

‘Only Amharic or Leave Quick!’: Linguistic Genocide in the Western Tigray Region of Ethiopia

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Abstract : Language is a potent instrument that does not only serve the purpose of communication but also plays a pivotal role in shaping our cultural practices and identities. The right to choose one's language is a fundamental human right that helps to safeguard the integrity of both personal and communal identities. Language holds immense significance in Ethiopia, a nation with a diverse linguistic landscape that extends beyond mere communication to delineate administrative boundaries. Consequently, depriving Ethiopians of their linguistic rights represents a multifaceted punishment, more complex than food embargoes. In the aftermath of the civil war that shook Ethiopia in November 2020, displacing millions and resulting in the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives, concerns have been raised about the preservation of the indigenous Tigrayan language and culture. This is particularly true following the annexation of western Tigray into the Amhara region and the implementation of an Amharic-only language and culture education policy. This scholarly inquiry explores the intricacies surrounding the Amhara regional state's prohibition of Tigrayans' indigenous language and culture and the subsequent adoption of a monolingual and monocultural Amhara language and culture in western Tigray. The study adopts the linguistic genocide conceptual framework as an analytical tool to gain a deeper insight into the factors that contributed to and facilitated this significant linguistic and cultural shift. The research was conducted by interviewing ten teachers selected through a snowball sampling. Additionally, document analysis was performed to support the findings. The findings revealed that the push for linguistic and cultural assimilation was driven by various political and economic factors and the desire to promote a single language and culture policy. This process, often referred to as ‘Amharanization,’ aimed to homogenize the culture and language of the society. The Amhara authorities have enacted several measures in pursuit of their objectives, including the outlawing of the Tigrigna language, punishment for speaking Tigrigna, imposition of the Amhara language and culture, mandatory relocation, and even committing heinous acts that have inflicted immense physical and emotional suffering upon members of the Tigrayan community. Upon conducting a comprehensive analysis of the contextual factors, actions, intentions, and consequences, it has been posited that there may be instances of linguistic genocide taking place in the Western Tigray region. The present study sheds light on the severe consequences that could arise because of implementing monolingual and monocultural policies in multilingual areas. Through thoroughly scrutinizing the implications of such policies, this study provides insightful recommendations and directions for future research in this critical area.

Keywords : linguistic genocide, linguistic human right, mother tongue, Western Tigray

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