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The role of political elites in nation-building in contemporary Ethiopia, 1960-2020

Alene, G.A.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

POST-2018 ETHIOPIA: THE ELITE CHANGE AND THE RISKS OF POLITICAL REFORM

8.1 Introduction

This chapter focused on the recent political settlement and the proclaimed transition to democracy in Ethiopia since April 2018. Given the brief time, this can only be a preliminary assessment. The researcher wants to shed light on the circulation of the core governing elite constituencies that have shaped the new political landscape and the practical measures taken to address longstanding grievances, promote inclusivity, and reform key institutions in Ethiopia's political, security, and economic sectors. These efforts are crucial for fostering nation-building. An important aspect to consider is the consequence of these ongoing changes in Ethiopia's political system, democratization endeavors, and the nation-building process. Given the fluid nature of the political transition, any conclusions drawn must be seen as provisional.

However, it is imperative to examine the positive and negative consequences of the transition and elite reconfiguration since April 2018, specifically focusing on the role of the elite in nation-building. To evaluate effectively this role, assessing whether the elite reconfiguration has successfully addressed historical grievances, fostered inclusivity, and promoted a sense of national unity is necessary. Furthermore, it is essential to analyze the extent to which the elite has championed democratization, upheld human rights, and implemented inclusive policies. Evaluating the elite's contribution to drive economic reforms, reducing poverty, and creating better future opportunities for the population is also essential. Additionally, the elite's impact on social cohesion and ethnic relations should be considered. By investigating these dimensions, the researcher can gain insights into the positive contributions made by the post-2018 power elite in nation-building and identify potential challenges and pitfalls.

8.2 State Building Efforts and the Democratic Transition Dilemma in Ethiopia

State building involves establishing and strengthening political, economic, and social institutions essential for long-term socio-economic development and national-political survival. It encompasses creating new institutions and reinforcing existing ones, playing a crucial role in the forging of a national political community across regional, ethnic, and religious differences within a state. In several developing countries, particularly in Africa, state fragility, in extreme cases, state failure has been attributed to weak institutions, perpetuating widespread poverty, hindering democratic transition, and leading to governance failure (Fukuyama, 2004). According to Scott (2007), state building can be viewed as a subset of development, encompassing mechanisms for service delivery, tax reforms, civil service reform, infrastructure development, promotion of democratization, the establishment of a multi-party system, implementation of responsible public financial management, and development of effective conflict management mechanisms. Krasner and Risse (2014) argued that the success of state-building can be determined by factors such as the legitimacy of the actors involved, task complexity, institutionalization, and the availability of adequate resources.

Since 1991, the EPRDF has controlled the government. The party built a political structure centered on ethnicity as a political identity, purportedly with representation for each 'ethnic group.' Once in state power, the TPLF changed its political stance several times. Even though it was a party/front representing about 6.5% of the total population and one of the minority groups, it controlled national politics for almost three decades within and through the EPRDF (Medhane & Young, 2003). The coalition experienced multiple legitimacy and ideological crises throughout its three decades of dominance. Through moments known as *Tehadeso*, translated as 'renewal,' it overcame most of these crises.

As one of the interviewees (Respondent no. 45, 2021) noted, "... EPRDF's reign was successful because of its political platform's unity, its members' dedication, including the vanguard cadre and party members, and its ability to adapt to the dynamic situation". The EPRDF improvised its policies on the unfolding global political situation on separate occasions (Aalen, 2020). For instance, it discarded Marxism and embraced a free market economy (though it remained party-led) in response to the significantly changing global order (see Paulos 2003). It reduced the threat posed by the insurgent OLF, repelled Islamist incursions from Sudan and

Somalia, defeated Eritrea in the 1998-2000 war, achieved impressive socioeconomic development, took radical steps toward state decentralization based on the principle of (ethnic) self-determination, and initially made progress—though uneven—toward democratizing the nation (Medhane & Young 2003).

After seizing state power, the EPRDF maintained a 'closed-access' order, which involved politically excluding rival elites and monopolizing rents through ethnic patronage (Chanie, 2007). These changes created institutional barriers to growth that continue to impact Ethiopia today. One of the respondents from Prosperity Party gave the following argument:

The EPRDF implemented a federal system to address longstanding power struggles arising from the centralization of political power and the marginalization of certain groups. This was achieved by decentralizing power to regional states, allowing for self-governance and the promotion of ethnic languages and cultures. In addition to establishing autonomous regional states to address local issues, the 1995 Constitution also emphasized the principle of shared governance in national affairs, ensuring fair representation in national decision-making bodies (Respondent no. 45, 2022).

The theoretical emphasis on self-rule and shared rule was there, and the rights were protected by the Constitution, even though EPRDF's federalism had many flaws and was criticized for being a symbolic federalism because the regions did not have complete autonomy. However, the EPRDF party structure, which served as a control tool, replaced the function of state institutions at the regional and national levels. Self-contradictory practices marked EPRDF's reign because of competing interests in centralizing power through party structures and the devolution of authority to the regional states. These practices fueled the nation's cycle of instability and weak state institutions (Respondent 31, 2022). Another political figure in an interview asserted that:

After over thirty years in power, the EPRDF's attempts to form a state failed to meet society's expectations. Neither had it established a system of shared governance that could promote national unity by tolerating diversity, nor did it produce a workable federalism that would strengthen regional autonomy. Instead, it fostered ethnic nationalism, which emphasizes diversity and 'multiculturalism.' Instead of addressing mutual respect for ethnicity and pan-Ethiopian political views as a way to reduce political polarization, the EPRDF used ethnicity as a patronage network to defend and preserve power against perceived rivals like the 'pan-Ethiopian groups. Protests began throughout the nation due to the ruling elite pursuing conflicting interests and being unable to satisfy social demands for peace, justice, a democratic system, and economic progress due to the coalition's inability to manage society's growing expectations for better life (social and economic) advances and a quest for Political reforms. Resistance and protests broke out in every part of the country, ultimately removing TPLF from the central seat of power (Respondent no. 8, 2022).

The interviewee above asserted that failure in the EPRDF's attempt to establish state institutions that could accommodate the divergent interests of numerous political groupings and be capable of the needs of the general populace resulted in a political breakdown in the system. The political system as a whole has experienced volatility and turmoil as a result of the institutional failures that caused political decline since 2016. In conversation with a former diplomat, he revealed the following:

Significant political deterioration had been going on for some time. The EPRDF attempted to address the issues at hand by implementing several internal political changes. However, it did not deal with the underlying problem, which was politicized ethnic tensions, which ultimately caused the breakdown of the system (Respondent no.16, 2022).

As a result, many government institutions failed to meet their obligations, mainly due to corruption, nepotism, the influence of a select few and a lack of fairness. The government's structures, which consisted mainly of civil servants from certain ethnic groups, proved ineffective at carrying out their duties. As public dissatisfaction grew, protests erupted, ultimately leading to the TPLF-led EPRDF relinquishing its power (Respondent no. 16, 2022). The interviewee's reference to political deterioration underscores the challenges faced during the democratic transition promised by EPRDF in 1991. Although the party initially introduced a multiparty system, expanding the country's political landscape, the transition could have lived up to expectations. Despite implementing electoral politics and five consecutive election cycles, the balance of power remained unchanged throughout EPRDF's nearly three decades of rule. The violent political unrest from dissatisfaction with the democratic transition ultimately resulted in the ruling EPRDF elite relinquishing power in early 2018 (Merera, 2011). Regarding this, one seasoned EPRDF official noted that:

The country's democratization process, which the EPRDF promised when it came to power and which could count on public support, faded over time, as did the revolutionary spirit of the party. As compared to the early EPRDF years, the elections, held every five years, were unable to bear legitimacy. The political space was gradually narrowed to the opposition political parties outside of the EPRDF network, leaving them vulnerable to coalition maneuvers (Respondent no. 15, 2022).

According to the interviewee, the challenge of democratic transition worsened the legitimacy crisis of the EPRDF. The public quickly responded as the EPRDF failed to fulfill its earlier promises, such as strengthening democracy, promoting balanced and equitable economic

growth and ensuring political stability. The veteran Oromo political leaders Lencho and Hassan (2021)¹⁹ emphasized that Ethiopia's main obstacle to democratization has always been the EPRDF's lack of internal democratic culture, as an undemocratic organization cannot promote democratization. They pointed out that the lack of internal party democracy not only hindered Ethiopia's democratic transition but also caused significant friction and ultimately led to the dissolution of the ruling coalition's power. The following section briefly discussed the push for political change within the ruling coalition.

8.3. The Quest to Reform and the End of TPLF Dominance in the EPRDF Coalition

8.3.1. Struggle within the EPRDF

As Markakis (2021) asserted, the primary focus of the EPRDF coalition was to gain control of state power and uphold the Ethiopian state's political stability and territorial integrity. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, the EPRDF employed two narratives to solidify its power: firstly, by promoting peace and stability through the containment of violent hostilities by insurgent groups, and secondly, by establishing a political structure that ensures equality among Ethiopia's diverse ethnic groups. Later, a third narrative was introduced, emphasizing to eradicate poverty and accelerating economic growth (Lencho & Hassan, 2021).

EPRDF made headway in fulfilling these three pledges: it ensured the stability of the country, established an ethnic-based political system that gave priority to ethnic group rights and was able to accelerate economic growth that uplifted millions of people from the trap of poverty. However, regardless of these successes, discontent emerged about the growing authoritarianism by TPLF leaders vis-à-vis the other three members of the EPRDF coalition.

The party circle's struggle sparked a demand for 'equal status' and 'genuine partnership' instead of a patron-client relationship. After the 2005 elections, the problem became increasingly apparent. During these elections, the EPRDF suffered significant seat losses in almost all of the country's urban areas. After the elections, peer and party reviews suggested the party 'should work very hard' on the economic front, especially in urban areas. In addition, the electoral defeat

¹⁹ See: 'Ethiopia and EPRDF: reform or perish', in *The Reporter*, 3 March 2018 (at <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/4415/>).

worsened the chasm between coalition members due to accusations and counter-accusations. EPRDF then decided to carry out two tasks: to increase the number of young and educated elites to join the party and initiate a quick economic growth program to win the public's hearts and souls.

In Chapter 7, the researcher observed a shift from the ideology of 'revolutionary democracy' to an aggressive economic growth program, based on the 'developmental state' ideology. This model allowed the party to focus on expanding infrastructure development, leading to increased agricultural productivity and rapid economic growth. Through direct foreign investment, the involvement of the diaspora in the economy, and the expansion of local businesses, Ethiopia has experienced significant economic growth supported by substantial domestic and foreign loans. This transformation led to Ethiopia being recognized as an 'African tiger' and a prime example of African economic success. Despite its remarkable achievements in economic development, EPRDF could not attain results in the dimension of social cohesion. One senior politician from the opposition camp confirmed that:

The TPLF, the central figure of the EPRDF, was blamed for the violent incidents; because TPLF core members and their affiliates were portrayed as prime beneficiaries of the dividends of the rapid economic growth....This anti-EPRDF sentiment caused internal strife within the ruling class since some power elite members sought to change the system and others were devoted to preserving the status quo by externalizing the political problems resulting from the system's decadence and the EPRDF's poor leadership (Respondent no. 14, 2022).

The EPRDF organized several unsuccessful meetings to contain the crisis. The coalition partners from the Oromo and the Amhara ethnic groups blamed the TPLF. This had been unimaginable in the past and marked a turning point. One of the interviewees articulated the lack of unity within the party as follows:

The elites within the EPRDF coalition did not represent national interests but rather the interests of various ethnic groups. This lack of a unified platform meant that representatives of different nationalities could not come together for common causes. As a result, they were divided and needed more cohesion. Additionally, their conflicting interests, with Oromo and Amhara elites advocating for their respective groups, further fueled this fragmentation. The focus on ethnic-based political competition, rather than party or ideology, only exacerbated these divisions. Ultimately, this led to a situation where the competition between rival ethnic elites resembled that of elites from different countries, further contributing to their fragmentation (Respondent no. 37, 2022).

According to the interviewee, the power struggle among the ruling elite began to affect the general public, leading to political and social unrest in different regions of the country. In a

departure from tradition, ruling coalition members publicly criticized and denounced their party. This shift in dynamics spurred youth protests and increased public calls for democratization and economic reforms. Economic grievances were fueled by a widespread belief that economic development benefits were primarily enjoyed by Tigray or corrupt elites working with the TPLF elite.

By October 2016, it had become apparent that the Ethiopian government was facing its most significant crisis since coming into power in 1991. The unrest and violence that began in Oromia, driven by disaffected youth, had spread to the Amhara region and had a profound impact across the nation. The youth movement exacerbated tensions between the established ruling party leaders and the emerging elite within the coalition party. The old guard, who sought to maintain the status quo, believed that things were generally going well, aside from some deficiencies in service delivery attributed to rent-seeking behavior among civil servants and political elites at lower levels of the government. The entrenched leadership disparagingly labeled the Oromo youth movement as petty narrow nationalist and the Amhara youth movement as chauvinistic and anti-federalist, in an attempt to discredit and marginalize their legitimate grievances and demands for change. Instead of addressing the root causes of the public's grievances, the EPRDF leadership largely attributed the protests to the influence of foreign governments.

The internal party rift between the party's old group and the newly rising young elites, who demanded reform, grew due to the widespread upheaval and pressure from the Ethiopian diaspora and the international community. In late 2017, EPRDF went to concede reforms in various sectors and ultimately accepted a change in leadership. As Yohannes Gedamu (2018) observed, the coalition unveiled a reform agenda focusing on broadening the political space, releasing political prisoners, and listening to the voices of the opposition. The disagreements among the member parties within the ruling coalition leadership ended in April 2018 (cf. Shoa & Gizaw 2021), when an internal election was held for a new chairperson for EPRDF and prime minister for Ethiopia replacing Hailemariam Desalegn who has been in power since the death of Meles Zenawi in 2012.

8.3.2 The Ascent of Abiy Ahmed to Power

The election of OPDO candidate Abiy Ahmed to the EPRDF chairmanship and premiership of the federal government meant a notable change within the political elite, as the hitherto dominant TPLF was unable to impose its candidate. Abiy's rise was facilitated by the then

Oromia Region President and the prominent party member Lemma Megersa, who was not a member of the parliament, and Abiy was elected with the essential, last-minute voting support of the Amhara ANDM bloc within the EPRDF. As Terrence Lyons (2019) and many others noted (cf. Abbink 2021a: 3), the rise of Abiy Ahmed to power occurred as a result of the popular uprisings *and* the internal party crisis in the EPRDF, which had led to a lack of direction and leadership in a moment of deep crisis, as evidenced by the declaration of the ‘state of emergency’ (cf. Abbink 2022: 308). The demands for change, equal participation, and autonomy from interference by the federal government in various regional matters per the 1995 Constitution guaranteed shared rule and self-rule rights for the two levels of government (cf. Bizuneh 2022).

The deep-seated animosity towards the TPLF led to a lack of trust and suspicion within the leadership, weakening the ability of law enforcement and other government institutions to address the needs of the people. The pressure from the public on the EPRDF leadership further strained the already fragmented relationships among ethnic elites, leading to increased unrest. The election of an OPDO candidate for the post of being prime minister with Amhara ANDM support marked a pivotal moment in dismantling TPLF dominance in Ethiopia's power structure. Prime Minister Abiy's unexpected major reforms signaled a significant departure from the EPRDF's traditions and were initially seen as a turning point in the nation's politics. However, experts in various fields argued that these rapid reforms exacerbated ethnic tensions in the country, fueled by ethno-national political movements influenced by past EPRDF policies.

8.4. The Reform Agenda of Abiy Ahmed: Elite Change or Redefinition?

8.4.1 Reform of the Executive Organs and other State Institutions

This section of the study examined whether the political transition within the EPRDF coalition since April 2018 constitutes a profound shift in the ruling elite and far-reaching, transformative consequences for Ethiopian and nation-building processes. The events of the past three years demonstrate that this transition has had a seismic impact on the country's political power dynamics sending shockwaves throughout the nation and remolding the very bedrock of its governance.

The new government and cabinet reflected a broadening of the base: there was an attempt to build a new ruling coalition, mainly based around the Oromo-Amhara alliance, but supported by other ethno-elites and aimed at reducing the influence and dominance of TPLF in the federal

power positions, the national army and the economy. Next to Abiy Ahmed's appointment as prime minister from OPDO, Demeke Mekonnen from ANDM became deputy prime minister. Furthermore, most of the cabinet positions were split between elites from these two ethno-political parties, with increased representatives from the previously underrepresented ethno-political forces in the south and the peripheries of pastoralist regions (cf. Meester *et al.* 2021).

Initially, the political transition under the new leadership allowed for the integration of new elite members from various backgrounds, including from universities, opposition political parties, and pastoralist regions with less political experience and weaker ties to the ruling coalition. Within the EPRDF circles, these elite members, previously not considered for higher-level positions, were appointed to key positions in the country's Cabinet. Following the 2021 national parliamentary elections, prominent opposition figures were appointed to the Ministries of Education, Science and Technology, and Culture and Sports under the Prosperity Party majority government (Mengistu T. 2021).

Since 2018, the new government has faced challenges in asserting control over state institutions and reshaping their composition and policies. The influence of TPLF networks within the state apparatus has been perceived as excessive and constraining, particularly in the early months of the Prime Minister's tenure. The new government has embarked on a course of action to address this issue. This has involved reorganizing the leadership of various government entities, including agencies, state-owned enterprises, and ministries, by bringing in a mix of experts, loyalists and political supporters. Additionally, a series of organizational changes have been implemented to enhance the effectiveness of state institutions while creating opportunities for the new ruling elite to weaken the established TPLF networks. Furthermore, Abiy's administration has adjusted financing arrangements to align with its new priorities, including increased budget allocations to critical ministries and centralized control over financial streams.

Being part of the ruling EPRDF coalition, holding key government and party positions, the researcher, as part of the governing political elite, attests that the appointment of new officials at critical positions helped the incumbents, on the one hand, paved the way to consolidate Abiy's autocratic power, and on the other hand to break the so-called reform obstacle in the existing power structure networks of the TPLF ruling elite and its affiliated parties. The appointment created space for new emerging leaders from different backgrounds, but their lack of experience and management capacity posed challenges in fully implementing unclear reform policies. Resistance

and lack of trust within institutions previously controlled by TPLF officials and civil servants were also characterized as if they hindered the early stages of the reforms. Using the dominant perception against Tigrayans Abiy shifting strategic portfolios away from TPLF control. However, reorganizing reporting lines to the new power elite was complex and slow due to entrenched power-resistant personnel in the system and a lack of competency and trust deficit incoming group.

Abiy's ongoing reform initiative was thought to be focused on appointing loyal and capable individuals to key positions within government institutions. However, this has led to rapid turnover and a loss of organizational memory and continuity. For example, in the last four years of Abiy Ahmed's tenure until the end of 2022, several ministries including Education, Justice, Innovation and Technology, Foreign Affairs, Defense, Agriculture, Revenues, Trade and Industry, as well as the National Security Service, the Army Chief of Staff, and other high-ranking officials and state ministers have experienced at least three times changes in leadership. This constant reshuffling has weakened the institutions and created instability within the state apparatus (Meester *et al.*, 2022).

8.4.2 Reform of the Ethiopian Security Sector

After the *Derg* regime was overthrown in 1991, the TPLF had a strong grip on the security sector with control over the armed forces and main intelligence agencies. Tigrayan military elites held top leadership positions and the majority of middle-level positions were held in these institutions. This dominance dates back to the early days of the EPRDF post-1991 transition, when the TPLF armed forces dismantled the Ethiopian military, police, and security apparatus and replaced it with its forces, giving them an upper hand in the country's military and security structure. There were few attempts to balance the security sector's composition over the last 25 years, and the imbalance worsened after the 2005 elections. This led to hostility among different segments of society and served as a rallying cry for large-scale demonstrations.

In 2018, Abiy Ahmed and his group sought to establish themselves as the emerging political elite by taking control of the challenges posed by the TPLF group. This involved implementing significant reforms in the security sector to maintain authority at the federal level during the transition. The leadership in the security sector was replaced by loyalists from the Oromo and the Amhara ethnic groups/parties, resulting in the removal of Tigrayan officers from top security positions by early 2020. TPLF's attack on Ethiopia's federal army camps in November 2020 sparked a two-year war, causing significant harm to the country, its citizens, and the hope of

the people of Ethiopia to transition toward the system that realizes the rule of law in the country. Ultimately, the war began as a conflict between the TPLF and the newly emerging federal political elite for power struggle.

8.4.3 Reforms in the Ethiopian Economy

Throughout the post-2018 transition, Ethiopia's economy turned into a critical arena where the new administration has sought to implement change. Improving the performance of the country's economy to deliver 'prosperity' to the population has been a key pledge of the new ruling elite since the early stages of the transition. As a result, economic reforms quickly became a domain where traditional elite interests and alliances were reconfigured. The government also sought to address the economic slowdown effects of 2016-17 and to increase the state's capacity to deliver economic benefits (UNDP, 2022). The changes taking place in the economic sector also had critical political implications. During the EPRDF era, the ruling elite and their allies had leveraged control over the economic sector.

The new administration in Ethiopia has the opportunity to implement significant economic reforms that could dismantle the existing patronage networks while also positioning itself within the state structure and kick starting economic growth. One key focus and showcase has been on professionalizing economic policy-making, with a commitment to prioritizing qualifications and experience over party connections when selecting new officials. The traditional appointment approach, which was heavily based on political considerations, has been criticized. To address this, the administration has established the National Macroeconomic Committee (NMC) to lead and coordinate economic policy-making efforts from the early stages of the transition.

Furthermore, the State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) were placed under the direct oversight of a new institution called the Public Enterprises Holdings and Administration Agency (PEHAA). This new agency replaced the previous coordinating body, the Ministry of Public Enterprises (MoPE), and was made accountable to the Ministry of Finance (MoF). Additionally, a new public entity called the Liability and Asset Management Corporation (LAMC) was established to manage the SOEs' debt and placed under the MoF. As a result, the Ministry of Finance emerged as a powerful entity with increased authority to coordinate all federal-level SOEs, which collectively account for about 15% of the country's economy (Meester *et al.*, 2022). Another critical aspect of the reform involved changes to the management of the SOE. It also helped the government

dismantle the previous system that allowed the TPLF elite to exert undue influence over the economy.

The government's efforts to reform Ethiopia's economy have also included, at least in words, the privatization of several state-owned enterprises. This was propagated as a vital part of the Prime Minister's reform agenda in the early stages of the transition. There were several reasons behind these privatization promises. They served as instruments to show a political signal of a departure from the EPRDF's ideological framework of the developmental state towards a more mixed, liberal economic model. Additionally, privatization was a way to attract foreign investment to Ethiopia, aiming to close budgetary gaps and bolster the nation's foreign exchange reserves. The government's commitment to privatization helped garner support from Western (donor) nations and international financial institutions—until the conflict in Northern Ethiopia began in late 2020.

8.5 The Rapprochement of Ethiopia and Eritrea

Following the 2018 change of government and the introduction of a new leadership team at the EPRDF, there was a shift in approach to the longstanding Ethiopian-Eritrean war. This conflict, which took place between May 1998 and June 2000, resulted in a significant loss of life and was sparked by economic disagreements and a border dispute between the two states. Tens of thousands of young citizens from both sides tragically lost their lives in a war that ultimately proved to be paradoxical and pointless for both countries.

After two years of conflict, Ethiopia and Eritrea signed a comprehensive peace agreement in Algiers on December 12, 2000. The agreement called for an end to military hostilities and the use of force between the warring parties. It also mandated the creation of a neutral boundary commission to address claims from both sides and called for an independent investigation into the origins of the conflict. The decision of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague was published in 2002.²⁰ However, Ethiopia refused to accept the decision, resulting in a stalemate and a "no war-no peace" situation until 2018. Despite the initial agreement to resolve the border dispute through a neutral arbitrator, both countries continued to engage in proxy conflicts and measures to undermine each other. This

²⁰ See: <https://pca-cpa.org/en/cases/99/>. Also: Abbink 2021b.

ongoing tension led to the closure of the border, suffering among local populations, and blocked economic exchanges.

In 2018, Abiy Ahmed's government made a breakthrough by accepting the EEBC Decision. Abiy visited Asmara in July to finalize a broader normalization agreement with Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki. This move did not sit well with the TPLF leadership, adding another layer to the growing intra-elite conflict within the EPRDF.

Nevertheless, the post-2018 leadership perceived by the populations in both countries as a profound measure ended instability on the border. The normalization of relations was also considered by the international community as a positive move towards stabilization and prospects of the wider Horn region (cf. Woldemariam 2019). No one could have predicted that the 20-year deadlock would end so quickly, and the dynamism and speed of the normalization were welcomed. According to Dibaba and Ahadu (2020), the resolution of the stalemate between Ethiopia and Eritrea positively impacted stabilizing the Horn region. However, TPLF's elite were uncomfortable with the events, claiming that the reconciliation aimed to isolate Tigray and undermine TPLF's authority in the region.²¹ The reconciliation between Ethiopia and Eritrea has raised hopes of the two peoples for a brighter future, including resolving long-standing conflicts, improving neighborly relations, creating a safer environment, promoting economic development and job opportunities, and strengthening people-to-people connections. Despite these positive expectations, the reconciliation also led to internal conflicts among Ethiopian political elites, resulting in mistrust and ultimately contributing to the deadly civil war in northern Ethiopia, preventing the desired stability from being achieved.

8.6 The Birth of the Prosperity Party and the Demise of the EPRDF

In December 2019, a significant shift took place within the ruling party in the form of the EPRDF announcing its disbandment and the formation of a new political party called the 'Prosperity Party' under the leadership of Abiy Ahmed. This decision was made at the 11th General Congress of the EPRDF coalition based on the proposal of the Central Committee (CC) following discussions that had been ongoing for over a decade. The party's General Congress, prompted by

²¹ Michael Woldemariam (2019) made much of this argument and suggested that Abiy and Isaias “shared the aim to dismantle the TPLF.”

the top leadership, recommended a shift from 'revolutionary democracy' to a new, more pragmatic approach (See Chapter 7). Additionally, in September 2018, the constituent parties of the EPRDF changed their names, with the OPDO becoming the 'Oromo Democratic Party (ODP)' and the ANDM becoming the 'Amhara Democratic Party (ADP)'. Both parties showed a trend of distancing themselves from the previous political culture and values of the EPRDF coalition and its leadership style fundamentally.

Since assuming control, the new leadership has advocated for the EPRDF coalition's unification into a single, unified national party. This was achieved through decisions made at the EPRDF congress, which provided the rationale for the merger. However, some members of the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP) and senior members of the TPLF opposed this move in various ways. Despite objections, the new EPRDF leadership dissolved the 30-year-old coalition in November 2019 in favor of the new "unified" national party, the so-called Prosperity Party (PP), with its own new party program and party bylaws. The proposal for the merger was accepted by three EPRDF member parties (from the Oromo, the Amhara, and the South²²) together with five other affiliated parties.²³

The new party agreed to uphold Abiy Ahmed's new political ideology called *Meddemer*²⁴ which emphasized a form of synergy and unity among people, along with more market oriented economic policies as a core party program. TPLF rejected the party merger, describing it as an "illegal and reactionary aspiration towards centralization of power into the hands of few individuals"²⁵ (cf. Lyons 2021).

The move was also denounced by other prominent 'ethno-nationalist' political figures and activists, including some opposition leaders who identified themselves as 'federalists', as an effort 'to reinstate the old unitary system' in Ethiopia, overthrown in 1991. Some critics, such as the academician Awol Allo (2019) stated that many constitutional, ideological, and representational concerns that could have improved the legitimacy and representativeness of the new party were overlooked by the PP's supporters. For other critics, the Prosperity Party was the product of an

²² The Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement.

²³ I.e., the Ethiopian Somali People's Democratic Party (ESPDP), the Afar National Democratic Party (ANDP), the Benishangul-Gumuz People's Democratic Unity Front (BGPDUF), the Gambela People's Democratic Movement (GPDM) and the Harari National League (HNL).

²⁴ See Abiy Ahmed's book *Meddemer / Ida'amu*, published in Amharic and Oromiffa in 2019.

²⁵ Cf. <https://addisstandard.com/news-tplf-cites-legal-procedural-shortfalls-to-decline-merger/>.

ideological crisis and a lack of competent leadership in the EPRDF coalition. Assefa Fiseha, in line with the above argument, also has argued:

At the core of this is an ideological crisis within EPRDF, a power struggle among the coalition members, and a lack of competent leadership within the ruling party. The EPRDF was dissolved prematurely and rebranded as the PP, which turned the member coalitions into branches, centralizing the party structure without enough consultation and consensus. The TPLF saw that as a step towards centralization that would lead to the dissolution of the federal system and declined to join as the process liquidated the autonomous position of the members of the coalition. The federal government continued to target the TPLF, accusing it of human rights violations while the TPLF responded by characterizing the PP as a centrist regime (Assefa, 2022: 285).

The emergence of the Prosperity Party signaled the end of the EPRDF as a political force. However, the party's impact on and influence on Ethiopia's political and economic landscape are enduring and will continue to be significant for years. Despite the elite reconfiguration represented by the Prosperity Party, it has not yet provided practical solutions to the longstanding issues of ethnic tensions, economic inequality, and political instability, as evidenced in the last five years since 2019. It remains to be seen whether the Party will be able to address these challenges effectively. However, the establishment of the Prosperity Party (PP) was viewed by many elite members and much of the general public as a positive step towards reunifying the long-divided nation.

8.7 Post-2018 Elite Change and Elite Action: Nation Rebuilding/Nation Disintegration?

This section discusses the political reform agenda post-2018 in Ethiopia. The shift in the political leadership and the subsequent implementation of the reform agenda have been hailed as a pivotal development in the country's political history. The reform was likened to a political 're-set' that brought about significant changes in Ethiopia's political landscape at the start of the reform period. It involved extensive restructuring of institutions, widespread rhetoric about constitutional amendments to protect rights and establish checks and balances, the promotion of political pluralism and citizen engagement, and reinforcing the rule of law. These comprehensive reform agendas have raised expectations for a bright future and the development of an inclusive and accountable political system, the strengthening of democratic foundations, and the promotion of social cohesion in Ethiopia. However, after implementing the reforms, the new government faced

unprecedented challenges, including drawbacks related to institutionalizing the reform agendas and increased ethnic tensions and nationwide strife. The country's economy also slows down, manifested by stagnating exports, mass youth unemployment, rising inflation, and a decline in foreign aid and foreign direct investment.

In this section, the researcher examined the political transition, its impact on nation-building, and the potential for nation disintegration following the elite change in 2018. The new political elite's efforts to implement reform agendas, improve democratic governance, promote peace and security, drive economic development, and strengthen social cohesion are crucial in achieving successful nation-building. However, due to the transition's fluid nature, only a preliminary assessment can be provided at this time.

8.7.1 Elite Circulation and Institutionalization of the Reform Agenda

As noted by North (1990: 3), institutions refer to formal or informal structures ('rules of the game') that help establish orderly relations in the political, economic, and social interactions of individuals in a society. Political institutions help ease collective decision making processes and orient towards a common destination or outcome.

Institutions are often considered as building blocks for nation-building since they indirectly involve the construction of a national identity using the power of state institutions aimed at promoting social cohesion, predictability of procedures and relations, and unification of the people within the state so that it remains politically stable and viable in the long run. Furthermore, as Mylonas (2013) argued, legitimate authority in modern national states emanates from majority popular rule, and nation-building is the process by which these majorities are constructed and validated. Nation builders control legitimate authority and take initiatives to develop the national political community through government programs, including military conscription, a national education system, and building infrastructures that enhance social, harmony, and economic growth through state institutions.

Solid and vibrant institutions are crucial for any society's peaceful and harmonious coexistence and development. According to Yeraswork Admassie (2006), one of the critical problems hindering a democratic transition in Ethiopian society is the lack of viable institutions that foster social, political, and economic development. The fragile institutions exacerbate 'bad governance' due to a lack of clarity of purpose and of organizational structures that ensure stability

and continuity, as well as structures that fit with national diversity. Therefore, he suggested that the elites should invent new institutions that foster social, political, and economic transformation in Ethiopia.

According to Lyons' (2021) argument, the post-2018 power elite, under the leadership of Abiy Ahmed, promised to implement political reforms with remarkable scale and speed to respond to longstanding popular questions. These promised reforms were notable for their ambitious nature, as they aimed to bring about significant changes in the political landscape. However, while the initial phase of reforms involved quick actions and proclamations from the top, the transition towards establishing a more enduring democratic system faced challenges and progressed at a slower pace and with little result in the beginning. The first phase of political reform spearheaded by Abiy Ahmed's administration was considered by the people as an impressive commitment to change. Proclamations were made, and perception grew as if decisive actions were taken to address longstanding political issues and promote democratic values. The rhetoric dictated a rapid and comprehensive approach that allowed for the implementation of various reforms that were previously unimaginable, indicating the determination and vision of the post-2018 power elite.

Despite the initial momentum, the subsequent phase of the reform process encountered difficulties in transitioning from top-down changes to the establishment of a sustainable democratic order. One of the major problems is the failure to circulate the power elites. The reform agenda and the task of institutionalizing these reforms was undertaken by an elite that was largely continuous with the established (former EPRDF) elite, especially at the middle ranks of government. However, the elite was incapable of realizing the intended transition, which proved to be a complex and delicate process that required careful navigation and consensus-building among various competing elite groups and stakeholders.

The slower and tentative progress in moving towards a more sustainable democratic order can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the entrenched nature of the pre-existing political value in the system posed challenges in terms of dismantling the existing power structures and establishing new ones. These obstacles necessitated a measured approach to avoid destabilizing the country further. Furthermore, the transition from autocracy to democracy requires the creation of robust institutions that can safeguard democratic principles and ensure accountability. This process takes time, as it involves designing and implementing new legal frameworks, electoral systems, and governance structures. The cautious approach taken during this phase was likely

driven by the need to ensure the effectiveness and durability of these new institutions. Additionally, the reform process faced resistance from vested interests and competing political factions, which further contributed to the slow and tentative nature of the transition. Navigating these complex dynamics required strategically determined leadership maneuvering and negotiation to build consensus and overcome opposition which was in huge deficit in post-2018 political power elite in Ethiopia. The post-2018 Abiy administration posed challenges that weakened Ethiopian institutions in the name of reform.

Medhane *et al.* (2021) admit that there are institutional building challenges in Ethiopia. The problem of functional institution-building emanates from the political culture of the elites which is engrained with the attitude that ‘the winners take all’:

Given the nature of state formation, contradictory narratives, radicalized ideologies, and divisive history, the single political practice that characterized Ethiopian politics has always remained to be the exclusion of rival elites, repression, and control. As a result, the state and peace-building conversation of the country has never been inclusive, predictable, and free of violence. The ultimate result of this has been the lack of institutionalization of a functioning state and durable peace, without which the aspirations of Ethiopians would not be realized (ibid. 2021: 17).

As Medhane *et al.* (2021) explained above, the political culture of Ethiopia's elites, characterized by a prioritization of power consolidation over the development of functional institutions, has obstructed the country's progress in nation-building. The quality of the elite itself, lacking competence and integrity, further hampers the establishment of effective governance structures. Despite political reforms introduced in 2018, persistent institutional problems remain, as the elites use institutions as instrumental for their benefit, impeding inclusive and accountable governance. While these reforms initially showed positive outcomes such as increased political participation, they have also exacerbated ethnic divisions and weakened social cohesion. The weak performance of the elite and the absence of a common purpose within the Ethiopian federal state ruling elite hinder the nation-building process. To overcome these challenges, fostering an inclusive and accountable political culture is essential for Ethiopia's successful path toward nation-building.

8.7.2 Elite Change and Democratic Governance

Following the change of power elite in 2018, there was a shift towards prioritizing promoting human rights and democracy in the political landscape. The post-2018 government

announced the implementation of a series of political reforms aimed at improving the political atmosphere. These initiatives included the removal of the state of emergency, the repeal of restrictive anti-terrorism and civil society organization laws, the encouragement of political parties, the establishment of an independent electoral commission, and the opening up of the media by granting access to previously restricted websites, blogs, radio stations and TV shows (cp. Temin & Badwaza, 2019).

Furthermore, amnesty was granted to rebel groups that were previously labeled as terrorists by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), as well as to prominent political activists and leaders who were imprisoned. The government extended a welcoming gesture to the rebel groups, urging them to pursue a non-violent political struggle. Many armed groups responded positively and disarmed, returning to their homes. However, it is worth noting that some factions resumed armed struggle despite the invitation (cp. Fisher & Meressa, 2019).

Before the sixth national elections scheduled for 2021 (which were delayed from 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other political reasons), there were widespread arrests of opposition activists. Political party members were detained in some instances, indicating a regression in the government's commitment to democratic practices. The democratization process in Ethiopia, under the leadership of the Prosperity Party, initially held the promise of political openness and liberalization. However, the country's political landscape has become characterized by mobilization around ethnic identities and grievances that perpetuate ethnic conflicts. The Prosperity Party seeks to address these political challenges by emphasizing military and security forces that aim to suppress the opposing voices across Ethiopia. The execution of this approach exacerbated the polarization problem, undermined the legitimacy of the government, and tested the inability of the ruling group to reconcile the diverse aspirations and concerns of different ethnic groups in the country.

8.7.3 Elite Change and Peace and Security

Before the recent change in Ethiopia's power structure, the state appeared relatively stable for several decades. It possessed a solid military force capable of handling internal and external threats. However, this stability came at the cost of strict control and suppression of dissenting voices. The state successfully quelled internal threats from various rebel groups, such as OLF and ONLF, through its military and security forces, establishing its monopoly on the use of force.

Despite the focus on security sector reforms after 2018, the state's monopoly on the use of force faced significant challenges from armed groups, leading to political turmoil and conflicts in regions such as Tigray, Oromia, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambella. The war in Tigray exposed elite discord and the government's inability to resolve political issues through dialogue and negotiations while also highlighting its limited capacity to control its territory and monopolize the means of violence.

Abiy Ahmed's appointment as Prime Minister in 2018 was initially seen as a significant moment for Ethiopia, marking the end of the TPLF's long-standing control over the EPRDF coalition and state power. However, the Tigrayan elite rejected the transition, claiming marginalization and exclusion from the new federal administration. This disagreement led to political and military tensions between the TPLF and the federal government, with each side mobilizing support and engaging in a media war. The TPLF criticized the Abiy administration as a threat to Ethiopia's ethnic federal system, while the Prosperity Party portrayed the TPLF as obstructing much-needed reforms. These tensions were further inflamed by a territorial dispute with Eritrea on the exact border, political reforms, and the Tigrayan authorities' decision to hold a regional election against the central government's wishes. Many believe that the TPLF's motivation for war was to prevent accountability for its past wrongdoings and regain federal power. The exclusion of Tigrayan elites from the federal government and the use of anti-Tigrayan rhetoric further escalated tensions, ultimately leading to a devastating civil war.

Similarly, over the past five years, the Oromia Region has emerged as the focal point of persistent ethnic and political unrest, resulting in the loss of numerous lives and the displacement of tens of thousands of individuals and ethnic Amhara cleansing in various parts of Oromia especially in Wollega. As of mid-2023, significant portions of the region remained in the grip of the 'Oromo Liberation Army' (OLA), an insurgent group, leading to a breakdown of governmental institutions and services within the area. Furthermore, the conflict between the federal government and the regional anti-Abiy administration forces is not only limited to the Tigray and Oromia regions but is also rampant in other regions, most recently in the Amhara region.

The failure to resolve political problems using peaceful means and to maintain a monopoly over the use of force in Ethiopia has severely impacted the state's ability to provide basic security and protection to its citizens, as well as control criminal activities. Despite the theoretical establishment of the state's monopoly on the use of force nationwide, it has been continuously

challenged by armed groups, local and regional rebel factions, and politicians from both the federal and regional governments. This has resulted in a persistent and widespread occurrence of communal clashes, inter-communal conflicts, border disputes, expulsions, and attacks on minority groups since 2019.

The armed conflict in the northern regions of Tigray, Amhara, and Afar from 2020 to 2022 stands out as the most devastating, accompanied by the violent campaigns of the 'Oromo Liberation Army', marked by mass killings and 'ethnic cleansing' of civilians. These conflicts have led to the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives and immeasurable social and economic destruction. Throughout the country, the manipulation of identity politics has further fueled ethnic violence, causing the displacement of millions of innocent civilians. The magnitude and trends of conflict, as well as the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs), are evident from the available data. Despite these grave challenges, the federal and regional governments have failed to effectively resolve the conflicts, resulting in a continuous growth in conflict trends over time.

The complex conflict in Ethiopia has not only ravaged the social fabric of the nation but also exerted a considerable influence on the wider Horn of Africa region. Ethiopia's precarious state of national integration raises concerns about the viability of nation-building efforts. The lack of basic security and stability threatens the well-being of its citizens and hampers the progress of the country. The severity and complexity of the situation are underscored by Ethiopia's ranking as the top country globally in the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project's 2021 report, based on eleven conflict factors. Urgent and effective measures are needed to address these conflicts and restore peace and stability in Ethiopia for the benefit of its people and the region as a whole. The following graphs in Fig. 3 and Fig. 4 below show the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country, as well as the (armed) conflict trends (which are undiminished up to 2024).

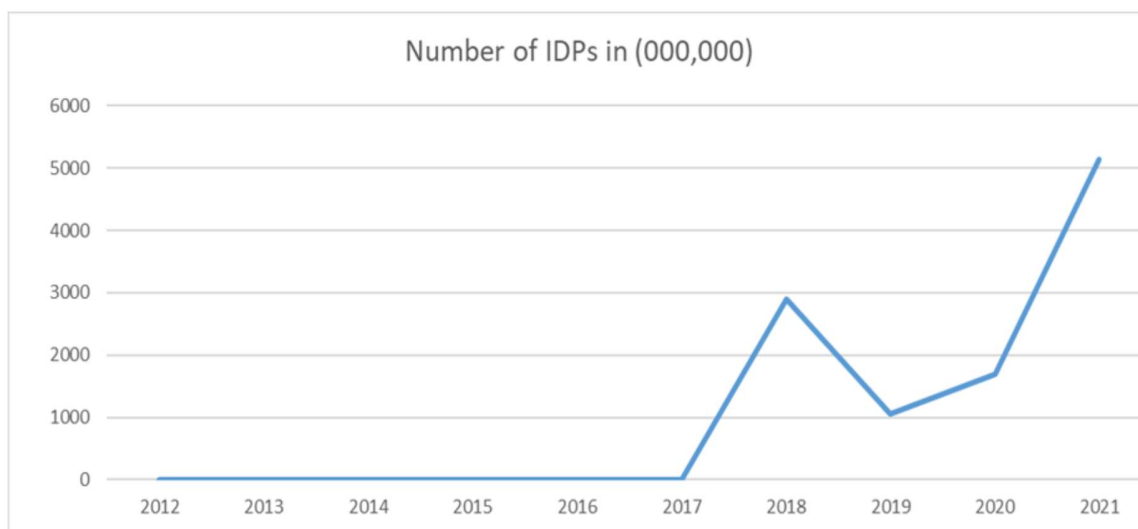


Figure 2: Trends of IDP numbers in Ethiopia from 2012 to 2021: Source: Data organized by the researcher from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) (See: <https://www.internal-displacement.org>).

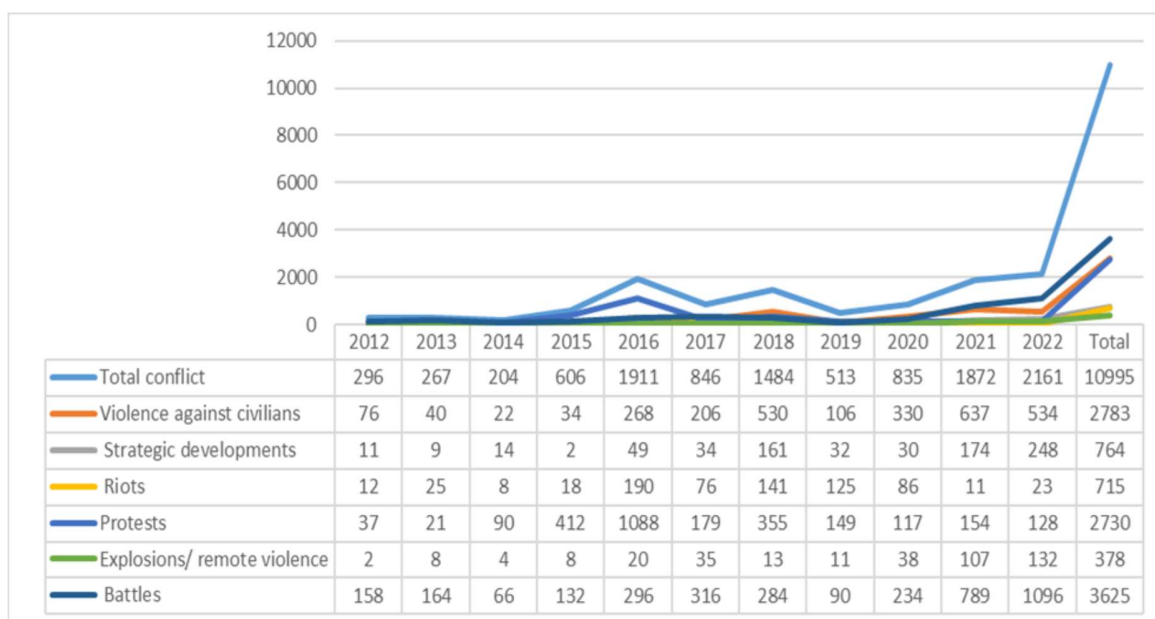


Figure 3: Conflict trends in Ethiopia in recent years: Sources: Data organized by the researcher from Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project (ACLED 2012-2022; see: <https://acleddata.com>. See also on 2023: <https://acleddata.com/2023/08/10/fact-sheetcrisis-in-ethiopias-amhara-region/>)

The two graphs above show that the trends of both the internal conflicts and internal displacement trends have alarmingly increased in recent years. Semir Yusuf (2019), among others, has put forth the argument that the root causes of conflict in Ethiopia are closely intertwined with ethnic politics. He posits that the rise of competing ethno-nationalisms has weakened the structure of the ruling party and undermined state institutions, leading to an escalation of ethnic mobilization. This pattern was observed in the past also and has persisted and intensified since 2018. As the ruling party and government have struggled to maintain peace and order in the country, self-appointed ethno-elites have exploited these circumstances to further aggravate the conflicts for their own opportunistic gains. The economic downturn has also played a role in fueling the conflicts. It has provided a source of grievances and facilitated ethnic mobilization, while also creating an environment where certain elites, who may have felt they had little to lose, find it easier to resort to violence.

8.7.4 Elite Change and Economic Development

Although Ethiopia's economy has become a crucial battleground in the post-2018 era, the primary commitment of the emerging ethno-elites since the early stages of the transition has been to enhance the country's economic performance and bring more prosperity to its population. With a focus on elite-driven initiatives and reforms, the ruling elite sought to address intricate challenges and steer Ethiopia toward a trajectory of comprehensive economic growth and the welfare of its citizens.

However, a recent UNDP (2022) report indicated that Ethiopia experienced a reverse impact on its macroeconomic balances due to combined shocks compared to the baseline in 2019. The country's ability to mitigate the adverse effects of these shocks is limited, affecting fiscal space, debt capacity, and external accounts. Ethiopia's vulnerabilities are further exposed by widening fiscal and current account deficits and weakened reserves, exacerbated by high food and fuel prices. While the report highlights the potential for future economic prospects, it also recognizes the challenging decisions that policymakers face in addressing immediate priorities without jeopardizing the progress made in important reforms. The report underscores the risk of adopting measures, driven by necessity rather than choice, which may undermine medium to long-term growth and development objectives, particularly in a constrained fiscal and external financing environment.

In addition, the reports from the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2022) also indicated that Ethiopia's GDP growth has slowed down in recent years, with a projected decline for the fiscal year 2021/2022. This deceleration can be attributed to several factors, such as the impact of COVID-19, the internal conflict, lower agricultural production, sluggish growth in industry and services, reduced donor financing, intensifying Foreign Exchange shortages, and spillovers from the war in Ukraine have collectively contributed to this economic downturn.

According to Hausmann *et al.* (2022) and African Development Bank (2023), in recent years Ethiopia has experienced a notable stagnation in its economic growth, which has had adverse effects on the country's ability to expand, export and generate employment opportunities. This slowdown gave rise to a range of macroeconomic challenges, most notably the emergence of high levels of inflation that are volatile and constantly escalating. As a consequence, the living conditions of the population have worsened, exacerbating the already difficult circumstances. The economic downturn also contributed to an increase in unemployment rates.

8.7.5 Elites, Social Cohesion and Nation-Building

Ethiopia is a diverse country with over 70 ethnic groups, each with their languages, culture, and traditions. While this diversity can be a source of strength, it also poses significant challenges to social cohesion, which is the degree to which people within a society feel connected, share values, and work together towards common goals. Some of the challenges to social-to-social cohesion in Ethiopia include historical division based on ethnicity and region, this has led to feelings of mistrust, resentment, and hostility between different groups as well as political polarization also another challenge. Ethiopia's political landscape is highly polarized, and political parties are usually organized along ethnic lines. This has contributed to a sense of 'us versus them' mentality that has undermined social cohesion. In addition to the aforementioned challenges, economic disparities, conflict, violence, and lack of proper communication and dialogue are pertinent to Ethiopia's future peace and stability. Zelalem Moges (2022), argued how the social cohesion in Ethiopia in a challenging situation in the following way:

In the last four years alone, tens of thousands (or more) have died, millions have been displaced, the country's international standing is severely weakened, national security is threatened, the economy is in shambles, and social cohesion is at an all-time low. The elites of the country are also divided, and the political scene is extremely polarized along ethnic and religious lines. Some of the root causes for these pathetic realities can be attributed to

recent events but most others go back decades and perhaps centuries, having left traces in the country's early state formation (Zelalem, 2022: 56).

The former ruling EPRDF coalition was constructed, ethnically based parties formed under the political influences of the TPLF. Tensions went deep between the four ethno-regional components that participated in the EPRDF coalition and other satellite parties that represented the remaining regions never truly represented the will of the corresponding people. In addition to the internal conflict within EPRDF, the return of previously exiled politicians to Ethiopia allowed for a new political dynamism in the country.

Yonas Adaye (2022) asserts that the polarization and fragmentation in current Ethiopian politics stem from the ideology of linguistic politics and the system of ethnic federalism. These issues trace back to the pre-1991 Ethiopian nation-state-building processes, which the EPRDF perceived and articulated. The emphasis on ethno-nationalism as the organized principle for resolving Ethiopia's longstanding political problems led to a "mono-causal approach" to conflict resolution, exacerbating political polarization and social fragmentation.

Targeting a nation marked by profound diversity, boasting over 70 ethnicities and a plethora of languages, Abiy Ahmed's reform agenda sparked not only widespread mobilization and grassroots politicization across all regions but also led to the fracturing of local and regional representation structures. Furthermore, this agenda contributed to the unsettling phenomenon of "displacement and violent dispossession" of numerous external peasants-individuals perceived as non-native or 'non-indigenous' by other rural residents of distinct ethnic or linguistic backgrounds, primarily in the Southern and Western regions of the country (BTI 2022:14). Indeed, ethnic tensions escalated in various locales, often fueled by border disputes, typically manipulated by politicians occupying high-level governmental positions. These ethnic conflicts, purportedly centered on Indigenous community concerns regarding the reclaiming of land and pastures allocated by the government to individuals from different regions, erupted in different parts of the nation. Moreover, the newly established government grappled with a legitimacy crisis exacerbated by its inability to effectively address human rights violations.

These violations included arbitrary arrests and detentions, disproportionate use of force against peaceful demonstrators, inadequate resolution of conflicts, lack of a clear strategy for rebuilding infrastructure and aiding internally displaced persons (IDPs), and ineffectual economic policies. Another indication of state fragility or failure is the government's incapacity to furnish

citizens with sufficient public services. This encompasses ensuring access to fundamental necessities such as education, healthcare, clean water, and infrastructure, as well as effectively managing unforeseen crises like pandemics, natural disasters, food shortages, or refugee influxes.

However, the government's ability to deliver these public goods was severely hindered by ongoing warfare, recurrent conflicts, and ethnic tensions across various regions of the nation. Despite efforts to provide services in relatively stable areas, critics contend that the quality and quantity of these provisions have declined since 2018. Additionally, corruption and poor governance are cited as significant obstacles impeding the delivery of public goods. It is acknowledged, though, that the government's limited capacity has constrained its ability to expand services as anticipated.

Summary

Ethiopia has undergone significant political, economic, and institutional reforms since 2018 with multidimensional consequences. The Ethiopian government under the leadership of Abiy Ahmed has initiated a series of political reforms aimed at promoting democratic governance, fostering political pluralism in the country, and enhancing the rule of law. These reforms have led to the release of thousands of political prisoners, the reopening of political space and the formation of new political parties, and rapprochement with Eritrea, at the beginning of the new administration tenure. However, the political situation in Ethiopia remains fragile, and it has been characterized by ethnic conflicts and political instability in much of Ethiopia as well as the civil war in the northern part of the country.

The consequences of the economic reform that has been undertaken by Abiy Ahmed's administration have resulted in the opposite direction of the government's initial promises and the expectations of the people of the country. As it is explained above, Ethiopia's economy has been one of the fastest-growing economies in Africa in recent years, with an average annual growth rate of over 9 percent between 2014 and 2018. However, the country faces significant economic challenges, including high levels of poverty, unemployment and inflation.

On the other hand, the Ethiopian government has also initiated a series of institutional reforms aimed at promoting functional state institutions at least in rhetoric. These reforms established new institutions. However, these institutions faced significant challenges related to capacity, proper leadership directions, lack of stability, and availability of resources.

The political reforms introduced in Ethiopia in 2018 have generated both positive and negative outcomes regarding social cohesion within the nation. Initially, these reforms facilitated enhanced political engagement and freedom, contributing to a reduction in intergroup tensions. This facilitated increased dialogue and interaction among diverse factions, fostering trust and bolstering social cohesion. However, the trajectory of reforms since 2018 has predominantly yielded adverse effects. They have fueled heightened ethnic and regional divisions, posing a threat to social unity. Ethnic polarization has intensified, exacerbating political and social fragmentation among various ethnic communities. This polarization has fueled discord and disputes between different ethnic groups. Additionally, the reforms have escalated regional tensions, with certain areas feeling marginalized or excluded from the political sphere, leading to localized unrest and demonstrations. Consequently, trust in governmental institutions has waned, as segments of the population perceive unfair exclusion from the political process. These developments have posed challenges for the government in upholding or furthering social cohesion.

Overall, the reforms have thus had both positive and negative consequences for social cohesion in Ethiopia. While they initially led to greater political inclusion and freedom, they have also increased ethnic and regional polarization and reduced trust in institutions. Eventually, the problems related to the post-2018 reforms, coupled with the old historical grievances and the new challenges emanating from local, regional, and global arenas, exacerbated the Ethiopian nation-building challenges and may threaten the existence of the Ethiopian state.

