

Self-Determination in Tigray

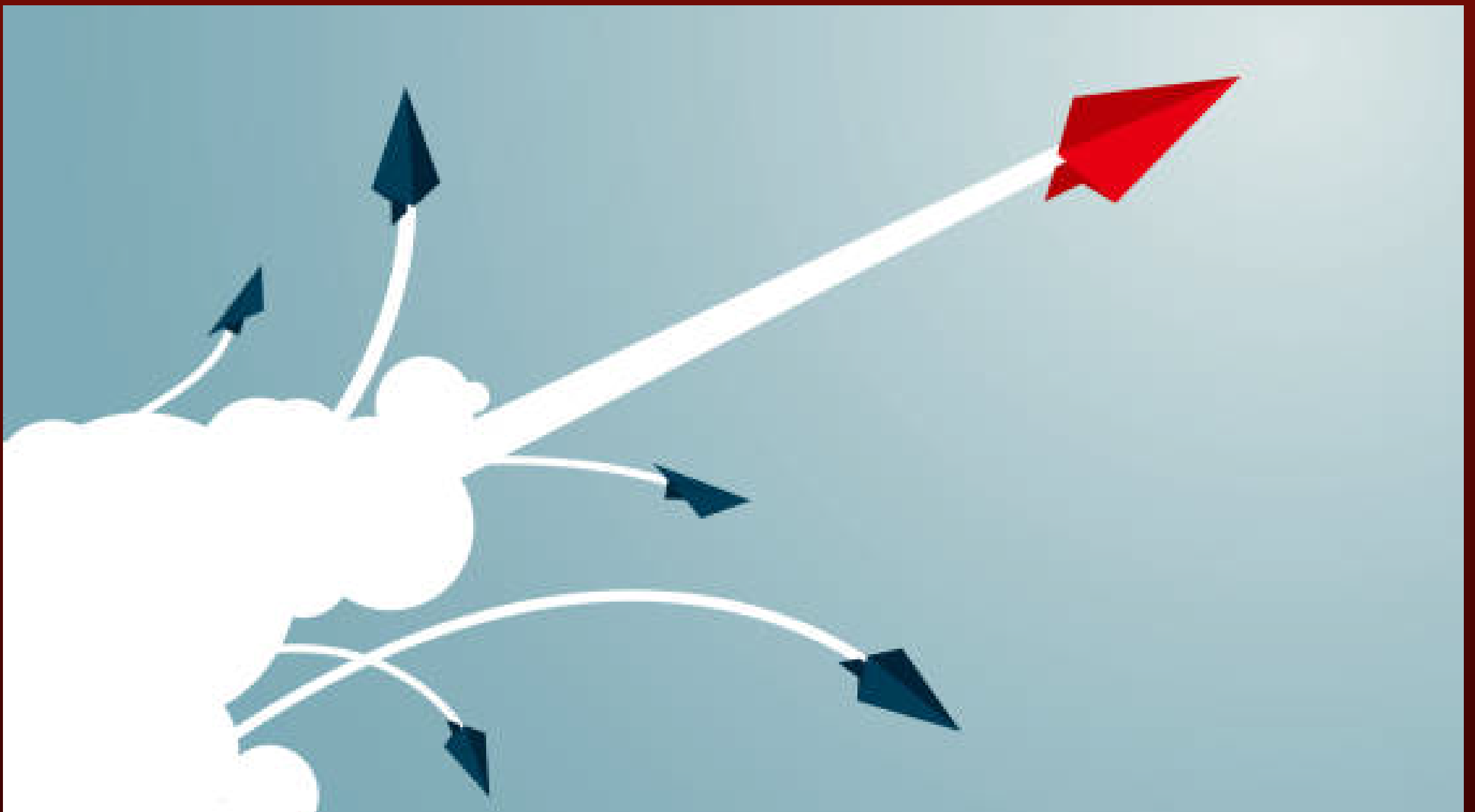
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What is Self-Determination?

In legal terms, self-determination is the “right of people to decide their own destiny” and is protected in the UN Charter as a right of all people.

Self-determination is a means to address injustice and inequality and, historically, has been approached differently by oppressed communities throughout Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, and particularly during the revolutionary period of the 1970s, self-determination has been defined by struggles for independence, the return of occupied land, and recognition and self-rule of different nations and nationalities.



Struggles for Self-Determination in Ethiopia



Ethiopia is an empire that expanded its borders by acquiring land through force during the late 19th century under the rule of Emperor Menelik II, who centralized power through a feudal monarchy that undermined the rights of marginalized and minority nations and nationalities. This unitary structure was maintained in different variations by succeeding rulers: Haile Selassie (semi-feudal monarchy) and Mengistu Hailemariam (the Derg centralized military regime).

Oromo, Somali, Tigrayan, Eritrean, and countless communities in Ethiopia, have long resisted the centralized power of Ethiopia, which continues to confiscate land and dispossess many families and communities throughout the country.

Self-determination was a key organizing framework for various political parties who fought against the Derg regime. After the fall of the Derg in 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of different regional political parties and representatives, developed a constitution for Ethiopia. This constitution attempts to address the question of the self-determination of different nations and nationalities through a multinational federalist formation that aims to center self-governance, self administration, and the right to secede.

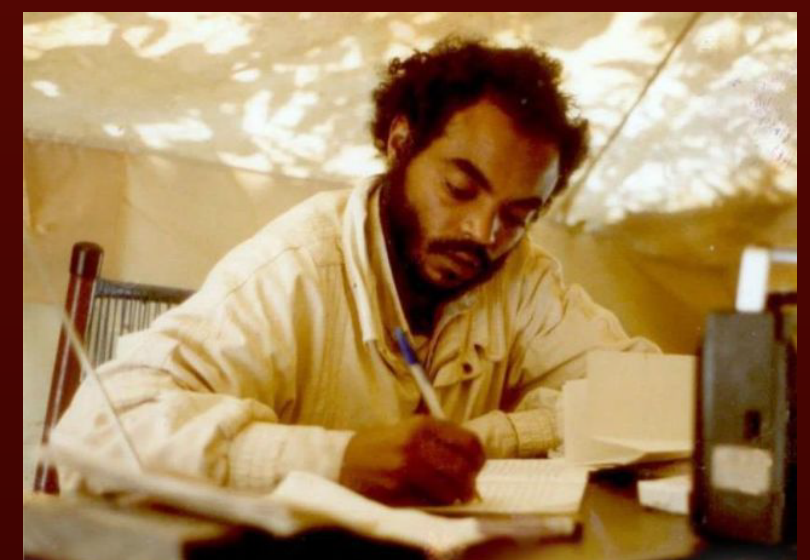
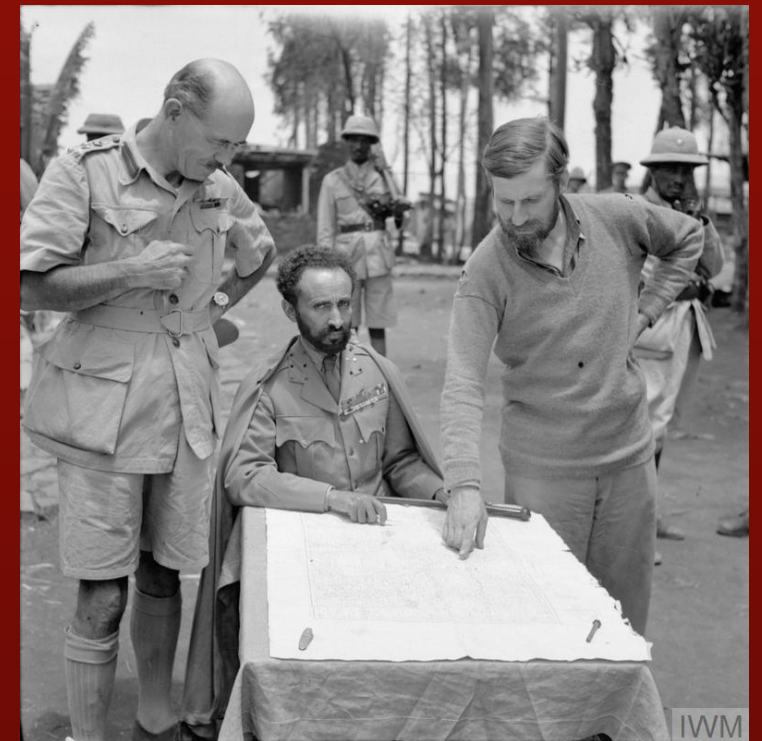


Tigrayan Self-Determination—“Then”

Self-determination in Tigray has always been about the right to self-rule and economic, political, and cultural autonomy.

The oppressive and exploitative policies against Tigrayans, such as suppression of local language, started under Emperor Menelik II in the late 19th century and early 20th century. It was, however, Haile Selassie’s fragmentation of Tigrayan territories in an effort to weaken Tigray that led to a rebellion known as the First Woyane in 1943. Emperor Haile Selassie enlisted the support of the British to defeat this peasant-led revolt, resulting in the disarming of Tigrayans, occupation of land, and imposition of heavy taxation.

Following the revolution of 1974, Tigrayan self-determination was at the core of the 17 years of armed struggle that thousands of ordinary Tigrayans participated in. The united front between the TPLF and allied forces, who joined together to defeat the Derg in 1991, reflects the ethos of self-determination.



Tigrayan Self-Determination—“Now”

Today, the Tigrayan struggle for self-determination continues to be a struggle for economic, political, social, and cultural freedom.

The Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed, has undermined Tigrayan self-determination through a genocidal war that has targeted civilians, most strikingly resulting in the weaponization of starvation and rape as tools of war.

As a result of the genocidal affront on Tigray, the Tigray Defense Force has emerged as a coalition of different Tigrayan political parties and civilians who are protecting the self-determination of Tigray—which is now primarily concerned with the preservation and protection of Tigrayan people, identity, and land.



Cultural Identity and Ethnic Cleansing



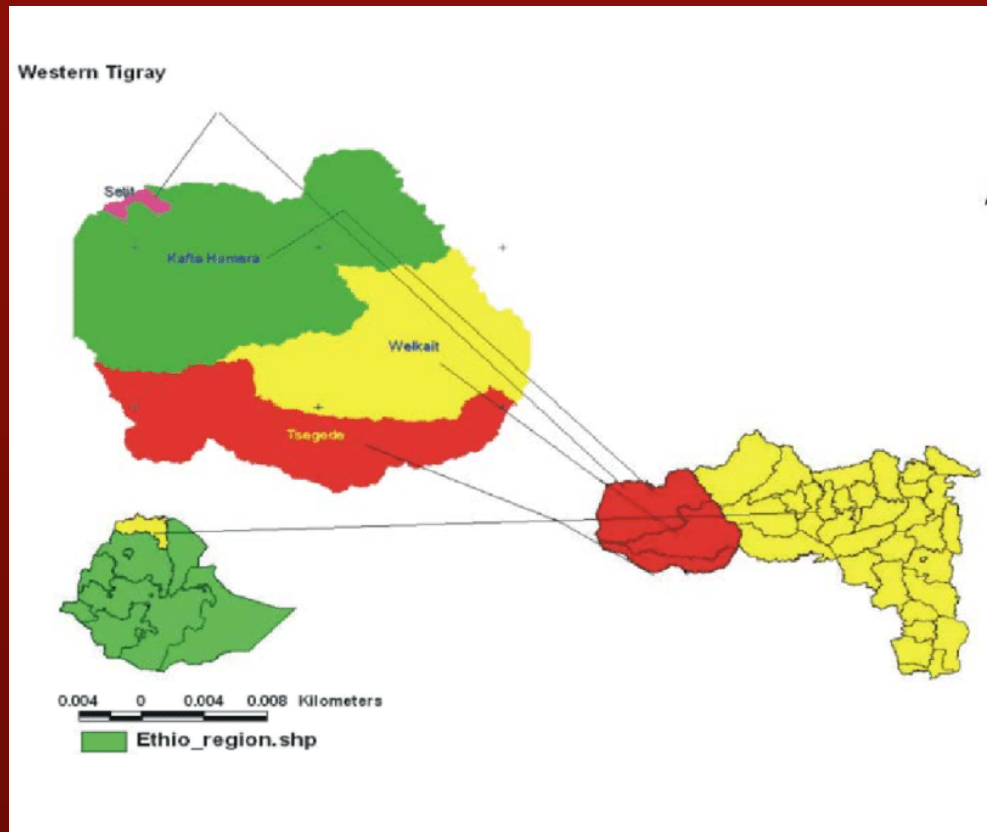
Cultural identity is central to Tigrayan self-determination. Historically, the Tigrayan language was a site of political contestation, as Amharic was enforced as the primary administrative language across Ethiopia.



Today, Tigrayan cultural and ethnic identity have been attacked through the destruction of historical sites, religious institutions, museums, schools, hospitals, and land by Ethiopian and Eritrean militarized forces, as well as Amhara forces. Further, the weaponization of rape is an attack on Tigrayan identity, as Ethiopian military soldiers, who are only one of the invading forces committing sexual violence, reportedly told survivors that their bloodlines need to be cleansed.



Land Struggle



Today's Tigrayan struggle for self-determination is also concerned with land, as Western Tigray has been a site of ethnic cleansing by Amhara militia, and prior to June 28, 2021, the rest of the region was occupied by Eritrean and Ethiopian military forces.

This land struggle is also concerned with resources as the Ethiopian government has been issuing licenses to open Tigray to the mining industry.

Tigray is an agricultural society. Tigrayan identity and way of life are tied to the land. Abiy Ahmed's war has disrupted the planting and harvesting season for Tigrayan farmers, which contributes to the economic and food insecurity of the civilian population.



Self-Governance and Autonomy



In 2020, Abiy delayed regional and federal elections, citing that COVID-19 prevented the federal government from safely administering the elections. However, this delay was widely believed to be a strategy for Abiy to continue to consolidate power and maintain the rule of his Prosperity Party. As per the federal and regional constitution mandate, Tigray went ahead and safely held a regional election that an estimated 2.6 million people participated in. Abiy denounced this election and shortly after initiated his “law enforcement operation” in Tigray.



On June 21, 2021, the Ethiopian government held a federal election amid ongoing violence and a man-made famine in Tigray. The absence of Tigrayan participation in the June 2021 federal election, along with claims of illegitimacy in reference to the Tigray regional election in 2020, is a display of the disregard the Ethiopian government has for Tigrayan self-determination.



Solidarity with Local and Global Struggles for Self Determination

The Tigrayan people's struggle for self-determination is aligned with the struggles of oppressed people—both within and beyond Ethiopia—who are fighting for a future free from the encroachment and occupation of their ancestral land, militarization, lack of political representation, the weaponization of food, and sexual and gender-based violence.

i. Oromia



ii. Palestine



iii. Kashmir



iv. First Nations of Canada



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#StopWarOnTigray, #TigrayGenocide, #AllowAccessToTigray

Sources

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