Ethiopia's National Dialogue:
Issues and Potential Scenarios

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Content

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Ethiopian National Dialogue Timeline

2018

Popular Protests Reshape EPRDF Leadership: The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) faced significant pressure from popular protests, leading to internal changes within the party. In 2018, a new leadership emerged as a response to the demands for reform.

Discourse: From 2018 onwards, there were conversations among civil society (Multi-stakeholder Initiative for National Dialogue (MIND); Ethiopians for Inclusive Peace (EID), and others) and with government officials on the need for a national dialogue.

Eritrea-Ethiopia Rapprochement: Eritrea and Ethiopia declared a rapprochement, marked by agreements signed in Abu Dhabi and Jeddah in July 2018. This diplomatic thaw signaled a shift in regional relations and dynamics with consequences for peace and war.

2020

Northern Ethiopia Conflict: Tensions escalated into open conflict in northern Ethiopia between the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) and Tigray forces in November 2020, leading to a complex and ongoing crisis.

2021

Establishment of Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission: On December 29, 2021, the House of Peoples' Representatives in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia approved the establishment of the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission. Proclamation 1265/2014 outlined the commitment of the Ethiopian government to create a diverse and inclusive National Dialogue Commission consisting of 11 commissioners.

2024

Agenda Setting Consultations: Early May 2024, the National Dialogue Commission concluded the agenda setting consultative chapter in Addis Ababa.

Commission Nominations and Shortlisting: Among the 632 nominees for the Commission, the identities of which remain undisclosed, the House of Peoples' Representatives shortlisted 42 candidates for further consideration. Ultimately, 11 commissioners were confirmed from the shortlist. The Commission's primary objective is to facilitate national consensus and uphold the integrity of the country.

Executive summary

Ethiopia has embarked on a critical national dialogue effort that carries the potential to reshape its political landscape. If not managed effectively, it could yield disastrous consequences.

A thorough analysis of Ethiopia's current national dialogue endeavors first requires a comprehensive examination of recent political developments, historical context, and the contentious issues at the core of the nation's present challenges. A profound understanding of these underlying factors is essential to chart a course for Ethiopia out of its current predicament.

This paper seeks to analyze various scenarios to gain insights into the current status of the national dialogue, assess the direction it is presently heading to, and engage in a discussion on the necessary actions to guide it towards a promising trajectory. Furthermore, it evaluates the prospects of establishing an improved framework to address the inherent fault lines in the Ethiopian context. While reviewing the potential outcomes and implications of Ethiopia's national dialogue across four scenarios, it also presents additional considerations for thoughtful deliberation.

"Ethiopia's National Dialogue: Issues and Potential Scenarios" has been commissioned from a well-informed and experienced author with intimate understanding of the National Dialogue Process and the issues it relates to. In light of the sensitivities surrounding the process, the author wishes not to be named.

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Issues in and Background of Ethiopia's National Dialogue

Ethiopia's Contestations in Historical Perspective and Current Context

Ethiopia's political tapestry has long been characterized by remarkable diversity, giving rise to a political culture marked by divergent perspectives. This diversity extends to various interpretations of the nation's history, the significance of its symbols, including its flag and revered figures, and the ongoing debate on whether Ethiopians constitute a unified people or belong to distinct 'nations and nationalities'. Furthermore, grievances rooted in historical injustices, marginalization, the uneven distribution of power and resources, poverty, and a range of socio-economic and political disparities have contributed to a complex and tense political, cultural, and economic environment.

Historical Precedents and Critical Junctures

While many of these issues have persisted over time, they have recently gained heightened prominence. Ethiopia's history is punctuated by critical junctures, with notable turning points occurring in 1974, 1991, and the most recent one in 2018. The 1974 revolution, following the coup against Emperor Haile Selassie and his regime, ushered in significant changes in the government's role, as well as land and property ownership. Internal conflict in the northern part of Ethiopia eventually led to the downfall of the military government and the independence of Eritrea, leaving Ethiopia landlocked since. In the aftermath of the Derg's fall in 1991, Ethiopia successfully averted collapse by adopting a federal system that brought about transformative shifts in self-governance, constitutional principles, economic dynamics, and amplified its regional influence. Federalism fundamentally changed Ethiopia's power relations and dynamics. Although the EPRDF tried to centralize power through the party, federalism became the bed rock of Ethiopia's continuing transformation. 2018 marks a watershed moment, when internal party coalition conflicts resulted in a transition with profound implications for Ethiopia's state-building process. It also ushered in a devastating war, fundamentally altering the political landscape in the Horn of Africa and undermining multilateralism. This period has extended into Ethiopia's pursuit of access to the sea, sparking a reconfiguration of forces both opposing and supporting Ethiopia. It could significantly reshape Ethiopia's power dynamics and the roles of its key players, acting as a catalyst in Ethiopia's state-building process. Nonetheless, these historical milestones are not immune to contentious interpretations, particularly in the context of the current federal structure, the constitution, and the calls for national reconciliation.

Challenges of Consensus in a Diverse Nation

Consensus has proven elusive in Ethiopia, given the country's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. There has never been a culture of dialogue and conversation on contested issues within the country. The inability to reach a consensus on key issues has often led to a "winner-takes-all" approach, evident even in the agreement signed between the Federal Government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in November 2022.

Contested Nation-Building

The process of nation-building is highly contested, and the pursuit of consensus has not followed a linear trajectory. Competing narratives in the country have contributed to what can be described as a "war of visions" concerning Ethiopia's past and future. One vision seeks greater centralization, drawing from Ethiopia's history of assimilation, while another supports a federal structure with greater devolution of power, self-determination, and even keeping the possibility of secession open, reflecting the embedded elite contestation for power. Middle positions advocate for maintaining the current constitution with certain adjustments.

Inter-ethnic Tensions

Contested narratives have been reinforced by the policies of successive governments, which have often leaned towards either marginalization or assimilation. Such policies have exacerbated tensions between the state and citizens and fostered divisions within communities, leading to protracted conflicts in Ethiopia's political landscape.

Consent and Coercion

The erosion of government hegemony following the weakening of the EPRDF from 2012 has given rise to attempts to hold onto power through coercion rather than consent and legitimacy. Inequality and narrow elite self-interest have sparked waves of unrest from Oromo-Amhara youth movements since 2015, prompting calls for increased policing to restore order nationwide[1]. It remains to be seen whether the current government's politics continue the authoritarian rule observed in the peripheries or if there could be significant change in the nature of consent and coercion. In any case, coercion is intertwined with a profound transformation in the balance of internal power within the state, where the federal government's dominance is challenged by emerging actors on the battlefield, in social media and other arenas.

Given the complex and multifaceted nature of Ethiopia's political landscape, the path forward must involve a comprehensive understanding of historical factors that have contributed to the current situation. A nuanced approach to addressing contested issues, promoting consensus, and finding common ground is essential to navigating the challenges and potential scenarios that Ethiopia faces, while also considering the regional implications of these developments.

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1 A more detailed political economy analysis is under consideration for a later point in time.

Self-Administration and Self-Determination: An Analysis of the Rationales and Pitfalls in Ethiopia's Federal System

Political arrangements often emerge as responses to prevailing realities and challenges, and this was distinctly the case in Ethiopia back in 1991. At that time, Ethiopia found itself at critical crossroads, with various armed movements pursuing self-determination, and the looming specter of disintegration. In reaction to these formidable challenges, Ethiopia adopted a federal state structure motivated by the "holding-together" principle. This structure acknowledged the presence of nations and nationalities as distinct political entities with a history of prior sovereign existence. While this model has faced criticism, it has, from a pragmatic standpoint, played a vital role in preventing Ethiopia from fracturing into smaller fragments or descending into prolonged civil strife. Simultaneously, the constitution's focus on group rights has, at times, been perceived as undermining individual rights. It has also reinforced group interests, which, in some instances, the political elite have manipulated for personal gain, posing challenges to the state-building process and social harmony.

Divergent Views on Governance

The Ethiopian political elite and intellectuals were divided on the root causes of the governance crisis in the country. Some believed it was primarily a matter of class struggle, while others focused on the question of nations and nationalities. These differing viewpoints came to a head in 1991, when Ethiopia faced the collapse of the Derg regime and the rise of multiple "liberation fronts" advocating for self-determination. In response to these demands and to preserve the country's territorial integrity, the 1991 transitional charter recognized self-governance based on ethnic identification and language. The 1995 constitution incorporated self-determination as a core principle to allow the armed fronts to envision their futures within Ethiopia. It was a pragmatic response to the demands of the diverse Ethiopian population. The notion that nations and nationalities are sovereign entities that have voluntarily ceded certain powers to the central government has been enshrined in the 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution. The constitution might not establish the legal boundaries of the regional units within the federation directly. But since the constitution recognizes the regional member states and their constitutions, the central government might not unilaterally change these boundaries.

Challenges and Controversies

While the philosophy behind the power-sharing arrangement is clear, there are questions about its implementation, especially during the negotiations between the central government and regional units. Some argue that the ethnic-based federal system was designed by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) as a means of divide-and-rule, aimed at maintaining its power through a coalition party while excluding major actors. It is suggested that genuine decentralization may not have been the primary intention. Furthermore, the authenticity of the "nations and nationalities" philosophy, which portrays them as sovereign entities prior to the federation's formation, is also questioned, with some doubting whether

power ceded can indeed be withdrawn. Others see Ethiopia's federal system, based on the recognition of self-determination and self-administration for nations and nationalities, as a pragmatic response to a critical juncture in the country's history. While it has played a crucial role in preventing disintegration and conflict, there are ongoing debates and concerns about its implementation and the motivations behind its design. As Ethiopia continues to grapple with these complexities, a nuanced approach to governance and a commitment to addressing the needs and aspirations of all its people are essential for the country's future stability and development.

Challenges in Ethiopian Federalism: Implications of Ethnic-Based Self-Administration and the Quest for Inclusivity

Ethiopian federalism, centered on the rights to ethno-linguistic groups (named nations, nationalities and peoples), has faced numerous challenges, including the assumption of homogeneity within these groups and the delineation of territories. This section explores the implications of this model, particularly how it has created new minorities and led to the exclusion of certain ethnic groups.

New Minorities and Lack of Definitions

Ethiopian federalism has designated specific ethnic groups, such as Tigrayans, Amharas, Oromos, Afars, Somalis, Hararis, and recently the Sidama, and a congregation of ethnic groups in Central Ethiopia, Southern Ethiopia

and South-West Ethiopia as "nationalities" with their own regional states. However, similar claims from groups like the Gurage, Wolayita, and others have been denied, leading them to seek self-determination through special zones, districts, or coalition efforts. The absence of precise criteria for determining which groups qualify as "nations, nationalities, and peoples" has created inconsistencies in recognition.

Contradictions Between Federal and Regional Constitutions and Minority Rule

Although the federal constitution strongly commits to the rights of nations and nationalities, regional constitutions have sometimes failed to protect these rights. Exclusive representation rights given to indigenous communities in certain regional constitutions negate the right to self-governance for the majority. In regions like Harari State, the Oromo, Amhara, and Gurage communities have lacked mechanisms to exercise their rights at the regional state council level. Even when the Oromo population secured a 50-percent share of the state council's seats in the Harari State, other groups remained unrepresented: The Harari people, constituting only 9 percent of the region's population, have held complete power at the executive level over the other 80 percent, highlighting the incongruity between regional and federal constitutions. The settler-indigenous dichotomy implicit in regional constitutions has further contributed to rights violations and violence against non-indigenous groups within these states.

Inclusivity and Identity

The Ethiopian federal constitution does not extend self-administration and self-

determination rights to those who seek recognition beyond nations and nationalities. Individuals of mixed heritage and those who identify simply as Ethiopian, without affiliating with a specific ethno-nationality, lack the means to exercise identity rights. Especially urban, educated middle-class individuals may feel marginalized when required to declare allegiance to a specific national group.

Ethiopian federalism faces significant challenges stemming from assumptions of homogeneity, the lack of precise definitions, representation disparities, and the absence of inclusivity for mixed-heritage and pan-Ethiopian identities. Addressing these challenges requires a careful examination of the existing system and a commitment to ensuring the rights and representation of all Ethiopians. Ongoing dialogue and reforms are essential to creating a more inclusive and equitable path forward.

The Vanguardist Tradition and the Evolution of Ethiopian Federalism within Prosperity Party

The Ethiopian constitution article 52 stipulates that "all powers not given expressly to the Federal Government alone, or concurrently to the Federal Government and the States, are reserved to the States". For example, protecting the Constitution is concurrently given to both. Article 50(8) underscores that the Federal Government should respect the powers of the States and vice-versa. This assumes that Ethiopian federalism grants regional units the right to reclaim powers ceded to the central government when they

perceive a violation of their rights and an expansion of central authority. However, the exercise of power by the central government, particularly under the EPRDF, over nearly three decades, seemingly violated this core principle. It led to questions about whether members of the federation were able to exercise their constitutionally stipulated rights of self-administration and self-determination. EPRDF's approach seemed to instrumentalize the federal structure to enhance central power rather than address local concerns. But since the changes in 2018, the notion of "reclaiming powers ceded to the central government" remained central to the conflict between the TPLF leadership and the federal government, resulting in the devastating war that set Ethiopia back significantly.

EPRDF Centralist Legacy

EPRDF's "revolutionary democracy" ideology, rooted in Marxist-Leninist principles of party organization and mobilization, promoted the centralization of power within the ruling party. This approach contradicted the essence of federalism, a democratic system built on a matrix of constituent institutions designed to distribute and thereby share power. EPRDF's inclination to centralize power and employ a vanguard model of governance hindered the regional states from developing their capacities to address the needs of their residents. The blurred distinction between government and party, combined with EPRDF's commitment to democratic centralism, stifled the emergence of alternatives and the promotion of democratic culture within and outside the party. It obstructed the development of a functional multiparty political landscape, which is vital for ensuring self-administration in a federal system.

Leadership Vacuum and Political Unrest

The leadership centered around the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi managed power between the central government and the regions through regional satellite parties. However, after Meles's passing the central government lost influence. The unstable political climate in Ethiopia between 2015 and 2018 was, in part, a consequence of this leadership vacuum.

Oromo and Amhara Youth Movements

The grievances of the Oromo and Amhara youth movements since 2015 were responses to inadequate leadership, particularly among those with more influence within the ruling EPRDF coalition, as well as economic and political challenges that had arisen since 2012. The Oromo youth demanded better implementation of the federal constitution, while the Amhara youth questioned the constitution's relevance. Both movements, however, concurred on the removal of the TPLF from its central role. The unity of purpose between these two movements, along with their counterparts in the OPDO and ANDM, resulted in the displacement of the TPLF from its long-held central position within the EPRDF leadership. Meanwhile, the divergence in perspectives between the Amhara and Oromo youth movements regarding the future of the constitution and the country remains a critical issue. (Also see "The Amhara Oromo Contestation" below.)

Language and Economic Inclusion

The Ethiopian federal order under EPRDF has played a critical role in addressing questions of identity and promoting inclusivity by enabling the right to education in one's mother tongue, the right to due process of law in a preferred language, the provision of public services in multiple languages throughout the country, etc. Furthermore, the federal structure arguably has contributed to the aggregate economic growth achieved since its institution. Many view the autonomy of the regional units and the allocation of resources through this structure as key factors in this economic progress. Others doubt whether it is genuinely tied to decentralization, as the centralization of power continued to be a significant feature within the system. Nevertheless, language politics and inclusive economic growth have notably benefited marginalized groups, such as pastoralists and nomadic cultivators on the periphery, who previously perceived themselves as unequal citizens.

Prosperity Party

The vanguardist tradition that characterized the EPRDF's governance has been carried forward into the Prosperity Party (PP). There is consensus that the Prosperity Party was formed with the intent to reduce the influence of the TPLF and transform the coalition into a more centralized organization. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed also weakened the TPLF's sway over other coalition members and managed to bring representatives of other ethnic groups into the fold. The TPLF had resisted the transformation of the EPRDF coalition into a national party, fearing it would diminish its own role. The merger of (originally nine) regional political parties into Prosperity Party may to some extent reshape Ethiopian politics and theoretically has the potential to foster a more inclusive national polity.

Large-scale Contestations and Continuing Fighting: Impact on the National Dialogue

From the outset, the reality of large-scale contestations and continuing armed conflicts in Ethiopia has posed significant challenges for the notion of national dialogue and the inception of the commission's work. In particular, when the House of Peoples' Representatives first proclaimed the National Dialogue Commission at the end of 2021, Ethiopia still found itself in the middle of the Tigray war. Many argued at the time that the fighting needed to stop before dialogue could begin. Though the Pretoria Agreement in November 2022 ended the Tigray War, many aspects of the underlying conflict remain unresolved. Furthermore, the conflict with the "Oromo Liberation Army" (OLA) in Oromia Region escalated in the course of 2021 and continues. Tensions between the "Fano" militia and Ethiopian government forces grew in 2022 and severe fighting spread to many parts of Amhara Region in 2023.

While these large-scale contestations and armed conflicts are firmly linked to the structural realities and historical background laid out above – and therefore concern the work of the commission in many ways – they leave the NDC in a difficult predicament: On the one hand, they question the basis of dialogue, its feasibility and acceptance, and could limit the dialogue agenda. Already, they seem to have stalled the inception of the commission's work several times. On the other hand, there is not too much that the commission can actively do about such large-scale and active conflicts. As a government-appointed entity, it realistically is neither equipped nor formally mandated to mediate ceasefires or political settlements. Moreover, neither of the two active armed conflicts seems to be "ripe for resolution". The question therefore is whether and what kind of national dialogue can take place in parallel to continuing, large-scale conflict in Ethiopia, and whether and under what circumstances these can formally be brought into the dialogue.

The Tigray Conflict: Consequences for the National Dialogue

Since assuming power in April 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed pledged comprehensive reforms across various sectors, encompassing socio-economic and political dimensions. While these reforms received international support at the beginning, they faced opposition from the TPLF, which had been the dominant party in the ruling EPDRF coalition since 1991. The TPLF's diminishing influence began with former Prime Minister Haile Mariam's leadership (after Meles Zenawi's death in 2012) and his eventual resignation. With Prime Minister Abiy's ascent to power, tensions escalated further as the TPLF resisted the ongoing changes.

Abiy's Reforms

One of the significant changes initiated by Prime Minister Abiy was the signing of a peace agreement with Eritrea in July 2018, signaling

a departure from the TPLF's previous policies. This agreement, while seemingly aimed at regional stability, is also argued to have paved the way for an alliance between the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea vis á vis Tigray. Additionally, the TPLF's refusal to join the transformation of the EPRDF into the Prosperity Party (PP) in November 2019, which it deemed illegal, led to its exclusion from the federal government.

Tensions Escalate

The situation further deteriorated when Tigray held regional elections on September 9, 2020, despite the federal government's decision to postpone national elections due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The federal authorities rejected to recognize the outcome of the Tigray election, calling it unconstitutional, and suspended financial transfers to the region. A closer examination of events following this period reveals that while power struggles played a role in the Tigray conflict, deeper divisions and broader contests for control were also at the heart of the crisis. Tigray elites contended that the extension of the Federal Government's term was unconstitutional, and therefore sought their election to establish greater legitimacy than the government. The government's rejection of the Tigray election deepened the existing differences. The subsequent choice by Tigray to withdraw its representatives from the Federal Parliament heightened tensions. Collectively, these actions sealed the fate of the relations between Mekelle and Addis Ababa.

Broader Implications

Understanding the multifaceted nature of the Tigray conflict is crucial for finding sustainable solutions and fostering national reconciliation.

This conflict has far-reaching implications for the national dialogue, governance, and the future of the country. It has resulted in a significant human toll and a substantial economic cost, estimated at more than thirty billion dollars. Human rights violations and a humanitarian crisis stemming from the conflict have severely weakened the country, deterred potential investors, and hindered planned reforms. This conflict has raised concerns about Ethiopia's unity and survival, underscoring the urgent need for conflict resolution and a shared vision for the nation's future. But it has even cast doubt on the relevance of Ethiopia's national dialogue, given the complexities it faces. Disagreements within regional governments, particularly in Amhara and Afar, present challenges to implementing agreements between the Ethiopian Government and TPLF. Contested territories, like Wolkait Tegede/western Tigray, add further complexity to negotiations, as returning these areas to Tigray would very likely lead to conflict with the Amhara region. The participation of Eritrea in the crisis has significantly complicated the situation, given that Eritrea opposed the Pretoria agreement, making its implementation an uphill struggle. Furthermore, Eritrea has persisted in interfering in the internal affairs of Ethiopia through this area, especially in the Amhara region, thereby reversing the normalization of relations between the two countries.

This conflict's impact on Ethiopia's geopolitics and external relations is significant and could affect neighboring countries like Sudan, Somalia, and Egypt. Unresolved border issues with Sudan and the potential for renewed conflict in western Tigray could contribute to regional instability. Additionally, Ethiopia's partial withdrawal of troops from Somalia

(Kismayo drawdown) has created security gaps in the region, potentially allowing increased activities by terrorist groups like Al-Shabaab. The Tigray conflict has also impacted Ethiopian troops involved in the African Union Mission in Somalia, potentially weakening the force, which heavily relies on the Ethiopian contingent. While a peace agreement has been signed, and there is relative calm, the complex challenges and consequences resulting from the Tigray conflict will continue to impact sustainable peace and stability in Ethiopia.

The Amhara-Oromo contestation

The Amhara-Oromo political alliance, often referred to as Oro-Mara, played a crucial role in toppling the TPLF's control of the EPRDF regime. The catalyst for this transformation was the TPLF's treatment of Oromo politicians within the EPRDF alliance, which, in the wake of protests from the Oromo community, motivated Amhara youth to join the Oromo-based opposition. The convergence of their grievances eventually resulted in a robust partnership within the EPRDF, uniting the Oromo and Amhara factions, despite their differing visions for Ethiopia's future and the constitutional framework. This collaboration exerted immense pressure on the TPLF, compelling it to relinquish power and ultimately retreat to its stronghold in Tigray in 2019/2020. The "Oro-Mara" alliance also proved instrumental not only in containing but ultimately defeating the TPLF during the two-year civil conflict. However, since its inception, this tactical partnership between the Amhara- and Oromo-based factions has faced numerous challenges. Instead of being rooted in shared values and common objectives, the coalition primarily served as a united front against the TPLF, with each faction pursuing distinct goals. The Amhara elites aimed to remove the TPLF from power, to nullify the federal constitution, which they perceived as marginalizing the Amhara's role, and ultimately to assert Amhara dominance under the guise of reunifying the Ethiopian state. Over time, signs of animosity and discord have emerged between these two groups. The Oromo elites are advocating for the full implementation of the constitution, while the Amharas seek to either modify it significantly or dismantle it altogether. The deepening divide between the political leaderships of Ethiopia's two major ethnic communities has led to another devastating civil conflict, which continues to be ongoing. The national dialogue has no mechanism to address such huge contestations between the two groups.

Origins

The roots of the current conflict are in the advent of the federal system and the rise of a new elite within the federal member states since 1991, which threatened the traditionally and historically dominant position of the Amhara community as a political entity. Consequently, ethnic Amharas – who have settled amongst most communities across Ethiopia - found themselves displaced from various regions, with Oromia being a prominent example. This challenge brought to the forefront fundamental questions regarding the principles underlying state-building. While the Amhara community has started to embrace the federal arrangement, albeit with a demand for revised (or adjusted) boundaries within Ethiopia, its stance on the constitution and its position over the past three decades have hindered efforts to foster understanding with the federal government.

However, the triggering factor for the current confrontation was the Pretoria agreement, which led Amhara leaders to believe that the territories of Wolkayit and surrounding areas, which were captured by Amhara combatants during the Tigray war, would be transferred back into Tigray Regional State. Eritrea's armed forces, who joined the

federal government and Amhara militia in the fight against the TPLF, also played a role in agitating discord and resistance against the federal government. Overall, there is a prevailing belief that the resistance led by groups like Fano will not fundamentally alter the status of the Amhara community and may even expedite its overall decline in influence, without significantly affecting the status of the federal government, except for a potential war of attrition that might weaken both sides in the long term. This is also because grievances over the historical role of Amhara as a political entity prevail amongst many communities in Ethiopia and outweigh the sense of opposition to the current leadership, at least in the short term.

Armed groups and the Ethiopian national dialogue

Ethiopia remains mired in a series of civil conflicts as armed factions persistently employ violence to challenge the government's authority. Among these groups, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and Amhara-based Fano militia stand out as the best-organized entities challenging the government's control. The inclusion of these armed groups in a national dialogue is a pressing concern. The role of these groups in national reconciliation is intricate and necessitates thoughtful analysis. Several critical factors merit consideration:

1. **Strategic Engagement:** Careful thought must be given to how to strategically engage these armed groups in dialogue, ensuring their grievances and concerns are adequately addressed.

2. **Conflict Resolution Mechanisms:** Identifying effective conflict resolution mechanisms that can accommodate the diverse interests and concerns of these armed groups is essential.

3. **Peacebuilding Initiatives:** Encouraging and supporting peacebuilding initiatives that promote reconciliation and reduce hostilities between these groups and the government.

4. **Inclusivity:** Ensuring that the national dialogue process is inclusive and representative of Ethiopia's diverse population, regions, and interests.

5. **Security and Demobilization:** Addressing security concerns and providing a clear demobilization path for combatants to transition from armed groups to civilian life.

6. **Long-Term Stability:** Establishing a comprehensive plan for long-term stability and governance that addresses the root causes of these conflicts.

Incorporating these factors into the dialogue process is crucial for fostering a more peaceful and stable Ethiopia. It is crucial to bear in mind that involving armed groups in a national dialogue is a complex and politically sensitive endeavor. The ultimate objective in and beyond national dialogue is to achieve a peaceful resolution and tackle the root causes of the conflict, all while ensuring the long-term stability of the country. Therefore, the approach should be both strategic and adaptable, taking into consideration the specific context of conflict in Ethiopia and the dynamics of the armed groups involved.

The Ethiopian government and OLA had –unsuccessfully-convened in Tanzania for the second round of talks at experts' level in November 2023, with the expectation that progress could be made to accommodate some of OLA's demands and establishing mechanisms to address other issues through the national dialogue. The central question at hand revolves around whether the national dialogue commission in the country can earn the trust and confidence of both society and various stakeholders to play a role here. While some view the framework as an opportunity for eventual power-sharing, this has not materialized. Nonetheless, can it effectively address the fundamental issues related to state-building and governance within the nation? Moreover, can this national dialogue be impervious to government influence and manipulation, ensuring an independent and transparent process that incorporates mechanisms for the involvement of armed groups to facilitate their disarmament?

Shifting power

Overall, in Ethiopia, power has shifted southwards, triggering an ongoing and profound process of social and power re-engineering as well as emerging alliances amongst the communities of Southern Ethiopia. Further cascading of governance structures on the basis of popular demand is underway. This transformation encompasses various "new" issues, ranging from religious and cultural shifts to political changes, all of which are impacting age-old cultural and religious foundations. This includes both the direct challenge to established structures and the facilitation of new structures and actors. All these changes, which have serious implications for Ethiopia's political development - should not be overlooked. It is crucial to recognize that these dynamics require thoughtful management, and a mechanism within the national dialogue should be devised to also address these evolving realities.

National Dialogue

Given the intricate web of challenges and fault lines outlined above, it is evident that a substantive dialogue in Ethiopia is imperative. This process must extend well beyond addressing individual armed conflicts, encompassing critical facets of the social contract, state structure, power distribution, and mechanisms for power-sharing, which include safeguarding constitutional rights as well as both group and individual rights. The urgency of this endeavor cannot be overstated, as conflicts are proliferating and Ethiopia is faced with limited opportunities to resolve the multifaceted predicament it currently grapples with. The stakes have grown significantly higher, making the need for comprehensive dialogue more pressing than ever.

The current framework: The Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission

There were civil society initiatives and other efforts that originally pushed for national dialogue, both behind the scenes and publicly. Government itself had also established the Ethiopian Reconciliation Commission (ERC) with a three year mandate late in 2018. These efforts contributed to the discourse on dialogue.

Eventually, on December 29, 2021, the House of Peoples' Representatives approved the establishment of the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission. In Proclamation 1265/2014, the Ethiopian government committed to creating a diverse and inclusive National Dialogue Commission consisting of 11 commissioners. Among the 632 nominees to the Commission, whose identities remain undisclosed, the House of Peoples' Representatives shortlisted 42 candidates for further consideration. Ultimately, 11 commissioners were confirmed. The Commission's primary objective is to facilitate national consensus and maintain the country's integrity.

While the decision to establish the National Dialogue Commission is a positive step, the prospects for meaningful and enduring change in the country hinge on the Commission's ability to operate transparently and inclusively, as stipulated in its governing legislation. One concerning aspect that remains in the wider debate in Ethiopia is the criteria for nominating commissioners. There is a strong feeling among many that the commission effectively excluded community and religious leaders, youth, and sufficient women representation based on academic status. There is also a genuine feeling among many that the process lacked transparency regarding the evaluation metrics that informed this selection. It is being questioned whether the choices were solely based on merit, integrity, and socio-demographic representation, or if other strategic and pragmatic factors were taken into account, and who exactly was responsible for making these decisions. This lack of transparency has gone unaddressed, eroding the Commission's credibility and raising suspicions that the process may not be free from political influence.

Numerous stakeholders have made the decision to distance themselves from the national dialogue process. The fundamental issue lies in the national dialogue commission's deliberate selection of participants and agenda based on its unique vision, which is not universally shared. The deliberate exclusion of certain stakeholders, as well as the voluntary withdrawal of others, has the potential to significantly undermine the credibility of the process. Regrettably, the National Dialogue Commission has yet to establish effective mechanisms for engaging with these sidelined actors and those with a direct stake in resolving matters related to war and peace in the country. This pertains in particular to the armed groups and political organizations that have opted to sideline themselves from the process. It is imperative to understand why their inclusion is vital. While the national dialogue commission has verbally expressed a willingness to involve these groups, this commitment has not been evident in practice.

The Federal government has been seeking to engage with certain armed groups, such as the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), and proposing that some of their concerns be addressed through the national dialogue. However, the government's approach does not extend to engaging with groups like Fano in the Amhara region, and as a result, internal conflicts with regional implications continue to persist, presenting an additional challenge to the dialogue effort. Following the Pretoria agreement, its implementation and the role of Tigray in the national dialogue have not been clearly defined and remain in a state of uncertainty. For Tigrayans, it is challenging to participate in the national dialogue while their borders are under threat from Eritrea, and the situation in western Tigray remains unresolved, rendering national dialogue a seemingly unattainable luxury. Multiple facets of this complex situation have yet to be effectively addressed by the national dialogue commission. Moreover, the pervasive absence of trust makes it increasingly difficult to facilitate the integration of these armed groups into the process.

Several stakeholders have already opted to distance themselves from the government's efforts to shift the decision-making process in the national dialogue from elite groups to the broader populace by means of systematic representation and agenda setting, which the National Dialogue Commission is doing selectively. They argue that such a move is perilous and fundamentally misguided. That it is unwise for the government to exert excessive control over the process while sidelining significant actors. The purported "bottom-up" dialogue, which, in reality, seems more geared towards using grassroots initiatives to amplify the government's agenda and manipulate the process to serve its own ends, is a hazardous approach. It threatens to undermine the legitimacy of the entire process, potentially robbing Ethiopians of the opportunity to challenge governance peacefully.

Possible Scenarios

Against the background of the intricacies of the situation in Ethiopia, as laid out above, one can contemplate four potential future outcomes for Ethiopia's national dialogue:

1. **Successful National Dialogue:** Ethiopians effectively address their foundational challenges related to state building and the contentious issues surrounding governance and create a framework for addressing subsequent challenges.

2. **Collapse of the National Dialogue:** Participants are unable to resolve the intricate and contested issues at hand, leading to a collapse of the dialogue and a failure of the process.

3. **Delegitimized National Dialogue:** The national dialogue loses credibility and becomes delegitimized. Such an outcome could cast doubt on the effectiveness and authenticity of any future national dialogue efforts.

4. **Consolidation of the current Ethiopian Leadership:** The Ethiopian leadership seizes control of the national dialogue, steering it toward constitutional and institutional reforms that ultimately serve to strengthen its hold on power without addressing Ethiopia's foundational challenges.

Analysis of the Scenarios

Scenario One:
Successful National Dialogue

In this scenario, Ethiopians achieve a consensus on addressing their country's challenges and fault lines through peaceful means. Recognizing that violence hinders economic development, perpetuates poverty, and fosters underdevelopment, they collectively opt for a peaceful trajectory and commit to working towards this common goal. The realization of this scenario would be a remarkable achievement for the people of Ethiopia, signifying the resolution of profound disputes related to state-building and the core symbols of the nation. Additionally, it would establish a framework for addressing other critical issues crucial to maintaining enduring peace and securing the ongoing unity of Ethiopia. This outcome represents a successful resolution of Ethiopia's deep-seated divisions, with key stakeholders choosing to set aside their arms and dedicating themselves to the collective task of rebuilding the nation.

One potential outcome of this achievement might be the decentralization of power to ethno-regional entities, potentially leading to the strengthening of a federal or confederal system that grants regions greater autonomy. Such a transformation would have a profound impact on the country's political structure, necessitating substantial constitutional reforms. Within this context, the national dialogue could lead to significant changes to the Ethiopian constitution, potentially establishing a more inclusive and rights-based framework. Alternatively, participants might opt to retain the existing constitution, reflecting the consensus they have reached.

A successful dialogue would also entail a comprehensive overhaul of the security and military sectors, aligning them with the new political and social realities in Ethiopia. Such changes would signal a nation that is prepared to refocus on economic development, thereby altering Ethiopia's economic trajectory. This would involve reforms related to investment, trade, and development policies, setting the stage for robust economic growth. Additionally, this scenario would likely see the resurgence of traditional authorities, such as elders and traditional leaders, who would play a pivotal role in the national dialogue and in steering the country in the post-dialogue phase. Their involvement would foster trust-building among diverse groups and garner significant public support for the entire process. This best-case scenario carries significant regional implications, potentially positioning Ethiopia as a beacon of peace and stability, actively contributing to regional and continental peacebuilding efforts.

Scenario Two:
Collapse of the National Dialogue

This scenario signifies a failure on the part of the parties engaged in the national dialogue to reach a consensus on the fundamental issues related to state building. However,

it is important to note that there may have been some initial success in launching the dialogue, creating a sense that stakeholders can come together to engage in a constructive discussion about Ethiopia's challenges. Within this context, the national dialogue might have made progress in addressing certain issues or reached partial agreements, albeit falling short of resolving the more complex or deeply rooted problems. This mixed outcome would have both positive and negative consequences, representing a partial success but not a comprehensive solution.

A crucial aspect of this scenario is that the dialogue could reach an impasse, leaving critical issues unresolved and the country in a prolonged state of instability and uncertainty. Such a situation may escalate into a crisis and even evolve into conflict, potentially necessitating international intervention. In this scenario, there is a possibility that external actors or international organizations may become involved in the national dialogue, either as mediators, supporters, or even enforcers of solutions, which could result in the establishment of improved frameworks for negotiation. This external involvement would have diverse implications for the process and its outcomes, potentially maintaining the status quo without fundamentally altering the country's trajectory.

It is important to recognize that this direction might not represent the worst-case scenario. Even if the dialogue collapsed, it could pave the way for a fresh start, with new institutions and leadership that garner popular support. This scenario assumes that the collapse of the dialogue would not lead to a disastrous conflict, allowing stakeholders another opportunity to engage in a new effort with

increased determination. In this context, the government and stakeholders could learn from their previous mistakes and cooperate more effectively in the next attempt at a national dialogue process.

Scenario Three: Delegitimized National Dialogue

A scenario involving the delegitimization of the national dialogue emerges as the third potential outcome for Ethiopia's national dialogue process. National dialogue would no longer be considered as an option to resolve longstanding fault lines of the country. Those leading the process would have failed to address the concerns of stakeholders, further entrenching the problems in the process. The delegitimization of the notion of national dialogue would be attributable to several key factors.

First and foremost, questions surrounding the construction of the National Dialogue Commission would have persisted from the very beginning. In this scenario, concerns have been raised about the nomination process for the commission, with some members appearing to be outspoken and loyal government supporters. Consequently, doubts have emerged regarding the commission's neutrality. There has never been an effort to address this challenge.

Secondly, the commission's performance has been characterized by inconsistencies, encompassing conflicting statements and mixed signals regarding the initiation of the national dialogue. There is ambiguity in how it intends to address participation challenges and the ramifications for groups that have

chosen not to partake in the process. While certain members maintain that the process is already in progress, others firmly state that the commission is still in its preparatory phases. Commissioners have indicated that they have received government approval to engage with some armed groups. However, political groupings that have opted to remain on the sidelines, insisting on the resolution of the armed conflict before commencing the national dialogue, have been entirely disregarded.

Moreover, the National Dialogue Commission has faced criticism for allegedly excluding crucial actors and stakeholders from its proceedings. Concerns have been raised regarding its agenda-setting mechanisms and participant selection framework, particularly the use of "popular participation," which is perceived as sidelining influential actors. With respect to engagements with the elites (at least the political party leaders), out of the 50-plus political parties, only 40 agree to collaborate with the National Dialogue Commission. But the remaining parties hold significant influence and could play a vital role in either legitimizing or delegitimizing the dialogue process. Against the backdrop of ongoing turmoil and civil conflict in various parts of the country, there is a prevailing sentiment that the national dialogue is seen as a luxury. Many argue that the government should prioritize resolving these crises rather than initiating a dialogue. In this context, the inclusion efforts directed towards bringing the Oromo Liberation Army into the dialogue process are considered a crucial development.

While the engagement of Oromo Liberation Army could serve as a catalyst, encouraging other reluctant participants to join, the

potential delegitimization of the national dialogue process would constitute a significant setback for the initiative to bring OLA onboard. The repercussions would be profound, as it might erode public confidence in the feasibility of peacefully addressing Ethiopia's underlying challenges and fault lines. Such disillusionment could contribute to an increased inclination towards military methods for conflict resolution, potentially exacerbating violence and unrest. Furthermore, the inability to instill a culture of dialogue in Ethiopia, fostering a social contract between the state and society, would be a missed opportunity. This failure could trigger a chain reaction of instability, not confined solely to Ethiopia but with potential ramifications for the broader Horn of Africa region.

Scenario Four:
Consolidation of the current Ethiopian Leadership

In this scenario, the current leadership in the country utilizes the national dialogue process to selectively deal with specific issues, aiming to consolidate its power by implementing fundamental changes to Ethiopia's governance structures. This scenario could begin with the first scenario, where Ethiopians create frameworks to address fundamental fault lines and subsequently adjust institutions to consolidate leadership powers. The government, while engaging with armed groups through the dialogue, seeks to establish a monopoly of coercion or render these groups irrelevant in challenging its authority. Once armed groups are incorporated, the government might strategically focus on instituting changes that

further consolidate executive power. After asserting its supremacy, the national dialogue process could be manipulated to reaffirm control.

Scenario Four envisions the government instrumentalizing the national dialogue as a means to bring about constitutional changes. These changes might aim to eliminate checks and balances inherent in Ethiopia's governance structure, with the government advocating for alterations proposed by (a section of) the dialogue participants. Recognizing the advantages of these proposed changes in terms of power consolidation, the government could push for a popular referendum to endorse the modifications.

These alterations could encompass the establishment of a presidential system to replace the parliamentary system and modify the way federal states govern and are held accountable, shifting the focus to the national leader rather than adhering to the existing constitutional frameworks that equally empower the federal member states. An existing party mechanism, which deviates from the constitutional arrangement, already calls for leaders of federal member states to convene under the banner of the Prime Minister's Office. Instead of addressing the Parliament within parliamentary chambers, members are summoned to attend meetings at the executive leadership's location. Formalizing this through a constitutional amendment could further weaken the checks and balances, facilitating the emergence of an authoritarian leadership that centralizes power at the highest level. This alteration could introduce additional fault lines within the functioning of the government at various levels and in its interactions with civil society and the broader state-society engagement.

Such changes may prove difficult to challenge on the ground, which could result in the leadership successfully implementing them. The scenario would ultimately undermine the role of civil society, impeding their capacity to contribute to good governance and decision-making processes. This whole process means that the government controls the National Dialogue with serious consequences.

The national dialogue process could potentially culminate in one or a combination of the scenarios discussed above. Ethiopians may use this platform to address core issues related to state building and governance while simultaneously augmenting the authority of the leadership. Alternatively, they could opt to focus on specific ideas aimed at reinforcing the government's power, particularly in the realm of constitutional matters and power distribution.

Conclusion

It is crucial to recognize that even the best-case scenario may not necessarily lead to the complete resolution of the crisis from the beginning. At the very least, it involves an acknowledgment and a firm belief that Ethiopia's challenges can be effectively addressed through dialogue, eliminating the need for resorting to violence as a means of problem-solving. This process is about setting the wheels in motion and establishing dialogue as a primary avenue for addressing conflicts, offering a peaceful and non-coercive alternative. A significant commitment and conviction underlie this belief, aiming to tackle a wide range of issues, from the less complex to the most challenging, using mechanisms and frameworks that command the trust of the people. However, it is imperative that transparency is maintained from the outset, and that any concerns, including those surrounding the National Dialogue Commission, the agenda-setting process, and the perception of the elite as a group that may undermine the government, are addressed openly. This approach hinges on the idea that all stakeholders can contribute in good faith, acknowledging that while there may be spoilers or those who stand to gain from the crisis, there are mechanisms in place for open debate and discussion of ideas, and the establishment of frameworks to address the underlying fault lines.

However, given that the government established the national dialogue commission unilaterally (through a process of the House of Representatives—Parliament) and determined the commission members, there are concerns about the qualitative aspects of this selection process. Notably, the commission's actions have raised questions about its approach. Rather than focusing on executing its mandated responsibilities, it has been perceived as concentrating on asserting control over the activities of civil society organizations and other citizens who have actively advocated for the importance of dialogue. This approach has the potential to undermine the legitimacy of the entire national dialogue process. It is evident that the government's unilateral establishment of the commission and its composition have not fully addressed these qualitative concerns. In the absence of meaningful engagement with these stakeholders, there is a risk that the process could become further delegitimized.

Past experiences have shown that once a national dialogue process commences, it tends to develop its own dynamics, potentially outgrowing and overshadowing the National Dialogue Commission. Valuable lessons from national dialogues in Sudan and South Sudan highlight that resolutions reached were not implemented by both governments. The question remains whether Ethiopia will face a similar fate. Therefore, it is imperative that the National Dialogue Commission remains aware of inherent possibilities down the road, which may emerge in the Ethiopian context. Various actors could significantly influence the process once initiated. The proliferation of social media and other media outlets may introduce parallel agenda items, as participants can be easily influenced and manipulated. While the National Dialogue Commission can shape the participant pool to align with the government's

expectations, there is a substantial opportunity that other forces may reshape the process to their advantage, potentially undermining the government's authority. As a result, a commitment from all stakeholders, including the government, to abide by the outcomes of the process becomes critically important.

If a national dialogue in a country like Ethiopia is controlled by the government and systematically manipulated to serve the government's own agenda, several negative consequences can be expected:

1. **Lack of Credibility:** A government-controlled dialogue is likely to lack credibility and public trust. People may perceive it as a mere charade or a tool for propaganda rather than a genuine effort to address national issues.

2. **Exclusion:** The government may exclude key opposition groups, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders, limiting the diversity of voices and perspectives. This exclusion can undermine the legitimacy of the dialogue and its ability to address the root causes of conflicts.

3. **Ineffectiveness:** A manipulated dialogue is unlikely to lead to meaningful solutions or agreements. It may merely provide a platform for the government to showcase its policies and suppress dissenting voices.

4. **Escalation of Tensions:** By marginalizing or excluding opposition groups, a government-controlled dialogue can exacerbate political tensions and further polarize the country. This can potentially lead to an escalation of violence and conflict.

5. **International Criticism:** The international community may view such a dialogue with skepticism and criticize the government's approach, potentially imposing measures in response to perceived authoritarian tactics. This might lead to isolation, in which international actors may isolate or distance themselves from the government's approach, further complicating diplomatic relations and international support.

6. **Lost Opportunity:** A genuine national dialogue can be a unique opportunity to address long-standing grievances and conflicts, but when controlled by the government, it becomes a missed opportunity for sustainable peace and reconciliation.

7. **Continued Instability:** The root causes of conflicts and grievances are unlikely to be addressed, which means that the underlying issues that led to the conflict will persist, keeping the country in a state of instability and uncertainty.

8. **Public Dissatisfaction:** The public may express dissatisfaction and frustration with the process, potentially leading to protests, demonstrations, or other forms of opposition to the government's handling of the dialogue.

9. **Human Rights Concerns:** A government-controlled dialogue may not adequately address human rights abuses or provide mechanisms for accountability. This can lead to ongoing human rights violations and impunity.

Hence, to ensure the success and effectiveness of a national dialogue, it is crucial for the

process to be inclusive, transparent, and genuinely focused on resolving conflicts and addressing the root causes of grievances. It should also involve independent facilitators or mediators to maintain impartiality and credibility. If the government controls the process, it becomes challenging to achieve these essential elements of a successful national dialogue.

National dialogue is not a matter to be treated lightly. It is a solemn and pivotal national endeavor that holds the power to shape a country's path toward either peace or conflict. It may determine whether a "negative failure" - as seen in scenarios three and four - will manifest, potentially carrying far-reaching consequences. Even a "positive failure," signifying a breakdown in the process, assumes that a national dialogue can be reconvened by reshaping the framework and altering the convening parties and ensuring a more inclusive participation of stakeholders. This is not easy. It is of utmost importance that, through open public discourse, there is a growing clarity regarding the nature of this dialogue and what it entails, as well as what it does not. This preparation is necessary before delving into an in-depth discussion once the national dialogue officially commences. This approach ensures that unrealistic expectations are averted while clearly defined objectives are pursued with determination, ultimately facilitating a conscious effort that allows for public accountability.