



Populism in Ethiopia?

**THE CASE OF PRIME MINISTER ABIY
AND HIS MEDEMER PHILOSOPHY**

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Abiy is not a populist. Abiy headlines rallies around the country, but he is by no means a tub-thumper. His addresses are not fiery blasts of political incentive; they are more like sermons, befitting his background as a devout Pentecostal. He does not fulminate against the 'elites', nor does he target the average Tigrinya, despite his ongoing political clashes with the TPLF.

Tom Gardner, British journalist based in Addis Ababa,
December 2018

Abiy is an opportunistic populist jockeying for power on a democratizing platform. By using a bellicose rhetoric and invoking patriotism he is making an attempt to obstruct both domestic political debates and institutional processes, or even to get rid of them for good.

Alemayehu Weldemariam, Ethiopian lawyer based in the US,
November 2020

Introduction

Following three years of anti-government protests and the subsequent resignation of former Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, the House of People's Representatives elected Abiy Ali as the fourth Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia on 2 April 2018.

The government's unveiling of its master plan to expand the capital of Addis Ababa further into the Oromia region in 2014 did in fact lead to protests where Oromo people expressed their long-existing grievances about the lack of political space and ability to express dissent within the government at the time (Aljazeera, 2018). Angered by an unfulfilled demand to retake control of some of their own lands, the Amhara launched protests in their region soon thereafter, expressing the same dissatisfaction towards the government. Such anti-government protests quickly translated into accusations of political dominance by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) within the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), therefore accusing the government of misusing its founding principle of ethno-national federalism (Bach, 2014). Anti-government protestors argued that rather than being an effective means of alleviating deep ethnic divisions that can help hold together the common state, the EPRDF used the principles of ethnic federalism as a means to compete for power over the central government through and along ethnocentric lines (Anderson, 2014). Pro-democratic protestors hoped that Abiy, as the first person of Oromo ethnic origins to serve as prime minister, would not only help quell the remaining tensions between the Oromo people and the government, but also help restore the initial principle of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia through democratic means (The Economist, 2018).

From this strategic position, Abiy framed his election as a reformation of his governing EPRDF. During his acceptance speech, he promised political reform; to promote the territorial integrity of Ethiopia and the unity of its people; to resolve the ongoing Eritrean-Ethiopian border conflict after the Eritrean-Ethiopian war; and to reach out to the political opposition within and outside Ethiopia (Hussain, 2018). The backbone to his ambitious vision for Ethiopia is his idea of Medemer, on which he wrote a book, and which entails his personal conviction that different and contrary views can be brought together so that a compromise can be found. In his book, Abiy demonstrates how such compromise can be translated into a strategy to build a united Ethiopian nation through a celebration of its ethnic multiplicity (Abiy, 2018 as summarized in United States Institute of Peace Conference, 2020).

After his first 100 days of rule, Abiy released political prisoners, unbanned opposition parties and closed the notorious Maekelawi detention facility, which is known to be a site of government-initiated human rights abuses. Abiy also signed a “declaration of peace and friendship” with Eritrea on 8 July for which he received a Noble Peace Prize in 2019. His popularity and support at home and abroad reached such a historical high that some political observers argued that Abiy had become overwhelmingly more popular than the ruling coalition of the EPRDF itself (Amnesty International, 2019). But the euphoria of Abiy’s early days as prime minister was short-lived; his push for unity and celebration of diversity quickly encountered more problems than it had solved.

By allegedly distancing the country from ethnic federalism, Abiy merged the ethnic and region-based constituent parties of the EPRDF into his new Prosperity Party, in which the previously dominant party in the EPRDF, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), refused to partake, as its inclusion would ultimately lead to a loss of political power. Tension began to rise between the federal government and the TPLF when Abiy declared Tigray’s August 2020 regional elections to have been illegal on the grounds of his previous announcement to postpone the elections to 2021 due to Covid-19 (Bhandari and Lewis, 2020). A full-scale war between the TPLF and the federal government broke out in November 2021 after the TPLF took control of the headquarters of the military’s Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defense Force

(ENDF) in Mekelle, which Tigray central command spokesperson Getachew Reda framed as a pre-emptive attack against an imminent threat from the federal government (Dimtsi Weyane Television, 2020, 1:14). On 4 November 2020, the federal government announced a military operation against the TPLF and its forces. The ENDF, the Amhara Special Forces (ASF) and allied militia, and the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) accordingly started a military offensive against the TSF and allied militia in Tigray. Abiy described the ongoing war as a law enforcement operation, but as it has dragged on there are growing accusations on both sides of the conflict of human rights abuses, mass rape, extrajudicial killing, and the use of starvation as a tactic (UHCHR, 2021). On 10 August 2021, shortly after winning the country's delayed elections with an overwhelming majority, Abiy asked "all capable Ethiopians" to "show their patriotism" by joining the war against the TPLF, now officially designated as a terrorist organization by Abiy's government (BBC, 2021). In response to Abiy's plea, Western mass media has tended to frame the war as a government-instigated "genocide" against the people of Tigray despite the complexities of the conflict. This very complexity, in turn, is diluted by the dominant Western narrative, which focuses on the apparent irony of the current state of affairs: Abiy, "from Nobel hero to driver of war" (The New York Times, 2021).



Abiy Ahmed won the Noble Peace Prize in 2019 for ending hostilities with Eritrea (BBC, 2021)
Source: https://ichef.bbci.co.uk/news/976/cpsprodpb/13EA0/production/_115786518_gettyimages-1187527708.jpg

What's in a name?

Laclau's conceptualization of populism

It seems then that Abiy's controversial involvement in the Tigray War with regards to its initial ambitions to build a peaceful Ethiopian nation has led to an intense debate within the popular mass media over whether Abiy is a populist or not. Statements by British journalist Tom Gardner and Mekelle University School of Law Professor Alemayehu Weldemariam are illustrative of the development of the debate, in both international and domestic mass media, from the time of Abiy's election in 2018 until the outbreak of the war in Tigray. Writing in December 2018, well before the Tigray War, Gardner argues that the prime minister's immense popularity does not make Abiy a populist since his vision for Ethiopia and his political undertakings are founded on his inclusive and democratic principles. On the other end of the debate, writing shortly after the start of the Tigray War in November 2020, Weldemariam argues that Abiy is an opportunistic populist who managed to conceal from the people of Ethiopia his initial intentions to centralize his political power in the government with his new Prosperity Party by portraying himself as a democrat. While the arguments are diametrically opposed, they do frame their understanding of populism in like manner by differentiating the attributes of a "populist" from those of a "democrat". But would Gardner still have argued that Abiy is not a populist if he had written his article after the prime minister's controversial involvement in the Tigray War? And what exactly would Weldemariam's explanation be about Abiy's overwhelming majority win in the 2021 election if his popularity was only produced through his painted image of a democrat? It seems that by conceptualizing populism on the same level as a particular political ideology – that is, by taking on the impossible task of finding out Abiy's "true" political intentions and whether

they align with “true” democratic values – both sides of the debate drain the very meaning of what it takes to be a populist.

In order to overcome this methodological issue, this essay will look at Abiy and his Prosperity Party through a populist lens by following Laclau’s conceptualization of populism as exemplifying how political identities are constituted in relation to each other rather than preordained (Laclau, 2005a). As such, this essay will take Abiy and his party’s political practices as a starting point of analysis, rather than the content of its political ideology itself. More specifically, this essay will look at Abiy’s idea of Medemer as a specific *logic of articulation* of the political ideology of his Prosperity Party, which he has continuously upheld throughout his rule even though at times the political actions taken on behalf of his party seemingly contravened the very principles of Medemer (Laclau, 2005b). What makes Abiy a populist, this essay will argue, is his capacity to discursively normalize the ambivalence upon which his political ideology relies, by presenting Medemer as a collective value of all “the Ethiopian people”, while simultaneously using Medemer as a means to justify the exclusion of others from the same construction of “the Ethiopian people”. This will be done by firstly analysing the discursive representation of “the Ethiopian people” in Abiy’s Medemer through Laclau’s idea of the empty signifier (Laclau, 1996). The very ambivalence upon which Abiy’s idea of Medemer lies will then be analyzed by closely looking at his acceptance speech in 2018 and his statements published on Twitter after his re-election in July 2021. As such, the aim of this essay will not be to bind populism to authoritarian and anti-pluralistic aspects, but to uncover the complex and ambivalent ways in which Abiy and his party, through their promotion of Abiy’s values of Medemer, defend the interests of “the Ethiopian people” (Rummens, 2017; Ingram, 2017).

Medemer as an “empty signifier”

Since the political content of populism involves putting “the people” first by defending its interests and promoting its values above all else, Laclau (2005a) argues that the essence of populism lies in the production of identity of “the people” with regards to these very interests and values. This production of identity takes place through what Laclau defines as an “empty signifier” that provides a means by which anyone can identify with the people as a whole (Ostiguy and Moffit, 2020). For Laclau, the empty signifier is “the hegemonic representative of a collection of signifiable things, whose emergence requires the equivalence of all signifiable things to prevail over their differences” (McKean, 2016:799). I understand Laclau’s empty signifier within the context of populism as an object, an identity or demand whose commendation connects individuals as a social and seemingly homogenous totality, regardless of their individual differences.

With this in mind, Abiy’s idea of Medemer can be understood as an empty signifier which provides a means by which anyone can identify with “the Ethiopian nation” as a whole. In a panel organized by the United States Institute of Peace, Ethiopian diplomat Lencho Bati presents Medemer as a comprehensive socio-political economic perspective necessitated by the past violent decades in Ethiopia (United States Institute of Peace, 2020, 59:34). In his Nobel Lecture, Abiy declares the essence of this approach to lie in the original meaning of the word “Medemer” as a process of healing; it describes a synergistic process of coming together of individuals, religious or ethnic groups, leaders and institutions to work more effectively and for the common good and in the public interest (Abiy, 2019). It aims to harmonize the politics of identity, sectarianism, and ethnic affiliation into a synthesis of nation-building, tolerance, understanding and forgiveness with regards to the violent decades Ethiopia endured before Abiy’s rule (Abiy, 2019). Medemer, accordingly, provides a means by which the people

of Ethiopia identify themselves as a whole through the recognition of their role in building a common peaceful nation through their “synergistic” cooperation. What makes Medemer an empty signifier, according to Laclau’s definition, is the way the Ethiopian people’s common duty to cooperate in the name of nation-building takes priority over their ethnic, religious, or social differences.

But as McKlean (2016) clearly argues, an empty signifier is not as neutral as its theory presumes, and accordingly, neither is the presumed inclusivity of Abiy’s idea of Medemer. McKlean (2016) traces this exclusionary practice upon which the empty signifier is based back to Laclau’s (2005a) understanding of equality and difference. By Laclau’s (2005a) binary account, to become equivalent to something is to be made homogenous with it, since equivalence must go on to subvert difference in order to make the system a homogenous totality (McKlean, 2016). As such Laclau’s empty signifier assumes equality and difference to be opposed from the very start. Accordingly, the “Medemer individual” depicted by Abiy has attained a certain state of consciousness and realizes the importance of synergistic collaboration for the task of nation-building and collective good (Abiy, 2019). In this sense, Medemer aims to harness the aspiration of individuals and unleash their energies for the collective good. In contrast, the singular pursuit of individual self-interest is ultimately self-defeating.

What constitutes a “Medemer system”, then, is the way each member is different from one another with regards to their ethnic, religious, or social identity. What the system also implies, however, is that all individuals must be different in a way that is excluded from the system itself; that is, they all must realize the importance of synergistic collaboration for the task of nation-building, and any act of self-interest is therefore automatically excluded from the self-named “inclusive” system of Medemer. Laclau (2005a:70) says this exclusion gives an antagonistic character to the included’s relationship to the excluded and calls this “something that the totality expels from itself in order to constitute itself”. As such, as the analysis of Abiy’s three particular statements will show, Laclau’s binary account of equality and difference in his idea of the empty signifier opens up the space for an ambivalent articulation of inclusivity in Abiy’s idea of Medemer. More specifically, with his idea of Medemer, Abiy seems to be able to promote inclusivity through exclusion, and to justify exclusion through the promotion of inclusivity.

The translation of Medemer in Abiy's inauguration speech

Abiy's inauguration speech after his election as prime minister in April 2018 lays out the foundations of his vision for Ethiopia under his leadership. And although he never mentions his idea of Medemer (his book was published more than a year after his election), his vision for Ethiopia continuously falls back on the foundations of his very philosophy. He firstly does so by outlining the essence of *Ethiopianness*, and how it can and should be set out as an example to the rest of the world. It is Ethiopia's turbulent and at times violent history which has given the Ethiopian people the wisdom not to be overcome by temporary obstacles but rather "to change the trials we face into opportunities and desirable obstacles and achieve victory" (Abiy as quoted in Hussain, 2018:2). The key to Ethiopia's survival, according to Abiy, lies in the importance of unity in a country with a rich cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity; the same unity Abiy later describes as the essence of his idea of Medemer.

Through his metaphorical representation of the unity of the Ethiopian people, Abiy seems to transcend his account of unity through a Nature/Body binary. By alluding to the very soil of Ethiopian land as the shared identity and destiny of the Ethiopian people, Abiy represents the soil as the bond which has held them together through Ethiopia's violent and turbulent years. Such metaphorical use of the Ethiopian land is evident.

While alive, we are humans; upon passing, we become soil and hence become country. You will find the precious bodies of every Ethiopian from every corner of the country become soil in another part of the country. We Ethiopians, while alive, we are Ethiopians; when we die, we become Ethiopia (Abiy as quoted in Hussain, 2018:3).

Ethiopia's soil, accordingly, is the common thread through Ethiopia's existence as a thriving nation. It places every Ethiopian individual on the same line of equivalence, since it prefigures everyone's existence and passing. But as Abiy goes on with his metaphor of Ethiopian soil, he argues that the stability of the Ethiopian nation can only be ensured when the fertility of the soil is maintained. Abiy represents this fertility as a corporeal sacrifice to the Ethiopian nation – to sacrifice one's body to become one with the Ethiopian soil. The Ethiopian soil itself, in other words, cannot sustain itself and therefore needs the continuous contribution, if not absolute dedication, of the Ethiopian people to collaborate in the name of a thriving Ethiopian nation. As such, the Ethiopian soil does not just prefigure the *equivalence* between the Ethiopian people but prefigures the role and devotion of all Ethiopian people to their land in order to sustain their own existence. The Body/Nature divide is represented as a dialectical process; the Ethiopian people depend on the fertility of the soil to survive as much as the soil needs the embodied sacrifices of the Ethiopian people to maintain its fertility. Abiy outlines how his dialectic account of unity has proven to be the source of Ethiopia's success in the past.

The Amhara have sacrificed in Karra Marra for our country's sovereignty – becoming intermingled with its soil. The Tigrayans have sacrificed in Metema saying, take my neck before my country and becoming intermingled with its soil. The Oromo have given his chest on the mountains of Adwa to protect the country's sovereignty and have intermingled with the soils of Adwa (Abiy as quoted in Hussain, 2018:3).

Here, Abiy recites the multiple instances where Ethiopians have sacrificed themselves in the name of their nation. Whether that is in North Ethiopia in Karra Marra, where the Amhara fought Somalians, or in Metema where Ethiopian Emperor Yohanise IV died while fighting the Sudanese, or in Adwa where the Oromo fought the Italian invasion, all have sacrificed their body and become one with Ethiopia's soil (Asegidew, 2017). Abiy's choice of events,

then, is not incidental, since he selected particular events throughout history where different Ethiopians, regardless of their ethnic background, sacrificed themselves for the nation as a whole. By doing so, Abiy lays out the very function of his dialectic conceptualization of unity; every Ethiopian individual's common duty to the Ethiopian land overshadows their individual ethnic, religious or cultural identity within Ethiopia itself. Here, in Abiy's inaugural speech, we can clearly recognize the workings of his Medemer philosophy as an empty signifier; the Ethiopian soil which binds all Ethiopians to their common duty to maintain its level of fertility represents the existing unity between all Ethiopians, which has to prevail over their ethnic, religious, or social differences.

Medemer as a foundation of the new prosperity party

On 1 December 2019, Abiy managed to transform his idea of Medemer into a political reality by replacing the EPRDF coalition by a single pan-Ethiopian party, the Prosperity Party. Three out of the four parties within the coalition, the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP), the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP), and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM), voted to join the party, while the TPLF rejected the idea as "illegal and reactionary" (Al Jazeera, 2021). In addition, five regional parties which were historically excluded from the decision-making process at the national level during the EPRDF's reign were also allowed to join the party. The idea behind the merger was to eliminate any unequal representation within the coalition and create an all-encompassing national party that speaks for the entire Ethiopian people. In doing so, Abiy managed to distance the country's politics from ethnic federalism, if not completely eradicate the former. More so, the newly founded Prosperity Party was supposed to represent a direct embodiment of the prime minister's Medemer, which he stated in his subsequent Twitter post:

The unanimous decision passed today to merge the Party is a crucial step in harnessing our energy to work towards a shared vision. Prosperity Party is committed in strengthening and applying a true Federal system which recognizes the diversity and contributions of all Ethiopians (Abiy, 21 November 2019).

Here, the Prosperity Party is represented as a means to overcome ethnic, religious, and social differences in the Ethiopian nation. More important, with the founding of this new political party, Abiy demonstrates the political reality

of his idea of Medemer; to overcome such differences, the newly founded party categorically erases them by negating the political representations of such individual identities. The only political identification which is recognized by the new Prosperity Party coincides with Abiy's notion of *Ethiopianness*; what makes an individual Ethiopian is the individual's duty to the Ethiopian nation as a whole, regardless of the individual's ethnic, religious, or cultural identity. So when the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) refused to participate in the Prosperity Party, as doing so would lead to the TPLF's loss of control of the country's political economy, Abiy and his new party consequently saw it as a form of betrayal to the Ethiopian nation, and the notion of *Ethiopianness*. More important, the Prosperity Party's "blindness" to ethnicity and religion allowed Abiy and his party to exclude the TPLF from their notion of *Ethiopianness*, without even having to counterfeit their principle of inclusivity, since the TPLF was excluded on the basis of their independent pursuit of political interest, and not of their ethnic identity itself.

Where is Medemer in “the cancer of ethiopia”?

less than two years later, on 20 July 2021, Abiy responded on Twitter to the TPLF’s recent statement that they will continue fighting until the “invaders” are out. He called for “all capable Ethiopians” to act on their patriotism and join the war against the TPLF (BBC, 2021). In response, the Western mass media has widely covered the blatant contrast between the prime minister’s first inauguration speech in 2018 and his July 2021 declaration; his call for unity in Ethiopia seems to have turned into a call for war against the TPLF in the Tigray region. But while the media has been right in pointing out the paradoxical situation in which Abiy finds himself, the prime minister’s statement should not be seen as contradictory to his inauguration speech, but rather as a continuation of his Medemer rhetoric. If anything, it seems that Abiy’s virulent reaction to the TPLF reinforced his Medemer philosophy as an empty signifier rather than contradicted it.

Although much more hostile, Abiy’s statement was along the same metaphorical lines as his inauguration speech. The prime minister still represented the Ethiopian nation as the Ethiopian soil and its fertility still conditioned by the Ethiopian people’s devotion to sustain it. Accordingly, Abiy translated the TPLF’s hostility to the prime minister’s PP as an impediment to building a national consensus. In Abiy’s metaphorical terms, the TPLF’s hostility was a source of degradation of the Ethiopian soil, as he outlines in his next statement;

The enemy we have faced is one which is a cancer for Ethiopia. The junta is perhaps the only group in history which has used the political power it has obtained to destroy its own country.

It has grown as an invasive weed out of our Ethiopian soil. It therefore needs to be uprooted in a manner that will ensure that it will not bud again' (Abiy, 18 July 2021, Twitter, translated by Tghat).

Here, Abiy clearly imposed limits on his empty signifier. The Ethiopian soil does not just prefigure one's belonging to the Ethiopian nation, it conditions every individual's duty to devote their body to it, in order to sustain its fertility. The enemy, accordingly, is the one who actively refuses to recognize such duty, and therefore becomes a source of "degradation" of the Ethiopian soil. Abiy calls the TPLF and its allies a "junta", therefore implying a distinction between the civilians within the Tigray region and the TPLF as a political party that emerged from the Tigray regional state. The joint statement on detentions in Ethiopia by the US and other embassies, however, indicates how Abiy's distinction between the TPLF and civilians seems to be blurred in practice (U.S. Department of State, 2021). With their joint statement, the embassies expressed concern over reports of widespread arrests of those suspected of association or collaboration with "terrorist groups" shortly after Abiy announced a nationwide state of emergency in November 2021 (Al Jazeera, 2021). According to such reports, the limits of Abiy's idea of the enemy seem to have extended beyond the identified members of the TPLF, by also targeting suspected "sympathizers". The loose use of the term "junta" therefore allowed Abiy to ambiguously identify "the enemy" as those who did not commit to his idea of Medemer to contribute to a collective Ethiopian nation, whether that was through one's direct or indirect participation with the TPLF. As such, Abiy seemed to be able to justify the exclusion of the TPLF and its "sympathizers" through his inclusive rhetoric of Medemer; to uproot the invasive "weed" for the common good to sustain the fertility of the Ethiopian soil. More so, Abiy's exclusionary practices seem to have even reinforced the limits of his idea of *Ethiopianness*, which he famously outlined in his inauguration speech in 2021:

¹ Abiy uses the term "Junta" here to refer to the TPLF as a political group which represents itself as the ruler of the Tigray regional state after rejecting its political association with the Prosperity Party. In doing so, Abiy makes an indirect claim which disassociates the Tigray people from the TPLF and their allies, which he identifies as the enemy. The "Junta", in other words, is not reduced to geographical or ethnic terms, but refers to the political organization itself and its supporters.

The children of Ethiopia have risen from all four corners to undo the plans of the junta. This itself is a victory. The children of Ethiopia have identified their enemy. And they know what they have to do. And they will do it (Abiy, 18 July 2021, Twitter, translated by Tghat).

Paradoxically, the identification of a common enemy of the TPLF and its “sympathizers” seems to mobilize the very national unity which Abiy has been promoting with his idea of Medemer. With regards to his theory of the empty signifier, Laclau says this exclusion gives an antagonistic character to system outsiders and calls this “something that the totality expels from itself in order to constitute itself” (Laclau, 2005a: 70). Accordingly, it is through the demonization of the TPLF, literally naming it the “cancer of Ethiopia”, that Abiy seems to delimit his definition of *Ethiopianness*, thereby achieving a stronger sense of cohesion, which he promoted with his Medemer philosophy. In Abiy’s own words:

We have already come out victorious of this war through the unity we have created to destroy the old conspiracy of the junta. This unity is what will destroy the owner of the conspiracy which will ensure the renaissance of the country they had conspired against (Abiy, 18 July 2021, Twitter, translated by Tghat).

Medemer in Abiy's

#great homecoming

challenge

the unity Abiy promoted through Medemer took on global dimensions after the prime minister promoted his new Great Ethiopian Homecoming Challenge in November 2021. The challenge itself, consists of bringing one million “Ethiopians, Ethiopian origins, and friends of Ethiopia” to Ethiopia for the Gregorian New Year (Great Ethiopian Homecoming, 2022). This initiative came about after Abiy's declaration of a nationwide state of emergency in response to the TPLF's advances in the Amhara regional state. More specifically, by framing the TPLF's advances as a growing threat to the central government,² Abiy seemed to justify his promotion of Ethiopian unity, which he extended beyond the territorial limits of Ethiopia by calling all Ethiopians abroad to come home for the Orthodox Christmas. Abiy himself declared the initiative to “demonstrate that Ethiopia prevails” and “would send a message of unity to the international community” (Abiy as quoted in Desta, 2022). It seems then that if every Ethiopian individual's common duty to the Ethiopian land overshadows their individual identities within Ethiopia, Abiy's relationship with the Ethiopian diaspora reflects an extension to his idea of Medemer, which negates the presence of an individual on Ethiopia's land as a condition to its membership of the Ethiopian nation as such. Abiy's extension to his idea of Medemer therefore again reflected the workings of

² The TPLF had some advances, particularly in Amhara regional state. Taking the towns of Dessie and Kombolcha were monumental gains. But it has never been near Addis Ababa. Kombolcha is almost 380 km away, yet Western media (e.g. CCN, BBC, *New York Times*) portray the TPLF as advancing on the capital. This portrayal is arguably part of a coordinated propaganda attack on the federal government (Pereira, 2021) and deserves its own separate analysis. But for the purpose of this essay, the reality on the ground is completely different and requires a closer look.

an empty signifier, since the element which binds all Ethiopians together is not the Ethiopian soil itself, but rather Ethiopians' common duty to maintain its level of fertility, whether “at home” or “abroad”.



Poster for #GreatHomeComing Challenge (Ethiopian Diaspora Agency, 2021)

Source: <https://twitter.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1466307291653849096?s=20&t=jqlOcwzOqQFuG7x5DpWrFQ>

As a reiteration of his idea of Medemer, Abiy’s initiative seems to take shape through and alongside a social media movement, #NoMore, to resist what activists frame as a “Western disinformation campaign on Ethiopia”.³ This “disinformation” refers to the ways Western mass media has portrayed TPLF

³ Recently organized by the Horn of Africa Hub, the #No more campaign was created by a coalition of Ethiopian and Eritrean activists led by former Al Jazeera and CBS journalist Hermela Aregawi. This social media movement, which has already gained a global dimension and recognition, has several objectives including opposing the ongoing Western media disinformation campaign in Ethiopia and the rest of the world, Western economic warfare, diplomatic propaganda and military interventions in Africa in general and the “Horn of Africa” in particular.

members as victims facing the “stereotypical African dictatorship” (Borkena, 2021). Members of the #NoMore movement in Ethiopia argue that the West, and more specifically the US, demonstrates neocolonialist behaviour when reducing the current Tigray conflict to one that is solely induced by Abiy’s “corrupted” government and by justifying the implementation of economic sanctions to Ethiopia (Borkena, 2021). The wider #NoMore movement therefore identifies itself as a postcolonial movement which aims to resist Western discourses and political involvement in internal African affairs by advocating for a “united Africa” in and of itself (Borkena, 2021). At the time of Abiy’s promotion of his Great Homecoming Challenge, countries such as the US, France, Germany, and Turkey urged their respective citizens to leave Ethiopia as a response to Abiy’s declaration of a state of emergency and the ongoing conflict arguably “threatening” the capital. In the meantime, and as a response to such actions taken on behalf of these countries, the spokesperson for the prime minister, Billene Seyoum, welcomed Ethiopian diaspora travellers via Twitter on the 28 December, writing: “When the world said to run from home, your heart knew the truth! Home is indeed where the heart is” (cited in Desta, 2022). The symbolic location of this “home” became clear in Abiy’s next Twitter statement in which he advertised his #Great Ethiopian Homecoming Challenge:

My fellow Ethiopians here and in the Diaspora, your role in telling the world the truth is commendable. In unity, we can overcome the existential threat this nation is confronted with by forces from far & near. As children of #Adwa, we will carry #Ethiopia #ResilientlyOnwards (Abiy, Twitter, 21 November 2021).

Referring to his inauguration speech in 2018, Abiy cited Adwa as the symbolic representation of the home of Ethiopians “from far and near” and used it as a reiteration of the same unity he referred to in his speech through his idea of *Ethiopianness*. Again, rather than being the Ethiopian soil itself, it is the sacrifices committed by Ethiopians on the Ethiopian soil which have historically united Ethiopians. In this case, Abiy made a reference to when Ethiopians defeated Italian troops during the battle of Adwa in 1896, implicitly linking it to #NoMore’s struggle against today’s Western “threat”. In a way, one could also understand Abiy’s statement as a reiteration of the identity of the Ethiopian nation as being one of the few African nations to have

thwarted European colonialism, and which Abiy aims to uphold by joining and supporting movements such as the #NoMore campaign. Therefore, in the same way Abiy has promoted the unification of Ethiopians through the “demonization” of the TPLF and its “supporters”, Abiy also seems to promote a “global” unity of all Ethiopians around the world to confront the dominant Western narrative.

In the end, what this aiming of a “populist” lens at Abiy has shown is that if there is anything inconsistent about Abiy’s rule since his election in 2018, it is perhaps the changing popular perception of his leadership by the West, rather than his political discourse itself. So, while the popular mass media is right in pointing out the paradoxical situation in which Abiy finds himself now compared to three years ago (Financial Times, 2020), this essay’s analysis has shown how Abiy’s virulent reaction to the TPLF and the Western popular narrative does not contradict his Medemer philosophy, which helped him gain such popularity during his first election in 2018. When posing the question of *how* such a drastic change of events could even take place, the Western mass media cites at least one important element of Abiy’s populist discourse, that is, the discursive power of an “empty signifier” and the very ambivalence upon which the latter relies. As Gardner (2018) so bluntly pointed out, surely Abiy’s strong will to reunite the Ethiopian nation could never lead to another political drift?

Conclusion

to conclude, the aim of this essay has been to challenge the popular tendency to bind populism to anti-pluralistic aspects by uncovering the complex and seemingly contradictory ways in which populist leaders such as Abiy have articulated the interests and values of “the people”. Accordingly, this essay has looked at Abiy and his Medemer philosophy through Laclau’s concept of the “empty signifier” in order to examine the discursive means through which the prime minister has upheld his high level of popularity even when political actions taken on behalf of his party seemingly contravened the very principles of his philosophy. More specifically, this essay has examined the translation of Abiy’s Medemer philosophy in three particular instances: his inauguration speech; his Twitter response to the ongoing conflict in the Tigray region; and his online campaign to promote his Great Ethiopian Homecoming Challenge. Accordingly, this essay has argued that what makes Abiy and his Prosperity Party populist is their discursively normalizing the ambivalence upon which their political ideology relies, by presenting Medemer as a collective value of all “the Ethiopian people”, while simultaneously using Medemer as a means to justify the exclusion of others from the same construction of “the Ethiopian people” at home and abroad. With his Medemer philosophy, Abiy has been able to promote inclusivity within Ethiopia through the exclusion of the TPLF, and to justify exclusion of the TPLF through the promotion of the very inclusivity of the Ethiopian nation.

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