

INTERSTATE* MEDIA WARS: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE ETHIOPIAN FEDERATION

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Abstract: The present study interrogates the interstate media wars that erupted following the emergence of relational troubles among the parties of Ethiopia's coalition: the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Data from archives and interviews were used to understand the causes and characteristics of the media wars that were mostly fought out on television and other mass media. Findings show that the states used offensive and defensive strategies that included delegitimation, narrativisation and moralisation. Findings further indicate that the most open media war involved the Somali and Oromia states, which used Facebook as their major platform to express an open political hostility relating to their ethno-territorial disputes in the earliest phases of the conflict. The present study highlights the potential dangers of inflammatory state media deployment in the context of fractured and fragile federations.

Keywords: *EPRDF, inter-party crisis, inter-ethnic tension, inter-state media wars, ethnification of mass media, television stations, memory politics*

Contextual Background

For nearly thirty years, Ethiopia was ruled by the coalition Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) composed of four parties that included Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO), Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) and Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF). In effect, TPLF was the dominant party in Duverger's terms (Duverger 1951: 163–171). The death of Meles Zenawi in 2012 as the TPLF-EPRDF chief was considered a severe blow as he was the master mind – the patriarch. The tranquility that followed his passing was therefore quite

* Interstate refers to the political binary and polarisation between states of the Ethiopian Federation facing each other in the main on account of unresolved territorial disputes, identity, memory and counter memory.

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contrary to expectations but it was both misleading and short-term given the complex potential in the then nine states of the Ethiopian Federation.¹

The general political prognosis of an impending crisis by some observers was valid in the long term as subsequent developments were to demonstrate (Aalen 2014). Thus, after the deceptive sense of normalcy within the ruling EPRDF and the political elite in general, brewing tensions and contradictions were surfacing precipitated by a variety of factors including simmering ethnic discontent of representational injustice and uneven development and perceived unfair distribution of resources. Interparty and interstate rivalries with complex threads were on the rise among “sister parties” and “sister states.” Magnified by alternative protest and social media, the fault-lines were to become quite poignantly clear as they started to manifest themselves in virulent protest movements supported even by some EPRDF member politicians from behind (Menberework 2018). Starting from 2016, brewing inter-party frictions were intensifying, signaling that the coalition EPRDF was facing a real test of organisational survival (Ashine 2018). Inter-party crisis was accompanied and worsened by inter-state and inter-ethnic tension magnified by narratives of victimhood. The Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO)² (later renamed ODP, Oromo Democratic Party), which was one of the coalition members of EPRDF, was behind some of the protest and openly in support of demonstrations driven by practical logic imperatives and, as later turned out, even supplying sensitive information to anti-EPRDF forces or resisting the TPLF (Ararsa 2017).

In Amhara state, ANDM (later ADP) was working in consort with ODP as a tactical partner in the anti-TPLF struggle (Fisher and Gebrewahd 2018). Both were to later rename themselves to symbolically delink with TPLF, ending their experience of stigmatisation as TPLF lackeys by their adversaries and attempting to forge a new image as truly independent parties. Perhaps explained by inter-organisational relational dialectics (Clegg et al. 2012), inter-party relations between TPLF and ADP as well as between TPLF and ODP seemed to deteriorate despite public statements of unity within the coalition party EPRDF. At the party level intra-party relations seemed an all-time negative despite expressive control of the member parties of the ruling

1 In 2020, Sidama, which was under the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region, became the tenth member of the Ethiopian Federation following a popular referendum, which was preceded by violent protests demanding autonomy for the people of the region.

2 ANDM and OPDO rebranded themselves in large part, probably to break the symbolic relation with TPLF and draw to an end the stigma associated with their perceived reputational standing in reference to their constituencies.

Ethiopian Revolutionary Democratic Front that often presented a front face of unity against a backstage of serious squabbling.³ The revolution that started with contagious protests in the Oromo region as the epicentre was later to spread to Amhara state galvanising the impetus for change. Acting in unison, state media in Amhara and Oromia were bolder than they had ever been in their support of the protest movements. They were also winning huge support from diaspora-based ethno-nationalist communities adding to the visibility of the federal crisis and intensifying the pressure on the EPRDF (Allo and Tesfaye 2015). The fight to end TPLF hegemony was a strong propellant for a number of reasons but most of all it was based on a moral protest against what was mutually considered an unjust system, wielding power for too long denying the majority a fair share of the political space. The Prime Minister, who hailed from a minority group in the Southern Peoples Region, was considered to have inadequate legitimacy credentials and added to that a TPLF lackey who lacked real powers. Many Ethiopians believed that despite the passing of Meles Zenawi in 2012, the TPLF was still in charge using Haile Mariam Desalegn as the puppet ruler. This characterisation was perhaps an illustration of post-truth politics (Gutsche 2019) but in any case a representation that had considerable emotive force, which was vital for the success of the popular mobilisation in both Amhara and Oromia states against the central government. Irrespective of the veracity of the characterisation, the two constituencies were prepared for alternative facts that would promise better times as the moral decadence within EPRDF was past remedy, with popular uproar reaching a tipping point.

At this critical juncture, the media were deployed to instill the narratives fuelling the raging protests that included minority rule, plunder of national wealth, bureaucratic nepotism, uneven development, human rights violations and the absence of the rule of law. However, the media also set the agenda for a discourse of interstate boundaries, questions of territories, questions of identity determination that were either lingering or were used to serve

3 The OPDO-ANDEM partnership was officially called *OroMara* (from Oromo and Amhara). OroMara provided the framework for heads of the communication bureaus in both states of Oromia and Amhara to introduce new editorial freedoms that encouraged their journalists to virtually join the rebellion (Ararssa 2017). More openly the people to people level of solidarity was manifest in slogans carried by protesters on both sides in towns in Amhara and Oromia (Africa Intelligence 2016). This synergy was further consolidated at the diasporic level discursively pressuring TPLF by the virulent US-based protest media, Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) and Oromia Media Network (OMN) (Woldie 2016). *OroMara* was the fulcrum decisively aiding the election of Abiy Ahmed as the new chairperson of EPRDF and Prime Minister of Ethiopia, following an apparently scripted electoral event in which the unsuspecting TPLF was clearly outmaneuvered by the new factional alliance.

the struggle over federal power. The discourse was hardly civil reflecting the deterioration of the pre-protest spirit of interstate cooperation that was now transformed into confrontation. The states involved in border conflicts were now weaponising the media in the attack and vilification of adversaries, using skewed frames (Chomsky 1989). Territorial flashpoints often formed the core of an interstate discourse with irredentist claimsmakers (e.g. the Wolkayt Amhara Identity Recovery Committee)⁴ on occasion heading to Addis Ababa for jurisdiction following the footsteps of issue entrepreneurs in the political landscape reigniting “issues of the past” (Carmines and Simson 1993).

These issues of the past were territorial but they were also about what might be called “ethnic citizenship” of groups in contested interstate border areas. The broadcast media were weaponised to exacerbate and consolidate exclusivity reflecting similar traits media institutions in fractured states exhibit, at times aiding in ethnic cleaning and displacement of out-of-state residents. It was a period of propaganda as the “systematic mistreatment of truth and information and their procedural safeguards” (Cunningham 2002). Despite the state of emergency and a decreed curb on mass communication activity these were not enough to stop the coverage of the rising tide of violent protest.

Reflecting the deterioration of the pre-protest spirit of interstate cooperation that was now transformed into confrontation, the states involved in conflict seemed to follow the propaganda model of journalism using the media instrumentally in self-promotion, vilification of opposition, and projecting skewed frames of adversaries (Chomsky 1989).

Thus, recent scholarship (e.g. Adisu 2019; Tadele 2020) seems to suggest that Ethiopian broadcast media are assuming more polarised ethnic characteristics and dwelling on narratives of exclusive victimhood, at times obtaining validation from ethnically-minded scholars. Exploring the involvement of television in particular, Gessese (2020) showed that media have become inflammatory institutions. His observation indicates that through framing devices, ethnic media outlets in the regions send the message that their ethnic group has been the victim while others are perpetrators. Amhara TV and Asrat TV (Amhara ethnic TV) have invariably painted the last 27 years of TPLF dominance as anti-Amhara (Amhara TV 2021), whilst OBN and OMN (which is a private Oromia media outlet) have characterised Oromo history as a period of oppression and humiliation under Amhara

4 The Wolkayt Amhara Identity Recovery Committee is a movement leadership demanding a return of the contested territories of Welkayt and Raya to Amhara state.

rule (Gutema 2020). Similarly, Tigray TV and its allied TV *Dimtsi Weyane* (DW)⁵ dwelled on narratives of victimhood, pain and suffering (Tigray TV 2015). Both OMN and Tigray state media have characterised the Abiy administration as conspiring and turning the wheels of history, re-imposing a unitary arrangement and rekindling systematic ethnic injustice of bygone times. Both appear to have dwelled on extended victimhood narratives (Diribsa 2016; Tigray TV 2018).

As political psychologists have demonstrated, the role of a group-based victim mentality as the enhancement of bonding and cohesion, reduced in-group guilt, self-justificatory violence, and the endorsement of third parties can be considerable (Noor et al. 2012). This becomes more worrying when states are proxies for ethnic identities. Skjerdal and Moges (2021) have examined the trends in the progressive ethnification of the media ecosystem and the growing polarisation since the coming of Abiy Ahmed, based on the dominant frames of othering that are emerging.

The purpose of the study is to shed light on how media, particularly broadcast media, were deployed as a platform for the communication of hostility by the key states involved in the wars in the airwaves during the last years of the premiership of Haile Mariam Desalegn (2016–2018) and the 2018–2020 transitional period of his successor Abiy Ahmed.

Conceptual Framework

The study integrates allied constructs from diverse fields in the social sciences in order to formulate a conceptual framework as a foundation for an empirical examination of the interstate media conflicts that evolved during the study period. A comprehensive perspective is adopted to enable a nuanced understanding of the media in times of conflict but also to provide theoretical insights that may shed light on other modalities of communication wars. The framework will enable to plot changes in interstate media confrontation alongside the fluctuations in the political thermometer. Trends in escalation in media hostility are shown as a function of inter-party dynamics as well as inter-state fissure. The television wars are focused in the study although the conflict involved a convergence of media technologies.

Based on the power transition theory (Zagare 2007), it may be surmised that media wars occur when a formerly weaker actor attains a level of/or

5 DW (Dimtsi Weyane) TV is a private but TPLF-affiliated broadcaster

near parity with its key rival. This explanation may relate to the dynamics of the Ethiopian Federation where Tigray/TPLF hegemony was met with more assertive resistance as the ODP/ADP started flexing muscles with the weakening of TPLF in the aftermath of Meles Zenawi. The weakening of a rival may provide further incentives for the weaponisation of media structures as crucial weapons of necessity in a multi-layered political, ethnic, economic and territorial conflict (Gawiser and Witt 1994), strategically priming and framing politically marketable issues. Thus, parties to a conflict, offensively and defensively involved, may harness the force of the media as they grapple with situations of inter-ethnic conflict with the media deployed to aid in the production, framing and dissemination of an angle of unilateral interest (Niessen 2015).

Once in the theatre of media war, agents may employ a variety of strategies that help them outdo their opponents in articulating, highlighting and defending specific interests/truths (Landtsheer, De Vries and Vertessen 2008). Typically, the parties would engage in aspects of public diplomacy striving to present a desirable self-image. More specifically, in media wars actors would strive to outperform their rivals in self-presentation as having more positive national attributes than their adversaries in the political spaces of the larger state such as a federation. In a competitive propaganda environment, the rival entities strive to exploit “image-enhancing situations” and minimise “image threatening situations” by manipulating the media through news framing and other programming as both offensive and defensive strategies (Jamieson 1992). The framework helps to identify the self-presentation strategies and tactics used by the parties to the interstate media wars to undermine the credibility of their adversaries and to promote their own image in the political spaces of the Ethiopian Federation as they seek to positively influence how they are perceived by individual states, the federation of states and its institutions.

Based on this framework, agents have at their disposal four strategies: two defensive and two offensive. When an actor finds they are at fault and are blameworthy, they may mobilise the strategy of blame-avoidance, and attendant tactics, which may be customised to meet contextual imperatives. On the other hand, agents can also utilise credit denial as a strategy with its tactics of *offensive dissociation* and *offensive reframing*. A third strategy is credit gain, which involves the tactics of *entitlings* and *enhancements* and the fourth strategy would be blame imposition with the corresponding tactics of association, *offensive reframing* and *de/legitimization* (Mor 2007: 670). More broadly, Van Leeuwen’s (2007: 2008) discursive framework is

used, which includes a classification of legitimisation strategies that subsumes authorisation (reference to established authority as a force of appeal), rationalisation (referring to arguments as compelling logical resources), narrativisation (use of narrative structures and devices to build persuasive cases) and moralisation (use of ethical parameters/force to support a claim). States mobilising media structures may further deploy strategies from reputation management such as denial and blame-shifting as important political strategies. Overall, the politics of impression centering on style and appearance rather than substance become a necessary arsenal for self-image management and the management of adversaries, using the media as an important political institution. Also of relevance is the theory of war termination, which may help to shed light on why media wars would end on account of a domestic coalition shift resulting in the change of government character or that of significant decision-makers (Stanley and Sawyer 2009).

Methodological Considerations

Case Study Research

In view of Ethiopia's complex historiography, an understanding of the mass-communication landscape would require examining the diverse perspectives of the political actors that mobilised the media arsenal in the discursive skirmishes that metamorphosed over the past years of EPRDF. An understanding of the media wars would entail the use of a diversity of sources showing "a plurality of truths" (Fraser 2004: 181). The multiplicity would help knowledge production that has broad empirical foundations aided by a gleaning of intra- and inter-institutional processes as well as intra- and interstate frameworks. The complex interplay of factors and processes would entail the use of the case study design as a multifaceted and in-depth examination capturing perspectival diversity of a unique and original subject of enquiry addressing interstate media conflict dynamics (Simons 2009).

The study of conflict envisages multiple understandings and positions requiring multiple ways of knowing aiding the mapping of points of narratives and counter-narratives. The multiplicity of actors, issues of contention, conflict dynamics, contexts and divergence of narratives requires a case study that is longitudinal and based on multiple sources viz. news as organisational memoranda. The case study used was a multiple case study involving qualitative content analysis in which document analysis and interviews were used.

Qualitative content analysis was necessary to extract data from the studied broadcasters' websites (i.e. ETV, Amahara TV, OBN, Tigray TV and Somali TV) and their social media outlets as well as the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority (EBA) as the federal body that has regulatory powers over interstate communication. Content included news, documentaries, party and state communiqués, and media interviews broadcast and uploaded by the regional and federal outlets.

The analysis centred on identifying key themes in the conversations between EBA and media officials in the unedited video of the meeting. The analysis was guided by Kuckartz's procedure for qualitative content analysis (Connelly and Peltzer 2016). Interviews were also important instruments.

Recruited through the referral chain, purposively selected interviewees included a total of twelve media workers that represented nearly evenly the five television stations: ETV, Tigray, TV, Amhara TV, OBN, and Somali TV. The face-to-face interviews centred on framing issues in news and other programming, as well as questions of editorial position relating to the relevant media wars. Interviewees were offered guarantees of confidentiality and their responses were coded to ensure anonymity. Interviews took an average of 42 minutes. In accord with relevant data-analytic practices (Cordon and Sainsbury 2006), extracts from interviews, chosen for their discursive utility, are sprinkled across the textual body of results in order to add to the findings obtained from the principal methods. Finally document analysis was further used to understand the Ethiopian media freedom and information legislation as well as the editorial policy of federal state media – of which regional state media editorial policies are derivatives – as a further source. Primarily, the following were consulted for a general perusal of the legal environment: Broadcasting Service Proclamation No. 533/2007, Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation No. 590/2008, and Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression (Proclamation No. 1185-2020). For a general interstate framework, the 1995 Ethiopian constitution was consulted, in particular its clauses pertaining to freedom of expression.

Results and Discussion

General Overview

Findings reported on the subject of interstate media wars come from multiple sources that included the websites of the involved media (ETV, OBN, Tigray Massmedia Agency, and Amhara Massmedia Agency; the Ethiopian media regulatory body Ethiopian Broadcast Authority (EBA) (later renamed

Ethiopian Media Authority), official social media pages as well as interviews with journalists and editors. A review of the relevant body of legislation showed that there was a gap in respect of interstate communication offences. Empirically, the most informative data came from a joint meeting of the regulatory body EBA and the media involved in the interstate crises during the heat of the period of hostilities.

In January 2018 the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority called relevant media and communication stakeholders to the joint meeting engendered by the rising interstate communication crisis, where it presented its latest media monitoring report. The media monitored included Addis TV, Amhara TV, Oromia TV, Somali TV, South TV, Tigray TV and the federal Ethiopian Television (ETV). The present study used an unedited video (Wubetu 2018), given that edited archives may hide vested interests and positions which EBA, as a regulatory arm of the hegemonic order, may be suspected to have as reflected in its video. Various edited versions of the video were archived by the different media under study. The meeting was also broadcast on ETV and OBN.

The Ethiopian Broadcast Authority's general position was that all media behaved unprofessionally and irresponsibly in different degrees (EBA 2019). However, the report was initially confined to generalities, addressing media offences in an anonymous fashion, considering sensitivities implied by the conflict. The critical EBA report was followed by heated discussion and recrimination involving primarily the broadcast media of Oromia and Amhara states, which were the epicentre of the political unrest. The media criticised by EBA were defended by their respective communication bureau heads.

The authority's critical assessments appeared to be received partly with a sense of guilt but also drew angry reactions from Amhara communication politicians. In one instance, the Amhara state communication head not only defended the Amhara media as being ethical and responsible but doubted the neutrality of the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority, describing it as biased against his regional media. His criticism could be tied to the broader narrative of the trust crisis and in context to the relational tension between EBA as headed by a TPLF central committee member and the ADP managed Amhara media. The Oromia Bureau of Communication head was more contrite, pleading that any media misbehavior relating to the Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN) should be understood from the mass dislocation of Oromos from Somali state and the humanitarian crisis it had precipitated. The EBA director disclosed that the media offences report represented a limited sampling of the large volume of offences too many to exhaust in the course of the joint meeting. A

review of the content produced themes that included polarisation, interstate rivalry, growing interstate mistrust, and subservience of the media to the relevant political leadership. These themes permeated the interstate media wars discussed in subsequent sections.

At the level of strategy, an examination of the strategies deployed in the media wars showed that defensive and offensive strategies were mobilised together with tactics from media wars in the former Yugoslavia among Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro (Pejic 2021). The media wars are presented as dyadic interchanges between states as presented subsequently.

Dyadic Media Wars

Federal Government and Tigray State Media

Growing polarisation and mistrust appear to have characterised Tigray TV and Federal ETV from the very early days of the coming of Abiy Ahmed as the new Prime Minister. Thus, the 2018 ETV aired rally in Addis Ababa in support of Abiy Ahmed was understood to be an offensive strategy as the symbols used including the national flag were flags of the past denoting hostility to the TPLF as the author of the new Ethiopian flag that had replaced the old flag now resurrected in the rally. The response of Tigray TV was to refuse to give coverage to the rally unlike almost all the other state broadcasters, which led the Ethiopian Broadcast Authority to rebuke Tigray TV (Addis Standard 2018). Tigray TV explained that the rally was filled with illegal symbols that contravened the constitution which were unfit to broadcast (Tigray TV 2018A). Delegitimation strategies were used by both parties ETV and Tigray TV at the semiotic level.

Since the pro-Abiy rally as a symbolic communication event, for all practical purposes, the new media ecology was beginning to be a battle scene and actors had to respond to the emerging “identity-enhancing situations” and “identity-threatening situations” (Mor 2007: 670-71). In the evolving political ecology of the struggle over the EPRDF history and memory and the shape and form of a new political arrangement, including the direction of the Ethiopian federation, as the evidence from the present study would show that TV was to be mobilised like never before. With such strategies as credit denial, credit gain and blame imposition in the unfolding interstate media wars, state television was the preferred technology of warfare (Mor 2007). From the body of evidence relating to the interstate media wars, further strategies of narrativisation, moralisation and rationalisation were used to outdo the adversary.

Not long after Abiy Ahmed assumed power, Ethiopian Television started airing documentaries critical of the years of Meles Zenawi and Haile Mariam Desalegn in office and implicating TPLF and hinting at the Tigrean role (ETV 2018a). Transitional justice stories on ETV seemed to suggest that Tigreans were the primary, if not, the sole party to the gross human rights abuses and power abuse and corruption in the preceding years (Fasil and Tsegaye 2018). Thus, the federal ETV broadcast a documentary on human rights abuses in Ethiopia that had taken place over the nearly three decade hegemony of the TPLF linking crimes and ethnicity (Global Society of Tigrean Scholars 2019). Fingers were pointed at persons of Tigrean origin with an explicit mention of their ethnicity. The TPLF camp was quick to dismiss the transitional justice as a jurisprudential circus and a caricature of justice designed purely as a political vendetta only serving to dash any hope of a healing democratic transition. All along, the TPLF maintained that responsibility for the human rights abuses over the last nearly three decades of EPRDF rule was collective, and the selective prosecution of TPLF officials as a clear act of victors' justice was to be used by oldest EPRDF member party to mobilise resistance against the new leadership of Abiy Ahmed (Fisher and Gebrewahd 2018).

Furthermore, at one point Ethiopian Television presented in its news bulletins the wrong map of the federation that implied areas of other states were annexed by Tigray state, presenting a case of cartographic aggression. The concocted map misleadingly showed Tigray territory extending to Benishangul State, far in the south west, which is not contiguous with Ethiopia's northern most state. The cartography seemed to conspire by showing that the Great Renaissance Dam was to be found in Tigray, assisting in the validation of conspiracy theories that the Great Tigray separatist scheme, which supposedly had expansionist territorial designs, was lurking behind^{6,7} (Tigray TV Editor, Personal Communication, 23 March 2018).

6 The period of interstate media wars included cartographic propaganda in the exacerbation of conflicts and especially in the war of narratives. While maps can be demonstrated to be false this may require spatial knowledge. Thus maps can be successfully employed in propaganda warfare in view of the general assumptions that they represent reality. The ETV news incident may be taken as a case of "persuasive cartography," which has been described as symbolic efforts to produce desired attitudinal states or opinions and not to represent certifiably factual geophysical information (Monmonier 2015).

7 The incidents could also be an act of sabotage, which happens in other organisations when some workers feel aggrieved because of employment conditions such as fairness and pay. Sabotage is a common theme in the organisational literature but in the media industry it does not seem to have drawn much attention.

Further, refusal by ETV to air gestures of peace in the interstate relations of Tigray and Amhara could be an illustrative example as the video from Tigray Television, which the regional TV asked ETV to air was about the state of Tigreans expelled from Amhara state and efforts by Tigrean and Amhara elders at reconciliation. The framing of the video, lending credence to Tigrean victimhood claims, was politically charged and thus carried political risks. This tallies with the view held that there is awareness of strategies by ethno regional media operators trying to manipulate the federal media (ETV Editor, Personal Communication, 18 March 2021).

The federal media's further discursive toolset included narrativisation. Narrativisation was a strategy used to highlight the promises of the transitional period headed by Abiy Ahmed, heralding change and punctuating the end of an era that many found unacceptable (ETV 2020A).

Whilst the strategy may have helped foster intra-group cohesion, the same strategy was interpreted as an act of opening old wounds, creating a sense of alienation and a new victimhood emerging among Tigreans, which was used by Tigray TV as a rallying point among Tigreans.⁸ Moralisation was a strategy persistently used by federal media to denigrate the period of TPLF dominance, described as divisive as its foundation was recognition of ethnic identity as a model of organising (ETV 2020a). The contrary strategy included emphasis on unity, brotherhood, peace and trust building as an antithesis to the regime of the earlier years. Freeing prisoners, reforming prisons, promise of respect for human rights, emphasis on the rule of law, and decent law enforcement were promised to place the new regime of change on a moral high ground (ETV 2018). On federal state TV, rationalisation was used to show the perils and discontents of federalism, the ethnic division and mistrust it had engendered breaking the ties that had unified the country. Playing down differences and focusing on civic nationalism was emphasised as a cure to the problems of the past decades (ETV 2018).

The incentives to avoid blame led EPRDF politicians other than those of the TPLF to use strategies that included scape goating, 'passing the buck' and defection. Therefore, the new ETV bosses, working for the new leaders, would direct the blame about EPRDF misdeeds of the past to TPLF exclusively and choose dissociation with the culprit, now being tarnished for everything that went wrong in the preceding years even in non-TPLF

8 Precipitated by fears of the future and arising from ethnic attacks many Tigreans started moving to Tigray from the centre for good, considering also the possibility that Ethiopia might break up.

constituencies (Ethiopian Monitor 2020). In the three years of ETV and Tigray TV confrontations, the non-TPLF parties seemed engaged in blame avoidance for working with TPLF, reframing their association in more palatable ways and offering justifications and in overall credit denial for TPLF. Further, they even claimed credit for the revolution that had ended TPLF hegemony as having been behind the youth movements that led the government to crumble (OBN 2018; Noor 2018). Thus they used tactics of entitlements, such as recognition for successful efforts to unseat the TPLF while within the EPRDF and leading the anti-TPLF struggle as enhancements for their role.

There was also what amounted to be credit denial from the angle of the TPLF. The TPLF felt that the sacrifices of its over 70,000 martyrs who died in the war to remove Mengistu Haile Mariam's regime and helped to usher in a new era of democracy and development were unacknowledged (AigaForum 2018). There was progressive hardening of the credit denial as opposed to initial limited recognition of the merits of the TPLF-introduced system of development until finally there was a virtual absolute rejection of the TPLF's history and a total non-observance of its victory day celebration of 28 May 2020 which was annually celebrated as a national official holiday for the preceding 27 years (ETV 2020a).

Tigray TV also focused on the delegitimation of the federal government and the extension of its tenure and defense of the legitimacy of its own regional state-elections using moralisation as a strategy highlighting its commitment to hold regular elections on schedule (9 September 2020) as constitutionally required and contrasting it with the federal government's scheme.⁹ The federal ETV was, on the other hand, fixated on justifying the postponement of the federal elections and the extension of the term in office of the government as a counter-moralisation strategy which used the threat of the Covid pandemic as a public health concern, justifying the delay of elections until the pandemic was controlled (Tigray TV 2020a). Both stations were preoccupied with pushing narratives against the other. It was a case of mutual de-legitimation (Kiruga 2020). Tigray TV assumed a significant role as a counter-hegemonic media institution that was becoming the new voice of the voiceless, reporting alternative views of popular movements in the South and North. According to a Tigray TV journalist:

Tigray TV has been all along a defender of federalism and the rights of nations and nationalities as enshrined in the constitution. We defended

9 In fact, Tigray state said it will not observe any federal decisions after October 2020 owing to the government's term expiry (Mekonnen and Ekubamichael 2020).

groups in their fight for self-determination as our coverage of the popular struggles of the southern peoples of Sidama and Wolayta would show. Our difference with other media was that we spoke truth to power while others found it more convenient to follow the direction of the wind. The result was that we were targeted, warned and even taken off air while the more docile media survived. (Personal Communication, 5 February 2021)

In this role, Tigray TV attracted the attention of audiences in Sidama and Welayata that were staging protests asking statehood and other “pro-federation forces” and was engaged in a war of narratives with the federal media (European Institute of Peace 2022).¹⁰ As much as it was becoming popular it was also proving to be a source of irritation to the central government. Thus, while Tigray TV was covering the conflicts and displacements daily, the federal government TV was explaining them away as the work of TPLF, which was behind as a sponsor of violence intent on unseating the government and making the country ungovernable.¹¹

The peak of hostilities was marked by the federal government’s outlawing the Tigray government as illegitimate and the 2020 Tigray elections as illegal (ETV 2020d). Further criminalisation of the TPLF took place and further sanctions followed in ETV’s news bulletin (ETV 2020e). Tigray TV intensified its discursive attacks with its mega narrative that the federal government was not only illegitimate but threatened the federal arrangement and hard-won rights of nations and nationalities as well as posing the threat of derailing the speedy socio-economic development enjoyed in the earlier years.¹² The intensity of the media war led the EBA to remove Tigray TV from the Eutelsat satellite platform (Seyoum 2020), invoking the Broadcasting Service Proclamation No. 533/2007 (Clause 29-Revocation of License). Despite the suspension, Tigray TV soon re-launched programming using another satellite.

Earlier, whilst the disbanding of EPRDF was a key event in 2019, drawing bitter altercation on both ETV and Tigray TV, there was even more to come changing the tone and intensity of the interstate masscommunication climate. ETV hailed the new successor party Prosperity Party as the epitome of democracy and unity while Tigray TV condemned the new organization as an attempt to resurrect

10 Tigray hosted and Tigray TV extensively covered the congress of Coalition of Ethiopian Federalist Forces, which aimed to “rescuing the constitution and multi-ethnic Federal System,” which would not be easy (Lefort and Davidson 2019).

11 Tigray TV and DW were earlier given warning by the federal EBA to “abide by regulatory norms,” see “Broadcast authority warns Ethiopian ethnic media” (Africa News Channel 2019).

12 Tigray region says it will defy federal laws enacted as of Oct. 05; EDP calls for transitional gov’t, inclusive dialogue & reconciliation” (Mekonnen and Ekubamichael 2020).

the old past (Tigray TV Journalist, Personal communication, 4 March 2021), following TPLF's refusal to join the new party on ideological grounds. The fight between the old and the new had ramifications for the broadcast media on both sides. Prosperity Party inherited the EPRDF media including Walta TV and Fana Radio and TV, and was now using them against the old master (Tigray TV Journalist, Personal communication, 5 March 2021) together with federal state media. The year 2020 was probably characterised by an unfortunate chain of events.

The most significant developments of 2020 included the withdrawal of the TPLF from the federal parliament and government, citing the expiry of the term of the federal government of Abiy Ahmed, the controversial postponement of federal elections which TPLF opposed leading it to decide to hold its own elections despite threats from the federal government (ETV 2020b; France24 2020). The federal government was also instrumental in taking off air both Tigray TV and DW TV as the stations became more biting and were considered a threat to the survival of the state (Seyoum 2020). They were back on air using other satellite service providers, showing the limits of national jurisdiction. The belligerent stations were once again at the centre of federal controversy and legitimacy debates.

The showdown was aggravated and polarised discourses of legitimacy further amplified, following the rise in the heat of the political struggle in the federation as the expiry of the term in office of the Prosperity Party-led government neared. Once again, Ethiopian state media's communication support to the federal government was met with discursive resistance from Tigray TV. As the Tigray election was a contested watershed event, it attracted considerable legitimacy evaluations from within the Tigray state and the Ethiopian federation at large, producing both negative evaluations and positive support from the camps involved in the confrontation. In the bid to hold regional elections in spite of the federal government protest, Tigray TV was in particular supported by legal scholars from the region's universities who provided favourable interpretations of the constitution in both news and current affairs programming (Tigray TV Editor, Personal Communication, 15 March 2021). Federal Television, on the other hand, mobilised pro-Abiy legal scholars and media analysts in order to justify the constitutionality of the extension of the federal government's mandate (Tigray TV Editor, Personal Communication, 15 March 2021). Mekonnen and Ekubamichael (2020), quoting federal television, reported that the Ethiopian Parliament had concluded that the Tigray "Election Contravenes Federal Constitution," and called it "Non-Binding and Non-Applicable." On federal TV earlier, the prime minister warned the Tigray state against

holding elections that would “cause youth to perish, mothers to weep, homes to be demolished, communities to be displaced” (EthioForum 2021). At the parliamentary level, the Ethiopian House of Federation voted to cut ties with the Tigray administration early in October 2020 (Ethiopian Monitor 2020). Dramatic developments occurred as the federal government expelled the Tigray administration from the federal government and further introduced sanctions before it finally took the political measure of labeling the TPLF as a terrorist entity. Federal television was in consequence used to communicate the federal government’s position and perspectives while at the same time discursively undermining the regional government. From the rhetorics on Tigray TV, it was clear that the media wars would ultimately escalate and lead to possible armed confrontation. Thus a televised November 2020 message from the Prime Minister announced that fighting between the two parties had erupted. This announcement was a watershed communicative event that defined ETV’s discursive character. According to an ETV editor,

ETV was cautious in much of the period before armed clashes started between the federal government and TPLF. But as the conflict between the two intensified because of the TPLF decision to hold its own election and leave the federal government, we were following the federal government’s political direction. We were in a conflict mode and news and other programming was thus designed to address the deviant position of TPLF and Tigray state. (Personal Communication, 12 March 2021)

In the fault lines war, resulting in the weakening of institutions, there were no legal mechanisms from the nation’s communication legislation referred to earlier, used to address the media offences that accompanied the political mayhem at the federal and regional levels.

Oromia–Somali Media

Ethnic polarisation and political divide was probably no more pronounced than in the Eastern part of the country. The media of the states of Oromia and Somali appeared to be the worst examples of instrumentalist media combustibly involved in interstate wars. They framed the interstate territorial issues of which there was extensive media coverage as fundamentally ethnic conflicts. The media rhetoric of both regional broadcasters seemed to focus on the atrocities of the other highlighting that their state and people were the victim (Reta 2019). On both sides state media accused the leadership of the other of being fully responsible for the conflict. Media news reports also implicated state police of

the other as being involved in cross-state raids and assassinations, especially the Somali special police called *liyu hayl* (Solomon 2017). They further traded blame for engaging in territorial expansion amid federal jurisprudential proceedings in the settlement of state territorial boundaries.¹³

As the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority indicated, inflammatory reports were aired by broadcast media in both states that alleged atrocities were committed against state citizens, including killings (EBA 2018). Ethical lapses characterising the reports included media practices that involved hyperboles, and the use of false and distorted imagery in support of a victim status projected deliberately to misrepresent the other as the aggressor. Further, the regional state media highlighted a narrow regional perspective rather than reflecting a broader, federal interest (EBA 2018).

Incendiary ethnic rhetoric was amplified, which further included open sedition and propaganda for war (Reta 2019). An attempt was also made to give the conflict a broader regional character with allegations that it involved actors from neighbouring countries, namely Somalia and Somaliland. For instance, there were news reports of Oromos facing xenophobic attacks and displacements in Somaliland (Manek 2017). There were also television discourses in the Somali side that appeared to be open calls for an all-out interstate war (Reta 2019). There was clear derogation of federal structures including the defense forces and security apparatus, perhaps in response to the large scale ethnic-based expulsions (EBA 2018). The use of social and diasporic media, adding fuel to the crisis, was a dangerous development in respect of the strife and polarisation witnessed in the two states which are the biggest territorial units in the Ethiopian Federation.

As the most intense interstate conflict, the Oromo-Somali antagonism, involved not only the border communities of the two regions but also top regional officials on both sides (Mohamed 2018). They employed regional radio and television in accusing the other side of bellicose behaviour that seemed to suggest each was a victim of the other (Reta 2019). As Reta (2019: 98) wrote, Somali Regional Television (SRTV) stated that:

As a media organization Somali Regional Television sees the conflict as a war waged on ethnic Somalis through the Oromia regional state's special police force and insurgent groups like that of OLF. Mostly we were covering the incidents according to this fact.

13 Following the outcome of a referendum held to decide on the 420 disputed contiguous localities 80 % were to be moved to the Somali state but the implementation was not taking place even years after the referendum.

On the other hand, OBN asserted that the conflict was simply the work of Somali Special Forces attacking ethnic Oromo civilians. The two peoples can never fight a fierce fight by their initiation; it is clear there was a covered hand of officials in the conflict. In both cases the political hands were chiefly implicated and from the exchange of government and party officials on both sides the claims seem to be validated. In the words of a former Somali Regional Television editor:

What I can say is that what the party said was what the government said and media being a state organ what it did regarding the conflict was based on the government's position. Media had no power in its own right. Its role was limited to masscommunicating the regional government's position on the border conflict. (Personal Communication, 5 February 2021)

In a Facebook post, the communication head of the Somali state described elements in the Oromo regional government as sympathisers of the then banned Oromo Liberation Front (VOA News 2017), adding that the federal government was tilting in favour of the Oromia state, which could threaten the viability of the Ethiopian Federation (Abdi 2017). To this, the Oromia state office of communication responded by accusing the Somali state of employing troops from neighboring Somalia in attacks on contiguous Oromo territories. As purported evidence, the Facebook page of the regional government posted what it represented was an identity card of a Somali soldier from Somalia, which the country's Embassy in Addis Ababa rejected out of hand (Endeshaw 2017).

The tug of digital war involved the daily exchange of Facebook postings of the leaders of the two regional communication bureaus who used the social media platform as propaganda launch sites worsening the strife even further. The high-level official involvement on both sides gave the conflict anomalous characteristics as the party officials were intensely engaged in operational level practices that are normatively in the domain of journalists. In fact, such was the intensity of the conflict it drew in the federal government in ways that appeared awkward. Thus, observers were taken by surprise when following the barter of accusations by both sides, the federal government communication minister warned the Somali side to refrain from hostile communication activities (Menberework 2018). The minister also criticised the private television Ethiopian News Network (ENN) and the radio station Zami FM for allegedly inflaming the crisis in Oromia. While other regional

broadcasters had committed more grievous offences, including sedition, the EBA found the private station Zami to be a softer target. As EBA's own justifications revealed, the political risks involved in taking measures against a key state media institution, regardless of its trespasses, were considered to be too high and obviously a light weight media institution would be sacrificed instead to stem the tide of rising protests.

Alongside the popular protests, the power struggle within the EPRDF was becoming clearer. Thus the EBA director, who was a TPLF veteran, made the comment that it was not in the communication affairs minister's official mandate to issue warnings based on statutes stipulated in the proclamation for the establishment of the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority. His remarks introduced another controversy amid the ethno-politically complex communications, with the minister consequently lodging a formal complaint in parliament referring to the director's comments as an ethnic attack designed to cause public humiliation (Ethiopian Observer 2018). In a bolder move, the Oromia communication head had earlier accused the federal government of involvement in the clashes between Somalis and Oromos (ESAT News 2017). This particular accusation seemed to resonate with the narrative that the TPLF and the Somali state were partners countering the Oromara struggle to unseat the federal government. Apparently, communication structures at the federal level were weaponised to serve specific narratives that instrumentally promoted primordialist concerns over more federal interests (Hagmann and Mohamed Abdi 2020).

The Somali-Oromo media conflict was in large part characterised by moralisation as a de-legitimation strategy. Discursive de-legitimation strategies included casting the other as masked terrorists working with outlawed organisations and as treasonous elements working in consort with foreign powers (BBC 2017). On the whole, they used a defensive self-presentation that involved blame imposition, holding the other party accountable and taking a self-serving victim status. In both, ethnicised mediated narrative was fuelled by intense emotions of antipathy, loss, defeat and bitterness, which was readily used as a combustible agent in the ethno-politically tense environment of humanitarian tragedy (Frohard and Temin 2018). With the new coalition shift in 2018 in Ethiopia, resulting in the coming of the ODP to prominence, a bargaining space was created and a negotiated settlement reached, ending the Somali-Oromo media belligerency.

Oromia-Tigray Media

There had been growing trust deficits between the TPLF and the ODP as the latter became more assertive after 2016. In fact, in the years following Meles Zenawi's death the ODP started to openly defy the TPLF and thus Oromia state formed the genesis of the wave of protests that spread to Amhara in 2016 (Africa Intelligence 2018). "Once a loathed mouthpiece of the ruling party" (Opride 2018), the state media of Oromia, particularly OBN, was working in tandem with the organised mass protesters in the region and enjoying "significant support and viewership." "They were virtually the voice of the voiceless, the most daring, the vanguard of all" (OBN Journalist, Personal Communication, 12 March 2018). According to Opride (2018), the OBN was now a darling of the masses that had "made significant strides to live up its tagline as *Voice of the People*."

The broadcaster's most important narrative and strategic rallying point, of course, was that the federal government was controlled by the Tigrean minority in unjust ways, while the Oromo as the majority had been denied their fair share of the political space for too long. Their struggle was purportedly an ethno-moral crusade against the professed Tigrean dominance in all spheres of national life. The stress on victimhood was a propeller (Jalata 2017).

OBN's narratives seemed designed to undermine the TPLF and its purported support base. One of the several narratives was that Tigreans were the most privileged actors in the national economy, controlling most notably trade and commerce including illicit trans-border trade. As a purported illustration of the narrative of ethicised illicit trade, the Oromo regional broadcaster OBN reported that "a Tigrayan man" was caught in the state owned Ras Hotel in Adama town in the Oromia region in the possession of a sizable sum of USD 11,000 headed for the Somali region. The story highlighted the ethnicity of the person, and the station enhanced the details of the story revising the amount involved up from USD 115 to 11,000 in order to amplify the level of outrage (Horn Affairs 2017).

In highlighting such news narratives, a second outlet – the privately-owned Oromia Media Network (OMN) – was motivated chiefly by the anti-hegemonic project of unseating the TPLF (Mohammed 2018). In the last years of the protests in Oromia in particular the network seemed to have engaged extensively in this project together with diasporic actors. Thus, the Ethiopian Satellite Television reported that the Tigray State Communication Office website was hacked by Oromo activists and sensitive communications put on display, giving OMN much needed ammunition (Gebissa 2019).

This hacktivism appeared to be an integral part of the media war and the intent apparently was to find sensitive information that would undermine both the TPLF and the Tigray State Government in the period of unrest. In large part, the hacking seemed to be a reprisal against the Tigray Communication Bureau for its accusation against the OBN, denouncing ethnic profiling by the state broadcaster against citizens of Tigray resident in Oromia. Following reports of the hacking of the bureau, the Director of the Tigray Communication Bureau was suspended as a contributory party to the communication crisis, perhaps on account of cyber security negligence, and later replaced by another veteran of the regional state media (Tigray TV Journalist, Personal Communication, 24 March 2019).

This change of faces seemed to have little effect in terms of the interstate communication war. Tigray broadcast media was for the most part on the defensive. In an apparent response to the continuing streams of footage of dramatic escalations of waves of rallies, protests, marches, vigils, boycotts, and civil disobedience in Oromia aired by the regional state broadcaster, Tigray TV was using narrativisation as a conflict strategy with the aid of music, lyrics and graphics which had been successfully used in the long years of the struggle to topple the Mengistu Haile Matiam Regime that had ruled Ethiopia for 17 years. Patriotic mantra of the civil war out of which TPLF emerged triumphantly, echoed lyrics of music exalting military prowess of combatants and the rebel organisation as well as the Tigrean people. Footage of the war depicting troops of the TPLF marching and conquering the enemy; the enemy surrendering in battalions and the rebel group finally defeating a large army was replayed to send a threat message (Tigray TV 2018).

As the EBA noted, Tigray TV behaved jingoistically by claiming for the region superior military powers, and heroism through allusions to history (EBA 2018). In this saber rattling, the platform contravened the spirit of the Ethiopian Federation and the constitution, the rule of law; equality, fraternity, and peaceful coexistence. The regional state media were also critiqued as instruments of authoritarian regional state officialdom, which sought indefinite survival through mediated mind-control and the concealment of moral and political incompetence that had contributed to the federal crisis. Indeed, this was journalism of an instrumentalist character as ethnic history was militarised, glorified and mobilised against social movements that threatened the incumbent that had a sense of entitlement perhaps for too long (Tessema 2018). The state TV also failed to air programs that would serve federal interests such as a celebration of collective history and a shared

belief in a common destiny (EBA 2018). Thus, it turned to be a primordialist institution (Posen 1993).

However, the Tigray communication bureaucracy had its own version of developments and issues. Thus, the Tigray State's Bureau of Communication complained to the Ethiopia Broadcasting Authority that despite protests over its unethical mass communication conduct, Oromia regional state media, especially Oromia Broadcasting Network, persisted in its violations of the norms of broadcasting and the amicable spirit of the federation. In a letter to the authority copied to the station and its branch in Mekele, the Tigray State Communications Office head explained that OBN had openly engaged in ethnic profiling of Tigreans living in Oromia state (Tigray Communication Bureau 2017). It mentioned that in political regional mass communications the names of suspects were detailed in a manner that would suggest persons of Tigray origin were typically engaged in illegal activities in the region. In particular Tigreans were reported as illegally possessing foreign currency or as being involved in illicit trade in the state. Their names were accentuated to strengthen the narrative that Tigreans were characteristically involved in unlawful business activities and money laundering.

An additional charge to which Tigray State's Communication Bureau protested was an OBN media report that Tigray generals were aiding and abating in the contraband trade using even aerial support such as helicopters in the porous East of the country bordering Somalia (Woldemariam 2019). Further, according to the EBA, the OBN was out of step when it started strategies attempting to lend credence to the conspiracy theory that there was strategic support from Tigray state for the Somali Administration that it said it was at war with (Adem 2019). In particular, regarding what it considered reputational attacks on Tigray and Tigrean nationals, Tigray State's Communication Bureau was making defensive statements.

The Bureau said it would go to the extent of issuing a statement of condemnation of the OBN should it fail to take measures in accord with norms of broadcasting. Although the Tigray Communication Bureau demanded retraction, the general editorial reaction by Tigray media was to downplay the rhetoric and the offensive against Tigray state in order to prevent further escalation (Tigray TV Journalist, Personal Communication, 23 March 2018). However, the ecology was clearly changing in ways unprecedented and the narrative against the TPLF was heating up. Delegitimation was being used chiefly by the OBN against Tigray as a major

resistance strategy. The station was a resistance structure whose work was to bring to an end what it considered to be too long years of TPLF-hegemony. According to an OBN editor:

We were the champions of the transition. We were all alone in the fight against oppression but we were fighting to bring a better order for all Ethiopians. We were criticized for the very reason that we should have been praised as fighters against oppression, corruption, and injustice. EBA targeted OBN because using legislation it was defending the system that we were fighting. We were exposing the ugly realities of the system but it was not our purpose to attack others. (Personal Communication, 5 March 2021)

The OBN used further strategies in its war against the TPLF. Narrativisation involving narratives of dispossession, eviction, victimhood under the TPLF-dominated EPRDF was a mobilising theme on the OBN, which also used moralisation as a strategy to show the moral decay of the EPRDF government and its officials (OBN 2020). Tigray TV was on the defensive using narrativisation to present its case that the years of TPLF hegemony were a period of unprecedented development and respect for diversity and inclusiveness (Tigray TV 2020b).

Most importantly, television was clearly weaponised as a psychological apparatus intended to demonise the protagonist that was believed to be wielding federal power for too long. Xenophobic narratives highlighted the media's deployment as a primordialist infrastructure, which would be considered inconsistent with the spirit of the constitution as a cohesive multicultural community's canonical document (Ethiopian Constitution 1995).

Amhara-Tigray Media

The communication wars between Tigray and Amhara started in subtle ways but eventually became public, which was necessary for the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP) in particular as it had been widely blamed for associating with the TPLF as a subordinate partner. After the ADP had outmaneuvered the TPLF in consort with the ODP, the next step was to celebrate its new found disinhibition and start maneuvering to ward public acceptability. While the media strategy was cautious, it was a matter of time before an open expression of antipathy toward the TPLF was to be staged. It was now necessary to reframe relations with the TPLF or engage in shifting

the blame to the TPLF. The task of confronting history and re-building trust in the constituency was onerous to the ADP once it had officially dissociated itself from the TPLF. A public apology was extended but the burden of history continued to have a degree of stain (Amhara Media Corporation 2018). This ritualistic cleansing required mediated confrontations with Tigray state media and the TPLF. Border issues were the most fertile grounds for the organisational revival that the ADP found necessary.

In consequence, the long dormant territorial conflict between the Amhara and Tigray states that followed the rebordering, which resulted in the localities of Wolkayt and parts of Wello formerly in Amhara state coming under Tigray jurisdiction, was now emitting ethno-political emotions (Crisis Group 2020). The territorial contestation resurfaced decades after the federal rearrangement of territories bringing the two contiguous regions on the brink of an all-out war. State media on both sides of the conflict attempted to address the issue as claimants but the violent protest in the Amhara state against the TPLF as hegemon was probably not solely caused by the territorial factor, although it could be taken as the trigger factor.

The border complex includes dimensions of historiography, politics, and economics, as well as more explicitly a narrative of victimhood (AMC 2021). While there is a constitutional mechanism (Article 48) that may be invoked in interstate physical territorial claims or determination of issues of ethno-linguistic identity, there has arisen a fundamental question of hegemony and lawmaking. As discourses of Amhara TV seemed to suggest, there was an emerging narrative that rejected the federal arrangement itself and together with it the EPRDF-led ethnolinguistically-based territorial re-arrangement of the country, and new claims that the constitutional drafting that led to the federal system being adopted had not included Amharas (Muluye 2020).

The televised historic Bahir Dar city rally of 2018 in Amhara state was a call for a revision of the political order and a loud refusal to abide by the terms of the constitution to which the regional political elite acceded. Tigray media replayed scenes from the protest asking the Tigray state to return localities incorporated after the 1990s (Personal Communication, 10 December 2019). The security dilemmas for Tigray were clear in view of the persistent territorial claims, the rejection of constitutional mechanisms relating to the settlement of territorial disputes and the emergent ethnic and interstate bloc of Amhara and Oromia challenging the TPLF as the nucleus of the EPRDF. Tigray Television was clear about this threat, presenting footage and analysis regarding the emerging security concerns for the state of Tigray (Tigray TV 2019).

However, Tigray broadcast media were also contributory to the security problem as bad impression managers. They were justifying the sense of economic injustice in the neighbouring state of Amhara and in others. The Tigray state media were instrumental in creating a perception that rapid socio-economic development was taking place in Tigray while other regions were lagging behind owing to the political system being discriminatory. In a desperate attempt to seek empirical validation of its contested theory of the developmental state, TPLF functionaries resorted to abuse of statistical devices that were used to lend credence to the viability of its development policies. The abuse coming in the form of doctored annual socio-economic development reports was most widespread among party and state circles in Tigray, as the EBA noted (EBA 2018).

The result of the fabrications, which were taken at face value, was the creation, politicisation, ethnicisation and marketing of a mega discourse in the opposition camp to the effect that the TPLF was promoting an unfair and unbalanced development in Tigray with resources it plundered from the centre using its hegemonic hold. However, the actual facts were that on the contrary Tigray had a consistently higher than the federal average poverty rate (National Planning Commission 2017) which Tigray broadcast media were oblivious of or chose to ignore as inconvenient truth and engaging instead in propagandistic development journalism and development news casting, where there was hardly any significant economic progress (EBA 2018). The opposition narratives of TPLF plunder of federal resources and uneven development were to lead to a backlash and a test of the federation amplified by deepening poverty and unemployment in Ethiopia's big states that challenged the morality and legitimacy of the hegemony of the Tigray state and party echelons (Mikias 2003).

Inter-organisational media ties of the two contiguous states were impacted by the inter-party tension and interstate acrimony. Amhara TV and Tigray TV were no longer media of the historical comrades that “fought, died and were buried together.” Latent grudges had surfaced, making even routine interstate news airing politically risky given a potential popular backlash. Their shared history itself started to be a site of contention. Thus, Tigray TV was on occasion involved in protest that Amhara TV narratives stole credit from TPLF for the military performance against the Mengistu regime (Aigaforum 2016). In other words, the TPLF's point was that the ADP gave an inflated account of its historical performance in the civil war while its contribution was limited. With ADP veterans' presentation of a counter-memory, the politics of memory became an extension of the interstate

fissure, challenging anything that could be called “EPRDF official memory” of the anti-Mengistu war.

However, there was also a display of something akin to *détente*. Media in both states did present the bilateral peace efforts in Tigray and Amhara to restore historic ties and good neighborliness – grounded in constructionist journalism promoting a shared narrative of their emblematic nation-building roles (Tigray TV 2019). The mediational instance of horizontal federalism of both states was an important endeavour to address the intricate interstate dispute bilaterally (ETV 2017). In addition to peace initiatives by scholars from universities in both regions, elders from both sides did make a successful decision to draw to a close the claims involving some territorial pockets on both sides (WALTA 2017). Yet the televised settlement of territorial questions in regard to specific contested localities seemed to have limited editorial weight and qualified pacifying effect. The Amhara state mass media gave the accord modest coverage, signaling that the larger memory politics of border regions has been un-addressed. Entrenched memories and imaginaries of the more symbolic contested localities appeared to persist as irresolvable narratives (Amhara Media Corporation 2020).

Thus, while some peace initiatives were covered by Tigray TV, they were ignored by Amhara TV – perhaps due to differences in the framing of the issues of contention. For instance, in the heat of the protests in Amhara, Tigray TV protested that a visit by a delegation of Amhara elders in Tigray was not covered by Amhara TV, while Tigray TV gave it extensive coverage (EBA 2018). As a journalist with the Amhara State TV recounted, the delegation of elders had gone over to Tigray in order to express solidarity with and request the return of Tigreans evicted from the Amhara region (Personal Communication, 5 March 2018). According to EBA (2018), in a fraternal spirit, the elders called them natives of Amhara to convey their relational closeness and fraternal feelings in unfeigned ways. In confirmation of their sincerity, they had looked after the property of the expellees, ploughed their farms, looked after their cattle and homes and accomplished all business on their behalf and even sent them proceeds from sales of their produce. At the time of the peak of the hostilities such gesture was unbelievable but certainly present. Tigray TV sent the video of the Amhara elders’ accomplishments to the Amhara Mass Media Agency,¹⁴ but they did not air it.

The reason was that the Amhara State TV was not editorially comfortable

14 Amhara Mass Media Agency (AMMA) is a regional media organization that includes television, radio and newspaper divisions of the Amhara Region government.

with the frame that seemed to suggest an acknowledgement of wrongdoing by the Amhara state which could further introduce political risks in a social movement context that was driven by a fervent anti-TPLF sentiment (Personal Communication, 2 March 2018). Regardless, Tigray officials mentioned that the editorial rejection was indeed indicative that the regional government failed to protect the Tigray citizens in Amhara state from xenophobic mob violence and pillage (Guardian 2016). Tigray Online reported that over 87 Tigray citizens lost their lives in the ethnic attacks against Tigray business owners and suspected sympathisers of the TPLF (Tigray-Online 2018). The Amhara state media were also reported to have engaged in news blackout over expulsions of Tigray nationals from the state. However, they reported killings of Tigray civilians and the arrest of perpetrators (Amhara Media Corporation 2018). There had been cordial relations between the media of the two states that now were turning sour and even openly hostile. According to an Amhara TV journalist:

Tigray TV is quite simply a TPLF megaphone that emits hate and falsehoods in line with the party's ideology of ethnic manipulation intended to divide and conquer the people of Ethiopia. But Amhara TV has been a responsible media institution guided by communication ethics and concern for the survival and continuity of Ethiopia as a nation. (Personal Communication, 15 March 2021)

As relations between the two states worsened, leading to a virtual halt to interstate commerce and communication and to the intensification of bellicose propaganda, issues of border securitisation started to assume even greater importance. Thus in March 2019, following the culmination of its twelfth regular congress, the Amhara Regional State Council issued a statement protesting that “in preparation for war Tigray state was massing troops along the common border” to which the Tigray state responded: “the people and government of Tigray know the consequence of war really well and will not be the first to start military action” (Tigray Communication Bureau 2019). The Amhara state also issued an official complaint to the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority protesting over programme content of Tigray TV and the TPLF-affiliated TV station Dimtsi Woyane (DW), which it said were intent on destabilising the Amhara region (Anbesse 2019).

The complaint chiefly included Tigray TV's and Oromia Media Network's coverage of the bloody conflict in the autonomy-seeking Kimant zone of Amhara state, which the region officials described as both unbalanced

and unfair. They further threatened they would take the two broadcasters to court (Amhara Mass Media Agency 2019). However, they did not mention the important issue of jurisdiction over interstate communication disputes. The present Ethiopian legislation is generally silent on interstate communication controversies, which seem to have been rather unexpected. Further, the admissibility requirement would suggest that state parties exhaust all available and effective institutional remedies, which include the procedures of EBA. However, even the Ethiopia media legislation as a whole (including the Broadcasting Service Proclamation No. 533/2007, Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation No. 590/2008 and Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Law (Proclamation No. 1185-2020), which the EBA could invoke, does not seem to have foreseen the possibility of state parties engaging in communication controversies as its relevant unit of analysis is ethnic groups, which it calls nations and nationalities. Further, any adjudication may be complicated by incidences of case and counter-case. Thus, although protesting against hostile media practices, Amhara TV itself (a part of Amhara Mass Media Agency) also reported on demonstrations in Tigray, framing the issue as a governance failure (Amhara Media Corporation 2020a) and hosted TPLF adversaries, giving them a forum to condemn the Tigray regional administration (Amhara Media Corporation 2020b).

Legal controversies aside, in both cases, the use of opponents as sources was deliberate as was the news blackout regarding own adverse issues and the highlighting of those of the other – which may be described as a binary of strategic silence and strategic amplification (Benkelman 2019). Such strategic political journalism was predominant in times of relative normalcy.

In more tense periods, and in more upfront ways, the Amhara and Tigray states in conflict had been issuing televised party/state communiqués relating to responsibility for the killings of the head of state and his deputies in Amhara and the country's chief of staff, raising alarm levels even further as the recent interchange of televised position communications between TPLF and ADP would show. A TPLF central Committee communiqué reads:

Ethiopia finds itself in the most severe crisis of its history characterised by fast deteriorating anarchy that has led up to the assassinations of the head of state and members of the cabinet of Amhara and Ethiopia's top generals and defence officials. We consider ADP to be responsible for the monstrous crimes orchestrated by anti-federalist party and state officials bent on seizing power through violent means. TPLF urges

an independent inquiry into the killings and an immediate apology by ADP. (DW Television 2019).

The rebuttal-rhetorical firepower from ADP read:

TPLF's statement as a perverse act of hostility comes at a time when we are mourning the grievous loss of our leaders and comrades in the hands of assassins, behind whose acts we believe there is a TPLF hand. TPLF is a dictatorial villain masquerading as a democratic organization that has now been unmasked to the bone. As a bad loser, it has been behind all acts of sabotage in our state and the federation at large. Its wretched character that has found fresh expression as a party that has offered sanctuary to high profile criminals despite its pretensions of respect for the constitution comes as no surprise at all. This is a party that is both unteachable and incurable. (Amhara Mass Media Agency 2019)

In what appears to be a continuation of the interstate and inter-party hostilities, Tigray TV was on air refuting disinformation from quarters that it described were intent on destabilising the Tigray state and the federation at large. It referred to the 14 December 2019 WALTA false news, which announced that the Tigray state chief Dr. Debretsion Gebre Michael was dead and that the station would give out details as soon as they received them. Soon, the Tigray Office of Communication issued a statement that the news was false and was intended for political purposes, adding it would start legal proceedings about the matter (Tigray Communication Bureau 2019). The Tigray chief himself posted on his Facebook page that he was well and in control, adding that the disinformation campaign was not new and in fact an integral part of a broad campaign to destabilise and discredit his state and government. The particular case may be taken as a relevant communication event to invoke the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation (Clause 5, Prohibition of Disseminating Disinformation Proclamation No. 1185 /2020).

The dyadic interstate media wars between Amhara and Tigray also involved blame imposition, blame avoidance and delegitimation. The political survival of the ADP, amid a new opposition party (Amhara National Movement), becoming more popular, seemed to have required intense hostility with the TPLF to outdo the new rival. It was classic crisis management by apology (Hearit 2006). Following an apology televised live by party and state leaders (ETV 2018b), the next steps were more radical severance of all ties at the state

level including closing interstate roads. Intra-organisationally humiliating pro-TPLF elements or using court procedures selectively against them was a further step that led to narratives of a rejection of history (Amhara Media Corporation 2019).

A host of blame reduction and blame imposition strategies were mobilised to protect the political and organisational survival of the party. A chief strategy of credit denial was used to undermine TPLF narratives of years of “double digit growth” and a delegitimisation of TPLF as well as an offensive framing of the past (Amhara Media Corporation 2018).

Conclusion

The present study has sought to examine the interstate media conflict dynamics in Ethiopia’s transitional media ecology using Van Leeuwen’s (2007) discourse framework and the rhetorical strategies developed by Mor (2007). As the study unraveled, the interstate crisis presented itself as a multi-layer phenomenon of interlocking dimensions. These included the party, state, and media levels. While the media mirrored the violence unfolding, including what appeared to be ethnic cleansing with millions uprooted from their homes fleeing identity-based attacks, it was also clear that the media were used instrumentally to push political interests of ethnic elites. Their weaponisation also led to memory politics that could undermine the common bond that was necessary for the survival and continuity of the Ethiopian Federation. In what has been more recently considered a fragile state, they were in more cases than not primordialist in practice or perhaps more typically instrumentalist as they were weaponised in defense of vested political interests rather than serving a more modern and high-minded constructionist role in a federation that has had a difficult past and appears set to have an uncertain future. By contributing to the erosion of interstate trust as the necessary foundation for a viable polity, the media showed the dangers of national dissensus and non-agreement that frighteningly seem to linger.

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