TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY IN DEEPLY DIVIDED ETHIOPIA: MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

The article explains the state of political transition in Ethiopia since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018 based on the concept of political settlement in a context of divided societies. While Ethiopians and the international community hoped for Ethiopia’s transition to democracy under Abiy, the article argues that the transition is stalled and the process is hijacked by centrist authoritarian elite that has marginalized main actors. Centralization and marginalization are currently two major challenges. Both are inimical to deeply divided Ethiopia that hosts territorially based cleavages. Those in power marginalize other major actors and those that are left out win and come back and repeat the same mistake and the cycle continues. Fragility has thus become part of the political system in Ethiopia as the fight continues between those that are in and those that are left out. Transition to democracy can only succeed through an inclusive dialogue that produces political settlement addressing deep cleavages through power sharing that will then lead to a more open election.

Key words: Democratization in Ethiopia, divided society, transition to democracy, political settlement
Transition from authoritarianism to democracy is not a linear path and is vastly complicated process. Indeed, the ousting of an authoritarian regime or its collapse and holding routine elections does not automatically translate to democracy. In the worst cases and as it happened in Ethiopia several times, it may end up only changing an old master by a new one, sometimes the new master becoming worse than its predecessor.

There have been several missed opportunities in Ethiopia in the past to open up the political space and make political participation more inclusive and democratic—such as in 1974 when the popular revolution removed the imperial regime. But the military takeover of power (1974-1991) and the resultant limitations on political participation gave birth to many class- and ethno-national based liberation movements in the 1970s ending with the overthrow of the military regime in 1991. After the Ethiopian People’s Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition took power in 1991, despite a more open transition (1991-1992), it led to the withdrawal and exile of key political actors, such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the transition in the end became an authoritarian de facto one party dominant rule. Another opportune moment was in 2005 when disputes over the results of the country’s most open and democratic elections led to a tragic post-election crisis and the resultant return to one party show that ended in the birth of armed movements like Ginbot 7 - one of the groups that returned after Abiy took power in 2018. The political context after 2005 election crisis was even more worrisome.

God rest the soul of my mother who told me as a young boy that I will be Ethiopia’s seventh King

(hardly noted Prime Minister Abiy’s Speech to the Ethiopian Parliament, April 2, 2018)
Authoritarian tendencies from the ruling party and a fragmented opposition together yielded an almost complete wipeout of the opposition in 2010 election when only one seat went to an opposition party and another to an independent candidate. In the 2015 elections no single seat went to the opposition. The effect was that participation in political life was restricted to the members of the ruling party and its allies, leaving a large section of society unrepresented and in disarray. As a result, some concluded that the multi-party system in Ethiopia has given rise to a one party state.

In essence, elections became ‘ritual performances,’ a formal routine process without competitive electoral policy options offered to the voter. This scenario has weakened moderates in the opposition and led to widespread social movements and street protests emboldening hardliners since 2015. As some argue ‘in Ethiopia, an election victory of 100 percent of parliamentary seats sends the message to potential rebels that there is only one game in town and that to imagine otherwise would be futile.’ This is exactly what transpired in 2016. When the political opposition was weakened and lost political space in parliament, the discontented section of society was left with little option than the social media and outlawed parties outside of the country. During the protests in Oromia and Amhara region, it was all clandestine and as The Reporter rightly wrote, ‘it was a revolution without leaders,’ without leaders in the sense that the leaders were not the traditional loyal opposition figures but clandestine and new ones using social media as an outlet.

A hegemonic political party and centralized decision making that focused more on economic growth diminishing regional states mandate to self-rule and a closed political system eventually led to the widespread protests that began in 2015. Lang grabbing, maladministration and growing corruption, the effort to expand Addis Ababa Master Plan to Oromia and very high sense of alienation triggered Oromia protests that soon extended to other parts of the country and culminated in a change of leadership within the ruling party in 2018. It was in this context that Prime Minister Abiy came to power.

The article investigates Ethiopia’s political transition since Abiy took office. The study is based on an analysis of Ethiopia’s recent political context within the framework of political settlement and divided societies, concepts that are hardly debated within the Ethiopian political discourse.

In depth interviews were held with fifteen key political party leaders and key experts. Key principle in democracy and political settlement is inclusion. Political settlement refers an inclusive and agreed upon framework among major political actors following negotiation that provides the road map on how power is to be exercised during the period of transition among the parties who are presumed to represent vital interests of the people. It also refers to resolution of fundamental issues while leaving secondary issues to be resolved during elections.

Equally crucial is the provision of political, not military solution to outstanding issues. It comes with peace deal where actors renounce violence in return for power sharing. The key issue is whether the transition is inclusive enough to bring in all relevant actors. Failure to do so would imply that left outs will continue to threaten the system making it fragile or calling for a new negotiated transition. It is also linked to nation building. An inclusive transition has the tendency to enhance the sense of we belong to the system that has the potential to cement the political process. While Abiy may have misled the Ethiopians with his well thought out speeches during the first six months, its true color came fast after that.

As will be shown later, in nearly all regional states, he sent his army to solve political problems and removed regional state heads. Democracy cannot emerge in violence, let alone to take roots. The war waged on Tigray is perhaps its worst manifestation: a Nobel Peace Prize winner who...
waged war on his people. He has excluded the entire region from his political process and continues to marginalize even his own social base - Oromia. The exclusion and marginalization saga is Ethiopia’s deeper problem that has long history. If one reflects on Ethiopia’s experience of the recent political history, the military junta (1974-1991) thought it can marginalize some section of society and that section of society dismantled the regime in 1991 (Eritrean and Tigrayan rebels). EPRDF (1991-2018) too thought it can marginalize the centrist elite (except of course during the 1991-1992 and then 2005-2010) and led to the protests in 2005 and 2015. The political developments since 2018 show, the centrist elite is now in charge after dislodging the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF).

The ruling party (prosperity Party- PP in short) now thinks it can consolidate its power without Tigray and by marginalizing major parts of Oromia. As the much talked about election 2021 approaches, two major political parties that claim to represent Oromia: Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) and parts of Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) are not in the campaign trail. So the cycle of exclusion and marginalization continues and those that are left out continue to threaten the regime. Exclusion breeds violence and cannot bring democracy. Groups continue to recycle in power in turns and Ethiopia has in a way institutionalized political fragility. Those in power marginalize other major actors and those that are left out win and come back and repeat the same mistake and the cycle continues. Fragility has thus become institutionalized in Ethiopia.

Exclusion breeds violence and cannot bring democracy.

As will be shown, Abiy’s centralization policy that diminishes the role of sub units is also inimical to deeply divided Ethiopia with countless territorially based cleavages that have survived more than five decades of central onslaught. They continue to challenge the regime demanding more inclusion at the center and political autonomy at sub unit level. In Ethiopia, where ethno nationalism has become the main tool for political mobilization institutionalized fragility can only be addressed through institutional design. It is argued the consociational power sharing scheme has the potential to break the cycle of marginalization as it aims to bring major political actors through either an equal or proportional basis. Otherwise there cannot be transition to democracy when significant political parties are left out from the process. The article thus argues that Abiy led transition is stalled and the process is hijacked by centrist authoritarian elite that is recycling the imperial narrative. Both in rhetoric and practice, the new ruling party is geared towards a more centralized political system. The transition to democracy can only succeed through an inclusive dialogue that provide political settlement between the centrist elite (now bringing the imperial narrative) and the ethno national forces that continue to challenge central rule. Ethiopia is a text book example of deeply divided society where ethno national based mobilization has survived central onslaught for more than five decades. Ignoring or marginalizing them will have its costs.

The article contains three sections, section one provides the introduction and explains the rise of new authoritarian centrist elite including the widely used tactic of manipulating public institutions to extend its term beyond constitutional limits to consolidate its authoritarian rule. The second section explains the internal contradictions within the ruling party including the hasty process of the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front’s (EPRDF) dissolution that gave rise to its own weakness, the growing insecurity and anarchy complicating the transition but resulting in power consolidation by Abiy. Section three discusses two central and interrelated subthemes: the challenges for democracy to emerge in Ethiopia and the nature of particular democracy that would fit deeply divided society like Ethiopia. The last section provides a brief conclusion.

There was a much hoped for transition to democracy with the coming to power of the new leadership. A hidden coalition later known as Oro-Mara to imply Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO) - Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) or narrowly ‘Team Lemma’ emerged within the broader EPRDF. This was known within the popular protests and the international community as ‘the rise of some reformist elements from within the coalition who embraced the people’s demand for change’ and identified as agent of change. The role and hope given to ‘Team Lemma’ in bringing reform and democratic transition in Ethiopia was very high.

PM Abiy’s ascendance to power saw a change in the power dynamics within EPRDF – the coming to power of the OPDO later renamed as Oromo Democratic Party- (ODP) - the party of the new Prime Minister. His election by the party was preceded by three years of protests that forced Hailemariam Desalegn to resign. The new PM moved rapidly to open up the political space, reshuffling the cabinet and bringing more women into it; ending the state of emergency that was declared twice during the protests, releasing thousands of prisoners; allowing banned and exiled political organizations and individuals to return home and lifting restrictions on internet and social media.
Importantly, he proclaimed multiparty democracy as the only route for the country’s political future. Exiled opposition groups and armed movements that came from exile were allowed to be engaged in the political dialogue facilitated by the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE). The NEBE itself went through some reforms. While the chair person - Birtukan Midekssa - a former opposition party leader that was in exile was handpicked, the other four members of NEBE were appointed following consultations with some key opposition political parties. The new government also reformed election and political party law. A draconian civil society law that limited the role of non-governmental actors since 2006 was also reformed and opened space. As a result, Abiy was quickly branded as ‘a reformer’ who would end the one party rule and lead the transition to democracy. The immense popularity he earned during the first few months as a result of the measures taken and the effort to bring peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea led to the award of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize. Many thus hoped that this time around Ethiopia was on track towards democratization, abandoning authoritarian rule.

Yet, the latest developments indicate the country is sliding back to authoritarianism with the new ruling engaged in the same old tactics. Popular cause for democracy and genuine self-government is being hijacked by centrist elite that is imposing its will by force including waging civil war in regional states. Instead of providing political solution to major issues (e.g. a more inclusive political system and more working federal languages, transition to democracy and genuine self-rule were among others the most popular slogans of the popular protests since 2015), the new trend is to use force to terrorize people. From Somali region to Sidama, Oromia, Tigray, and Wolayta, the actions taken by the federal government particularly after the assassination of a prominent Oromo singer Hacchalu Hundessa on June 29, 2020 speak for themselves: one party show and military rule including the use of emergency decree to remove legitimate leaders and stop public demands, violence and excessive use of force, massive abuse of human rights, political killings and imprisoning key opposition political leaders (including Jawar Mohammed, Lidetu Ayalew (later released), Bekele Gerba, several senior OLF leaders, Eskinder Nega and thousands of junior opposition party members) and restricting media outlets and internet.

“More serious political parties that pose electoral challenge to the ruling party such as Oromo Federalist Congress, faction of the Oromo Liberation Front and Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) are either marginalized or branded as terrorists.”
More serious political parties that pose electoral challenge to the ruling party such as Oromo Federalist Congress, faction of the Oromo Liberation Front and Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) are either marginalized or branded as terrorists. These are the major parties that are calling for more inclusion at the center and genuine self-government or even a confederation. The marginalization has thus peculiar dimension: it pushes the ethno national based parties and creates favorable ground for parties that favor a more centralized form of government. What was supposed to be a transition to democracy is thus slowly evolving to a new centrist authoritarianism. With the postponing of the much anticipated country wide and regional state elections that was due in 2020, Ethiopia’s democratic transition according to many observers is reversed from elections without democracy to full-fledged centrist authoritarianism. There are many signs that demonstrate this trend.

The ideological framework of the ruling party is slowly becoming clear. Abiy’s close advisor Daniel Kibret-pretentiously religious said ‘we will continue to implement Menlik’s nation building project that was disrupted by EPRDF in 1991. ’This was centralized Ethiopia that liquidated quasi autonomous kingdoms that existed for long through brutal and coercive process that became source of Ethiopia’s political agony in the last century.

The paradoxes inherent in this process are well known ranging from those who think it was a normal process of nation building to those who think it was an empire building and part of colonialism. In between the two extremes one finds those who advocate for a new social contract that allows for a more inclusive center and genuine self-rule be it in the form of a federation or confederation. The new equivalent that advocates for the return to the old nation building era is Abiy’s ‘Medemer.’ Prime Minister Abiy recently rejected the concept of Ethiopia as pluri-nation state as outlined in the preamble of the 1995 constitution and said ‘we are one people.’ Credible sources indicate that if Abiy’s party wins the 2021 election he has grand plans to introduce a more centralized political system dismantling the existing federalism. Hence the critique as aptly explained by Trueman the ‘imperial narrative is being recycled’ in a new form through Abiy. This is not surprising. Abiy’s victory speech in Parliament in April 2018 included the line ‘God rest the soul of my mother who told me as a young boy that I will be Ethiopia’s seventh King.’ One cannot expect democratization under a leader who thinks he is Ethiopia’s seventh king. Whatever pretentious democratic exercises he may conduct is more of a coronation than election.

Since Abiy came to power, many of the leaders of the regional states have been removed by the ruling party (PP) disregarding regional states mandate to self-rule and the people’s right to elect their own leaders. Indeed the speed at which the Abiy government’s centralizing trend and its frequent intervention in regional state affairs hints his style of governance despite his ODP background. The Education Road map issued by the federal government in May 2019 required the teaching of Amharic language in elementary schools in contradiction to the federal constitution that empowers regional states to choose their working language including the language of education.
a unitary decentralized state, not a federation anymore. A centrist elite is thus in power. This remains a puzzle because the constitution has not been amended. One should look into the forces that brought Abiy to power to capture the risks of this development. He came through ODP and it is well known that the core content of the protests in Oromia was ‘we need a genuine federation, more self-rule, stop federal government intervention in states’. In other words, it was a demand for more, not less autonomy. It is an irony then that Abiy is keen to centralise power contrary to his own social base. This is a paradox but reveals clearly his plan.

The more PP tries to centralize and imposes military rule, the more it triggers ethno nationalism and with it comes threats of fragmentation.

There is more evidence that shows the centralization trend. The constitution empowers regional states to establish their own police to ensure peace in their territory (Article 52). However, a recent policy document of the federal government shows that the federal government has proposed to dissolve the regional state police alleging that it is heavily militarized against its mission and is becoming a threat to peace, security. The document further state the special police is becoming tool for extremist ethnic and religious groups. It centralizes the recruitment process of regional state police by subjecting it to federal control. Regional state police, according to this document, is made accountable to the federal police while reserving the administrative accountability to the regional states. Reversing previous trends and violating the regional state mandate, it subjects the promotion and appointment of deputy commissioner and the commissioner of regional states to be made by the federal government (Ministry of Peace).

It should be mentioned that in addition to the sham nature of the federations, it was the effort to centralize by the ruling elite that triggered the failure of the former USSR and Yugoslav federations. There is thus a worrying parallel in Ethiopia at present: the more PP tries to centralize and imposes military rule, the more it triggers ethno nationalism and with it comes threats of fragmentation. It is this worrying trend that we have labelled as the rise of a new centrist authoritarianism.

One should add, as in many other African countries, the ruling party’s insistence to stay in power beyond constitutional limits. As the special issue of the Journal on Democracy demonstrated well in 2002 ‘elections without democracy’ is a dominant feature of African politics. Such regimes are often called hybrid regimes and stand somewhere between outright authoritarianism and full-fledged democracy. Hybrid regimes may hold regular elections, tolerate some pluralism and even allow an opposition to compete in elections yet hegemonic ruling parties, military rulers, big men and authoritarian regimes manipulate existing state institutions and maintain their grip on power.

One common tactic of disrupting democratic transition has been through controversial constitutional amendments that extend terms. Abiy has resorted to this tactic extending his term using rubber stamp institutions that are fully in its control to postpone a much awaited 2020 country wide and regional state election using COVID 19 as an excuse. There is no agreement among experts on whether the constitution could be interpreted to allow the postponement of the elections and the extension of the term of parliament given that there is an express clause in the constitution that sets five year term.
Another factor complicating the transition is the Prime Minister’s decision to dissolve EPRDF. The EPRDF faced mounting political crisis following its ‘100 win’ in 2015 elections. The results may have heralded the end of hope for multiparty election under EPRDF and there by triggered the violence but the crisis is manifestation of years of un resolved political issues. While Ethiopian economy remained one of the fastest growing in the African continent, closure of the political space since 2005, lack of genuine reform, repression and one party state led to violence.

The ruling party lacked charismatic and competent leadership since the passing away of Meles Zenawi in 2012. Unable to reform, the regime was brought to its knees by three years of protests. EPRDF also lacked ideological coherence with parties like Amhara Democratic Party (ADP) preferring liberalism and a more centralized federalism while others prefer to keep the multination federation and developmental state. It slowly entered into an internal power struggle that made it difficult to respond to emerging political and economic issues. Deadlock within the ruling party and popular protests in Oromia and Amhara regional states in the end resulted in new leadership in 2018. While the official narrative has been that it is the ODP-ADP coalition within EPRDF that was the driver of the changes, latest evidences show the ODP-ADP coalition worked secretly hand and gloves with opposition political and activist forces in the diaspora. In a way the changes in 2018 resemble more what Smith labelled a combination of schism within the ruling coalition and complex interaction with opposition parties and mass protesters.

Understanding the forces that were behind the changes is critical because it explains very well the current political turmoil in the country and to a certain extent reveals the overly narrated role of the ODP- ADP coalition. As both the ODP and ADP worked closely with the leaders of the protesters inside and outside the country, both parties were deeply infiltrated by the opposition political parties and activists.

As a result, both parties have little control over their respective regional states let alone to capture the fast changing political landscape and lead in the right direction. Informal forces and the political opposition were pushing both the ODP and ADP in different directions and at times have led to open confrontation between the ODP and ADP: Benishangul Gumuz is a battle ground as ODP is working on the side of the regional state and ADP trying to dissolve the regional state (or part of it) to annex it to Amhara region.

The more PP tries to centralize and imposes military rule, the more it triggers ethno nationalism and with it comes threats of fragmentation.
Among the major source of Abiy’s internal turmoil is his premature decision to dissolve EPRDF and create his new Prosperity Party (PP). The apparent reason for the liquidation of EPRDF and replacement by PP relate to ending ethnic based coalition and replace by a one unified national party, need for a centralized policy making, an ideological shift from revolutionary democracy, group rights and developmental state to the right focusing more on individual rights (hence the rhetoric Ethiopiawinet and zegenet poletica- citizenship politics in line with the wishes of the centrist elite) and in the end dissolve ethnic federalism and shift to geographic federalism. EPRDF may have been authoritarian and vanguard that weakened state institutions but it was surely the machine that brought Ethiopia’s fundamental socio economic transformation since 1991.

Abiy however decided to dissolve the EPRDF coalition without ensuring broader consultation within the ruling party, without addressing the internal contradictions and without a clear alternative. According to a key informant, Addis Abeba, the federal capital is another battle ground for both groups: the Oromos claiming based on history and the Amhara elite claims it as Menlik’s home town. The ADP and the centrist elite in general are pushing for a more centralized government and a major constitutional restructuring possibly ending ‘ethnic federalism.’ This is partly shared by the PM and his vague vision Medemer that is a new version of the Derg’s slogan Ethiopia Tikdem (Ethiopia First). The horrors committed by the military in the name of Ethiopia First (Red Terror vs. White Terror) during the early 1970s are constant reminders of the dangers of centralized politics in which the junta killed hundreds of thousands of young students. The hard core ODP and a large section of the Oromo elite are pushing for a loose center and a more genuine self-rule, something like a confederation with many federal working languages.

In short, apart from ending the repression, the forces that claim to have played a key role for the new political development in Ethiopia do not seem to have a shared vision. Indeed their interests and visions are very divergent. If one adds the ideological crisis of the ruling party (some going liberal, others left and many confused in between) and the struggle for controlling power in particular between ODP and ADP, it explains very well the state of political crisis in Ethiopia. Nor is there a competent leadership that understands the state of the crisis and able to provide political solution through an inclusive and consultative process.

As explained later, what began as a promising start is now under the command of centrist elite led by Abiy and that is adding fuel to fire, triggering a major mistrust between the federal government and regional states and within the ruling coalition. A frustrated Somali elite wrote ‘It is Abiy’s alignment with these neo-imperialists (centrist elite) and that is the biggest hurdle for the transition. They sit at the crux of political, cultural, economic, military, security and media vessels that were left rudderless by the abrupt retreat of TPLF, and are determined to crush everything and everyone they see as a threat.’
the process of dissolving the member coalitions did not comply with internal party procedures or the political party law as some of them were dissolved without conducting their party congress or have done so without ensuring the necessary quorum required to pass a decision. NEBE is also required to observe the meetings to ensure the procedures are complied with but have not done so in all cases. As a result, some even doubts the legality of the current party. Abiy was quick to pinpoint weaknesses within EPRDF particularly its authoritarian tendency and human right abuses. Lemma Megerssa’s objection to the process from his own party (ODP), the very person who gave his ODP’s chairmanship to let Abiy become a prime minister does tell in itself how reckless the process was. Lemma, who was considered the front runner of the reformist team, stood against the decision, creating the first signs of a consequential rift between him and Abiy. TPLF, the founder of the EPRDF and the major force within the ruling coalition withdrew from PP. Since then PP – TPLF relations have gone from bad to worse leading to a destructive war that started early November, PP trying to dislodge an elected regional state and replace by its own puppet while TPLF trying to ensure its self-rule. The result is a mutually assured destruction with a possible long term effect for the country.

More importantly although the ODP-ADP alliance worked well in evicting the TPLF from federal power (that in itself being exclusive of Tigray) both ODP and ADP were never popular in their respective regional states. In Oromia, the OLF and Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) led by Merera and Jawar Mohammed remain major contenders for power and there is no indicator that ODP earns more legitimacy than OLF and OFC. Indeed following the measures taken by the federal government in June 2020, ODP’s social base in Oromia is dwindling fast. Serious media sources such as OMN, Addis Standard, FineFine Intercept run by Oromo elites have rejected ODP’s ‘anti Oromo measures.

‘In Amhara as well, ADP is rivaled by the Nationalist Movement of the Amhara (NaMA) and many centrist political forces. ADP-ODP alliance is thus based on thin social base in their respective regional states which PP inherited. Additionally the ODP-ADP rivalry and irreconcilable visions for Ethiopia created a deadlock within PP. There is a mounting tension waiting to explode.

There is no other option for residents in Metekel zone other than organizing, arming and defending themselves

Demeke Mekonnen, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs
any time soon. PP is thus embroiled in an internal struggle abandoning the democratization project and failing to address popular demands. Abiy thus destroyed the EPRDF but without creating a coherent alternative. According to a senior political observer, ‘PP is an intellectually and politically orphaned EPRDF minus the TPLF.’

The overall effect of incompetent leadership and internal contradictions within the party is the emergence of failing public institutions and high sense of insecurity. Following an interethnic conflict between Amhara and Benishangul Gumuz deputy Prime Minister Demeke Mekonen said ‘there is no other option for residents in Metekel zone other than organizing, arming and defending themselves. ‘This state of fact speaks volumes about the state of affairs in Ethiopia. A former official Dawit W. Giorgis wrote Ethiopia under Abiy is officially a failed state by all indicators.’

The federal government has not been able to ensure law and order throughout the country, the bare minimum role of any government. This development has affected public trust in authorities and public institutions. Ethiopia has more than four million internally displaced people as a result of horizontal and vertical conflicts that the government was not able to handle, one of the highest in the world. A large part of the country is under emergency rule and military command.

Unable to ensure law and order the safety of citizens, the federal government has declared state of emergency in several regional states (Parts of western Oromia, North Shewa of Amhara region, Benishangul Gumuz, Tigray to mention a few). It is as if military rule has replaced federalism. PP does not physically control a large part of western and Southern Oromia and the lower structures in Oromia regional states are under the influence of non-state actors.

Lately the federal government has officially dismissed nearly all TPLF members from federal institutions, decided to cut subsidy and waged war against the TPLF and imposed an emergency in the region and assigned a puppet government. Ethiopia is now a federation without Tigray. For those familiar with ethno nationalism, isolation fuels and is a natural fertilizer for secession. As a result, Tigray nationalism is now on the rise and absent amicable solution to the ongoing war and massive violation of human rights, the situation could speed up the country’s fragmentation.

With rising insecurity, the state capacity to deliver public services and the bare minimum law and order is in decline. Bank robbery was not common in Ethiopia. Some eighteen banks were robbed under Abiy and nobody is held responsible to date. Interregional state mobility is very much limited affecting the economy significantly with the IMF predicting 2% growth. Under Abiy human safety and security is seriously threatened more than ever before. Transition to democracy requires stable and functioning state institutions that are able to deliver basic public services.

Transition to democracy requires stable and functioning state institutions that are able to deliver basic public services.

Those state institutions will then be diffused and redistributed to avoid concentration of power and then subjected to rule of law. There cannot be transition to democracy in the absence of functioning state institutions. Larry Diamond captures the essence:

“If democracies are to weather the storms of history and limit the self-aggrandizing impulses of human actors, they need strong and well-designed political institutions... a state that has the administrative capacity to perform the essential functions of government: to maintain order, adjudicate disputes, construct infrastructure, facilitate economic exchange, defend the national borders, and collect the taxes necessary to fund these activities.’

The failure on the part of the federal government to ensure law and order, the growing perception that it is weak along with the regular road blocks also sends the message that citizens feel more secure in their respective regional states. This adds fuel to the already weak social cohesion. Instead of nesting the different identities, the federal government is facilitating their fragmentation.

The amassing of illegal army, the rise of regional state police that looks like the federal army and weapons by individuals and regional states is a response to a failing federal government. Citing security concerns and mismanagement of ballot boxes NEBE cancelled several electoral polls in parts of Oromia, Somali, Amhara and Harar that were planned to be held on June 21, 2021. The US Department of State stated ‘the exclusion of large segments of the electorate from this contest due to security issues and internal displacement is particularly troubling. ‘Democracy cannot be born and take roots in such context of emerging political uncertainty.
Democratization in the context of growing insecurity and failing public institutions links with the debate on whether there are particular preconditions for democracy. There is already a solid consensus that shows several countries have evolved differently towards democracy even in the absence of favorable socio-economic conditions. Yet there is a solid consensus as well on a more fundamental question on what Rustow calls the genetic question of democracy. How does democracy come into being in the first place? From the comparative literature it appears the first key entry point to democracy is related to the idea that democracy is rooted in human beings innate capacity for self-government as a political community. It is a political system that allows citizens to elect their leaders through free, inclusive, competitive and fair elections while enjoying basic freedoms (speech, association, assembly), to have a say and influence policies and more importantly it is about popular control of government. This assumes that in that political community the existence of a broad consensus, a deliberate agreement and commitment among political party leaders, the political elite and more broadly among the population on the idea that ‘democracy is the only rule of the game to come to power.’ Transition to democracy requires the evolution of a democratic political culture in which the main actors, parties, the mass and institutions view and accept democracy as the only means to come to power.
A significant number of political parties and individuals still think power in Ethiopia can only be realized through the barrel of the gun not through ballots.

It is not difficult to trace Ethiopia's source of problematic transition based on this framework. A significant number of political parties and individuals still think power in Ethiopia can only be realized through the barrel of the gun, not through ballots. As efforts to democratize ended tragically in 1974, 1991, 2005 and 2018, the sad memory has left its own negative footprints. Individuals, parties and peasants are arming themselves in reaction to failing federal government. As mentioned already the federal government also uses violence (through the deployment of federal army-command post) to deal political issues. It deploys the army to remove legitimate leaders in several regional states (Sidama, Wolita, Oromia, Tigray, Somali) instead of providing political solution to the issues. This has increased both in terms of frequency and magnitude under Abiy.

Transition to democracy imply popular and elite support for democracy and democratic rules are accepted as norms, anti-system parties are weak or non-existent and more importantly authoritarianism is rejected wholeheartedly. This is a fundamental question for Ethiopia and is called the genetic question of democracy because it determines the gate way and the answer to the question: how does democracy come into being in the first place. We cannot have democracy when a country has significant number of armed rebel groups in or outside the country who still think that power comes through the ‘barrel of the gun.’ As Mainwaring wrote ‘a society in which there is broad support for violence as a means of realizing interests does not bode very well for democracy.’ To be sure rebel, armed forces and those left out are not going to accept democracy as the only rule of the game unless the system is ready to concede on some fundamental issues. Thus, it is very much linked to the management of transitions as political settlement.

Political inclusion is thus a missing norm in current Ethiopian politics.

Political Settlement and Managing Transition

Managing a transition following the end of civil war or a political crisis is a difficult but important moment of democratic transition. What are the rules of engagement? Who are the actors? What will be the role of armed groups? What kind of pact needs to exist among major political actors and what is the road map and the process to end the transition? Experts often refer to three separate but interrelated concepts: peace deal, political settlement and constitutional design/revision. At times they all happen at once, in other cases each may happen separately one following the other.

Peace deal is a formal or informal agreement to end violence among rival groups and to address the root causes of the conflict: a deal to end violence and to provide political solution to outstanding political issues. The agreement to end violence cannot however be realized without some promise of power sharing during the transition. Political settlement thus refers to the agreed framework among major political actors following negotiation that provides the road map on how power is to be exercised during the period of transition among the parties who are presumed to represent vital interests of the people. It also refers to resolution of fundamental issues while leaving secondary issues to be resolved during elections.

Equally crucial is the provision of political, not military solution to outstanding issues. This is crucial for Ethiopia. The primary issues such as the flag, political inclusion at the center and how, genuine self-government, heroes, anthem, whether the country is a nation (demo) or multination (demos), whether it should be federation or not and if so what type, its history and whether there is shared history or even common vision, issues related to addressing the legacies of the past, (‘burden of history’) and the issues associated with the coercive nation building process need to be settled and should not be tabled for parties during election. They need sober answer and elections are not the way to do that.

Those issues need to be taken off the table and political settlement is the way. Otherwise, election becomes a battle ground as the winner takes all and loser gets none. Thus political settlement is a negotiated transition from conflict that includes the making or fundamental revision of an existing one, to bring in critical political actors that had been excluded through a new or revised
social contract. The leaders of the rival groups play a key role but there is a need to make sure that they represent or have a broad social base. Otherwise the transition may be spoiled because some major actors that are not included may then threaten the process. The key issue is whether the transition is inclusive enough to bring in all relevant actors. Failure to do so would imply that left outs will continue to threaten the system making it fragile or calling for a new negotiated transition. It is also linked to nation building. An inclusive transition has the tendency to enhance the sense of we belong to the system that has the potential to cement the political process. While Abiy may have misled the Ethiopians with his well thought out speeches during the first six months, its true color came fast after that. As mentioned already in nearly all regional states, he sent his army to solve political problems. Democracy cannot emerge in violence, let alone to take roots. This state of fact coupled with mobilized and territorially based ethno national groups is bomb shell in Ethiopia that has triggered bloody conflicts with severe consequences for the country.

In a few countries, as part of the political settlement they enter into a pact with some concessions between the outgoing or old regime and those assuming power to facilitate smooth transition and safe exit. If one reflects on Ethiopia’s experience of the recent political history, the military junta thought it can marginalize Tigray and Eritrea and that section of society dismantled the regime in 1991 (Eritrean rebels and TPLF/EPRDF). EPRDF too thought it can marginalize some section of society (except of course during the 1991-1992 and then 2005-2010) and led to the protests in 2005 and 2015. The political developments since 2018 show, this elite is now in charge after dislodging the TPLF. The ruling party now thinks it can consolidate its power without Tigray and by marginalizing major parts of Oromia. As the much talked about election 2021 approaches, two major political parties that claim to represent Oromia: OFC and parts of OLF are not in the campaign trail. So the cycle of exclusion continues and those that are left out are threatening the regime. Exclusion breeds violence and cannot bring democracy. Groups continue to recycle in power in turns and have in a way institutionalized political fragility in Ethiopia.

The ruling party now thinks it can consolidate its power without Tigray and by marginalizing major parts of Oromia.

Political exclusion has become the order of the day. No surprise left outs are trying to come back. There cannot be transition to democracy when significant political parties are left out from the process. In the words of Marina Ottoway democracy in Ethiopia is crude formality devoid of content with the restriction of political freedoms) ended up one party state. The lesson is we can only succeed if we have a workable political system that is inclusive, broad based and a negotiated one. Leaving out any significant political force is a major risk to the system, it will come back, it is only a matter of time. Although the ODP-ADP alliance worked well in evicting the TPLF from federal power (that in itself being exclusive of Tigray) both ODP and ADP were never popular in their respective regional states. Political inclusion is thus a missing norm in current Ethiopian politics. In fact for Tigray, this is the worst regime ever that has dismissed all TPLF figures from federal government making it officially a federation without Tigray. Left outs such as the TPLF and the OLF thus challenged the process from the outset. What was supposed to be a transition to democracy simply brought a new master and the regime continued to marginalize its own social base and the TPLF.

Democracy in Deeply Divided Societies

Last but not least, if we agree, inclusive democracy should be the way, what type of democracy is also a very important question, more so in deeply divided societies like Ethiopia. Unfortunately, one of the most fundamental issues in democracy is also little debated and understood in Ethiopia. According to Horowitz, deeply divided societies refers to cases in which identity-based politics have a high degree of prevalence exceeding that...
accorded to alternative forms of political mobilization such as ideology, class, and gender, and the relationship between groups is affected by deep levels of mistrust and antagonism making it less cooperative. As argued by Sujit Choudhry ‘a divided society is not merely a society which is ethnically, linguistically, religiously or culturally diverse…. it is hard to imagine a state today that is not diverse. ‘What makes a society divided is when the differences are politically salient and an identity based distinct group uses it as bases for political mobilization. As such identity becomes the prime source of political mobilization around which political claims for recognition, resource control, accommodation, self-government are framed, political parties formed, elections contested and governments composed. These forces affect the process of constitution making, constitutional design and the type of democracy. A distinct identity based political mobilization demands for a more autonomous self-government and accommodative political framework while less mobilized groups could be managed through integration and other softer options. The nature of the cleavage, its level of mobilization has effect on institutional design and on the type of democracy. A short explanation about the nature of the cleavage is thus in order as it explains the source of Ethiopia’s political ills and how it may affect institutional design issues.

“Nationalism is the most powerful force in the world... You cannot defeat nationalism, so stop trying.” stephen walt

Ethno national based political mobilization has continued to challenge the nation state and attracted experts to look for a distinct institutional arrangement to manage it. Politically mobilized identity based cleavages caused after the end of the Cold War to what Arend Lijphart dubs a ‘wave of ethnic conflicts, ‘instead of the promised ‘third wave of democracy.’

Mobilized ethno National minorities are regionally concentrated ethnic groups who once enjoyed or aim to enjoy political autonomy and have become part of states in which they constitute an ethnic minority through conquest and other coercive process of nation building.’ They mobilize politically around assertions of national identity and self-determination. The goal of such mobilization is to recover the extensive self-government they claim to have enjoyed historically or they aspire to have it now. The degree of self-government they seek ranges from autonomy, national self-government to independent statehood. Countries that have politically mobilized ethno national groups cannot assume to have stable territory. The demands of such groups are framed and entrenched in relation to a particular territory and the very existence of the unity and territorial integrity of the state is put to test. Back in 2011, Stephen Walt wrote ‘nationalism is the most powerful force in the world.’ In 2019, he wrote, ‘you cannot defeat nationalism, so stop trying.’ The idea that groups that share the same language, culture, history, shared narrative about the past and future destiny, occupy defined territory and feels that they constitute distinct identity ought to govern themselves is largely an old concept that led to the collapse of several empires (Austro-Hungarian, British, Ottoman, Spanish) in Europe giving birth to many nation states. It has a strong emancipatory role for those that aspire autonomy and independence from colonial and authoritarian rule. Yet as witnessed in the two world wars and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, nationalism also has its ugly face.

The relationship between the nation and the state is very complex because many states are composed of diverse groups within their territory and the state has enormous resources at its disposal that employs it to ensure unity and territorial integrity while groups within the state that feel politically suffocated aspire to have autonomy or even their own state. Walker Conner way back in 1972 challenged the idea of nation building warning that it could lead to nation destroying. Minorities within nation states faced expulsion, assimilation and in worst forms genocide. Even in the advanced democracies of the west, French speaking Canadians, Scottish, the Flanders in Belgium continue to negotiate for more, not less autonomy. In the face of state under the control of centrist elite as is the case in Ethiopia, nations within the state aspire to have autonomy or even their own state to ensure their survival and right to self-government.

Mismanagement of ethno national based cleavages has resulted in the formation of some twenty seven states that have joined the United Nations.

Many have predicted the end of nationalism and the nation state but as rightly argued by Walt (2011, 2019) and Nodia nationalism is here to stay. It has survived predications of its demise both from the right and the left and we should find ways to manage it.
Mismanagement of ethno national based cleavages has resulted in the formation of some twenty seven states that have joined the United Nations. In the 1960s and 70s nearly all schools of thought (liberalism, socialism, globalization, modernization), regardless of their different viewpoints predicted that ethno national minorities will wither away through liberalism, socialism, melting pot and assimilation. Some have called this ‘post national illusion’ and counselled actors to properly understand this force and the need to design appropriate institutions and policies to manage it. Countries in Africa like Nigeria, Ethiopia, South Africa and Kenya, despite differences in the degree of mobilization, all continue to face challenge related to particular type of cleavages. In other words, they are all deeply divided societies. As such identity becomes the prime source of political mobilization around which political claims for recognition, resource control, accommodation, self-government are framed, political parties formed, elections contested and governments composed. These forces affect the process of constitution making and constitutional design. A distinct identity based political mobilization demands for a more autonomous self-government while less mobilized groups could be managed through integration and other softer options.

Wimmer (2019) articulated the promise and strength of the nation state and its relations with the nation that goes back to the heart of the social contract. As reflection of nation’s right to self-government:

‘rulers should govern in the interest of the nation- ensure participation, equality, rule of law, and that as long as they did so, the ruled owed them political loyalty, soldiers, and taxes. Nationalism at once reflected and justified this new compact. It held that the rulers and the ruled both belonged to the same nation and thus shared a common historical origin and future political destiny. Political elites would look after the interests of the common people.’

Empires belong to conglomerate of entities while a nation with a state has an owner that is ready to fight and die for it. According to Wimmer (2019), ‘from 1816 to 2001, nation-states won somewhere between 70 and 90 percent of their wars with empires or dynastic states.’ The implication is that the nation state has the owner nation that defends and is ready to die for it. The empire on the other hand is a loose conglomeration of several entities and is not cohesive enough to stand united in times of crisis.

Ethiopia is in some ways very distinct compared to many countries in Africa as it defeated Italian colonialism in 1896 and the process of nation building was led by its own elite. The fact that it enjoyed centuries of civilization meant the different ethno national groups despite long years of interaction have retained their own distinct features including their language and identity. Ancient experiences under quasi autonomous kingdoms also serve as framework to claim self-government at present. Yet, though the nation building process was led by its own elite, in some ways it had similarities with the nation building process in Europe. It was led by a centrist elite that borrowed the European nation state as its model and brutally enforced it by liquidating quasi autonomous kingdoms that have existed for centuries towards the end of the 19th century. The left outs from the nation building process resent this and have continued to challenge the center. The debate between the centrist elite and the left outs is Ethiopia’s major political paradox that the post 1991 federal system aimed to address but continues to challenge Ethiopia making it very fragile. While cleavages in other African countries aim for integration, in Ethiopia they also aim at accommodation and exit: there are many nations in search of a state of their own.

The Tigray Peoples Liberation Front, the Oromo Liberation Front, the Ogaden National Liberation Front are the few examples. And the more the elite in power tries to centralize, the more it provokes ethno national elites to push to the extreme. Whoever controls power in Addis Ababa often fails to understand Ethiopia’s basic political paradox, not even PM Abiy who came to power from Oromia, the very region that opposed centralization and federal intervention during the protests between 2015 and 2018. Political elites have little grasp of how much Ethiopia’s social fabric has changed since 1970s when the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) articulated on the need to ensure equality among the different groups. Tigray was at the fore front of the struggle for self-government and played a key role in the post-1991 federal system but fears that new regime has since 2018 been engaged in centralization became clear with the onset of the devastating war in November 2020. The same challenge is slowly emerging in Oromia particularly following the assassination of a prominent Oromo singer in June 2020. Demands for more autonomy and self-government have also been on the rise in the Southern state.

The debate between the centrist elite and the left outs is Ethiopia’s major political paradox that the post 1991 federal system aimed to address but continues to challenge Ethiopia making it very fragile.
Some ten ethno national groups that used to administer themselves at local government level in the South have following the winds of change in 2018 demanded a status of constituent unit and one of them - the Sidama has complied with all constitutional procedures to be Ethiopia’s tenth state. Ethno national groups are thus demanding more, not less even after two and half decades of federal practice. The tension between the federal government committed to centralising power and regional states that are pushing for more autonomy is at its pick.

Second, Gurr argues that the conflict between competing nationalisms typically escalates in stages and it is here that one finds the link with state policy. Eritrea’s secessionist elite demand in the mid-1980s was limited to restoration of the federation (1952-1962) that was unilaterally abolished by Emperor Haile Selassie in 1962. With the military regime’s failure to respond, radical issues such as secession emerged. Thus cleavages often start with non-violent modest demands and when regimes fail to respond evolve into protest to violent protest and finally to rebellion. This escalation occurs through a pattern of demands and responses: non-violent protest is met with a lack of political responsiveness, which in turn leads to violent protest, which is met with a violent reaction, and which then leads to rebellion and an armed conflict and civil war. State policy and action or inaction is thus a major factor that can escalate or moderate ethno nationalism.

A precaution is in order here. The cleavages do not automatically translate to a political project. Political and economic injustice that is reinforced by deep cleavages, elites that frame the issues and state response or the lack thereof play their own roles in the process of transformation. First, as argued by Anderson and Choudhry, cleavage or diversity is not destiny. It needs an agency- political entrepreneur that reads into the political dynamics of the country and frame the issues in a way that appeals to their audience. Anderson and Choudhry rightly pointed the role of political entrepreneurs in ‘framing of narratives,’ articulating the exclusion, subjugation and one should add the elite provide a counter narratives that aims to deconstruct the centrist narrative. ‘Political entrepreneurs are critical to the success of political mobilization by framing the case (of ethno nationalism), developing strategies, and marshalling resources.’ They play a critical role in articulating and framing alternative narratives about the past, present and the future (fears and possible hopes) addressing the grievances and the entitlements of the population they claim to represent including territorial entitlements. They frame the ideology for a concrete action.

Third, the process of transformation from a diversity that is not mobilized to a political project is heavily associated with the nation building project pursued by the central government including the forceful annexation of previously semi-autonomous territories, centralization and the imposition of common national identity including language. Left outs from the process design a defensive response to central state led project of nation building. In other words, ethno national based cleavage and political mobilization is often a reaction to centrist elite’s project and a search for finding a political and identity space. It is a sub state nationalism framed in reaction to the central government’s nationalism. There are thus competing nationalisms within the nation state that if not addressed could led to violence, civil war and state fragmentation.

Both are pursued in the name of nationalism and have the potential to fuel the passions and emotions from both sides of the political spectrum to cause political instability and state collapse. This one may call is a clash of nationalism, one pursued by the central government in the name of nation building, patriotism, civic nationalism, unity, ensuring territorial integrity and the other by the ethno nationalist elite.

A clash of nationalism, one pursued by the central government in the name of nation building, patriotism, civic nationalism, unity, ensuring territorial integrity and the other by the ethno nationalist elite.
The civil war in Ethiopia (1974-1991) fits well into this framework. The centrist military regime fought the ethno national based liberation fronts in the name of Ethiopia Tikdem (Ethiopia First) and ensuring the territorial integrity of the country while branding them as secessionists.

The ethno nationalist elite frames the centralized nation state as a mask for the ‘centrist elite’s culture, language, religion to become the national culture, language or religion. Those that hold power at use state institutions and policies to ‘promote, consolidate and create a privileged position with respect to its identity and its manifestations.

The state is defined as the expression of the group’s nationhood. ‘The non-material aspects of conflict such as the search for dignity and collective self-esteem, rich history (we were great and we want to be great again), claims by ethno nationalist groups to regain lost social status (dignity), in response to historical traumas on their identity fuel the political and resource conflict.

As Walker Connor pointed, ‘Men do not allow themselves to be killed for their interests; they allow themselves to be killed for their passions.’ It is not surprising then that the legitimacy of the government, its institutions and the values upon which it is established remain one of the sources of tension and at times the cause of its terminal crisis.

Fourthly, majoritarian based democracy in deeply divided societies become source of problem than a solution and thus the need for other inclusive options. This is particularly acute if the drivers of the central government version of nationalism are not a majority.

In many cases as in Ethiopia, there is no dominant ethno national group that enjoys a demographic majority and could claim to have democratic majority to pursue its goals. It becomes a clash between a minority that has state resources at its disposal trying to impose its will on another minority and thus is very destructive.
Yet even if the central government’s project of nationalism enjoys a majority, it pits a permanent majority against a permanent minority and the latter has no hope of becoming a majority. Arend Lijphart brought this tension to the fore in the post Sadam Iraq. Majoritarian democracy applied to Iraq would mean ‘a national government mainly or exclusively Shi’ite majority that excludes Sunnis and Kurds…and it will be naïve to expect such minorities condemned to permanent minority to remain loyal or constructive.’

The values of the centrist state such as the flag, the national anthem, public policy, the media, language and cultural policies that are instruments of centralized nation building are deeply resented.

With it comes the issue of why would an ethno national minority under perpetual rule of injustice be expected to be loyal to such regime and stay in the union. The general assumption of majoritarian democracy that the rulers alternate every possible election in that today’s majority will become tomorrow’s minority does not hold true in deeply divided societies. In this context the institutions as well suffer from legitimacy crisis. The decisions of the majority are not accepted by the minority. The values of the centrist state such as the flag, the national anthem, public policy, the media, language and cultural policies that are instruments of centralized nation building are deeply resented and rejected by the ethno national minority. Thus alternative theories such as consociational democracy are recommended when the political system faces deeply divided cleavages.

Instead of having winners and losers, consociation democracy brings major political actors either on equal or through proportional arrangements to power and insists on consensus decision making on fundamental issues. Thus lefts outs in the majoritarian democracy become decision makers through power sharing, reducing the potential for conflict. Distinct institutional arrangements thus matter in managing cleavages and reducing conflicts.

As indicated in previous sections, unfortunately the elite in power is pursuing a marginalization and exclusion policy against major ethno national forces that represent deep cleavages. In many healthy federations with deep divisions as Ethiopia, majoritarian democracy is not the best way to manage diversity. In Belgium where there exists tension between the French and Dutch speaking communities, the federal executive must be composed of equal number of representatives from both communities.

In Switzerland where there exist French, Italian and German speaking communities, each segment is represented in the highest decision making body and the seven member presidency is not only representative of all communities but the chairmanship rotates annually to minimize fear of domination by smaller groups. In short, a consociational democracy where different communities are assured of representation (in many cases equal) in federal institutions along with veto power on issues that matter most to ethno national groups serve as mitigating institutional arrangements.

In the literature, these institutional arrangements are called consociational federations that are distinct from majoritarian based federations. Besides independent institutions such as courts, election bodies, human right institutions counter majoritarian institutions and ensure rights of citizens and minorities.
CONCLUSION

To many observers on the state of political transition in Ethiopia, the situation indicates that Abiy is not a reformer and since he decided to use parliament and the House of Federation to extend his term beyond constitutional limits and chose to pursue centralized decision making disregarding the mandate of regional states to self-rule, centrist authoritarian rule has hijacked the process of transition. Transition to democracy in Ethiopia is unlikely unless there emerges a broad consensus, a deliberate agreement and commitment among political party leaders, the political elite and more broadly among the population on the idea that democracy is the only rule of the game to come to power. Popular and elite support for democracy means that democratic rules are accepted as norms, anti-system parties are weak or non-existent and more importantly authoritarianism is rejected wholeheartedly. The current trend in Ethiopia is moving in the opposite direction: violence is increasing, not decreasing. Instead of providing political solution to major issues, Abiy is imposing military rule. Military rule has replaced federalism.

Second is political settlement among the major political parties on fundamental issues that can be achieved through an inclusive dialogue. The contradictory perspectives by different political forces and the cycle of exclusion need to be addressed. Centralization and marginalization are currently two major challenges and both are inimical to deeply divided Ethiopia that hosts territorially based cleavages. Those in power marginalize other major actors and those that are left out win and come back and repeat the same mistake and the cycle continues. Ethiopia has thus institutionalized political fragility as the fight continues between those that are in and those that are left out. There cannot be transition to democracy when significant political parties are left out from the process.

Thirdly, Ethiopia fits well into the literature on divided societies and need a peculiarly designed democratic package. The nature of the cleavage and its level of mobilization has effect on institutional design and on the type of democracy. Ethiopia is home to countless armed ethno national liberation movements perhaps a record within the African continent. They have survived for no less than five decades despite heavy onslaught from the central government. The goal of their mobilization is to recover the extensive self-government they claim to have enjoyed historically or they aspire to have it now. The current ruling party has chosen to recycle the imperial narrative instead of addressing the cleavages. While cleavages in other African countries aim for integration, in Ethiopia they also aim at accommodation and exit: there are many nations in search of a state of their own. And the more the elite
in power tries to centralize, the more it provokes ethno national elites to push to the extreme. Whoever controls power in Addis Ababa often fails to understand Ethiopia’s basic political paradox, not even PM Abiy who came to power from Oromia, the very region that abhorred centralization and federal intervention during the protests between 2015 and 2018. Political elites have little grasp of how much Ethiopia’s social fabric has changed since 1970s when the Ethiopian Student Movement articulated on the need to ensure equality among nationalities. In Tigray, Oromia and the South demands for more autonomy and self-government has been on the rise, not on decline. The tension between the federal government that now is committed to centralise power and regional states that are pushing for more autonomy is at its pick threatening the country’s stability.

Lastly, in deeply divided societies like Ethiopia, the general assumption of majoritarian democracy that the rulers alternate every possible election in that today’s majority will become tomorrow’s minority does not hold true. This is particularly acute if the drivers of the central government version of nationalism are not a majority. In many cases as in Ethiopia, there is no dominant ethno national group that enjoys a demographic majority and could claim to have democratic majority to pursue its goals. It becomes a clash between a minority that has state resources at its disposal trying to impose its will on another minority and thus is very destructive. Yet even if the central government’s project of nationalism enjoys a majority, it pits a permanent majority against a permanent minority and the latter has no hope of becoming a majority. It will be naïve to expect groups labelled as permanent minorities to remain loyal to the system and that explains the major source political crisis. Thus alternative theories such as consociational democracy are recommended when the political system faces deeply divided cleavages. Instead of having winners and losers, consociational democracy brings major political actors either on equal or through proportional arrangements to power and insists on consensus decision making on fundamental issues. In this manner lefts outs in the majoritarian democracy become decision makers through power sharing, reducing the potential for conflict. Distinct institutional arrangements thus matter in managing cleavages and reducing conflicts. At the heart of it is about political inclusion and having a just political order. Without addressing this major issue through institutional design, it is unlikely that Ethiopia will democratize and may indeed be accelerating its fragmentation.

ENDNOTES

2. Berman, supra, p.39
4. Repressive laws that restricted the role of civil society groups and the political opposition were issued giving rise to what the political opposition calls ‘narrowing down of the political space’. See Jon Abbink, ‘Discomfiture of Democracy? The 2005 Election Crisis in Ethiopia and its Aftermath,’ African Affairs 173-199 (2006).
7. United States President Obama remarked in a well televised speech as the headquarters of the African Union in Addis Ababa on July 28, 2015 ‘democracy is not merely about formal and routine process of conducting elections’ substantive democracy is much more than that.
8. Arriola and Terrence Lyons, supra, 86.
12. Latest developments show Ethiopia-Eritrea relations may have improved but was a tactical pact between leaders of the two countries to wage war against TPLF. Esayas of Eritrea wanted to revenge for the humiliation he suffered during the 1998-2000 brutal war. Abiy identified the TPLF as a major obstacle to his power. Both joined hands in the brutal war that started early November 2020, the consequences of which are yet to be seen.


17. On November 3, 2020, a mutually destructive war began between the federal government and Tigray regional state. The was a consequence of years of misunderstandings between the two government that revolve around dissolution of EPRDF and formation of Prosperity Party, self-government, elections that were planned for August 2020 and postponed. What is tragic is foreign forces are involved in the war and is slowly turning into a major crisis with implications to the Horn. Marks, Simon; Walsh, Declan (28 December 2020) ‘Refugees Come Under Fire as Old Foes Fight in Concert in Ethiopia’ The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/28/world/africa/Ethiopia-Eritrea-Tigray.html; 28 December, 2020


23. Rene Lefort, ‘Ethiopia’s war in Tigray is ‘but the tip of the iceberg when it comes to conflicts ravaging the country’ the Africa report https://www.theafricareport.com/84350/ethiopias-war-in-tigray-is-but-the-tip-of-the-iceberg-when-it-comes-to-conflicts-ravaging-thecountry/30 April 2021


25. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZzcxrHngV4&t=1759s.


29. Interview with a member of an expert group working on the drafting process, Addis Ababa, 3 June 2021


31. See his speech at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RO6D6xPZAk as accessed on September 9, 2020


34. See Police Standard in the FDRE, December 2020, Addis Ababa, Policy Document p.58

35. See Police Standard in the FDRE, December 2020, Addis Ababa, Policy Document P.71

36. The policy document states that while the federal police is headed by Federal Police Commissioner General, the regional state police will be headed by Commissioner whose status is one step lower than the federal Commissioner General. It introduces a new element of the regional state police accountability to the federal level that violates the federal principle. See Police Standard in the FDRE, December 2020, Addis Ababa, Policy Document. The document is yet to be discussed with regional states and it is to be seen how the latter will react to this development.

37. Police Standard in the FDRE, December 2020, Addis Ababa, Policy Document p.67. The document is yet to be discussed with regional states and it is to be seen how the latter will react to this development.


42. Hybrid regimes are also exposed to political instability, ethnic conflicts and even revolutions. Their commitment to human rights and rule of law also remains dubious see. David Epstein, Robert Bates, Jack Goldstone, Ida Kristensen, Sharyn O’Halloran, Democratic Transitions, American Journal of Political Science v.50 no 3 (2006) p.551

43. Some experts suggested for a political dialogue, others for transitional government and a few ones consultation with regional states and political parties. See interview with Yilkal Getnet senior leader of Abronet https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGkLTCOex50&pbjreload=101; Jawar Mohammed Opinion: Ethiopia’s Impending


45. Known Oromo activist Jowar Mohammed openly spoke about this in an interview on LTV and said ‘I gave the political calculations to the ODP leadership and led the protests in Oromia along with the ODP.’ Andargachew Tsige, one of the top leaders of Ginbot 7 gave several speeches to diaspora Ethiopians indicating that the new leaders worked with his party secretly. See Jowar’s interview with LTV at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42UI5ZYzgVs&pbjreload=10; Eritrea’s dictator Issay’s claims he was the main driver of the change and may partly explain the cordial relationship with the Ethiopian Prime Minister.


47. Interview with a leader of a political party from Benishangul Gumuz 23 April 2020, Addis Ababa


49. Abiy and his advisors like Daniel Kibret have several times indicated their main job is to complete Emperor Menlik’s unfinished project of nation building; that centralized, Amharic speaking Orthodox state. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZzzxzHngV4&t=1759s; See Bekele Erko, Regional Prosperity Party leaders need to regain autonomy—and rescue Ethiopian democracy https://www.ethiopiainsight.com/2020/09/11/regional-prosperity-party-leaders-need-to-regain-autonomy-and-rescue-ethiopian-democracy/September 11, 2020. In several of Abiy’s public speech’s although Medemer was initially given a soft meaning synergy it later became clear he meant Ethiopia Tikdem (First). Despite the federal principle and inclusion of Article 39 in the constitution he said ‘Ethiopia Atfersim’ and sent the military to crush peaceful protests in Wolyta, Sidama and Oromia that called for genuine self-rule. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42UI5ZYzgVs&pbjreload=10; Eritrea’s dictator Issay’s claims he was the main driver of the change and may partly explain the cordial relationship with the Ethiopian Prime Minister.

50. See the political programs of the OFC, OLF


55. The TPLF accuses the Prime Minister for violating internal procedures of EPRDF while dissolving the
party. It argues that it is not the leadership but for each member coalition to decide on whether to dissolve or not before the leadership could decide on the fate of the party. See TPLF Cites Legal, Procedural Shortfalls to Declare Merger addisstandard https://addisstandard.com/news-tplf-cites-legal-procedural-shortfalls-to-decline-merger/ / November 21, 2019

56. Interview with a key informant based at NEBE in charge of political parties 20 May 20201, Addis Ababa
24 Addis Standard July 2021


58. Beyond denouncing PP’s measures in Oromia, diaspora Oromo demonstrated massively in major western cities such as Berlin, Paris, London and several cities in USA.

59. Interview with a senior political analyst, 26 May 2021, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia


62. Former Derg official who returned to Ethiopia following Abiy’s amnesty and who initially advised the PM to scrap the existing constitution and start fresh transition said ‘Ethiopia under Abiy is officially a failed state’ https://www.bbc.com/amharic/news-47879359 10 April 2019


65. None of these emergency decrees had any legal backing. As per the Ethiopian constitution Article 93 and 94, emergency decree has to be declared through council of ministers that has to be adopted by parliament. Military rule put on parts of western Amhara, Sidama, Wolyta, western and southern Oromia were all issued in violation to the constitution.


74. There is a heated debate between the procedural (minimalist) and substantive definitions of democracy. The substantive definition includes horizontal and vertical accountability of leaders to the people and enjoyment of socio economic rights. See for details Robert Dahl Polyarchy. New Haven: Yale University Press 1972; Lise Rakner, Alina Rocha Menocal, Verena Fritz, DemocratizationsThirdWave and the Challenges of Democratic Deepening: Assessing International Democratic Assistance and Lessons Learned 2007 p.6; Lipset’s argument that there are some preconditions for democracy to emerge is well known. See Lipset, S. M. (1959) ‘Some Social Requisites of Democracy, Economic Development and Political Legitimacy’, American Political Science Review 53 (1): 69-105. Yet democratic transition in East Asia in the 1970s and elsewhere as argued by Berman emerged in the absence of some of the preconditions set by Lipset. India and the United States were poor and agrarian when they started to democratize their political system.


77. A section of the OLF is still fighting the federal government in western and southern Oromia. The OLF seems to have learned from its mistakes in 1992 in that although a section of the political leadership decided to work with government, its army had little trust and stayed in the bush. Federal governments mishandling of Tigray is slowly leading to an open confrontation between federal government and TPLF

78. Illicit Firearm Inflow into Ethiopia Increasing- Police https://www.ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/6771/Illicit-Firearm-Inflow-into-Ethiopia-Increasing-Police#:--text=November%202012%2C%202013%20%2D%20Ethiopia%20has%20various%20parts%20of%20the%20country.


81. See Christine Bell and Kimana Zulleta-Fulscher, Sequencing Peace Agreements and Constitutions in the Political Settlement Process (IDEA, 2016)

82. Theunis Roux, ‘The South African Constitutional Court’s Democratic Rights Jurisprudence’ Constitutional Court Review v.6 (2014) p.35


96. See Alfred Stepan, Juan Linz and Yogendra Yadiv supra pp. 9, 14.


104. Anderson and Choudhry, supra p.383.

105. Anderson and Choudry, supra, p. 382.

106. Anderson and Choudry, supra, p.381.26 Addis Standard July 2021


