

The State of Peace and Security in Contemporary Ethiopia¹

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1. Introduction

The path Ethiopia passed through since 1991 has left an indelible imprint on social cohesion, peace cum-nation-building process in the country. Irrespective of a reported economic growth, which however was suspected of marginalising the majority in favour of the minority political elites, the past thirty years are remembered more for divisive ethnic politics than an equitable distribution of development, peace and security in Ethiopia, which still keeps on haunting many citizens. It ethnicised politics, politicised ethnicity; it ethnicised territory and territorialized ethnicity. It took the primordial view at face value. Hence identity is taken for granted that it is immutable and static. This entrenched and rigid view has rendered the transition to a new vision of development sluggish, if not stunted.

In light of the preceding, this paper tries to make sense of the peace and security situation of the country emphasizing mainly on what transpired since the onset of a political transition in 2018. In so doing the focus of the paper is threefold; first, appraising developments witnessed since the onset of the transition; second, exploring and identifying the major challenges arising during the process of transition; and finally, indicating the way forward for policy consideration.

2. Developments Witnessed Since the Onset of the Transition

Since April 2018 Ethiopia started to undergo a political transition from clan-oriented to citizen-based inclusive and multinational state-building process with a transformative objective. Likewise, active engagement for improving peace and security in the Horn of Africa region started by the rapprochement with Eritrea. This was followed by diplomatic efforts to ensure amicable relations with Somalia, Djibouti, Kenya and the rest of African countries including Egypt and Sudan, a move seen as in the right direction for sustainable peace and security in Ethiopia, the sub-region and beyond.

Such a trend was however upset by the flare up of conflict in the northern part of Ethiopia. Triggered by the TPLF's unprovoked attack on the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), a coalition of Ethiopian security forces apparently took a decisive measure against the rebels. The current situation sends the signal of a lull in the fighting after clearing TPLF forces from

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most of the Afar and Amhara regions (irrespective of reported sporadic attacks by TPLF forces on civilians in parts of the same regions).

Laying foundations for inclusive governance and shared values to reunite multinational Ethiopia is the strongest achievement so far. Equally, significant achievements thus far include: the second round filling of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) successfully (84%); impressive women's participation in political leadership; conducting the 6th national election, which was successful, credible and transparent as well as without any noted violence, where the will of the majority of the Ethiopian people was expressed and reflected; Green Legacy for sustainable prosperity as a positive impact on climate change and environmental depletion; establishment of commissions for peace and reconciliation as well as administrative boundary and identity issues, which are now further expanded to engage in charting out conducive ways for a national dialogue to deal with the apparent deep divisions among the Ethiopian society, to mention just a few examples. Furthermore, thwarting of the rebels' move towards the capital empowered by the western fake news, misinformation and propaganda campaign against a sovereign state, need to be underlined as a mark of invincible spirit.

3. Major Challenges Arising from Path Dependency

Resistance to the current reform with a view to fragmenting and deleting the name 'Ethiopia' from the world map mainly came from the constituency of ethno-linguistic politics, which did not work for the past three decades. In the same vein, the reform has faced challenges resulting from the systemic limitations of the ethno-linguistic federalism whose genesis goes back to the way the pre-1991 Ethiopian nation-state building processes were perceived and articulated by the post-1991 leaders, which was entirely a mono-causal approach to conflict resolution. This led to the spread of hatred, enmity and suspicion among the whole society of Ethiopia causing an unhealthy ethnic competition. The misperception and misconception of internal conflict as having only one root cause and one solution (*e.g. one root cause is ethnic identity question; and one answer is ethnic politics*) made Ethiopia pay high price.

Moreover, in the context of the conflict in the northern part of the country, the flagrant intervention in a sovereign and independent nation's internal affairs by the west particularly the USA, going as far as issuing instructions to the Ethiopian government 'what to do and what not to do' as if the country is an extension of their territorial entity, has caused anger and rage among the Ethiopian people. Insidious conspiracy against Ethiopia has been brewing in the belly of some of the UN actors related to the current internal conflict. This internationalisation of internal conflict has brought about a Herculean task on the government and the people of Ethiopia.

Despicable atrocities committed against citizens in Amhara, Tigray and Afar regions of Ethiopia, incalculable damages done to human lives, the environment, properties of innocent citizens, are the most outstanding challenges Ethiopia is facing today. Schools, hospitals, and infrastructure that support social institutions have been made out of use by the conflict. Moreover, the rising cost of living partly driven by the violence and artificial price hikes of goods and services is yet another challenge. Unemployment of the educated youth who are susceptible to propaganda and cross-border interactions with violent extremist groups such as al Shabaab is another area of major challenge that needs serious attention. Wide spread circulation of small arms and light (as well as heavy) weapons with an easy access to criminal groups is yet an area to be dealt with. Bordering with volatile Sudan and fragile Somalia and sharing porous borders with both countries is one of the challenges that need to be addressed urgently. Further, issues relating to the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) are not yet settled with Egypt and Sudan irrespective of the first and second phase of successful filling.

Lack of required level of urgency, commitment and coherence in the political leadership, particularly at the lowest structures is to be taken into account very seriously. Dealing with self-centred political culture of 'winners take all' orientation and non-competitive and zero-sum game politics still needs to be in the 'to-do-list'. Ethiopia's diplomacy, which was engineered, shaped and welded for revolutionary democracy, does not appear to be fit for citizen-centred Ethiopian politics and international relations that essentially needs to be anchored in the national interest of Ethiopia and its people. Unfinished border issues with neighbouring countries, particularly with Sudan, are outstanding homework. At the time of writing this piece, the condition of peace that prevails in the country could be labelled as 'fragile' needing utmost attention from the citizens and the leadership at every level.

4. The Way Forward: Takeaways for Policy Consideration

To deal with the above challenges and for a viable future, therefore, collective, coordinated, proactive and visionary actions should be taken pre-emptively. Once internal violence is unleashed, as we witness in Ethiopia, it will be difficult to contain than the Covid-19 pandemic, as evidenced in Rwanda and Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Thus, there is an urgent need for strategies that address violent internal conflict in Ethiopia and build durable peace in the sub-region.

- First, concluding the active violence now in progress and bringing the suspected criminals to justice for due legal process and starting post-conflict recovery and peace as well as nation-cum-state building.

- Second, institutional reform, including revision of the 1995 constitution of the country and that of the regional states, is one of the key measures by which the Government can address the current surge in ethnic violence. The constitution insufficiently sets out the divisions of power between the federal and regional governments, leaving excessive openings for rights to self-determination, including secession or breaking away from Ethiopia. Any reform of the constitution would be expected to address these questions. It should be emphasised, however, that any type of constitutional reform will need to be very carefully crafted, not to embolden centrifugal forces or increase the ethnic competition it aims to alleviate.
- Third, to deal with the structural causes and dynamics of internal conflicts, it is vital that dialogue should be promoted and peace education provided. Civil society and academia should play significant roles in facilitating dialogue and interactions. Academia needs to engage in peace research, peace building and provision of peace education to deal with the underlying causes of ethnic violence and its impacts –both immediate and long-term. Such courses can be provided from kindergarten through to the university levels to entrench a culture of peace in Ethiopia. Its contents need to pinpoint sources of conflict, peaceful ways of handling conflicts, communication strategies and skills, the meaning and ways of preventing violence and other pertinent components of peace and conflict studies. It would contribute to transforming Ethiopia’s political culture from clan- and ethnic-based to civic- and citizen-based politics.
- Fourth, it’s worth underlining at this juncture that pledging allegiance to one’s own ethnic identity group is a universal practice in human communities and needs to be accepted and respected. The problem only arises when ethnicity becomes an organising principle of politics, economy, security, foreign policy and the entire polity of a nation. This can lead to ethnic extremism, as has been the case in Ethiopia for the last three decades. Therefore, it is imperative to strike a balance between ethnic identity and citizenship politics. That said, the collective as well as individual ethnic identity of every Ethiopian should be respected, while at the same time Ethiopian national identity needs to be stressed.
- Fifth, the state machinery, including the Federal Government-regional states relationship, is in need of profound reform. However, in doing so, it may be counter-productive to pour ‘new wine into old bottles’.

- Sixth, continuous and deeper reform in the security sector is needed to ensure that the complex configuration of security forces – the army, federal police, regional police, regional special police, and militia – will effectively cooperate in addressing violent internal conflicts.
- Seventh, strengthening sub-regional organisations, such as the Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), for collective action against violent extremists, such as al Shabaab in the Horn of Africa, is of paramount significance. It should be underlined here that contemporary peace and security issues in the Horn of Africa are fused with the Horn's own cleavages, while domestic and regional balances of power are shifting. In spite of these security predicaments, there are economic opportunities emerging from foreign rivalries played out in the Horn. Policy makers have apparently taken into account the increasing strategic relevance of the region to a variety of foreign actors and they include the role of foreign influences, particularly of the Gulf States, China and Turkey, into their thinking on the economics, politics, and security of the Horn's ports and the region. So, a new and innovative approach to contemporary peace and security in the Horn of Africa is at the forefront. Existing institutions and policies need to become fully capable of introducing a new regionalism in the Horn of Africa. What are still rampant in the sub-region, as one can observe on the ground, can be listed as follows: neo-patrimonialism, clientelism, corruption, political and economic marginalisation, nepotism, ethnic- or clan-based politics (with attendant internal displacement of persons on the basis of their ethnic identity), and dysfunctional state apparatus. These practices are indeed (further) weakening the social fabric and state institutions. So is why collective regional response to such malaise which serves as breeding place and safe haven for violent extremists shall be in order.
- Eighth, in addition, the current reform in Ethiopia, which aims at building sustainable peace and development in the country and the sub-region, needs to be given stronger internal institutional tools and support at sub-regional/regional and global levels, since failure thereof will have negative implications for the stability of Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa and beyond. Once again, bringing an end to the on-going conflict and as soon as the violence ceased , holding suspected criminals to account at a court of law, starting negotiation, building national consensus to work together, as well as setting up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission need to be in order.
- Ninth, in a more general note more commitment is needed to attend to social ills. In this regard, eradication of poverty and deprivation as well as youth unemployment is essential. So as to do this, most urgently and indispensably needed now are strong institutions capable

of delivering public goods, state effectiveness and authority with accountability, integrity, responsibility and transparency, as well as investing in and empowering the youth. Such an agenda is *sine qua non* to entrench sustainable peace and security, to provide resilience to statecraft and to reduce conflict in Ethiopia in particular and in the Horn of Africa in a broader sense of regional peace and security.

- Finally, reflecting on and drawing lessons from the past failures and successes, the way forward calls for engaging all the conflict parties in a nation-state building process to be conducted in a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation. That may contribute to transforming the unhealthy ethnic relations into a cohesive, diverse, peaceful, prosperous and resilient multi-national Ethiopia with positive spill-over to the Horn of Africa.

Selected References

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