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Ethiopia

# Lelisa's Message

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**A wave of protest in Ethiopia highlights the country's history of exploitation and dispossession. This summer, when marathon runner Feyisa Lelisa crossed the Rio finish line with his hands crossed above his head, he expressed his solidarity with a protest movement in Ethiopia's Oromia regional state.**

The marathoner's gesture comes from a nonviolent resistance movement that has organized demonstrations across Oromia — which includes the capital city, Addis Ababa — for the eight months leading up to the [Rio Olympics](#) . It also mourns the more than eight hundred Oromo citizens murdered by government security forces.

With a simple gesture, Lelisa highlighted the reality of life under a brutal dictatorship, where a few oligarchs have done well at the expense of the majority, who suffer from famine, rampant unemployment, land confiscation, personal insecurity, and the loss of basic human rights.

## The Trigger

The Oromo protests began two years ago, when the Ethiopian government — led by the Tigrayan-majority [Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front \(EPRDF\)](#) — unveiled its urban master plan, called the Integrated Development Plan for Ethiopian Renaissance.

The plan designated a total area of 1.1 million hectares of land — extending in a forty-to-one-hundred-kilometer radius around Addis Ababa — part of the planning region. This area included seventeen rural districts and three dozen cities in the Oromia regional state. In effect, the plan would increase Addis Ababa's size twenty-fold.

When the plan was presented to the Oromia state for approval in February 2014, the regional government members opposed it, arguing that it violated the principle of federalism, the human rights provisions, and the transparency clause of the Ethiopian constitution. That April, students took to the streets decrying the planned displacement of Oromo farmers and residents on the affected land. Above all, the protesters demanded respect for the autonomy of the Oromia regional government in deciding local issues, including land transfers.

Government security forces [responded](#) by firing live ammunition and violently beating peaceful protesters. They killed seventy-eight, injured hundreds, and sent thousands to concentration camps in the humid Afar region. The action was so egregious that the protests garnered international attention.

The government has strongly denied any wrongdoing, even as images of dead bodies and injured protesters were widely broadcast across social media. The demonstrations subsided without resolving the problem that incited them in the first place — but not for long.

In the May 2015 national elections, the EPRDF claimed 100 percent of the country's [parliamentary seats](#) . It interpreted its alleged victory as a mandate to accelerate development projects, including the Integrated Development Plan for Ethiopian Renaissance.

In November 2015, government officials arrived in Ginchi, a small town west of Addis Ababa, to lease out a school

playground and sacred forest area to an investor. Students and residents protested, and the movement quickly spread to all corners of Oromia. What started as resistance to land seizure quickly transformed into a sustained opposition to the governing party's stranglehold on the political landscape, to ethnic discrimination in allocating national resources, and to the incessant use of violence to resolve political differences.

## Historical Injustice

The issue of land founds the protests' demands. In Ethiopia, land serves multiple purposes. For smallholder farmers, land marks their identity, organizes their social lives, and provides their means of survival as individuals and as members of a household and a kin group. For elites, land supports the state machinery and serves as an instrument of social control.

The struggle for political power and economic control often takes the form of struggle for land control. Indeed, throughout Ethiopian history, whoever controlled land also controlled the economic base and the infrastructure of domination.

In the nineteenth century, the southward march of imperial Ethiopia in search of arable land and natural export commodities culminated in the conquest of several independent Oromo states and other entities. In the 1880s, [Emperor Menelik II](#) annexed their territories and assigned conquering soldiers as administrators. The new rulers and their retainers drew no salaries, instead living off the land they confiscated and the evicted tenants' labor.

Oromo farmers would lose more land for the next century. After the end of Italian occupation in 1941, [Emperor Haile Selassie](#) transferred large tracts to private holders, including members of the royal family and the nobility, individuals with connections to the imperial court, and loyalists who claimed to have fought the fascists.

At the same time, the imperial regime promoted private investments to develop commercial agriculture. Well-connected officials acquired thousands of hectares to grow coffee for export. Foreign firms — such as the Dutch HVA and the British Mitchell Cotts — were given land to grow sugar and cotton in the fertile southern and southwestern areas. The evicted Oromo farmers became day laborers for the commercial companies or seasonal laborers for the new landlords. Many migrated to towns in search of opportunities.

In 1974, this unresolved issue occasioned the imperial government's collapse. In February 1975, the Derg, the military junta that took power, nationalized rural land, allowing farmers equal access and use rights, prohibiting private ownership, and outlawing hired farm labor. To retain their rights, farmers had to meet numerous demands including joining farmer-operated cooperatives and peasant communes.

In time, the Derg became the sole landlord, turning the cooperatives into its extractive arm and instrument of political control. The regime's unending demand for surtaxes, fees, various charges, and recruits for the army rendered the gains of the revolution immaterial to the lives of the peasants.

## Land to the Investor

The Derg fell in 1991 after almost two decades of struggle. The EPRDF, which largely consists of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), came to power. Its leaders argued that the land-ownership prohibition protected

farmers against rapacious capitalist land-grabbers and affirmed state ownership in the 1995 constitution and several land administration proclamations.

This started to shift in 2002 when the late prime minister Meles Zenawi launched an antipoverty campaign. The program rested on increasing productivity in agriculture, which justified allocating land to private interests. At first, the government transferred small plots of land to domestic and foreign capitalists to grow flowers for export, but the practice grew: soon vast agricultural lands in Oromia and other states were being leased out.

In 2005, the EPRDF won highly controversial national elections. In the aftermath, the party leader declared that the country needed an activist government to ensure accelerated, sustained, and broad-based growth. In a surprise about-face, the land law that was supposed to protect rural owner-operators against wealthy capitalists instead facilitated land transfers to investors. The federal government replaced the law that recognized the regional states' authority over land administration with one that granted that authority to the federal government. The regional states were forced to change their laws to conform to the federal proclamation.

Having passed the unconstitutional measure, the government opened farmlands for foreign and domestic capital owners with generous terms, minimum restrictions, and token capital requirements. Terry Allen [sums up](#) : "At a price ranging from cheap to stolen, investors lease vast tracts for as long as ninety-nine years and for as little as forty cents per acre per year."

When the lease wasn't cheap enough, corruption helped. One investor noted, "You get a bottle of Johnnie Walker, kneel down, clap three times, and make your offer of Johnnie Walker Whiskey."

Investors flocked in. By 2011, about 3.6 million hectares of land had been awarded to foreign capitalists, and 4 million hectares more were still available.

To be sure, the federal government wasn't supposed to get in the business of redistributing land. Under the cover of development, it used land with a view to short-term political goals rather than long-term economic processes. As a result, it fueled unbridled corruption that dispossessed millions and relegated them to destitution. Among the Oromo in particular, this meant not only lost property but also a breakdown in traditional social organization.

In 2015, these concerns converged around the Integrated Development Master Plan. Addis Ababa was originally built on the stolen ancestral land of the Oromo. As the city expanded, the surrounding people were evicted, and new settlers took over, changing the area's demographic composition.

The new development plan evoked the Oromo's bitter experiences of the predatory relationship between Addis Ababa and the surrounding area. The scale of the proposed plan and its potential to displace millions touched off the massive resistance that came to be known as the Oromo protests.

## State Capture

The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front " which played a central role in toppling the Derg in 1991 and now constitutes the major part of the EPRDF " hails from the northern part of Ethiopia. They initially argued that coercion, forced cultural assimilation, and political centralization cannot succeed as a state-building strategy.

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To reconstruct the collapsed state, they devised a new constitution that instituted a federal arrangement among newly demarcated ethnic-based regional states. The approach recognized the unconditional right of every nationality in the country to self-determination, including secession. It was a novel response to the problem of national integration in light of the failure of past regimes.

However, TPLF leaders were never committed to either constitutional rule or their unique federal structure: neither would aid their political or economic interests. From the start of their rule, party leaders understood that the survival of Tigray depended on people migrating south and wealth migrating north. To enact this, the party had to dominate the political center. As John Young [points out](#), the TPLF “did not seriously entertain the idea of building alliances with existing southern parties and instead drove them largely out of existence.”

After 1991, the TPLF-led coalition deployed various justifications for the one-party rule it envisaged, but never succeeded. It finally decided to simply make the institutions of the state subservient to the political will of a party. Elections were conducted, but only to confirm the ruling party in power and to ensure that its development programs were not disrupted by short electoral cycles.

The TPLF-dominated parliament passed draconian laws to consolidate its hold on power.

One measure, approved by parliament in July 2008, added to the numerous restrictions placed on the Ethiopian press. For example, it made journalists and editors potential accomplices in acts of terrorism if they published statements that the government classified as an act of sedition.

In January 2009, a [civil society organizations law](#) prohibited foreign non-governmental organizations from engaging in any human rights or governance work, rendering most independent human rights work virtually impossible and making all NGO work that the government declared illegal punishable as a criminal offense.

An [antiterrorism law](#) passed in July 2009 granted broad powers to the police and enacted harsh criminal penalties for political protests and nonviolent dissent. Together, the laws gave absolute power to the government to accuse, convict, and punish anyone by executive order. As the result, thousands of journalists, human rights advocates, and political dissidents have been sent to infamous federal prisons in the outskirts of the capital. They languish there without trials or visitation rights, at the mercy of prison guards.

As a direct consequence, human rights violations became more flagrant. International rights groups and other organizations have documented the government's extrajudicial executions of political opponents, its degrading treatment of prisoners, and its rejection of court orders to free dissidents. As a former defense minister of the incumbent regime noted, the vast majority of the inmates at one of the most notorious prisons belong to the Oromo ethnic group.

Once the Tigrayan-majority party fully captured the state, economic benefits began to flow to political and military elites in exchange for loyalty. Millionaires emerged overnight, and current and former officials now own massive skyscrapers. Apart from these nouveaux riches, the party itself owns businesses that amount to two-thirds of the economy. Meanwhile, [ordinary citizens](#) suffer from double-digit unemployment, insufficient housing, rising inflation, and economic insecurity.

State capture requires full control of the coercive apparatus. After the Derg's national military force was dismantled, TPLF commanders and political commissars created a new non-political military to support the new democratic state rather than to act as the ruling party's private army.

They organized a new Ethiopian Defense Force, which was smaller in size and broader in its rank-and-file's ethnic composition. But the military command-and-control structure remained under TPLF control: more than 95 percent of the general staff and commanders come from Tigray. While the military is ostensibly apolitical, it remains highly connected to the political apparatus.

The military is also deeply involved in the private sector. Active and retired military officers own their own businesses. Furthermore, the EPRDF government has increased the military's stake in the economy through the [Metal and Engineering Corporation](#) (MetEC).

Created in 2010, MetEC is supposed to ensure technology transfer across the country. According to its establishing proclamation, the company is directly accountable to the prime minister and operated by the ministry of defense. It participates in all sectors of the economy " manufacturing, construction, energy, and transportation " and produces weapons for the country's defense forces, including armored vehicles, explosives, ammunition, big guns, light weapons, and personal weapons. The military has become an economically powerful actor.

The TPLF coalition built a political system that has no space for dissenting voices. The architecture of power relations that was meant to ensure the interest of a minority group has now produced an unbridgeable political chasm that is growing thanks to economic inequality, political instability, and personal insecurity. The shortsighted arrangement designed to ensure minority rule in perpetuity has now come back in the TPLF's face like a boomerang.

## Impending Danger

John Markakis concluded his latest book, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, with a warning for the EPRDF:

At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the incumbent regime in Addis Ababa is engaged in the same battles that exhausted its predecessors, impoverished the country, and blasted peoples' hopes for peace, democracy, and an escape from dire poverty.

Indeed, previous governments were brought down because of their refusal to share power with the country's diverse constituencies and interest groups.

To keep power, the incumbents have built a politically connected, heavily armed, and economically powerful military to protect its monopoly on political and economic power. Because the protesters threaten the party's and its high-ranking officials' interests, the military has used force with impunity, killing hundreds of innocent protesters who simply demand respect for their constitutionally guaranteed rights. But force will breed more instability and demand the use of more force.

The military has not succeeded in putting down the protests, and it's hard to say whether they will.

But Ethiopia's history shows that when structures fail, humans are capable of unimaginable cruelty not just for survival but in defense of their insatiable desire for comfort. Feyisa Lelissa gave the world fair warning.

[Jacobin](#)