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Continuity and Rupture in Ethiopia under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

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Introduction.
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This issue of *afriche e orienti* reflects on the challenges of state- and nation-building in Ethiopia under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). It collects articles from different disciplines in the social sciences and humanities that rely on empirical research conducted during the EPRDF period (1991-2019) and during the most recent political transition since 2018. Articles unpack trajectories of state- and nation-building from the vantage point of social and political change: they engage with the question of how to read Ethiopia's recent history through the analytical lens of continuity and rupture at a time of heightened social and political transformation.

In recent years Ethiopia has been in the spotlight of African politics and international relations. After a wave of anti-government protests that swept the country since the mid-2010s, Abiy Ahmed's surge to power in April 2018 marked the end of the control of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) over the EPRDF and, one year later, the disbandment of the EPRDF itself. While initially the transition was marked by a liberalisation of the political landscape, the country rapidly descended into a deep political crisis characterised by a surge of ethnonationalist politics, which, among other outcomes, escalated into a fully fledged military conflict in Tigray after November 2020, opposing the Federal government and the TPLF. The current political crisis, of

which the outcome remains uncertain, is rooted in deep transformations which have simmered over a long period of time, and which have at their heart the contested nature of Ethiopian history of state- and nation-building. While discussions around continuity and rupture are well articulated in Ethiopian studies, the EPRDF period as an analytically discernible timeframe has not been an object of systematic investigation and reflection. This special issue aims to start a conversation about this important topic. In the aftermath of the Derg military regime (1974-1991), the EPRDF/TPLF leadership, relying on the radical political ideology of 'revolutionary democracy', institutionalised ethnicity as the main principle of organisation of the Ethiopian state under the model of ethnic federalism. After the war with Eritrea (1998-2000), a political crisis within the EPRDF/TPLF in 2001, and with greater pace after the contested 2005 elections, Ethiopia embarked on a selective strategy of economic liberalisation driven by what the political leadership dubbed a 'developmental state'. Driven by a boom in the construction sector and services, in the course of the 2010s Ethiopia became one of Africa's fastest growing economies, eliciting representations of the country as a clear example of 'Africa rising'. Amid a context of growing authoritarianism, the scope of the reforms undertaken by the EPRDF in the course of the 2000s and 2010s encompassed most aspects of social, economic, and political life. The complex interplay between ethnic federalism, the developmental state, and authoritarianism is the terrain within which contributions to this issue interrogate questions around the nature of Ethiopian history, its structural and material drivers and representations as an analytical lens to read state-society relations under the EPRDF.

The first four articles of the special issue engage critically with some flagship projects and policies embarked on by the EPRDF under the developmental state. These articles demonstrate the centrality of the EPRDF's developmental ideology to dissect broader dynamics of state- and nation-building. They identify cases and instances in which policies and programmes designed under the developmental state have been successful and unsuccessful to nurture a cohesive national discourse. These articles point at the urgency of new research dissecting the legacy of the developmental state under the EPRDF to shape the formation of social and political identities in the current conjuncture. Tefera Negash Gebregziabher interrogates the concept of 'developmental patrimonialism' to unpack the nature of the Ethiopian 'growth miracle' under the Ethiopian developmental state. Pinning an analytical focus on the creation of party-military conglomerates, such as the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT), the article argues that the EPRDF's economic strategy has entailed the significant concentration of economic and political power within the party-state and its elites, while obfuscating discussions around authoritarianism in the name of the developmental mission of the state. Yeshiwas Degu Belay, Emanuele Fantini and Iginio Gagliardone discuss one of the developmental state's flagship projects, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The article dissects how mainstream Ethiopian

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media have represented the GERD across different leaderships between 2013 and 2020. While representations of the dam rely on multiple political narratives about state-building, a main finding of the article is that there is a remarkable continuity in the ways political elites have purported the GERD as a symbol of national unity. This is remarkable, the authors contend, especially if one considers the increasingly fractured and polarised media landscape along ethnonationalist lines after 2018.

The article by Logan Cochrane and Melisew Dejene Lemma historicises the role of social protection systems under the EPRDF. The authors discuss the power relations within which social protection policy is enmeshed, mapping the implications to broader questions about state-building. The article finds that, despite the ostensibly universal scope of policies elaborated as part of the developmental state's transformation agenda, the expansion of social protection systems has not been uniform and, rather, it must be regarded as an important tool through which the EPRDF government attempted to institutionalise power at the local level. The implementation of social protection systems reflected a context of growing authoritarianism, which disenfranchised political dissent, and furthered the marginalisation of livelihoods along ethnolinguistic identities. This has constrained significantly the transformational potential of social protection systems to nurture national inclusion under the EPRDF. The article by Davide Chinigò explores the quest for rapid industrialisation as another key feature of the project for socio-economic transformation under the Ethiopian developmental state. The article explores the question of labour that has emerged in conjunction with the expansion of the textile industry in Tigray region since the 2010s via the agency of global production networks. The article reconstructs the history of labour mobilisation in Tigray and contends that manufacturing development entrenched new forms of marginalisation of labour along class and gender lines, despite the narrative of the developmental state as a more inclusive model of economic transformation than its 'neoliberal' alternatives.

The next two articles discuss the symbolic and material value of borders to shape dynamics of state- and nation-building along the construction of social and political identities. Both articles use the 2018 political transition as an entry point to explore the history of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea (Aurora Massa), and between Ethiopia, Sudan and Eritrea (Luca Puddu). Using an ethnographic approach, Aurora Massa explores how regimes of mobility across time have shaped the symbolic and political value of the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The author identifies both continuities and discontinuities in the ways Ethiopian returnees and Eritrean refugees have represented the border against critical events, such as the independence of Eritrea in the 1990s, the Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000), and the peace agreements in 2018. The article finds that these events, in their own ways, contributed to shape the symbolic boundaries between Ethiopia and Eritrea, with significant implications to how ordinary people negotiate forms of national belonging in their everyday life. The article points

to how processes of nation- and state-building require an analytical perspective that scrutinises social change as the constant re-working of the past, as well as aspirations and expectations about the future. By historicising the relations between Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan in Ethiopia's north-western frontier, Luca Puddu maps some of the regional ramifications of the conflict in Tigray since November 2020. The article contends that current border conflicts need to be contextualised against the historical competition for the control of natural resources and transboundary trade routes, as well as competing claims over territories that were artificially partitioned during the colonial period. The author argues we can fully understand the scope of these border conflicts only by pinning an analytical focus to historical sub-regional centres in competition for political power beyond a view of the Ethiopian state as a monolithic entity. This sheds light on why the different regimes that have been in power in Ethiopia since the late Imperial period have formulated conflicting, and often incoherent foreign policy objectives around how to claim these borderland territories. The two articles of Massa and Puddu combined highlight the necessity of understanding present-day dynamics of state- and nation-building in Ethiopia against competing claims for political authority between a variety of actors beyond the nation-state as a discernible unit of analysis.

The final two contributions bring us to address the 2018 political transition and its aftermath. The articles by both Yonas Ashine and Serawit Bekele Debele engage with the difficult question about how we might rethink present-day Ethiopian politics away from the divisive forces of ethnonationalism. What are the conditions of possibility for a new Ethiopian subject to emerge, one that is able to transcend a toxic politics that pins Ethiopian people against each other? Clearly, this question has methodological, epistemological and ontological dimensions that are immense and beyond the reach of this issue. However, mapping some of these dimensions is an important endeavour to start a critical discussion about how the disciplines of Ethiopian and African studies construct and make intelligible their research objects. In other words, how do we engage in a productive conversation about Ethiopian history and politics at a time of deep social and political crisis?

The article by Yonas Ashine addresses the topic of university conflicts during the political transition. Based on primary research conducted between 2017 and 2019, the article finds that conflicts between students based on the political mobilisation of identity have become increasingly prevalent in universities across Ethiopia after the 2018 political liberalisation. The author traces the roots of campus conflict in the unresolved 'question of nationalities' as it was initially formulated by the 1960s Ethiopian student movement during the late Imperial period. Universities, Yonas contends, have become a contested terrain in that they are the result of a divisive ethnonationalist discourse mobilised by elites competing for political power, and a microcosm of broader tensions that have simmered in Ethiopian society for a long time. The author contends that the only way to depoliticise ethnic identity is for universities

to engage in a critical pedagogy based on debate, dialogue and deliberation, towards the formation of subjectivities that transcend the inherent contradictions of Ethiopia's historical nation-building project.

For Serawit Bekele Debele the post-2018 political crisis begs the important question about what constitutes political change in present-day Ethiopia, and what does it entail to imagine a future for the country that transcends extreme social polarisation. Drawing on an ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the Oromo anti-government protests by the mid-2010s, the author reflects on the potential of feminist practices of solidarity that emerged during the encounter with her fieldwork subjects. The article scopes the notions of *waloo, tumsa* and *wallala* as potentially new conceptual underpinnings to foster democracy, solidarity and a politics geared towards attending the everyday struggles of people at the margins. These practices of political engagement are meant to interrogate the nation-state and its organisation from the perspective of those societal voices that remain unheard, bringing forward a notion of political transformation that relies on how ordinary people experience violence and marginalisation.

Davide Chinigò, *editor of this issue*

Numeri pubblicati