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How can a decades old rebellion come to a peaceful, lasting political solution? With the growth in conflict termination as a field, there are multiple theories which seek to explain the termination of hostilities. One of the leading theories on conflict termination is that of I. William Zartman's ripeness theory. This paper will apply Zartman's ripeness theory to the conflict between the government of Ethiopia and the separatist movement of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). Ripeness theory provides a valuable framework for analyzing this three-decade old intrastate conflict and its ultimate termination through a 2018 peace agreement.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**TITLE: CONFLICT TERMINATION IN ETHIOPIA: A CASE STUDY OF RIPENESS
THEORY**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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Executive Summary

Title: CONFLICT TERMINATION IN ETHIOPIA: A CASE STUDY OF RIPENESS THEORY

Author: LCDR Keith Becker, United States Navy

Thesis: Ripeness theory provides a valuable framework for analyzing the three-decade old intrastate conflict between Ethiopia and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and its ultimate termination through a 2018 peace agreement.

Abstract: This study is an examination of the explanatory value of I. William Zartman's ripeness theory in the termination of the conflict between Ethiopia and the separatist movement Ogaden National Liberation Front. Zartman's concept of 'ripeness' has been central to both academic and policy debates for over 30 years. This paper assesses the usefulness of Zartman's model through an analysis of the 2018 peace agreement which was negotiated during a time of significant reform in Ethiopia. It uses Zartman's model to argue that the concept of 'ripeness' remains a useful means to analyze the potential for peace and that it can provide an explanation for the success of the 2018 peace agreement between Ethiopia and the Ogaden National Liberation Front and for the failure of previous negotiations between the two sides.

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Table of Contents

	Page
Executive Summary	i
Disclaimer	ii
Introduction.....	1
Literature & Theoretical Review	2
Case Study Overview.....	9
Ripeness Theory applied to Case Study.....	17
Conclusion	22
Postscript.....	22
Bibliography	23

INTRODUCTION

How can a decades old rebellion come to a peaceful, lasting political solution? With the growth in conflict termination as a field, there are multiple theories that seek to explain the termination of hostilities. One of the leading theories on conflict termination is I. William Zartman's ripeness theory. This paper will apply Zartman's theoretical concept of ripeness to the conflict between the government of Ethiopia and the separatist movement of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and show why it is the best theory to explain the inter-dynamics at play in this conflict. Ripeness theory provides a valuable framework for analyzing this three-decade old intrastate conflict and its ultimate termination through a 2018 peace agreement.

The conflict between Ethiopia and the ONLF is an important case study for analysis because of the conflicts changing dynamics over a thirty year period. The conflict vacillated between higher and lower levels of armed conflict, and there were several stops and starts towards a negotiated reconciliation that never progressed beyond an initial stage. The two parties remained locked in a zero-sum approach, with the ONLF demanding self-determination and Ethiopia demanding recognition of the federal constitution and authority of its government. The key players on both sides changed over time, but the zero-sum approach remained largely the same until the 2018 election of PM Abiy Ahmed.

There are several opportunities of peace negotiations during the thirty-year conflict to apply ripeness theory and observe how the moment was not ready for resolution. However, the groundwork established during those early discussions contributed to the ultimate achievement of ripeness towards resolution in 2018. PM Abiy's reform agenda applied a shock to the system but was not enough alone to settle this conflict. Without the efforts of years of discussions, even

while armed conflict was happening, the ability to quickly recognize and take advantage of the ripe moment by both sides may not have been possible.

Starting with a conflict termination literature and theoretical overview, this paper will provide context to Zartman's ripeness theory to afford the reader a basic understanding of its construct. Following that is an overview of the conflict's historical framework between the government of Ethiopia and the ONLF. This paper will then use ripeness theory to analyze this case and explain its eventual termination of the conflict in Ethiopia.

LITERATURE / THEORETICAL REVIEW

There are multiple ways to approach the concept of conflict termination, but most approaches focus on substance or time as the key ingredient to proper resolution. This case study will demonstrate how the substance based approach without consideration for the importance of timing is insufficient in capturing the inter-dynamics at play in this conflict.

In the first approach, substance-based arguments put forth that parties in conflict only come to a successful resolution based on the substance of the proposals, generally considered a midpoint between their positions. Robert Walton and Richard McKersie apply this through behavioral theory, Oran Young in the concepts of bargaining, and Howard Raiffa through his book *The Art and Science of Negotiation*. These scholars generally discount the notion of time as a critical element to negotiation and conflict termination. Rather, they focus solely on finding the right solution. The second approach maintains that finding the right timing for negotiation and the termination of conflict is critical. The substance is still an essential factor in this approach, but substance alone is insufficient to achieve success.¹

¹ I. William Zartman, "Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond." In *International Conflict Resolution After the Cold War*, edited by Stern, Paul C. and Daniel Druckman, 225 (Washington, D.C: National Academies Press), 2000.

I. William Zartman is responsible for a significant component of the conflict termination scholarship utilizing the approach of time. His conception of “ripeness” for the termination of a conflict is one of the more fruitful pieces of work on the subject. There is value in utilizing ripeness theory because its key tenants also cover several other concepts and theories to include cost-benefit analysis, public choice notions or reality, prospect theory, and game theory.² Zartman’s work created a bridge between the fields of international relations and comparative politics during a time when borders between them remained firm. His later writings expanded his theory by building bridges to concepts such as bargaining and other facets of the study of conflict termination.³

Ripeness is not an infinite period but rather a fleeting moment when conditions are ripe for action. As such, scholars like Zartman emphasize the need to prepare and be ready for the moment when it arrives. Zartman explains it best through his observation:

Like any metaphor, the idea of the ripe moment should not be taken too literally. Moments, when ripe, do not fall into one’s hands; they have to be taken with skill. Furthermore, in an imperfect world, moments are rarely totally ripe, or, no matter how ripe they are, they are usually counterindications and communications problems that can make them most unready for treatment if mishandled.⁴

² I. William Zartman, "Ripeness': The Importance of Timing in Negotiation and Conflict Resolution." *E-International Relations* (Dec 20, 2008), 1, <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/595>.

³ Terrence Lyons and Gilbert M. Khadiagala. "Conflict Management and African Politics: Framing the Links." In *Conflict Management and African Politics: Ripeness, Bargaining, and Mediation*, edited by Lyons, Terrence and Gilbert M. Khadiagala, 1. New York, NY: Routledge, 2008.

⁴ I. William Zartman, *Ripe for Resolution: Conflict and Intervention in Africa* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 273.

Conflict termination is heavily dependent on identifying the ripe moment and putting in the work ahead of time to take advantage of the moment when it is identified. “You have to do the right thing at the right time,” as former U.S. Secretary of State George Schultz proclaimed.⁵

Part of Zartman's contribution to conflict termination studies is his development of core concepts of the “mutually hurting stalemate,” a “mutually perceived way out,” and a “ripe moment” to explain when a situation is ripe for resolution. Ripeness theory demonstrates that when a mutually hurting stalemate is reached between the parties in conflict and both parties identify a mutually perceived way out, the circumstances are favorable for the conflict’s termination.⁶ Ripeness theory importantly identifies that parties to the conflict can achieve these elements (acknowledgment of a mutually hurting stalemate and a perceived way out) at different times and for different reasons. However, ripeness is reached only when both parties recognize both elements.

A key element of the theory is the mutual hurting stalemate (MHS), which describes when parties in a conflict recognize they are stuck in a deadlock from which they are unable to escalate the conflict to achieve victory. This deadlock is painful to each side even though the degree of pain does not have to be equal to each.⁷ The key to this argument is that both parties must feel the discomfort caused by the costly, dead-end stalemate for the situation to achieve ripeness properly. They must believe the other party also recognizes the stalemate. They are unable to change the current status quo, and both parties realize that fact. If either party does not perceive the stalemate to exist, then the situation is not at the point of achieving ripeness.

The second component of a mutually perceived way out offers that disputants must be able to visualize a way out of the stalemate. The perceived way out does not require the

⁵ Zartman, “‘Ripeness’: the Hurting”, 227.

⁶ Zartman, “‘Ripeness’: the Hurting”, 228.

⁷ Zartman, “Ripeness: the Hurting”, 228.

identification of a precise answer to escape the stalemate. However, both parties must first sense that a solution is possible and second, believe that the other party shares in the willingness to find a way out. If there is no shared sense of a way out, then the situation has not achieved ripeness as it would leave the parties with nowhere to go.⁸ The mutually perceived way out is essential as it allows both sides to envision a way out that does not result in total defeat or continued stalemate. This concept offers much in the form of evaluating long-running intrastate conflicts in which both parties have at least some desire for finding a resolution. This Ethiopia-ONLF case study presents the reader with several moments when this shared sense of a way out was not present.

Although initially a primary component of ripeness theory, including a neutral third party to act as a mediator is not a requirement for ripeness. Zartman finds great value in a facilitator's role but has since relegated this component to "second-level importance."⁹ Being able to offer neutral interpretations of desired outcomes can significantly assist the process of producing ripeness by helping the parties identify the stalemate and visualize that a way out exists. As an independent observer, the mediator may also be able to articulate to each party's spokesman the areas that have the greatest opportunity to achieve success and thus focus efforts towards building momentum on the way to overall ripeness. According to an analysis of conflicts since 1945 conducted by Jacob Bercovitch and Scott Gartner, international mediation was used in 70% of them. Those that have used a third party mediator have a six times greater probability of achieving a peace agreement.¹⁰

Ripeness theory has withstood the test of time. It has been applied to many situations, both in recognition of correctly identifying ripe moments and failed negotiations where ripeness

⁸ I. William Zartman and Alvaro de Soto, *Timing Mediation Initiatives* (United States Institute of Peace, 2010), 6.

⁹ Zartman, "Ripeness: The Hurting", 235.

¹⁰ Jacob Bercovitch and Scott S. Gartner, "Is There Method in the Madness of Mediation? Some Lessons for Mediators from Quantitative Studies of Mediation." *International Interactions* 32, no. 4 (2006), 329-354.

was not sufficiently present. Many scholars have made contributions to the study of ripeness over the past 30 years. Studies were conducted applying ripeness theory to conflict case studies in Zimbabwe, Namibia and Angola, Eritrea, South Africa, Philippines, Cyprus, Iran-Iraq, Israel, Mozambique, and Northern Ireland, among others.¹¹

In addition to being tested over several decades against various case studies, ripeness theory has also been expanded upon by other scholars. A main augmentation built on ripeness theory is Dean Pruitt's readiness theory, as both continue to emphasize the importance of a "time" factor when entering negotiations. In Pruitt's distinction between ripeness and readiness, he proposes that the conditions of ripeness are to be met but are not sufficient by themselves. Pruitt emphasizes that decision makers are not often rational or do not act reasonably when entering a negotiation to end conflict. Readiness theory focuses on the principles of motivation (to end a conflict) and a sense of optimism regarding the negotiation's outcome.¹²

Richard Haass provides valuable insight in support of ripeness theory, and he places a particular focus on the leaders involved. While they must recognize the mutually hurting stalemate and have a shared sense of accord being possible, leaders specifically cannot be too strong or too weak in pursuit of a compromise and how they convince their constituents of its viability. Haass also reinforces Zartman's argument that a lack of ripeness is not a reason to avoid negotiation. The process needs to be nurtured so parties can take advantage when the critical elements for ripeness are realized.¹³

Other scholars, like Daniel Druckman, have argued while ripeness theory is valuable, they require greater precision to increase the usefulness of the concept of a turning point in the

¹¹ I. William Zartman, "The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments." *Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 1, no. 1 (Sep 01, 2001), 10.

¹² Dean G. Pruitt, "Whither Ripeness Theory?" George Mason University (Fairfax, VA, 2005) 9.

¹³ Richard Haass, *Conflicts Unending: The United States and Regional Disputes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 27.

negotiation.¹⁴ Jeffrey Rubin argues that there are simply too many ripe moments and no such thing as a wrong time to attempt the mediation of a conflict.¹⁵ This same line of argument is what Landon Hancock calls the “passivity of ripeness”. He claims that entering mediation requires both when (timing in ripeness) and how to properly mediate.¹⁶ In his more recent writings, Zartman acknowledges these criticisms but argues ripeness theory is based on being predictive of identifying the necessary elements for productive negotiation even if they are not sufficient. He argues this type of analytical prediction in social science is the best that can be obtained, and that stronger prediction would be available only through the elimination of free choice.¹⁷

Stern and Druckman argue that some scholars offer specific theories while others focus on defined strategies such as power politics, conflict transformation, structural prevention, and normative change which lead to conflict resolution. It is important to note that many of these theories share similar characteristics. While one may offer greater insight into the process by which an intrastate conflict was formally resolved, all offer relevant components to build our understanding of the overall situation.¹⁸

Zartman himself identifies a limitation of the original application of ripeness theory. It was structured to address the question of parties opening negotiations rather than the entire process and culmination of conflict termination. This case study will seek to do just that: to apply ripeness theory not only to the commencement of negotiation but more importantly to the point of conflict termination. With the many contributions made towards it over the past 30 years,

¹⁴ Daniel Druckman, "Turning Points in International Negotiation: A Comparative Analysis." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 4 (2001), 521.

¹⁵ Jeffrey Z. Rubin, "Some Wise and Mistaken Assumptions about Conflict and Negotiation." *Journal of Social Issues* 45, no. 2 (1989), 238.

¹⁶ Landon E. Hancock, "To Act or Wait: A Two-Stage View of Ripeness." *International Studies Perspectives* 2, no. 2 (2001), 195.

¹⁷ Zartman, "Ripeness: The Hurting", 228.

¹⁸ Daniel Druckman and Paul C. Stern. "Conflict Resolution in a Changing World." In *International Conflict Resolution After the Cold War*, edited by Stern, Paul C. and Daniel Druckman, (National Academies Press, 2000), 1-37.

Zartman's ripeness theory offers the best approach to viewing intrastate conflict resolution in general. This paper applies ripeness theory to a recent case of conflict termination between the government of Ethiopia and the ONLF.

CASE STUDY OVERVIEW



The Ogaden region, formally named the Somali Regional State by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, gets its name from the same majority clan. Ogaden was partially ceded to Ethiopia by the British in 1948 and entirely in 1954 after having been claimed by both Ethiopia and the Italian protectorate of Somaliland. It is the second-largest land area

¹⁹ Aden Abdi, "Pathways to Peace in Ogaden - Navigating Symbolism in Early Peace Talks." *Accord* no. 29 (Aug 2020), 65.

region (327,068 square kilometers) in Ethiopia and the easternmost, bordering the Federal Republic of Somalia. The United Nations estimates the Ogaden region population to be 5.6M, 97% of whom are ethnic Somali. Sunni Islam is the religion of 99% of the region's population.²⁰

Conflict is not new to the Ogaden region. Since its original incorporation into the Abyssinian Empire (predecessor to the Ethiopian state) in 1888, the region has been habitually affected by violent conflict.²¹ Much of the conflict in the region is rooted in the nineteenth-century expansionism of the Abyssinian Empire. The Somalis who inhabit the Ogaden region are nomadic pastoralists. Increasingly recurrent drought has wreaked havoc on pastoral lands and caused significant degradation in the environment.²² Such conditions make the Ogaden region ripe for conflict.

Ethiopia went to war against Somalia over Ogaden. In 1977, while Ethiopia was amid internal turmoil and the Ogaden region experienced local resistance movements, Somalia conquered most of the Ogaden region with the help of the Ogaden-based separatist group Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF). Under the revolutionary military regime of President Siad Barre, Somalia hoped to reunify territories inhabited by ethnic Somalis, but rather than acting as a unifying Somali people's force they marginalized the Ethiopian Somalis. After the Ethiopian military retook the territory in 1978, Ogaadeni elders redirected their hopes from a greater Somalia and instead focused on creating an independent state.²³

The WSLF's support of the ill-fated Somali takeover caused it to lose support among the Ogaden population and created the appropriate opportunity for the rise of a new movement. Clan

²⁰ Central Statistics Agency. <http://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/>.

²¹ Abdi M. Abdullahi, "The Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF): The Dilemma of its Struggle in Ethiopia." *Review of African Political Economy* 34, no. 113 (2007), 556. <http://www.jstor.org.lomc.idm.oclc.org/stable/20406430>.

²² Mohammed Adow, "Changing Fortunes in Ethiopia's Ogaden," *Al Jazeera*, September 17, 2012. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2012/9/17/changing-fortunes-in-ethiopia-ogaden>.

²³ International Crisis Group, *Ethiopia: Prospects for Peace in Ogaden*. (Belgium: International Crisis Group, 2013), 3.

elders and young Ogaadeni intellectuals believed Ogaden's destiny had to be decided by local people and not the Somali government or their proxies in the WSLF. This movement led to the creation of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in March 1984.²⁴ The ambition behind the ONLF was a renewed focus on the goal of self-determination and autonomy for the region.²⁵

At its early stages, the ONLF was a relatively innocuous organization. It worked to establish a grassroots political network. However, it generally remained inactive in the region until 1991 when Ethiopia's military regime (known as the Derg) was overthrown by a broad-based coalition of ethno-nationalist groups led by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). After the EPLF broke off to lead Eritrea's succession from Ethiopia the remaining groups formed the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Anchored by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the EPRDF set up a new Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) which sought to restore democratic rights and expand autonomy to the regions. In the Ogaden region, they found a partner in the ONLF.²⁶

The situation between the ONLF and the ruling EPRDF grew more unstable throughout the early 1990s.²⁷ The central government continued to wield a heavy hand, including the power of the purse with funds allocated directly from the capitol which could be withheld at any time for any reason. These actions set the stage for the continued recurrence of interference from federal authorities towards the regional state. As an Ogaadeni elder stated, the government's meddling created "a continuous political vacuum in an already fragile and contested political

²⁴ Abdullahi, "The Ogaden National Liberation Front", 556.

²⁵ The ONLF was founded in 1984 by six people: Abdirahman Mahdi, chairman of the Western Somali Liberation Movement Youth Union; and former WSLF members Mohamed Ismail Omar, Sheikh Ibrahim Abdallah Mohamed, Abdi Ibrahim Ghehleh, Abdirahman Yusuf Magan and Abdulahi Muhammed Saadi. It was then led by Sheikh Ibrahim Abdallah Mohammed.

²⁶ International Crisis Group, "Ethiopia: Prospects for Peace", 5.

²⁷ Abdullahi Mohamed Sadi was the first elected president of the Somali Regional State during the TGE.

environment.”²⁸ From its conception, Ethiopia’s “authoritarian ethnic federalism” still commanded tight control by the federal government and a heavy dependence from regional state governments on the federal government despite using language which allowed for regional autonomy.²⁹

While the new federal structure was taking form, ONLF leaders demanded a vote for secession and convinced the regional assembly to vote for self-determination unanimously. These actions proved to be a bridge too far for the Ethiopian government. They dismissed the regional government, arrested the regional president, and had ONLF members killed by some accounts.³⁰ As the new constitution officially establishing the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia moved towards ratification in December of 1994, the relationship between the ONLF and the ERPFD-led federal government deteriorated to the point of armed conflict.

As the conflict with the federal government grew over the ONLF’s perceived right to pursue self-determination, so too did tension between a hardliner secessionist faction and a moderate wing willing to cooperate with the regional Ethiopian Somali Democratic League (ESDL) leadership. This tension ultimately led to a split in the organization buoyed by the federal government actively working to sway the more moderate wing into the political fold. The division did nothing to ease the tensions with the remaining ONLF leadership and their established militia organization that openly called for armed resistance against the government.³¹

Though unequal in military strength, the ONLF was successful through irregular hit-and-run-style of attacks against the government.³² While generally contained by the federal

²⁸ International Crisis Group, “Ethiopia: Prospects for Peace”, 7.

²⁹ Meheret Ayenew, "Decentralization in Ethiopia." In *Ethiopia: The Challenge of Democracy from Below*, edited by Bahru Zewde and Siegfried Pausewang, (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2002), 135-139.

³⁰ Abdi, “Pathways to Peace”, 66, and International Crisis Group, “Ethiopia: Prospects for Peace”, 7.

³¹ The secessionist wing of ONLF was led by Sheikh Ibrahim.

³² Abdullahi, “The Ogaden National Liberation Front”, 558.

government, this style of struggle created a continuous stalemate through the remainder of the 1990s. Each side attacked the other though with nothing that amounted to anything more than a low level of armed conflict. In 1998, a war broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which had succeeded from Ethiopia in 1991, and continued until the internationally mediated Algiers Agreement was signed in June 2000. The deadly conflict claimed approximately 70,000 lives from each of the sides, but it also gave rise to the use of proxies to continue the conflict.

After signing the internationally mediated Algiers Agreement in June 2000, Eritrea reportedly began providing direct military and financial aid to the ONLF to include militia training in Eritrea. According to UN documents, Asmara sought a “second front” in Somalia against Ethiopia by supporting armed groups opposed to Ethiopian presence in Somalia.³³

As a result of the money and training provided by Eritrea, ONLF militias began stepping up their attacks against the regional state and federal government structures. These proxy wars represent a significant hurdle in overcoming the stalemate between Ethiopia and Eritrea and Ethiopia and the ONLF as Eritrea’s proxy in the Ogaden region. The ONLF conducted their most aggressive attack to date on April 26, 2007 when they destroyed a Chinese oil exploration site. The attack resulted in the killing of 65 Ethiopians, a majority of whom were ethnic Somali, and nine Chinese workers.

The attack brought international attention to the region and hardened the government’s counter-insurgency campaign. Reports detailed the Ethiopian government’s extreme measures undertaken in response such as blocking critical infrastructure and access to food and water. The attack resulted in the increased securitization of the Somali Regional State and the creation of the Liyu (special) police force, a paramilitary type of force composed of mostly ethnic Somalis. The

³³ Daniel Berhane, “UN report shows the Eritrea-ONLF-Shabaab terror nexus,” *Horn Affairs*, October 22, 2014, <https://hornaffairs.com/2014/10/22/un-report-eritrea-onlf-shabaab-terror-nexus/>, paragraph 56.

creation of the Liyu force caused a dramatic turn as the fighting now pitted ethnic Somalis against each other. As the government's conflict with the ONLF insurgency escalated, so did the extreme tactics of the Liyu.³⁴

The Anti-Terror Proclamation of 2009 was another key tool the federal government used to repress the ONLF. Along with the placement of a younger generation of militant, anti-ONLF leaders in the Somali Regional State government, the ruling class maintained an intense security posture in the region. It continued their oppressive tactics towards ONLF members and civilians alike.³⁵ By classifying it as a terrorist organization, the Ethiopian government restricted ONLF access to aid groups in the region. The terrorist designation created an additional impediment to peace and allowed the government to exploit internal fractures within the ONLF. Government leaders actively recruited ONLF members, including those living abroad, with offers of land and economic opportunity in exchange for denouncing the ONLF and outing their supporters. This fracture had the effect of creating three distinct groups among the Ogaadeni in the early 2010s: those supporting the push for continued armed struggle as the only means, those lead by intellectuals who argued the armed insurgency only invites more violence and division, and those who actively supported the regional government.³⁶

In 2011, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zanawi requested Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki's assistance in facilitating a new round of peace talks. An essential factor in this request was the rising influence of Ogaadeni politicians in Kenya. Ultimately, the Kenyan facilitation team would be composed entirely of Ogaadeni Kenyans who were ethnic Somalis.³⁷ Including a

³⁴ "World Report 2016: Events of 2015." United States of America: Human Rights Watch, (2016) 241, as well as multiple media outlets.

³⁵ In 2010, Abdi Mohamed was elevated from Chief of Security to President of the Somali Regional State. His tactics drew harsh international condemnation, and he was removed and imprisoned in 2018. He is currently standing trial.

³⁶ Tobias Hagmann, *Talking Peace in the Ogaden*. (Nairobi, Kenya: Rift Valley Institute, 2014), 25.

³⁷ The facilitation team was led by Kenyan Senator Yusuf Haji.

third-party international team marked a significant turn by the Ethiopian government, who had been reluctant to add any international presence to resolving the conflict. International pressure had been increasing as their human rights record was coming under increased scrutiny, so Meles determined the time was right to seek negotiations.³⁸

As discussions between the parties took place, Meles died on August 20, 2012. He was replaced by then Deputy Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn who officially supported continuing his predecessor's efforts to find a political solution to the conflict in Ogaden. On September 6, 2012 members of the negotiating teams met for the first time in Nairobi to begin the peace discussions.³⁹ The two sides also agreed that the talks would focus on the major conflict areas of politics, security, human rights and humanitarian assistance, and economic and resource sharing. The initial meeting brought with it renewed optimism for a peaceful solution.

A second round of talks occurred in October 2012 which focused on two key points: the status of the Ethiopian constitution and the composition of the government's delegation, which consisted of military and security personnel. These issues impacted the ONLF's claim to self-determination and became a roadblock in the negotiations' progress.⁴⁰ Little progress was made following the October 2012 talks. Both sides continued their efforts, and armed conflict continued at a low intensity. It was widely believed that while Hailemariam supported the push for a political solution, he did not have a tight grip on the government's security apparatus like his predecessor. As such, his words did not carry significant weight in the Ogaden region as the Liyu continued their anti-ONLF campaign.

After six years of intense negotiations, both face to face and via the third party facilitators, no agreement had been reached but talks went a long way towards building dialog

³⁸ Abdi, "Pathways to Peace", 64.

³⁹ The heavy military makeup of the government's delegation was noted as a stumbling point in future discussions.

⁴⁰ Abdi, "Pathways to Peace", 68.

and restoring at least some modicum of trust. Even if they were not able to clear the impediments in front of them, they softened the barriers enough so that what would turn out to be the dramatic events of 2018 could be seen and seized for their proper ripeness.

In February of 2018, Hailemariam suddenly announced his resignation after years of growing turmoil and political unrest. The Ethiopian House of Representatives elected Abiy Ahmed to take his place. Abiy, still of the ruling EPRDF party but the youngest Prime Minister ever elected and the first ever from the Oromo clan, came to power with a dramatic reform agenda. In the first months of his term, he completely reshuffled his cabinet with a focus on gender equity among leadership roles and fired a host of highly controversial government officials. Abiy also lifted bans on websites and media members, freed thousands of political prisoners, and ended a sweeping state of emergency declaration that had focused on quelling the widespread civil unrest.⁴¹ Abiy used his power to take significant steps towards reconciliation with various rebel groups. He removed the terrorist designation that had been placed on the ONLF under the 2009 Anti-Terror Proclamation.⁴²

On July 8, 2018, Ethiopia and Eritrea signed a peace agreement that included a declaration formally ending the Ethiopian-Eritrean border conflict.⁴³ After securing an agreement with Eritrea, Abiy quickly pivoted to the ONLF, and in-person talks began again between the two delegations. As discussions quickly progressed, both sides had the opportunity to sell the points of the talks to their constituents.⁴⁴ On August 12, 2018, a unilateral ceasefire was declared

⁴¹ Namhla Thando Matshanda, "Ethiopian Reforms and the Resolution of Uncertainty in the Horn of Africa State System." *The South African Journal of International Affairs* 27, no. 1 (Jan 02, 2020), 10.

⁴² Matshanda, "Ethiopian Reforms", 10.

⁴³ "Ethiopia and Eritrea Put an End to Two Decades of Conflict." *The Economist*, (Jul 10, 2018).

⁴⁴ Abdi, "Pathways to Peace", 70.

between the government of Ethiopia and the ONLF. On October 21, 2018 in the Eritrean capital of Asmara, the ONLF and Ethiopian government announced the signing of a formal peace deal.⁴⁵

ANALYSIS: RIPENESS THEORY AND THE OGADEN CONFLICT

The conflict between Ethiopia and the ONLF is a valuable case study for ripeness theory analysis because of its changing dynamics over a thirty-year period. There are multiple occasions to apply ripeness theory during this conflict and observe how the moment was not ready for resolution. After reaching a mutually hurting stalemate and achieving the mutual recognition of a perceived way out, the conflict between Ethiopia and the ONLF became ripe for resolution. Ripeness theory offers a basis for examining this three-decade old intrastate conflict and its ultimate termination through a 2018 peace agreement.

Mutually Hurting Stalemate

The elements of a mutually hurting stalemate are present multiple times throughout this case study. As the parties met for various negotiations throughout the years, it was clear, especially in the earlier negotiations, that the situation was not yet ripe for discovering a perceived way out. Years of conflict produced a weary constituency that likely brought the ONLF to recognition of a stalemate earlier than the government who had more critical conflicts to deal with in Eritrea and the threat from the evolving chaos in Somalia.

The ONLF had been consistent in their goal regardless of Ethiopia's political changes and internal splits in the organization: the right of self-determination for the Somali people of the Ogaden region. It was the driving force behind the stalemate they presented, and it was buoyed first by the independence Eritrea gained and further by the arms and training support Eritrea

⁴⁵ "News: Ethiopia, ONLF Sign Historic Peace Deal." *AddisStandard.com*, October 22, 2018, <https://addisstandard.com/news-ethiopia-onlf-sign-historic-peace-deal/>.

provided. It is clear, and crucially it was clear at the time, that the ONLF had concluded that while they could maintain their campaign without defeat, they could not attain their political goals.

Abiy recognized that the most straightforward path towards his pursuit of regional revival for the Horn of Africa meant first addressing the prolonged stalemates in which his country had found itself. His election was a critical step towards the government recognizing that their ability to pursue a regional renaissance required first addressing the stalled Eritrea and ONLF conflicts. He also acknowledged that words alone were not enough; to fully gain the popular support of the people, he would have to take actions to indicate the government was open to finding a way out.

Both ONLF and the government were accused of committing human rights abuses and crimes against civilians at various times throughout the conflict. The people of the Ogaden region had generally been left out of the benefits of basic public services and infrastructure, education, health services, and clean water services. Their exclusion is the most likely reason for their tacit support of the ONLF as the government was not providing a better option. Neither side entirely held the support of the local populace. This was another strong indication that a stalemate had been reached.

The leaders of the ONLF and the Ethiopian government knew, as a critical component in the conflict, that the option of a decisive military victory was not possible to achieve the effects desired in the Ogaden region. The EPRDF had failed to defeat the ONLF and the ONLF had failed to remove the government from their claimed territory. Even with the military power imbalance favoring the government, both sides were locked in a decades-old stalemate and took the risk to negotiate because they recognized a military victory on either side was not possible.

Abiy's reform and peace agenda provided a willingness from the government to seek peace to several long-standing disputes. Also, Abiy's willingness to apologize on behalf of the government for specific actions taken throughout the long conflict lifted the promise of reform. "He not only publicly acknowledged the EPRDF government's responsibility for acts of torture and other human-rights abuses but championed a June 2018 amnesty law that within nine months led to the release of almost forty-six thousand people."⁴⁶ Abiy's actions represented a shock to the system of Ethiopian governance.

Abiy focused on creating a more inclusive government. In July 2018, he stated, "Given our current politics, there is no option except pursuing a multiparty democracy supported by strong institutions that respect human rights and rule of law. This will allow us to mediate our differences peacefully and to ensure lasting progress."⁴⁷ Abiy's words and actions provided the ONLF a clear indication that the government sought a way out of this long held conflict.

The ONLF had made clear their willingness to find a way out of the conflict through years of internationally facilitated talks. They too clung to a zero-sum approach focused on self-determination, but that focus had caused rifts within the organization over the years:

Many Ogaadeni are now placing peace and economic well-being—trade and development—above the ONLF's struggle for self-determination. Even Ogaadeni intellectuals agree that improvements in political governance, in respect for human rights, and more accountability by local and regional

⁴⁶ Jon Temin and Yoseph Badwaza, "Aspirations and Realities in Africa: Ethiopia's Quiet Revolution." *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (2019), 143-144. <https://search-proquest-com.lomc.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/aspirations-realities-africa-ethiopias-quiet/docview/2267373335/se-2?accountid=14746>.

⁴⁷ Maggie Fick, "Ethiopia Prime Minister Calls for Multiparty Democracy." *Reuters.com*, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics-idUSKBN1KC0LM>.

government, would diffuse much of the anger and anxiety that fuels the insurgency.⁴⁸

As the stalemate clearly showed, the ONLF were weary after years of conflict and oppressive government tactics and were under pressure from their constituents to find an alternative path. As they altered their zero-sum approach to self-determination to address ‘root causes of conflict’ in the 2018 negotiations, they allowed themselves to present a way out.

Mutually Perceived Way Out

The peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea perhaps offered the most significant evidence that a mutually perceived way out was becoming ripe. As a proxy of the Eritrean government’s conflict against Ethiopia, ending the ONLF conflict naturally took on greater importance. Eritrea’s involvement in helping facilitate the final peace deal between the ONLF and Ethiopia is a strong indicator that the way out for both conflicts naturally happened together.

Resources also offered a potential path of mutual agreeance. A main motivation of the government may have been gaining access to natural resources in the region safely: “The conflict has been a major obstacle to development, including of one of the largest oil and gas reserves in the Horn of Africa.”⁴⁹ As a resource of the area, the ONLF was motivated by the region also benefiting from this large reserve. Safe resource exploration in exchange for a commitment to secure investments in their regional infrastructure and people was a strong motivating force for the ONLF.

The Kenya facilitation team’s addition being agreed upon by both parties was a significant step in the ripeness process. It allowed for the discovery of ‘constructive ambiguity’ to take hold as a way to work through the major impediments causing the stalemate. Abiy then

⁴⁸ Hagmann, *Talking Peace*, 41.

⁴⁹ Abdi, “Pathways to Peace”, 66.

emerged as a highly charismatic new leader and a spokesman the ONLF finally believed they could trust because of his actions. Abiy presented to the ONLF an example his predecessors could not achieve, a peace agreement with Eritrea.

The Ripe Moment

The peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia was a strong indicator of ripeness for the timing of the Ethiopia-ONLF peace agreement. It provided a perceived way out for both parties. The issues Ethiopia had with Eritrea and the issues Ethiopia had with the ONLF are deeply interconnected. If the need to find a way out of the stalemate with the ONLF was to exist, there was a high probability that Ethiopia would also have to overcome its stalemate with Eritrea. Indeed, part of the stalemate with Eritrea had to do with their support of the ONLF against the Ethiopian government. Their support of the ONLF served as a counter-balance to the Ethiopian government's support of opposition groups against the Eritrean government. Though not explicitly required, the timing for peace as a package deal was ripe for pursuing.⁵⁰

A window of opportunity opened after the shock Abiy's reform agenda applied to the system. After years of a slow grind towards reconciliation, a radical change in leadership presented a moment of ripeness that the parties were ready to seize. The stops and starts towards peace over the years may have been discouraging to the involved parties but only because they had taken place were the parties able to exploit this moment in time.

CONCLUSION

Zartman's theoretical concept of ripeness offers the best approach to explain the termination of conflict between the government of Ethiopia and the separatist ONLF movement. Ripeness and the importance of mediating at the right time offers the optimal explanation of the

⁵⁰ Matshanda, "Ethiopian Reforms", 11.

complex dynamics at play in this conflict more effectively than substance only based perspectives. The components of the mutually hurting stalemate and mutually perceived way out are clearly present in this case study. Ripeness theory provides a valuable framework for analyzing this three-decade old intrastate conflict and its ultimate termination through a 2018 peace agreement.

After decades of conflict with stops and starts towards peace, the time was ripe for bold action. Abiy rightly recognized his desire to make Ethiopia a strong regional and African leader required first the resolution of these long-enduring conflicts. Rather than approaching the stalemate as being ripe for winning, as many of his predecessors did, he worked with the ONLF to identify the fundamental principles to make the conflict ripe for resolution. ONLF leadership, weary from decades of conflict, also recognized in Abiy's reform agenda that the time was right to settle the conflict and gain much need investment in the Ogaden region. The parties endured a protracted stalemate, presented the proper way out, and struck when the time was ripe. Ripeness theory best describes the process that led to the termination of the decades-old conflict between the Ethiopian government and the ONLF.

POSTSCRIPT

In early November 2020, conflict broke out in Ethiopia's Tigray regional state, resulting in military operations, significant population displacement, and a growing humanitarian crisis. USAID estimates at least 4 million people in Tigray will require emergency food assistance in 2021. This conflict has the potential to upset regional stability to include the 2018 peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea and in South Sudan with the significant influx of displaced peoples. The conflict is a result of long festering strains between PM Abiy and the

TPLF who had been the primary force in Ethiopian politics since the government overthrow of 1991.⁵¹

Although major military operations have not taken place since December 2020, there is still a significant crisis at hand and no sign of resolution between the parties. As ripeness theory proved useful in analyzing an earlier conflict between the government and an estranged group, following a similar structure here could benefit both parties. There is significantly more international pressure to resolve this current conflict. Given Abiy's goal of increasing Ethiopia's international influence, hopefully both parties can recognize the elements of a stalemate and a mutually perceived way out much quicker to focus on addressing the substantial humanitarian crisis it created.

⁵¹ USAID, "Ethiopia – Tigray Conflict", https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/02.03.2021_Tigray_Fact_Sheet_1_0.pdf

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