

The Potential of Democratization in Ethiopia: The Welkait Question as a Litmus Test

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Abstract

Abiy Ahmed was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for his role in initiating peace talks in the Horn of Africa and his attempts to reform the Ethiopian democracy. Under the slogan *medemer*, he promised he would do everything possible to unite the multi-ethnic country, reconcile conflicts and bring brotherly peace to the country. This article treats the Welkait question as a litmus test to determine the potential of democratization in Ethiopia. The identity question of the indigenous Welkait Amhara was raised and suppressed since 1991. In April 2018, the then newly elected Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed met with members of the Welkait Amhara Identity Question Committee and promised that this case would be solved within the federal system and in accordance with the constitution. Within the struggle for recognition paradigm, this article asks if government responses follow the *medemer* approach of reconciliation, cooperation, rule of law and democracy.

Keywords

Democracy, Ethiopia, Welkait, Colonel Demeke Zewdu, *medemer*, ወልቃይት

Introduction¹

Two weeks after Abiy Ahmed was appointed Prime Minister of Ethiopia in April 2018,² he held a meeting with the recently released political prisoners from the Welkait Amhara Identity Question Committee³ in Gondar. After the meeting, all attendees were hopeful that the Welkait⁴ issue could be solved peacefully. They agreed that the government institutions would abstain from arrest and torture but use a peaceful and democratic approach in line with the constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) and, in return, the Welkait Committee would keep the population calm (Atalay, 2020; Demeke, 2019). In 2016, the Welkait Committee members had been arrested and tortured for petitioning for identity recognition of the Welkait Amhara population (Keasegid, 2019; Teshager, 2018).

Abiy Ahmed won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for his approach to resolving some conflicts in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. He had declared on numerous occasions that under his

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administration, the country would be united, democratized, and governed by rule of law (Abiy, 2018, 2019a, 2019b).⁵ This article uses the Welkait case as a litmus test to determine the potential of democratization under Ethiopia's current governance. The fundamental question that this article wants to answer to assess possibilities of democratization in Ethiopia is: Are the constitution as well as democratic institutions and processes respected?

In the 1990s, the ruling party drew regional borders without consulting or obtaining the consent of the population concerned. Throughout Ethiopian history, allotment of land has always been an instrument for control—an instrument that was applied by force. Thus, attempts to allot land without consultation were oftentimes met with resistance (Bahru, 2017: 76, 90, 191, 212, 217). The Welkait question is not unique; similar land and identity conflicts exist throughout the country. Hence, how the Welkait case is handled signals nationwide the likeliness of policy change, the achievement of internal peace and reconciliation promised by Abiy Ahmed.

The clamor for recognition has emerged as a powerful paradigm. The theme of struggle for recognition is widely associated with the works of Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser. According to Honneth (1995: 127), at the core of any public sphere lies a struggle for recognition. Fraser (2009: 101f.) applies a recognition theoretical turn to describe the tendency to tackle many pressing real-life issues. Classic examples of issues that are tackled by applying a recognition theoretical turn include discrimination, exclusion, social justice, political or gender equality. The core of the struggle for recognition paradigm consists of questions regarding identity formation, self-realization and subjectification. Normally, those who are actively involved in a struggle for recognition make deliberate efforts to eliminate institutionalized patterns that sustain and reinforce various mechanisms of exclusion. They are also struggling against those institutionalized patterns of value because they strip them of their dignity and subordinate them out of existence. Therefore, struggles for recognition seek to redress injustices as much as to step out of invisibility and end the violation of fundamental rights. The struggle for recognition may take different forms, which can be classified into two categories: argumentation or violence. Some struggles for recognition seek reconciliation and a viable consensus, while others may refuse the idea of consensus and seek instead to perpetuate an agnostic confrontation. Some struggles for recognition are both argumentative and violent, while others may transform from argumentative to violent modes. This article hypothesizes that applying constitutional procedures to the Welkait case builds public trust in the institutions and helps consolidate democracy in Ethiopia. In turn, refusing democratic processes to legal political claims will most likely transform an argumentative recognition claim into a violent one and counteract the democratization process.

In this article, a descriptive research approach is applied by comparing the calls for the democratic procedure by the Prime Minister with the actual steps taken to solve the Welkait issue. First, the article lays out what the Welkait question is, how it was raised, and how the Ethiopian institutions reacted before Abiy Ahmed's term of office. To a large extent, this part relies on oral history recorded through expert interviews and on formal letters by the Welkait Committee written to respective regional, state and federal offices, petitions, and signature lists.⁶ The interviews with Committee members were conducted before their arrests in 2016 and after their release in 2018. Follow-up interviews were conducted between September 2018 and February 2020.⁷ Field notes and observations were collected from 2015 to 2020. The Welkait issue has not yet been investigated by scholars inside of Ethiopia due to restrictions in academic freedom and remains a mere side note in the literature on Ethiopian contemporary history and politics (Muluken, 2018: 12).⁸ Ethiopians in the Diaspora have assembled a comprehensive body of literature, most prominently Prof. Asrat Woldeyes and other members of the All Amhara People's Organization (Achamyeleh, 2016: 4ff., 2020; Muluken, 2018: 317ff.).

Additionally, this article delves deeper in describing the context in which this conflict is addressed, and the political system Abiy Ahmed set out to reform. Subsequently, the article lays out Abiy

Ahmed's understanding of democracy expressed in his inauguration speech as Prime Minister, in his book *Medemer*, and in his speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize (Abiy, 2018, 2019a, 2019b). This is followed by a reconstruction of recent developments through expert interviews (Atalay, 2020; Awol, 2019; Demeke, 2019). Finally, applying the basic principle of rule of law and the recognition paradigm as a framework, it will be possible to conclusively state whether Abiy Ahmed's administration applied democratic procedures in addressing the question of the Welkait Committee.

Welkait

Welkait is an area located in the northwestern part of Ethiopia, at the border between the Amhara and Tigray regions (see Figure 1). The area borders Kafta Humera to the north and Tegede to the south. Today, Welkait is officially part of the Tigray region. However, as the Welkait Committee claims and documents, when the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) gained control of the country in 1991 and restructured the regions under the TPLF-led party-coalition Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the indigenous, geographically and culturally Amhara territories of Welkait, Tegede, Tilimt, Humera and Raya were demarcated as part of the Tigray region. During the previous socialist Derg regime, Welkait was part of Semien Wogera Woraja, with its capital Dabat, in Amhara. Prior to the Derg, under the reconstituted Italian colonial empire, Welkait was within Begimder province (hence, within Amhara region), one of the six major regional divisions, with the city of Gondar as its capital (Achamyeh, 2016, 2020; Keasegid, 2019: 2f., 58ff.; Muluken, 2018: 232ff.; Bahru, 2017: 162). The Tekeze River was recognized as a natural border between Tigray and Amhara. The river is considered one of the country's four major river systems, flowing westwards into the Nile (Achamyeh, 2016: 6; Human Rights Council [HRCO], 2016: 3ff.; Bahru, 2017: 2). Achamyeh (2016) collected geographical and anthropological evidence from European scholars studying Abyssinia in the 19th and early 20th centuries characterizing Amhara and Tigray as historically separate kingdoms, differing in language, dress and customs, and separated by the Tekeze River.

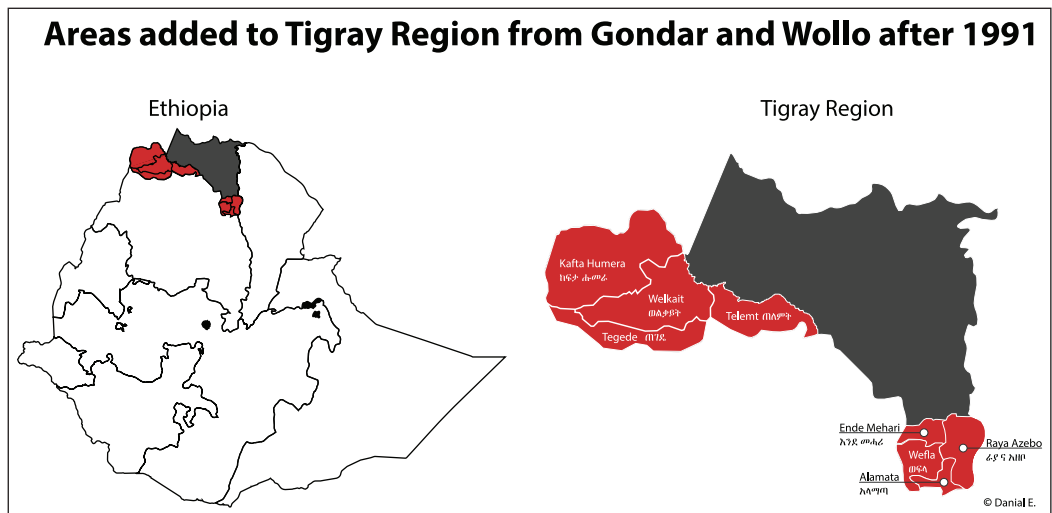


Figure 1. Map of Tigray region and contested areas.

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This article restricts its scope to the case of the Welkait Committee only. The first section is divided into three subsections. It presents the nature of the question, how it was raised by the Welkait Committee, and how state institutions responded.

What is the Welkait question?

The Welkait Amhara Identity Question Committee (የወልቃይት የአማራ ማንነት ጥያቄ ኮሚቴ) requested state institutions to recognize the identity of indigenous⁹ Amhara people from Welkait as Amhara. They claim that when the government demarcated the regional borders and placed Welkait within the Tigray region, they violated the FDRE's article 46 (2) of the Constitution: "States shall be delimited on the basis of the settlement patterns, language, identity and consent of the peoples concerned." This request was written in a letter and sent via fax and delivered in person to all relevant zonal, regional and federal offices of the government, ministries and EPRDF party bureaus on 17 December 2015.¹⁰ The request was printed on the letterhead of the Welkait Committee, and received and numbered by the receiving institutions (i.e. Office of the Prime Minister no. 034440).

The letter starts with a written authorization of the delegates to represent the Welkait Committee and the Welkait Amhara people. The centrality of the message in the letter is the "Welkait Amhara National Identity Question." Further, the letter enumerates the key contributions of Welkait citizens to the culture and history of Ethiopia. It states that apart from their ancestors cultivating the Amhara identity, their land and property were acknowledged and respected. Welkait citizens were proud of their Ethiopian and their Amharic identities (Welkait Committee, 2016: 1). Oppression, violations of the law and other "unpleasant incidents" have forced them to justify their Amhara identity claim. The letter testifies that Welkait is geographically located in Amhara territory, that it has been administered by Amhara offices—within North Gondar (Auraja) under the administration of Wogera region—prior to the restructuring in the 1990s, and that cultural expressions through music, dance, ceremonies and language are distinctively Amharic. It is mentioned that many people also speak Arabic and Tigrinia due to the proximity to Sudan, Eritrea and Tigray. The letter attests to the national contributions of Welkait people through their cultivation of export products including sesame, cotton and millet (3). It also stresses that Welkait people have contributed politically to the country as patriots who fought the Derg regime, resisting the TPLF narrative that all Amhara were Derg supporters (4). The letter stresses that the question is not new but that it has been raised since 1991 based on the constitutional rights expressed in article 39, paragraphs 2 and 5, which suggests that the government, over the decades, repeatedly promised to answer this question democratically but failed to do so (4). Worse, Welkait people who kept their Amhara identity were harassed, dispossessed, killed, arrested, kidnapped and deported, and many are still missing to this day. In Ethiopia, it is a constitutional right for anyone to demand acknowledgment of identity, but the government breaks its laws (5).¹¹ The letter goes further to mention oppression and discrimination. As described in the letter, oppression and discrimination are manifested through the tendency of denying children the right to learn the Amharic language. Children are forced to speak Tigrinia in school even though this is in total contravention of the constitution. Officials in state institutions speak Tigrinia only. Names of places, rivers, lakes, mountains, springs, cities and regions have been changed from Amharic to different Tigrean names. The discrimination becomes evident when 95% of government jobs are given to Tigreans and only 5% to Amhara. Amhara girls and women were abducted and raped; Amhara students were raped by Tigrean teachers (5). The letter mentions and lists Welkait Amhara people who were dispossessed for refusing to convert their Amhara identity to Tigrean. The dispossession involved confiscation of their land and belongings which were given to Tigreans (5). "Under the previous regimes, people lived peacefully in the area but the current government treats Welkait Amhara people like war enemies despite living under the same democratic constitution" (6).

Every year new proclamations are passed that dispossess Amhara. More specifically, while Amhara people used to receive two hectares of land per household, Tigreans now receive 50–100 hectares that are taken from dispossessed and displaced Amhara (7). The letter ends with the request to be protected by the constitution while they politely, democratically and peacefully want to engage with the public and the institutions to finally get an answer to this question without being harmed in person or losing property (8). “We ask this because we have the experience of our people being abducted, killed and disappearing simply for asking this question” (8). The appendix to the letter provides a list of 116 names of Welkait Amhara people who have suffered this fate for raising this question. The attachment also lists some dispossessed and rape victims (8–11).

How was the question raised in 2016

Displaced Welkait Amhara discussed their concern in Gondar and formed a group to debate among the Welkait Amhara community if there was any justifiable reason to pursue the identity question and demand their civil rights. On 23 August 2015,¹² they had convened their first meeting and formed the Welkait Amhara Identity Question Committee. On 19 September 2015,¹³ they conducted an inaugural conference at the Landmark Hotel in Gondar with approximately 450 Welkait Amhara in attendance (Keasegid, 2019; Muluken, 2018: 214f.). At this conference, a committee was formed with 20 members, including Colonel Demeke Zewdu as head of mobilization and Teshager Woldemicael as secretary. One of the resolutions of the meeting was that “From that day onward, we have contacted the Federation to regain our identity as Amhara,” said Teshager (2018). They have collected approximately 25,000 signatures of Welkait people who identify as Amhara and authorized the Committee to speak on their behalf.¹⁴

When members of the Welkait Committee started to petition and tried to deliver their request to the responsible government offices, they were denied and threatened. Demeke (2018) recalls:

First we applied to Tigray region and they rejected it; they said we were given Tigrean identity and do not need any other. They said: “You must stop this now. Otherwise we can take measures over you.” We answered that we asked legally according to the constitution. Then we went to the regional government but the same answer was given to us by Mrs. Kidusan Nega, the spokeswoman of the regional council. And then we went to Abay Woldo, president of the Tigray regional government. He announced on TV that we must return to our area, that we are “Enemies of Tigreans” who miss the old days. But nobody gave us their answers in writing.¹⁵

After the offices in Tigray region refused to accept and process the petition, on 3 February 2016,¹⁶ the Welkait Committee sent *The Request for the Declaration of Welkait People of their Amharan Identity as per the Constitution* to the House of Federations (HoF) for an appropriate remedy. Simultaneously, copies were sent via fax to the offices of the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Council of Ministers, Ministry of Justice, EPRDF, Federal Police Commission, the Tigray Regional State President, the Federal Human Rights Commission, the Federal Office of Ombudsman, and the Tigray region’s TPLF. The HoF claimed that it was not responsible and referred the case back to the Tigray regional council (Atalay, 2018; Demeke, 2018). The Tigray regional council gave them an oral directive to present their case to the Western Zonal administration of the Tigray region. But the zonal and district (*woreda*) administrations were not willing to hear the question. Hence, the Committee approached the regional council again, to no avail. The district, zonal, regional and federal offices gave the Welkait Committee a run-around, each refusing to hear the case, claiming not to be responsible. Some argued that it is a matter of identity, others that it pertains to borders. The former should have been dealt with on the state or zonal level, the latter on the federal. Clearly, there was a lack of political will to hear the claim and address it.

Over these months, the Welkait Committee held regular meetings and consultations with the population in Gondar, Bahir Dar, Welkait, and other places with displaced Welkait Amhara people, to which everybody was invited to participate and the intentions and demands of the initiative were made public and transparent. In sum, the Welkait Amhara Identity Question was brought forward by the appointed committee in a peaceful, democratic and lawful way, based on the laws of the country. How did the government agencies react?

Government's answer: Arrests, torture and killings

Months passed and no office reacted to the petition. On 28 January 2016,¹⁷ a delegation of 81 Welkait Amhara people traveled to Addis Ababa with the intention to submit their letter personally to the HoF. When they reached Entoto, the outskirts of the capital, federal police stopped them. They interrogated the Committee in Tigrinia, refusing to speak Amharic, the national working language of Ethiopia (Demeke, 2018). They told them to stop raising this question, denied them entrance into Addis Ababa and deported them to Chanco in Oromia region, 300 km from Entoto. The Committee informed the Oromia regional government about the incident and received their support in return. Two days later, they split up and went to Addis Ababa in different groups. On 3 February 2016,¹⁸ 19 delegates reached the HoF, and four entered the office to make an appointment. However, when they left, they were taken into custody and treated like criminals—interrogated, intimidated, photos and fingerprints taken—at the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Atalay, 2020; Demeke, 2018; Keasegid, 2019; Teshager, 2018). The following day, 4 February 2016,¹⁹ the delegation was held at HoF and given a letter to the Tigray region, stating that to raise the Welkait question is a constitutional right and that it has to be treated by the regional legal bodies properly.

Half a year later, the Tigray region still refused to deal with the question but sent the military to arrest all committee members. In July 2016, the committee members Atalay Zafe, Alene Shama, Getachew Ademe and Mebratu Getahun were arrested in Gondar's Kebele 3 and taken straight from Gondar to Maekelawi prison in Addis Ababa (Atalay, 2020). In Ethiopia, the name Maekelawi is synonymous with torture and state terrorism. They were kept for the first 17 days in solitary confinement in a dark chamber. No communication was possible during the confinement. Usually, interrogations were held in the middle of the night. During the daytime, they were kept in dark rooms. Limited toilet hours ensured separation from other prisoners. After 17 days, they were moved to a windowless room together with 20 other people. "The air was very bad, it stank. Many people were sick," Atalay (2020) recalls. The food without vegetables and fiber caused constipation as a method of torture. The Committee members, some elder men, handled the torture differently. Getachew Abebe fell very sick, he could not get up. Other inmates' legs and backs were covered with scars from the beatings by prison guards (Mengsti, 2018).²⁰

After three months in the crowded and closed room, they were transferred to "Sheraton," a small room with the luxury of a window. After another five months they were moved to the Addis Ababa Police Commission which is on the same compound, where their indictments were read. From there they were transferred to the transit camp Kilinto Zone 3, into a room of 7 × 2 meters filled with 150 other people. "You could barely sleep. The room is called 'Siberia' because it is very cold. We were imprisoned for one year, seven months and 15 days" (Atalay, 2020). The group was released from Kilinto in three phases. The last group included Atalay Zafe, Getachew Ademe, Mebratu Getahun, Teshager Woldemicael, and the priests Aba Gebreyesus and Aba Gebresslassie. They were all accused of being terrorists. The priests were not politically engaged; they only protected the trees belonging to the monastery Woldba from being cut by Tigrean settlers. As punishment for their resistance, the priests were arrested and nuns were raped (Atalay, 2020).

Colonel Demeke Zewdu recounts his attempted arrest:

On 12 July 2016²¹ at 10 pm Tigrean police came to my house to arrest me. I refused to go with them as they did not have a letter from the court and did not come during daytime. They started shooting which I returned and my neighbors defended me. After two days I went to the regional government and requested that the Amhara government would not extradite me to the Tigrean police. The police who arrested our Committee members in Amhara region were all Tigreans. I was labeled as a terrorist, but I am not. They had no evidence when the judge asked them, and my case was closed. Elders asked the government to protect me and release me from prison. I was in Gondar prison for one year, five months and ten days. (Demeke, 2018)

The arrests of Welkait Committee members in July 2016 triggered protests that spread across the Amhara region. The Welkait question became a national question for democratization and justice. The specific demands for Welkait self-determination and the release of political prisoners broadened to demands for more democratic rights. These were suppressed by the TPLF-led leadership. Human Rights Watch reported that there were large-scale arbitrary arrests throughout Amhara region and that security forces killed over 30 unarmed people at one incident in Bahir Dar alone. It also reported that peaceful protesters expressed concerns regarding the unequal distribution of power and economic benefits in favor of those aligned to the government (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2017: 7). Colonel Demeke Zewdu became a hero in the Amhara region and throughout most of the country. His mentions were mostly accompanied by the term ጆግና (*jegna*, hero); his image is plastered on buses, taxis and walls. His house in Gondar-Deslagn was turned into a museum; the bullet holes in the walls are clearly visible (Keasegid, 2019: 90). People express that he resembles the hope in a democratization process in the country that will bring rule of law and justice to the disenfranchised and marginalized (179ff.). In numerous interviews and informal conversations, Colonel Demeke was credited for starting the democratization in Ethiopia, and his insistence on peaceful and democratic processes following rule of law, despite harassment and life threats, was a starting point for political reform processes under Abiy Ahmed. After appeals from religious leaders for peacefulness, protesters were mostly unarmed and changed tactics to holding general strikes. These were outlawed when the then Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn declared the state of emergency on 9 October 2016.²² During the countrywide state of emergency, from October 2016 until August 2017, security forces arrested more than 20,000 people and committed widespread human rights violations (HRW, 2018: 2). The Ethiopian Human Rights Council had condemned the arbitrary arrests, violence, shooting and silencing of citizens in Amhara and Oromia during the state of emergency (Ethiopian Human Rights Commission [EHRC], 2016; HRCO, 2016, 2017). In January 2018, Colonel Demeke was released when the citizens of Gondar held another peaceful general strike in the city and warned that they would use violence if their demands for releasing political prisoners were not answered. Shortly after, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigned, declaring that TPLF hindered his envisaged democratic reform course, and made room for a successor. After several weeks of deliberation, Abiy Ahmed was appointed Prime Minister. Important aspects of the autocratic democracy he set out to reform will be described in the following section.

Ethiopia's democracy

The previous section has laid out how the Amhara Welkait people transparently organized a civil rights committee, democratically gathered support, informed and consulted the public, phrased their question based on constitutional articles, peacefully raised the question but were repressed by state institutions. To understand this repression of the Welkait question, it helps to take a look at

Ethiopia's ethnicized political system. This section lays out the democratic and federal design, followed by remarks regarding the lack of implementation.

Federal and democratic republic

When TPLF assumed power over Ethiopia, ethnicity was introduced as a major category and fault line for power. The regional states and political parties were organized around ethnic identity. Previously, even during the Era of Princes, groups mobilized in power struggles along with regional domains; ethnicity was not a relevant divide (Yonatan, 2010: 157). Some Welkait Committee members stress that their question—to be considered Amhara and not Tigrean—is one of identity but not political (Goitom, 2019). However, since identity has been highly politicized under ethnic federalism, identity began to matter for inclusion or exclusion from power. When identity is politicized, every identity question becomes political and may be assumed as challenging power.

The FDRE constitution, however, not only recognizes diversity but also celebrates it. Political ethnic and regional pluralism is embraced as a key solution to the problems witnessed by the previous regimes in reflecting the lived reality of diverse culture, lifestyle, economic activity and political orientations of Ethiopian peoples. According to the constitution, within the framework of territorial autonomy by each sub-national jurisdiction, minority communities can exercise a broad range of political powers, including the authority to afford an official status to their languages and to establish and control their educational institutions. The Ethiopian constitutional reform of the early 1990s had the empowerment of regionally and locally based ethnolinguistic groups as its primary agenda. In the constitution, several components of the right to self-determination can be identified. Ethnic groups are granted language and cultural rights. In their claim for recognition, the Welkait Committee stressed article 39 (2), which provides that every ethnic group “has the right to speak, write and develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its own culture; and to preserve its history,”²³ as well as article 46 (2), which holds that “states shall be delimited on the basis of the settlement patterns, language, identity and consent of the peoples concerned.” As a first step, they requested state institutions to answer this identity question. Article 19 (1) of Proclamation no. 251/1993 states that the HoF has the power to refer the application presented by any nation, nationality, or people who believe that its self-identity is denied, to the regional state concerned (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], 2001). Additionally, article 20 (1) stipulates that applications shall be submitted to the HoF only after exhaustion of solution by the various organs in the administrative hierarchy of the state concerned. Once an answer is provided, they could then ask the Amhara region to petition for a change of state borders in line with article 48 of the constitution to include Welkait. To comprehend why the institutions declined to even hear the Welkait Committee and denied to process the question requires comprehending the character of Ethiopia's federal democracy.

Hierarchical authoritarianism

Although Ethiopia's government expresses itself as a federal democratic republic, the *Democracy Index* classifies the political system for subsequent years as an “authoritarian regime” (The Economist Intelligence Unit [EIU], 2017: 10, 2019: 28, 2020: 13). The *Democracy Index 2017*, assessing the situation in 2016 when the Welkait Committee was arrested, predicted for Ethiopia to continue to be a deeply entrenched one-party state without providing the freedoms necessary to promote genuine democracy (EIU, 2017: 50). The report for 2019 remains skeptical of the transformative power of the new Prime Minister: “patronage systems that have been entrenched for

decades will be difficult to reverse with any speed” (EIU, 2020: 45). In November 2020, Abiy (2020) painstakingly described the details of how the “criminal clique” hindered his reforms.

Scholars investigating Ethiopian federalism have pointed out discrepancies in the *de jure* and *de facto* states. The country has a progressive constitution but it is insufficiently implemented. Constitutionalism is a concept that states that the authority of the government is derived from the people and its authority is limited by the constitution. Its legitimacy depends on obeying these limitations; the idea of rule of law means that every person and entity must observe the laws; nobody is above the law. Also, the idea of rule of law, meaning that all government decisions should be under the law, is closely linked to the concept of constitutionalism. With its novel ethnic federal arrangement for self-determination, the constitution could be, in theory, considered as a groundbreaking design that combines grassroots self-governance with ethnicity uniquely. However, the political system is characterized by the “centralization syndrome” (Fiseha, 2014: 60). Federalism usually means a shared government and shared power between the federal and state levels. It promotes decentralization and certain degrees of regional autonomy. In practice, however, all power lies centrally with the ruling party—until 2020 the TPLF-led EPRDF.²⁴ This inherently contradicts the liberal, democratic and politically pluralistic provisions of the constitution. Assefa (2013) argues that although states are given broad mandates to design policies that fit their local context, in actual terms their role is limited to the implementation of policies designed at the center. Hence, the judicial framework provides rules and procedures that can deal with inter-ethnic or boundary disputes and regional state minorities, but the political space to address them is closed.

Ethiopian federal studies scholars point to the paradox between generously granted constitutional powers to the states and a centralized federal system in practice, which arises from a centralized party system as well as historically hierarchical and patriarchal governing structures (Bahru, 2017). The ruling party coalition controls not only the institutions of the federation but also all the regional state governments in the federation either directly through its member parties or indirectly through affiliated parties that control the other five states. As a result of this party structure, most policies that have implications for the federal and state governments are generated through the party’s central decision-making apparatus (Assefa, 2015: 33f.). As a result of Assefa’s (2013: 34) assessment that the ruling party “contradicts the constitutionally proclaimed principles of self-rule and state autonomy,” he defined the Ethiopian political system as “democratic centralism” resulting from the twins of hierarchy and authoritarianism with their emphasis on obedience to the higher level:

[T]he role of democratic institutions such as the Federal Parliament and the regional state councils that are expected to reflect “the will of the people” are reduced to approving party programmes and party nominees. In a democracy power ultimately emanates from the people served through democratic and elected institutions. In Ethiopia, the party dictates institutions of democracy so that the party, not the people are sovereign. (Assefa, 2013: 138)

Hence, under TPLF, democratic institutions in Ethiopia were not allowed to work according to the spirit of the constitution. Zemelak (2015) confirms the dependency of local governments on the leadership of a single ruling party. He recommends the need to consult the relevant community in the process of demarcating and altering local boundaries (202). He further argues that “the federal Constitution falls far short of explicitly recognizing local government as an autonomous order of government” (205). By building on the argument by Getachew (2015: 191) that it is necessary to use local government only as an administrative arm, not as empowerment, Zemelak (2015: 2017) claims that the EPRDF changed its policy towards local governments “as a political maneuver to diminish the power of regional authorities.” Hence, Ethiopian governance under TPLF was managed by a political order with a minimum level of participation and representation and avoidance of any

effective challenge to the leadership. The regime held on to an effective monopoly of political power and, thus, remained a classic case of an illiberal state. Therefore, the House of Federation could refer the Welkait case back to the regional offices, knowing very well that they had no power to solve the issue.

This part has shown that the political structure of the FDRE under EPRDF lacked meaningful federal and democratic components. Political analysts qualified the Ethiopian political system as authoritarian, centralized and hierarchical. It lacked the two essential components of democracy—that is, democratic institutions and public discussion. The word republic stems from the Latin *res public* and means public affair: transparent, open discussion and decision making. To discuss the Welkait question was impossible and the attempts criminalized. Hence, taking a democratic turn in Ethiopia, as Abiy Ahmed has promised, requires deep changes in Ethiopia's political culture. His understanding and promise of democratization will be presented in the subsequent sections.

Medemer democracy

Abiy Ahmed received the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize for peace building and reconciliation attempts including addressing the border conflict with Eritrea, releasing many political prisoners, rehabilitating the political opposition, and allowing previously criminalized politicians and activists back into the country. The Nobel Foundation (2019) argued that the prize serves more as a motivation than a reward. The Nobel Committee is aware that the country is far from being reconciled. Ethnic clashes over unresolved issues had internally displaced close to three million people since Abiy Ahmed took office. While some political prisoners were released, others were incarcerated. A few months after opening the border to Eritrea, it has been closed again. In conflict situations, the government still disables the internet connection throughout the country (Internally Displacement Monitoring Center [IDMC], 2019; Nobel Prize, 2019).

To democratize and unite Ethiopia tops Abiy Ahmed's political agenda. When he was inaugurated as Prime Minister on 2 April 2018, he declared to bring peace, unity and democracy to the country and the Horn of Africa. In his short speech of fewer than 5,000 words, he mentions democracy 23 times. "Today, for us building democracy is an existential matter," he declares and calls on all to unite around this project. He urged all Ethiopians to "strive to develop a mature democracy" (Abiy, 2018: 15, 39). Having joined TPLF's allies before 1991, building a career through the military and intelligence apparatus, co-founding and then serving as the director of the Ethiopian Information Network Security Agency, Abiy Ahmed knows the political system in detail. In his speeches, he acknowledges shortcomings of the Ethiopian democratic system (Abiy, 2018, 2019a, 2019b). Government officials were not only guilty of not responding democratically; worse, they have actively committed crimes: "many members of our society have been uprooted from their places of residence. They were exposed to displacement and grave loss of life and property . . . we will strive to stop these unbecoming practices and ensure that such actions are never repeated again" (Abiy, 2018: 39). He urges officeholders to establish the supremacy of the law: "The government needs to respect the law" (20). He states that during the reign of EPRDF, the fundamental aspects of democracy—freedom and brotherhood—had eroded (Abiy, 2019a: 93). The focus on ethnicity produced ethnic conflicts and hindered the development of civil society; this, in turn, hindered the development of political debate which is essential for democracy (105).

Abiy Ahmed's understanding of democracy includes both the institutional and discussion aspects. Abiy Ahmed stresses that the rights of all citizens to participate in all structures and at all levels democratically need to be fully realized and that democracy is unthinkable without freedom. He urges: "We need to respect all human and democratic rights, especially to free expression,

assembly and organization, by upholding the constitution that emerged from this understanding of freedom” (Abiy, 2018: 16). Ideas should be expressed peacefully: “What we all need to understand is that building a democratic system demands listening to each other” (Abiy, 2018: 18).

In his book *Medemer*,²⁵ Abiy (2019a) analyzes Ethiopian history as a basis to lay out his vision for the country. The term *medemer* is translated as synergy, in the sense of a sum that is greater than its parts. Under the concept *medemer*, Abiy defines a social contract with which Ethiopians should build a just, equal, democratic and humanitarian society (Abiy, 2019b). He expresses that the invention of ethnic federalism was supposed to rectify the previous marginalization of ethnic identities but that it created a new problem. However, Abiy suggests not to abolish the whole system but to keep what is working and to add what is missing: *medemer*. He proposes to continue with ethnic federalism but strengthen democratic institutions and debate to create an Ethiopian democracy. The democracy he envisions for the country would be tailored for the Ethiopian context, rooted in Ethiopian culture, consciousness and thinking (Abiy, 2019a: 108). The goal would be to develop a *medemer democracy* based on brotherhood and unity. An Ethiopian democracy should mirror, address and include all aspects of Ethiopian society, tradition and lived realities. Cooperation is considered the best approach to overcoming disunity in society. This encompasses to debate peacefully, correct injustices, and form truth and reconciliation commissions. Hence, the political elite and the people at large should adopt and embrace the *medemer* concept.²⁶

As a reading of the inauguration address, the Nobel Prize acceptance speech, as well as relevant parts in his *Medemer* book have shown, Abiy Ahmed understands democracy as both the existence of democratic institutions and a process of public discussion which can create a unique Ethiopian democracy if accompanied by reconciliation processes. The next section will summarize recent developments of the Welkait Amhara identity question and see if the *medemer* concept was practiced.

Attempts to solve the Welkait issue

When Abiy Ahmed became Prime Minister, he declared to democratize, unify and pacify the country and asserted that the Welkait case would be solved under rule of law. This section will consider whether and how state institutions responded, public discussion was ensured, those affected by the decision were consulted, and a truth and reconciliation process was started.

During the meeting at Goha Hotel in Gondar, on 19 April 2018, with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the then President of the Amhara Region Gedu Andargachew,²⁷ the Welkait Committee members recounted their experience of how they were treated when they were raising their identity question in a peaceful way: that state institutions lied about receiving their letter, that they did not respond, that they were illegally incarcerated and tortured (Atalay, 2020). In the meeting, they made three demands. First, the Tigray military must stop harassing civilians; second, the end of violence and killings; and third, the answer to the identity question that was raised in February 2016. Abiy Ahmed promised that the Welkait Committee would be able to work in peace, that they would not be harassed, incarcerated, tortured by pulling their fingernails or locking them in solitary confinement in dark chambers. In exchange, he demanded the Committee to keep the people calm. The Welkait question, he said, would be discussed within the federal system and dealt with according to the FDRE Constitution (Atalay, 2018; Teshager, 2018). Atalay (2018) and Teshager (2018)—both previously tortured political prisoners—attended the meeting and were intrigued by the possibility of direct conversation with the Prime Minister; two years prior, all political bodies refused to hear them and they were incarcerated for petitioning. Welkait Committee members were hopeful that the

question they had been asking peacefully since 2016 would be answered (Atalay, 2018; Demeke, 2018; Shefeke, 2018; Teshager, 2018).

Since then, the Welkait Committee has de-escalated the situation and kept people patient and calm. This is not easy, as Welkait Amhara people are frustrated about perpetual discrimination, violence, arrests, tortures and killings in their indigenous area at the hands of TPLF-funded militia groups (Atalay, 2020; Demeke, 2019).

We committee members in Gondar are not being harassed. But the terror has gotten worse. If someone raises the Amhara identity question about Welkait, Tegede and Tilimt, he will be immediately shot. If they even assume someone is raising the question, the person will disappear. They have pushed people over cliffs to their deaths. 2018 they abducted Ju Kasse from the Welkait Committee. Tegen Mersha was killed. On 22 June 2019, the day that Dr. Ambachew was killed, groups of Tigray people expelled Amhara people in Humera. Bayew Kassegn, our committee member, the first person that was kidnapped in 2016, and Angaw Kide were chased from their indigenous area in May-Kadra. Now it is worse than before. You cannot speak Amharic at all, you cannot have Amharic songs on your phone or flash drive, you cannot display the national flag without the EPRDF symbol; you cannot wear the shirt of the Gondar football club Fasil Kenema. You risk your life simply being Amhara. (Atalay, 2020)

Amnesty International reported that perceived or actual supporters of the Welkait Committee were “subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention, torture and other ill-treatment on the basis of their Amhara identity, for speaking Amharic, or listening to Amharic music” (Amnesty International [AI], 2019: 15).

Colonel Demeke Zewdu (2019) attended the second meeting between the Welkait Committee and the Prime Minister in January 2019. They reminded the Prime Minister that despite the promises, the institutions and offices are not working, but indigenous Amhara people in Welkait are still being displaced and arrested. Colonel Demeke Zewdu (2019) found it bizarre that government officers are violating their constitution they have sworn to protect. Worse, many Welkait people are becoming desperate, sad, frustrated and impatient. Abiy Ahmed asked them to be patient and to wait for the Border and Identity Questions Committee to start their work and also to engage in the traditional mediation process.

The Welkait Committee had already contacted the Border Commission but found it inactive. They noticed there was no progress from the Tigray regional office. Further, the Committee was not heard by Keria Ibrahim, the speaker of the House of Federation,²⁸ and thus they tried to consult the Border and Identity Question Commission. The responsible officer was absent and the secretary refused to talk to them (Atalay, 2020). Reluctantly, she accepted the reactivation letter they had brought, requesting the Commission to process their case and deliver an answer. The Welkait Committee was sent away and told to prepare files giving historical evidence that Welkait was part of Gondar. This documentation, including anthropological and historical descriptions as well as official maps, had already been assembled years ago by the All Amhara People’s Organization (Achamyeleh, 2016: 4ff.; Muluken, 2018: 317ff.). They have not heard anything from the office since then (Atalay, 2020). The Border and Identity Question Commission was established to investigate and find solutions for the existing problems in the country. However, this Commission has only met once, in mid-May 2019 (Awol, 2019). It is an old strategy to avoid uncomfortable questions by “creating committees and commissions, largely so that the members might attempt to exonerate themselves from responsibility” (Bahru, 2017: 162).

As part of the reconciliation process, the government offered traditional mediation: ሽምግልና (*shimglana*). Usually, each side brings respected individuals, oftentimes elders or religious leaders, to negotiate on their behalf. In this case, however, the Welkait Committee was not allowed to bring their own

shimagli (mediators) but had to accept the ones hired by the government: the singer Teddy Afro and the athlete Haile Gebrselassie.²⁹ Atalay (2020) points out that both celebrities did not know the issue, were not invested in peace-building, not objective, and mostly interested in collecting payment. Hence, it did not produce any fruitful results. Atalay (2020) and Demeke (2019) stressed that they would agree on real *shimglana* mediation with the representation through real *shimagli* of their choice.

Colonel Demeke Zewdu (2019) observes: “The government is not listening and responding well.” Neither public discussion nor democratic institutions are working to solve the issue. Meanwhile, the Tigray government moved many soldiers close to Welkait and built new bunkers. The Amhara people also prepare themselves; many young men are armed, organized, and have undergone paramilitary training. “As a Committee, we don’t want a single person to die,” said Colonel Demeke. “We are working to solve the problem peacefully with the government, not to solve it in war,” he said. “Lastly, if the government can’t solve this problem peacefully, the conflict will be real and the federal government will not continue in that position” (Demeke, 2019). They are also considering taking the issue to the African Union or the United Nations.

Conclusion: Litmus test failed?

Democracy consists of two major components: public discussion and democratic institutions. This is also reflected in the democratic understandings of both Abiy Ahmed and the Welkait Committee. Both sides have stressed the importance of debate, consensus and constitutional rules to address and solve the Welkait issue. As this analysis has shown, the Welkait Amhara Identity Question Committee did respect the legal and political institutions of the country and appealed to them to be heard. But government institutions have remained unresponsive, willfully delayed the case, blocked legal pathways, and obstructed the case through intimidation, imprisonment and killings. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced the democratization of the country and its institutions along with reconciliation processes for national unity. However, since he assumed office, the state institutions have still not addressed or democratically answered the Welkait question. The people concerned were not informed and consulted. Their consent was not requested. The respective state institutions outsourced the decision to an inactive commission. The constitution can only become more meaningful for the political process in the country when state institutions respect it. One of the implications of the democratic constitution is that public discussion has to occur as a prerequisite for conflicts to be reconciled. Reconciliation cannot be ordered from the top down. Without open public discussions, the order from the Prime Minister’s office for national unity will not last.

The research for this article was conducted well before the TPLF attacked the Ethiopian National Forces in November 2020, which resulted in ongoing armed struggle. While explaining the use of force in Tigray, Abiy (2020) explained how the TPLF refused to return state power back to the state. They had instigated violence and blocked all of his reform initiatives. This does explain the inaction in the Welkait case. In the meantime, Colonel Demeke Zewdu was appointed as Peace and Security Administrator for Welkait, Tegede, Setit and Humera. He is consistent in his claim for civil rights and justice for all. Colonel Demeke Zewdu condemns all attacks based on ethnic identity and reminds the public and armed forces that certain members of the TPLF have an arrest warrant on their name, but that common Tigrean people are fellow Ethiopians and are not to be targeted.

The Welkait Amhara identity recognition struggle is currently on the verge of transforming from an argumentative to a violent mode. As Nancy Fraser has established, when recognition cases are not solved through discussion, they tend to turn violent. When people are not being heard through the legal system, they might use strategies outside the law. The Welkait Committee is willing to

follow the constitutional procedures for a solution. Achieving this peacefully and legally will be a major stepping stone for eventually consolidating democracy in Ethiopia.

Taken the Welkait case as a litmus test, the answer is clear. State institutions have failed to accommodate democratic processes. As a result, peaceful and democratic actors are weakened while violent ethnic entrepreneurs gain more support. Citizens lose hope that the state can control the continued attacks against ethnic Amhara people in Tigray and Oromia regions. Recent political mobilization of Amhara identity is framed in a reverse discourse reacting to hate crimes against Amhara people (Tezera, 2021: 5f.). As Martin Luther King, Jr., another Nobel Peace Prize laureate, established, peace is the presence of justice. As long as the grievances of people are not heard, as long as past and present grave injustices are not addressed, as long as just, democratic and legal processes are not functioning, as long as identity is politicized, Ethiopia will not be at peace.

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Notes

1. Earlier versions of this article were presented as papers at the conferences “Democracy, Federalism, and Peace” (October 2018) and “Vision Ethiopia” (June 2019), both held in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. I express my gratitude to members of the Welkait Amhara Identity Question Committee who have tirelessly answered my questions. I thank Mulunesh Dessie, Bosena Niguse, Jalale Getachew Birru, Yared Debebe, Bamlak Yideg and Mesfin Amare for translations, interpretations and explanations. Likewise, I thank John Ishiyama and the blind reviewers for constructive comments.
2. Dates are given in the Gregorian calendar; for important events, the date is also provided in the Ethiopian calendar (EC) in the footnote.
3. In the following, in short Welkait Committee.
4. In transcriptions from Amharic to the Latin alphabet, ወልቃይት is written Welkait, Wolkait, Wolkayte, Welqait, among other variations. It is not to be confused with ወለቁቴ, commonly spelled Welkite, in the Omo Valley.
5. In-text citation of Ethiopian names list the personal name; the reference list includes the personal and the initial of the father’s name, in that order.
6. A complete set of copied documents are with the author.
7. For details cf. the list of interviews.
8. Aalen (2019: 10) acknowledges that the 2016 protests erupted when the federal government attempted to arrest “the chairman” of “a committee requesting a referendum on a decision made in 1991 to include an area of Amhara region into Tigray region in the north,” albeit without identifying Colonel Demeke Zewdu or the Welkait Committee.
9. In various interviews, statements, recordings and letters they identify themselves as indigenous to the Welkait area: “የአካባቢው ተወላጅ ነው ተብሎ.”
10. 7 ታኅሣሥ 2008 EC.
11. Own translation; the same applies to all quotes from this letter.
12. 17 ነሐሴ 2007 EC.
13. 8 መስከረም 2008 EC.
14. Copied signature lists are with the author. The Welkait Amhara forced into the Diaspora have uploaded numerous testimonies on social media groups.
15. During all interviews taken over the years and in all documentations, Welkait Committee members have always distinguished between the Tigray government and Tigray people. They only accuse the TPLF-led government of injustices.
16. 25 ጥር 2008 EC.
17. 19 ጥር 2008 EC.
18. 25 ጥር 2008 EC.

19. 26 ጥር 2008 EC.
20. Recording of oral testimony and photos are with the author. Many previous prisoners were also interviewed on TV and, eventually, Maekelawi prison was closed.
21. 5 ሐምሌ 2008 EC.
22. 9 መስከረም 2009 EC.
23. These rights are also articulated in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which Ethiopia has signed (United Nations [UN], 2008).
24. At the time of writing, the ruling party-coalition EPRDF was recently restructured, without TPLF, and renamed to Prosperity Party. This can have positive implications for the Welkait Committee in the legal and political domains, as the power of TPLF—the main antagonist—will be weaker.
25. While Meles Zenawi was known for “renaissance,” Abiy Ahmed chose *medemer* as his signature logo.
26. Free digital copies of the book circulated, an audio version is available at www.medemer.et/am and was read over TV stations in May 2020.
27. Gedu Andargachew resigned in March 2019, warning of inter-ethnic tensions between Amhara and Tigray regions. He was succeeded by Dr. Ambachew Mekonnen, who was assassinated on 22 June 2019 in the regional capital Bahir Dar.
28. Keria Ibrahim was the HoF speaker from 6 May 2018 until 8 June 2020.
29. Both celebrities had previously donated items to the Maekelawi prison. Atalay (2020) recounts that Haile Gebrselassie donated handcuffs and Tedi Afro donated mattresses.

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List of experts interviewed

Name, Position, Place, Date of interview taken

- Alene Shafu, Wolkait Amhara Identity Question Committee, member, political prisoner, Gondar, 14 June 2018.
- Atalay Zafie, Wolkait Amhara Identity Question Committee, Chair, political prisoner, Gondar, 14 June 2018.
- Atalay Zafie, Wolkait Amhara Identity Question Committee, Chair, political prisoner, Gondar, 22 February 2020.
- Awol Hussein, Border and Identity Commission, member, 30 May 2019.
- Birhanu Mulu, Wolkait Amhara, political prisoner, 14 June 2018.
- Colonel Demeke Zewdu, Wolkait Amhara Identity Question Committee, Chair, political prisoner, Gondar, 14 June 2018, 26 September 2018, 30 April 2019.
- Goitom Amare Birara, Wolkait Amhara Identity Question Committee, political prisoner, Gondar, 7 June 2019.
- Mengsti Tesfahun, Amhara, political prisoner, Gondar, 14 June 2018.

Reskey Ademe, Welkait Amhara Identity Question Committee, political prisoner, Gondar, 7 June 2019.
Shefeke Adem Muhamed, Welkait Amhara Identity Question Committee, member, political prisoner, refugee, London, 18 July 2018.
Teshager Woldemicael, Welkait Amhara Identity Question Committee, member, political prisoner, Gondar, 10 April 2016, 14 June 2018, 30 September 2018.

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