

National Dialogue for Peacebuilding in Ethiopia: Lessons from Rwanda, Tunisia, and Yemen

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Abstract

Since the late 20th century, national dialogues have been a widely recognized mechanism for peace-building during political transitions. Following its own transition in 2018, Ethiopia launched an inclusive public dialogue process aimed at addressing both historical and contemporary sources of discord while fostering national consensus to build a peaceful and prosperous state. While this process holds significant transformative potential, it currently lacks a systematic framework for integrating empirical lessons from comparative international models, which hampers its ability to incorporate proven success mechanisms. This study examines national dialogues in Rwanda, Tunisia, and Yemen to extract a comprehensive set of lessons that could inform Ethiopia's ongoing process. Through a systematic literature review and thematic data analysis, the study identifies ten key factors that contribute to the success or failure of national dialogues: political will and national ownership; the credibility of the convener; the inclusion or exclusion of key stakeholders; the scope and nature of the dialogue agenda; connecting public suffering to structural solutions; decision making systems; unifying dialogue slogans; support structures and programs; the interplay between tangible and intangible goals of national dialogue; and the implementation and sustainability of dialogue outcomes. Effectively adapting these insights could significantly enhance the prospects for the success of Ethiopia's national dialogue.

Keywords: Ethiopia, national dialogue, peace-building, political transition, stakeholder inclusion, transitional justice, Rwanda, Tunisia, Yemen

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Introduction

National dialogues serve as inclusive public forums that play a pivotal role in political transitions aiming to shape a nation's political future. These dialogues typically focus on addressing the root causes of conflict while fostering trust, promoting broad participation, and building consensus on critical national initiatives (Murray, 2015; Stigant, 2021). In the wake of its 2018 political transition, Ethiopia has shown a strong commitment to this process as a means to address both structural and contemporary conflicts. To facilitate this, the country established three commissions through proclamation: the Administrative Boundaries Commission (No. 1101/2019), the Reconciliation Commission (No. 1102/2018), and the National Dialogue Commission (No. 1265/2021). The Reconciliation Commission, in particular, seeks to tackle historical and contemporary sources of conflict, foster consensus, rebuild social trust, restore eroded social values, and create a national consensus by engaging political elites, opinion leaders, and various societal groups.

Although this initiative carries significant transformative potential, its success is contingent upon overcoming profound structural and procedural challenges. A major obstacle is the lack of a systematic framework to integrate empirical lessons from other national dialogues, which hampers the ability to adapt proven strategies that ensure inclusivity, legitimacy, and tangible outcomes. Hence, addressing this gap will be the puzzle of this study.

To address short-comings, in the existing knowledge base, this study employs a systematic literature review and document analysis to examine national dialogues in Rwanda, Tunisia, and Yemen- cases chosen for their varied outcomes including relative success, partial success, and failure. The methodology includes a thorough analysis of diverse secondary sources, such as academic literature, legal documents, case studies, and institutional reports. Through thematic data analysis, the study identifies key factors contributing to success and failure to extract evidence-based lessons. Ultimately, this analysis offers concrete, actionable recommendations aimed at strengthening the design and implementation of Ethiopia's national dialogue, thereby supporting its goal of meaningful and lasting reconciliation.

National dialogue: Conceptual clarification

National dialogue has emerged as a tool for political transition following the end of Cold War and a legitimacy crisis in various countries. Since the late 1980s, it has become increasingly evident that traditional conflict resolution methods such as elections, armed struggle, and peace agreements among a few elites have been

inadequate for addressing deep-rooted political crises. There is a need for a broad based and inclusive approach to address the grievances of multiple groups and rebuild state legitimacy from the ground up (Vimalarajah, 2017).

National dialogues are convened to address issues of national significance by tackling the root causes of conflict. The primary goal is to foster consensus on divisive political, economic, or social matters, redefine state society relations, and developing strategies for their resolution (Thania, 2016; Guo, 2015). However, some national dialogues focus on specific, contested issues and immediate symptoms rather than the underlying sources of disagreements. Such narrower approaches often lead to superficial outcomes that are fragile (Moosa, 2020; Thomas, 2007).

National dialogues can pursue both tangible and intangible outcomes. Tangible outcomes include concrete agreements, such as roadmaps for political and constitutional reforms while the intangible goals focus on transforming fundamental societal values, fostering a culture of peace, tolerance, and peaceful conflict resolution. These aspects are crucial for building a resilient society and state (Guo, 2015).

The structures of national dialogues are not a one-size- fits- all solutions to every problem. Successful dialogues are often bolstered by smaller mechanisms, such as deadlock breaking procedures, which help prevent total collapse. National dialogues achieve success when their processes embrace: inclusion, transparency, and public support (Thomas, 2007).

Although national dialogues are complex and context-specific processes, they are generally guided by fundamental principles: inclusive participation; national ownership; a clear mandate and agenda; credible and impartial facilitation; transparency and communication; and established decision- making rules (Murray, 2015). A trustworthy convener, a clear implementation plan, balancing inclusiveness with efficiency, national ownership, effective information dissemination, the allocation of sufficient resources, and the establishment of monitoring mechanisms and follow-up strategies are also critical for the success of national dialogues (Guo, 2015).

It is also important to highlight the relationship between peace deals and a national dialogue. Peace deals are typically more focused, formal pacts negotiated primarily between warring parties to immediately halt violence and establish concrete terms for power-sharing, security, and governance. Often, an initial peace agreement is necessary to secure a ceasefire and commit armed actors to a national dialogue process, thereby creating the stability required for meaningful dialogue. However, without a subsequent inclusive dialogue, such agreements risk being

seen as elite pacts that lack public buy-in and fail to address deeper grievances. Therefore, depending on the specific context of a nation undertaking a national dialogue, it is advisable to integrate the peace agreement into the dialogue process to ensure maximum effectiveness (Vimalarajah, 2017).

A comparative thematic analysis of national dialogues: Drawing lessons from Rwanda, Tunisia, and Yemen

This section offers a comparative analysis of national dialogues in Rwanda, Tunisia, and Yemen by examining key dimensions: the pre-existing conditions that prompted each dialogue; the dialogue processes, their outcomes, and the resulting political and social impacts; and the factors that influence the success or failure of these national dialogues. By systematically evaluating these cases across these analytical categories, the study uncovers common themes, divergent approaches, and evidence-based lessons that can inform the ongoing national dialogue in Ethiopia.

Pre-existing conditions and underlying issues

Rwanda

Rwanda is often viewed primarily through the tragic lens of the genocide, overshadowing the country's rich history and ancient civilization. This small, landlocked nation in East-Central Africa is home to three main social groups: Hutu (85%), Tutsi (14%), and Twa (1%). Before the arrival of colonial powers, Germany (1897–1916) and Belgium (1916–1962), these groups were closely united, with distinctions largely defined by socio-economic roles. Tutsi individuals, who owned significant cattle, while Hutu farmers were associated with agriculture and the Twa were known for hunting and gathering (Sentama, 2014).

Colonial powers, particularly the Belgians, implemented divisive strategies that disrupted this unity. They transformed social classes into artificially created ethnic divisions through five key methods. First, they promoted the false ideology that Tutsis were a superior "race" compared to the Hutus and Twa, favoring them for administrative roles. Tutsi were granted privileged access to economic, social, and political rights, while Hutu and Twa were marginalized and deemed unfit for administrative positions. Second, colonizers dismantled the social fabrics and traditional institutions that united the groups through divisive educational policies.

Third, they introduced identity cards that classified people into these ethnic groups, mandating the inclusion of ethnicity in all official documents. Fourth, the colonizers changed land tenure system, fracturing the group's unity and cohesion. Before, colonial rule, land was communally owned, which promoted

social stability and harmony. The introduction of private property ownership created divisions and social classes. Fifth, colonial administrators compelled Rwandans to work on coffee and tea plantations through coercive measures, using Tutsi intermediaries. Refusing, to work brought severe punishment or even death (Sentama, 2014).

In the 1950s, some members of the Tutsi elite recognized that the Belgians were exploiting ethnic division for their gains and began advocating for independence. As national and independence sentiments grew among the Tutsi elite, the Belgians shifted their strategy, hastily fostering new Hutu elite, while blaming the Tutsi for hardships endured during colonial rule.

Rwanda gained independence in 1962 establishing a republic dominated by the Hutu majority. Following independence, the Tutsi population, along with some Hutu who opposed the oppressive policies of the ruling regime, were systematically denied economic, political, social, cultural, and employment rights (Reyntjens, 2018).

The colonial powers strategically incited conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi, organizing actions that led to violence against the Tutsi population. The genocide was triggered on April 6, 1994, when a plane carrying the Hutu president Juvénal Habyarimana was shot down. His death was immediately attributed to the Tutsi-led rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). This accusation escalated existing tensions and led to the slaughter of an estimated 800,000 to 1 million Tutsi, as well as many moderate Hutus who opposed the genocidal regime and those providing shelter to Tutsi individuals (Zorbas, 2004).

The massacre began in the capital, Kigali, and rapidly spread throughout the country. The genocide resulted in severe human, physical, social, and institutional devastations and was orchestrated by government security forces and extremist elements within the political elite. The military and government-backed militias, notably the “Interahamwe” played direct roles in the massacre.

The devastating loss of life shattered the social values and traditional institutions that once held the groups together. Physical infrastructures and political institutions were destroyed, leading to a complete collapse of law and order. National law enforcement agencies and judicial institutions ceased to function, leaving behind numerous orphans, widows, and a deeply traumatized and vulnerable population. The genocide came to an end when the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) captured Kigali and took control of the country (Sentama, 2014).

Tunisia

Tunisia, a relatively small country with a largely homogenous population, had only two leaders from its independence from France in 1956 until the revolution in 2011: Habib Bourguiba (1959–1987) and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Following independence, Tunisia struggled to establish socially just socio economic and political system, similar to many other Africa Countries. The nation faced significant economic disparities between urban- and the rural areas, as well as between the affluent coastal regions and the impoverished interior. Notably high unemployment, particularly among young university graduates, added to these disparities; this led to uneven resource distribution and public grievances.

Politically, President Ben Ali (1987-2011) enforced a highly centralized administration that concentrated power within his own hands and those of his party. He maintained a one-party rule, outlawed opposition parties, and suppressed human rights organizations, and civil society groups while declaring himself president-for-life. His government persistently violated citizens' privacy, and limited rights regarding freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association.

In response to this repressive regime, spontaneous uprisings began in 2008, escalating dramatically in late 2010 after Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old street vendor, set himself on fire in protest against the confiscation of his cart and mistreatment by a police officer. This dehumanization sparked widespread public outrage and protests across the nation (Lavie, 2019).

To counter public grievances, Ben Ali relied on coercion and used his domestic security forces and the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party to suppress the revolution. However, this coercion approach backfired and ultimately undermined his regime (Cino, 2019). The success of the mass protests was driven by social media, the political stance of the Tunisian military, and the Trade Union's role in organizing demonstrations. Ultimately, the 'Jasmine Revolution,' also known as the revolution of dignity and freedom, succeeded in toppling President Ben Ali's 23-year reign on January 14, 2011 sparking a wave of uprisings across other Arab countries (Kaye, 2018).

Yemen

Prior to the unification of Yemen, North and South Yemen functioned as two distinct States. North Yemen emerged as a state following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 while South Yemen remained a British colony during that period and subsequently gained independence in 1967. In the 1980s, both states sought to establish pacts to leverage their resources, and collaborate on oil

exploration aiming to boost the economies of both nations. This cooperation set the stage for the unification of present-day Yemen in 1990.

Upon unification, Ali Abdullah Saleh, North Yemen's ruler since 1978, assumed Presidency, while the former ruler of South Yemen, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, became Vice-President (Al-Hinai, 2020). However, just four years after the merger, southern Yemen began to challenge the political, economic, and social dominance of the north within the newly formed state. This growing discontent among southerners escalated into the civil war of 1994, leading calls for secession by southern leaders. Overtime, the political crisis deepened, resulting in the emergence of numerous rebel groups opposing the government.

By late 2010, Yemen's crisis escalated into nationwide upheaval, with the Arab Spring exacerbating tensions. Protesters organized sit-ins in Sana'a and various other regions, demanding the president's resignation (Moosa, 2020). The confluence of widespread dissatisfaction including, active youth, civil society, opposition groups, and influential leaders drove Yemen toward the brink of becoming a failed state. Concerned that the instability could allow al-Qaeda and other extremist factions to thrive, the U.S., EU, UK, and Saudi Arabia persuaded revolutionaries to engage in peace talks with the government (Guo, 2015).

The Dialogue process, outcomes, and impacts

The national dialogue process discussed in this study refers to structured and inclusive series of discussions that convene diverse stakeholders within a country. The aim is to address critical national issues, promote peace, resolve conflicts, create consensus, foster cooperation, and enhance national unity. The outcomes of these national dialogues encompass both tangible and intangible results. The impacts, on the other hand, pertain to the long term political, economic, social, and security effects stemming from these dialogues.

Rwanda

Shortly after assuming power, the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) initiated efforts for unity and reconciliation to address interconnected challenges (McDoom, 2011). The RPF initially placed a strong emphasis on urgent matters such as peace, security, and order. Consequently, Rwanda successfully repatriated and resettled over five million refugees, relocated Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and demobilized and reintegrated former combatants. Additionally, more than 300,000 orphans were adopted, regardless of their ethnic background, which played a strategic role in mending the fragmented social fabric. Once these critical and

sensitive emergency conditions were addressed, Rwanda began its recovery and reconstruction efforts.

To solidify its legitimacy within the broad community and to identify key national issues requiring public dialogue, Rwanda deliberately organized grassroots public consultations. These consultations highlighted five priorities: Unity and Reconciliation, good governance, justice, security, and economic and social development essential for achieving peace, stability, and order. To tackle these pressing issues, the Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) effectively integrated both top-down and bottom-up strategies. The top- down approach consisted of three National Summits (2000, 2002, and 2004), alongside seminars, and action-research to inform policy decisions (Sentama, 2014). Meanwhile, the bottom-up strategy included reconciliatory initiatives such as Gacaca courts, community reconciliation clubs, and peace education, as well as cultural activities like theater, music, and dance (Sentama, 2014).

Rwanda's Unity and Reconciliation process was lengthy, spanning a nine years transition period that culminated peacefully in 2003. Although, this transition took considerable time, it ultimately laid the groundwork for Rwanda's future peace, order, and prosperity. In 2003, a new constitution, a revised history curriculum, and a new education policy were adopted. Following the adoption of the constitution, elections were conducted at the grassroots, local, and national levels in 1999, 2001, and 2003, respectively. To foster a culture of peaceful conflict resolution, national unity and reconciliation policies were formally integrated into all institutional strategies (Buckley-Zistel, 2006).

To diffuse the concentration of power and enhance citizen participation in decision making, a decentralized governance system was established. Significant institutional reforms were enacted particularly in the land, public, and justice sectors (Sentama, 2014). These concrete measures led to improvements in the country's security, economic, social, and political conditions. Rwanda has successfully avoided major conflicts and achieved an average GDP growth exceeding 6%. By 2009, its GDP per capita reached \$512, although, it still faced challenges related to unequal resources distribution (Mcdoom, 2011).

However, these achievements are overshadowed by three fundamental limitations. First, in the pursuit of combating genocidal ideology, the 2003 constitution restricted all forms of identity expression, allowing only a singular Rwandan identity (Moss, 2014). This approach fails to address the core issues facing Rwanda. The existence of ethnic identity is not inherently a threat to national unity; rather, the danger lies, how ethnicity is weaponized for political mobilization. The dialogue process should focus on fostering negotiation skills,

promoting peaceful conflict resolution, and respecting political opponents to cultivate lasting peace (Moss, 2014).

The second limitation is the restriction of political space and the suppression of dissent. In the name of combating genocidal ideology and division, a "genocide ideology" law was enacted that suppressed political discourse and prohibited discussion of ethnicity and power (Moss, 2014).

The third limitation concerns the ongoing dominance of the Tutsi in social, political, and economic spheres. It has been argued that the Tutsi-led government, alongside the Rwanda Patriotic Front has monopolized power, evaded accountability for acts of retribution, and played a role in the displacement of one to two million Hutus to eastern Congo (McDoom, 2011; Mgbako, 2005). These factors placed Rwanda's national dialogue on unstable ground and undermine its tangible achievements.

Tunisia

In Tunisia, economic inequality and authoritarian governance fueled public discontent, ultimately leading to the overthrow of Ben Ali's regime. Following this pivotal event, Tunisia's interim parliament, known as the National Constituent Assembly (ANC), was elected in October 2011 with a mandate to draft a new constitution, establish an electoral commission, and organize democratic elections (Koehler, 2023). This election ushered the formerly marginalized Islamist Ennahda party into power, which formed a majority coalition known as "Troika" alongside Ettakatol and the Congrès Pour La République. The Troika government had committed to a one-year transition.

However, various challenges complicated this transition, resulting in an extension beyond its intended timeframe. The drafting of the constitution experienced delays (Stigant, 2021), while the assassinations of secular opposition figures Chokri Belaid and Mohamed resulted in widespread mistrust and a breakdown in political dialogue (Guo, 2015). Furthermore, clashes arose between secularists and Islamists over critical issues such as sharia law, women's rights, and the structural framework of political system (Humud, 2014). Public frustration was compounded by the lack of improvement in living standards in the post revolution period (Koehler, 2023).

The shortcomings of the initial transitional phase led to a second round of attempts, which commenced in August 2013. This new phase was driven by initiative of four key civil society's groups- the UGTT, UTICA, LTDH, and the National Association of Lawyers- collectively referred to the "Quartet." They initiated a national dialogue between the competing factions, Ennahda and the

secularist Nidaa Tounes, in an effort to break the political impasse (Koehler, 2023; Guo, 2015).

The Quartet successfully resolved the political stalemate by negotiating a roadmap between the rival parties, Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes. Key outcomes of Tunisia's national dialogue included- the adoption of a new constitution, the establishment of an independent electoral commission, and the election of legislative and presidential bodies in 2014 (Boubekeur, 2015). These developments laid the groundwork for improvements in Tunisia's socio-political landscape, effectively ended prolonged strikes and protests, while ensuring a period of relative stability (Kaye, 2015). Today, Tunisia is governed by a democratically elected administration operating under its new constitution (Fabbri, 2016). In recognition of these accomplishments, the Quartet was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015.

However, the dialogue process had its limitations, as it failed to address critical revolutionary demands, such as economic reform, transitional justice, and security sector reform (Ridge, 2022). Additionally, the considerable powers granted to President Saied under the new constitution have raised concerns about a potential resurgence of authoritarian tendencies (Koehler, 2023).

Yemen

The conflict in Yemen arises from tensions between three main actors: the incumbent government (led by president, Hadi), the northern extremist faction known as the (Houthi) and the southern secessionist group called (Hiraak). In an effort to prevent a complete state collapse, a national dialogue was initiated. The National Dialogue Conference (NDC) was convened in Sana'a from March 2013 until January 2014. This dialogue was overseen by a nine-member presidency that included President Hadi and was organized into nine working groups each assigned specific mission. Additionally, two technical committees were formed, primarily responsible for drafting and implementation of the constitution (Vimalarajah, 2017).

The primary goals of dialogue were to resolve Yemen's civil war, its political future, draft a new constitution and prepare for elections (Guo, 2015). It also aimed to address pressing issues such as the north-south divide and state building (Vimalarajah, 2017). The dialogue comprised 565 delegates who sought to ensure equal representation from both north and south, with designated quotas for women (30%) and youth (20%). Political parties, civic society organizations and some members of the southern movement participated in the process.

However, it notably excluded key actors- specifically - Houthi leaders from the north and factions from the southern secessionist movement- Hiraak (Guo, 2015).

The dialogue produced mixed outcomes: it generated 1,800 recommendations, reached a consensus to establish Yemen as a federal state, which temporarily alleviated secessionist demands. Additionally, the political transition was extended for one more year (Gaston, 2014).

However, the dialogue process ultimately failed to establish a lasting consensus on critical issues such as the number of federal regions, resource distribution, and power-sharing (Guo, 2015). The process lacked legitimacy, particularly since key actors, like the Houthi and Hiraak groups, rejected it entirely, favoring armed struggle instead (Robinson, 2023).

The complete failure of Yemen's National Dialogue Conference resulted in catastrophic consequences. Over four million people were displaced, and the circumstances led to the worst cholera outbreak in recorded history, with more than 800,000 cases reported (World Health Organization, 2017). Widespread shortages of food and medicine persist, leaving 80% of the population, including over 12 million children, in dire need of humanitarian aid. As a result of the collapse of basic services, an estimated 7.8 million children are out of school. An approximately, 10 million people lack access to clean water and sanitation. Furthermore, the forced recruitment of child soldiers has become rampant throughout Yemen (Robinson, 2023).

Factors influencing success/ failure of national dialogues

The success of Rwanda's National Unity and Reconciliation conference was driven by six reinforcing factors: an inclusive process, effective design and implementation, a clear objective, support from grassroots structures, confidence-building measures to establish legitimacy, and the unifying slogan "Never Again" (Kubai, 2016).

Tunisia's national dialogue was influenced by five interrelated factors. First, the Quartet established institution to break deadlock such as the "Constitutional Consensus Commission." Second, the Quartet was widely accepted and recognized as a legitimate. Third, it framed a modest and clear agenda for national dialogue. Fourth, the Quartet successfully convinced key national actors to agree on consensus- based decision- making procedures. Finally, the Quartet framed a unifying slogan to persuade opposing sides to agree on shared principles.

In contrast, seven reinforcing factors contributed to the total collapse of Yemen's national dialogue. First, the process was severely compromised by excessive interference from external actors, including the USA, UK, EU, Saudi

Arabia, Iran, and Qatar, who prioritized their own strategic interests over Yemen's needs, thereby undermining the legitimacy of the dialogue (Arman, 2023).

Second, the NDC failed to secure meaningful participation from critical factions. Although designed to be inclusive, the leadership of the Hiraak movement and the Houthi largely abstained. Additionally, participants in the dialogue lacked grassroots influence, eroding popular support for any potential agreements (Gaston, 2014).

Third, the conference failed to reach a consensus on the most contentious issues- including southern grievances, Houthi demands, power-sharing, resource distribution, and state restructuring. Instead of deferring these issues for future discussion, President Hadi established an ad hoc committee to make decision, which intensified existing tensions (Gaston, 2014).

Fourth, the dialogue failed to take concrete actions to build public trust which could have helped advance the dialogue process. This failure was exacerbated by public concerns such as lack of basic services, economic decline, and insecurity, creating a stark disconnect between the political dialogue and daily realities (Schmitz, 2014).

Fifth, the NDC failed to establish or to utilize existing support structures to break deadlocks. Sixth, it couldn't persuade key national actors who preferred armed struggle to participate, leaving violence as a viable alternative to politics (Moosa, 2020).

Finally, the process was doomed by flawed decision-making. In its final stages, authority shifted from the inclusive conference to smaller committees handpicked by President Hadi. This shift, created perceptions of a return to autocratic rule (Gaston, 2014), which the Houthis capitalized on by seizing Sana'a in September 2014 and rejecting the outcomes of the NDC's entirely (Stigant, 2021).

Synthesis of comparative lessons for Ethiopia

This section outlines the essential factors that have shaped the success and failures of national dialogues in Rwanda, Tunisia, and Yemen. These factors have been identified through an analysis of three critical comparative dimensions: the pre-existing conditions that prompted each dialogue, the dialogue process themselves, their outcomes, and their political and social impacts. The key factors are detailed below.

Political will and national ownership

The case studies demonstrated that political will and a sense of national ownership play a critical role in the success or failure of national dialogues. The study found that national dialogues are most successful when they are driven by genuine domestic commitments and are free from external interferences. Interferences by external actors often undermine the dialogue process and its outcomes. For instance, Rwanda's post-genocide reconciliation was rooted in the Rwanda Patriotic Front's (RPF) commitment to fostering inclusive dialogue. The RPF took the initiative in designing and supporting the entire dialogue processes. Similarly, Tunisia's Troika government exhibited strong political will in backing the dialogue efforts, with a key decision- the adoption of the Quartet's roadmap- being largely supported by the Troika government. In both cases, the influences of external actors were minimal.

In contrast, as highlighted in the analysis section of this study, Yemen's dialogue lacked local political will and was heavily shaped by external impositions. From the outset, the dialogue was initiated by external entities, primarily, the U.S., EU, UK, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf countries. The Hadi Government also sought to manipulate the process to its advantages, which eroded public trust and legitimacy and ultimately led to the dialogue's failure. Therefore, the core conclusion of this analysis is that political commitment and national ownership are crucial factors in determining the success of such dialogues.

In its modern history, Ethiopia has missed two significant opportunities for political transitions that could have transformed its violent political culture and divisive narratives. However, following the political transition in 2018, the government has exhibited unprecedented determination to tackle long standing and deeply rooted sources of conflicts through inclusive dialogue. Along with this political commitment, a notable strength of this initiative is its emphasis on avoiding external interference, which is essential to maintain independence of the process. While external technical or financial support may be acceptable, it is crucial to protect the process from undue foreign influence over its agenda or outcomes. Ethiopia must uphold its commitments throughout the dialogue process to effectively address the root causes of cyclical conflicts and their contemporary manifestations.

Credible convener

As highlighted in various case studies, convening institutions play a critical role in determining the success or failure of national dialogues. For example, the broad acceptance of the Tunisian Quartet by all parties was essential to its success, while Rwanda's Reconciliation Commission gained legitimacy through grassroots engagement. Both Rwanda and Tunisia derived their legitimacy from consistent commitments to impartiality throughout their respective dialogue process.

In contrast, Yemen's dialogue suffered from a legitimacy deficit; the nine-member presidency, including President Hadi, represented partisan interests that sought to solidify their own political legitimacy. The superficial nature of this dialogue ultimately led to a significant erosion of its legitimacy, resulted in its collapse.

Ethiopia's national dialogue proclamation No. 1265/2021 places a strong emphasis on the dialogue's legitimacy. This is evident in its preamble and subsequent articles. The preamble underscores the importance of establishing an impartial institution to lead inclusive deliberations. Additionally, (Articles 3, 12, and 13) outline the principles of dialogue, criteria for appointing commissioners, and the procedures to ensure their competence and neutrality. However, the responsibility for translating this legislative commitment into practice lies with the commission. To ensure success, the commission must actively demonstrate its independence and leverage its statutory mandate to build trust and make the dialogue fruitful.

The Inclusion/ exclusion of key national actors

The outcomes of national dialogues are significantly influenced by the processes that govern them. As evidenced by various case studies, the inclusion of key national actors or power centers is critical factor that determine the success or failure of these dialogues. In Tunisia, the involvement of essential political entities such as (the Islamist Ennahda party and the secularist Nidaa Tounes) played a pivotal role in the success of their dialogue. Similarly, the participation of all major political forces in Rwanda contributed to its reconciliation process.

In stark contrast, Yemen's National Dialogue Conference suffered from the exclusion of key national actors. The analysis reveals that tensions in Yemen escalated due to competing actors: the Houthi movement, Hiraak, and the Hadi government. Notably, the (Houthi and Hiraak) didn't participate in the dialogue from the outset. Although, the dialogue process appeared inclusive on the surface with 565 participants from various social groups, the absence of grassroots

influence among these participants undermined the legitimacy of the outcomes, ultimately leading to the dialogue's failure.

In Ethiopia, while many groups, including opposing parties, are engaged in the ongoing national dialogue, others have chosen to withdraw and pursue armed conflict. To engage these actors, Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission must intensify its efforts through both formal and informal channels. It is crucial for the commission to actively include key stakeholders and demonstrate the adaptability necessary to achieve meaningful resolutions.

The scope and nature of national dialogues agenda

Case studies suggest that the framing of the agenda for national dialogue significantly influence its success or failure. National dialogue agendas that addresses the root causes of disagreements are more effective when they are focused enough to yield tangible agreements, inclusive, clear, and well sequenced. Additionally, strategically linking the agendas to shared future significantly enhances the success of the dialogues.

For example, Rwanda's and Tunisia's National Dialogue Commissions developed clear, focused, and comprehensive agenda through inclusive participation. They intentionally connected their agendas to a shared narrative about the future, which helped to break potential deadlocks, by steering conversations away from contentious past issues toward a common desired future. This strategic approach positively influenced the success of their dialogues.

In contrast, Yemen's National Dialogue Conference faced challenges because its agenda was excessively broad, and suffered from critical execution shortcomings. The conference also failed to distinguish between national dialogue requiring issues and those that could be addressed through policies and administrative measures.

Currently, Ethiopia's national dialogue proclamation sets extensive goals-aimed at addressing the root causes of disagreement among political elites and diverse societal groups. It seeks to strengthen national consensus, foster trust, and restore eroded societal values. However, to avoid the pitfalls of being overly ambition, the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission must strategically prioritize the foundational issues that deeply polarize Ethiopian society.

The agenda should focus specifically on reconciling contested historical narratives and the state formation process; defining state identity, evaluating ethnic federalism against alternative models, determining whether to adopt a parliamentary or presidential system, reconciling the constitutional right to secession with territorial integrity, reviewing constitutional tenets regarding land

ownership, establishing official language(s) and national symbols, and addressing issues related to transitional justice. It is essential that these agendas are strategically integrated with a shared future to create common purpose that positively contributes to the success of the dialogue.

Connecting public suffering to structural solutions

The case studies revealed that the success of a national dialogue is profoundly influenced by the daily concerns of citizens, indicating that it should be grounded in these everyday public issues while also addressing their underlying causes. People tend to prioritize their immediate lives over abstract discussions of policies and strategies, as demonstrated in various case studies.

For example, in Rwanda, the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission strategically focused on critical public concerns particularly those related to peace and security as highlighted in the analysis section of this study. This well-crafted approach helped the commission establish its legitimacy and positively contributed to the success of the dialogue process and its outcomes. Similarly, Tunisia adopted parallel strategy. The Quartet leveraged its established respect to assure citizens that their concerns would be acknowledged and addressed, thereby shielding the process from the broader turmoil within the country.

Conversely, Yemen, struggled to incorporate immediate public concerns to its dialogue process. The political leaders engaged in debates over abstract issues while citizens grappled with a collapsing economy and a growing safety fears. In times of struggle, abstract political discussions can seem irrelevant, leading to a loss of legitimacy for the dialogue. The environment created an opportunity for spoilers to exploit public grievances for their own interests, ultimately contributing to the failure of Yemen's dialogue.

These empirical experiences provide valuable opportunities for Ethiopia's ongoing national dialogue. To avoid repeating past shortcomings, Ethiopia's national dialogue should concentrate on two critical areas. First, it must tackle the foundational issues that have polarized both elites and communities. Additionally, it needs to address immediate public concerns particularly those related to security, order to build trust and foster a conducive environment for the dialogue process. By integrating foundational issues with immediate public concerns, the dialogue can enhance its legitimacy, boost public confidence, and significantly contribute to its overall success.

The Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission should initiate comprehensive public awareness campaigns to dispel misconceptions and prevent spoilers from exploiting the public's suffering for political gain. The Commission

must clearly demonstrate how the dialogue serves as a sustainable solution by addressing the root causes of Ethiopia's challenges. Creating messaging that ties citizens' daily struggles to the broader reform agenda will help build public trust, empower citizens as active participants, and isolate obstructive factions. Ultimately, the Commission's ability to anticipate and counter potential disruptions will be as crucial as its facilitation of the dialogue itself.

Decision-making systems

The primary objective of national dialogues is to resolve sources of disagreements through consensus-building. When decisions are made without achieving consensus among polarized elites and the broader community, even with majority vote, there is the risk of exacerbating the existing divisions that national dialogues aim to address. Therefore, national dialogues must implement mechanism to resolve deadlocks and disagreements effectively.

This can be seen in the successful national dialogues. For example, in Tunisia, the Quartet facilitated both formal and informal discussions to bridge the divide between the two primary opposing factions- the Islamist Ennahda and the secularist Nidaa Tounes. Similarly, Rwanda's National Unity and Reconciliation Commission consistently prioritized consensus in its decision-making process.

In contrast, Yemen's national dialogue faced challenges with highly sensitive issues, such as those concerning to the southern region, and political power-sharing, that were ultimately resolved by small groups under the direction of President Hadi's direction, rather than through comprehensive dialogue (Thania, 2016).

These examples offer valuable lessons for Ethiopia's national dialogue. To mitigate potential deadlocks, Ethiopia's National Dialogue Commission must establish clear internal regulations and decision making procedures as mandated by Article 9(9) of Proclamation No. 1265/2021. If a deadlock persists, matter should be tabled for future discussion rather than decided without consensus.

Unifying national dialogue slogans

Case studies suggest that unifying, aspirational slogans significantly enhance national dialogues. For instance, Rwanda's "Never Again" promoted unity, while Tunisia's "Social Stability for an Improved Economy" helped align opposing groups. In contrast, Yemen's dialogue, which lacked a cohesive message, encountered substantial difficulties.

This underscores a critical point for Ethiopia's dialogue. The current slogan, ኢትዮጵያ እየሚከተሉት ነው" Ethiopia is in the process of dialogue", focuses solely

on the process itself. To effectively mobilize the nation, the commission should embrace a purpose-driven slogan that inspires hope and reflects shared national aspirations, appealing to Ethiopia's diverse population. A phrase like "*One Ethiopia, Our Shared Future*" could serve as a powerful and unifying message.

Support structures and programs

The analysis of case studies reveals that the efforts of national dialogues alone are insufficient for achieving successful outcomes. The presence of additional structures and programs is critically important to enhancing their effectiveness. The successes of Rwanda's and Tunisia's dialogues can be attributed in part of these supportive frameworks. For example, Rwanda's dialogue process was underpinned by various supportive structures and programs as detailed in the analysis section of this study. The Quartet implemented a "Constitutional Consensus Commission" to address deadlocks encountered during the dialogue process. In contrast, Yemen's National Dialogue Conference failed to establish the necessary support systems, operating under the misguided assumption that the dialogue structure itself could resolve the country's complex issues.

Ethiopia's National Dialogue Commission must learn from these proven experiences. Indigenous conflict resolution institutions, religious organizations, civic societies, universities, and other social entities can play a crucial role in bolstering the efforts of the National Dialogue Commission. Integrating the dialogue within these institutions will enhance both its effectiveness and legitimacy.

The interplay between tangible and intangible goals of national dialogue

National dialogues are designed to tackle profound crises with their success measured by both tangible outcomes (concrete results) and intangible factors (shifts in trust and attitudes). These dimensions are interdependent: intangible changes lay the groundwork for enduring tangible results, and vice-versa. However, the importance of the intangible aspect is frequently overlooked, potentially, undermining the stability of the dialogue.

Ethiopia's National Dialogue Proclamation (No. 1265/2021) explicitly seeks to address this oversight. Its preamble focuses on rebuilding trust and promoting social values, while Article 6(4) and (5) aim to establish a new political framework to confront deep-seated challenges. These intangible elements are essential for fostering societal resilience and facilitating implementation of

tangible outcomes. Therefore, the Ethiopia National Dialogue Commission must strategically incorporate both dimensions to achieve vision outlined in the proclamation.

The implementation and sustainability of the dialogue outcomes

Evidence from the case studies highlights a significant flaw in national dialogues: the inability to implement their outcomes effectively. In both Rwanda and Tunisia, there was a prioritization of short-term political transition over transformative change, which resulted in failing to institutionalize the results of their dialogues. The subsequent democratic backsliding in these nations serves as a reminder of the repercussions of such shortcomings.

For Ethiopia, this presents a vital lesson. To transform the dialogue into a catalyst for enduring change, the government must be dedicated thoroughly implementing the public demands that emerge. This commitment is essential for fostering a sustainable political future. Failing to act on this would not only disappoint citizens' expectations but could also lead to destabilizing repercussions.

Conclusion

A comparative analysis of the national dialogues in Rwanda, Tunisia, and Yemen transcends an academic exercise; it provides a critical framework for understanding their success or failure. While nations convene such processes to resolve deep-seated challenges, their outcome depends on the genuine commitment of the government and all stakeholders to both the dialogue process and the implementation of its results.

The success of Rwanda's and Tunisia's dialogues stemmed from such commitment, demonstrated through clear objectives, inclusive participation, mechanisms to overcome deadlock, attention to public needs, and unifying national narratives. In stark contrast, Yemen's dialogue collapsed under a dual deficit: externally, it was undermined by foreign interference and an autocratic turn; internally, it lacked legitimacy from the outset, excluding key factions and operating without transparency or sincere political will.

For Ethiopia, these are not abstract lessons but practical imperatives. While its dialogue must be grounded in the nation's distinct realities, empirical evidence from other cases provides an essential guide. By consciously applying the key factors that determined success or failure elsewhere- particularly those ensuring inclusivity, credibility, and implementation- Ethiopia can significantly enhance its own dialogue's prospects, turning a moment of negotiation into a foundation for lasting stability. To this end, the genuine commitment of the

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government, which must move beyond legal frameworks to practical action, and the parallel commitment of all stakeholders are critical to both the dialogue process and the implementation of its outcomes.

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