

Constructing Amhara Identity: Nationalist Strategies and the Politics of Ethnic Identity in Ethiopia



Birhanu Bitew Geremew

Department of Political Science and International Studies, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

Drawing on data from interviews, mainstream and social media platforms, and political manifestos, this paper examines the strategies adopted by Amhara nationalists to construct a collective Amhara identity. Amhara nationalism emerged in response to the structural violence inflicted on the Amhara by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which seized power in 1991. The EPRDF, an alliance of ethnonationalist fronts with an anti-Amhara stance, perpetrated various forms of structural violence against the Amhara, including killings, evictions, economic marginalization, political underrepresentation and cultural stigmatization. In response, frustrated Amhara elites began a movement by forming the All-Amhara People's Organization in 1992. This movement evolved into widespread protests in 2016, which escalated into an ongoing armed struggle since April 2023, driven by the government's failure to address the movement's concerns. To mobilize the masses, Amhara nationalists have sought to construct a collective Amhara identity, a concept that remains contested. The distinctiveness of an Amhara identity has been challenged by various groups, including some Amhara elites, who argue that this identity was historically an instrument of assimilation used by pre-1991 governments to represent Ethiopia as a whole rather than as a single ethnic group. Despite these challenges, Amhara nationalists assert that the Amhara are a unique ethnic group with a significant role in the formation of the Ethiopian state. They employ three discursive practices to construct a collective identity: essentializing Amhara identity by tracing it to primordial origins, depicting a golden age and asserting a victim thesis.

Keywords: Amhara, Ethiopia, Ethnic Identity, Identity Construction, Structural Violence

Biography:

Birhanu Bitew Geremew is a PhD candidate in Political Science at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. His dissertation, titled Amhara Nationalism in Ethiopia: Origins, Drivers and Trajectories. He has published several papers on the topic, including Identity Construction, Reverse Discourse and the Amhara Nationalism in Ethiopia in the Journal of Asian and African Studies. His research interests focus on identity formation, nationalism, genocide, interethnic relations and indigenous knowledge in Ethiopia.