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The Current Amhara Fano Resistance: Viewed from the Historical Military Tradition of the Amhara People

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This paper explores the contemporary Amhara Fano resistance in line with the historical military tradition and warriorhood culture of the Amhara people. Its purpose is twofold: presenting historical facts about Fano's origin and challenging misguided and incomplete portrayals of Fano from media outlets and political commentators concerning Ethiopia's contemporary politics. The study employs qualitative method, and secondary sources of data from the literature, such as books, journal articles, government and international organization reports, newsletters, and other credible internet sources, are obtained and contextualized for analysis through the qualitative data analysis technique. The paper postulates that the current Fano resistance group originated from the Amhara people's historical military tradition and warriorhood culture, though it has significantly evolved from a volunteer fighters' group to a politico-military force with the aim of overthrowing the existing government and changing the country's political system. In its current resistance movement, initially, Fano's organizational structure consisted of several autonomous fighter groups; however, attempts have recently been made by different Fano groups to avoid fragmented structures and establish military commands for organizational cohesion. The paper contextualizes the Amhara Fano's resistance within the post-1991 political space of Ethiopia, marked by anti-Amhara narratives and systemic identity-based attacks, as the root cause. Recent developments, such as denying Amhara farmers fertilizer or barring travellers from their region in Addis Ababa, contribute to immediate catalysts. The Ethiopian government's decision in April 2023 to disband regional forces and disarm the Amhara Fano groups escalated the conflict in the Amhara region.

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INTRODUCTION

In the culturally rich history of the Amhara people, the military and warriorhood traditions of the people are well-known for prevailing from many centuries back to this day. The term Fano, defined as a volunteer fighter rifleman in times of need, also evolved from this historical military tradition of the Amhara culture, which continued until the current Fano resistance movement in the Amhara region. In the political history of the Amhara people, Fano serves Ethiopia as a volunteer form of military institution that has always been ready to protect the country's territory and sovereignty from foreign invasions. Jonas (2011) explains that the people have a strong military tradition with a patriotic spirit and obligation to defend the country from foreign invaders when the country has no formal national army.

Currently, the Amhara Fano has identified itself as a resistance movement against Abiy Ahmed's government, which shows Fano has made a transition from a group of volunteers' fighters to a political-military force. As the leaders of the Fano movement explain, they took arms against Abiy's regime due to decades of systemic and continuous marginalization, which has increased to large-scale violence since Abiy Ahmed came to power. Besides the root causes of the current conflict in the Amhara region, the April 2023 decision of the government to dissolve the regional forces and its claim to reintegrate them into the army is one of the triggering immediate causes. The majority of the members of the dissolved Amhara special force have joined the Fano movement, which is believed to strengthen the Fano resistance movement (International Crisis Group, 2023).

As fighting intensifies between the Ethiopian army and the Fano fighters, the conflict in the Amhara region draws the attention of the

mainstream media and several publication outlets to the question, “who are the Fano groups?”. The purpose of this paper is to provide viewers and readers with a comprehensive understanding of the current Amhara Fano resistance movement and its origin by examining some historical facts about the military and warriorhood traditions of the Amhara people.

METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative approach. The context of this study demands closer attention to historical phenomena and contemporary political affairs, in which the qualitative method is convenient to the nature of the study for deeper explanation and analysis by contextualizing complex issues. Thus, secondary sources of data are obtained from the literature, such as books, journal articles, government and international organization reports, newsletters, and other credible internet sources. From the data gathered, the study employs qualitative data analysis techniques coding into themes and patterns to discuss Fano's resistance movement by contextualizing it with the military tradition and warriorhood culture of the Amhara people.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**Profiling the Historical Background and Origin of Fano**

Many writers and media reporters, in their coverage and discourse about the conflict in the Amhara region, fail to provide a complete definition of Fano. When explaining the question “Who are Fanos?”, they just narrowly define the term Fano as the Amhara youth groups fighting injustice and discrimination. However, such definitions suffer from comprehensiveness and lack insightful information, as they fail to trace the origin of Fano and its strong historical ties with the culture and history of the Amhara people. To give a broader and more comprehensive

definition, Fano evolves from a historically perpetual military tradition and warriorhood culture of the Amhara people, dating its origin many centuries back, in which the Amhara people employ it whenever there are gaps associated with political, leadership, and security affairs of the people. Fano serves the Amhara people as a means to manage or deal with both domestic injustice and foreign threats of aggression in times of need and crisis (Birhanu, 2023b).

To make the term Fano clear and lay a foundation for its origin, it is highly important to look back at the historical tie between Fano and the retained values of the Amhara people. Fano is emerged from the deeply societal military tradition and the men's norm of self-training on how to fight and use a rifle. Regarding the military tradition and warriorship culture of the Amhara people, Levin (1965), explains that the military organization of the Amhara people was highly individualistic, where each man must learn how to fight by himself, provide his own military equipment, and practice of *Shillal* (a war chant that shakes the spirit of warriors when they go to the battlefield).

To lay a concrete foundation about the historical deep ties between the Amhara people and its military tradition, Davis (1964) goes back to the Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (locally called *Gragh Ahmed*) invasion era and explains as follows:

“The central core of the imperial Ethiopian army in the sixteenth century was composed of local troops from the home province of the Negus. Thus, when the dynasty resided in Shoa, the nucleus of the imperial army consisted of the Amharas of that region. Under Negus Lebna Dengel, this function of warrior supremacy was exercised by the Gondar Troops. By the sixteenth century, the imperial crown, and the Gojjam branch of the dynasty, constituted the base of the imperial army”.

In explaining the crucial role of Fano's as defenders of national identity and sovereignty,

Birhanu (2023b) argues that because there was a continual norm of collective resistance in the people's culture against external enemies and domestic political oppression, the Fano military style was adopted by the Amhara rulers in the 16th century to reverse the Oromo migration driven by occupying resource-rich territories of the Abyssinian land.

Looking back at the historical footprints of Fano, Fanoism¹ as a means of dealing with problems related to internal political crises, the rebellious years of Kasa Hailu (later Emperor Tewodros II) can be seen as an assertive historical phenomenon. Kasa and his many volunteer followers, making the bushes of Qwara, Gondar district, their base, rebelled against the era of local governments and nobilities known as *Zemene Mesafint* (from 1769–1855), aiming to establish a centralized government and realize a unified Ethiopia (Molvaer, 1998). As seen from the point of view of filling political leadership gaps and managing internal political crises, Kasa's rebellion era can be considered a struggle in the realm of Fano, which led to the reunification movement of the highly divided Ethiopian state. After a successive victory over local leaders and nobilities, Kasa Haylu became Emperor Tewodros II in 1855 and reinstated the central power and prestige of Ethiopia's imperial throne (Bahru, 2002). In this context, we can see how Kasa's struggle with the Fanoism spirit led him to establish a unified state and create an empire with a centralized government.

As a retained cultural and historical military arrangement of the Amhara people, forty years after Ethiopia's victory over the Italians at the battle of Adwa, Fanoism became the centre of resistance, playing an indispensable role in fighting against the second Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1936. In this regard, Aregawi (2015) asserts that, shortly after the Battle of *Maichew* and the retreat of the emperor, local chiefs and patriotic groups formed several sections of freedom fighters and commenced resistance

¹ The spirit and mentality of Fano with the courage and dedication to sacrifice one's life to protect others.

movements against the Italian invaders all over the country for five successive years, making the bushes of their localities their military base. This patriotic resistance of Fanos contributed the lion share to expelling the fascist Italians from Ethiopia's territory and the restoration of the Ethiopian Monarch.

In the past three decades, Amharas have been victims of persistent and large-scale ethnically motivated attacks, and there was Fano's movement in defiance of anti-Amhara political groups, with the aim of protecting the endangered Amharas. Shortly after the downfall of the Derg regime and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) taking power in 1991, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) in coalition started hunting and killing ethnic Amharas, where the damage was excruciating in the Arba Gugu and Bedeno areas of the Oromia region. After hearing the news about the horrific massacres of Amharas, Fano Asmare Dagne, with his few volunteer comrades, moved from Shoa to Arba Gugu and fought with the OLF militants who perpetrated the gruesome ethnic cleansing against Amharas in late 1991². Asmare Dagne, in the eyes of the current Amhara generation, was the first highly regarded Fano and the symbol of courage, who put his patriotic footprint to protect Amharas whose lives were targeted by the ultranationalist OLF militiamen.

More recently, in July 2016, there was a popular protest that started in Gondar and spread throughout the Amhara region following the TPLF-led government attempt to arrest the leader of the Welkaiyt Amhara Identity Committee, Colonel Demeke Zewdu. The committee had been going through a peaceful quest and submitted its question to the FDRE House of Federation, demanding the Amhara identity and self-determination in Welkaiyt district, a territory that the TPLF annexed to the Tigray region, which was

part of the Gondar district of the Amhara region prior to 1991 (John, 2021).

While the protest continues in several parts of the Amhara region, Colonel Demeke was imprisoned in Gondar after an exchange of fights with government security forces. This development led to the establishment of the Kefagn Amhara Fano resistance movement in late July 2016 in the bushes of North Gondar by Gobe Melkie³. The founder of the Kefagn Amhara Fano movement, Gobe Melkie, was a selfless patriotic individual who left his family, properties, agricultural investments, and thousands of cattle and decided to establish an armed Fano resistance group, concluding that the Amhara quest for the self-determination of Welkaiyt area was unattainable through peaceful mechanisms⁴. The Kefagn Amhara Fano resistance was a significant phase that indicates Amhara Fano resistance is an inevitable phenomenon in the wider political struggle of the Amhara people as the post-1991 political space of Ethiopia is becoming narrower for peaceful struggle. For example, Eskinder Nega, the former prominent journalist and human rights defender known for his two decades of peaceful struggle, has joined the Fano resistance movement. In this regard, Birhanu (2023b) asserts that the current Amhara Fano movement is an extension of the 2016 Amhara popular protest, claims to have inherited the bravery of their ancestors, and draws ideological and organizational origins from the historical military tradition of the Amhara people.

THE CURRENT AMHARA FANO RESISTANCE MOVEMENT

The Early Stage

April 2023 was the most significant period when Abiy Ahmed's government made a decision to dissolve the regional special forces. The decision faced the strongest opposition from the Amhara side. Immediately after this declaration, the entire

² A short bravery story of Fano Asmare Dagne, narrated by the Amhara Media Corporation. Available at <https://www.ameco.et/20353/>

³ Gobe Melkie was a wealthier farmer and businessman who was a closest ally of Colonel Demeke Zewdu in the struggle

for the Amhara identity quest of Welkaiyt. He was assassinated by a mercenary in late February 2017.

⁴ Amharic documentary about Gobe Melkie. URL, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1bCILF_iuE

Amhara region was engulfed by massive and popular protests that continued for several days, including in major cities like Gondar and Bahirdar, demanding the government reverse its decision to dissolve regional forces. According to the report from Al Jazeera (2023), Amharas have been accusing the federal government of ignoring attacks on ethnic Amharas living in the Oromia region and other parts of the country, and the decision to dissolve regional forces will make them more vulnerable to further extensive ethnically motivated attacks and leave the Amhara people completely unprotected.

The Ethiopian National Defense Force was mandated to disarm regional special forces in a short period of time, and in April 2023, the military began sending its soldiers to the Amhara region, accompanied by successive interviews of the top military leaders on the disarmament process. For instance, General Abebaw Tadesse, the Deputy Chief of the Army, claimed in his interview with Fana Television (2023) to disarm members of the Amhara Special Force and Fano groups within a few weeks of military operation. On the contrary, following the government's decision to dissolve regional forces, the majority of members of the Amhara Special Forces had joined the Fano fighters with their weapons, as Binalf Andualm, minister of the FDRE Ministry of Peace, admitted back in August 2023 in a discussion with representatives of different political parties.

As the Ethiopian military failed to prove the earlier promises made by top leaders of the army to dismantle the Amhara special force and Fano armed groups within a short period of time, the Council of Ministers held an urgent session and declared a six-month state of emergency on August 4, 2023, and approved it by the House of Representatives on August 15, 2023. The government established four command posts, namely, the West Amhara Command Post, the Northwest Amhara Command Post, the Central Shoa Command Post, and the Eastern Amhara

Command Post, aiming to put the entire Amhara region under the control of the army. Deputy prime minister Temesgen Tiruneh (former chief of spy), in his press conference⁵ explains that a general command consisting of members from the Amhara region authorities, the ENDF, the National Intelligence and Security Service, the Federal Police, the Prosperity Party, and Communication Service, was established to enforce the state of emergency. However, the government security forces were deployed in the Amhara region four months before to the state of emergency was declared.

Moreover, the Ethiopian army failed to conclude its military mission and was unable to dismantle the Fano groups within the expected six months, which forced the government to extend the state of emergency for an extra four months, again approved by the House of Representatives on February 2, 2024. The reason why Ethiopia's army failed to successfully execute its military mission in the Amhara region and defeat the Fano groups is because Fano fighters, contrary to the expectations of the government, were quickly gaining momentum and victory in several parts of the Amhara region. Regarding this, International Crisis Group (2023) explains that different groups of Fano fighters, despite lacking a central command, control the countryside to regroup and are joined by the former Amhara special force members, are able to launch successive attacks on the army, in which the counter-attacks by federal forces failed to repel insurgents, who have elite support and deepened community ties. Fano groups, at different times, managed to show their military presence and conduct a number of attacks on the army, which they call a special military mission, including in major Amhara region cities such as Bahirdar, Gondar, Debre Markos, and Debre Birhan.

⁵ Temesgen Tiruneh, head of the general command of the state of emergency press conference regarding the

enforcement of the state of emergency. EBC, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KRW8OCqWiEg>

FANO'S CAUSE AND THE POLITICAL SPHERE OF ETHIOPIA SINCE 1991

Anti-Amhara Narratives

It would be impossible to delineate and explain the cause that Fano is currently fighting for without looking back at Ethiopia's political sphere and its state structure since 1991, a period that marked the downfall of the military regime, Derg, and the introduction of the EPRDF. After the downfall of the Derg regime, the TPLF adopted an ethnoterritorial federalism arrangement in which the situation left several million ethnic Amharas outside the Amhara region without representation and exposed them to decades of ethnically motivated systemic, state-backed, and coordinated attacks that have resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands and the displacement of millions (Bekalu, 2018). The systemic attacks against the Amhara people are based on the narratives that portray the Amhara people as colonialists and expansionists who created Ethiopia to exploit non-Amhara societies.

It was the fascist Italians who first coined anti-Amhara political thoughts in the Ethiopian political sphere because they hold historical grudges against Amhara's resistance to their colonial ambitions and the second fascistic invasion. The Italians (1935–41) used the term Amhara damagingly, designating the people as colonialists and expansionists, and preached to detach Amhara from the population in southern Ethiopia, which entailed a long-term consequence in Ethiopian politics (Tsehai, 2018). Regarding the consequences of the Italians erroneous narrative, Birhanu (2023a) asserts that Fascists introduced the discourse of Amhara colonialism by narrating Menelik's territorial expansion as a process of establishing Amhara domination over other ethnic groups, in which the narrative has played a major role in ethicizing Ethiopian politics and the subsequent systemic attacks and genocidal killings against the Amhara people.

In the late 1960s of the Ethiopian Students Movement, Amharas were targets of political discourses and thoughts that were extensions of Fascist narratives. One of the prominent figures of

the then political discourses and perspectives was Walelign Mekonnen, who portrayed Ethiopia as the prison house of nations, nationalities, and peoples created by Amharas. Walelign (1969) concluded that, despite being a country of several nationalities with their own respective culture, language, and history, the Ethiopian state was established by the Amhara ruling class with the aim of exploiting and oppressing other ethnic groups of the country. This kind of political conception has resulted in the establishment of several ethnonationalist political groups in Ethiopia's political space, including the TPLF and OLF, aspiring for liberation and complete freedom from the Amhara colonial state of Ethiopia, which eventually laid a solid foundation for persistent ethnic violence and targeted the Amhara people.

Decades of Systemic Attacks

One of the ethnonationalist political groups established based on the Fascist Italian and 1960s political narratives was the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) in 1975, stressing its political cause and struggle as an anti-Amhara national movement for an independent republic of Tigray. According to Bamlak and Premanandam (2019), TPLF, in its 1976 manifesto, claims geographic territories to incorporate parts of Gondar areas such as Humera and Welkaiyt and of Wollo, including Alamata, Ashengie, and Raya Kobo. After overthrowing the military Derg regime and securing power in 1991, the TPLF abandoned the idea of establishing the republic of Tigray and decided to continue in the Ethiopian state, controlling the political economy of the country for 27 years. According to Birhanu (2023a), the TPLF-dominated EPRDF ethnonationalist groups continued to apply anti-Amhara policies through spreading rhetoric and vilification in media and public speeches, committing kidnappings, torture, killings, and mass evictions. The EPRDF regime aggressively worked on propaganda, preaching that nations and nationalities are freed from historical oppressions and exploitations to mobilize non-Amhara ethnic groups and facilitate attacks on ethnic Amharas living outside of the Amhara region.

As per its manifesto, the TPLF forcefully annexed Amhara-inhabited and agriculturally fertile areas, including Welkaiyt and Raya, and established a Tigray regional state based on the FDRE constitution. In the case of Welkaiyt, for instance, after displacing the Amhara community from Welkaiyt Tegedie of the Northern Gondar province, the regime settled thirty thousand demobilized TPLF militiamen and four hundred thousand Tigrayans into the newly established Tigray regional state (Bekalu, 2018). Contrary to the TPLF's territorial claim, Prince Mengesha Seyoum⁶, affirms that Tigray's boundary is historically confined to the river Tekeze, where Welkaiyt Tegedie was part of Gondar until the TPLF annexed the area into the Tigray region.

In the subsequent periods of 1991, ethnonationalist groups that took control in several parts of the Oromia region started to hunt and kill ethnic Amharas, whose earlier deadliest attacks took place in areas called Buno Bedeno and Arba Gugu. In the Arba Gugu area of Arsi, in December 1991, OLF cadres orchestrated the deadliest attacks on ethnic Amharas, and their villages were burned and destroyed (Human Rights Watch, 1993). For instance, in the Bedeno area of Eastern Harerghe district, in April 1992, more than 150 Amharas were slaughtered and threw over the cliffs into ravines, and in June 1992, in Arba Gugu, several ethnic Amharas were gruesomely massacred. According to Amnesty International (1995), those massacres were committed by a group of OLF militiamen, government, and pro-government troops, labelling the victims as expansionists and supporters of the All-Amhara People's Organization⁷, instigated and facilitated by senior OPDO cadres (Human Rights Watch, 1993).

Since Abiy Ahmed came to power, armed groups attacks against ethnic Amharas have increased extensively in the Oromia region, resulting in the killing of thousands of ethnic Amharas by OLA

militiamen. In one of the deadliest attacks in June 2020, more than 200 ethnic Amhara people were killed like chickens in an armed group attack in Gimbi County, Oromia Region (The Guardian, 2020). In another deadliest massacre, on June 18, 2022, heavily armed assaulters massacred at least 400 ethnic Amhara civilians, including many women and children, in Tole and Sene counties, and at least five villages were entirely burned, indicating that ethnic Amharas in the Oromia region were left unprotected (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

According to the to the Lamkin Institute Genocide Prevention (2023), between June and August 2022 alone, at least 1,566 ethnics Amharas were killed and several hundred were heavily injured in the large-scale killing campaigns conducted by the OLA in the Kelem and West Wellega zones. According to Peebles (2023), in the past five years, with the involvement of Oromia regional state authorities, the Oromo Liberation Front/Army (OLF/A), Oromo ultranationalist groups, and their sympathizers, between 25,000 and 40,000 ethnics Amharas have been killed and hundreds of thousands have been displaced.

The systemic ethnic attacks against the Amhara people have increased at an alarming rate since 2018, when Abiy Ahmed came to power. Abiy Ahmed's earlier moments in office were full of promises in which the prime minister vowed to end systemic ethnic violence and prevailing tensions by reconciling historical grievances, erasing hateful and erroneous narratives, and building a new political system. However, a few months after Abiy Ahmed came to power, in September 2018, a mob attack took place in Burayu after celebrating the return of OLF from exile in Addis Ababa. In this attack, the Oromo youth group moved to the town located on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, killed at least 23 minorities, attacked residential houses, and looted

⁶ Prince Mengesha Seyoum was the former governor of Tigray province during Emperor Haile Selassie's regime. He spoke to the VoA Amharic Service in March 1, 2016, in which he asserted that the Welkaiyt Tegedie area had been part of Gondar prior to 1991.

⁷ All Amhara People's Organization was established by Professor Asrat Woldeyes, a renowned surgeon.

businesses by chanting slogans like ‘leave our land’ (Al Jazeera, 2018).

After a year, in October 2019, following a controversy between Jawar Mohammed and the Ethiopian government, more than one hundred people, the majority of whom were ethnic Amharas, were killed following Jawar’s post on Facebook calling the Oromo Youth group to protest the government’s security forces attempt to arrest him. Following Jawar’s social media post, the protests began in the surroundings of Jawar’s house in Addis Ababa and spread to several towns across Oromia, in which eyewitnesses described the Oromo youth group, Qerro, as having begun attacks against people from other ethnic groups (Reuters, 2019). In this incident, no one was held accountable, and victims and their families still seek justice for crimes perpetrated by violent mobs (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

In late June 2020, the deadliest mobster attack took place in the entire Oromia region following the assassination of Hachalu Hundessa on June 29, 2020. Following the assassination, Oromia Broadcasting Corporation (OBN) and Oromia Media Network (OMN), fuelled by social media campaigns, reported the situation that Hachalu was killed by the anti-Oromo Neftegnas⁸, which instigated a protest in the entire Oromia region. From June 30, 2020, to July 3, 2020, a large number of organized groups moved from place to place and gruesomely killed ethnic Amharas for three continuous days using knives, stones, axes, machetes, and flammable materials. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (2021), in its investigative report, indicated the mob attack took place in over 40 localities and stated the situation as “it did not feel like we had a government,” which accounts for crimes against humanity because the attack was a systematic and coordinated identity-based attack perpetrated by a large number of organized groups supported by the media and hateful slogans.

⁸ Nefteгна is an Amharic word that means rifleman, and the word is a code name used by anti-Amhara political groups to portray ethnic Amharas as colonialists and expansionists.

One of the regions where ethnic Amharas have been victims of systemic and constitutional marginalization is the Benishangul Gumuz region. The 2002 constitution of the region claims that the owners of the region are ethnic groups, namely Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, and Mao, and Komo. Other ethnic groups living in the region are designated as other residents of the Benishangul Gumuz region. Ethnic Amharas living in this region have been given a code name called Qey⁹ people, in which the code name was given to perpetrate coordinated and identified ethnic cleansing and displacement. According to Bekalu (2018), since 1991, to make the region free from Amharas, regional and federal government officials have instigated and been involved in mass evictions and ethnic cleansing against ethnic Amhara farmers in the Benishangul Gumuz region, widely in the Metekel Zone. Prior to the 1991 period, Metekel Zone was part of the Gojjam province, and the area was taken from Gojjam and included in the Benishangul Gumuz of the Ethiopian ethnoterritorial federation.

Since 2018, an insurgent group called Gumuz Militia has been established in the Benishangul Gumuz region, where the group maintained a strong tie with the Oromo Liberation Army and committed ethnic-based massacres targeting Amhara-inhabited areas of the region, particularly Metekel Zone. The Gumuz militia perpetrated brutal attacks and killings indiscriminately, from the killing of pregnant women and newly born babies to the mass massacres of elder men and women using firearms and traditional weapons like knives, bows, and arrows (Yihenew et al., 2021). In April 2019, thousands of IDPs, mainly Amharas, fled the Metekel zone into the Awi zone of the Amhara region, following violence that killed civilians and the destruction of more than 1,800 residential houses (OCHA, 2019).

On December 23, 2020, in Bulen County, Metekel Zone, more than 200 ethnics Amharas, including children and pregnant women, were slaughtered

⁹ Qey is an Amharic word meaning a light-skinned person.

and members of families burned in their homes. The attacks targeted civilians based on their skin colour (Tsegaye, 2020). This attack was perpetrated a day after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and other high-ranking government authorities visited the area and held discussions with local people. Prior to the December 23 attack, in the region's Metekel Zone, Bulen, and Wonbera counties, at least two instances of violence occurred on September 6, 2020, and between September 7 and 13, 2020, and disturbing news was reported to the commission (Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 2020).

On January 20, 2021, more than one hundred ethnic Amharas and Agewes were killed by the Gumuz militia and OLA. The massacre in Daletti County, Benishangul Gumuz, Metekel Zone, took place after the task force led by Let. General Asrat Denero to restore security in the region claimed improvement (Borkena, 2021). The victims of this deadliest attack were buried in mass graves ordered by the Ethiopian government. According to Tsegaye (2022), in the continued ethnic violence that started in April 2019, the Oromo insurgents, mainly the OLA, in coalition with the Gumuz militia, often targeted civilians.

Immediate Causes

The Pretoria peace deal signed on November 2, 2022, between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) to end the war that started on November 4, 2020, was one of the immediate causes of the current war in the Amhara region. Fano groups claim that the Amhara people were denied a genuine representation on the Pretoria peace deal despite much of the battles fought in the Amhara region and being victims of the war. Relatedly, one of the grievances of the Amhara people is that Amhara people were not represented in the 1991 political transition and the ratification of the FDRE constitution, in which the Fano leaders claim the Pretoria Peace Deal was an extension of the post-1991 political culture of marginalizing Amhara. The Amharas have no trust in the government

authorities because of their previous failures and frequent U-turns, and the people appear to be neither officially nor formally included in the peace deal, despite the ongoing tension with the TPFL and border disputes including Welkaiyt and Raya (Samuel, 2022).

In more recent developments, there have been concerning issues that have aggravated the grievances of the Amhara people against Abiy Ahmed's government. For instance, the Amhara region has faced a shortage of chemical fertilizer for the 2023 production season, and Amhara farmers were forced to cultivate millions of hectares of land without fertilizer. The Amhara region farmers and leaders of the Fano groups accuse the government of denying chemical fertilizer on purpose because the government was preparing to declare war on the Amhara region and denied fertilizer to the region with the aim of creating a shortage of food and easily subduing the Amhara people. Additionally, since February 2022, travellers from the Amhara region have been banned from entering Addis Ababa, and passengers were forced to return to their region if their ID cards were not issued in Addis Ababa or Oromia.

Among the immediate causes, the April 2023 decision of the Ethiopian government to disband regional forces and disarm the Fano groups was the very triggering factor that instigated the conflict in the Amhara region. During the war with the TPLF, the government itself calls on the Amhara Fano to arm itself and defend the Amhara people from the TPLF's wave of invasion. For instance, the former head of the South Gondar Zone administration, Kelemework Mihrete, declared in his statement¹⁰ at the warfront that Fano is entitled to inherit and own armaments when it captures TPLF militants. Following ENDF's withdrawal from the Tigray region in July 2021, there has been criticism against the government's decision because it would expose the Amhara people to the TPLF's invasion. Regarding the decision and criticisms on the ENDF's withdrawal from the Tigray region and

¹⁰ See the statement at: URL, <https://www.ameco.et/20399/>

its implications for the Amhara people, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed explained in his speech¹¹ at the Millennium Hall that the Amhara people have a historical military tradition and the bravery of defending themselves if enemies intend to attack and subjugate them forcefully, and they can defend themselves if the TPLF invades the Amhara region.

All these combinations of the root and immediate causes have resulted in the conflict in the Amhara region, which Fano leaders claim they are fighting for. On the other hand, Atrsaw and Yared (2024) argue that in contemporary Ethiopia, Fano groups are assumed to be armed groups operating in the Amhara region that see themselves as forces defending the interests of the Amhara region's population. However, this argument fails to explore and give a full picture about the causes that Fano groups are claiming to be fighting for. For example, BBC Amharic (2023) explains in its report that the leaders of Fano have an objective beyond the Amhara region, and their struggle is to overthrow the existing political system and regime to end the decades of government-led oppression, genocidal killings, displacements, and systemic marginalization of the Amhara people throughout the country.

Fano's Move from a Fragmented to an Organized Structure

Until recent times, the Fano resistance movement was an amalgamation of decentralized and fragmented group resistance, as seen from the organizational structure point of view. At the early stages of the Fano resistance movement, different groups were operating separately in several localities of the Amhara region. Regarding this, Atrsaw and Yared (2024) argue that the Fano insurgency is generally composed of loosely organized groups that lack formal organizational structure and actively operate autonomously in different parts of the Amhara region, namely,

Shoa, Gondar, Gojjam, and Wollo. Despite their decentralized structure and fragmented military presence, all Fano groups have a strong consensus and unity on the cause they are fighting for, which is protecting the Amhara people living throughout Ethiopia from decades of systemic, state-sanctioned, and coordinated acts of marginalization, ethnic cleansing, and persistent oppression (International Crisis Group, 2023). This consensus among different autonomous Fano groups has resulted in the initiative of forming a centralized command, first at district levels, and finally realizing a single Amhara Fano central command.

However, recent developments within the Fano groups reveal that efforts were being made to establish commands at the district level to bring several loosely organized groups into structuralized command operations. Gojjam district has taken the first initiative in terms of avoiding fragmented and loose structures and established a single district level Fano command following the Demama Declaration¹², a military accord signed to bring different autonomous Fano groups that were operating in Gojjam into a single military command, called the Amhara Fano in Gojjam. The declaration and the commitment of the Fano groups to form a unified command in Gojjam were significant developments, as seen from the organizational structure, in which Fano groups from Gondar and Wollo districts subsequently established their respective district-level centralised military commands. Shoa, having two district commands, is the remaining area expected to form a single military command. Prior to the establishment of military commands, there had been comments made by several leaders of the Fano group stressing the need for establishing a centralized Amhara Fano command, considering factors related to political-military affairs (Atrsaw & Yared, 2024).

¹¹ See the speech from the Office of the Prime Minister's YouTube channel, URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xvv-YSRy3Y>

¹² The declaration is named after the accord that was signed in a small county called Demama, located in West Gojjam. The military accord was signed between Zemene Kasse,

leader of the Amhara Popular Force, and Major Zinabu, leader of the Amhara Fano Gojjam command.

Despite the efforts made to establish military command structures at district level, the most crucial move expected from Fano groups to create a central Amhara Fano Command by bringing all district commands into one is the task yet to be done, which requires massive efforts, integrity, and the courage to overcome potential barriers. The vast geographical positions of the Amhara region, accompanied by mountains and valleys, which helped Fano actively operate in the fighting, could also be a disadvantage to the leaders of the Fano groups to meet in person and hold continuous discussions on the matter of establishing a central command while fighting with the army (International Crisis Group, 2023). This is mainly because successive meetings between Fano leaders require controlling and retaining safe and free zones for a long time and securing strategic locations that connect the four districts.

The other potential barrier to the Fano groups is their connection with the Amhara diaspora community across the world, entrusted with fundraising, lobbying, and advocacy activities. For instance, on February 8, 2024, the US Department of Justice registered Getachew Beyene under the Foreign Agents Registration Act to execute tasks including lobbying, advocating, fundraising, and other essential activities on behalf of the Amhara Fano Unity Council. The Amhara diaspora, huge in number, has a strong record for raising funds, coordinating social media campaigns, and hosting worldwide demonstrations. However, the Amhara diaspora community is also often criticized by intellectuals and political commentators for being divided into several associations and advocacy groups across North America and Europe, lacking organizational unity and comprehensive advocacy. Fano groups have assigned different influential individuals in the Amhara diaspora community for the purpose of fund-raising and lobbying. Therefore, the Amhara diaspora, in its connection with Fano groups, while lacking organizational unity and having fragmented advocacy campaigns, could pose a potential challenge to Fano in the efforts to establish a central Amhara Fano command.

From Volunteer Fighters to a Political-Military Force

Historically, Fanoism was a form of riflemen, who solely served as a group of volunteer fighters in times of need, mainly against foreign aggressors. In the Amhara culture, there is a continued military tradition among the people in which men exercise self-training on how to use weapons and adopt the norm of acquiring rifles individually. This military tradition has been preserved and seen as an asset in the eyes of rulers to make a national call to their people whenever there is a foreign invasion threat. The Amhara farmers marched to the battlefields with their own rifles and rations, making them volunteer fighters.

However, the current Fano purpose is different, taking on a new shape and identity as compared to the previous ones. Currently, Fano has reinvigorated its mission and purpose by making a transition from a volunteer fighters' group to a political-military force with the objective of overthrowing the existing government and changing the political system of Ethiopia. Several Fano groups are composed of professionals including engineers, teachers, lawyers, journalists, medical doctors, and former politicians, and the current Fano arrangement is playing a significant role in shaping the objective and end goal of Fano's resistance. Leaders of the Fano groups express their political interest in their interviews when they are asked questions such as "What are you going to achieve in your fight with Abiy Ahmed's government?"

The current conflict in the Amhara region is drawing the attention of the international community to Fano's resistance movement. For instance, after visiting Ethiopia, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee and Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Michael Hammer had an online brief that included interests regarding Fano's resistance movement. The US Department of State (2024) expresses that the US has an interest in facilitating and participating in possible talks with the Amhara Fano, and the US Ambassador in Addis Ababa, Ervin Massinga, has been seeking options if there

is an opportunity to engage with the Fano leaders in order to find a peaceful solution and end the conflict in the Amhara region¹³. This approach by the US implies that Fano's resistance and interest in the eyes of the international community are seen as serious security and political developments, not just confined to Ethiopia but also in the wider regional dynamics of the conflict-ridden, strategic, and geopolitically contested Horn of Africa. However, on the Fano's side, it was seen as difficult to adequately respond and effectively communicate in terms of accepting or rejecting the US's call for negotiation since Fano groups have no centralised and complete Amhara Fano command.

Fano and its Community Tie

Fano has a strong and deep community tie with the Amhara people because it claims its origin from the historical military tradition of the Amhara people and its resistance movement from the patriotic spirit of their ancestors. Historically, Fano warriors crossed forests, mountains, and river valleys far from their home with a determination to sacrifice their lives to protect their people, and they are still honoured in the oral tradition of the people for making Ethiopia intractable to be ruled by foreign invaders (Tsehai, 2018). The current Fano resistance has become popular, mainly due to its close ties with the community they are fighting for, especially in areas controlled and administered by Fanos.

On the ever-growing influence of social media platforms, from Facebook to Instagram, X, YouTube, and TikTok, millions of social media users have been influencing Ethiopian social media engagements through posts and trending hashtag messages that honour the bravery, dedication, sacrifice, and commitment of Fano groups to protect the Amhara people. In the past few years, prominent musicians have released songs and music videos that glorify Fano and are viewed by tens of millions by dominating

Ethiopia's YouTube stream, which shapes the psychic of millions by creating moral connections between social media communities and Fano on the battlefield. Accompanied by AI-generated images, artistic expressions to convey narratives that symbolise the collective resistance of the Amhara society for survival, reminiscent of the history of Fano, and the warriorhood culture of the Amhara people have been dominating social media platforms, which indicates how Fano has a strong community tie, not just with people living in Ethiopia but also with millions across the world (Esayas, 2023).

On the government side, there have been accusations portraying the Fano groups as extremists, looters, criminals, bandits, undisciplined groups, and other related characterizations. Aired by state-owned media, such characterizations have been used by government authorities, leaders of the ENDF, including the chief of the army, and government-affiliated social media personalities. However, no evidence has been presented with the government's accusations against Fano groups. Related to the government's accusations against Fano groups, BBC Amharic (2023) claims that Fano leaders reject the government's claim by arguing that the government itself is involved in organizing, training, and financing armed groups in the name of Fano to perpetrate several crimes, including taking foreign tourists as hostages, and blame it on Fano groups to tarnish their resistance and the cause they are fighting for. Fano groups claim that they are disciplined freedom fighters to free the Amhara people against systemic marginalization, ethnic cleansing, and suppression.

Regarding this claim of Fano, the Coordination of Associations and Individuals for Freedom of Conscience (CAP LC) in its statement¹⁴ submitted to the UN Secretary-General explains as follows:

¹³ See the US Ambassador to Ethiopia Ervin Massinga's Policy Speech on Human Rights and Dialogue, May 15, 2024. US Embassy Addis Ababa YouTube channel, URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2oG0_Vkbpk

¹⁴ Written statement submitted by Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, a non-governmental organization in special

“In Federal Defense Force controlled areas, horrifying atrocities are being committed, including the rape of women, execution of families within their homes, and artificially inflated prices of essential food items. This has created an environment of fear and desperation among the Amhara population residing in these areas. In stark contrast, areas under Fano control have demonstrated relative stability, with no reports of vandalism, crime, or bank robberies. Citizens in these areas are encouraged to assign individuals to replace government officials, and some are even compelled to flee to Addis Ababa in an effort to secure the safety and well-being of their communities.”

The above statement, despite engaging in armed resistance, explains the discipline of Fano groups and the positive ties between civilians and fighters, which disproves the accusations and characterizations of the Ethiopian government and military leaders.

CONCLUSION

Originated from the centuries of historical military tradition of the Amhara people, the Amhara Fano has been in a resistance movement against the Ethiopian army since April 2023. Taking crucial steps to establish organizational structures, the Amhara Fano is currently realizing military command structures at district level, in which creating a single Amhara Fano command is the biggest task waiting on the commitments and dedications of the Fano groups. The term Fano in its previous definition took the meaning of a volunteer fighter rifleman in times of need; however, the current Amhara Fano has reinvigorated itself, taking on a new shape of politico-military force in its resistance movement against Abiy Ahmed's regime. Stating the decades of systemic identity-based attacks, marginalization, and violence against the Amhara people as causes Fano is fighting for, a new military resistance movement has been taking place in the Amhara region of Ethiopia, where the situation has the potential to shape the regional dynamics of the Horn of Africa, a region often

known for persistent interstate and intrastate conflicts and, more recently, for becoming the battlefield for strategic and geopolitical competition among global and emerging powers.

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