

Democratisation and Violent Ethno-Political Conflicts in Post-2018 Ethiopia: An Examination on their Interface and the Way Forward

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Abstract

Since 2018, two seemingly contrasting realities surfaced in the Ethiopian political landscape. On one hand, the big-bang political reforms in the country were acclaimed both within and outside of the country. On the other hand, the country has been rocked by violent ethno-political conflicts, arguably as never seen before in terms of its intensity and frequency. Based on extensive insights gathered from existing literature and an interpretative approach, this article examines how the theoretical debate of democratization, security, and violent conflict have unfolded in the post-2018 Ethiopian political landscape. Settling the national and regional questions; bargain between the autocratic elites and the opposition; and co-optation between the old and the new elites are scrutinized to draw a direction for the way forward.

Keywords: Democratisation, Ethno-political conflict, Authoritarian Regime, Horn of Africa, Ethiopia

1. Introduction

Democracy, as an instrument to diffuse ethnic interests and reduce tensions by allowing for the establishment of an inclusive means of governance to address the needs of all ethnic groups in the state, has been implied in scores of literatures (Bueno et al., 1999; Ward and Kristian, 1998; Maoz and Bruce, 1993; Bremer, 1993). The underlying assumption in these works is that security as well as development can be preserved better only in the context of a democratic system. As such, in principle, democratization is viewed as presenting a golden opportunity for resolving ethnic as well as religious conflicts.

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While the hypothesis that establishes that democracies do not go to war against each other has frequently found empirical support, processes of change from an authoritarian environment to the one that is more open, however, will not happen automatically; sometimes creating a fertile climate for hatred and prejudice (Mansfield and Snyder, 2005). Especially, the coincidence of the third wave of democratization with an increase in the number of ethnic groups in conflict has made the issue a point of attention (Gurr, 1993). It even led some to claim that violent conflicts may be the inevitable result of the disintegration of an authoritarian regime (Huntington, 1991). As a result, some even compliment authoritarian rule for an effective enforcement of law and order and for creation of the conditions for effective governance (Huntington, 1991). For writers like Huntington, therefore, in a multi-ethnic society authoritarian rule, not democratization, is the antidote to ethno-political violence. As the debate goes on unsettled, recent experiences in different countries can be considered as demonstrating how ill-managed processes of change from an authoritarian environment to one that is more open could create a fertile ground for violent ethno-political conflicts. Since 2018, following the coming into power of the new prime minister, Ethiopia has witnessed a political liberalization in unprecedented manner. The new government, in a very short span of life, took drastic measures, unparalleled to its predecessors, which completely changed the political sphere of the country. In equal parallel, however, the period was also a time where the country has been ravaged by violent ethno-political conflicts. Ethno-political conflicts, as Donald (2016) notes, are conflicts characterized by ongoing states of hostility and opposition between two or more ethnic groups or national groups of people. Moreover, Hettne (1990:190) defines it to mean ‘ethnic identity activated and used for the purpose of political mobilization’. As such, they are conflicts informed predominantly by ethnic and religious implications. With that note, though it is true that Ethno-political strife has always been present in Ethiopia, it has been bedeviling the country even more so, it appears, following the April 2018 transition in the country. Such tendency even seems to be the defining feature of the contemporary Ethiopian state.

While the theoretical debate on democratization warns that a country is prone to communal conflicts at the early stage of its democratization process, the following are important questions: “what details explain the relationship between the post-2018 political developments and the surge in ethno-political conflicts in the country? Why does the country end up in vicious cycle of violent conflict since 2018?” The aim of this article is, therefore, to examine the interface between democratization and violent conflicts considering the recent surge of ethno-

political turmoil in Ethiopia. As such, it basically assesses how the rapid process of democratization in the absence of strong institutional capacity has precipitated violent conflicts in the contemporary situation of Ethiopia. It also examines how the unhealthy political competition that surfaced the post-2018 political landscape and the problem sequencing of tasks have contributed to the problem. The research addresses these issues based on extensive insights gathered from the existing relevant literature on democratization process vis-à-vis the ethno-political conflicts as happened/happening in different parts of the country.

2. Review of Literature

It has been long considered by liberalist scholars that societies governed democratically are more inclined to avoid conflict with each other. According to them, democracy provides mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution; generating a conclusion that established liberal democracies do not go to war against each other. Proponents to this view place that stronger democracies are less prone to violent conflict for at least two reasons. First, healthy democratic institutions and regular electoral processes create incentives for political participation by a wide range of ideological actors at relatively low cost. The implication is that, therefore, taking up arms involves much higher costs than exerting effort to political participation through ideology. This happens to be the case, especially at the elite level. Second, conflict instigators are less likely to find support among citizens if popular grievances are being met through peaceful and credible political processes (Madeleine and Mehid 2017). Despite that long-held proposition, the challenge posed on a myriad of social, political, economic, and security issues by both established and emerging democracies, especially at the turn of the 21st century, have dissipated the democratic euphoria (Madeleine and Mehid, 2017). Because of their more open and deliberative nature, democracies are perceived as more exposed to criminal and violent actors. With this regard, the rise of violent extremism and sectarian conflict is embraced by those that counter democracy. In general, it has been pinned that democracy leads to chaos and the breakdown of security. This narrative has somehow fed doubts about the role of democracy in underpinning national security and international stability (Madeleine and Mehid, 2017).

Specific to the African context, it has been commonly mentioned that the wave of democratization that swept over Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s severely precipitated the emergence of ethnic and religious politics and conflicts (Chua, 2003; Smith, 2000; Ottaway, 1998; Glickman, 1995). The fact that religious and

ethnic identities have formed the basis for a vast number of political parties in post-liberalization Africa is telling of the capacity for political mobilization that these identities contain in the contest for power and resources. However, it is important to note that their mobilization capacity is derived from the fact that these identities do have remarkable salience on the level of the ordinary believer or community member. Even though they are social constructs, ethnic and religious identities, as Laakso and Olukoshi (1996:3) note, are nonetheless “real” and constitute a crucial element in the social fabric, social relations and self-conceptions of individuals and groups anywhere in the world. This takes us to the next issue of what link, then, can be drawn between democratization and ethno-political conflict; and why a move from authoritarian environment to one that is more open could exhibit very different characteristics. Empirical studies conducted at different times suggest that new democracies suffer more from ethnically motivated dissent and violence than do authoritarian political systems. Groups are more likely to rebel in democratic systems, presumably because rebellions are easier to organize in more open societies and because repression, which is more prevalent in non-democracies, may succeed in preventing rebellious activity or raising its costs (Snyder and Jervis, 1999). After all, the very existence of a new democracy suggests that the fundamental grievances that have recently been addressed are, thus, far from being over. Explaining on the issue of politicization of identities, more particularly ethnic and religious identities, Laakso and Olukoshi (1996), among others, claim that the suppression of these identities ordains their politicization. Yet, it is certain that repression will fail to establish a basis for a lasting solution rather increase the likelihood of the politicization of these identities and their eruption during transition to democracy. Thus, this, in part, might explain the group grievances derived from an authoritarian era and suppressed by it, which find a way to be voiced with democratization (Saideman et al., 2002). In other words, in such authoritarian contexts, the transition to more democratic political forms provokes the decomposition and/or disarticulation of the coercive apparatuses of the state and opens the possibility for ethnic mobilization and even violence.

Mansfield and Snyder (2005:2) argue on the issue by forwarding that in the condition of weak or absent institutions ‘politicians have incentives to resort to violent nationalist appeals, taping their opponents as enemies of the nation in order to prevail in electoral competition.’ Especially elites whose positions are threatened have a strong motive to resort to this strategy, because they can pretend to act in the name of “the people” without being fully accountable to them (Abraham and Sergio, 2015; Vorrath, Krebs and Senn, 2007; Mansfield and Snyder, 2005). In a way that supports and summarizes the assertions made thus far, Vorrath, Krebs and

Senn (2007:9) come up with three aspects as explaining factors on how democratization can be central for the outbreak of conflict: (a) the opening of the political arena; (b) political competition producing “winners” and “losers”; and (c) the sequence of democratizing procedures /elections. As to the first explanation, with the opening of the political arena through the democratization attempt in a given country, formerly marginalized or suppressed groups have the opportunity to mobilize and organize (Vorrath, Krebs and Senn, 2007). As a result, new actors and movements occupy the public space and old ones normally transform or disappear. On the other hand, central power might loosen its grip on the periphery, since chains of command fall victim to the opening of the system (Vorrath, Krebs and Senn, 2007). Vorrath, Krebs and Senn goes on to claim that, in extreme cases, democratic transition can be accompanied by a power vacuum at the centre, especially in the initial phase, which obviously holds a strong danger of turmoil.

As to the second, the emerging plurality of actors generates competition over constituencies and resources, thereby resulting in political competition. The peak of rivalry is, however, normally reached in the course of elections as “democracy polarizes by distinguishing between voters and non-voters, majorities and non-majorities” and therefore, producing “winners” and “losers” (Vorrath, Krebs and Senn, 2007:10). Ultimately, groups feeling marginalized in the process or as losers of the popular vote, may try to change the results by non-democratic means and even resort to violence.

Their claim to the third explanation factor is that, where local and regional elections take place before national elections, this might have negative effects. In explaining same, they argue that the national and state question will hardly be settled if regional or local elections are carried out first. Hence, a lasting compromise between old and new elites and a demobilization of the public will become hardly possible under the condition of electoral competition (Vorrath, Krebs and Senn, 2007). In general, though the hypothesis that democracies may not go to war against one another is an established one through different empirical studies. A change from one authoritarian regime to another may potentially exhibit different characteristics. Thus, democratization as a driver of violent conflict would suggest the different scenarios on how the process may end up with some unwanted consequences. It is with all these and other notes that this article laid its foundation to find an explanation for the recent surge of ethno-political violence in Ethiopia.

3. Research Methods

The research assumes a qualitative approach in nature. Thus, by employing an interpretive approach based on the extensive literature on the issue and observable phenomena in the country, an attempt was made to “make sense of” the dynamic socio-political process as it unfolds in contemporary Ethiopia. As such, it endeavoured to “interpret” the reality through a “sense-making” approach.

4. Violent Ethno-political Conflicts in Contemporary Ethiopia

4.1. Situating the Problem

Ethiopia, since 2018, has experienced both rapid political liberalization and a surge in violent ethno-political conflicts. As scores of democratization processes, the new government, among others, had freed political prisoners; apologised for the violence and excesses of the state; revised draconian laws; unblocked hundreds of jammed news sites, expanded media freedom; persuaded a noted dissident to head the country’s election board and legalized opposition groups long classified as terrorists, which then were invited to return home and engage in peaceful contestation for power. However, violent ethno-political conflicts were recorded in every direction of the country. It was not that long after that violent conflicts between the *Oromo* and *Gedeo* ethnic groups displaced dozens of people in the western *Guji* and *Gedeo* zones of neighbouring *Oromia* and the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples’ Region (IDMC, 2018). There was also ethnic violence in the *Oromia* and the *Somali* regional states, especially along the borders in September 2018 (Yonas, 2019; IDMC, 2018). Not only that, some ethnic Tigries that used to live in some parts of the Amhara and other regions of Ethiopia felt insecure and left out; *Amharas* were expelled from *Oromia* and *Benishangul* regional states while many innocent Ethiopians have died in the southern cities of *Hawassa* and *Sodo* as well as in *Moyale* and *Dire Dawa* as a result of ethnic violence (Crisis Group, 2019b; IDMC, 2018).

Moreover, it is a recent memory (September 2018) that civilians were killed in *Ashewa Meda*, in *Burayu* town of Addis Ababa (Yonas, 2019) and also in *Kemise of the Oromo* Special Zone in the Amhara National Regional State (Semir, 2019). Moreover, scores of civilians from the *Gamo* and *Ghuraghe*, ethnic groups were also targeted and killed around the capital city, Addis Ababa, in 2018 (EBC, 2018). Furthermore, religious tensions in Ethiopia, a country where, for centuries, Christians and Muslims lived in harmony and won international acclaims for tolerating each other, had reached its climax following the April 2018 political

transition in the country. Although such attacks have happened in Ethiopia before², the fast escalation at a time of political transition is a major concern. It is becoming common to hear localized violent episodes on several occasions in recent times where religious places were set on fire, destroyed and attacked. Some of these cases include: the August 2018 incident in *Jijiga* town, which later spread to *Dire Dawa* City Administration where churches were blazed (Crisis group, 2019b; BBC Amharic, 2019); the July 2018 burning of churches in *Sidama* zone (African Report, 2018); the December 2019 incident in *Mota* Town, where a number of Mosques were attacked (FBC, 2019; Aljazeera, 2019); furthermore, during several days of violence in the *Oromia* region in October that killed more than 80 people, attacks on both mosques and Orthodox Christian churches were reported (Reuters, 2019).

These and other numerous incidents that occurred in a very short period after 2018 have resulted in the maiming and killings of several persons and the loss of properties and business investments. In general, across the country, particularly more recently, there is a sharp escalation in community tensions and local clashes between different ethnic groups or between different religious groups; and with a magnitude rarely witnessed since the establishment of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. For that matter, in the year 2018 Ethiopia had the highest number of new internal displacements associated with conflict worldwide exceeding that of Syria's (IDMC, 2019). Moreover, the number of violent events and protests have actually increased by over 8% within six months since April 2018 (the time the new PM assumed power), relative to the six months prior. This has corresponded to an increase of over 48% in the number of reported fatalities (ACLED, 2018). To be more specific, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED, 2018), 70 instances of inter-communal violence have resulted in more than 500 reported deaths since April, 2018. Furthermore, in the first half of 2019 only, violence among ethnic militias resulted in the displacement of 140,000 people in *Oromia* region and 100,000 people in *Amhara* region (IDMC, 2019). It is basing on these facts that this paper aspires to find a systematic explanation for the events happening in contemporary Ethiopia through the lens of the democratization debate.

4.2. The Ethno-Political Conflicts in Ethiopia and the Democratization Theoretical Debate

If, as contended by Benidix (1964:18), “*the central fact of nation-building is the orderly exercise of a nationwide public authority*”, recent events in Ethiopia would

appear to suggest that violent ethno-political conflicts are increasingly posing challenges to the central state authority in the country. As implied above, ethno-political violence has infiltrated in different parts of the country since 2018. The following section explains the violence in the lens of the theoretical debates of democratization as a driver of violent conflict.

4.2.1. Ethno-religious groups mobilization

One of the explanations that democratization would serve as a trigger of conflict in a country under transition is based on the assertion that with the opening of the political arena through the democratization attempt in a given country, formerly marginalized or suppressed groups have the opportunity to mobilize and organize. This goes in parallel to the theoretical debate that repression of identities in an authoritarian regime will certainly fail to establish a basis for a lasting solution; it rather increases the likelihood of the politicization of these identities and their eruption during transition to democracy (Laakso and Olukoshi, 1996). The examples throughout history are numerous³.

That said, the experience of Ethiopia since 2018 underlines the old truism that the most vulnerable moment for any authoritarian state is when it starts to reform. The time the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)'s tight grip over power loosened and necessitated its reform marked the epicentre in terms of its vulnerability. Before looking at how, it has been viewed in different literatures that in post 1991 Ethiopia ethnicity and religion have become one of the major variables in articulating political claims and contestations in the country (Abbink, 2006; Clapham, 2004). The country has been defined by politicization of identities in every sphere of life. In other words, ethnic nationalism occupied Ethiopia's centre of political gravity, becoming the single most important principle shaping political life in the country. Following the transition in 2018 and the opening of the political space, therefore, ethno-nationalist groups wasted no time to mobilize the already politicized identities. As such, ethno-nationalist sentiment around the country overstretched, with ethnic movements using increasingly incendiary rhetoric about other groups. For that matter, in *Amhara* region, the National Movement of the *Amhara* challenge the ruling party and demand the annexation of land from *Tigray*, *Oromia* and *Benishangul-Gumuz* that they believe historically belong to the *Amhara*. As Semir (2019) notes, those conflicts in areas inhabited by the *Qemant* people and in the *Oromo* Special Zone of the *Amhara* region, are partly related to *Amhara*, *Oromo*, *Qemant*, *Tigrayan* and *Gumuz* ethnic mobilisations and

counter-mobilisations. Same goes to the cross-border antagonisms that involved the *Amhara*, *Tigrayan* and *Benishangul-Gumuz* Regional States.

In *Oromia*, the *Gedeo-Guji* conflict, though it has its own historical explanation in post-1991 Ethiopia, was an antecedent to the political opening in the country. For long, *Gedeo* and *Guji* have engaged in inter-ethnic conflicts mainly on issues of land (Asebe, 2010). As such, the groups were in continuous mobilization by their respective nationalist elites. Especially, the claim that *Gedeo* nationalist elites were planning to remap *Gedeo* locations inside *Guji* into the *Gedeo Zone* in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region and the rise of Oromo nationalist mobilisation and sentiments in the *Guji* area has already boiled the tension (Semir, 2019). The April 2018 transition in the country was, therefore, the most favourable condition in venting it as it gives a perception of possible political vacuum to be created in the process, especially in peripheries. This reiterates the argument by Vorrath, Krebs and Senn (2007) that during political transition, central power might loosen its grip on the periphery, since chains of command fall victim to the opening of the system. As a result, it became a cause for the killings of many and displacement of close to a million people (IDMC, 2018).

In the south, the July 2019 crisis in *Sidama* following the referendum's delay represents another typical explanation to the issue at hand. The *Sidama* statehood question was arguably a question that lasted throughout the creation of regional states under the 1995 constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (Wolassa, 2016). While the question was there for such a long time, it was, however, contained under the tightly controlled rule of the pre-2018 government in the country (Lovise, 2002). The condition of the state losing its grip and the opening of the political space after 2018 had created the opportunity for the undergrounded question to explode where groups had seized the opportunity to mobilize their ethnic groups. The tension we are witnessing currently in the region in the quests for more autonomous statehood also follows same explanation.⁴ This goes in line with the argument by Laakso and Olukoshi (1996) that, under authoritarianism, identity issues do not vanish, rather they simply get driven underground and erupt during transition. In general, as the democratization theoretical debate goes on saying, long-standing political grievances, rigid inequalities and long ignored social wrongs will have a favourable condition during political transition. The longstanding grievances among Ethiopia's ethnic groups are becoming more acute following the opening of the political space since 2018. This is precipitated, in particular, due to the absence of effective institution in the country. There is a growing consensus in the scholarly research that the transition

to a democratization could be destabilizing and debilitating for weak states (Paris, 2004).

While political citizenship is being redefined within the confines of a democratic opening, communities and societal groups, hitherto repressed, may well use the liberalized societal space to stake out claims at their disposal, especially in the absence of strong institutions. Hence, strong (but limited) state institutions are necessary to buffer the straining effects of the transition (Paris, 2004). The post-2018 developments in Ethiopia, unfortunately, could not live to this prerequisite. The developments in the country can only be expressed as a rapid transition to liberal democracy in the absence of effective institutions. With more liberalization of the political space, more ethno-religious mobilization got under way, giving rise to an ever redefined and more hardened nationalist rhetoric, resulting in ethno political conflicts in the country. While the ethnic mobilization and hardening of nationalist rhetoric are not brand new things in post-2018 Ethiopia, they did not get out of control for most of the EPRDF's rule. In other words, the tight grip rule of the EPRDF's reign was able to contain most of the tensions at a lower level. No wonder, therefore, the opening of the political space following the transition is the ideal period to openly air issues kept underneath during the tight rule of the EPRDF, thereby effectively hindering the processes of peacebuilding and peace consolidation in the country.

4.2.2. Political rivalry of the elites: A competition for power

Political competition is another explaining factor of ethno-political conflicts in the contemporary Ethiopia where political balance of power between different ethnic groups in the country is an underlying concern. As Mickael and Kristian (1998) claim, while countries under democratization may be less repressive and permit greater political freedom than their predecessors, they also are subject to instability and attempts by challengers to seize power. In line with that, the political liberalization since 2018 in Ethiopia means that the forces that kept them at least partly in check are loosening, and, therefore, all around the country groups that see each other as competitors are jostling for power. And, in an existing political culture where almost all issues are under debate among the power jostlers and the rules and norms for the peaceful contestation of power are relatively undeveloped, the potential for violent conflict is high. Moreover, the opposition parties appeared unrestrained in their willingness to root themselves in the multitude of local interests that came up in the various regions of the country.

For that matter, between *Amhara* and *Oromo* elites, for instance, there appears an underlying issue in terms of the political power balance. For *Oromo* nationalists, *Amhara* elites were beneficiaries of the past imbalance of power and they believe that has to be reversed now. On the other hand, *Amhara* elites see the *Oromo* as the new power-wielders in the country and could be used as a step to further *Amhara* subjugation (Crisis Group, 2019a). As the power contestation extends also to the other ethnic groups in the country, it must be acknowledged that such tensions between groups have the potential to overwhelm the political management capacity of the centre. In other words, the attempt by one to end the past power imbalance is leading to worries by the other that a new imbalance of power is in the making.

The June 2019 alleged foiled coup by a rouge militia in *Amhara* Regional State that left death of three high regional officials, including the president of the region and the assassination of the chief of the Army in the capital Addis Ababa, also hardly fall short of similar explanation. Safeguarding the *Amhara* nationalist interests both inside and outside the *Amhara* regional state in a militant way, as represented by the regional state's security branch, was what led to a rift between the administration and the then regional state's security branch (Semir, 2019). Moreover, before it reached its climax in June 2019, for instance, pursuing this goal in the *Benishangul* and *Kemise* areas has led to widespread friction between ethnic groups (ACLEDA, 2018). It could be recalled here that, on top of the attack, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) released a statement criticizing the *Amhara* Democratic Party, another constituent party in the former EPRDF, saying that the party cooperated with "chauvinist forces" and was undermining national security (African News, 2019). Such an open criticism of one against the other was hardly imaginable in the previous tight grip rule of the EPRDF. Likewise, the violence in Somali region that was associated with the '*Liyu*'⁵ Police' in June 2018 had the element of maintaining the *status quo* by the then president of the region. Such confrontation is alluding to the existence of sub-regional power-brokers in Ethiopia that are seeking to consolidate their power and advance their own interests in this period of political transition. This resonates to the explanation by Mansfield and Snyder (2005) where they note that groups, especially elites, whose positions are threatened by the new political order have a strong motive to resort to the strategy of creating instability, because they can pretend to act in the name of "the people" without being fully accountable to them. Apart from that, the confrontation we are witnessing in the Western *Oromia* where the government forces are in active fight with a segment of the *Oromo* Liberation Army is an illustration of power rivalry during political transition in the country. So, in general, in an ongoing democratic transition in the country where the central demands of ethnic

groups for political autonomy, representation, and justice remain unresolved, it could find itself in violent conflicts for its realization and that appears to be true in contemporary Ethiopian context also.

4.2.3. Sequence of tasks

Although consensus on sequence of tasks in transition to democracy is considered improbable, there appears a general agreement, however, that the process of democratization is a sequence of tasks. It is perceived as a sequence of tasks, "each with its own logic" and the "ingredients" of which are "assembled one at a time" (Mansfield and Snyder, 2005). As such, democratization should make itself free from an attempt to storm everything at a time. Failure to do so will lead to instability because the rapid opening of political space is a step into the unknown, and not without risks. In line with that Michael and Kristian (1998) note, rapid democratization may bring about weak regimes unable to establish effective control and political order.

The political transition in Ethiopia since 2018 has hardly lived to this procedure. Frequent and sweeping changes in the country have empowered ethnic strongmen building powerbases thereby challenging the government. It has also brought confusion and division among the high government officials as well as the ordinary people. An important explanation for same, among others, could be the tension created in the country following the rift between Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the former Defense Minister Lemma Megerssa following the move to transform Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) into Prosperity Party (PP). The sequencing of tasks was one of the major claims aired by the latter in his interview with VOA (2019) as well as the once dominant party under EPRDF, *Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)*, for not buying the EPRDF's move towards PP⁵. In general, the tendency to rush over things, to try to telescope decades into months, years and so forth by the transition government has branded the regime as weak; unable to establish effective control and political order.

5. The Way Forward

If the possibility of democratization exhibiting very different characteristics than sought is a founded proposition, the next question would be how it could be managed to be successful. On the basis of empirical evidence from different regions, Bunce (2003) identifies the following three elements as central to a successful and peaceful democratic transition which shall be analysed in the Ethiopian context as follows.

The national and state questions need to be settled:

- a. The rules of the transition and the new political order are the result of bargaining between a small group of the autocratic elites and a small group of representatives of the democratic opposition
- b. The co-operation of the authoritarians can be secured through co-optation. The transition is essentially a compromise between the old and the new elites. The public can be demobilized so that it does not pose a threat to the old elites, which otherwise could provide them with a rationale to undermine the transition process.

The first element voices the importance of consensus on national identity before democratization. This resonates to the argument of Rustow (1970) that the only prior condition for successful democratization is national unity. This is particularly important in multi-ethnic societies like Ethiopia. National unity, however, does not mean that everyone has to trace one's ancestry back to the same ethnic group, nor does it mean that everyone has to speak the same language, or even practice the same religion. It, instead, means that nearly everyone must believe they belong together in a single political community (Rustow, 1970).

While that is the case, in ethnically divided African countries, it often lies in their nature that the national and state questions have not been settled. The Ethiopian case is no exception. Among Ethiopians, no consensus exists, for instance, on the issue of history, the national flag, and the appropriate extent of federalism, among others. For instance, people from the two camps have different opinions about the length of the country's history, the moral worth of the emperors' reigns, the veracity of the country's long-running independence and sovereignty, and others. Same goes to the appropriate extent of federalism and other issues. Moreover, it can be noted that increasing numbers of smaller ethnic parties have emerged, many playing on historic grievances between different ethnic groups and reigniting territorial border disputes.

Thus, as Bunce (2003) and Rustow (1970) note, looking for a common ground among Ethiopians that help to bring belief of belongingness to a single political community is essential. In other words, popular conversations and building an enduring consensus across Ethiopian society around important national and regional issues need to be sought. As such, conversation on issues including the basic structure of the state and the relationship between the federal government and the regions, the relationship between the state and the economy, and the social contract on the issues of national citizenship like what value system is to underpin

a society's or nation's identity are essential. It is true that, being fiercely political in nature, these societal conversations cannot be taken for granted in terms of their outcome. However, a strong consensus on national integration must emerge if the ongoing democratic transition has to bear any fruit.

The second way forward reiterates the argument for a meaningful agreement among divergent political constituencies to be sought. The absence of a meaningful elite pact, in the long run, suggests the possibility of increased violence among communities in future periods. This is different from the "transformative" model of a "transition paradigm"⁶; which is plausible in contexts where the incumbent is in charge of the transition with tremendous capacity to shape the nature of the new democracy without consultation or negotiations with opposition forces (Huntington, 1991). This takes us to the argument that the Ethiopian transition does not fit perfectly to any of the modalities of a "transition paradigm"⁷ envisaged by political scientists, and, therefore, what Bunce (2003) suggested needs to apply *mutatis mutandis* here also.

According to Bunce (2003), a bargain between a small group of the autocratic elites and a small group of representatives of the democratic opposition should guide the new political order in the country. This would help in translating the polarizing force of ethnic politics toward constructive ends. In contemporary Ethiopian context, there is need to recognize that the escalation of the political competitions in to violence is also attributed to absence of negotiation on the rules of the game between the autocratic elites and the democratic opposition in the country. Forging a political bargain between the government and opposition forces is essential to achieve the breakthrough needed in managing the political transition in the country. An absence or narrowed political pact in the country could lead to weakness to advance the transition and ultimately its failure. As such, a genuine transition bargain to trade off the conflicting claims of the political actors in the transition must take place in the country.

Co-optation between the old and the new elites is the third way forward. This is important to secure the cooperation of the old guards in whatever capacity they are today. This appears to be especially important in political transition where party cadres and army units in most of the country used to form a kind of dual administration before the transition like in Ethiopia (Abbink, 1995). In doing so, there is need to demobilize the people so that it does not pose a threat to the old elites or their sympathizers. Transitions, however, usually fail in this regard because, as Michael and Kristian (1998) remind, political leaders in young

democracies become more dependent on popular support and subject themselves to populist pressures emphasizing the short-term maximization of political support. As such, in some cases, certain groups become targeted and made scapegoats for existing problems.

With that note, the political transition in Ethiopia must find a way to address the sense of alienation, anger, and humiliation among supporters as well as sympathizers of the once dominant party before the transition, the TPLF. The security situation in the country has worsened partly because the leadership in the transition has targeted Ethiopia's authoritarian security agencies to gain popular support and remove threats to its leadership. Senior officials have been relieved from their positions or arrested under corruption charges. The move has made the *Tigrayans* feeling targeted by the government and has caused an undeniable and damaging power vacuum⁸. It has also created a perception that *Tigrayans* have been singled out for purges by authorities and displacement by members of other ethnic groups from different parts of the country which derail the prospect of national unity. On the other hand, their alienation will be exploited by the new administration as scapegoats for existing problems. Co-optation is, therefore, a win-win solution to shape the political landscape of the country.

6. Conclusion

While the term “transition to democracy” is too optimistic as a label for the processes of regime change in different countries, many countries have a “standstill,” where many countries are troubled with violent conflicts after the fall of the authoritarian regime. Since the new administration took office in Ethiopia in April 2018, barring the enormous political changes, violent ethno-political conflict is on the rise in the country. Not only is this type of violence becoming more common, but it is also becoming more lethal. In this paper, it has been argued that the rapid move to political liberalization in the absence of strong institutions in the country has created a fertile ground for communities and societal groups to use the liberalized societal space to stake out claims at their disposal. Hence, different groups used the opportunity to mobilize their supporters along ethno-religious lines without much restraint, giving rise to an ever redefined and more hardened nationalist rhetoric. This has precipitated the ethno-political conflicts in the country. Moreover, the unhealthy political competition during this period of political change, coupled with problem of sequencing tasks and other factors, have exacerbated violent ethno-political conflicts in the contemporary Ethiopia. The paper has also scrutinized the settling of the national and regional questions;

bargaining between the autocratic elites and the democratic oppositions; and working for cooperation with the supporters and actors of the old guards through co-optation as a way forward in facilitating the fulfilment of the longstanding demand for the establishment of a participatory democracy in Ethiopia. Failing to do that will put the country fixed in the grey area where the ‘transition’ would claim on the way to something better, but the evidence dictating otherwise.

Notes

1. That proposition goes as long as Immanuel Kant where he discussed in his essay called ‘Perpetual Peace’ that citizens of a democratic republic are less likely to support their government in a war because “this would mean calling down on themselves all the miseries of war.” See Immanuel Kant. 1795. *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, F. Nicolovius Publishing.
2. Violent religious conflicts in post 1991 Ethiopia like in 2006 in Jimma and Illubabor Zones, Oromia and in 2011 in Asendabo, Omo Nada, Agaro and Yebu in Jimma were among the notable ones (Abbink, Jon. 2011. “Religion in Public Spaces: Emerging Muslim-Christian Polemics in Ethiopia, *African Affairs*, Vol. 110 (439):253-274; Abbink, Jon. 2014. Religious freedom and the political order: the Ethiopian ‘secular state’ and the containment of Muslim identity politics”, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, Vol. 8, (4):346-365).
3. It can be noted here that thirty countries have transitioned from authoritarian to substantive democracy between 1974 and 1990. By the mid-1990s, thirty-six other regimes had become competitive authoritarian, exceeding the number of democracies among developing and post-communist countries (see Huntington, S. P. 1991. *The third wave: Democratization in the late twentieth century*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press).
4. Dozens of zonal administrations in the region have already submitted their statehood question to the regional council after getting approval from their respective zonal councils (as per the procedure envisaged under the 1995 FDRE Constitution) and are waiting for approval from the regional council.
5. ‘Liyu’ is an Amharic word and it means ‘special.’ As such, ‘liyu police’ stands for ‘special police’, kind of paramilitary force in the region.
6. It has been claimed later that PM Abiy Ahmed and Lemma Megerssa have narrowed their differences as per the Oromo culture and the latter agreed to support the move by the PM (Oromia Communication Bureau, December, 2019).
7. Political scientists envisage three models of “transition paradigm” in a given political transition: transformation, transplacement and replacement. According to the transformation model of transition, transition is triggered by the existing regime, which introduces reforms that end authoritarian rule and pave the way for democracy to emerge. In this model, the incumbent is in charge of the transition with tremendous capacity to shape the nature of the new democracy without consultation or negotiations with opposition forces. In trans-placement context, transition emerges from a stalemate between the incumbent and opposition forces. Realizing that each side cannot triumph

over the other, the opposing forces reach a compromise and decide jointly to usher in political transition. The ensuing democracy is, therefore, heavily conditioned by the nature of the political bargain both sides make during the transition. The last modality, replacement, occurs when the authoritarian regime resists reforms and is toppled by the opposition. In this situation, the new government directs the transition process and shapes the ensuing democracy. (See Huntington, S. P. 1991. *The third wave: Democratization in the late twentieth century*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press).

8. In an interview with local medias, the former vice president of the Regional State of Tigray, Debretsion Gebremichael, had underlined how the action by the government of Abiy was not motivated with ensuring justice throughout the country rather was a move particularly targeting one ethnic group, Tigriyans. Moreover, remarks made by the new administration and documentaries on state media were perceived to have painted the past as dark and as an attack on Tigrayans (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVG0a9X-NPc>, accessed on March 1, 2020).

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