The Post 2018 Ethiopia's State Building Approach: Responsive and/or Unresponsive Federalism Approach?

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Abstract

The change in leadership, following the 2018 reform in Ethiopia, evidently created many expectations. The general objective of this study is to critically examine whether the post-2018 state-building approach is responsive and/or unresponsive. The study employed a qualitative approach using both primary and secondary data. The key findings of the study were twofold: the continuity of business-as-usual politics (employing unresponsive strategies and approaches); and massive deconstruction indicating key departures in historical, political, security, and economic aspects. Although the grand new way forward approach has come along with the leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed who has brought the Medemer (literally to mean addition, synergy or coming together) approach, the real politics in the aftermath of June 2018 has reinvented suspicious politico-security environments. The results have further shown that the reformist government had labelled the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) as reactionary forces; the tactical alliance between the Oromo and Amhara forces was successful in overthrowing TPLF, which had full supremacy over the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) from the centre, and yet eventually the alliance was collapsed; and the implicit hegemonic role of the EPRDF has been sustained, though there have been endeavours to peripheralize conflicts. There have been also ongoing responsive paths (like the light under a bowl): merging up all incumbent ethno-national (regional) political parties, economic liberalization, establishing national dialogue commission, urban beautification, etc. It has, therefore, been recommended that all stakeholders need to commit to a responsive approach to the constitutional federal state-building and give up cynical unresponsive approach(es).

Keywords: *Federalism; state-building; nation-building, Medemer, Ethiopia.*

1. Introduction

States of the world have emerged through different processes of state formation. If anything they have in common, they have given up their identity markers such as ethnicity, culture, language, and psychological makeup in favor of the dominant political group (Asafa, 2009). In post-colonial African context, for instance, the process of formation/consolidation of most of the states has been through the highly centralized unitary model. To be sure, most African states have some common characters such as they have become multiethnic; failed to restore and sustain their original African identities; inhibit incomplete state formation; invariably have authoritarian, undemocratic, and ethnocratic governments; experience ethnic based tensions and conflicts (Kidane, 1997:120).

Though Ethiopia remains to be unique from many other African states, it fully or partly shares the above features exhibited by many African states. Ethiopia's socio-economic and political developments have been influenced by a combination of different historical and contextual factors. To begin with, given the different interpretations and narratives of the history of its existence as a polity, it is difficult to have authentic and comprehensive

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understanding of the trajectory of the Ethiopia's politics. As a result, the process of Ethiopian state formation/consolidation and the justifications given to it have been contested for different political interests and motives (Ezekiel, 2014). Despite all these differences in terms of understanding and interpreting the processes of state and nation building, however, the plausible commonalty was that the successive Ethiopian regimes employed centralist-unitary state and nation building approach mainly through cultural assimilation and excessive use of force.

This study examines whether the post 2018 state building approach employed by the new leadership is responsive and/or unresponsive to the pre-2018 demands. More importantly, the study delves in to what extent the post 2018 reform attempts have been strengthened or challenged the Ethiopia's young age federalism. To do so, the study begins by providing theoretical framework and Ethiopia's contextual and historical settings served as the foundation for the introduction and institutionalization of Federal governance. In addition, the study puts some flash on the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front's competing approaches in its federal state-building endeavor. Thereafter, the article tries to ditch the ideas and approaches of the new leadership under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (PhD) juxtaposing the popular demands which dictated the EPRDF change its leadership. In doing so, the study examines the viability and responsiveness of the post-2018 approach to federal state-building and finally summarizes by providing concluding remarks to indicate changes, continuities and recommendations.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Responsive federal state-building

The rationales why many states of the world follow unitary, federal or hybrid governance systems, in one way or another, are to keep (sustain) territorial integrity and create national consensus (Pierre, 2005:221). In unitary states national consensus is obtained by recognizing the state as the sole source of coercive authority within the national boundaries. In federalism, on the other hand, national consensus is deliberately diffused to the greatest common denominator between the various groups composing the nation. The hybrid systems, however, mix both cases (Ibid). Hence, in all cases, the objective is either to build the state (state-building envisioning state nations) or to build the nation (nation-building objected to create a nation state). Traditionally, federalism has been regarded as a process of state formation in which smaller units join to create a bigger state. In contemporary times, however, the relevance of federal arrangement particularly in multi-ethnic societies is for two reasons: first, to accommodate diversities and demands of ethnic groups; second, to protect the territorial integrity of the state through the union of ethnic groups. This implies that federalism prevents (resolves) or mitigates ethnically inspired conflicts and thereby can ensure stability in states (Roza, 2004). In addition to this, federalism aims at compromising internal pluralism and keeping external uniformity (Dicey, 1959). Federalism is also referred to as the advocacy of multi-tiered government combining elements of shared-rule (collaborative partnership through common government) and regional self-rule (constituent unit autonomy) (Watts, 2009: 8).

2.2. Responsive and unresponsive state-building approaches

The discussion of state-building, as a concept and usage, has gained popularity in the post-World War Two (OECD, 2008; Vaughan, 2011; Markakis, 2012). There are two pertinent contexts either to discuss or take as socio-economic and political strategy of a given state. The first context is when the state weakens (not altering the willingness of the people to the state and the government), hence, shortly when state fails. Secondly, when the nation fails (the people change their attitude towards the government and the state and look for another alternative) as the last resort. Although scholars and practitioners would agree on the general understanding of what state-building is all about, it has been differently defined from different perspectives. Accordingly, for some state-building is the establishment, re-establishment, and strengthening of public structures for efficient delivery of public goods (von Bogdandy et al., 2005).

However, comprehensive conception of state building has been provided by DFID (2010: 12). In this regard, state building combines two important dimensions: enhancing the capacity of the state to function and the political processes that underpin the state-society relations. It is about strengthening the relationship between the state and society and developing effective ways of mediating this relationship. Hence, state building is a long-term, historically rooted and internal process driven by a wide range of local and national actors. Therefore, there are three state-building scenarios. First, state building is not a technical process of strengthening governmental institutions (preferably institutional building) rather it is basically about state-society relations- the psychological attachment to the citizens to the physical state and the government. Second, state building is primarily an endogenous process and subject to multiple factors. Thirdly, state building is a dynamic process with three interrelated elements: political settlement among elites, survival functions and expected functions of the state to earn actual and perceived legitimacy and bring about stability. This study embraces the dynamic process of state-building scenario to help understand and analyze the contemporary developments in Ethiopia.

This dynamic and pervasive process of state-building has three interrelated elements. The first element is political settlement among elites (formal and informal) whereas the second and third elements fundamentally relate to how the state shall earn actual and perceived internal legitimacy to bring about stability (Hébert, 2009: 23). Put differently, the second and third elements of state-building are about the survival functions and expected functions of the state respectively. Political settlement is basically about ensuring common understanding among elites to organize political power which serves the interests and beliefs of a society. Sometimes, it goes beyond elites and embraces the whole society. Survival functions, on the other hand, initially consolidate authority of the state and build confidence of the citizenry in the Government. Put differently, the state's basic functions are about the security of the state and the people. Finally, the expected functions are the other extra functions that a society anticipates from the state. These functions are not essential for the survival of the state. They are about efficient delivery of public services, good governance, and other services such as health, education, infrastructure; employment programs; personal safety and access to justice to society by institutions of the Government. Conversely, such functions are also crucial to building legitimacy for the state and

Government (DFID, 2010).

Moreover, state building in this context is a process that integrates the disparate groups together. It also determines the relation as well as makes the state represent all these different groups structurally and institutionally. Considering this, building unity without undermining diversity through the carefully negotiated terms is acceptable to all national issues. Hence, vertically all groups have the same perception and belongingness to the state and horizontally there are symmetric relations. Even if there are rough horizontal relations among the groups, the vertical function remains pivotal to experiencing successful state building. Goitom (2014) argues that African states, including, Ethiopia have been preoccupied to regime survival than diverting state resources to more development endeavors. Specific to Ethiopia, he posits that Ethiopia had experienced problematic state-building whereby the political culture of the country continues to be zero-sum game and competitive interest among elites of different groups (Ibid; Merera, 2010). However, it is vital to acknowledge that in the post 1991 Ethiopia has been in a complex process of building national unity by integrating the different identities of 'nations', 'nationalities' and 'peoples' of Ethiopia so that the so called 'community of citizens'-*national citizenship*- has been created under shared socio-economic and politico-cultural systems (Kidane, 1997; Vaughan, 2011).

The dynamic process of state-building is further understood from two approaches: responsive and unresponsive (DFID, 2010). The approach which gives priority to meeting public expectations to enhance state legitimacy is known as the responsive state-building approach. The major indicator of responsive approach includes that a state focuses on enhancing legitimacy and recognizes the importance of inclusive politics, creates structures and robust institutions responsive to citizens, and accepts the need to meet some expectations. As a result, public confidence and expectations grow, and citizens become active responsible. Even in times of crisis and hardship, the political settlement which extends beyond the elites to reflect broader compact between the state and society serves and fills possible gaps of dynamic state-building process. On the contrary, an unresponsive state-building approach primarily focuses on ensuring state power at the cost of public expectations as the Government relies more on the system of patronage leading intra-elite tension and instability in a society at large. As a result, state institutions are patronage, hence, some groups pose potential threat to the others; there is low drive for loyalty, reliance on repression and little attention given to expectations from the Government side; and steps change (conflict, people's movement, and demand for new political settlement).

3. Federal State-building in Ethiopia: From 1991-2017

John Markakis (2011) has divided Ethiopia's state-building trajectories into three: the imperial model (pre-1974), socialist model (from 1975-1991, and federal model (since 1991). However, Clapham (2013) argues that Ethiopia had an old federal experience. Plausible history, nonetheless, tells us that the successive Ethiopian regimes employed centralist-unitary models on the pretext of national unity through cultural, language, and religious assimilation and excessive use of force.

Hence, the Ethiopian state and society in the post-military regime has been directed along

the democratic federal state, de facto from 1991-1994 and de jure since the 1995 (FDRE Constitution'). Concomitant with this, Ethiopia's pre 1991 sustained the centralist unitary-state model in which the politically minority ethno-national groups (regardless of their population) were assimilated by the politically dominant culture (Kidane, 1997:121). With regards to the evolution of federal governance in Ethiopian context, Andreas (2013) has characterized federalism as "…an ideal for a society in unfavorable circumstances, circumstances unfavorable to constitutional democracy" (P. 62). Andreas (2013) argues that there were historical, political, and situational factors which helped EPRDF to introduce federal governance, which later helped to establish a Federal and Democratic State structure. Furthermore, Andreas (2013: 83) underscores:

During the Peace and Democracy Conference held at Addis Ababa in July 1991, most participants were nationalist organizations, with political programs upholding the right to self-determination. The few political organizations without a nationalist political agenda lacked organized constituencies…. within this assembly, EPRDF could not vote for a unitary state without provoking disarray in its own ranks and among representatives of diverse cultural communities, whose withdrawal from the new Government would pose an immediate threat to the very survival of Ethiopia. Those in the assembly who had fought against great odds to lead their own lives by their own lights were not at all prepared to entrust their fate to anyone…The National Charter, a transitional constitution endorsed by the conference, therefore, predictably recognized self-determination and secession as entitlements belonging to Ethiopia's territorially based cultural communities.

Already from the outset, competing histories and identities started to emerge during the transitional period. On the one hand, federalism proved to be a decisive political instrument in Ethiopia's transition to democracy, recognition of equality, identities, and freedom of the nations, nationalities and peoples of the country. Though, the introduction and institutionalization of federalism seems to have laid a specter of fragmentation or inter-communal confrontation, the Ethiopian model of federalism has promised to achieve two historic and important promises: to pacifying intra-society relations; redefine state society relations based on civic citizenship, and determining the nations, nationalities, and peoples' rights to self-determination (Dereje, 2013) to inextricably link identity and territory together. According to Roza (2004), Ethiopia followed a new state building strategy focusing on two things: protecting the identity and rights of nations, nationalities and peoples and ensuring the unity of the Ethiopian state. Clapham (2013) sees the Ethiopian model of federalism as a potential responsive state building as it has served its historic mission in rectifying the deep-seated imbalance among the peoples.

It is also vital to acknowledge that the Ethiopia's model of federalism has faced both praises and condemns. The ethnonationalist forces see it as the only viable option for the integrity of the Ethiopian state and the society. Others posit that it exacerbates and ignites identity politics, hence, would lead to further disintegration comparing Ethiopia with the failed federal states in the fall of 1990s in other countries. Federalism as a form of governance is widely accepted. Reaching an agreement on the type of federalism viable to the Ethiopian contexts and realities, nonetheless, remains a dominant debate both at the levels of elites and scholars. Some elites and scholars propose non territorial/personal federalism as a

complementary to the existing federalism approach. Whereas there are also groups that propose "geographic federalism", others propose to further be making multinational federalism functional (Ketema, 2020).

As identity-based federalism was central to the EPRDF's approach, the regime had also employed multiple additional state-building strategies: revolutionary democracy, developmental state, and dominant party systems. The EPRDF had articulated the concept of democracy from an ideological strategy inherited from the armed struggle of the 1970s and 1980s and a codified discursive strategy that needed to coexist with the liberal dominant model (Bach, 2011:649). Tronvoll (2012) argues that revolutionary democracy is meant vibrant with its ideological underpinnings, and it was intended to complement the Ethiopian identity-based federalism approach. For Abbink (2011), EPRDF deliberately used these two forms of democracy-liberal (to legitimate the survival of the EPRDF leadership) and revolutionary (as core doctrine of the political ideology) for different purposes to complement EPRDF's survival in political power.

However, Revolutionary democracy faced critical criticisms and was regarded as an unresponsive approach to federal state-building. According to Merera (2003), revolutionary democracy was nothing but what the EPRDF had invented for itself where the conscious choice of this ideology was driven by the hegemonic aspirations of the vanguard party which had brought about fusion of the party and the state. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, after the post 2005 election said, "The relevance of democracy for us is unquestionable and we did that, but the debate should be how best we achieve it within our context" (cited in Tronvoll and Hagmann, 2012:280). He meant that the universal standards and liberal principles of democracy must be addressed and shaped in the interest of the EPRDF ruling party and the Ethiopian context. Moreover, revolutionary democracy reinvigorated as a response to a threat of internal dissent within the party (Ibid). For Bach (2011:644), revolutionary democracy had dual positions. In the first decade of EPDRF´s rule, revolutionary democracy was a symbol of giving due emphasis to the creation of federal democratic constitution and multiparty system within the parliamentary democracy. Later, revolutionary democracy became a continuous struggle-a malleable ideology; a powerful fighting tool (exclusionary weapon, discursive exclusionary strategy targeting opposition parties, and radical EPRDF officials) (Ibid). Hence, from the extensive scholarly and empirical analyses, one could deduce that revolutionary democracy was not responsive to federal state-building approach under the regime of EPRDF.

The other state-building strategy which EPRDF employed was developmental state. For the EPRDF, the idea and practice of developmental state were there during the EPRDF's insurgency and transitional period (EPDRF, 2007: 65-68). However, the EPRDF's control of Ethiopian state and society was coincided with western liberal thinking following the fall of the socialist world. As a result, the EPDRF´s thinking of the political economy was like a pendulum: on the one hand it was a must to adjust itself with the global context and domestic realities, and on the other hand it had developed and inherited democratic centralism during its insurgency. Put differently, EPRDF decided to control the commanding heights of the country´s economy and opened the market for the private sector (Ibid). The concept of developmental state was initially used to describe East Asian States which have experienced

rapid economic growth through state-led development policies. It was Chalmers Johnson[1] who first conceptualized developmental state in the 1980s. According to Routley (2012: 8), developmental state has four basic attributes. These are: (1) capable, autonomous (but embedded) bureaucracy; (2) development oriented political leadership; (3) symbiotic relationship between some state agencies and key industrial capitalists; and (4) successful policy intervention which promote growth (Ibid).

Practically, the Ethiopia's Five-Year Growth and Transformation Plan was the highest stage and best indication of the EPRDF's ambition to experience developmental state model stressing on economic growth. It entails full emphasis on national economic development whereby political consideration would be secondary and legitimacy would be sought in the economic growth achievements such as infrastructure, road building, hydro-power mega projects, double digit GDP growth, and foreign direct investment etc. on the one hand and technocratic approach on the other (Ibid: 598). From the theoretical and practical point of view, however, the developmental state frustrated the country's nations, nationalities and people's needs enshrined in the Constitutions of the Federal and regional states, impacting negatively state-society and intra-societal relations *per se*. Developmental state prioritized national issues at the expense of regional and local interests for which identity-based federalism stands.

From the view of opposition political parties, developmental state was another instrument of EPRDF's ambition to remain on hegemonic, crippling opposition political parties and making them irrelevant. Hence, the dominant party system has replaced multiparty democracy which made it unresponsive to the 1995 FDRE constitutional provisions. According to Semir (2019), the results of the EPRDF's federalism practice involved both empowerment and disempowerment different groups in Ethiopia. He further says "Paradoxically, ethnic federalism both empowered and disempowered ethnic groups in Ethiopia" (Ibid: 3). Put differently, the Ethiopia's balance sheet of federal state-building experience showed both gaps and challenges vis-à-vis it's institutional and constitutional blueprints (Erk, 2014: 535; Asefa, 2013).

4. Examining the Post 2018 State Building Approach

4.1. The Context of political transition

Nearly two years after the passing away of the influential Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi in 2014, protests broke out in Oromia over a "Master Plan", which was intended to expand Addis Ababa by taking land from the surrounding Oromo communities. The EPRDF security forces, nonetheless, violently repressed the protest. Later in November 2015, three months after the election in which the EPRDF supposed to have won 100% of the seat in parliament,

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[1] Chalmers Johnson is regarded as a father of Developmental State concept when he coined it in his study on industrial policy in Japan. Accordingly, he argued that the East Asian countries including Japan were based neither on Soviet-type command economies nor on laissez-faire free market economies, but on ´market-conforming methods of state intervention-Capitalist Developmental State (Johnson 1982:1999 cited in Peter Meyns and Charity Musamba (eds.): The Developmental State in Africa: Problems and Prospects. Institute for Development and Peace, University of Duisburg-Essen (INEF-Report, 101/2010: 8).

the Oromo protests flared up again expanding horizon and depth across Oromia; the security forces killed and detained thousands of protestors before the protests spread to Amhara region. The widespread unrest caused Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, who had assumed Prime Minister Position after the death of Meles Zenawi in 2012, to step down. Consequently, the governing coalition led by the EPRDF elected Abiy Ahmed (PhD) as its new leader (EIP, 2022).

Although the phase and the context seemingly differ, the 2018 political transition tended to be similar to what happened when a team of military wing called *Dergue* organized itself and controlled political power in 1975. Likewise, in 2018, a team of former security officers but political elites from within the EPRDF informally mobilized support and organized themselves in the name of *Team Lemma* to replace the TPLF dominated EPRDF. The public expectation was that the new regime would change the status quo through a revolution; but the new leadership envisioned reform to the existing EPRDF led governance by introducing "Medemer or Addition or Synergy" propelled by the new Prime Minster as an overarching roadmap to his leadership indicating a turning point from his predecessor.

In addition to the formal attempts to respond to the popular demands, there were many other informal and indigenous attempts to the then political circumstances in Ethiopia. Among such indigenous attempts was *Destiny Ethiopia*[2] composed of high-profile leaders from across the Ethiopian nations, nationalities, and peoples came together and crafted four possible Ethiopian scenarios-dawn, hegemony, broken chair, and divided house- based on their experiences and understandings of the Ethiopia federation[3]. During the scenario exercise, one overarching question was asked, "*How do we respond as Ethiopia faces complex economic, political, and social challenges*?" Hence, seven response areas were identified: character of democracy, economic development and inclusion, conflict and violence, response to environmental changes, food security, impact of global circumstances, and continuity of the state (Ibid). Similarly, Alex de Waal (2021) has identified five but overlapping scenarios of Ethiopian state collapse, namely, state contraction, state disassembly, state inversion, a security perimeter state, and state (empire) fragmentation[4].

Immediately after the ascendancy of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, there was a great optimism that Ethiopia would transit to better federal democracy where citizens' lives, liberty, property, and security would be protected. In conformity to this optimism, one of the first steps of the new leadership showed unwavering commitment to real political transition and remarkable legal and institutional changes like releasing political prisoners, calling up and welcoming the armed opposition political groups, lifting the state of emergency, reforming media and CSOs proclamation (Endalcachew, 2022). Moreover, Worku and Ephrem (2020) identified some post-2018 achievements, and pertinent challenges that the new leadership has encountered. The two key achievements registered were the temporary enhancement of

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[2] Destiny Ethiopia Initiative is an indigenous response to the current political circumstances in Ethiopia. The initiative was led by a Core Team comprising nine concerned Ethiopian nationals from diverse walks of life, political perspectives, ethnic groups, faith affiliations, and professional backgrounds, of which Monenus Hundara was a member and Oromia Region key stakeholders' coordinator.

[3] Forum of Federations (2019). Destiny Ethiopia-Four Scenarios of Possible Future.

[4] https://worldpeacefoundation.org/blog/five-scenarios-of-state-collapse-in-ethiopia/

diplomatic ties with Eritrea (at the horn of Africa) though it did not last long and secondly the widening of general political landscape like releasing political prisoners; lifting the state of emergency; unblocking websites, blogs, radio and TV stations; closing the historic torture center (Maekelawi); declaring forgiveness; reconciling the split between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and undoing the terrorist law (Worku and Ephrem, 2020: 444-445). Among the pertinent challenges which it believed that the new leadership faced were the prevalence of media extremism, ethnic and communal conflicts (violence), political uncertainty and mob justice, ending tactical alliance between Amhara and Oromo elites, high living conditions and money laundering, lack of impartial institutions and security crisis, and disharmony among the EPRDF coalition party members.

This shows that the post 2018 state-building approach has found itself in between *a rock and hard place* which negated much expected great optimism. Hence, the legitimacy of the new leadership has started facing crisis following the arbitrary arrests of political opponents, activists and journalists thereby leading to shrink political space. Moreover, the new leadership jailed potential political contenders on the eve of the national election and came out as a winner, helping the continuation of undemocratic culture from the previous regime. Rameshshanker et al. (2020:17) put the post 2018 political events as "Isomorphic mimicry of a full functioning democracy; as a result, Ethiopia finds itself in a legitimacy trap" (Ibid: 18). In the words of Endalcachew, the current situation in Ethiopia arguably subscribes to the "Oligopoly of violence" than "Monopoly of violence" (p. 5). Sara (2019) has also argued that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed seemed to be unstoppable as he continued to make headlines at national, regional, and global occasions. She has underscored that the new Prime Minister wanted to rebranding Ethiopia through "renewed vision" by introducing *Medemer (*meaning synergy or coming together) which is believed to be a crosscutting reform. In the words of Bassi (2024:19), "Medemer is an Amharic term meaning adding or coming together. It encapsulates the idea of building bridges or synergies for the common goods of development and prosperity, overcoming ethnic divisions."

Doxologically, *Medemer* is the new political philosophy which drives the prosperity party regime (Ibid:19), but it is subjected to further scrutiny whether it is a political philosophy or ideology or approach or strategy or principle. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that *Medemer* is a fundamental value in the post EPRDF regime and serves as a normative judgement for members and supporters of the Prosperity Party. For the purpose of this study, *Medemer* is examined as a new state-building approach employed to lead the post 2018 multifaceted reform agendas. Hence, the following section is devoted to discussions on the analysis and examination of *Medemer* as a new state-building approach from the framework of responsive and/or unresponsive federal state-building approach in the post 2018 period.

4.2.   Medemer as new state-building approach

From his inaugural speeches to his usual meetings, briefings and statements, PM Abiy has been known for his concept of *Medemer*. Although it is still premature to judge whether *Medemer* is a responsive or unresponsive federal state-building approach, it is worthy enough to question it based on the hitherto experiences, as the Oromo proverb puts: "Buddeena nama quubsu eeleerratti beeku". Roughly translated, it means "It is possible to

discern, from the clay plate over a fire, if a flatbread (made of teff flour) will satisfy". To begin with, its understanding that *Medemer*, which is an Amharic word, has equivalent (synonymous) terms like "Addition", "Synergy" or "Coming together"[5] in English; and "Ida'amuu"-*in Afaan Oromoo.* During his speech at Word Economic Forum, 2019, Davos, the Prime Minister said:

Medemer is a renewed vision and sustained commitment to positive reforms in politics, economy, and society. It is a historic reform to organic change and is building on the gains of the past while reminding us of rich heritage. It also reflects the modern reality of strengthening the synergy in politics, economy, technology and society[6].

PM Abiy continued to argue that the contemporary Ethiopia's political reform is deeply rooted in *Medemer*. He further says that *Medemer* is a people-centered and has three interdependent elements: vibrant democracy, economic vitality, regional integration, and openness to the world (Ibid). In his Book titled: *Medemer*, page 36, PM Abiy indicated the overarching objective of *Medemer* is sustaining and broadening all the previous political and economic successes of our country; correcting the mistakes; in addition, realizing the next generation's interests and benefits. However, in analyzing the Ethiopia's problems, *Medemer* is indigenous. From finding the solutions perspective, but it is both indigenous and exogenous.

Although it has become more than half a decade since its introduction into formal Ethiopia's political, social, economic, and diplomatic spheres, there is still confusion with regards to what it is meant and what is not. Put differently, there is discrepancy in fully comprehending the very concept of *Medemer.* Some observers see *Medemer* as a situational solution to the generous recognition of ethno-linguistic diversity or identity-based federalism by strengthening the once seemingly fragile national unity. For others, *Medemer* is a concept borne out of emotion and desire for unity envisioning *diversity-in-unity*, not *unity in diversity* if that might save Ethiopia from the likely disintegration. In the words of the PM Abiy Ahmed (2019)[7]:

Ethiopia needs to break through the state of stalemate of two extreme and divergent forces: Oromo and Amhara forces though many people think that TPLF is a potential threat to Ethiopia. To help Ethiopia breakthrough the challenges, we will successfully merge all regional incumbent political parties, but we expect utmost challenge from TPLF and some Oromo nationalists. Contrary to this context, in 1991, the then President of the Transitional Government, Melles Zenawi, said "It is not the flag and the territorial relevance of Ethiopia which saves Ethiopia from disintegration, rather it is up to the nations, nationalities and

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[5] https://www.usip.org/events/changing-ethiopia-understanding-medemer

[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0AwXkhFWeqM

[7] The Destiny Ethiopia Core Team engaged with the Prime Minister on December 21, 2019, at his newly decorated office to provide briefings of the Ethiopia Scenario Team draft scenarios. During the discussion, the PM said "Ethiopia needs to break through the state of stalemate of two extreme and divergent forces: Oromo and Amhara forces though many people think that TPLF is a potential threat to Ethiopia. To help Ethiopia breakthrough the challenges, we will successfully merge all regional incumbent political parties, but we expect utmost challenge from TPLF and some Oromo nationalists."

peoples to opt living together or peacefully establishing one's own state[8]."

Moreover, the critics both downsize *Medemer* and argue that it is neither a political philosophy nor ideology, rather it is the PM Abiy Ahmed's unfiltered assumption which came up with to appear that he has had new vision and idea to lead the post 2018 demanding popular governance. *Medemer* is a catchword and political marketing tool (like what we saw in liberal political orders: Obama's *Yes, We Can,* in 2008; Marthin Luther King's *I have a Dream*; Donald Trump's *Make America Great Again*, in 2016, etc.) to capture a plausible solution for the susceptibility of the country to disintegration.

Put differently, the ethno-nationalist camp seriously rejected and even argued that *Medemer* is a classical nation-building assumption called melting pot in which the core group's identity, culture and language becomes that of the state. Considering this, *Medemer* is antithesis to EPRDF's *incumbent* federalism and to serve the resurging interest of the Amhara nationalism and centralization tendency following the demise of the TPLF dominated EPRDF regime.

In addition to the appreciations for and critics against the *Medemer* concept, there has been a moderate view. Despite all the possible gaps and weaknesses that can be attributed to *Medemer*, some people argue that it is about the intention of adding new energy, values, and perspectives to break-through the deadlock created from 2014 to 2018; discourage Ethiopia's territorial disintegration; cultivate the value of unity and togetherness in difficult times; and project the hope in near future. In his Book, *Medemer Generation, Abiy (2023)* has reiterated the importance of working more on and strengthening unity, and consequently concept of *Medemer* has emerging as a panacea to balance the competing extreme interests between the federalists and centralists. In addition to his concept of *Medemer*, the Prime Minister has provided extensive remarks and comments which could be taken as extraordinary constitutional efforts to solve the complex, dynamic, and unpredictable problems Ethiopia has had.

In a nutshell, the scholarly and empirical analysis of *Medemer* need to be carried out in relation to the major tenets of the functional Constitution of the federal and that of the states. The Prime Minister's first speech in the parliament comprised peace and justice; harmony and solidarity; calling for unity irrespective of ethnicity, religion and political difference; and lastly appealing apology to the entire nations, nationalities, and peoples. However, as time kept going and things changed, the tone, approach and measures of the Prime Minister showed some changes and continuities though he tried to be different from his predecessors. The Prime Minister's leadership approach has elements of *Carrot and stick* type, infusing insecurity, inflation, tension, and maladministration- all of which shadowed the reform efforts made so far.

4.3. Analysis of the post-2018 state-building approach: Responsive?

In Ethiopia, the move during the last decade of the 20th century has been federal state-building project recognizing and sustaining the existence of completely different nations,

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[8] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-V_U_Y27E.

nationalities and peoples. The Ethiopian nations, nationalities, and peoples are constitutionally recognized and the federal arrangement which takes the reality of the Ethiopian society into account has been established-*identity-based federalism*. The institutional and constitutional strategies of Ethiopia till the 2000s had, therefore, been responsive state building though there were rhetoric theoretical foundations in it. The EPRDF Government popularized the motto of *'unity-in-diversity'* that basically signifies the ethno-federal model of the Ethiopian state. However, intra-party elites' division and the Ethio-Eritrean war dictated the ruling coalition to shift the responsive state building to unresponsive one since 2001. As a result, national issues had been championed over the regional/identity issues, including Hoisting the federal flag one meter higher than that of the regional states' showing federal Government supremacy and subordination of regional states (Monenus, 2015).

Moreover, the planning and implementation of many socio-economic and political policies were top-down through the chain of the EPRDF. In a nutshell, EPRDF had returned its face to the classical nation-building (in the post 2001, Amharic language became increasingly the lingua franca of the country including in regional states; federal security extensively penetrated the regional states' territory, administrative jurisdictions, and socio-economic issues; and excessive integration) which basically contradicted with the major tenets of the Ethiopian federal democracy model in general.

It did not take long for political actors with competing interests to re-emerge and start organizing themselves against the reform agenda. The TPLF, which had found itself dislodged from power for the first time in nearly three decades, increasingly withdrew to Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, refused to partake in the transition initiated by the new leadership. To the worst, the tactical alliance between Oromia and Amhara against TPLF started to break away due to disagreements over the status of *Addis Ababa/Finfinne* and competition over who takes the dominance role, which was formerly gripped by TPLF. Furthermore, the Prime Minister quickly moved to abandon coalition members of the EPRDF ethnic line political parties and its affiliates and established a new party called Prosperity Party (PP). It was during this time that *Medemer* started to take shape (EIP, 2022).

Three consecutive *Medemer* books have been published and distributed to the members, supporters, and the entire public to help the overarching *Medemer* approach to be understood at large. The last two books- *Medemer Road,* and *Medemer Generation*-are more thorough, detailed, and consistent than the first *Medemer* book. However, other than generally putting itself as a pragmatic approach with regards to dealing with multifaceted social, political, diplomatic, and economic issues, *Medemer* has limitations on clearly identifying changes and continuities in setting the national interests of the Ethiopian federation. The Ethiopia's *early* post-2018 state-building approach is, therefore, characterized as responsive approach. Hence, political settlement among elites (formal and informal) to ensure common understanding, and organizing legitimate political power to serve the interests and beliefs of the Ethiopian nations, nationalities, and people was the major benchmark.

However, major security incidents happened from June to September 2018 have opened

Pandora's box. The way the Federal Government responded to these incidents laid a destructive political settlement environment in which key political actors like TPLF and OLF were considered as reactionaries to the reform/change. Unfortunately, *Medemer* (Addition) has started with '*Mekenes*' (Subtraction), hence undermined potential inclusive and genuine political settlement. Similarly, in early 2019, major disagreement erupted between the Ethiopian Government and the OLF leadership though the agreement between the two on how to disarm, demobilize and reintegrate the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) members had been reported in August 2018[9]. This disagreement led to reinstitute of state of emergency in Western and Southern Parts of Oromia to control OLA (EIP, 2022) *but later expanded to other parts of Oromia as well*. Moreover, in June 2019, key Federal and Amhara region officials were assassinated in an alleged coup attempt[10]. This further complicated the possibility of political settlement even from within the new leadership members as serious questions were started to be asked.

Furthermore, following the postponing of the 2020 national election, constitutionality debate erupted between the federal Government, Tigray National Regional State and key opposition parties/figures. Whereas the Tigray National Regional State decided to conduct the 2020 regional level election, the Federal Government decided to postpone the election using COVID-19 as the main reason. The election-related divergences of interest had further hampered the political settlement among the political elites in Ethiopia. Regarding the delivery of both the survival and expected functions of the State, in the post-2018, the analysis shows that Ethiopia has been in the worst-case scenario. Instead of security, law and order, major parts of the federation have been experiencing high levels of insecurity, chaos and disorder as the monopoly of violence is transformed into an oligopoly of violence. Though initiatives like green legacy and corridor development can be considered as the expected functions of the State, the general socio-economic situation of the people is at its lowest in terms of employment, inflation, and living costs.

Briefly, the analysis shows that the post-2018 state-building approach is unresponsive juxtaposition to the pre-2018 popular demands. Hence: 1) The focus of the Ethiopian Government under the Prime Minister Abiy has intended to earn legitimacy through *Medemer*, unity, prosperity, peace and stability but it has faced institutional, and capacity wise challenges to sustain and embrace political differences. Eventually, Ethiopia's state-society relations, security, peace and stability have been eroded resulting in multilevel tensions, armed conflicts, inflation, narrowing political and democratic spaces looming across the social, political, economic, and diplomatic spheres. 2) The new leadership has captured the already established federal state-building structures and institutions to implement reforms along the major *Medemer* tenets, but so far it remained unfinished business when it comes to gearing the federation towards clear economic, political, social, and diplomatic goals and successes. 3) The Ethiopian Government is trying to deliver core functions securitizing issues to its survival. Since the introduction of *Medemer* and the establishment of Prosperity Party, civil servants, private sectors, media and individuals have

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[9] The Ethiopian Government's delegation to Asmara was led by the then Oromia President Lemma Megersa and Dr. Workineh Gebeyehu, Minister of Foreign Affairs. The OLF was represented by the Chairman Dawud Ibsa and his executive committee members.
[10] June 23, 2019, FDRE Prime Minister Office Press Release.

put in either box of pro or against part. Those who unquestionably accept and comply with the policies and strategies of the *Medemer* and Prosperity Party are considered by the Government as friends and have been embraced, whereas those who question the case are labeled as [proxy] enemies and consequently have been distanced from active roles within the Government bureaucracies and even labeled with different designations. For instance, TPLF was labeled as *day-time hyena* and *junta* as betrayers of the Mother Ethiopia, whereas OLF and conservative Oromo nationalists have been labeled as "*OLF-Shane*, terrorists, etc."

Moreover, Amhara nationalists are also labeled as *extremist*s who aspire to restore the supposedly historical supremacy in the country. Such labeling and exclusionary moves resulted in war with TPLF where its drastic effects expanded to Afar and Amhara regions. Due to the growing pressures both internally and internationally, the Ethiopian Government has settled the issue with TPLF through a Pretoria Peace Treaty, though the implementation of much of the agreements remain challenging. Furthermore, two rounds of peace negotiations between Ethiopian Government and the Oromo Liberation Front-Oromo Liberation Army[11] (OLF-OLA) concluded without agreement though the armed conflict in Oromia which started in September 2018 has continued to disrupt social, economic, political, and security situations in Oromia in particular and in the country at large. Likewise, armed conflict has erupted in Amhara Region as one of the new developments due to the *extremist* aspiration to restore the supposedly historical supremacy on the one hand, and due to the unresponsive moves of the leadership on the other hand.

4) The Ethiopian Government is also diverting the attention and expectation of the Ethiopian nations, nationalities, and peoples to national socioeconomic issues as the pressure from society at all levels are mounting and getting strong. The issue of access to sea either through peaceful across Eritrea and/or through *a de facto* independent state Somaliland remains to be on the top. Unexpectedly, January 2024 was like a new year's surprise both for Ethiopians and to the international community when Ethiopia signed a memorandum of understanding with Somaliland. This development has caused more negative echoes than positive ones implicating repercussion in diplomatic relations. Moreover, the urban beautification and corridor development in major cities; building new national parks and palace have raised both legitimate concerns and earned appreciation.

5) In conformity to the above points, the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission has been established to assist and feed the ongoing reform agendas of the *Medemer* vision of the Prime Minister. Though the National Dialogue Commission has been established for three years and expected to finalize its mandate in not more than three years, the Commission has been granted a one-year extension to finalize its mandates. To the worst scenario, the competence, neutrality, impartiality, and inclusiveness of the Commission have been questioned by key opposition political parties and religious stakeholders.

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[11] Though OLA has been one of the key wings of OLF, in May 2019, the OLA announced its split from the OLF. Consequently, the OLF leader, Dawud Ibsa disavowed all link with the OLA and announced its commitment to peaceful political struggle whereas the OLA leadership established OLF-OLA as a new insurgency face of the old Oromo struggle against the Ethiopian state.

4.4. **The Post-2018 crises: Blaming the federalism model or the new leadership?**

The post 1990s Ethiopia's democratic federal endeavor had the objective of addressing three inherent problems of the pre 1991 Ethiopia's centrist nation-building project. First, the Ethiopian nation-state attempt denied 'peoplehood' to ethno-culturally diverse peoples within their territory. Second, the Ethiopian nation-state vision linked Ethiopian citizenship and nationality together. Thirdly, the vision of the Ethiopian nation-state tried to pursue the idea of creating homogeneous Ethiopians out of more than 81 linguistically, culturally, and historically different societies. As an option, the federal state-building emerged as an alternative to accommodating diversity within the territory of democratic Federal State in Ethiopia. Hence, federalism has had the potential to balance peoplehood and statehood through harmonizing the elements of national shared-rule and regional self-rule (Watts, 2009; Kymlicka, 2006). In Ethiopia, federal democratic governance is not something a luxury; rather it has been a necessity. Ethiopia is home to more than 81 ethnic groups, multi-religious, highly divided societies, rough (problematic) state-society and intra-society relations, undemocratic and very centralized political culture, violent conflict, encircled by volatile states, etc. Ethiopia's federal state-building and the overarching democratization processes had been the only and responsive strategies to state-building project in the post 1991.

The much hoped and expected political transition in 2018 has hardly achieved in transforming the social, political, economic, security, and diplomatic aspects (Semir, 2019). As a result, so far Ethiopia's Federal democracy exercise showed both federalism and democratic deficits, and as a result complicated the lives of ordinary Ethiopians. These days it seems that Ethiopia is back to centralization through security and military interventions. According to Assefa (2023: 196), the post 2018 situation shows the Ethiopia's extreme place as far as the desires of Federal Government's central political control and complete disregard of the Federal Constitution with little or no progress towards the democratization. In the latest Addis Standard analysis, Jawar Mohammed, one of the key figures in the Oromo Protest against EPRDF, has asserted that the post-2018 Ethiopia's state-building approach has abandoned the foundational ideological principles of the Oromo struggle for equality and/or self-government, and a quest for building a multinational federation and/or a multicultural nation-state (Addis Standard, 2024[12]).

Assefa (2023) has the view that marginalization at federal level and denial of self-government at sub-unit level reinforces mistrust in the federation leading to alienation and separation which Ethiopia is experiencing in the last five years. The Federal Government has gone further in undermining the consociationalism models of power-sharing and opted to employ a 'military federalism' by dismantling the security and values of federalism. In a nutshell, Ethiopia has become a military federation, deinstitutionalization of the security, partiality and inability of public institutions to deliver services, drive for centralization, and unilateral attempts to amend the Constitution (or enacting laws which negate the Constitution before amending it).

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[12] https://addisstandard.com/the-interview-jawar-mohammed/

Moreover, the much-expected transition in the post 2018 has added another aspect of failure to the federation. Due to the government's inability to have a monopoly of violence, multiple competing forces have emerged to provide alternative security protection to their claimed supporters and such forces directly engaging in armed conflict with the Government security forces. To make the situation more complex and worse, the regime intentionally or unintentionally deinstitutionalized key federal institutions and values in the country.

Rather than empowering and strengthening the existing institutions of federalism and infrastructures, the Prosperity Party Government naively established obsolete commissions to undermine the infant federalism institutions, cultures, values, and procedures started to be built since the introduction of federal governance in Ethiopia. When it comes to delivering public goods and services, institutions have become incompetent and have failed to provide partial services to the citizens. Corruption, bribery, and maladministration best describe the posture and nature of the public institutions that are expected to provide goods and services to the citizens. Furthermore, unconstitutional moves with respect to enacting new laws which negate the provisions in the 1995 FDRE Constitution and developing selective narratives to influence the Ethiopian federal society's understandings, perceptions, and behaviors in the areas of the nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia's rights to self-determination, up to and including secession, are threats to the advancement and well-functioning of the federation.

All the above happenstances negate the key elements, values, and prospects of federal democracy in Ethiopia in the post 2018 period, and the multifaceted crises are related to the malfunctioning federalism and democracy. For instance, the way new regional states are created triggers both the weak side of EPRDF and results in unnecessary constitutional precedence. In addition, the new education Road Map is against the self-rule element of federalism. Finally, the sporadic violence, insecurity, and tensions all add to contributing to the collapsing economy which can eventually lead to fragmentation of the federation and ignite civil war. Ethiopia's 1995 Constitution had enshrined identity-based federalism as the system of governance for the country's "nations, nationalities, and peoples" but rather than guaranteeing their "unconditional right to self-determination," it was often used by the EPRDF as an instrument of domination through divide-and-rule: when that failed, the system relied on exclusion and suppression. This Ethiopian federalism model has also formalized unhealthy competition between and within Ethiopia's ethnic groups.

Ketema (2020) has argued that lack of institutionalization of Intergovernmental Relations (IGR) in the post 2018 has left the regional states unarmed with mechanisms to safeguard them from the potential attempts of the Federal Government to limit their constitutional freedom. To sustain the changes and reform agendas, the Prime Minister has changed EPRDF internal policies and operational routines which were observed as against the party bylaws and long-term ideological underpinnings (Kjetil, 2024). For Vaughan (2023), everything negated the EPRDF era like replacing revolutionary democracy with liberal market economy; abolishing democratic centralism and strengthening centralization of power at the expense of the nations, nationalities, and peoples' constitutional self-determination were not something which both the coalition members and affiliates of the EPRDF expected.

Finally, Assefa (2023) indicates that both at conspiracy and practical levels, a new form of centralization that has changed the narrative to centralized nation building, issued policies that promote unitarist, engaged in removing regional state heads by force, and imposing 'command posts' in the states have become business as usual politics. Given its geographic coverage literally affecting most regional states and the frequency of use, command post administration has become the new normal. This appears "as if militarism has replaced federalism" in Ethiopia. The reaction is vivid: an all-out war against the center, particularly in Tigray, Oromia and Amhara-*the first two are of the states that harbor age-old demand for self-government whereas the last one is considered as the foundation of Ethiopia's building blocks*; and are now pushing for a loose confederation. Centralization and marginalization are currently two major challenges, and both are inimical to deeply divided Ethiopia.

5. Conclusions

This study has discussed the post 2018 Ethiopia's state building approach with the intent of assessing the level of responsiveness and/or unresponsiveness of the state-building approach to the real demands of the Ethiopian state and the society from the constitutional federal democracy system. It has started with introducing the general statements with regards to how and why states of the world were formed and followed to the theoretical framework through which this paper intended to describe, analyze, and generalize the post 2018 state-building approach (es), the time since the new leadership has come with the new political approach, referred to as *Medemer*. Due to the fact that Ethiopia is still under one and the same constitutional order since 1995, key strategies of the EPRDF and historical contexts have been given emphasis by using the 1995 Constitution as a springboard towards understanding, explaining, and analyzing the post 2018 developments and/or scenarios. Accordingly, revisiting the Ethiopian situation from the responsive federal state-building approaches especially from the *Medemer* point of view and describing the contemporary multifaceted crises that Ethiopia is facing have been flashed upon. Like in any federations, federalism in Ethiopia would have been considered as a working progress- *developing, improving and sustaining federalism institutions, values, policies, and building capacities*. Moreover, expecting federalism as a panacea for all the ills, and at the same time blaming federalism for all the problems are the key challenges contributing to the fragility and susceptibility of the Ethiopian federalism to failure. Evidence of the post 2018 discourses, rhetoric, policy orientations, and actions of key stakeholders like the Federal Government, regional states, opposition political parties, media, etc. are reflections of these factors.

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