

THE EZLN AND TPLF: SO CLOSE, YET SO FAR APART

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### **Abstract**

For multiple reasons, rebel groups face difficulties in challenging the state. They often need to form coalitions with other groups to pose a significant threat. Rebel groups frequently organize around ethnicities, but when forming coalitions they might have to collaborate beyond their primary ethnicity, which can bring further problems. Rebel groups can utilize ideology, such as Marxism, as a way to ease collaboration between their members. This is the case with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) of Mexico and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) of Ethiopia. Both groups have mobilized different ethnicities largely through the usage of ideology, specifically feminism, democracy, and Marxism. They have each achieved notable successes in organizing, but have seen tremendously different outcomes. The EZLN has generally remained consistent to their ideology and their multiethnic character, while the TPLF has not, instead becoming an authoritarian organization devoid of legitimate multiethnic representation. These divergent outcomes in terms of ideological consistency and commitment may be due, at least in part, to their internal governing structures as well as the role of external influence. The similarities in how the groups mobilized ethnic groups through non-ethnic ideology, and the differences in how they have turned out, provides insight into the role that ideology can play in organizing different groups of people.

## Introduction

Rebel groups tend to be weaker and less well supplied compared to the states which they are fighting. Because of this, rebel groups often need to develop coalitions to strengthen their position against the state. In many circumstances, rebel groups organize around ethnic lines, as most civil wars since World War II have been based around ethnicity (Denny and Walter, 2014). But when an ethnic group is not large enough to support a rebel group capable of achieving their goals, the group may be required to form coalitions with different ethnicities. For a variety of reasons, it is difficult to achieve coalitions between different ethnic groups, such as lower levels of trust between different ethnicities. One of the ways for a group to bridge this gap is through non-ethnic ideology, such as Marxism. Rebel groups attempting to utilize this strategy might argue that anything that divides ethnic groups is secondary to a larger, underlying problem, like capitalism. Two organizations that have somewhat successfully used this strategy, but with drastically different results, are the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) of Mexico and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) of Ethiopia.

These two groups share numerous similarities that warrant their comparison. First of all, they both are rebel groups which were founded before the end of the Cold War and continue today, with the EZLN being founded in 1983 and the TPLF being founded in 1975. Both organizations have attempted to appeal to multiple ethnicities to achieve their goals. Their multiethnic character is despite the fact that both groups are primarily centered on the interests of one group of people, with the EZLN focusing on indigenous Mexicans and the TPLF focusing on the Tigray. Maybe recognizing the difficulty in organizing/appealing to multiple ethnic groups, both organizations made non-ethnic ideological appeals. Most significantly, both organizations advocated for Marxist ideologies, despite neither being associated with or supported by the

USSR. They also both advocated democratic and feminist philosophies. By combining Marxism, democracy, and feminism, the EZLN and TPLF increased their ability to appeal beyond their primary ethnic groups.

However, despite some significant similarities between the groups, there are many things that differentiate them. One way these differences become obvious is through closer analysis of their similarities. For instance, both of these groups promote democracy, but the kind of democracy they advocate for differs substantially. As well as that, while leftism plays an important role in both group's ideologies, the TPLF would later drift away from this towards a more capitalistic ideology. These differences in ideology have had a material effect on how the groups have developed. When the TPLF controlled the Ethiopian government from 1991 to 2018, they operated as an authoritarian state which barely represented any of their previous ideological stances, like ethnic equality motivated by Marxism. Although the EZLN and TPLF could hardly be more different today, both groups have achieved impressive levels of success. Both groups survive today and continue to hold some amount of power in their regions, and the TPLF managed to achieve the ultimate goal of control of the national government for a period. This success motivates inquiry into the similar ways the groups mobilized different ethnic groups, and the different results they have achieved. Their similarities and differences can provide insight into the role non-ethnic ideology can play in mobilizing different ethnicities.

### **Background Research**

Rebel groups usually face a steep battle when it comes to challenging the state. In comparison to governments, rebel groups tend to be armed with less weapons, less well/consistently funded, and have a more difficult time appealing to third parties, among other disadvantages (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Huang, 2016). Due to these asymmetries, rebel

groups must compensate. One way groups may do this is by building a coalition of different groups similarly aggrieved by the government. Coalitions can manifest as explicit military alliances or as tacit coordination between different groups. One issue that limits coalition building is commitment, since rebels can struggle to trust their allies' willingness to stick by them (Blair et al., 2022). Numerous factors influence whether rebel coalitions will form. For example, groups of relatively similar power are more likely to ally than groups with large gaps in power (Steinwand and Metternich, 2020). One of the largest positive factors for different groups to ally is shared ethnicity (Steinwand and Metternich, 2020). However, in some circumstances, rebel groups perceive that to achieve their aims they must appeal to multiple ethnic groups, which can open up new difficulties.

Ethnicity is a significant cleavage between groups in many conflict areas across the world. Between 1945 and 1998, of the 709 identified minority ethnic groups around the world, 100 of them had members engage in ethnic rebellion versus the state (Fearon, 2006). The existence of hostility between ethnicities is explained in a number of different methods. Primordialists believe conflict is rooted in memories of long standing historical enmity, advocates of a "clash of civilizations" theory believe conflict is based in irreconcilable cultural differences between different group, others believe changes caused by modernization drives ethnic competition, and some believe it is driven by ethnic elites (Sambanis, 2001). Some reasons why ethnicity can be a difficult barrier to cross are cultural and linguistic differences, as well as generally less trust of non-coethnics (Fearon and Laitin, 1996; Habyarimana et al., 2009; Dinesen et al., 2020; Larson, 2017; Kaufman, 1996). These issues are often presented as reasons why ethnic conflict is so common, but it can also explain why multi-ethnic rebel coalitions can be difficult to establish. Ethnic leaders tend to be reluctant to share any sort of power with other

ethnicities, but will do it when the other option is to not have any power at all (Nomikos, 2021). One way in which groups can overcome the barriers of ethnicity is through the force of ideology.

Ideology creates an overarching set of ideas for different ethnic groups to focus on, rather than the differences between ethnic groups. Ideology can serve as a powerful unifying force, regardless of if ethnicity is a relevant cleavage, as it can ease collaboration in numerous ways (Blair et al., 2022; Gade et al., 2019; Walter, 2017). Shared ideology of a rebel group's members helps produce resilience in the face of state repression (Blair et al., 2022). Shared ideology can help overcome the issue of commitment between different rebel groups, as rebels have stronger reason to trust their allies will not betray them (Keels and Wiegand, 2020; Blair et al., 2022). Blair et al., 2022 finds that the positive effects of ideology on an alliance staying together are greater in material alliances (like the TPLF and EZLN) rather than mere rhetorical ones (Blair et al., 2022). Some research suggests that ideology can be an even stronger uniting factor for formal alliances than ethnicity, although it depends on the circumstances of the conflict (Balcells et al., 2022).

Researchers have identified multiple different methods of identifying ideologies. In a codebook by the University of Gothenburg's V-Dem Institute, they define the ideologies of political parties along the lines of numerous different factors, such as their stances on issues like LGBT or women's equality, or their economic positions on a left-right scale (Lindberg et al., 2022). Ideological analysis of political parties is similar to that of rebel groups, but it might be easier to determine political parties' "real" positions due to the fact that they usually can operate within the state apparatus rather than opposing it. Using a dataset of 232 rebel groups from 1989 to 2011, Soules, 2023 finds that most rebels make some sort of ideological appeal, from anti-government rhetoric to women's rights to Islamism (Soules, 2023). By far the most common

ideological appeal made by groups during this period were ethnonationalist, which tracks with the previously mentioned findings that most post-WW2 civil wars were along ethnic lines (Soules, 2023; Denny and Walter, 2014). However, for reasons that should be obvious, ethnonationalism is probably a bad strategy to unite different ethnic groups, and so it is no surprise the EZLN and TPLF went beyond their ethnic ideologies to garner support. Balcells et al., 2022 note Marxism and Islamism as the two most prominent ideologies which focus on the exploitation of groups of people without dividing them along ethnic lines, as they emphasize the exploitation of lower social classes and Muslims respectively (Balcells et al., 2022). The Marxist rhetoric of the EZLN and TPLF fits within this logic.

Perhaps recognizing the issues associated with organizing different groups of people, particularly different ethnic groups, the EZLN and TPLF have utilized nonethnic ideologies to ease collaboration. The primary general ideology utilized by both organizations is Marxism.<sup>1</sup> Within this Marxist framework, both groups also emphasize democracy and women's rights, which further their appeal beyond their primary ethnic group. Although both groups leveraged non-ethnic ideology for similar means, their different levels of commitment to their ideologies has resulted in dramatically different paths for each group.

### **The The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN)**

The EZLN was formed in 1983 out of members of the National Liberation Forces (FLN), a Marxist student-based rebel group. Members of the FLN decided to create the EZLN as a way to regroup themselves in response to their near-destruction resulting from Mexican

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<sup>1</sup> The exact forms of Marxist ideology that each group advocated are different. The EZLN's ideology was/is influenced by an eclectic mix of leftist sources, including Mao, Guevara, and Trotsky, but ultimately this blending of thought created an ideology unique to the Zapatistas (Henck, 2018; Cedillo, 2012b). The TPLF's ideology similarly came from multiple places, but was influenced by traditional Marxism-Leninism, then later Hoxhaism, and also bore some similarity to Stalinism (People's Voice, 1990; Berhe, 2008; Admasie and Fantaye, 2021). The exact differences between the leftist ideologies of the groups will not generally be a focus of this paper, but it should be noted that their ideologies are not identical.

counterinsurgency efforts in the 1970s (Gunderson, 2013; Cedillo, 2012a). This near-destruction ultimately led to a reevaluation of strategy, leading to indigenous people becoming the core group they focused on (Gunderson, 2013). Originally, the FLN and EZLN were not ethnically focused, viewing the indigenous struggle as just another part of class struggle (Marcos and Le Bot, 1997; Oikonomakis, 2019; Gunderson, 2013). By interacting with indigenous people, the EZLN/FLN's ideology changed and became a mix of leftist thinking with indigenous thinking, creating a new ideology of *neozapatismo* (Khasnabish, 2010). A 23-25 January, 1993 meeting between EZLN, FLN, and indigenous leaders consecrated this change in the group's ideas by shifting the power in the organization from urban latinos to rural indigenous people (Oikonomakis, 2019).

From that point on, the EZLN's ideology would clearly be indigenous first and leftist second, although the two ideologies would be so intermingled that they could not be separated. The supremacy of indigeneity in their ideology can be seen through their rhetoric during the 1994 Zapatista uprising, in which the EZLN took control over much of the southern state of Chiapas. During this conquest, Subcomandante Marcos,<sup>2</sup> the EZLN's main spokesperson, declared "Don't forget this: This is an ethnic movement!" (Henck, 2018). The leftist class warfare rhetoric of the EZLN altered due to their organization around indigenous people and the economic characteristics of their new base. For example, because most of the indigenous people in Mexico were *campesinos* (peasants), their base was not the industrial proletariat working class, as is prescribed as the base of revolutionary action by orthodox Marxism (Khasnabish, 2010).

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<sup>2</sup> Subcomandante Marcos has gone by Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano (often shortened without Insurgente) since 2014 (Galeano, 2014). However, I will continue to refer to him as Subcomandante Marcos as that is what he is most commonly known as.

Although the EZLN has not drifted from the idea that they are primarily an ethnic rebel group, that does not mean that they solely appeal to one group of people. First of all, although they broadly market themselves as representing the indigenous in general, multiple groups of indigenous people constitute their ranks. Different indigenous groups who serve and lead in the EZLN include the Tzeltal, Tzotzil, and the Ch'ol (Collins, 2010; Godelmann, 2014). The multiethnic identity of the EZLN is reflected in their ardent stand for the preservation of the languages and cultural traditions of different ethnic groups (Máiz, 2010). As well as the multiethnic indigenous base, the EZLN also appeals to non-indigenous people as well, who they view as a valuable part of their movement (EZLN, 1996). Compared to other indigenous movements in Latin America, the EZLN has been notably inclusive towards latinos being involved in their movement (Mattiace, 1997). Perhaps one reason for this is their origin in the urban latino FLN as well as the EZLN's most prominent leader, Subcomandante Marcos, being latino.

The EZLN enhances its cross-ethnic appeal through women's issues. Subcomandante Marcos stated in 1996 that, "Tomorrow... If there is to be one, it will be made with the women, and above all, by them," reflecting the EZLN's strong rhetorical support for women's rights (Marcos, 1996). This support is not only in rhetoric, however, as the organization also has enacted material changes to help women. Before they even declared war on the Mexican government in January, 1994, the EZLN had developed their Women's Revolutionary Laws (Marcos, 2014). These laws included such things as women having the right to work with a fair salary, women having the right to decide how many children they have, and women having the right to serve leadership positions in the revolutionary struggle and achieve military rank in the armed forces (EZLN, 1994). The EZLN also has worked towards improving female based

infrastructure in Chiapas, such as by building women's clinics (Marcos, 2014). These changes, although focused on indigenous women, provide benefits to women generally in Mexico.

The next element of the EZLN's ideology which is utilized to appeal beyond ethnic lines is democracy. Their conception of democracy was, and is, focused on the power of the people (Esteva, 1999; Skarbek, 2014). This can also be seen through the fact that they advocate for autonomy generally, but specifically for smaller scale communities, like municipalities (Mattiace, 1997; Landau, 1996; Skarbel, 2014). Subcomandante Marcos stated early on that their mission is not to seize power nationally, like Castro or Lenin, but to help people, particularly indigenous people, transform their lives on a smaller scale (Landrau, 1996). Although they did not wish to seize power nationally, one of the EZLN's strongest stances has been its resistance to the corruption within the Mexican democratic system, specifically through party politics (Skarbek, 2014; Veltmeyer, 2000). They have focused on how this process disadvantages the indigenous, but they clearly have utilized this rhetoric to draw attention to a problem which affects all Mexicans. Their advocacy of community-based democracy is based around providing voices to historically marginalized groups, like the indigenous, but also provides a broader appeal.

The EZLN justifies its cross-ethnic, feminist, and democratic appeals largely through the overarching rhetoric of Marxism, which serves as a unifying force between the distinct groups the EZLN strives to represent. In their view, the oppressive capitalist forces that restrict indigenous people also harm Mexicans in general, motivating their cross-ethnic appeals (Mattiace, 1997). The inclusion of women in the movement also is ideologically based in leftism. According to them, the oppression of women, particularly indigenous women, in Mexican society is rooted in capitalist exploitation (Marcos, 2014). There is a history of the capitalist class

of landowners sexually abusing indigenous women workers, with rape sometimes a requirement for continued work (Marcos, 2014). This violent objectification of women is neither new nor extinct, and the EZLN argues that the sexism of the bourgeois class has spread to the minds of the rest of the country, making it a more pervasive issue (Marcos, 2014). Although the EZLN roots its feminist struggle in the ideas of class struggle, they explicitly do not consider it to be inferior, instead arguing that men and women, and women and socialism, go together perfectly (Marcos, 2014). The EZLN's democratic values also are justified through Marxist/anti-capitalist ideas. Their advocacy of democracy is in opposition to the perceived undemocratic effects of neoliberalism, and how it has become entrenched in the Mexican system (Watson, 2002; Veltmeyer, 2000). By utilizing multi-ethnicity, feminism, and democratic values mixed with Marxist thought, the EZLN enhances their group's appeal by universalizing their ideology beyond the struggles of just the indigenous people.

The EZLN is a unique organization for many reasons. The EZLN's primary representation of the indigenous (which are themselves a group of multiple different ethnicities) while still appealing to the struggles of non-indigenous people is a distinct trait. They also have been sure to include the female struggle as an integral part of their organization. Both these traits speak to the fact that the EZLN found it beneficial to appeal cross-nationally, which is further cemented by their democratic elements. The way that they appealed to these disparate groups, men and women, indigenous and non-indigenous, was largely through the utilization of leftist rhetoric, indicating a belief in the ability for leftism to organize across barriers. The TPLF shares a leftism motivated, cross-ethnic, feminist, democratic ideology, but it will be seen that it would manifest quite differently.

### **Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)**

The TPLF was formed in 1975 in the wake of political unrest following the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 by the Marxist-Leninist junta known as the Derg (Duffield and Prendergast, 1994). In particular, the TPLF emerged from the radical leftist student movements that had been bubbling in the country since the 1960s (Young, 1997; Loukeris, 2001). As its name suggests, the TPLF is and was focused on the issues of the Tigray people, who primarily reside in the Tigray regional state in northern Ethiopia (Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1983; Berhe, 2004). The TPLF believed that the Tigray people had been oppressed by multiple governments of Ethiopia, and so formed the organization as a way to fight for their cause (Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1983; Berhe, 2004). However, similar to how the EZLN did not only appeal to indigenous people, the TPLF did not exclusively appeal to the Tigray people.

The student movements that the TPLF emerged from espoused pan-Ethiopian unity as a way to combat the oppressiveness of Haile Selassie and then the Derg (Young, 1997). The naming of the TPLF as an explicitly Tigray group was chosen to reflect the geographic and ethnic makeup of the movement (Young, 1997). Still, they rhetorically supported the self-determination of all ethnic groups in the country, even up to the point of secession if absolutely necessary (Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1983; Berhe, 2008). From early in its lifetime, the TPLF had a pan-Ethiopian element, despite their name suggesting that they focus on only the Tigray. They established the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition in 1989 in an attempt to officialize their pan-Ethiopian stance (Berhe, 2008; Tsega, 2018; EPRDF, 2005). When the EPRDF took power in 1991, it consisted of four groups: the TPLF, Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO), and the Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement

(EDORM), although the EDORM would dissolve soon after formation (Vaughan, 2003; Berhe, 2020). They would later be joined by the Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) in 1992, then known as the Southern Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Front (SEPDF) (EPRDF, 2005). The EPDM primarily represented the Amhara, and would eventually transform into the Amhara Democratic Party (Pateman, 1991; Ademe and Seid, 2022; Gudina, 2011). The OPDO nominally represented the Oromo people, specifically the Shoa Oromo (Tronvoll and Haggmann, 2011). Finally, SEPDM represented many groups of people from Ethiopia's Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (Arriola and Lyons, 2016). The EPRDF, which was practically controlled by the TPLF, reflected the group's national ambitions, and showed that despite their monoethnic identity they were not just interested in their group, at least ostensibly. By tying themselves with the Oromo and Amhara, the TPLF controlled EPRDF now represented the two largest ethnic groups in the country, despite the Tigray people only representing roughly 6% of the population (Tessema, 2020; Sibuh, 2022). As well as that, the TPLF appealed to both Orthodox Christians and Muslims through rhetoric of religious freedom (Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1983). The Derg's atheism and dispossession of Muslim landowners enabled the TPLF to advertise itself as a liberator, broadening its appeal regardless of religion (Young, 1997; Berhe, 2008). However, despite the EPRDF's multiethnic identity, the TPLF would never lose their minority identification, and, as will be discussed later, their commitment to multiethnic unity is highly questionable compared to the EZLN (Tadesse and Young, 2003).

As well as their representation of multiple ethnic groups, the EPRDF/TPLF also have attempted to appeal to women (Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1983). According to the TPLF, around 1/3rd of their fighters in the mid 1980s were women (Bennett, 1983; Young, 1997). This enabled women to achieve some level of economic independence as well as greater freedom to

discuss social issues (Tadesse and Young, 2003; Berhe, 2008). However, this was also limited by patriarchal attitudes within Tigray at the time, largely due to the influence from the Orthodox and Muslim establishments (Tadesse and Young, 2003; Berhe, 2008; Young, 1997). Despite some limitations, the TPLF did change legal processes for the benefit of women, such as by raising the minimum age of marriage, increasing access to divorce, and improving education for women (Bennett, 1983; Veale, 2013; Young, 1997). Land reform conducted by the TPLF also benefited women (Berhe, 2008; Veale, 2013). As well as that, within the corps of the TPLF, female soldiers were common and sexual violence was rare, at least before the TPLF/EPRDF took over the government in 1991 (Berhe, 2008; Veale, 2013). When the EPRDF controlled the government, they also created the Ministry of Women Affairs, the first such government organization in Ethiopia (Semela, 2019).

The TPLF's organization of people beyond the Tigray also was done through democratic ideas. At various times before they took power, the TPLF advertised themselves as the only, or one of the only, democratic forces in Ethiopia (Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1983; Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1984; People's Voice, 1990). They also advocated for autonomy of communities through this democratic framework (Lyons, 2021). This manifested through a federalist approach to government (Loukeris, 2001).

Like the EZLN, the TPLF based its multi-ethnic, feminist, and democratic ideas in leftist anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist ideology. As the Mexican people in general are affected by the same ails of capitalism and imperialism that plague the indigenous people, the same is true of Ethiopian people generally and the Tigray in particular. "The prime enemies of the Ethiopian people are feudalism, imperialism and bureaucratic capitalism which has now evolved to the stage of state capitalism. Among these, the fascist state of the state bourgeoisie and its sustainer,

Soviet imperialism, are the foremost enemies of the people,” reads their party program from 1983 (Tigray People’s Liberation Front, 1983). Before the TPLF took power in 1991 through the EPRDF, they would criticize both American and Soviet imperialism as oppressive to the Ethiopian people (Tigray People’s Liberation Front, 1983). In this early literature of the TPLF, they do not single out the Tigray as the sole oppressed entity in Ethiopia, but instead suggest a sort of cross-ethnic oppression among Ethiopians. However, somewhat confusingly, they would also espouse secessionist rhetoric in this early stage, but they would eventually back away from this viewpoint (before returning to it in recent years) (Vaughan, 2003; Berhe, 2008). The TPLF’s support of women also was delivered through the lens of Marxist struggle. Since the leftist revolution the TPLF sought was nationally guided, they recognized it would be ideologically inconsistent to exclude women (Berhe, 2008; Young, 1997; Semela et al., 2019). According to one of the female fighters, the focus of the TPLF’s women’s association was class struggle because “it unites everybody, not just women, not just men - they are not separated.” (Hammond, 1989). The women’s movement within the TPLF, however, was treated as subordinate to the class based revolution that was the group’s primary focus (Berhe, 2008). The democracy the TPLF desired also was underlied by their Marxist ideas. They pushed for “revolutionary democracy,” which bears more similarity to the Leninist idea of a vanguard party representing the people, although not through competitive elections (Berhe, 2008; Abbink, 2015; Gebregziabher, 2019; Loukeris, 2001). This difference from the EZLN’s community-based democratic ideas, which were also informed by leftism, would lead to significant differences between the groups.

In general, the TPLF differs from the EZLN due to a lack of consistency to their purported ideology, which ultimately has led to them betraying their multi-ethnic base. Although

there seems to be similarity in how the groups mobilized their diverse bases through cross-ethnic leftist appeals, the TPLF's multicultural ideology appears in retrospect to be much more opportunistic rather than based upon any legitimate belief. First of all, although the TPLF advocated for self determination for all groups early in their life, even at this nascent stage their commitment to such ideas is questionable. In the 1970s, the group condoned anti-Amhara discourse and downplayed/ignored atrocities against the Amhara, all while stressing the class unity between the ethnicities (Berhe, 2008). These sentiments were strongest among the secessionist factions within the TPLF (Berhe, 2008). Furthermore, although the formation of the EPRDF was motivated by a desire to appeal nationally, their commitment to legitimately representing the Oromo and Amhara is questionable. The OPDO was not created as a representative organization for the Oromo people, but instead it was created out of Oromo prisoners of war captured by the TPLF (Tareke, 1991; Jalata, 1996). The OPDO was practically a puppet organization of the TPLF and, in the view of many Oromos, only harmed the Oromo people by cannibalizing groups that actually represented the Oromo (Hassen, 2002; Jalata, 1996; Gudina, 2007; McCracken, 2004). Because of the OPDO's backing by the TPLF/EPRDF, organizations deemed more representative by the Oromo people, namely the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) stopped running for election (McCracken, 2004). The EPRDF also thwarted attempts by Oromo groups to secede, despite constitutionally protecting succession (McCracken, 2004). The EPDM's ties to the Amhara ethnicity is also largely through influence of the TPLF. The EPDM originally had a pan-Ethiopian ideology, not espousing support for only one ethnicity, but became an Amhara focused organization at the behest of the TPLF after the fall of the Derg (Ademe and Seid, 2022). Similar to the OPDO, the EPDM's actual commitment to the Amhara people is questionable, as it operated mainly as a puppet of the EPRDF (Engedayehu,

1996). This is even more so the case considering the atrocities committed against the Amhara under EPRDF governance. While the Tigray led EPRDF ruled Ethiopia, the regional state of Tigray expanded into the Amhara regional state, including by annexing the lands of Gonder and Wollo (McCracken, 2004). As well as that, the TPLF and EPRDF have been accused of marginalizing the Amhara people through organized ethnic cleansing campaigns (Hunegaw, 2017; Atnafu, 2018).

The TPLF/EPRDF's relationship with women also is fraught despite their claims to represent women. Although the TPLF structure was empowering towards women, they nonetheless were still subordinate to the male dominated structure of the organization (Berhe, 2008; Veale, 2003). The women's organizations associated with the TPLF before taking power were subordinate to this male dominated structure, and thus the women had limited power over the women's organization (Berhe, 2008). The idea was that the liberation of women should be secondary to the armed revolution, contrasting with the EZLN's notion of both fights being equally important (Berhe, 2008; Marcos, 2014). This continued after the TPLF/EPRDF took power in Ethiopia. While in power, the TPLF/EPRDF continued to dominate women's organizations in Ethiopia (Biseswar, 2008). This was similar to policies under the Derg where leadership in "revolutionary" women's organizations were practically just decided by their loyalty to the ruling party (Biseswar, 2008). As well as that, years of EPRDF rule left women, including women who fought in the revolution, out of high ranking positions, such as those in government (Veale, 2003; Semela, 2019). The women who fought with the TPLF tended to receive higher levels of education, but found that this education did not translate into applicable job skills (Veale, 2003). In the period that the EPRDF has ruled Ethiopia, women's educational attainment has fallen behind levels in comparable major sub-Saharan countries (Semela, 2019).

The EPRDF's relationship to women was defined by how women could help the state, rather than how the state could help women (Biseswar, 2008). This indicates that, for whatever reason, the TPLF/EPRDF perceived that appealing to women no longer was as important after taking power.

One could argue that, unlike the TPLF's commitment to multi-ethnicity and women's rights, they have remained consistent with their democratic ideas. This could be true due to the fact that the democracy they originally advocated for came from the illiberal idea of a vanguard party, meaning that their disallowance of free elections while they ruled is not necessarily inconsistent (Gudina, 2011; Kassa, 2020). However, considering that the idea of a vanguard party is clearly based in Marxism makes their democratic claims more dubious since they abandoned their Marxist rhetoric after coming to power (Tadesse and Young, 2003). Their abandonment of leftist ideology as soon as they achieved power partially underlies their low commitment to multi-ethnicity, feminism, and democracy, since all of these ideas were largely justified and advertised through the Marxist lens.

However, despite the questionable commitment to their ideology, the TPLF did obviously see the benefit in advertising themselves cross-nationally. They found Marxist ideology to be an effective tool to organize different groups and to justify their policies. This is somewhat similar to how the EZLN utilized Marxism, but the results have been drastically different, which can be explained by numerous different factors.

### **Explaining the Differences**

The EZLN and the TPLF bear numerous similarities despite no direct link between the groups. Their Marxist ideologies are superficially similar. They came into being in similar time periods, with the TPLF being founded in 1975 and the EZLN in 1983, and both originating from

Marxist student movements of the 1960s. Despite this era, neither group was supported by the dominant communist power, the USSR, nor did they cease to exist after the end of the Cold War when communism became a less powerful organizing ideology. If anything, they achieved the apex of their power after the end of the Cold War. As well as that, they both appeal to multiple ethnic groups despite their explicit focus on one group. Their national appeals are enhanced by their considerations of the feminist struggle and democracy. Their support of multiethnic, women's, and democratic causes also are ideologically justified in similar manners, primarily through the usage of leftism.

However, despite these similarities, both groups have panned out rather differently. The EZLN continues to espouse a similar ideology to the one they always have, that being the Marxist, indigenous, feminist, democratic, community focused ideology of *neozapatismo*. They still are important players in southern Mexico and provide services to local residents, such as justice, healthcare, and education (Rebrii, 2020). Their communally minded ideology manifests in their governance, as most of their functions have some form of democratic accountability (Rebrii, 2020). An example of this are the police being elected by the people (Rebrii, 2020). The EZLN itself is quick to admit that it has not accomplished nearly everything that they have wanted to. Despite the fact that they have attempted to appeal nationally, their movement has not successfully resulted in national change, with most of its influence still in the same areas they conquered in the early 90s (Olvera, 2010; Skarbek, 2014). But despite these shortcomings, they nonetheless have remained steadfast in their ideology and mission.

On the other hand, the TPLF's ideological commitment has dramatically declined over time. As was mentioned earlier, the TPLF's representation of non-Tigrayans was questionable from early days in the organization's history, and especially so after they took over the

government in 1991. When the EPRDF reformed as the Prosperity Party in 2019, the TPLF did not choose to participate in the new multiethnic coalition now that it no longer was the dominant force, and has since been an ethnic separatist organization in active conflict with the government. During their period in power in the national government, the TPLF backed away from almost all of their previous ideological stances. This can be associated with their recession away from Marxism after they achieved government power, since Marxism underlied their other stances.

So, then why did these organizations end up so different? It is impossible to decide exactly what has led the EZLN to remain consistent to their ideology and the TPLF to drift away from its ideology. There are too many differences between the two groups, particularly because they are from vastly different countries, to explain why the EZLN remained consistent to their ideology and the TPLF to drift away from its ideology. However, there are some key factors that seem to have pushed the groups in different directions.

Firstly, a key difference in results is the authoritarian nature of the TPLF/EPRDF versus the strict anti-authoritarianism of the EZLN. This is manifests in many ways, including the groups' usage of fair elections and treatment of other ethnicities. This difference can be explained in part through their different conceptions of democracy. Although the TPLF advertised itself as "the only democratic force in Ethiopia" before taking power, they were not referring to liberal democracy, but instead revolutionary democracy based around a vanguard party (Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1983; Berhe, 2008; Abbink, 2015; Gebregziabher, 2019; Loukeris, 2001). This idea of a centralized democracy in one party manifested through how the party itself operated internally. Within the TPLF, the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT) served as the vanguard of the TPLF and effectively monopolized power within the group (Berhe, 2008). Future Ethiopian president and prime minister Meles Zenawi was the most dominant

person in the MLLT, and thus obtained authoritarian control over the TPLF (Berhe, 2008). When the EPRDF was formed, the TPLF dominated the coalition, meaning that one man (Meles Zenawi) had almost total control over one faction (MLLT) which had almost total control over one party (TPLF) which had almost total control over the EPRDF (Berhe, 2008; Lyons, 2021). The illiberal democratic character of the TPLF, which is rooted in both ideology and the structure of the party, is a strong explanation for the group's authoritarian twist during their control of the government. Upon becoming an authoritarian government, the TPLF no longer needed to worry as much about broad popular support and could renege on their previous commitments with nobody to stop them.

On the other hand, the EZLN represents democracy ideologically as well as in its structure. Their philosophy and action has focused on direct democracy, not representative democracy, and certainly not the vanguard democracy of the TPLF (Máiz, 2010; Watson, 2002). A stronger, more legitimate democratic character benefits minority groups, like indigenous people and women, and so the fact that the EZLN has operated more democratically can explain how they have maintained their ideology. Unlike the TPLF, the EZLN subordinates itself to the communities that it claims to serve. It serves the Clandestine Indian Revolutionary Committee (CCRI), a community elected committee of indigenous peoples (Collins, 2010; Landau, 1996). This subservience to the CCRI potentially limits the decision-making efficiency of the EZLN, but maintains their commitment to and reliance upon the communities that they serve (Watson, 2002).

Another factor explaining the direction the TPLF went is the influence of outside powers. The TPLF/EPRDF's primary opponent during its initial rebellion was the Soviet supported Derg government, which meant if the TPLF wanted support from superpowers they would have to

appeal to the United States. This marked a divergence from their previous rhetoric in which they criticized the influence of both the United States and the Soviet Union (Eritrean People's Liberation Front and Tigray People's Liberation Front, n.d.). The TPLF/EPRDF's desire/need to receive American support to overthrow the Derg forced them away from leftism (Admasie and Fantaye, 2021). The EZLN, on the other hand, never tried to court a power who was diametrically opposed to their ideology, which meant their commitment to leftism never had to decline for that reason. In fact, they have resisted aid from the Mexican government because of ideological opposition (Rebrii, 2020). They do receive support from international charitable organizations, however, but this does not seem to have diluted their ideology (Rebrii, 2020).

Another possible reason for the EZLN and the TPLF's divergent results are the differences in their goals. Although they sought national appeal, the EZLN never sought to take over the national government, rather they solely wanted autonomy in the indigenous communities in southern Mexico (Landau, 1996; Mattiace, 1997). On the other hand, the TPLF's goals varied depending on period, but often were more extreme than solely autonomy. As was mentioned earlier, a prominent faction in their early days advocated for succession (Berhe, 2008). Eventually, they backed away from this position, but it would return later. When they achieved national power, they constitutionally legitimized secession (Berhe, 2009; McCracken, 2004). Considering the fact that the TPLF has attempted to secede using this constitutional clause after losing power, it raises questions of if the TPLF created this clause solely to allow themselves to leave Ethiopia when things went south. The TPLF's obvious ambitions towards both national power and secession at different times mark a distinct difference in goals from the EZLN's mission of autonomy. These more lofty goals could explain the TPLF's authoritarian nature, as they had more wide-ranging things to achieve than the EZLN. It could be argued that

this does not reflect a difference in ideology between the two groups, and simply that the TPLF had the capacity relative to their government to seek such ambitious goals. No matter the cause, the different goals can partially explain the difference in results between the two groups.

There are plenty of other hypothetical reasons as to why the two groups differed that warrant further exploration. For instance, it could be worth considering if ethnicity is a more violently politicized issue in Ethiopia compared to Mexico. Although both countries are not lacking in ethnic violence throughout their history, perhaps at the time of each groups' incipience the ethnic issue in Ethiopia was more dangerous. The EZLN's and TPLF's relationship to the ethnicity associated with the ruling class, which in Mexico are the latinos/mestizos and in Ethiopia are the Amhara, could also be an explanation. Although the relationship between the indigenous of Mexico and the latinos has historically been fraught with conflict, the EZLN does not stoke the flames by encouraging conflict against the Latino ruling class because of their ethnicity. Instead, they support struggling latinos and welcome latino membership, including Subcomandante Marcos. The TPLF instead has internally expressed contempt towards the Amhara since their early days and enacted violence against them when coming to power, despite outwardly expressing ethnic peace.

### **Conclusion**

Rebel groups must cope with defeating a state which is often much more powerful than they are. One way that they do this is through establishing coalitions large enough to challenge the government. Coalition building is difficult for a number of reasons, such as commitment problems, and these issues only become greater when trying to build a coalition across ethnic lines. Ethnicity tends to be a significant cleavage in many conflict areas. So, rebels that seek to build a coalition, especially multiethnic coalitions, must find ways to hold multiple different

groups together. Ideology proves to be a powerful unifying force among rebels. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation of Mexico and the Tigray People's Liberation Front of Ethiopia are testaments to the ability for non-ethnic ideology to unite different groups. Each group advocated for women's rights and democracy, which were themselves used as parts of broader Marxist ideologies. This Marxist, feminist, democratic rhetoric eased collaboration between different ethnicities by stressing a larger issue to focus on that ethnic division. However, the EZLN has remained consistent with their ideology and multiethnic support, while the TPLF would mostly abandon their ideology and their multiethnic base. Numerous possible reasons for this divergence have been presented, such as the TPLF's more authoritarian structure and their eventual alliance with the United States. Further inquiry is required to parse out the exact causes of the differences. This paper should elucidate that although non-ethnic ideologies like Marxism can be remarkably effective in unifying different groups, the actual results of these groups could vary wildly depending on their commitment to the ideologies they advocate. Similar lines of inquiry should also be applied to other rebel groups that utilize non-ethnic ideology as a multiethnic unifier.

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