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Unpacking Predictors of Police Violence in Ethiopia: A Post-1991 Perspective

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Abstract

There are considerable disagreements among scholars regarding the root causes of police violence. Some tried to investigate it by focusing on the distinctive characteristics of police officers, whereas others concentrated on the conduct of suspects and circumstantial incidents resulting from police-citizen encounters. Some others continue to rely on the organizational contexts in which policing is taking place. The researcher contends that the causes of police violence in less democratic countries like Ethiopia must be analyzed in conjunction with the broader political system makeup. This is with the recognition that leaders with authoritarian indulgence catalyze the level of police violence by their overzealous political meddling, provision of inadequate funds, weakening of civilian oversights, inept investigations, and punishment of abuses. This study therefore sought to unpack the causes of police violence by blending aspects of the conventional perspectives and the larger politico-institutional contexts. To address this objective, data from primary and secondary sources were gathered using interviews and document analysis tools. The research approach is qualitative with a case study design. The analysis proceeded with a thematic technique. The study unveiled that, coupled with organizational predicaments and other circumstantial factors, the authoritarian nature of the EPRDF government has left massive ramifications on the unabated police violence in Ethiopia.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Force, Police, Police Violence, Politicization.

1. Introduction

Though varying in degree and intensity, police violence has become a significant socio-political problem in developing and developed countries. The ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement in the United States (US) has its roots in the violent and discriminatory police actions against black Americans. England and Wales also saw high rates of police-citizen encounters between April 2019 and March 2020, which, together with two deaths, resulted in minor and severe injuries for an estimated 23,000 officers and 27,000 citizens (Home Office, 2021:25). In the periods that followed the Cold War, torture of civilian’s shows unprecedented growth in Brazil (Abnen, 2007; Costa and Thompson, 2011) and India as well (Belur, 2010a; Mathur, 1992). The situation in Kenya and Nigeria is not exceptional, where the police are repeatedly accused of corruption, torture, and other forms of degrading treatment (see Agbiboa, 2015; Hope, 2018; Mukaria, 2018; Okenyodo, 2016).

The police use of coercive force in Ethiopia also manifests elements of injustice, brutality, and repression. Going back to the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie I, Paul (1994:244) depicts it as full of ‘arbitrary arrest, forceful integration, mistreatment of prisoners and indeed sometimes cruel treatment of students and political dissidents...’ This practice continued unabated during the *Derg* regime, where the security forces subjected civilians to grave mistreatment, torture, and extrajudicial killings (Andargachew, 1993; Babile, 1989; Dawit, 1989).

The federal-regional police forces of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary

Democratic Front (EPRDF) also failed to have a reputation for observing the constitutionally recognized rights of the citizens. Supported by the state security apparatuses, the EPRDF government continued to use militaristic tactics to intimidate civilians and put down organized dissent (See AI, 1995; HRW, 1997; Vestal, 1999). The infringement of rights and basic freedoms continued with great vigor, and it is this harassment that presents the EPRDF government as less distinguishable from the Haile Selassie or *Derg* regimes (Toggia, 2008:114). Aspects of the repression can be learned from its bloodiest actions against students at Addis Ababa University (AAU) in 1993 and 2001 (Adejumobi, 2007; Markakis, 2011; Toggia, 2008), the killings of figures like Assefa Maru, Wako Tola, Tesfaye Adane, etc. (Abbink, 2017; Arriola, 2013; Mohammed, 2002; Vestal, 1999) and multiple other elections and protest-related violence.

In this vein, the question of ‘why’ police cause violence by overusing force continues to be a puzzling issue in academia. Instead of addressing the puzzle of persistent violence in post-1991 Ethiopia, a growing body of related research works concentrates on the genesis and gradual evolution of police organization (see Aemro, 2008; Assefa, 1971; Dereje, 2009; Moges, 1970; Tamrat, 2016) and the positive promises and the resultant challenges of community policing in the country (see Denney and Demelash, 2013; Di Nunzio, 2014; Wondem, 2021). The exception is Arriola’s (2013) contribution about how the ethnolinguistics differences in Ethiopia’s police commissions have worsened protest-related violence in the Oromia regional state. His study, however, seems

incomprehensive as it overlooked the politico-organizational contexts for the rising police violence. This study therefore integrates aspects of the macro and meso perspectives in learning about the roots of police violence in Ethiopia.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives

2.1. Discussion of Concepts

To control the conduct of a person, police are allowed to use physical force and psychological threats. The former involves the application of objects or tools which can breed death or injuries to a person, whereas, the latter catches ‘hostile behaviour like gestures and words’ to induce threats and bring compliance (Aghamelu and Ejike, 2017:24). Nevertheless, formulating an agreed-upon definition of force is a challenging task in academia in general, and police science in particular. One of the factors that complicates the efforts for a mutually accepted definition is its interchangeable usage with coercion (Terrill, 2014). However, to this day, coercion is viewed as a ‘catch-all term’, because, in addition to physical force, it involves ‘threats, positional authority, and social pressures’ (Anderson, 2008:17).

A related concept to force is violence. Criminologists and behavioral scientists associate violence with physical acts that result in obvious physical damage to the individual in question. The assertion restricts violence to damages that can be seen, quantified, and measured when they are committed by one person against other using physical objects (Bulhan, 1985:132–33). However, actions that do not necessarily involve physical force or result in harm to the body are still labeled as

violence, such as social oppression (Aghamelu and Ejike, 2017:24). Thus, violence is ‘any relation, process, or condition by which an individual or a group violates the physical, social, and or psychological integrity of another person or group’ (Bulhan, 1985:135).

Scholars are also at odds with what exactly constitutes ‘force’ and its legitimate, appropriate, or reasonable applications. Does force embrace or not nonphysical attacks like threats, blackmail, intimidation, and verbal warnings? The answer to this subject is clouded by opposing views, as authors like Muir (1977), Terrill (2005), and Williams and Westall (2003) classified verbal directives as forms of force while Klockars (1995) took an opposing stance (Cited in Terrill, 2014). This study has used the notion of force and violence to refer to those ‘physical actions taken [*by an individual or a group of individuals*] to control the mobility or freedom of another individual’ (Alpert and Dunham, 2004:21).

2.2. Theoretical Perspectives

The question of ‘why’ the police and other law enforcement bodies abuses the discretion of force attracts scholarly attention. By drawing experiences from Western nations with institutionalized democracies, three conventional perspectives dominate the study of police behaviours and the associated misconduct. These are the individual (psychological), situational (sociological) and organizational perspectives (Friedrich, 1980; Worden, 1996).

The individual perspective identifies officers’ characteristics as the key predictors of police behavior and the associated use of force patterns

(Crawforda and Burns, 1998; Friedrich, 1980). Officers are distinguished by their age, duration (length) of service, sex, race, education, job satisfaction, personality traits, and racial attitudes (Sherman, 1980:70; Worden, 1996:25). The perspective calls us to investigate these distinctive behavioral and personality traits of individual officers and the associated influence on the use of force patterns. Although the employment of an individual (psychological) perspective has certain relevance, due to resources constraints and the limited experiences in rigorous quantification, the employment of this perspective is less feasible in in this study.

The situational (sociological) perspective complements the shortcomings of the individual perspective by integrating situational cues and suspects' conduct into the analysis. The perspective explains violence by linking it to the 'specific characteristics of situations' that arise during police- citizens encounters (Friedrich, 1980:84). The variables identified thereof subsume entry types, visibility of encounters, suspects and complainant's characteristics (Crawforda and Burns, 1998:45; Friedrich, 1980:84; Sherman, 1980:77). The perspective is important to analyze the influence of suspects' behaviours and circumstantial factors on the police use of force of patterns.

The organizational perspective shifts the focus of analysis to the organizational contexts in which policing is taking place. It attempted to analyze violence from the perspective of the formation and administration of police departments (Sherman, 1980), organizational cultures and styles of policing (Wilson, 1968), the

presence or absence of regulatory mechanisms (Worden, 1996), police recruitment, selection, training and educational system (Crawshaw, 2007). The perspective is instrumental in examining how the police forces in Ethiopia were organized, trained, regulated, disciplined, became professionals and bureaucratic, and so forth. However, this article contends that by proclaiming internal contexts as the primary predictors of police violence, organizational perspective sidelined the broader political system and external environmental factors from their analysis (Carter, 2016).

In this respect, institutionalism (political institutionalism in particular) can be taken as an essential complement. To explain the lives and behaviors of both the governed and the governors, scholars have devoted close attention to the understanding of the nature of governmental institutions since Aristotle's day (Peters, 2019:4). Although it has been little discussed as one variant of institutionalism –since it was tied to historical institutionalism– the political institutional perspective gained relative prominence since the 1980s (Amenta and Ramsey, 2010:33). The perspective places much emphasis on the causal role of political institutions on political outcomes or processes (Amenta and Ramsey, 2010:40; Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:10). Political institutions are responsible for determining political identity and organizational dynamics, above all domestic politics (Amenta and Ramsey, 2010:36; Lowndes and Roberts (2013:8) Hobbes also envisages, strong institutions are fundamental not just for the effective functioning of the government, but also to relieve humans from their own worst instincts of ego or lust (Peters, 2019).

Inter alia, this study gives prime attention to issues of regime types and how it fundamentally shapes police violence and the overall political outcomes in post-1991 Ethiopia. The regime factor is a critical component in learning about police violence in Africa (Baker, 2008; Hills, 2007). More specifically, a review of the literature ushers in that leaders with an authoritarian nature aggravate police violence through their overzealous political meddling, provision of inadequate funds, erosion of civilian oversights, conduct of inept investigation, and punishment of abuses (see Baker, 2008; Cao, Huang and Sun, 2015; Medie, 2018; Skolnick, 1999; Wiatrowski and Goldstone, 2010).

3. Research Methodology and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a case study design. The approach is chosen since it allows the researcher to undertake in-depth interviews to learn the views and perspectives of key informants about the causes of police violence. A case study design, on the other hand, is selected given that the issue under investigation is bonded both in the time and subject matter. Equally, the design is meritorious to the in-depth understanding of the problem itself.

Data for the study were gathered from primary and secondary sources. Whereas books, journal articles, theses/dissertations, and magazines served as secondary data sources, for triangulation, in-depth interviews were held with a total of thirteen informants drawn from police trainers, retired police officers, university professors/researchers, lawyers and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC). Lawyers, police trainers, professors/researchers and a director from EHRC were chosen purposively, based on the researcher's

deliberate choice and informants unique set of characteristics like the possession of rich and reliable information, knowledge or experience about the issue under investigation. Retired police officers, on the other hand, were drawn through snowball sampling technique, where participants are identified by asking people to recommend someone who is/are relevant sources of data. Participation in this study are made based on voluntary agreements and following a clear explanation of the study's aims and its intended use. With the approval of the interviewees, some conversations are tape recorded but kept confidential. For the sake of safety and based on their choice, the names or profiles of several interviewees were excluded, whereas, some names are in use ascertaining their consents.

The analysis proceeded with the use of a thematic technique. The technique involves the establishment of themes which emerge from the data itself. Data from interviews and texts analyzed to create meanings and themes, and the building of themes was carried out simultaneously with the data collection phases.

4. Predictors of Police Violence in Ethiopia

The analysis of the cause of police violence in Ethiopia is a complex issue to grasp. Although rarely conflicting, the views gleaned from key informants and documented sources are diverse. Some, however, placed a strong emphasis on the broader political culture of the polity, whereas, others bring organizational contexts and circumstantial factors into their analysis.

4.1. Political Contexts as Factors

Ethiopia is a historic African country which successfully safeguarded its sovereignty from European colonial encroachment. The polity, however, has a long history of autocratic rule (Babile, 1989; Tafesse, 2012), with the uncontested power of a 'strong' or 'tough' man at the center of the political system (see Bahru, 2002:248-9; Clapham, 2017). The monarch's absolutism and indisputable power received legal recognition, as article 4 of the 1955 constitution affirmed the 'person of the Emperor as sacred, His dignity as inviolable and His power indisputable'. The *Derg*, under the leadership of President Mengistu, has remained authoritarian (Bahru, 2008; Markakis, 2011) where it was impractical to file criticisms and engage in political discussion without oversight from the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) (Dawit, 1989).

Amidst the official rhetoric and incorporation of liberal tenets in the 1995 constitution, the transition to a liberal multiparty democracy has faced massive setbacks. Instead of democracy, what characterized EPRDF's decades of administration was a totalitarian state dominated by a single hegemonic party (see Aalen and Tronvoll, 2009). Succinctly, Clapham (2017:77) stated:

[the EPRDF government] cannot remotely be described as democratic, in the liberal sense of the term that insists on open competition between rival political parties, the choice and change of ruling parties in free and fair elections, and respect for globally defined human rights. The sense of 'democracy'

that it embodies is strictly Leninist, in which the ruling party enjoys an effective monopoly of political power, and seeks to incorporate within it what are taken to be the leading elements (or vanguard) of the society. Its aspirations are explicitly hegemonic, and challenges to its control have been suppressed with whatever level of force ...

Recognizing this fact, Merera (1 Dec. 2024) linked instances of the mistreatment of civilians and political dissent to the country's overarching political system rather than to the training, recruitment, and personality traits of police officers. Bahru (2002) reinforces the claim by associating the blatant repression with the country's longstanding authoritarian political tradition. Merera further reiterates;

The country's political system did not undergo tremendous modernization, by deepening the culture of the rule of law and constitutionalism, guaranteeing freedoms such as expression, and strengthening institutions like the free press, civil society organizations, independent judiciary, and an electoral board. Rather than open democratic discussion and mutual concession, governance has continued based on force and firearms.

The authoritarian nature of the EPRDF government took the highest proportion for the overall abuses and extrajudicial actions. The issue central to this discussion is the analysis of the impacts of this authoritarian political system on police

violence.

4.1.1. Police Politicization and Instrumentalization

In countries with evident democratic deficiencies, police and other state institutions saw excessive political intervention and instrumentalization. Leaders set them in a way that ensures their survival, by spying on the people and silencing dissent (Medie, 2018). Through using appointments, selective promotions, and other incentives, politicians and officeholders co-opt police members into their network and political leaning (Hills, 2007). As a result, rather than enlarging societal welfare, the functional accountability of the force geared toward quelling anti-government critics coercively. This particular approach to policing is referred to as regime policing.

The situation in the post-1991 period has certain connections with this insight. To the violation of Proclamation 720/2011, which designates the police as an independent and politically unbiased entity, a highly politicized police force has persisted in the country (Interviewee-7, 5 Oct. 2024). The government has polluted the organizations with its needless political meddling and provision of preferential treatment. Until the early 2000s, police personnel in Ethiopia were made to pay party membership fees to the EPRDF (Interviewee-8, 5 Dec. 2024; Interviewee-9, 6 Dec. 2024). Preferential incentives were provided to officers and management committee members who adhered to the party's program and ideological premises (Demelash, 2 Dec. 2024; Interviewee-7, 5 Oct. 2024; Interviewee-8, 5 Dec. 2024; Interviewee-9, 6 Dec. 2024). Rather than merit and qualification, leadership appointments were carried out by

anchoring political criteria (Demelash, 2 Dec. 2024; Cao, Huang and Sun, 2015; Medie, 2018).

Through these and related other measures, the government has made police departments dependent and politically subservient. The supposed functional and organizational independence of the force has proven to be a mirage, as political leaders bring them under their total control. This means that it is the regime in power which determines the agenda of the police—including issues of arrest, release and other extrajudicial actions—rather than the law and professional codes of conduct (Baker, 2008; Medie, 2018).

Because of the unabated intervention and political control, the bureaucratic structures, including the police, served as the best means to pursue EPRDF's program and sustain its dominance (Abbink, 2009; Kassahun, 2005; Young, 1998). The revolutionary document of the party asserted that the authority needs the police to advance its political program and sphere of influence (Demelash, 2 Dec. 2024). The force was regarded as EPRDF's own property destined to eliminate challengers to its authority and the state (Baker, 2015). Accordingly, to ensure the regime's survival and the narrower interests of elites, the security apparatuses (the military, militias, police, and more recently, the special police) were utilized strategically (Merera, 1 Dec. 2024).

The force, therefore, demonstrated more pronounced partisanship by favouring the EPRDF at the cost of the rival political groups (Interviewee-8, 5 Dec. 2024) and suppressing dissent and critics to ensure the EPRDF remains in power (Interviewee-5, 1 Oct. 2024; Merera, 1

Dec. 2024; Tronvoll. 18 Feb 2024). Hence, the violence perpetrated by police and other security apparatuses must be analyzed in the context of serving the incumbent instrumentally.

4.1.2. Weak Supervision and Accountability Mechanisms

Law enforcement agencies in developed democracies are subjected to rigorous scrutiny by governmental and non-governmental bodies (Bayley and Shearing, 1996). Countries like the UK, the US, Australia, and Canada have benefited from the building of civilian review boards that assume autonomous roles in investigating police misconduct (Bayley and Shearing, 1996). Conversely, the means for civilian control are unavailable in regimes with an authoritarian nature. Anticipating challenges to their power, leaders demonstrate relative intransigence to have efficient oversight and accountability measures (Hills, 2007; Medie, 2018).

Likewise, the undertaking of effective monitoring over the affairs of the law enforcement authorities was skimpy during EPRDF's decades of administration. Institutions like the courts, parliament, human rights commission, office of the ombudsman, and so forth were not competent to impartially and promptly address the allegation of police violence (UNCAT, 2011). This lack of supervision subsequently contributed for the increasing violent police practices in the country (Interviewee- 4, 12 Oct. 2024; Interviewee-6, 15 Oct. 2024; Tronvoll, 18 Feb. 2024).

The 1995 constitution bestowed parliament members the supreme political power, which encompasses the power to

investigate and take measures when members of the 'defense force, public security, and federal police' violate citizen's rights and national security (See Article 55 (7)). Nonetheless, due to limited experience, a lack of expert guidance, and EPRDF's hegemonic position in the parliament and the entire political life, the proper exercise of this responsibility has remained unsatisfactory (Kassahun, 2005; Meheret, 2019). Except for the 2005 election, where opposition political parties took one-third of the seats, a single-party dominance in the parliament was unequivocal. This hegemonic stance of the EPRDF has eradicated parliamentarian's roles in monitoring and controlling 'excesses' committed by the executive organs, including the police. The party discipline has prevented them from carrying out the necessary checks and balances (Kassahun, 2005). This led to rampant corruption, unwarranted exercise of power and violation of human rights (Meheret, 2019; Vestal, 1999).

The same constitution founded courts in Ethiopia as independent government organs free of executive-legislative interventions. It empowered them to pursue their functions with 'full' independence and out of political non-interventionism (See Article 79). However, the observance of this entitlement has left aspirational, as government officials constantly intruded on the working conditions of courts and judges. The intervention started early in the transitional period when the incumbent expelled more than 500 trained and experienced judges and prosecutors under the guise of reform and corruption allegations (CILC, 2005; Vestal, 1999). The measure has made the country home to inexperienced, incompetent, or 'lay'

judges with trivial knowledge of the law and criminal justice (HRW, 1997:9; Mulugeta, 2019). Because of these knowledge gaps and excessive political interference, courts lack the strength to adjudicate politically sensitive cases with full independence and impartiality.

Pursuant to Article 55(14) of the 1995 constitution, a government-supported Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) was formed by Proclamation 210/2000 as well. Including the investigation and monitoring of instances of violence, the proclamation has assigned the commission various duties regarding human rights promotion and protection (See Article 6 (1-10)). Conversely, the commission has had limited contributions in probing and overseeing abuses, often by omitting its duty over matters that are politically sensitive to the authority (Mohammed, 2013). Much of its efforts therefore wasted on investigating politically insensitive complaints.

Also, for the good parts of its history, the EPRDF government treated civil society organizations and the free press with suspicion. A range of restrictive and oppressive measures were taken to either eliminate or bring them under its control (Brechenmacher, 2017; Hagmann & Abbink, 2012). The pressure was grave against organizations that work in human rights and democracy fields. The Human Rights Council (HRC) has paid heavy costs in this respect, with its assets and bank accounts subjected to repeated freezing and staff members experiencing arrests, death threats, and in its gravest scene, extrajudicial killing. The Charities and Societies Proclamation (no. 621/2009) has undermined the operation and service of civic associations as well, by restricting

their access to foreign funds to only ten percent (See Article 2(2)). Many right-based organizations halted their ‘advocacy and monitoring activities’ as a result. These restrictions and instances of intimidation ended up in little scrutiny regarding police violence.

4.1.3. Limited Investigation and Punishment of Police Abuses

The impetus to investigate cases of excessive force was not totally dissipated during EPRDF’s rule. For instance, delegated by the Council of Representatives (COR) and led by the president of the Supreme Court, a fact-finding Committee was formed in 1993 to inquire about the police’s violent action against AAU students who opposed EPRDF’s plan for a referendum regarding Eritrea’s independence (AI, 1995). Following the 2005 electoral turmoil, a parliamentary Inquiry Commission was also instituted with a similar purpose. Notwithstanding the government’s manipulation of the report to its advantage, this Commission uncovered that the security forces have used excessive force against civilians and non-violent protesters (Baker, 2015; Smith, 2007). By openly obstructing the persistent calls for an impartial international investigation, the government has delegated the EHRC to investigate the mistreatment committed during the mass protests in Amhara, Oromia, and parts of the southern regions between 2015 and 2018.

With these exceptions, the investigation of torture and other grave ill treatments was either inadequate or non-existent. Several cruel and brutal measures were omitted from ‘official comment’ or reporting (AI, 1995). Furthermore, the government showed belittles interest in punishing

perpetrators of extrajudicial killings or injuries under its civil-criminal laws (AI, 1995; Interviewee-8, 5 Dec. 2024; Interviewee-10, 27 Dec. 2024; UNCAT, 2011; Veen, 2016). When victims demand immediate justice, the typical government response was that ‘the concerned authority is inquiring about the matter’ (Interviewee-6, 15 Oct. 2024; Interviewee-5, 1 Oct. 2024; Interviewee-8, 5 Dec. 2024). In whole or in part, police delinquency in Ethiopia was not properly investigated or has been left unpunished. A culture of impunity hence permeates the police departments and the national culture, and it is this culture which contributes its part to the ongoing abuses (Interviewee-10, 27 Dec. 2024; Tronvoll, 18 Feb. 2024).

The justifications provided are diverse as the nature and causes of violence are varied and sometimes complex. Importantly, regimes with authoritarian natures tolerate police offense in exchange for their loyalty and protection of the throne (Baker, 2008; Wiatrowski and Goldstone, 2010). Besides, authoritarian leaders lack viable legal institutional mechanisms to guarantee accountability and redress victims (Toggia, 2008). Institutions were built primarily to serve the interests of those in power rather than the principles of law and justice. Interviewees to this study associate the issue of impunity with the nascent culture of rule of the law but the rule of men (Interviewee 4, 12 Oct. 2024; Interviewee-5, 1 Oct. 2024; Interviewee-10, 27 Dec. 2024; Merera, 1 Dec. 2024). The authorities seek to uphold justice not by referring to the legal frameworks and factual facts but by calculating their interests. Firehiwot Samuel³, in his

interview with *Ghion Magazine* (June 2022), described the EPRDF government as ‘a group of indecency who, after committing a murder, summon an investigator, and investigate the case with you and alter your decision to suit their demand; if you do not comply, then they will kill you.’

4.1.4. Underfunding and its Ramification

More than judges, police assume more roles in delivering justice in a country. While police engage in a wider range of duties related to law enforcement, crime detection, and order maintenance, judges validate the legality of the actions of police officers and prosecutors. Thus, it is crucial to provide police personnel with adequate ‘remuneration’ since their work has a ‘risky nature’ and their contribution to the community’s well-being is essential (Nsereko, 1993:473). Without making significant investments in policing, it would be difficult to envision an efficient justice system.

Nevertheless, authoritarian leaders are criticized for weakening the force and under-resourcing them through underfunding and deliberately diverting resources (Medie, 2018). Employees frequently suffer from low or non-payment of salaries. In Ethiopia too, the investment in police departments has been less than favorable (Interviewee 3, 29 March 2024; Interviewee-8, 5 Dec. 2024; Interviewee-9, 6 Dec. 2024), with police constables earning the lowest pay compared to judges and other public servants (Hassen, 2005). The remuneration paid was particularly insufficient for lower-ranked police members. The problem of low pay for

³ He was the chairperson of a Commission

delegated to inquire into the post-2005 electoral crisis.

officers went to the extent of not fulfilling basic necessities like food and housing (Interviewee-9, 6 Dec. 2024) and the educational fees for their children (Demelash, 2 Dec. 2024).

The limited investment in the police has imperiled the efficacy of the overall justice system. Among others, low wages open up the space for political co-opting and subsequent misconduct (Demelash, 2 Dec. 2024). Officers and police leaders align themselves with politicians to 'attract favours and resources' (Hills, 2007:407). They also unconditionally carry out the orders of higher officials and their superiors to avoid the risk of losing jobs for their subsistence (Interviewee-7, 5 Oct. 2024; Merera, 1 Dec. 2025). Accordingly, based on Hills (2007:407) and Medie (2018:143), the excessive use of force beyond the 'guidelines and principles of human rights' arose from underfunding and insufficient pay.

The limited investment equally impedes police departments not to owning the necessary equipment like vehicles, computers, laboratory materials, as well as non-lethal weapons. Due to these shortages, line personnel in Ethiopia carry out patrolling activities on foot. Except for batons and to some extent teargases, the instruments to manage disturbances and riots nonviolently were scantily available (Interviewee-3, 29 March 2024; Interviewee-1, 15 April 2024; Interviewee-5, 1 Oct. 2024; Interviewee-3, Interviewee-9, 6 Dec. 2024). The police commissions did not have adequate less-lethal weapons such as water cannons, rubber bullets, pepper spray, Tasers, and so forth. Could it be therefore possible to curb violence by purely arming policemen/policewomen with firearms? In

this vein, Interviewee-8 (5 Dec. 2025) connects the ongoing shootings and injuries to the insufficient availability of non-lethal weapons for police officers.

Moreover, provisions of adequate 'remuneration' to employees can enhance the chance of getting 'men and women' of good conduct (Nsereko, 1993:473). The police profession demands candidates who are mentally and physically capable and demonstrate promising behaviour and commitment to duties. On the other hand, the low wages and investment in policing can lead to a shortage of applicants with much-developed intelligence, skills, and competence. Insufficient pay and incentives have discouraged academically competent students from pursuing careers in law enforcement. School dropouts, who haven't scored passing grades in national exams and with limited job opportunities, largely demonstrate interest in being police (Interviewee-3, 29 March 2024; Ministry of Peace, 2020). The infringement of human rights partly emerges from the enlistment of these applicants with limited competence.

4.1.5. 'Weaponizing' the Law and its Context

More than personality traits or biases, the law makes conditions conducive for police to use force illegitimately (Obasogie, 2020). It can do this by warranting tremendous discretion to use coercive force in discharging its responsibilities. Khalif and Doornbos (2002) connected the heightened human rights violations in Ethiopia's Somali region to the far-reaching discretion bestowed on members of the security forces. Following the 2005 electoral crisis, the EPRDF government has introduced largely subjective proclamations that gave the police broader

discretion in areas of law enforcement and crime detection (Interviewee-5, 1 Oct. 2024; Interviewee-4, 12 Oct. 2024; Interviewee-6, 15 Oct. 2024). Three of its kind were the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (no 652/2009), Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation (no.590/2008), and Charities and Societies Proclamation (no. 621/2009). The government has used these laws not with good spirit but to muzzle dissent and justify its repression and intrusion into the privacy of individuals. Adem (2012) considered this state of affairs as ‘rule by law’ whereas Zelalem (2017) referred to it as ‘weaponizing’ laws.

The decree in question was the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, which aspires to ‘prevent, control and foil’ terrorism and terrorist threats in the country. Against this ambitious promise, the EPRDF-led government has leveraged this decree to silence critics, weaken the work of journalists and competing political parties (Zelalem, 2017), along with stifling ‘public discussion’ on major policy concerns (Arriola and Lyons, 2016). The proclamation gave law enforcement officials increased powers to unconditionally arrest terrorist and their alleged accomplices. As outlined in Article 19(1), police are permitted to arrest ‘any person whom he reasonably suspects to have committed or is committing a terrorist act’ without a court warrant. The consequence has been deadly, as seen from the unprecedented arrest of public figures, politically conscious individuals, journalists, leaders of political parties and, civil society organizations (Zelalem, 2017).

The draconian state of emergency decrees was also the other ground for the blatant use

of violence in the country. Although it was not approved by the parliament and published in the *Negarit Gazeta*, a semi-kind of emergency decree was broadcasted by Meles Zenawi on the night of the 2005 national election. The decree placed the police under the control of the Prime Minister’s office (Aalen and Tronvoll, 2009; Adejumobi, 2007; Markakis, 2011), who commanded them to use all the possible means to quell election-related defiance and opposition movements. The outcome was abysmal, with nearly 200 fatalities, 763 injuries and the imprisonment of tens of thousands of others (Smith, 2007).

Another state of emergency decree (no. 984/2016) came to the scene in response to the eruption of protest in the Oromia region in 2015 – which was triggered by the advent of an integrated master plan to expand the boundaries of Addis Ababa into Oromia special zones (Asafa, 2017), and Amhara –following the July 2016 failed attempt to arrest Wolkait Amhara Identity Question Committee members. After obtaining the approval of the parliament, a six-month state of emergency was declared in October 2016, which was extended for an additional four months. This decree has granted extensive discretion to the defense force and federal police members to conduct arrests and constrain freedom of press, and speech. The deadliest measures that followed resulted in numerous arrests, injuries, killings, forced disappearance, and other forms of torture against individuals and groups (HRW, 2016).

4.2. Organizational Factors as Predictors of police Violence

Theorists have identified numerous variables to create an account of

explanation based on organizational perspective. Elements like organizational cultures and policing styles, the presence or absence of regulatory mechanisms, training, recruitment and selection systems, and professional development are some of them. Based on the findings and the argument the author suggests, the persistent police violence in Ethiopia aligns with these and related other quandaries.

4.2.1. Flawed Recruitment and Selection Systems

It is widely recognized that organizational pollution and inefficiency can be minimized by systematically investigating the background and behaviors of police applicants before enlistment. Countries with promising success in building democratic and corruption-free police are known their stringent selection and recruitment standards. A prime illustration is Singapore and the Nordic countries like Norway, Sweden, and Denmark which employ psychological tests and intensive interviews to draw applicants with promising ethical and psychological competence (Fekjær and Petersson, 2020; Quah, 2006).

According to Demelash (Dec. 2024), the big challenge in modernizing and professionalizing the police force in Ethiopia arose from the flawed recruitment and selection systems. The recruitment standards incorporated in police proclamations and regulations are clear and well-known, and no significant problem that deserves mentioning in this regard. The real problem arose from the increasing demand to abuse these standards in one's favour and the lack of commitment to properly implement them (Demelash, 2 Dec. 2024; Interviewee-7, 5 Oct. 2024;

Interviewee-8, 5 Dec. 2025; Interviewee-9, 6 Dec. 2024).

Importantly, the police recruitment and selection procedures in Ethiopia were not free from political intervention. It is widely acknowledged that the EPRDF officials deliberately enlisted their members and politically affiliated individuals for officer-ships (Interviewee-7, 5 Oct. 2024; Interviewee-8, 5 Dec. 2024; Interviewee-9, 6 Dec. 2024). Competing political parties and groups in armed resistance equally have shown similar interests in sending their members and supporters to academies to gain military and warfare skills (Demelash, 2 Dec. 2024). Because of this intervention, applicants –regardless of their educational qualification –might get admission to police departments and training depots (Interviewee-7, 5 Oct. 2024).

The recruitment and selection system were also criticized for sidelining the adequate investigation of the autobiography of applicants. The application of rigorous screening strategies like the use of intensive interviews, psychological tests, and entrance examinations were relegated from regular undertakings. The respective police commissions failed to establish a promising working culture to address the grassroots and interview communities or families concerning the moral and ethical qualities of applicants. Added to this fact, the community was not conscious of the police recruitment and selection undertakings (Demelash, 2 Dec. 2024). They showed marginal interest in filing complaints against potential applicants with arrogant and undesirable behaviours (Interviewee-1, 15 April 2024). Instead of filing complaints, the community sometimes supports for their recruitment

so far as to distance them from their locality (Demelash, 2 Dec. 2024; Interviewee-9, 6 Dec. 2024).

Because of political interference, the inconsistent application of legally codified standards, and the inability of the police commissions to conduct the necessary screening, candidates who do not fulfill the minimum standard sometimes obtain employment in police institutes (Interviewee-7, 5 Oct. 2024; Demelash, 5 Dec. 2024). Illiterate and lower grade attendees, political party members, individuals with arrogant behaviours, convicted of crimes, and aged and physically unfit join the commissions unprecedentedly (Interviewee-7, 5 Oct. 2024; Ministry of Peace, 2020). The outcome was venomous, as the police in the country have been responsible for the massive human rights violations and other offenses. All instances of human rights violations and miscarriage of justice by Ethiopian police are deeply ingrained in the hiring of individuals whose character traits, political neutrality, academic competence, and intelligence are less scrutinized (Demelash, 2 Dec. 2024; Interviewee-7, 5 Oct. 2024).

4.2.2. Training and Education Related Quandaries

The police training and education during the early days of the EPRDF's rule were not adequate and standardized. It was common to employ individuals as police officers regardless of the provision of the necessary training and indoctrination (Interviewee-7, 5 Oct. 2024; Interviewee-9, 6 Dec. 2024). With the passage of time, reforms were in display with the respective police commissions adopting their own regulations that prohibit employment before the completion of the training at the

officially designated training institutes. However, the action has never produced policemen/policewomen with sophisticated skills, knowledge, discipline, and attitudinal change (Demelash, 2 Dec. 2024; Interviewee-9, 6 Dec. 2024). Although authors like Baker (2013) and Veen (2016) are inclined to lay down training, manpower, and material-related distinction, qualifications and higher-level learning was an acute problem in both federal and regional police commissions. Certificate and above graduates were small in number, not more than three thousand out of the 44,368 police manpower in the country (Hassen, 2005:118).

The training system had other limitations, as in the form of lacking necessary standardization and harmonization (Demelash, 2 Dec. 2024). For long, the country did not have national standards and police doctrine that guide its policing philosophy, training and recruitment activities. Because of the lack of a national standard, the provision of uniform training and education to new police recruits was unavailable. Colleges and police training centers provided the training according to their preferences. Also, to the violation of the curriculum, the training schedule was subjected to an unnecessary reduction, to three or fewer months, as per the will of higher officials and police leaders (Ministry of Peace, 2020). This period is not enough to produce officers with professional expertise in crime investigation, detection, prevention, and, above all, the provision of public service.

Distinctly from other educational programs, police training and education are expected to cultivate discipline, good conduct, and servant behaviours. It must be given in a manner that brings attitudinal

change (Demelash, 2 Dec. 2024). In so doing, throughout the training periods, careful follow-ups into the conduct and performance of trainees are mandatory (Interviewee-7, 5 Oct. 2024). In this light, the police education and training in Ethiopia did not bring the necessary attitudinal changes partly because of the admission of large numbers of trainees to colleges at once (Demelash, 2 Dec. 2024; Interviewee-7, 5 Oct. 2024). The enlistment of huge numbers of trainees emptied the undertaking of intensive supervision and follow-ups into the ethical-moral progress of the trainees before graduation (Interviewee-7, 5 Oct. 2024). The training was also attacked for placing too much focus on theoretical issues and hard military/warfare skills development (Ministry of Peace, 2020:27). Recruits learn police science and crime investigations at a theoretical level, with limited or no practical exercise at police stations or court hearings.

In this vein, the relationship between police education and use of force patterns is straightforward in that officers with higher-level training use force infrequently compared with lower-grade and non-college graduates (Smith, Locke, and Fenster, 1970; Vespucci, 2020). This is because, the acquisition of necessary policing skills and knowledge from higher-level education enables officers to have confidence, easily comprehend the events that are taking place, and decide the appropriate types of measures to be used. Because of the inadequate knowledge and skills, police in Ethiopia perceive coercive force as the best alternative to arrest troubles, interrogate suspects and related other duties (Ministry of Peace, 2020). An informant (6 Dec. 2024) brings the following story, to show how the limited

skills and knowledge have worsened the state of police violence.

Two of the police members brought to my office an individual who was injured with a gun in the head. When asked why they did this to him, the perpetrators of the offense replied that the suspect had refused to go to the police station when asked for interrogation. Problems of such a sort emerge either from the lack of the necessary skills and knowledge or due to emotional and aggressive conduct.

4.2.3. Inadequate Legal Frameworks in Governing Force

Scholars noted that the making of rules and regulations, which openly define circumstances when the use of force is legitimate, is an important first step to controlling its misuse (Bayley and Bittner, 1984:56; Reiss, 1980:123). In this absence, police work is typically performed traditionally, by pooling the experience and traditions of officers already on duty (Vespucci, 2020:35; Bayley and Bittner, 1984:56).

Ethiopia did not provide an elaborated set of guidelines that properly direct when, how, and why to use force and firearms. Detailed and comprehensive laws that govern the use of force for law enforcement purposes were unavailable. The existing federal-regional police regulations (see Regulations 86/2003; 6/2003; 268/2012; 47/2005) are not comprehensive enough to effectively govern force and its applications. Informants to this study associate the

misuse of force with the inadequate availability of the legal frameworks (Interviewee 4, 12 Oct. 2024; Interviewee-6, 15 Oct. 2024; Interviewee-10, 27 Dec. 2024).

The origins of the problem, based on an informant lies within the police commissions itself (Interviewee-10, 27 Dec. 2024). The commission stifled the adoption of a draft legal framework that it produced in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice nearly a decade ago. The commission resented the inclusion of the police accountability clause in the proposed legislation. This resistance stems from the instinct not to be accounted for and to evade answerability for potential misconduct that members might pamper (Interview-10, 27 Dec. 2024). This is an archetypal manifestation of the growth of an organizational sub-culture that Skolnick (2002:7-8) considered as ‘the Blue Code of Silence’, which aims to protect fellow officers from facing punishment or disciplinary measures.

Above all, viewing at a glance, the observance of the restriction enshrined in the 1995 constitution, police establishment proclamations and regulations was negligible. These legal frameworks prohibit the infliction of tortures through using arbitrary and excessive force. To this breach, harsh and incriminating acts of violence were on display throughout the EPRDF era. Acknowledging such fact, Paul (1994:254) and Vestal (1999:48) opined that the police and military cliques in Ethiopia are untrammelled by laws, democratic norms and other socio-cultural values.

4.3. The culture of Violence as a factor: Political, Organizational and Societal Contexts

As the longstanding history of the Ethiopian polity ushers in, militarism and its culture remain the preferred *modus operandi* to gain or exercise political power (Bahru, 2008; Paul, 1994; Tafesse, 2012). The country’s political culture is heavily dominated by the ‘barrel of the gun’ where the ruling elites give a deaf ear to the opinion and demands of the larger public (Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003:35). Softening this ‘iron fist’, by adhering to such things as tolerance, compromise, discussion, and persuasion, was equated with a ‘sign of weakness’ that ultimately ends in one’s demise (Babile, 1989:5). Thus, the government-people relations are intertwined by the wider application of violence

Likewise, the EPRDF government safeguarded its power not by practicing liberal democracy but by persistently displaying firearms and weaponizing the security forces (Merera, 1 Dec. 2024). It has proclaimed military means as the preferred strategy to intimidate any resistance to its power. More than revolutionary democracy, hence, all the government-backed repression in the country had its roots from the strong conviction on violence and ‘militarism’ (Baker, 2015:277).

The militaristic approach to politics complicated the efforts to build law-abiding behaviors among armed forces, law enforcement bodies, and political figures (Paul, 1994:254). Since the culture is deeply ingrained at the very top of the state, young officials and police personnel at the lower level retained similar convictions by treating violence with impunity as their rights (Tronvoll, 18 Feb. 2024). Substantial numbers of police personnel were in favour of using coercive

measures during instances of interrogations and control of potential disturbance and or suspects (Interviewee-3, 29 March 2024; Interviewee-9, 6 Dec. 2024; UNCAT, 2011:8). It is common to see police committing street-level beating and other forms of human rights assaults (Demelash, 2 Dec. 2024; Interviewee-5, 1 Oct. 2024; Interviewee-6, 15 Oct. 2024). The mentality continued unaltered despite the different training services provided by instructors from South Africa (Baker, 2015).

The political culture on force and firearms has a good chance of infiltration to the culture and thinking of the community (Merera, 1 Dec. 2024). Babile (1989), Bahru (2008), Tronvoll (18 Feb 2024) supported the claim saying that the culture of violence is ingrained down to the grassroots community. It forms the 'national psyche and socio-cultural heritages' (Babile, 1989:4). This is not to say that the Ethiopian society is inherently violent or conflictive but rather peaceful. The people have beautiful traditions to resolve divergences non-violently, often with the use of religious leaders, elders and traditional institutions. Against this backdrop, some cultural values support violence and bloodiest undertakings. This can be learned from the communities' poetic expressions and daily songs like *fukera* (war chant) (Bahru, 2008).

This violent ethos was truly observed in a time of people-government antagonism. It was common to see attempted attacks, insults, destruction of properties, throwing of stones, lootings, road blockages, firing of tires and so forth by protesters during demonstrations and street-level gatherings. Of course, many of these misconducts have to be managed without necessarily

resorting to the lethal actions. The law and the professional standards dictate the police to first exhaust non-violent and less lethal means to arrest disturbance and riots that do not directly endanger human life and physical well-being. The undeniable fact, however, is that encounters which are full of misdemeanors might upset and sometimes panic officers (Demelash, 2 Dec. 2024). As a consequence, the police might tend to advance aggressively abusing their discretion on force and firearms.

5. Conclusions

Although the root causes of police violence are multifaceted, this study painstakingly highlighted that the flawed democratic transitions in Ethiopia after 1991 have exacerbated the longstanding mistreatment of civilians and dissenting voices. Notably, the EPRDF government has threatened the professional and operational autonomy of the police forces with its needless political meddling, preferential treatment, inadequate funding, and low salaries. Furthermore, the government has shown negligible interest in investigating incidents of police brutality or swiftly punishing offenders to ensure justice and redress victims. Instead, it has provided prosecution immunities in return for their partisan and politically affiliated services, thus evading accountability for the violence that the officials themselves masterminded. The internal organizational structures to discipline police forces were dysfunctional because of the growth of the culture of protecting fellow officers from punishments and external pressures on the operations of disciplinary and complaint-resolving committee members. Added to this fact, the available institutions like the courts, parliament, human rights

commission, and several other governmental and non-governmental agencies were not powerful enough to promptly address alleged police brutality.

Because of the authoritarian political traditions and the conviction on force, the inadequate training and education for police officers, as well as the flawed recruitment and selection procedures, the police exercise of coercive force in post-1991 Ethiopia was full of mistreatment, harassment and in its extreme case, wounding and extrajudicial killings. It is therefore a timely call to the current government of Ethiopia, under the leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, to make the necessary investment to modernize its police forces, foster democracy and strengthen democratic institutions, and avoid unnecessary political meddling on the professional and operational affairs of the police and other law enforcement agencies.

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