed the problem of Ethiopia from the Leninist perspective of national oppression (Vaughan 2003: 169). Hence, its initial vision was to liberate its regional base, Tigray. Nevertheless, with victory siding with the TPLF in the late 1980s, the group transformed its mission of capturing Tigray to ruling Ethiopia and tried to make itself organisationally

worthy of meeting the new dream (ibid. 167). To this end, it sponsored the formation of a broad-based organisation with a pluri-national rather than a mono-national character. Forming a broad-based coalition constituted TPLF's first step towards hegemony and a historical bloc.

Successful hegemony requires the establishment of such a historical bloc or a powerful coalition of social and political forces capable of leading the subaltern and materialising a hegemonic control of the state (Hoare and Smith 1992: 182). In the same way, TPLF forged a historical bloc on the eve of its military victory. The group spearheaded the initiative for the formation of a broad-based alliance with various insurgents. TPLF patronised the coalition with the Ethiopian People Democratic Movement (EPDM), later renamed the Amahara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), and formed the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) in 1989. Later, the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) joined and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) became a union of four ethnic-based organisations. TPLF had dominated the coalition by defining and bringing ethnic federalism into motion as the future common sense and administrative principle of Ethiopia. From the outset, its seniority and ideological monopoly helped it to assume the upper hand in imposing a hegemonic discourse of ethnic politics by co-opting elites recruited from various ethnic groups (Gudina 2003: 146).

When the TPLF came to power in 1991, it had to overcome three challenges with a sense of urgency, all related to the consent of the governed. First, TPLF had to expand its presence and control beyond Tigray, the centre of its guerilla fighting. TPLF has already formed a bloc to appear nationwide force, and it responded to questions of political outreach by decentralising (though despotically) power through its junior partners (Tadesse and Young 2015: 389). Mandating ethnic-based organisations, or as Gudina (2003: 123) calls them people's democratic organisations (PDOs), helped TPLF to deepen its penetration down to the kebele¹ level in a short period. The second challenge TPLF had to overcome was the task of building peace and of streamlining state reform. To this end, TPLF embarked on the appointments of erstwhile guerilla soldiers and loyal cadres as interim governors and transitional peacekeepers. Like other insurgent groups, TPLF attempted to gain temporary acceptance

1 Kebele is the lowest tier of local government in Ethiopia.

by preserving a civil atmosphere and promising self-governance. Third, TPLF had to overcome the challenge of gaining unwavering popular consent, given that it ascended to power through long years of war. In order to realise long-term hegemony, TPLF implemented hegemonic projects in the realm of structure and superstructure, as shown in the following sections.

Framing Common Sense: The Hegemony of TPLF in the Superstructure

Gramsci presents ideology as a decisive factor in building hegemony. As Coutinho puts it, Gramsci considers ideology as the “medium of hegemony” (2012: 73). Ideology as such is an educative and directive continuum that ensures a popular consensus on a particular state principle and a particular interpretation of the substance of politics. More in this perspective, ideology creates “subjects” by discursively presenting asymmetric power relations as immutable (Woolcock 1985: 205). Thus, ideology is an instrument that sustains the ruling hegemony by shaping the collective behaviour or “common sense” to use Gramsci.

In keeping with Gramsci’s insight about ideology, this section analyses the main discursive tactics of the TPLF. TPLF, as EPRDF’s arch-strategist, championed the ideological road map in post-1991 Ethiopia in order to build a solid base of support beyond the confines of Tigray (Aalen 2019: 3). Against this backdrop, the overarching modus operandi of ethnic federalism and the two ideologies, revolutionary democracy, and developmental state have been hegemonic apparatuses of the party.

To start with Gramsci, ideology operates by articulating and naturalising the problems and solutions of the state. For the TPLF, the problem of Ethiopia was national oppression and its solution lies in ethnic federalism (Vaughan 2003: 169). Also, the project of inventing common sense succeeds by enforcing a particular societal norm as the only possible norm. Similarly, TPLF declared ethno-linguistic identification as the only way of belonging into the state and the appropriate mode of social action. In this way, TPLF championed and embodied ethnic nationalism in the constitution, the state structure, and the civil society. Consequently, primordial common sense came to pervade Ethiopia as the only hegemonic truth by obfuscating class, gender, religion, citizenship, and other ways of being an organisation.

The TPLF buttressed varieties of discourses in order to habituate a primordial *Weltanschauung*. It presented ethnic federalism as the only solution that would save Ethiopia from disintegration. The discourse insisted on the realisation of the ethno-federal project; otherwise, Ethiopia would face the fate of Somalia (Zegeye 2017: 7). The other discourse framed ethnic federalism as a project that redresses the historical injustices committed by Amhara forces (Muluye 2020: 46). Back then, demonising Amhara as an oppressor was a potent rhetorical tool in mobilising non-Amhara elites to fight for the ethno-federal arrangement (Lata 1999: 134). In order to influence popular beliefs, TPLF vaunted itself as the liberator of oppressed and marginalised ethnic groups (Vaughan 2011: 627). Lofty promises of ethnic entitlement and ethnic empowerment were enticing discourses for elites from various ethnic groups. It is worth noting that many elites and political parties of diverse ethnic groups have reproduced the hegemony of the TPLF by impregnating the hegemonic worldview of TPLF into their constituent units. Thus, years of indoctrination and practice made primordial common sense a voluntarily embraced value in Ethiopia.

In a detour to previous regimes, TPLF elevated ethno-linguistic identity not only to become the primary vocabulary for political decision-making but also the proper standard of social relations. It was during TPLF rule that the beliefs of an oppressive ethnic group, settlers, natives, the liberator ethnic group, the narrow nationalist ethnic group, and the chauvinist ethnic group became rooted in the popular psyche of Ethiopian society. It is difficult to quantify how powerfully the ideology of TPLF shaped citizen's views, but it did have a tremendous impact on the way people thought and acted, all the more so because no competing narratives were allowed to develop in mainstream discourse. It is undeniable that the discursive roots of such rhetoric preceded the formations of the TPLF (Gebremariam, 2013: 138–139), but the TPLF imbued it to the mainstream by institutionalising it.

Compounding the potency of the discursive formulation of primordial politics was its systemic expression through the ideologies of revolutionary democracy and the developmental state. Revolutionary democracy is the long-held TPLF ideology, rooted in the principles of Leninism, aimed at regimenting the masses with the activities of the vanguard party (Vaughan 2015: 308). Revolutionary democracy with its discursive production and

institutional embodiment attempted to merge the vision of TPLF with the population in the form of class/ethnic consciousness.

Revolutionary democracy presented the TPLF as the sole guardian and representative of the poor and the peasantry (Vaughan 2011: 622). This rhetoric had the hegemonic ability to paint TPLF/EPRDF as the natural guardian of the masses. For this, criticism of the party was like criticising the manifest aim of all peasants. True, there were internal contradictions in the TPLF's pre-2001 era regarding Eritrea, the opening of the Ethiopian economy, and the absorption of national bourgeoisie. However, the party's stance towards the peasantry was more or less similar (Tadesse and Young 2015: 392–393).

Like revolutionary democracy, patronisation saturates the discourses of the developmental state. The narrative describes the party as a committed partner of the people in the fight against poverty. For that, all political, economic, and social processes are required to work in order to end the greatest enemy-poverty (Arriola and Lyons 2016: 79). This narrative conspicuously jumbles the government and the party by overemphasising their telos. In so doing, the discourse buttresses the claim that economic development is the goal the whole population instinctively identifies with. Its genius lies in the assumption that since the country is on consensus with the basic national goal, there is no need for a competitive objective or party. This condescending narrative enabled the TPLF to unsettle the opposition from securing a discursive niche. In this regard, the TPLF had utilised both ideologies in order to effectively dislodge major power contenders. Among others, it kept ultra-secessionist movement such as the OLF and pan-Ethiopian groups at bay (Kisha 2019).

In the field of civil society, TPLF streamlined civil society institutions such as schools, religious institutions, the media, and socio-cultural sites in order to reproduce hegemonic worldviews. Regimentation allowed the party to inoculate the dynamic fields of collective action, including universities, professional associations, youth/women's associations, and customary institutions. For revolutionary democracy, the primary function of schools, religious institutions, and the media are to percolate the ideas of ethnic federalism (Girma 2012: 119). It views education as a tool for editing collective consciousness per the experiment of ethnic federalism. Similarly, revolutionary democracy considers religious institutions as a tool of acquiescence (EPRDF 1996: 1–10). The party appropriates religious

institutions in return for political support, while at the same time monitoring their practices (Haustein and Østebø 2011: 756–760).

Without manipulation of the media outlets, it may not have been possible to advance the TPLF discourses. From the start, TPLF established, reorganised, and masterfully supervised the Walta information centre, the Ethiopian news agency, and other media outlets in order to disseminate hegemonic narratives (Gebregziabher and Hout 2018: 5; Stremlau 2011: 722). These include disseminating the indispensability of the TPLF in saving Ethiopia, and presenting the indomitability of the TPLF, sometimes in megalomaniac tones. According to (Clapham 2012), this sense of righteousness to exercise authority is linked to the legitimising tactics of post-liberation movements. In this regard, Dorman pointed out that when dominant parties such as the TPLF “begin to be challenged, by opposition and civic groups outside the coalition, the exclusionary language of liberation reemerges” (Dorman 2007: 1092).

This has been most noted in the media, which has stressed the equality of all ethnic groups, at least in their autonomy. Nevertheless, the media often depicted the TPLF and, by extension, Tigrayans as liberators of other nations and nationalities, for which the latter should be deeply grateful.²

Moreover, to establish the heroic image of the TPLF in the collective memory, the media carefully choose nationalist *cum* Marxist lexicons such as martyrdom “Meswaetinet,” salvation “Madan,” and freedom “Netsanet,” in order to adulate the gallantry of the TPLF. Glittering expressions such as “a generation that shakes mountains,” “Terarochin Yanketekete Tiwulid” are repeated to present how the TPLF started with seven fighters, hardly with any ammunition, and turned into a massive military force that defeated the military government. All this was to normalise the mythical status of the TPLF and the “particularism” of Tigray (Henze 2000: 251). In this connection, Ives noted the importance of reworking the cultural repertoire through the adoption of new terms, alterations of definitions of established meanings, and the removal of certain grammars as a way of clearing the discursive ground for the adoption of a new discourse (Ives 2004: 63–71). Again, tailoring artistic works in a way that reflects the TPLF’s solidarity with nations and nationalities

2 It was an unwritten rule for many leaders in the EPRDF to express their indebtedness and tribute to Tigray and the TPLF. The materiality of this discourse is believed to have paved the way for the economic hegemony of the TPLF.

has been one way of shaping common sense (Abebe 2018: 15–92). A related discursive vindication was the defining development in terms of growth and in comparing these measures with the previous regimes. Although some of the figures broadcasted as an achievement were brazen lies (Mandefro 2016), leaning on Femia’s “superficiality of consent,”³ the TPLF’s subterfuge to sustain its hegemony is no surprise.

Promoting a personality cult was another consent-generating instrument of the TPLF. Specifically, the media venerated the “geniuses” of TPLF leaders, so that the wider public would acknowledge their rectitude. For instance, regularly disseminating preposterous myths about the excellent style of leadership, dynamism, and international credibility of the late Prime Minister was one way of gaining approval. The novelty of this discourse lies in framing Meles Zenawi in congruence with the prevailing discursive ethos of leadership – a strong man rule, that the Ethiopians subscribe to.⁴

In addition to media-centred accounts, deluging public spaces with hegemonic messages is no less important in analysing TPLF’s effort. In this regard, Puzey and Vuolteenaho’s toponymic hegemony recognises the usefulness of changing the names of locations, squares, and public spaces in rebutting past hegemonies (2016: 66–77). In this spirit, during its early years the TPLF changed the names of public spaces as a way to undo the myths surrounding them. For instance, the change of “Abiot” (revolution) square to “Meskel” (cross) square and several changes of places that carry revolutionary and monarchical meanings were part of countering the legacy of the past regimes. Similarly, the constructions of symbolic monuments and celebration of events have given rise to new public consciousness.⁵ Again, altering the former flag of Ethiopia falls within the same context of countering unwanted symbols and their emblematic messages (Zenawi 1992).⁶

3 “Superficiality of consent” indicates the fickle and episodic nature of consent in a system of decadent hegemony. In such cases the ruling group resorts to deception in order to sustain its rule (Femia 1981: 43).

4 The efficacy of ideology does not only lie on the creation of a new common sense but should also be compatible with common senses already retained. In Ethiopia’s political culture, “a strong man” is tantamount to a good leader and the “qualities” of the late Premier are conspicuously invented to be part of the Ethiopian definition of a good leader (see Vaughn and Tronvoll 2003).

5 Anole monument and the celebration of the day of nations, of nationalities and peoples are good examples of emotional propaganda for brainwashing Ethiopians.

6 Once asked about the former flag, Meles emphasised the need to modify it as it signals symbolic messages anathema to liberty, equality and democracy. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-V_U__Y27E

Lastly, the party used several softer methods of repression to thwart dissensions. Strangling or co-opting oppositions, censoring the public sphere and mass surveillance for signs of resistance are some of the methods the TPLF used in order not to rely too much on its coercive apparatuses. The TPLF has never hesitated to narrow the political space and suppress dissent under the pretext of the community's wider interests. The party invoked discursive justifications for repression by framing the opposition as anti-peace, anti-development, and terrorist (Alo 2017: 154–170). Moreover, arsenals of stifling laws, such as the proclamation on charities, and the anti-terrorism proclamations, compelled citizens to conform to the ruling bloc for pragmatic reasons of survival. Overall, the mix of revolutionary democracy, developmental state, and ethnic federalism assisted the TPLF in spreading its hegemonic project.

The Hegemony of TPLF in the Economy

Hegemony is the presence of a class monopoly over the totality of moral and economic life. According to Gramsci, alongside the discursive manipulation of common sense, the economic well-being of the subaltern is equally important for reverence of leadership. Obviously, ideologies shape the way the subaltern conceives its material reality. The TPLF record in the material field is mixed. On the one hand, the TPLF has built a comprador bourgeoisie driven economy that bulldozes the material interest of subalterns (Gebregziabher and Hout 2018: 1–7). The TPLF, on the other hand, had obtained credit for registering improved economic results. As its trail demonstrates, revolutionary democracy, combined with the developmental state increased the role of the party in the economy, and the natural outcome is a hegemonic party that keeps a tight lid on the extraction and mobilisation of economic resources (ibid.). TPLF's ideological choice for “a party state-led economy” provided the TPLF with the resources it needed in order to retain its clients and mobilise support (Lefort 2015: 357).

Under the general rubric of a party-led- economy, the economic hegemony of the TPLF involved a range of stratagems. The first was plundering humanitarian aid. Hassan has divulged that looting aid has long been the trademark of the TPLF since the time of the war (Hassan n.d.: 2). This predatory process in the struggle periods bolstered the economic strength of the TPLF, allowing it to build a formidable insurgency capability, in contrast to the rest of the rebel groups in the country (ibid. 6–11).

In the years following the seizure of power, the TPLF embraced exclusionist policies that favour Tigray. The organisation in its formative years in power, favoured its regional base, Tigray, in areas of budget and other investment allocations.⁷ Discursively inducing a sense of triumph, and iterating the sacrifice it required of the TPLF and of Tigrayans in general offered an expedient excuse for siphoning substantial amount of capital in the name of the reconstruction of war-torn Tigray. Again, the TPLF made subsidy grants an arm of influence by controlling its distribution process to the regional states (Chanie 2007: 366).

Establishing party endowments was another way to secure consent. The TPLF blended a web of corporations through an endowment, to leverage on the state's capability to distribute economic goods. To this end, an Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT) spawned business corporations in areas of farming, manufacturing, banking, housing, and mining. Under the aegis of the TPLF, EFFORT spawned several companies in a short period because of a range of implicit cum explicit favours (Gebregziabher and Hout 2018: 1–7). As the owner of EFFORT, TPLF could logically utilise this fund to satisfy its clients.

Involving the military in civilian investments can be considered another hegemonic drive of the TPLF. The late premier spearheaded the establishment of METEC, which stands for Metals and Engineering Corporations, in 2010. The official explanation stated that the military is a large force with the power, skill, adaptability, and commitment to contribute to the developmental aspirations of Ethiopia (Gebregziabher 2019: 5). Nevertheless, the ulterior motive was to assuage the military as the TPLF was suffering from sagging legitimacy (ibid. 12). Regardless of its financial gain for the TPLF, the corporation has been a conveyor belt for the party affiliates, by flagrantly facilitating the flow of resources such as foreign currency and imported goods by abusing the notion of a secret expenditure in the military budget (ibid. 12). It is plausible that the TPLF overtly and covertly exploited METEC for its patronage politics as demonstrated by the shocking revelations of outrageous illicit dealings and corruption in its dissolving days of 2019 (Ayiteneu 2020: 171).

7 Skewed distribution of manufacturing industries in Ethiopia is attuned to what Abbink calls “a selective hold on politics and economics” (Abbink 2005: 12).

In short, for long-term consent, performance legitimacy in the economy is essential as it curtails counter-hegemonic forces. We argue that the firm grip of the TPLF on the economy partially legitimised the party by presenting it as a benign patron. Moreover, economic monopolisation provides the TPLF with regulatory and penetrative capacities by easily commanding its clients.

The Crisis of TPLF Hegemony

In November 2015, just six months after the EPRDF declared an absolute election victory, two decades of TPLF dominance started to degenerate. Waves of protests flared up, first in Oromia, followed by Amhara regional state, signalling a hegemonic crisis. The protesters have expounded their dissatisfaction both with their respective regional governments and with the TPLF. These three year-long waves of protests finally decentred the TPLF by bringing in a new leadership.

The gravity of the three years of protest signifies an organic crisis, implying a long period of system instability in all its political and socio-economic aspects. Gramsci illustrates three intertwined conditions that constitute an organic crisis (Hoare and Smith 1992: 206–210). The first is when the ruling power loses its “organic affiliation” with the governed, resulting in a loss of allegiance on the part of the overwhelming population. Second, the rise of the masses as a united counter-hegemonic force questioning the old rule, proposing alternative forms of socio-political organisations and calling for more freedom. Third, when the ruling class reacts coercively it signals the decay of hegemony (*ibid.*). In the interest of brevity, let us group the causes of the crisis in two: the first being the economic crisis; the other being the crisis of authority.

In conceptualising a hegemonic crisis, Gramsci remarks that, if the economic crisis is indeed a matter of fact, the hegemonic crisis would continue for a long time and there will be difficulty on the part of the ruling group to resolve it in conventional ways (*ibid.* 178). This conceptual cue applies to the Ethiopian context. The developmental state, despite its successes, has created uneven development and socio-economic disarray in Ethiopia. In Lefort’s terms, the developmental state generated contradictions over “the division of the cake between central/peripheral authorities/oligarchies but also between these oligarchies and the population in general” (Lefort (2016). Furthermore, corruptions, unemployment, a rising foreign debt, inflation,

and land grabbing have tapered the legitimacy of the regime. In effect, this compelled the public to act as a unified force in opposing the ruling bloc.

Waves of protests initially erupted in Oromia in reaction to the Addis Ababa master plan (Záhořík 2017: 263–264). The underlying cause, however, was the eviction of Oromo peasants from their land with nominal compensation (ibid.). The eviction had external elements such as the constellation of local and foreign capitalists evicting the peasantry in the name of foreign direct investment. Consequently, a failure to integrate the interests of the peasantry with the expected economic development led to the withdrawal of subalterns from the prevailing rhetoric of “Ethiopia is rising.”

Besides the peasantry, youths were the largest segment of protestors in both regions and their grievances were rooted more in their livelihoods than politics (Lefort 2016). Degree holder protestors or “the no future generation” in both regions called for an end to the unemployment and economic marginalisation (Záhořík 2017: 265). Linking with this, one typical mode of collective action was burning and vandalising foreign-owned investments. Such acts of destruction may reflect the youths’ lack of participation, a lower sense of ownership, and the sheer absence of agency in those projects. Again, the burning of those factories could be interpreted as an aspect of resisting the neo-liberal hegemony that functions through false optimism and extractions.

The crisis of authority was the second major driver of the 2015 crisis. In part, the crisis of authority in Ethiopia stems from the disingenuous alliance of the developmental state policy with the vanguard party. Ethiopia’s developmental state policy was elitist, as it does not consider public engagement (Lefort 2013: 461). Moreover, a denial of civil and political rights, an unwillingness to conduct fair elections, unlawful detention, disrespect for human rights, the inability to uphold rule of law, and closure of the political space robbed the legitimacy of the regime.

Looking deeply into the discourses of the protestors, one can see the rift between the expectation of the public and the performance of the leadership. In this respect, the urge to do away with anything related to the TPLF/EPRDF rule was the common *leitmotif* of the protestors. Protestors in Oromia demanded the fall of the regime, chanting their slogan “down down Woyane”⁸

8 Woyane is a term in Tigreña meaning rebellion. In 1943, Tigrayan farmers revolted against the Haile Silassie regime, which is remembered as the first Woyane rebellion. During the 1970s, the TPLF hailed its movement as the second Woyane movement (Berhe 2004: 584).

(down down TPLF) (Bekele 2018: 367). In the same spirit, protestors in Amhara list the fall of the regime among their primary demands by chanting the slogan “Beka” (enough) and intoning the popular opprobrium “Woyane leba new” (TPLF is a thief). In addition to such slogans, the protestors adopted a semiotic resistance by sharing their talents in drawing cartoons in order to ridicule and criticise TPLF heavyweights.

A related source of organic crisis points to the institutional and ideological shortcomings in addressing identity-related problems. The inability of the ruling bloc to establish cross-sectional national values in conjunction with the fragile administrative structure led to the proliferation of ethnic resentment, which in effect ruined the party’s credibility. In this case, one of the drivers of the Amhara protest was the question of restoring Wolkayit area in the Tigray to the Amhara region (Fesseha 2017: 236). Similarly, ethnic conflict between ethnic Somalis and ethnic Oromos was one tragic fact along with the crisis as a whole.

Apart from the widespread protests, resistance against the TPLF emerged within the EPRDF. OPDO and ANDM added their part in spurring the crisis by exerting pressure on the TPLF. Indeed, ANDM and OPDO long tried to renegotiate power with the TPLF, but these longer stretches have been squelched by the dominance of the late premier, Meles Zenawi. Nonetheless, following the death of Meles, “the big man” in 2012, the TPLF could not keep its unity and chokehold on the coalition partners (Leyons 2019). In the years following his death, the two coalition parties faced strong blame from their respective communities for their servility to the dominance of the TPLF. Amid this feeling of inferiority, the protests exploded in 2015. These protests were a blessing in disguise for the OPDO and ANDM in order to contest the TPLF’s monopoly of power by aligning with the protestors (Lefort 2016). This assertiveness of the ANDM and OPDO later morphed to form a tactical alliance known by its portmanteau “Oromara” in order to sideline TPLF (Barkessa 2019: 4–6).

TPLF/EPRDF as a hegemon in crisis came up with many ways to keep the crisis under control. The first reaction was to declare a sequential state of emergency in order to crack down on protestors (Alo 2017: 170). This move by the TPLF/EPRDF is consistent with Gramsci’s prevision that, in periods of organic crisis, the ruling group tends to use military options in order to mitigate perceived threats to the hegemonic order or “legality” (Hoare

and Smith 1992: 215). Furthermore, the TPLF/EPRDF tried to leverage all possible resources, such as providing revolving funds for unemployed youths, calling for various excuses, and applying diversionary tactics. Gramsci's analysis of the reactions of the ruling class in times of crisis is also indicative of this move. A dying ruling class may "make sacrifices and expose itself to uncertain future by demagogic promises; but it retains power, reinforces it for the time being, and uses it to crush its adversary" (ibid. 211). Again, the party tried to appoint technocrats and reshuffle its leadership. In essence, this is analogous to Gramsci's notion of cross-class formation to refurbish the old class by sending a message of reform to the public. However, not all these could produce anything more than a fleeting relief.

Finally, the change of political environment within the EPRDF, coupled with the public pressure prompted Prime Minister Hailemariam to tender resignation. His resignation opened up a new arena for an intra-party rivalry within the EPRDF. Following a brief political tumult, the EPRDF council elected Abiy Ahmed as its chairperson to be the Prime Minister of Ethiopia. Looking back, the TPLF had the ambition to place a puppet on the stage, but the Oromara tactical alliance put Abiy on the lead. Although there was no formal procedure in place to elect a successor to Prime Minister Hailemariam from a particular ethnic group, it appeared that the Oromara block struck a deal to elect the next PM from OPDO. This move was intended to soothe the rage and resentment of the Oromo and Amhara youths, who were resisting the TPLF. In addition, the decision was meant to address Oromo nationalists long-standing concern that, despite being the largest ethnic group, they had been excluded from influence.

Abiy assumed power in April 2018. Over the next few months, his roller-coaster reforms directly defied the TPLF, putting him at odds with the trailblazer of the system for 27 years. As we shall see in the next section, the situation was a war of position between two political opposites, the one led by the TPLF, the old hegemonic establishment, and the other headed by Abiy, the leader of the new counter-hegemonic force, finally leading to the outbreak of war.

Abiy's War of Position and Beyond

Following the political changes of 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his Oromara group initiated a counter-hegemonic praxis, which seeks to

undo and deconstruct everything “inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed” (ibid 333). Initially, Abiy succeeded in impeding the TPLF with the use of ideational and institutional tools. The leadership championed alternative ideologies, and a new consciousness, that aimed at replacing the one held by TPLF. However, Abiy did not produce something new from the perspective of a hegemonic project. Instead, the years following his ascendancy can be read as episodes of doing politics within the orbit of an interregnum.

This section and the next weave the conceptual pieces of war of position and interregnum to analyse the situation in Ethiopia. We adopt the war of position to refer to the vigorous and everyday struggles of the new leadership to diffuse the pressure and legacy of the TPLF, to conceive a new common sense, and a new definition of reality.

Starting from the day of his inaugural address, 2 April 2018, Abiy has commenced an ideational confrontation against the TPLF, notwithstanding his indirect challenges, and largely refrained from explicitly attacking the TPLF and its core principles. In his speech, Abiy not only deconstructed many of TPLF’s established symbolic and conceptual narratives about the state and its history, but he also hinted at the future ideology of government – “Medemer.” His inaugural speech on the unity and longevity of Ethiopia (CGTN Africa 2018), for instance, challenged the colonial and the imperial view of Ethiopia’s past promoted by the TPLF and others like it. Moreover, the speech disapproves of the historical discourse of the TPLF, which slashes Ethiopian history to a mere 120 years. To this day, Abiy has continued to emphasise Ethiopian unity that undercuts the TPLF narratives.

As a way of countering hegemonic lexicons, Abiy introduced new ways of understanding and interpreting Ethiopia’s politics. For instance, he uttered the phrase “competitive parties” (Tefokakari Partiwoch) to refer to rival or opposition parties in Ethiopia. Conversely, TPLF regarded opposition parties as lethal adversaries and the Amharic term “Tekawami” has a far less constructive connotation than its equivalent opposition in English; Abiy’s effort represents a way to deconstruct the old hegemonic term. He also replaced “rent seeker” (kiray sebsabi), a common euphemism describing corrupt politicians with the more explicit expression of the subaltern “Leba” or thief. In line with the efforts of the premier, Gramsci stresses the political instrumentality of developing a new grammar and vocabulary,

which stands in defiance of hegemonic discourses and the power relations imbued in them (Ives 2004: 77–82). In addition to adopting new terms, Abiy advocated reconciliation in his ensuing public appearances, while ignoring such inflammatory allegations as chauvinism, secessionism, and tribalism, which have been TPLF's dominant taglines in Ethiopia's politics.

In his first hundred days in office, Abiy has introduced roller-coaster reforms, which have flabbergasted many observers (Temin and Badwaza 2019: 139–140). On top of this, Abiy's reputation surged both domestically and internationally, whilst the stature of the TPLF was worsening. Around this time, skeptics from TPLF circles began complaining about the populist approach of the premier. Soon enough, the TPLF orchestrated waves of demonstrations around Tigray, and called for an immediate solution to end victimisation of Tigrayans and respect for the constitution among others. The demonstrations indicated the TPLF's misgivings about the changes introduced by the centre. At around the same moment, the TPLF highlighted its impression of the new PM at the 11th EPRDF conference held in Hawasa city.

At the congress, the TPLF chairperson, Debretsion recalled Abiy's unique quality of leadership and praised him (Zehabesha Official 2020). Nonetheless, he pointed to the weakening of the collective leadership tradition and hoped that they would soon regain the old way of decision-making. Yet, this TPLF stance towards Abiy – a leader who ignores collective decisions – was no longer tenable as Abiy overstepped the collective decision-tradition by deciding on the large-scale arrest of corrupts. In response, TPLF deplored the detentions, with the view that they were linked to the political outlook and ethnic background of the individuals involved and accused the new leadership of attacking Tigrayans. This stage marked an open rebellion of the TPLF on Abiy's administration and opened a space for both blocks to pursue rigorous counter-hegemonic campaigns.

The ideational struggle between the weakening and the emerging hegemon in the next twelve months is reminiscent of the Gramscian war of position. The new administration tarnished the TPLF, side-by-side vaunting its worth by utilising documentaries, stories, reports, and many emotional investments. Gramsci contends that a war of position necessitates the “intense labor of criticism, by diffusion of culture and spread of ideas” (Femia 1975: 34). Similarly, the discourse of the new administration called on all Ethiopians

to notice the anti-democratic, anti-peace, and anti-development essence of the TPLF (Jonathan and Tsehaye 2019: 203). In this respect, the new bloc transmitted an interview with detainees in order to stage the way for TPLF demonisation. On the show, the prisoners confessed their experiences of abuse by the TPLF and by *Tigreña*-speaking prison officials. The new bloc used this scene to present the TPLF as the archenemy of civil rights. The accusations legitimised the government's action of barring TPLF officials from security institutions (Mikael 2019). The most vitriolic assault against the TPLF came from a series of documentaries that claimed responsibility on the part of several TPLF circles for the misuse and theft of public resources. The public made sense of those documentaries by aligning them with the famous Abiy's affront "yeken Jib" or daytime hyenas.⁹ Discourses in the form of party statements often disparaged the TPLF for seeding discord between ethnic groups (*Addis Standard*, 7 December 2019).

The recurrence of delegitimising tactics also played a role in discursively cornering the TPLF. Nevertheless, marginalising the TPLF would not have been possible without disrupting the ideological base and the institutional core of the TPLF. Rejecting revolutionary democracy and merging the EPRDF was a coup de grace that put an end to the TPLF's suzerainty in Ethiopia's politics. The counter-ideology of the new administration was remarkably close to Gramsci's idea of supplanting hegemonic ideology with an alternative. Gramsci proposed that the central prerequisite for a successful counter-hegemony is to have an alternative ideology that reconciles diverse interests with a potential to be rapidly accepted (Hoare and Smith 1992: 328). Therefore, the new leadership foregrounded "Medemer" as an ideological framework through which several elements can be brought together – a deepening democracy, a vibrant economy, and regional integration (Behailu 2019: 218–227). For "Medemer" to be the new ideology, the leadership discarded revolutionary democracy, the operational philosophy of the TPLF/EPRDF for 27 years. To that effect, the new leadership was ingenious in exposing the inherent weakness and oppressive nature of revolutionary democracy to the public. In this respect, Abiy's critique of the atheistic essence

9 "Yeken Jib" (day time hyena) is a verbal offence expressed by Abiy shortly after the Meskel square bomb blast at the Abiy support rally in June 2018. For Mikiael, who was the head of Tigray's Prosperity Party branch, Yeken Jib was "an underhand reference to the dead hand of TPLF" (Mikael 2019).

of revolutionary democracy in a religious society during a live television broadcast was aimed at discrediting the ideology (Borati Reality 2019).

Discarding revolutionary democracy was important to the new leadership in four ways. In the first place, symbolically rejecting the Marxist-suffused revolutionary democracy meant rejecting the TPLF, cutting off the legacy of Meles Zenawi, and dropping the pride and arrogance implied in it. Second, scrapping revolutionary democracy rescued Abiy from ideological fights in which the TPLF cut its teeth. In this regard, jettisoning revolutionary democracy gave Abiy a free reign to carry out his plans without fear of evaluation and democratic centralism. Third, the abolition of revolutionary democracy broke the institutional and legal pillars of TPLF hegemony. Medemer's position on liberalisation, for example, goes against the interest of TPLF. Fourth, the separation between the TPLF and the new Prosperity Party (PP) would not have been possible without tossing revolutionary democracy away from the ideological battlefield.

The second component to the full realisation of counter-hegemony is the creation of a political party as much as it is the absolute manifestation of the new ideology. The conceptualisation of the new political party by Gramsci comprises three interrelated critical components: the "principal," "intermediate," and "mass" elements (Hoare and Smith 1992: 153). Gramsci emphasised that each level must function together in order to achieve synergy and as such the principal or the leadership must radiate a sense of purpose by encouraging its followers (*ibid.* 88). In line with Gramsci, Abiy's defining role became clearer when he spearheaded the plan for a merger of the EPRDF at the 11th congress in October 2019. The move was simultaneously counter-hegemonic and hegemonic. It was counter-hegemonic in that dismantling the EPRDF meant getting away from the illegitimate party and the ideology imbued in it. Similarly, it removed the TPLF's stranglehold on decision-making, as the new party follows a proportional model based on the population size of each region.¹⁰ However, it was also hegemonic, in that the re-branding of the EPRDF would boost the credibility of the new historical bloc. To this end, the new leadership for all its objectives launched successive discursive campaigns by pointing at the new party's contribution to unity, autonomy, accommodation, peace, and stability (Aggrey 2019).

10 Contrary to the PP, the EPRDF had been offering equal voting weight for the four parties, irrespective of population number.

On November 15, 2019, the three partners of the TPLF, ANDM, OPDO, SPDM, and the affiliated parties in the five regions endorsed the merger plan. The five affiliated parties accepted the proposal because it granted them a hard-won and long-awaited autonomy and equality.¹¹ The discourse on the merger generally strove to echo the inclusiveness of the new party, which, in line with Gramsci, aspired to establish a “broad base” (Martin 1998: 96–97) that embraces erstwhile marginalised parties. The TPLF, the oldest and the founding member of the EPRDF, rejected the merger and formally left the EPRDF by breaking its ties with the new Prosperity Party.

In such a messy context the government of Abiy postponed the 2020 election due to the outbreak of COVID19. This latest development became a new strain as the TPLF opposed the postponement and held regional elections in September 2020, defying the decision of the central government. Tensions soared in the weeks following the election until the early days of November, when the TPLF allegedly attacked the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Army. Following that, on 4 November 2020, Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Abiy launched a “law enforcement operation” with a promise to capture top TPLF officials and install a transitional regional government. Although the conventional war between the TPLF and the federal government came to quick end, there are still reports of intermittent fighting that further complicate the security and humanitarian problems. All in all, the current war between the TPLF and the federal government is a product of profound ideological differences and contestations for political, and economic influence.

Imagining a Post-TPLF Order

The initial reform efforts of Prime Minister Abiy are commendable, but sadly, they are incomplete because, among other reasons, they were rooted in the necessity of crushing the TPLF, placating popular challenges, and regaining legitimacy. Only time will reveal whether the reforms introduced will have a positive effect or not. However, in view of the current situation Ethiopia’s situation can be interpreted as an interregnum, a fluctuating political landscape in which the “old is dying but the new cannot be born” (Hoare and Smith 1992: 276). An interregnum according to Gramsci is

11 As they are not members of the executive committee of the EPRDF, sister parties representing the five regions of Somali, Harari, Benishangul Gumuz, Gambella and Afar played only a minor part in the national decision-making process before the merger.

a moment of uncertainty, ideological delusion, and violence in which the erstwhile ideologies – while still wielding institutional influence – are losing momentum; nevertheless, this does not mark the formation of a new hegemony (ibid). Interregnum to quote Salem “is a time of uncertainty during which political changes occur, but a new ruling class is never quite able to create hegemony” (Salem 2020: 201). Therefore, interregnum periods are replete with various “moments” and a shift in “tempos” but they do not represent a radical break from the old hegemony (ibid. 161). We analyse the current and imagine the future context of Ethiopia’s politics by using the idea of an interregnum because the perspective considers the many intricate elements of political change by addressing basic issues of power relations, structural contradictions, and material aspirations rather than focusing on political and social temporalities of the state.

Abiy, a former soldier and intelligence chief, and a member of EPRDF, who was elected by the Oromara tactical alliance, can be considered as a leader heavily influenced by the old establishment. This fact rules out the possibility that he would be the polar opposite of the TPLF and its ideology. On the other hand, Abiy undoubtedly has introduced a variety of tempos in his speeches and actions, and he repeatedly demonstrated his willingness to navigate beyond the spirits of the past. Nonetheless, the tempos introduced are cosmetic and far from being institutionalised, not to mention the lack of a clear-cut road map.

This article argues that the current interregnum in Ethiopia entwines with structural features that are long standing. The legacy of the TPLF (founded in 1975) is not something that can easily be left behind. In this regard, PM Abiy in his holiday message for the 2020 Ethiopian Epiphany euphemistically admitted the living legacy of the TPLF in the following way.

The enemy has planted several seeds of discord among the public. Some are institutional and structural, others are legal and ideological, the rest are embedded in education, media, and socio-cultural practices that form public discourses. It is our responsibility to uproot these evils one by one (Ahmed 2021).¹²

12 Abiy Ahmed 2021[Epiphany Message] available at <https://twitter.com/abiyahmedali/status/1351028303805739012?lang=en>

Moreover, the weak hegemonic positioning of both the Prosperity Party and its opponents precludes radical changes, leaving Ethiopian politics in the limbo of restoration and revolution. The Oromara elites had cooperated to sideline the TPLF, but soon failed to maintain the warmth of their relation within the Prosperity Party. Similarly, the antagonistic politics pursued by political groups have limited and displaced their constructive potential – further triggering what Gramsci calls the “morbid symptoms,”¹³ including a weakening central government, ethnic animosities, intra elite acrimony, and mass disillusionment. If the “unstable equilibrium”¹⁴ in Ethiopia persists, Ethiopia will not only squander another redeeming chance for what Donald Levine¹⁵ calls “structural openings” for real political transformation but also endanger the survival of the state itself.

Conclusion

The present article adopted the Gramscian articulations of hegemony, counter-hegemony, historical bloc, organic crisis, war of position, and interregnum in order to analyse the post-1991 politics of Ethiopia. In conversation with Gramsci, our article examined how the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) utilised hegemonic apparatuses to create a particular type of hegemony that alternates between consent and coercion parallel to the extensive insemination of primordial common sense.

The change in state-society relations can be interpreted in the context of Gramscian organic crisis and the interregnum. The article argues that the hegemonic project of the TPLF has paved the way for a political and economic crisis leading to three years of protests in the two major regions of Ethiopia, during the period 2015–2018. Following the protests, the political change of 2018 brought a counter-hegemonic alternative to the one held by the TPLF. This article indicates that the effectiveness of counter-hegemony lies in its challenge to the established configuration of power relations. The replacement of the old ideology and its institutions are a major step towards

13 Hoare and Smith *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1992: 276). Morbid symptoms are latent and current disturbances in the interregnum. They include ideological contestation, mass cynicism, disillusionment and violence.

14 The circumstances of an interregnum resemble a long period of unstable equilibrium that encompasses chronic structural contradictions (Morton 2013: 112).

15 According to Levine, structural openings represent a temporary political opening of previously closed system. The rare moment abounds with many incentives to create democracy, if properly exploited (Levine 2013: 3).

this challenge and the construction of a new hegemony. In this respect, the Medemer ideology of Prime Minister Abiy, the Prosperity Party, and all reform efforts are counter-hegemonic strategies. However, the rise of Abiy has not produced something new from the perspective of a hegemonic project. Instead, the years following his ascendancy can be read as episodes of doing politics within the orbit of an interregnum. Abiy's counter-hegemony and related reform efforts are incomplete because, among other reasons, they were primarily driven by the need to crush the TPLF and largely to placate popular challenges by regaining legitimacy. Ultimately, the ongoing war between the federal government and the TPLF is largely the product hegemonic contestation over the core tenets of Ethiopia's politics.

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