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Research article

Impact of non-state armed groups on state-society relations in Ethiopia

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Abstract: *In most contemporary armed conflicts, at least one non-state armed group (NSAG) is engaged in combat with state forces and other NSAGs, often within the boundaries of states. Both state and non-state actors frequently challenge state-society relations. Since 2018, Ethiopia's political landscape has been shaped by ongoing armed conflict, a decline in the state's monopoly on violence and challenges to state-society relations. The impact of non-state armed actors, such as the Tigray Defense Force (TDF), the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), and the Amhara Fano, on the legitimacy of the Ethiopian state and public trust in its governance since 2018 is the focus of the study. The study adopted qualitative methodology with case study as a design. Secondary data and primary data from interviews were collected and analyzed. The results reveal that these groups effectively mobilized their supporters around ethnic identities and eroded state authority and deepened societal division. The state's capacity, particularly in promoting sovereignty, has been significantly weakened. Popular sovereignty has been undermined, especially with the suspension of local elections, and the majority of territories are now controlled by NSAG. Moreover, the state has been unable to provide essential public services, leading to a decline in public trust, which signals a fragile political reality. To solve Ethiopia's crises, the government must prioritize inclusive dialogue, decentralization of power, and transparent investigations into rights abuses to restore trust and reduce marginalization. International mediation and support for local governance are vital to foster accountability, reconciliation, and lasting peace.*

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1. Introduction

There has been significant discussion over Ethiopia's contemporary state creation and nation-building process being top-down. For example, Markakis (2011) contends that conquest and force have been the main factors in Ethiopia's state creation. It has made it possible for the state to gain authority over society. Similarly, Tesfaye (2002) contends that society would be unable to restrict the state's jurisdictional power and would not have the chance to select the kind of political system. It has been determined that the state and the church, specifically the Ethiopian

Orthodox Church (EOC), are the two main institutions that govern the structure of power as well as its organization (Tamirat, 1973; Tibebu, 1995).

Particularly in rural areas, other social institutions were either non-existent or too weak. Therefore, through diocese and local governance institutions, the state and EOC were the competing forces for societal control (Tibebu, 1995). In pre-1974 politics, the EOC was able to establish itself as a crucial authority in both legitimizing and delegitimizing state power (Tibebeu 1995; Zewede, 1991). However, in the years following 1974, the state supplanted the church and became the only powerful institution.

By controlling the majority of the power structure within its borders, the state was able to further subdue the EOC after 1991. As a result, in comparison to the other actors, the state emerged as the most potent and dominant actor at the local, subnational, and national levels. Domination and conflict have been the hallmarks of state-society relations. The Ethiopian society has fought to curtail the state's dominance and power. Through peasant rebellion in various provinces (Bale, Gojjam, and Tigray), the Ethiopian student movement, the urban uprising that led to the 1974 Ethiopian revolution, and the protracted civil war fought between the state and armed groups of EPLF, TPLF, OLF, and others, the Ethiopian society has historically challenged the state's power and authority (Tareke, 1996; Berhe, 2009). Nonetheless, the state has maintained its strength and dominance, mostly using military and authoritarian tactics to quell opposition.

Ethnic-based federalism was implemented by the current government in response to secessionist difficulties following the fall of the Derg. The state and government are not viewed as distinct ideas or entities in the traditional Ethiopian context. A unified understanding of sovereignty and the apparatus of power is indicated by the term "Mengist" (Mesfin, 1984). With an emphasis on their effects on legitimacy, public confidence, and governance since 2018, the researchers seek to understand how the rise of armed actors in Ethiopia threatens state-society interactions.

The rise of non-state armed actors (NSAG), such the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), the Amhara Fano and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), has been the main cause of Ethiopia's severe political unrest since 2018. Although state-society connections in Ethiopia have been studied in previous works, the influence of these players on Ethiopia's sociopolitical environment in the years following 2018 is frequently ignored (Mengistu, 2015). This disparity

hinders a thorough comprehension of the changing relationships between society groups and political authority, especially in an environment characterized by civil disturbance and ethnic conflicts. The majority of research concentrates on historical accounts rather than the current effects of these armed groups on public service delivery and governance (Fenta, 2014).

Despite Ethiopia's ethnic diversity and propensity for conflict, the roles of NSAG in interethnic interactions are not frequently and sufficiently addressed. Although inter-ethnic violence is mentioned in some studies, they have not examined how these actors affect ethnic tensions, which is crucial for promoting social cohesion (Debelo, 2012). Furthermore, little is known about the socioeconomic effects of NSAG, such as how it affects livelihoods, access to resources, and economic stability (Menkhaus, 2021). These gaps undercut community development initiatives and make it more difficult to implement effective conflict reduction techniques. Additionally, there hasn't been much research done on the relationship between NSAG and civil society organizations; most of the literature that has been written about it has been on governmental repression (Keller, 2015).

Targeted research is required to narrow these gaps, especially comparative comparisons with other nations dealing with comparable issues to monitor the development of NSAG since 2018 (Gouriellec, 2018; Hassen, 2002; Zewde, 2002; Asmare, 2024). Gaining an understanding of the NSAG's changing functions is essential to enhance public trust, security, and governance in Ethiopia's future. Therefore the objective of this paper is to analyses the impacts of NSAG on state-society relations.

1.1. Conceptual framework

Scholars view the concepts ‘state’ and ‘society’ as contentious ideas in political analysis (Migdal, 2001; Sørensen, 2004). In general, state-society relations are thought of as a pattern of interactions between the state and society that establishes norms and restrictions, allocates resources, and structure power (Migdal, 2001; Sellers & Kwak, 2010). Relationships between the state and society are involved in establishing various forms of representation, negotiating the distribution of power, defining mutual rights and obligations, and holding each other accountable (Migdal, 2001).

Their access to power determines how the state and society negotiate their separate positions. The structure of power relations (agency, actors, network), the exercise of power (power to or over), and the results of the exercise of power (domination and subjectification) are all necessary for the distribution of power. The hierarchy of decision-making and the allocation of authority among conflicting parties are reflected in the power structure (Power, 1995). The structure of power is founded on power relations, which include control over the means of violence, access to resources (land and other), and the right to political representation (Power, 1988). Thus, the power structure aids in defining the public and private domains as well as the national and local political landscapes (Migdal, 2001; Thomson, 1995).

The distribution of power among interacting but competing actors, (social classes, ethnic groups, political forces) via established agencies (constitution, institutions, formal and informal state structures) creates the network of power structure (Layder, 1985). The network of the power structure enables competing actors to exercise their discretion over one another. Therefore, the power structure sets the ground for power exercise (despotic or infrastructural). The exercise of power according to Mann (1984) can be distinguished as despotic power (DP) and infrastructure of power (IP). Despotic power refers to the exclusive exercise of power by elites without involving competing groups/sections of society, whereas infrastructure of power (IP) implies "the capacity of the state actually to penetrate into the society to implement logistically political decision throughout the realm of its territory" (Mann, 1984).

The dimension of the infrastructural power is not one-sided but encompasses multiple actors. Therefore, the expansion of the state's infrastructure power determines its capability. In the context of this study, the state's ability to enforce its laws and carry out its policies, control the use of force or violence, preserve state symbols that represent its authority, and exert control over social and political control mechanisms are all considered forms of infrastructure power. The general power dynamics and interactions between the national government and local communities with regard to resource access, political power exercise, and control over the means of violence are referred to as state-society relations. Understanding the dynamic interplay between the state and society is central to political inquiry, with researchers often employing four distinct theoretical lenses: state-centric, society-centric, interactionist, and pluralist

perspectives. These frameworks offer divergent views on the locus of power and the direction of influence in shaping social and political outcomes.

The state-centric theory posits that the state is the primary, autonomous actor wielding central authority, capable of independently shaping societal structures and political life. This perspective analytically prioritizes the state's institutional capacity and power as the causal force determining governance and policy trajectories. Tilly (1992), for instance, underscores the state's historical monopoly on violence and its role in primary state-building as foundational to its singular capacity to dictate social and political outcomes. Similarly, Weber (1978) highlights how the state's legitimate authority and administrative apparatus enable it to impose its will and mold societal relations, emphasizing the imperative coordination that defines the state's relationship with its populace. This framework implicitly assumes a top-down model where societal preferences are largely subordinate to the state's objectives and capacities.

In direct contrast, the society-centric theory inverts the causal arrow, asserting that societal forces, rather than state autonomy, are the primary determinants of social and political outcomes. This perspective analytically foregrounds the influence of various societal groups—from working classes and elites to civil society organizations—on state actions, arguing that governance systems and policies largely reflect aggregated societal interests, conflicts, and demands. Gramsci (1971) famously conceptualizes the state not as a neutral arbiter but as a mediating apparatus through which dominant societal forces secure their hegemony, thereby shaping state-building processes and policy agendas from the ground up. Cohen (1989) further elaborates on the vital role of civil societies and social movements as conduits for popular influence, demonstrating how organized societal pressure can compel or constrain state policies. This framework emphasizes the inclusion of the state within broader social power struggles.

The interactionist theory moves beyond a unidirectional view, proposing a more nuanced, dialectical relationship where the state and society are understood as perpetually influencing and co-constituting each other. This analytical lens rejects the notion of either a monolithic state or a passive society, instead emphasizing a dynamic and continuous process of negotiation and mutual transformation. Foucault (1977), for example, illustrates how state institutions, through disciplinary power and surveillance, intersect with and internalize societal norms, thereby

shaping individual behaviors while simultaneously being reshaped by the resistance and adaptations of individuals within society. Lukes (2005) further explores the multifaceted exercise of power, arguing that it is embedded not only within formal state structures but also throughout informal societal interactions, demonstrating how power is mutually produced and contested in ongoing interactions between the state and its subjects. This perspective highlights the fluidity and reciprocal shaping evident in state-society relations.

Finally, the pluralist theory analytically frames power as dispersed among multiple, competing interest groups within society, such as businesses, labor unions, and political organizations. Within this framework, the state is conceptualized as a relatively neutral arbiter, mediating between these diverse groups to ensure that no single entity monopolizes the political process. Dahl's (2005) seminal work provides a foundational analytical defense of this decentralization of power, arguing that policy outcomes are the result of continuous bargaining and compromise among various veto players. However, this ideal is critically challenged and some analytically contend that the pluralist system often inherently favors certain well-resourced interest groups, thereby undermining genuine democratic competition and potentially skewing state policies in favor of privileged actors. This framework, while acknowledging societal influence, specifically analyzes the distribution and contestation of power among organized interests.

1.2. Actors on state-society relations

Numerous actors influence interactions between the state and its citizens, each of whom has a distinct role to play in shaping state-society relations. These actors fall into the following general categories: individuals, the corporate world, civil society organizations, and governmental entities. Comprehending the functions of these players is essential to appreciating the intricacies of civic participation and governance in modern countries.

The main players in state-society relations are governmental institutions. They include the executive, legislative, and judicial departments of government, which create and carry out laws that have an immediate impact on the public. The level of public trust and governance is frequently determined by the legitimacy and efficacy of these institutions. Fukuyama (2013), for example, highlights the significance of robust state institutions for efficient governance, contending that their ability affects their capacity to address social demands. State-society

relations may be strained as a result of social discontent, corruption, and poor governance brought on by weak institutions.

1.3. Non-state armed groups

Organizations that commit acts of organized violence without having a formal affiliation with a recognized national government or state are known as non-state armed groups (NSAG). Numerous organizations, including paramilitary groups, militias, terrorist organizations, and insurgent movements, can be classified as NSAG. In modern wars, the emergence of NSAG has grown in importance, especially in areas where state authority is weakened, disputed, or collapsing (Kalyvas, 2006; Mampilly, 2011).

The main characteristics of NSAG are their involvement in violent acts and their lack of formal governmental status. An NSAG functions outside of the established legal frameworks of international law and state governance, in contrast to state actors, who are acknowledged to have sovereignty and legitimacy (Schmidt, 2013). They can be divided into a number of groups according to their goals, organizational design, and operational procedures. For example, some NSAG may participate in criminal activity driven by profit, while others may pursue political objectives, aiming to topple current governments or obtain autonomy (Hoffman, 2006). The following is one typical NSAG classification:

1. Insurgents: Organizations with political objectives that oppose an established government through violent opposition. The Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) in Ethiopia and the Taliban in Afghanistan are two examples.
2. Militias: Armed organizations that are not formally recognized or incorporated into state security forces but may function with the tacit consent of a government. These organizations frequently support certain political, ethnic, or regional objectives (Mampilly, 2011).
3. Terrorist organizations: Groups that employ violence, frequently without discrimination, to spread terror and further their ideological objectives. Al-Qaeda and ISIS are two examples (Hoffman, 2006).
4. Criminal organizations: Groups like drug cartels or human trafficking rings that use violence mainly to further their financial interests (Schmidt, 2013).

The NSAG's existence significantly impacts the state, society, international relations, and worldwide security. These organizations frequently step in to provide governance and services where the state is unable or unwilling to do so, filling the power void left by weak states. This phenomenon may result from a type of "shadow governance," in which NSAG creates its own legal, social service, and law enforcement frameworks (Kalyvas, 2006). Groups such as Al-Shabaab, for instance, have supplanted the state in some parts of Somalia by offering security and education in return for allegiance and support. An NSAG's presence, though, may potentially contribute to a rise in instability and violence.

Because an NSAG fights asymmetrically against state troops, conflicts involving these groups frequently end in prolonged combat. Human rights abuses, population displacement, and humanitarian disasters may result from this (Mampilly, 2011). Furthermore, because an NSAG may not follow negotiated agreements or may have different objectives from those of the state or other stakeholders, their expansion hampers peace processes and conflict resolution attempts (Schmidt, 2013).

1.4.Non-state armed groups in Ethiopia's and state-society relations

Throughout Ethiopia's varied political landscape including pre-colonial, colonial, imperial, Derg, and Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)—non-state armed actors have played a crucial role in forming the country's state-society relations. Throughout Ethiopia's history, these actors—which include insurgent organizations, local militias, and other armed entities—have impacted social cohesion, governance, and the dynamics of warfare. Ethiopia is known for its many ethnic groups and decentralized political systems before Europeans scramble for Africa. Due to the existence of numerous regional kingdoms, such the Kingdom of Aksum and the numerous chiefdoms in the south and west, non-state armed actors, were essential to local security and government. To manage interethnic conflicts and defend communities from outside threats, local militias and armed groups were crucial. Armed groups were mobilized to protect against incursions by rival ethnic groups or outside forces, and functioned as a socio-political framework that dominated its people (Hassen, 2002). These non-state actors played a crucial role in the establishment of states since their military might frequently shaped regional politics and the interactions between a newly established centralized authority and local populations.

New dynamics in state-society relations were brought about by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia from 1936 to 1941, especially through the rise of resistance movements. In an effort to oppose foreign dominance, a number of non-state armed groups, including the Ethiopian Patriots, were formed in response to the presence of Italian colonial forces. A wide coalition of Ethiopians from many ethnic backgrounds typified this resistance, demonstrating how non-state actors may bring disparate groups together against a common foe (Zohar, 2016). These armed non-state actors had a significant impact throughout Italy's occupation. In addition to fighting Italian soldiers, the Ethiopian Patriots were instrumental in maintaining Ethiopian sovereignty, which profoundly influenced the country's identity and cohesion. In addition to strengthening the idea that resistance is a fundamental component of Ethiopian sovereignty and cultivating a sense of national pride that will impact future state-society interactions, their activities helped bring about Ethiopia's eventual liberation in 1941 (Zewde, 2002).

Emperor Haile Selassie's government (1930–1974) was challenged by a number of armed non-state actors when Italian occupation ended, especially in the Eritrea and Tigray provinces. A well-known rebel organization that promoted Eritrean independence from Ethiopia was the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) (Mekonnen, 2016). State-society interactions changed during this time as the central authority used military force more frequently to crush dissent. It became clear that the state relied on non-state actors for governance and security, particularly when considering the allegiance of local militias and regional leaders. Increased conflicts and opposition from different ethnic groups resulted from the desire to consolidate control and stifle local identities. During this time, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) also came into being, first as a student organization fighting for the rights of the Tigrayan people. Their shift to military conflict highlighted their increasing dissatisfaction with imperial control and their call for more independence (Mekonnen, 2016).

The Marxist-Leninist military political regime known as the Derg government (1974–1991) fundamentally altered Ethiopia's state-society dynamics. As a result of the Derg's repressive tactics, numerous insurgent groups, including the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), arose to oppose the authoritarian government, which in turn led to the growth of non-state armed players. Armed opposition was

stoked by the Derg's ruthless repressive measures, such as the Red Terror campaign, which intensified social unrest (Keller, 2022). These non-state armed actors had a big impact during the Derg era because they fought protracted wars that attempted to reshape state-society relations in addition to toppling the regime.

By portraying its fight as one for liberation and self-determination, the EPRDF, for example, was able to forge coalitions with a variety of ethnic groups and take advantage of popular unhappiness. Non-state armed actors started to influence the political scene at this crucial time, which ultimately led to the Derg's fall in 1991. As the EPRDF gained control in 1991, the function of armed non-state groups kept changing. The Derg's repressive rule prompted the formation of the EPRDF alliance, which aimed to institutionalize ethnic federalism in order to meet the concerns of several ethnic groups. However, as the EPRDF consolidated its hold on power, new armed non-state entities also emerged, especially as some ethnic groups felt excluded from the ruling coalition.

Non-state armed organizations calling for more rights and political participation have resurfaced as a result of the Oromo and Amhara protests in the mid-2010s, which brought attention to the dissatisfaction with the EPRDF's rule (Chinigò, 2022). The EPRDF found it difficult to keep its hold on power while juggling the demands of many ethnic groups during this time, illuminating the complexity of state-society relations. The emergence of armed non-state actors during this time period was a reflection of societal resentment and the difficulties of multiethnic state government. From the pre-colonial period to the present, non-state armed actors have generally had a major influence on state-society relations in Ethiopia. These players have had a significant impact on the political landscape by influencing identity, governance, and conflict dynamics. Addressing the issues of governance, social cohesion, and national unity requires an awareness of the historical significance and current influence of non-state armed players as Ethiopia continues to negotiate its complicated sociopolitical reality.

2.Research methods

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationships between state-society dynamics and the influence of non-state armed actors in Ethiopia, a qualitative research methodology was employed. This approach was strategically selected for its capacity to explore

the nuanced perceptions and lived experiences of key stakeholders, which is imperative for analyzing complex socio-political phenomena. The primary data collection mainly involved semi-structured interviews with a diverse array of participants, including community leaders, government authorities, and representatives from civil society organizations. This inclusive selection of interviewees ensured a multi-perspective insight into the local impacts, policy frameworks, and advocacy efforts pertaining to the interactions between state and non-state actors within the Ethiopian context. The semi-structured interview format offered the requisite flexibility to delve into emergent themes while maintaining a focused inquiry into the core research objectives.

To further contextualize and corroborate the primary findings, a systematic review of secondary data sources was conducted. This encompassed a thorough examination of scholarly articles, official reports, and relevant media releases, which collectively enriched the historical and political understanding of the post-2018 environment in Ethiopia. The integration of these disparate data sets facilitated methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the overall validity and depth of the empirical investigation. Subsequent to the data collection, both primary and secondary qualitative data underwent rigorous thematic analysis. This analytical technique enabled the systematic identification, categorization, and interpretation of recurring patterns and significant themes inherent in the data, ultimately facilitating the derivation of insightful deductions regarding the complex implications of non-state armed groups on state-society relations.

3. Findings and discussion

After 2018, Ethiopia experienced a unprecedented political transition by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, which had been manifested by “political reform,” recurrent conflict, and the rise of non-state armed groups. These non-state actors are beyond the chain of military commands, disciplines, tactics, and sources of funds. The groups are national, regional, and transnational and have had impacts on state-society relations in Ethiopia. The Tigray Defense Force (TDF), the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), the Amhara Fano, and the Ethnic Militias of Gumuz have strongly hampered the state-society relations. This research paper examines how the NSAGs influence the state’s legitimacy, governance, social cohesion, economic stability, and the

international actors that have influenced the Ethiopian political landscape since 2018, the commencement of the so-called political reform.

For 27 years until 2018, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) had ruled the country, which was dominated by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Abiy Ahmed ended the ruling regime of EPRDF in the form of "political reform." However, the reform is very debatable by different schools, politicians, and the views of external actors. At the beginning of the reform, there was promising progress and the majority of the Ethiopian people saw a glimmer of hope because there was political freedom, peace with the Eritrean government, the release of political prisoners, and the opening of public space for media and civil societies.

Afterwards, EPRDF evolved into the Prosperity Party (PP), in which TPLF was alienated and retreated to Tigray. Those transformations galvanized the ethnic federal structure, triggering armed conflict as marginalized groups sought greater political autonomy and power.

3.1. The influences of NSAGs on governance and state authority

Under this section, the researchers seek to examine how NSAGs have contributed to the erosion of state monopoly on acts of violence. Since 2018, the Oromo Liberation Army has controlled some districts in West Oromia, particularly rural areas, and the federal government has not been able to control these territories, and its state power monopoly of violence is being challenged and eroded in those areas. According to the interviewees, in West Oromia, in Wollega, some parts of West Shewa, and Southeast Oromia in Gujj areas, the OLA has controlled some places, and the federal and regional states were not able to regain these places for a long time. The Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) has also controlled the Tigray region since November 4, 2020; this area was beyond the control of the central government for two consecutive years. This shows that the society of Tigray was isolated from the federal government since its state monopoly on violence was highly eroded and the territory was beyond the control of the state.

Based on the researchers' observation and interview data, Amhara Fano has controlled towns and rural areas of the region since August 2023, which it has been administering; therefore, Amhara Fano is totally disrupting the governance roles of the government in rural areas and small towns of the region.

The other important aspect of understanding the Ethiopian state-society relation erosion is viewing the dimension of fragmented sovereignty. According to Haider (2010), in the state-society relation, sovereignty is a vital component, and three ways are expected for sovereignty (1) how the political power is acquired, (2) to what extent the state institutions are effective, and (3) how basic rights and freedoms are enjoyed by citizens. The understanding of sovereignty may be taken as external and internal sovereignty. The internal sovereignty of the state is characterized by the state monopoly use of violence in the internal affairs of the state and the popular sovereignty of the state, in which the state can obtain its legitimacy and public trust; in return, the state-society relation will be enhanced.

Since 2018, when NSAGs emerged, one of the characteristics of popular sovereignty is free, fair, and periodic elections at different governance levels. According to the FDRE 1995 constitution, the government must be elected through a popular vote in a free, fair, and periodic election. According to the FDRE 1995 constitution, the highest political power is vested in the legislative organ, which is elected by the people in vertical understanding. The government organ at the federal government level is the House of People Representatives (HPR); at the regional level, state councils; at the district level, village (*kebele*) level; and also local councils, which are the manifestation of popular sovereignty and elected by the people, and the legislature establishes the executive and control the judicial organs of the government, having the possibility to ensure internal sovereignty and public legitimacy.

Based on the interview data, the government's legitimacy was being challenged as the periodic election was not free, inclusive, and periodic as the 2021 general election had not been conducted in all parts of the state. The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) conducted the election for HPR and regional council members by excluding the Tigray region, and the Tigray region was not represented in the HPR since it was asking the federal government to conduct elections because the federal government wanted to delay the elections. The Oromia and Benshangul Gumuz elections were not conducted in every part of these two regions because the federal government was fighting NSAGs in some districts of these two regions.

Therefore, the state-society has been challenged because of limited political participation and representation; therefore, the legitimacy of the federal government has become questionable

due to lack of popular representation to HPR of the Tigray region, since their voices and interests are not represented. According to a key informant from NEBE, the aspect of the legitimacy of the local council representation and representation power in Tigray have been suspended since June 2018, since the local election was conducted in 2014; their power expired in June 2018. However, up until now, the local council elections have never been conducted. According to the interviewee, it is because of the presence of the armed groups' movement and they challenged the government to conduct elections; therefore, the state is (1) losing its legitimacy from the people since the executive organs of the government are not legal since they have not gained power through elected representatives, and (2) it shows that popular sovereignty is the mask of the state; the power is not constitutional.

According to the key informant, the state's security sectors have failed to maintain peace and security in the Amhara and Tigray regions, and some parts of the Oromia region. These are under the control of NSAGs, and the majority of the people are obtaining security services from the NSAGs, and the capacity of the state has been diminished. In most of the rural and small towns of the Amhara, Oromia, Tigray, and Gumuz areas, the judicial constitutions are replaced by the NSAGs, and the provision of justice has been under the control of the NSAGs.

3.2. Impact of NSAGs on state capacity in service provision

The provision of social services to the people in most areas of the three regions has been suspended. According to one key informant, in the Tigray region from November 2020 to 2022, in the Oromia region from 2018 to 2023, and in the Amhara region from 2023 to the present, the social service provision has been considerably affected, and the society in these regions is suffering from access to education, access to healthcare, and other social services in which the state has been alienated from the society in providing services and have lost legitimacy and public trust. The results of this study show that the government’s service provision had deteriorated in the regions where NSAGs strongly controlled some areas.

The government had been challenged on its legitimacy as the provision of social services to the public highly deteriorated because of armed conflicts between the government defense forces and NSAGs. For instance, education services had been damaged, and many students were out of school, and it was questionable if the government existed in these areas because schools were

either damaged or closed. The researchers would like to show these scenarios with empirical evidence from 2018 to 2024 in Oromia, Tigray, Amhara, Afar, and the Benshangul-Gumuz regions. In 2021, at least 25% of the schools in the Tigray region experienced damage, including the loss of classrooms and offices. In 2021, the UN also reported that looting and war had damaged a "large majority" of public schools in Mekelle, the region's capital (UNICEF, 2021). About 150,000 pupils, 45% of them girls, and more than 4,000 teachers suffered from the conflict in 2021 as a result of the fighting that destroyed or seriously damaged about 760 schools which spread throughout 21 *woredas*, or districts, in the Afar area (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2022).

Because of the TDF invasion of the neighboring zones of the Amhara region, as of September 2021, over 1,660 primary and secondary schools in the Amhara region—or 17% of all schools in the region—had been damaged or destroyed as a result of conflict, according to the UN Report (2021). The school damage affected more than 1.2 million students, with around half of them being female. The Amhara region's North Gondar, South Gondar, Waghemra, North Wollo, and South Wollo zones—all of which border the Tigray region—were home to the majority of the destroyed schools. According to the East African Review (2024), the situation was particularly bad in the Amhara region, where the ongoing fighting had prevented about 4.1 million children from attending school for two consecutive years. The violence began in August 2023 and had created unprecedented disruptions to education, affecting around 670,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) in the region. Some of the more than 4,178 schools that had been shuttered had reportedly been turned into military camps. The United Nations estimates that 17 million children were not attending school as a result of the insecurity that had gripped parts of Ethiopia. There were 5.5 million more people at risk of dropping out. There had not been any funding to rebuild schools or restore services, and the humanitarian response had been sluggish.

Yeromaw (2024) argued that the conflict in northern Ethiopia severely damaged the area's health system, making it incapable of withstanding the shock of continuous fighting. According to sources, in northern Ethiopian war-affected areas of the Amhara region, about half of the region's healthcare infrastructure, 40 hospitals, 453 health centers, 1,850 health posts, 466 private health facilities, and hundreds of ambulances were taken and destroyed. The health

system had no time to recover from these losses, and it was unable to do so just months before another armed conflict erupted in the region.

In the Oromia region, 1072 public healthcare facilities have been damaged, plundered, destroyed, and/or set on fire in the Oromia districts where armed conflict was still raging. Hospitals, health stations, and health centers were damaged, looted, destroyed, and/or set on fire in the 11 Oromia administrative zones where fighting was ongoing (Gutema et al., 2023). Therefore, in the areas most impacted by the ongoing armed conflicts in Oromia, 44% of 159 vehicles (ambulances, district health office cars for logistics, and motorbikes) used to provide routine health emergency services have been damaged, looted, and/or destroyed as a result of these conflicts.

The other aspects that show the consequences of NSAGs on state-society relation are ethnic tensions and social fragmentations. According to the interviewees, the armed groups were exploiting Ethiopia's ethnic federalism, and they were propagating by framing their struggle ethnic liberation. TPLF's narratives of the Tigrayan victimhood, on the other hand, OLA's emphasis on Oromo repression and marginalization, Amhara Fano's narrative of the existential threat facing Amharas, and the struggle for maintaining survival and equal protection for the Amhara people—all these manifestations by the armed groups are dividing the social cohesion of the society among different ethnic groups.

According to the sources, the NSAGs have caused the division of the internal affairs of religions, for instance, the division that had been attempted in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Oromia Synod that has been manipulated by the political wings of OLA, and the conflict that was the recurring feature in Oromia and the cause of the loss of human life and destruction of Amhara Orthodox Christianity followers in the Oromia region.

The TPLF is also the cause of the split and the establishment of the Tigray Orthodox Christianity synod, which shows how social division and divergence among the Ethiopian societies had undertaken. The other aspects of the relationship were humanitarian issues and human rights violations devastating state-society relations. Both NSAGs and state forces violated the human rights of citizens based on the data, as the state forces violated civilian human rights, and civilians had lost trust in state institutions. Civilians were using the networks of the NSAGs for

their survival since the state institutions had failed to fulfill and maintain their survival during armed conflict.

3.3. Trust in the state

Trust in the state is an essential component of governance, as it influences the willingness of citizens to comply with state institutions, pay taxes, and cooperate with government policies. The activities of the TDF and OLA significantly undermined public trust in the Ethiopian government, particularly in regions directly impacted by their insurgencies. Concurrently, the state's own counterproductive actions significantly undermined its legitimacy, exacerbating the decline in public trust. Government responses to insurgencies, including, but not limited to, human rights abuses, arbitrary detentions, restrictive civic and political spaces, and inconsistent application of justice, can alienate segments of the population (Abebe et al., 2025; ISS Africa, 2024).

In Tigray, the TDF has emerged as a symbol of resistance and a defender of Tigrayan rights. Many Tigrayans view the Ethiopian federal government's military actions as an attack on their people, leading them to identify more with the TDF's cause than with the Ethiopian state (Tsehaye & Reisen, 2024). The Ethiopian government's response to the Tigray conflict, which had been marked by widespread accusations of war crimes and human rights abuses, has deeply polarized the country. In Tigray, the government is viewed as illegitimate and corrupt, while the TDF is seen as a legitimate force fighting for justice and Tigrayan identity. This has created a significant rift between the Tigray region and the Ethiopian federal government, further eroding trust in the state (Keller, 2022).

In Oromia, the OLA has similarly gained traction as a representative force for the Oromo people. Many Oromos view the federal government as oppressive, particularly following the violent suppression of protests in Oromia and the killing of Oromo activists. The portrayal of the OLA as a terrorist group by the Ethiopian government has only fueled resentment, with many Oromos identifying with the group's struggle for self-determination and justice (Adem, 2024). The government's militarized response, including the use of arbitrary detention and violence against civilians, has further deepened the sense of mistrust towards the state, particularly among

younger Oromos who feel excluded from the political process. The perception that the government is not committed to addressing the needs of the Oromo population has contributed to a growing sense of alienation and a decline in trust.

4. Conclusion

The rise of the Amhara Fano, the Tigray Defence Force (TDF), and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) has fundamentally altered the legitimacy of the Ethiopian state and eroded public confidence in its governance since 2018. The government's aggressive military response, characterized by widespread violence, systemic repression, and egregious human rights violations, has caused significant alienation among various ethnic groups, particularly in Tigray and Oromia. These armed factions have adeptly leveraged ethnic grievances, successfully galvanizing substantial support from their respective communities, which has further undermined the state's authority and legitimacy. The ongoing conflict has not only exacerbated Ethiopia's ethnic divisions but has also reinforced political marginalization and exposed the inadequacies of the government's governance structure. As Ethiopia struggles to address these deep-rooted issues, the prospects for rebuilding trust, achieving lasting peace, and fostering national unity remain precarious, with the challenges of entrenched ethnic tensions and ineffective political leadership threatening any meaningful reconciliation.

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