

INNOVATIONS

The Theory and Practice of Political Transition in the Post-2018 Ethiopia

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Abstract

This article critically reflects on the nature of the 2018 political transition in Ethiopia and how intense political competition derailed the success of the transition. Drawing the country's prior experiences of political transition as an analytical framework, the paper entangled the current political crisis into the lack of democratic political experience. Although reformist leaders introduced ambitious political and economic reforms – open the political space, release political prisoners, welcome exiled opposition groups and liberalise the economy – polarised political interests reduced the tendency to full-heartedly implementing it. Hence, the transitional period has been orchestrated by hateful ethnic propaganda, contestation between political forces and the reclaiming of authoritarianism by the ruling class. Recurrent ethnic tensions, competing political interests and authoritarian response to the challenges of law and order manifesting the transitional period has historical antecedents. Much of Ethiopia's history was dominated by authoritarianism, elite rule and patrimonial system, which negatively shaped the political atmosphere of the contemporary Ethiopia.

Keywords: 1. Ethiopia 2. Medemer 3. patrimonial system 4. political transition 5. Transitional leader

Introduction

Although Ethiopia is an ancient polity which traces its origin from antiquity, it took its present shape during the second half of the nineteenth century as a result of the incorporation of different ethnic, religious and cultural groups by Emperor Menelik II [1]. Rather than serving as a means of national unity, this process brought contradictory interpretations of history. In the light of this, [2] identified three opposing perspectives. The first is the nation-building thesis, which saw no wrong in the nation-building process. Proponents of this view propagate that 'the expansion to the periphery was not a result of an Abyssinian desire to exploit and subjugate, but primarily an outcome of internal power struggle between Menelik and competing forces. They mythicized Ethiopia as a state that has a long and uninterrupted political history with its own unique literary system, nationalist ideology and social organization.

National oppression thesis is the second perspective, which accuses the state-formation process of imposing new culture, religion and language upon the pre-existing kingdoms and principalities of the different peoples. Advocates of this group argue that there was one oppressor nation and a host of oppressed nations and nationalities who were politically and economically marginalized and culturally and linguistically dominated[2]. To that end, the Amharas are categorized as oppressor while 'others' as oppressed. The third perspective is the colonial thesis that depicted Ethiopia as a colonial state formed by Amhara through colonizing dozens of ethnic groups[3]. This perspective saw separation as the only solution[4] to the political problems of the country.

These competing perspectives create formidable challenges on the success of political transition in Ethiopia[2]. The problem of contradictory interpretation of history has been further boosted by hegemonic aspiration, zero-sum politics and patrimonial system. This hampers the success of political transitions in Ethiopia as it creates the notion of winner and loser. For winners, the transition has created a blessed opportunity for leaders to enjoy utmost untrammelled access to power and wealth. In contrast, for losers, the transition meant a fall from power and the loss of access to wealth.

The sentiment of winners and losers emboldens the protagonists to engage into intense political competitions. [5]argues that, for the elite the loss of influence over the state meant the loss of everything. Losing an office meant not only losing political influence but also access to economic resources. Hence, political transitions open old cleavages and create new ones, and in so divide society along multiple fault lines, leading to conflict as well as intense and desperate rivalry in the political arena[6]. To retain lost privilege as well as to consolidate acquired power, political elites engaged in the mobilization of ethnic/territorial groups by unleashing discourses on alternative policy.

This is followed by political transitions' transformation to unexpected animosity and tension. The problem is worse in Third World countries where they have noexperience of democracy. In this part of the world political transitions are always messy affairs. When regime changes and a new leadership come to power, large-scale shifts in expectation occur... the expectations outpace the ability of the new regimes to meet them[7]. The failure to meet the expectations has been followed by public dissatisfaction that led to another round of transition perhaps with more chaos, volatility and violence.

According to [7], for transitions to be successful, transitional leaders must respond quickly to the impending crisis and avert the polarization of political forces. Leaders must create civil order and end violence, inspire domestic trust and gain international legitimacy, establish and protect the autonomy and authority of independent judiciary and media, and achieve economic growth, increase employment and control inflation[8].They should engage in a form of creative destruction, and replace existing institutions with new sets of institutions[9] and appropriate policies.

The experiences of Ethiopia show that political transitions have not been substantiated by appropriate policies and strategies. Although the 2018 political transition brought public optimism for change in its early age, it has been subject to controversial opinions and claims. While some believe that the transition can bring the expected changes, others see it in suspicion, claiming that the change is a mere replacement of the old dictatorship with a new form of authoritarianism. It is this controversy of opinions that incites the interest to write the present paper. The central question the paper attempts to answer is that do the transitional leaders

properly implement what they ambitiously promised to the Ethiopian people. To do so, both the theoretical and practical aspects of the transition are going to be examined. Before proceeding to the main discussion, a brief examination of the pre-2018 political developments, including the culture of political transition from antiquity is made. This is intentionally done to analyse the changes and continuities in the political tradition of Ethiopia and how the past experiences shaped recent developments.

The culture of political transition in Ethiopia

Although Ethiopia has had a society that has reached the peak of human civilization at a time when most European lives in caves and survived by fishing and hunting[10], its people have not been led by a democratically elected leader of their own free choice[11]. For many years, Ethiopia was ruled by monarchs who claimed their pedigree to Queen Makeda of Ethiopia and King Solomon of Israel. This principle of political transition – power transfer through blood line – is stated in the *KebraNagast* (The Glory of Kings), the sacred book of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC).

KebraNagast is a thirteenth-century manuscript that contains the mystical story of Queen Makeda and her journey to visit King Solomon[12]. According to this tradition, Queen Makeda had paid a visit to King Solomon's court after hearing about his wisdom from a long-distance merchant named Tamrin. On her visit, she bore Menelik (the son of a wise man) after King Solomon tricked her in bed. As such, *KebraNagast* obliged the royal lineage that could be traced back to Menelik I and through this King Solomon and the house of David must be the legitimate leader of Ethiopia. Moreover, this national epic gave spiritual legitimacy to the monarchs by confirming the divine origin and sacredness of them. The *KebraNagast* had this to say in this regard:

Our lord said in the gospel: give to the king what is the king's and to God what is God's. And the apostle Paul said... every one of you must be submissive to the authority of the ruler, since the rule is appointed only by God. And God has appointed all the rulers and given them authority; one who opposes the rulers and rebels against him, rebels against the ordained of God[13].

The EOTC provided theological justification to this monarchical political culture through citing what is written in the *KebraNagast*. It propagates that the emperor is the 'elect of God' and as such no one can claim political power unless tracing genealogical lines from the established ruling family. The transfer of power from one king to the other in this way has not brought fundamental change on the political narratives of the country as the newly appointed emperors implement previous policies, claiming that they are the result of his forefathers' wisdom which they initiate through the ordained of God.

The continuing authoritarian nature of the monarchical system fuelled public discontent during the reign of Haile Selassie I (1930-1974), the last emperor of the Solomonic line. Public discontent was followed by a popular revolution in 1974, which ended the era of the longest dynasty in the world that ruled the country for over seven hundred years. The revolution culminated with the control of power by a group of military officers known as the *Derg* (committee). Establishing a transitional government called the Provisional Military Administration Council (PMAC), the *Derg* dismantled the traditional symbols of legitimate authority, national identity, independence and unity[14]. It destroyed old patterns, replaced traditional values and institutions with a new set of institutions[15], dissolved the parliament and suspended the constitution.

To acquire legitimacy, the regime issued different decrees and proclamations. The most important of them was the 1975's land reform proclamation, which addressed the historical grievance of the Ethiopian people. Later in 1976, as part of building socialism and alleged response to the nationalities question, the *Derg* came up with the declaration of National Democratic Revolution (NDR). This declaration states that the right to self-determination of all nationalities will be recognised and fully respected. No nationality will dominate another one since the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism. The declaration further expounded that a nationality has the right to determine the contents of its political and economic life, to use its own language and elect its leaders.

Like the monarchical system, oppressive laws were issued to demolish political opponents. The law that dethroned the Emperor banned and criminalised all kinds of oppositions and demonstrations [11]. Political parties, trade unions and free press were banned. As a result, the regime was challenged on many fronts: from a reinvigorated secessionist movement in Eritrea and student's radicals in the urban centres of Ethiopia to a host of rural-based national insurgencies. The regime opted to use force, including arbitrary arrest, torture, summary execution and long term detention to destroy oppositions.

The outcome of this was that political oppositions decided to remove the *Derg* from power through force. Ethno-nationalist groups in particular were active participants in the fight against the military regime through mobilizing fellow ethnic groups. In the end, Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), by forming a front called Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) together with Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) and Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM), defeated the dictatorial regime and controlled the locus of power in 1991. The coming of EPRDF to power was hoped to bring the long awaited peace, democracy and reconciliation[15] through dismantling oppressive laws and institutions that were used by the *Derg*.

In its infant stage, the EPRDF fostered discontinuous evolution of democracy[16]. The road to democracy was begun with the adoption of a transitional charter in July 1991. This charter guaranteed Ethiopia's numerous ethnic groups the right to self-determination up to and including secession and leading Ethiopia towards a multiparty democracy based on ethnic federalism[17]. A political rift, however, has occurred within a short period of time as a result of EPRDF's ambition to dominate power. The rift was intensified when EPRDF began to intimidate members of competitive political parties during the 1992 election[18]. The EPRDF used battlefield skills in leadership and tight control of resources to divide and conquer political foes.

Critically looking at the culture of political transition in Ethiopia from antiquity, the contemporaneous political culture is affected by the heritage of authoritarianism and elite rule [19]. In fact, one could argue against this, claiming the fact that Ethiopia is a country of diversified ethnic groups with different political cultures. Though this argument is correct, it did not adequately espouse the politics of the centre as it is shaped by the patrimonial system of the *ancien* regime. In this regard, [20] commented that:

Ethiopian politics ... was dominated by the legacies of emperors who led the country on the basis of a culture of elite interaction that was, in fact, a patrimonial rule based on loyalties and kinship. And such a system of interaction and rule resulted in their legacies becoming a hindrance to the

consolidation of the democratization process, while also serving as a school at which future leaders and political elites could learn the smarts and strategies of political survival.

Power holders treat the country and politics as their privileged domain[19], which they used as a means for controlling economic resources. The existence of deep economic logic behind the political process in the country makes power holders engage into the practice of patron-client relationship. To that end, Ethiopian leaders followed a similar staunch policy of appointment and dismissal[21]. Such appointments and dismissal are a testament to keeping those loyal close and suspected traitors in check. The dismissal of Lemma Megersa, former Defence Minister of Ethiopia, by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is a case in point. Lemma was once a trusted ally of Abiy but relations soured after he publicly criticised the transitional leaders' decision to merge the EPRDF into one party. Rather than accommodating different ideas, as a continuation of authoritarian political culture, Abiy's party suspended Lemma from membership and marginalized from the politics of the centre.

Research methods and materials

The aim of this paper is to analyse the paradox between the theory and practice of political transition in post-2018 Ethiopia. For this purpose, in-depth interview and document analysis methods were employed to collect data. Interviews were held with leaders of Prosperity Party (PP), Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), National Movement of Amhara (NaMA), TPLF and Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), through which the party was selected based on their sphere of influence on Ethiopian politics. Additional interviews were also conducted with purposely selected political scientists. The interviews were conducted within two months (between 19 October 2020 to 21 December 2020). Before conducting interviews, consent was obtained from informants. The author withholds the name of the informants for security reasons. Moreover, books, articles, reports, news, conference proceedings and working papers were reviewed to supplement the primary data. In the end, the data were analysed through thematic analysis method. The data that were collected from participants and documents were structured into themes and patterns to have a clear analysis of the results based on the established objectives.

The antecedents of the 2018 transition

With the ascendance of power in 1991, the EPRDF restructured Ethiopia into nine regional states on the basis of ethnicity. It established ethnic federalism to resolve nationalities' questions – a question that many ethno-nationalists have fought to it since the 1960s. However, since its introduction up until this day, this system has been subject to debate among political scientists and the general public. Supporters claim that it maintained the unity of the people and the territorial integrity of the state at large. They argue that it has brought the recognition of the principle of pluralism and ethnic equality[22]. It also produced a sense of pride and equality especially among those Ethiopians who felt marginalized by the dominant culture of the centre[23]. Moreover, members of the EPRDF argue that ethnic federalism saved Ethiopia from state disintegration and grants linguistic and cultural rights to the formerly oppressed ethnic groups.

In contrast, opponents espoused that ethnic federalism expanded cultural and linguistic rights to ethnic groups without providing meaningful political and economic freedom. Despite its goal of maintaining unity, ethnic federalism escalates ethnic conflict, unnecessarily essentializes identity and encourages secessionism and fragment political space along ethnic lines[15].[24] further pointed out that the EPRDF's commitment to ethnic federalism is an anachronism, a throwback to a

model of inter-ethnic relations that had just been proved a failure in three former communist federations, including the USSR, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia.

In addition to ethnic federalism, the EPRDF published the program of revolutionary democracy to control the political economy of the country through the Leninist principle of democratic centralism. Anchored by this principle, the EPRDF tightly controlled the country's overall affairs by excluding rival political groups. The relationship between constituent parties within the front was also based on some degrees of power differences [25]. TPLF defines the organization of state structure and initiates policies to be passed by the parliament without proper dialogue. The constitution was undermined through violence, intimidation and political influence in order to prevent regional governments from exercising their freedoms[26]. Above all, TPLF provides preferential access to government credit facilities, preferential treatments in obtaining licence and custom clearances, manipulation of privatization and tailoring public sector infrastructure investment to the needs of the party-affiliated business groups[27]. It established a huge business empire known as Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT) to rebuild the war torn Tigray region. Though the aim of EFFORT is promising, it was used as a means of expropriating the economy of Ethiopia for party use.

Competitive political parties have also been intimidated, suppressed and marginalised by state security apparatuses. Within the EPRDF system, election was characterised by electoral fraud and violence, state capture of Medias and delays in vote tabulation[19]. Elections were conducted as a mere propaganda to deceit donor countries, international financial institutions and other international observers (interview with transitional leader, 23 November 2020, Addis Ababa). One former leader of CUD, a competitive party in the 2005 election, had this to say in this regard.

The EPRDF used state intelligence services to dismantle strong political parties. Intelligent agents were deployed as members of opposition political parties through carrying destructive missions. If you take the disintegration of CUD, it has to do with EPRDF agents' creation of mistrust and suspicion among prominent leaders. They used ethnic differences as a means of creating suspicion ... and irreconcilable and polarized political differences that finally led to CUD's fragmentation... Moreover, the EPRDF created affiliate parties by providing financial assistance. The roles of affiliate parties were to defame opposition parties and glorify the EPRDF during electoral debates (interview with former leader of CUD, 21 November 2020, Addis Ababa).

The outcome of this was that no strong political parties that could end the hegemony of EPRDF emerged. By making opposition political parties incompetent, the EPRDF won 100% of the parliamentary seats in the 2015 election. This victory, however, has not brought legitimacy to the regime and lasting peace to the country.

Agitated by state tyranny, the Ethiopian people massively protested against this regime in different corners of the country. Initially, the protest erupted in Oromia, the country's largest region, in November 2015. In fact, sporadic protests began in April 2014 against the controversial 'Addis Ababa Integrated Development Plan', which was launched as an urban expansion plan aimed at responding to the industrial and human growth of the capital city. The main concerns of protesters were to ensure proportional ethnic representation, reduce land corruption and end TPLF's domination. The response of the government was violent in that the security forces killed and arrested protestors, claiming that they are terrorists and mercenaries of Ethiopia's enemy.

The government admitted at least five hundred deaths since the protest began, while some human rights organizations reported that there were at least 800 deaths[28].

The protests, though they were initially unfolded in the Oromia region, have quickly expanded in other parts of the country. The most prominent of the protests were the Amhara resistance that began in July 2016 after a fatal clash between TPLF security forces and Colonel DemekeZewude, a prominent leader of Wolkayt Amhara Identity Question Committee. This committee was established on 23 August 2015 to restore the Wolkayt territory into the Amhara region as 'people from Wolkayt objected to being included in the newly expanded Tigray region[18] by the TPLF in 1991. The TPLF attempted to squash the question by labelling the committee members as terrorists and mercenaries of the government of Eritrea. TPLF security forces tried to capture Colonel Demeke on 11 July 2016, but he refused to surrender and opened fire against them. This created public grievances that led to the eruption of popular protests at Gondar, Bahir Dar, Debre Markos and other towns of Amhara region.

In the protests, the Amhara youths displayed an unprecedented level of solidarity with Oromo, chanting in their slogan that 'the sacrifices of Oromo are ours too'. Frustrated by this solidarity, TPLF elites tried to use ethnic and ideological cleavages to precipitate the fall of popular movements. In an interview with Fana Broadcasting Corporate (FBC), GetachewReda (former Information and Communication Minister), said that the solidarity between the two groups that have polarised political differences implied that the government has failed to do its homework. The attempts of the TPLF to surmount the protests were unsuccessful because the solidarity between the protesters was supported by member parties of the EPRDF. ANDM and OPDO sided with the protesters in contrast to their brand of subordination. The former has begun to break away from the messianic doctrine of the ruling party by showing allegiance to the concerns of the Amhara people. Above all, on November 2017 OPDO reached out ANDM at Bahir Dar in a spirit of solidarity and cooperation that led a renowned hope of expropriating power from the TPLF[29]. The TPLF led EPRDF has finally fragmented and its reign ended in 2018.

The onset of the transition

Many commentators pointed out that the EPRDF introduced the policy of revolutionary democracy and ethnic federalism to stay in power for a long reign by excluding rival political groups. The regime's deformed intention to stay in power is best reflected in one of the speeches made by Bereket Simon, Former Information and Communication Minister of Ethiopia. He said that I would like to stress, nothing in Ethiopia will change. The government will continue our institutions and policies. Nothing will change in Ethiopia. Nonetheless, having been baffled by popular protests, the EPRDF declared its readiness to pursue meaningful reforms, including preparation for free and fair elections, the revision of oppressive laws that tightly constrained politics, listened to the voice of political oppositions and released political prisoners in January 2018. In the ensuing months, thousands of prisoners were freed and the notorious federal crime investigation unit in Addis Ababa, commonly known as *MaekeLawi*, was closed.

The people were not, however, satisfied by the measures taken and thus followed by incessant riots, strikes and protests. Following this, Prime Minister HailemariamDesalegn announced his resignation from power on 15 February 2018. In a televised speech, said his resignation was vital in the bid to carry out reforms that would lead to sustainable peace and democracy. He further expounded that we are at a stage where we are undertaking reforms...appropriate to give answer to the demands the Ethiopian people are raising. He admitted that the country was at a gravely concerning stage and the resignation was to be a part of the solution to the unrest and political crisis that have led to the losses of lives. Leaders of the governing coalition held an emergency

meeting following the announcement of the resignation. The meeting declared a national state of emergency to ease the tension until a new Prime Minister came to power.

It is at this critical juncture that the new leadership assumed power to fill the existing political vacuum. On 2 April 2018, Abiy Ahmed was appointed as Prime Minister from formerly marginalised constituent units of the EPRDF, the OPDO. The coming of Abiy to power brought optimism about the prospect for political and economic changes. These hopes were further boosted by the contents of his eloquent inaugural speech as he appeared to focus on Ethiopia's past history with an ambitious vision to national unity that was put into grave by the former regime. He underscored the potential dangers of interethnic contestation and the importance of weaving new, inclusive and future-oriented Ethiopian narratives that recognises and seeks to transcend past grievances. He stressed on the necessity of national consensus through national reconciliation and connectedness.

To gain public support, the Prime Minister promised to establish democratic political system, which is vital to protect human and democratic rights and settle differences in an accommodative way. He said that:

In one country, there will inevitably be differences in opinions. Differences in opinions are not curses. When we are listening to each other despite our differences and engage in principled discourse, our differences return dividends in the form of blessings. In a fight over ideas are solutions to our problems... The sentiment that 'I rather die than see my idea not win' destroys families, let alone nations.

The accommodation of differences in opinions can be developed through establishing genuine democracy. The Premier claim that today, for us building democracy is an existential matter, which is necessary to open political space, ease ethnic tensions and prosper the country. Through consolidating democracy, he further said that we need to respect all human and democratic rights, especially to free expression, assembly and organization, by upholding the constitution. To put the promises into practice, he undertook several measures which needed to be done at the start of every transition, including releasing political prisoners, inviting opposition political parties for dialogue and allowing relative media freedom. As a result, the Ethiopian people gave unreserved support for the new leaders to lead the transition. The people showed allegiance to the Prime Minister in demonstrations held at Addis Ababa and other towns of the country, chanting that 'Abiy is my leader'.

Major reforms

Transitions require effective leadership that can dismantle the existing system while at the same time introducing new practices and institutions to reinforce democratization[9]. Transition leaders need to make a critical breakthrough to undo the old structures and delegitimise the old culture – structures and institutions that caused public resentment due to its repressive practices. To establish new structures and acquire legitimacy to the new order, effective follow-up initiatives are necessary to be done by the newly emerging leadership. Hence, constitutions are rewritten, bureaucracies are revamped, state institutions overhauled, economic models are reorganised and new sets of social formation are instituted to establish the transition on solid foundations.

Dismantling former structures did not imply the complete trivialization of traditions and institutions that cement the people together; rather, it implies abandoning institutions and practices that served as a means of state repression to the former ruling class. The traumatic

experience of Ethiopia following the ascendance of *Derg* into power has been attributed to the total breakdown of the social fabric of the people in the name of revolution[14]. The age-old cultural traditions held sacred by the people of Ethiopia were denigrated, labelled as primitive and backward, which caused Ethiopia's backwardness. The *Derg* did not just kill people; it tried to kill a cultural tradition Ethiopia has developed for centuries [30]. *Meheret* (Pardon) and *ereq* (reconciliation), which were the moral structure of the old political universe, have been forgotten. The EPRDF was not exceptional in this regard. It disregarded Ethiopianist values and sentiments of the people and replaced it with factional loyalty to ethnic identity. This brought ethnic based killings and evictions and ethnic tensions over territorial claims in the last three decades. The conflicts between Amhara and Kemant[31], Guji and Gedeo[32], Gurage and Silti[33] and the tension between Amhara and Tigray over border issue were among the deadliest ethnic conflicts that has happened after the introduction of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia.

In a departure from previous transitions, Abiy Ahmed aimed to revive the past glory of the country and the moral structure of the older political universe through openly calling for national pardon and reconciliation. He used to retain the notion of 'greater Ethiopia', which was the overriding principle of nationalism for monarchical leaders, but labelled by the EPRDF as false nationalism that oppressed the autonomy of 'nations, nationalities and peoples'. In the light of this, the Prime Minister introduced the concept of *medemer* (synergy) in various public speeches and official statements he has made. He wrote a lengthy book, [34], which reflects his personal philosophy, visions, outlooks and worldviews. In this book, Abiy called for the necessity of revisiting the old wisdom and socio-cultural and historical realities of the country in order to provide solutions to the contemporary predicaments. The concept of *medemer* proposes an end to the politics of extremism through forging national consensus and reconciliation. It suggested the need of loving one's country and respecting the historical achievements of national heroes and heroines that were forgotten due to the deconstructionist policy of the EPRDF. Above all, *medemer* aims to harmonise the politics of identity into a synthesis of nation-building, tolerance, love, understanding and forgiveness. It rejects the notions of division in the country on the basis of ethnicity and religion.

The concept of *medemer* was practically manifested in the first few months of the political transition. Transitional leaders ended the tyranny of the previous regime and its begotten political unrests through taking bold political measures. In the honeymoon period of the transition, Ethiopia, which was a prison house of political dissidents, journalism and human right activists, has become a land of free press and political freedom (interview with political scientist, 5 December 2020, Bahir Dar). Politicians and political parties that were condemned as terrorists and banished from Ethiopia by the EPRDF were redeemed fully and accepted with open arms to take part in the political process. Repressive laws on anti-terrorism, civil society and the media has been revised. The transitional leaders expressed their commitment to electoral reform, a reform which can foster free and fair elections. The prime minister has conducted continuous discussions with opposition political parties with a vision to open the political space. He frequently expressed the need to ensure political plurality, stating that the country had 'no option' but multiparty democracy based on rule of law.

Medemer, as a new concept, has not been free from criticisms. It has been strongly challenged by opposition political groups, including the TPLF, human rights activists and public intellectuals. Critics claim that the concept of *medemer* is nothing more than a mere rhetoric that could have not been put into practice. They further argue that the concept of *medemer* has been used by the

Prime Minister to hide his weakness of bringing authentic policies and strategies. As one member of TPLF in an interview says:

The country is ruled arbitrarily by the order of the Prime Minister. There are no authentic rules and regulations that limit the power of the government ... The Prime Minister incessantly talks about the controversial concept of medemer to use it as a means of building his personality rather than finding appropriate panacea to the political ills of the country. Through medemer, the Prime Minister negated former policies, including democratic developmentalism without bringing alternative policies and strategies. He engaged in denigrating former institutions and practices; though he was part of it (interview with leader of TPLF, 23 October 2020, Addis Ababa).

The transitional leaders also embarked the country on ambitious economic reforms. The privatization of public enterprises to encourage private business was among the reforms initiated during the transition period. Before the transition, the country's economy was run by a developmental state. Developmental state was officially declared as an economic model in 2005 to ameliorate the national economy so that the regime can maintain its hegemony by siphoning off popular support from competing political parties[35]. Accompanied by the regime's controversial ideology – revolutionary democracy – developmental state served as an instrument of state capture and marginalization of rival political groups[36]. Recognizing this problem, the transitional leaders declared to replace the developmental state with a system that can encourage private sectors. Moreover, the Prime Minister introduced ambitious and transformative projects to lessen the country's economic problems through employment creation, private sector development and foreign currency generation. Development projects, including Sheger project, Entoto project and the partial filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) were successfully accomplished by transitional leaders. The privatization of public enterprises, however, was a mere rhetoric because the government's promise to transfer telecommunication, electric and water sectors to the private businesses has remained unimplemented.

Beyond domestic reforms, the transitional period brought the rapprochement of the relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which were in a serious hostility for twenty years due to intractable border dispute. The Prime Minister has paid frequent visits to Asmara and in return Isaias Afewerki, president of Eritrea, moved to Addis Ababa to strengthen bilateral relations. With this diplomatic success, Abiy gained political and financial support from multiple numbers of international parties, including the United Arab Emirates, the European Union, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In his effort to normalise Ethio-Eritrean relation and in his commitment to forge domestic peace, the Prime Minister awarded the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize.

Next to embarking political and economic reforms, the other task of transitional leaders was to gradually deemphasise ethnicity as the centre of politics and work towards the reinvigoration of Ethiopian nationalism. A part of this plan was to merge the EPRDF into a single party. Hence, on November 2019, the front was transformed into PP by merging the three constituent parties and the five 'allied parties' – the ruling parties of Afar, Benishangul Gumuz, Gambella, Harari and Somali regions. TPLF openly criticised the front's merger and declined to join the newly formed party citing procedural and legal mishaps. By merging EPRDF into an all-inclusive, pan-Ethiopian and national party, the transitional leaders aimed to end ethnic polarisation from the soil of Ethiopia.

As the country's politics has been characterised by extreme polarisation, the transformation of EPRDF into PP becomes the source of political contestation. Ethiopian nationalists warmly

welcomed PP for they believed that it is a positive step towards uniting a long-divided country. But, their support was challenged by ethno-nationalists, arguing that the support is driven by careless assessments of Ethiopia's ethnic cleavages and political fault lines and more by their fixation on a homogenizing conception of unity. Ethnic nationalists tend to claim that the merger of the distinct entities that represented the various ethnic groups make a return to Ethiopia's centralizing and homogenising past. They believed that PP has the potential to undermine the achievement of the past three decades in terms of cultural autonomy and lays the structural foundation of a unitary state that will rob them off ethnic groups' dignity and autonomy. There were others who opposed the merger because they believed that the time was not right. This group argues that ethnic nationalism has been the dominant mode of political mobilization in the country and that merging the party before addressing political controversies will risk state disintegration. Still others regarded PP as the tactic used by transitional leaders to consolidate political power. Merera Gudina, the chairman of OFC, said that the formation of PP is a tactic to 'win the upcoming election in the face of fierce political competition brewing'.

Ethiopian Democracy: Moving one step forward and many steps backward

The title for this section is borrowed from [37] analysis of the 2005 pre-election's political pluralism and the post-election crisis in her article, *Ethnic Federalism and Self-Determination for Nationalities in a Semi-Authoritarian State: the Case of Ethiopia*. The year 2005 was a turning point in Ethiopia's party politics due to the fact that the EPRDF for the first time widened the political space, allowed state-owned Medias for political parties to publicise their alternative policies and opened the system to electoral debates and election campaigns[19]. It was with this open political environment that the third national election was conducted on 15 May 2005. The period following this day, however, was ignited by popular protests and electoral violence, killing and other human rights abuses by government forces, delays in vote tabulation, a large number of electoral complaints, a prolonged and problematic electoral dispute resolution process and the resurgence of government and opposition clash. To that end, [37] characterised the democratic development of the country as it was 'moving one step forward and many steps backward'.

Likewise, the coming of new leadership in 2018 brought optimism for change in the political system of Ethiopia. In the beginning, there were widespread public hopes that Ethiopia ushered with a new era of democratization and economic and social transformations. The transitional leaders promised to abandon the cultures of exclusion and marginalisation and to bring a new era of trust, togetherness and federalism. Hence, the transitional period has vowed with unprecedented decisions to open political space, ameliorate the national economy and bring social transformation. Despite a raft of reforms introduced by transitional leaders to overhaul the authoritarian system, the transition period has been characterised by a sharp increase in lawlessness, intensified domestic conflict and heightened ethnic tension.

After a few months of the onset of the transition, Ethiopia is sliding dangerously backward, particularly on security and democracy. Ethiopia's simmering ethnic tensions and political divisions have deep-rooted. Competing interpretations of history, an unfinished project of federalism and ethnic polarisations were critical problems that deteriorated the prospects for change (interview with political scientist, 16 November 2020, Addis Ababa). The country has been under the situation of worsening levels of militant ethno-nationalism and inter-communal violence, a dangerous standoff between the central government and Tigray region and an increase in politically motivated deaths. This has been compounded by the government's turning to forceful response to law and order challenges, including intimidation and mass arrest of civilians, opposition politicians and journalists.

Since the infant stage of the transition, the new leadership have been challenged by the problem of accommodating polarised political interests, including Oromo elites' grievances, the demands of Ethnic groups' for more autonomy in ethnically diverse southern region and the unity of Ethiopia. The failure of the transitional leaders to provide timely response to these contesting demands brought political deadlock in Ethiopia. The deadlock is accompanied by politicians' involvement in ethnic mobilization rather than on alternative discourses. For the mobilization has been conducted based on ethnic hatred, it was followed by evictions of ethnic minorities by labelling them as 'outsider' in the area where the perceived 'majority' is living. Transition leaders claim that ethnic tensions have not been the outcome of their failure; rather, it has been an extension of the former regime's policy. It seems true; but, the main aim of any transition is to alleviate past grievances through devising appropriate policy and strategy. Associating current problems with the former pitfalls without doing once homework did not immune the transitional leaders from accusations.

The transition period was characterised by politically-motivated killings. The killing of the president and other three senior officials of Amhara region and the murder of chief of the national army on 22 June 2019 was among the turbulent political situation since the transition. Labelling the incident as a coup d'état, the government attempted to suppress political oppositions, particularly which are formed to struggle for the cause of Amhara (interview with NaMA leader, 27 November 2020, Addis Ababa). Arbitrary arrest of political opponents began immediately after the incident, though the Prime Minister promised to end politically-motivated arrests. Members and leaders of NaMA were the primary target of the government's heavy hand. Many criticised the action of the government that it was purposely done to restrict the influence of NaMA on the political domain of Ethiopia, claiming that the government feared the public acceptances that the party acquired. One leader of NaMA in an interview said that:

From the inception, transitional leaders gave deaf ears to the questions of the Amhara people. They frequently criticised Amhara nationalism as a threat to national unity. By national unity, they meant is not the real Ethiopian unity, but their political interest ... Their political interest is to replace the hegemony of TPLF with OPDO through marginalising strong political opponents... Transitional leaders were not in a position to accuse other ethnic-nationalists because they were not potential threats to their political interests. They always accused political groups established to struggle for the causes of Amhara. Simple errors were needed to dismantle us ... and they used the incident of 22 June 2019 as a pretext to arrest prominent leaders of NaMA and other political elites of Amhara (interview with NaMA leader, 19 December 2020, Bahir Dar).

After one year of this turbulent situation, an Oromo singer, Hachalu Hundessa, was killed on 29 June 2020. Following the death of Hachalu, violent unrest has erupted in Addis Ababa and the surrounding Oromia region. Targeted attacks and killings, particularly against ethnic minorities in the region, was the main feature of the unrest. The unrest led to the death of 9 police officers, 5 militia members and 215 civilians. Murithi Mutiga, the Horn of Africa (HOA) project director at the International Crisis Group characterised the situation as follows:

This has been the most significant and concentrated outburst of violence since the transition... There has been a steady drumbeat of ethnic displacement and killings across the country but this is one of the most serious challenges Abiy has faced since coming into office. The danger is that in asserting himself and trying to gain control, he may move in a more illiberal direction.

Critics said that Abiy has responded to the instability by blaming foreign and domestic detractors, often without giving evidence. Ahmed Suleiman, HOA researcher at Chatham House had this to say: the prime minister has come out with a scattergun approach and blamed different institutions without providing evidence, which is unhelpful. He suggested that 'there needs to be a proper judicial process to identify what has happened and who may have carried out this act. But, the government arrested about 9000 people, leading to concerns that these could be a return to authoritarian rule that the transition leaders had promised to end. Civilians, opposition leaders and journalists languished into jail and the detention conditions were contrary to the protocol of COVID-19.

The political tension was exacerbated by the indefinite postponement of the election that was due on 29 August 2020 as a result of COVID-19 concerns. The government arrived at this decision unilaterally without consulting concerned stakeholders. The lack of inclusion angered opposition groups and they started to question the legitimacy of the government after the parliament's term expires in October 2020. Efforts to avoid a crisis of legitimacy for the government caused by the end of parliament's term led to a decision on the way forward being taken by the Council of Constitutional Inquiry. This group of legal experts gave the PP an open ended extension of power term, rubber stamped by House of Federation (HoA), with no limit set on their powers during the interim period. Many in opposition advocated for a transitional or technocratic government during this period. The Prime Minister backed at this idea by saying that 'those suggesting this are those who prioritise gaining power at any cost over the aspiration of the people'.

Rejecting the decision of the central government, the TPLF decided to hold regional election in Tigray. The TPLF established a regional electoral commission, in spite of grave objections from the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE). In fact, TPLF embarked on a project of permanent criticism against the transitional leaders since 2018 with the aim of delegitimizing their mandate to govern the country. The postponement of the election has created another opportunity for TPLF to further discredit them. TPLF officials complained that the new administration has undermined the constitution, which granted the right to self-determination to ethnic groups. To exercise this right, the Tigray region's State Council declared that it would hold the election, scheduled for 9 September 2020. TPLF insists that it is Tigray's constitutional right to run polls, saying that the central government's decision to extend all regional governments term was illegal. It argues that self-rule granted by article 39(1) of the constitution, which states that 'every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession', is non-negotiable and supersede the NEBE's role of overseeing vote.

Federal officials, meanwhile, rejected Tigray's constitutional interpretation and categorised its action as unconstitutional. They believe that law is on their side in that article 55(2) of the constitution, which states that the federal parliament enforces 'political rights established by the constitution and electoral laws and procedures', bestowing the central government the power to decide on electoral controversies. As such, the central government warned TPLF to stop its move; otherwise it opted to use force to deter the conduct of the election. In support of this Abiy says that any 'unconstitutional attempts to undertake illegal actions will result in harm to the country...the government will be forced to take any measure to assure the safety of the people and the country'. But, Abiy changed his position in a meeting held with opposition political parties in August 2020, saying that 'the federal government has no intention and interest to attack its own people'.

Although Abiy ruled out military intervention, other higher officials threaten punitive measures, including denying federal subsidies that can make the party blow. Rather than taking punitive

measures, the central government opted to deny recognition to the outcomes of the election. The HoF, in a meeting held on 5 September 2020, decided that the formation of an electoral board in the region is illegal and any action taken by it would be unenforceable. Citing article 9(1) of the constitution, which states that ‘...any law, customary practice or a decision of an organ of state or a public official which contravenes this Constitution shall be of no effect’, the HoF declared that the election that will be held in Tigray region as unconstitutional and vowed not to recognise the result. Representatives of TPLF refused to participate in the meeting, claiming that the house had failed to disclose the agenda before the session. As such, TPLF declared any attempt to stop the election as a ‘declaration of war’. It was with this controversy that the election was held on 9 September 2020 as planned and the TPLF won 98.2 % of the vote for regional assembly.

The tension between TPLF and the federal government reached its highest stage on 4 November 2020 when the Prime Minister declared military operation in the Tigray region. This operation was precipitated by a night-fire assault by the TPLF on a major Ethiopian National Defence Force base in Tigray that resulted in the killing of non-Tigrayan soldiers and the looting of heavy artillery and weapons. The federal government described this attack as high treason and termed it as ‘law enforcement operation’. In the beginning, the TPLF denied initiating the conflict, accusing Abiy of starting a war ‘to consolidate his personal power’. However, a top official appeared to confirm the federal government’s claim that TPLF forces sparked the conflict by attacking the military base. Sekoutoure Getachew, in a video discussion, said that pre-emptive strikes were carried out in self-defence against the Ethiopian army, calling it an ‘internationally known practice’. After several weeks of fighting, Ethiopia’s federal government seized control of the Tigray region’s capital city and declared victory over the TPLF on 28 November 2020. This was followed by the banning of TPLF from the list of political parties by the NEBE as of January 2020.

In addition to such political tensions, transitional leaders were criticised for favouring the Oromia region in economic incentives and the appointment of Oromo elites in key government positions. Chiefs of the army, manager of Commercial bank of Ethiopia, mayor of Addis Ababa and leaders of other key public corporations are controlled by Oromo through ousting former leaders and managers. Moreover, the Prime Minister has been criticised for consolidating his power domination by excluding strong personnel and surrounding himself with weak ministers, rather than working to the best of the country. Abiy failed to respond to the country’s complex political problems beyond establishing ad-hoc commissions, including one for reconciliation and one for administrative boundary and identity issues. Above all, he gave deaf ears to the complex socio-economic and political problems of the residents of Addis Ababa. Ethiopian Peoples for Social Justice (*EZEMA*), in a party statement released on 29 August 2020, reveals that 210, 000 square meters of land were illegally appropriated in the capital city. In addition, the cabinets of the city transfer 23,000 condominium units to Oromo peasants and youths, supposed to be the victim of land expropriation by the former regime, but whose land has allegedly been required by the government for public use. The residents of the city who have been registered and saved money to the condominium units for more than fifteen years were denied their right to have a house.

Thus, critics argue that reforms initiated by the transitional leaders were superficial. The Ethiopian political landscape is still characterised by divisions, hatred and domination. MereraGuidina once said ‘the country is still at the cross road...there are still tensions everywhere...political tensions, social tensions and economic tensions’. ShiferawBekele, professor of History, on his side characterised the political situations as ‘continuous, debilitating crises’. He likens the current situations to the so-called *zemenemesafint* (era of princes), between

the 18th and 19th centuries, when warrior fiefdoms engaged in a perpetual struggle for supremacy. Critical observers fear that this situation might lead the country into disintegration as is the case in Yugoslavia. Eskindir Nega, an award winning Ethiopian journalist and human rights activist, worries that the catalyst for rupture will come if Abiy's party emulates the TPLF by building a system clearly dominated by Oromo elites. If this happens then, in the long term, breakup is a real possibility'. Alemayehu Woldemariam, a constitutional lawyer, has also said 'as to the fear that Ethiopia might go the way of Yugoslavia, yet it is highly impossible, but not impossible'.

Conclusion

Since 2018, Ethiopia is on the course of political transition, a process that has passed through formidable challenges. The transition brought public optimism for change in its early days. These hopes were corroborated by transitional leaders' bold promise to open the political space, revive the lost Ethiopian nationalism and reduce ethnic tensions. Leaders introduced several reforms to settle the old challenges and bring new order to the country. A part of the reform was the concept of *medemer* introduced by Abiy Ahmed, which aims to revisit past wisdom so as to resolve current predicaments. *Medemer* calls for the revitalization of pardon, reconciliation and connectedness, which were the moral structure of the old political universe. In the light of this, exiled opposition political groups were welcomed, political prisoners were released, the gospel of Ethiopian unity was sermonised and conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea was resolved. This development, however, has been compounded with animosity, ethnic tension and the reclaiming of authoritarianism by the ruling class. This traumatic experience is the result of transitional leaders' failure to construct the institutions of change on solid foundations to direct such change toward peace and democracy. To establish democracy through closing the past chapter, transitional leaders were expected to facilitate a peaceful national reconciliation process among political elites on the crimes committed in the last half century on Ethiopian people. Nevertheless, the ruling class and opposition political parties have driven political struggle through ethnic mobilization, which the transitional leaders promised to end through national reconciliation, rather than on alternative discourses. The outcome of this is that a state of anarchy has prevailed in the country because opposition groups, disgruntled parties and frustrated youths frequently rejected the decisions of transitional leaders. This is followed by politically motivated killings, violent protests, unilateral decision to conduct regional elections and forceful responses by the government to the challenges of peace and order. The dictatorial tendencies of the ruling class, ethnic tensions and polarised interests which characterise the transition period have historical precedents and are deeply rooted in the political culture of the country. Hegemonic aspirations, zero-sum politics and patrimonial system are the defining characteristics of the political history of Ethiopia. The heritage of authoritarianism and elite rule shaped the political domain of Ethiopia to a large extent. This created a deleterious impact on the success of political transitions as reflected in the 2018 transition. As [20] writes 'political leaders in Ethiopia still impose authoritarian rule, and that is simply the continuation of the characteristics of previous authoritarian regimes in a newly minted neo-patrimonial fashion'. But, it did not mean that the country had no potential capacity to conduct a successful political transition. Successful transition can be conducted through political actors' full commitment to resemble inclusive dialogue and reconciliation, as they seek to forge a common future.

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