

ETHIOPIA'S DIFFICULT COURSE: MULTIPARTY POLITICS AND BUILDING DEMOCRACY (1991-NOW) – INSIGHTS GAINED

Tariku Dagne
Department of Civics and Ethical Studies
Dilla University
Dilla, Ethiopia
tarikuda2003@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8585-6091>

Abstract. *The shift to multiparty politics in Ethiopia after the Derg regime was overthrown in 1991 marked a crucial moment for building a democratic state. This article takes a close look at how multiparty systems have either helped or hindered this journey over the last thirty years. By diving into historical events, institutional setups, electoral processes, and the political landscape, it argues that even though multipartyism was officially adopted, its real impact on democracy has been significantly limited. Several key issues contribute to this: the lingering effects of centralized governance, the strong influence of ethnonationalism in how parties are formed and compete, the weak establishment of democratic norms, ongoing state repression, and the tough task of balancing ethnic federalism with national unity. The analysis highlights important lessons: simply having multiparty systems isn't enough without a true commitment to political diversity and the rule of law; ethno-political parties can empower communities but also exacerbate societal divides; strong, independent institutions are essential; and fostering inclusive dialogue is crucial for navigating the complexities of identity politics. The period after 2018 shows both new opportunities and the ongoing vulnerability of Ethiopia's democratic efforts, calling for deep reforms focused on real political liberalization and strengthening institutions. Ethiopia's experience with multipartyism over the last thirty years makes one thing clear: simply having multiple political parties isn't enough to build a solid democracy. While it may seem like there's political diversity, the system often fails to provide true political rights, accountability, or a fair playing field. To make real strides in democracy, Ethiopia needs to move past the surface-level multiparty elections and focus on genuine political liberalization, building strong and impartial institutions that uphold the rule of law, and nurturing a political culture that promotes tolerance, inclusive citizenship, and dialogue that goes beyond ethnic lines.*

Keywords: Ethiopia, Democracy, Multiparty System, Ethnic Federalism, EPRDF, Prosperity Party, Opposition Parties, State Building.

1. INTRODUCTION

The fall of the Marxist-Leninist Derg dictatorship in 1991 was a pivotal moment for Ethiopia. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the coalition that took over, promised a significant shift towards democratization and ethnic self-determination. They officially set up a federal republic and supported a multiparty system. In democratic theory, multiparty competition is often seen as a fundamental element of pluralist democracy (Dahl, 1971; Schmitter & Karl, 1991), providing pathways for representation, accountability, and peaceful transitions of power. However, Ethiopia's journey since 1991 has been complex and sometimes contradictory, where the structure of multipartyism has existed alongside notable shortcomings in its essence. This article explores how multiparty politics has influenced the development of a democratic Ethiopian state since 1991, examining the factors that have shaped its functioning and drawing out key lessons learned. It argues that even though multiparty systems are in

place, their ability to nurture a solid democracy has been consistently hampered by structural limitations, ideological conflicts, and the focus on preserving elite power.

The analysis is grounded in Robert Dahl's concept of polyarchy (1971), which highlights competitive elections, civil liberties, and inclusive participation as pillars of democracy. Additionally, Levitsky and Way's competitive authoritarianism (2010) provides a lens to understand Ethiopia's hybrid regime, where multiparty elections mask entrenched authoritarianism.

While the introduction sets the stage for Ethiopia's democratic hopes, this analysis is firmly rooted in modern political theory. The researcher draws on Robert Dahl's polyarchy framework from 1971, which outlines democracy through two key dimensions: contestation, meaning free and fair competition for power, and inclusiveness, which refers to broad participation rights. Dahl's eight institutional guarantees like freedom of expression, the right to form associations, fair elections, and the need for government policies to reflect the will of the voters offer clear benchmarks to assess Ethiopia's multiparty system.

Moreover, Ethiopia's complex reality, where multiparty elections happen alongside significant authoritarian practices, is best viewed through the lens of competitive authoritarianism, as described by Levitsky and Way in 2010.

In these types of regimes:

1. Elections take place, but they are fundamentally skewed: Incumbents misuse state resources, restrict access to media for the opposition, intimidate rivals, and manipulate how elections are run.
2. Civil liberties are routinely trampled: Even if constitutions promise rights, critics including media, opposition, and civil society often face repression.
3. There's no level playing field: The incumbent holds overwhelming advantages, making it extremely unlikely for power to change hands through elections alone.

This theoretical framework sheds light on the ongoing disconnect between Ethiopia's formal multiparty structures and the significant democratic shortcomings observed in the periods discussed below. It goes beyond a simple democracy versus autocracy dichotomy, capturing the intricate realities of Ethiopia's political landscape.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research takes a qualitative historical-institutional approach, which is particularly effective for unpacking Ethiopia's intricate political journey since 1991. Its main strength is in carefully tracing developments over time, allowing for a thorough examination of how key institutions like the evolving multiparty system, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), and the constitutional-legal framework have grown, interacted, and changed through three significant political periods: the foundational yet restrictive EPRDF era (1991-2005), the crackdown and authoritarian consolidation following the 2005 elections (2005-2018), and the tumultuous transition under current government, characterized by initial openness but later conflict and democratic setbacks (2018-2023).

Additionally, this approach enables a deep dive into institutional design and its effects, analyzing how both formal rules like the provisions of the 1995 Constitution, the Charities and Societies Proclamation, and Political Party Laws and informal practices such as patronage networks, elite agreements, and coercive tactics have influenced political behavior, party competition, and ultimately, the stalled process of democratic consolidation. Importantly, it's crucial for unraveling Ethiopia's unique context, capturing the complex interactions between deeply rooted ethnonationalism, the centralizing tendencies of state power, the heavy burden of historical grievances, and the strategic maneuvers of political elites' elements that are key to understanding the ongoing disconnect between formal multiparty frameworks and real democratic progress.

To really understand the discursive and strategic aspects, researcher dive into key political statements, analyzing major speeches, policy announcements, and public comments made by successive Prime Ministers Meles Zenawi, Hailemariam Desalegn, and Abiy Ahmed as well as senior officials from the ruling party. These statements touch on important themes like democracy, multiparty politics, and how opposition forces are treated. To complement these primary sources, researcher also look at a variety of

secondary materials that provide essential context, interpretation, and outside perspectives. Scholarly literature plays a vital role here, drawing from peer-reviewed academic works that cover Ethiopian politics, modern history, federalism, ethnicity, and the processes of democratization. Researcher pay special attention to empirical studies and theoretical analyses that relate to the development of party systems and the challenges of state-building.

Additionally, reports from international organizations offer valuable independent insights and documentation, including detailed election observation mission reports especially from the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) for the years 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2021, as well as from the Carter Center. Researcher also consider human rights investigations and reports from organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, along with in-depth conflict analyses and political risk assessments, primarily from the International Crisis Group (ICG). Lastly, researcher utilize media archives from reputable Ethiopian and international news outlets, which have been carefully cross-referenced for accuracy. These archives serve as crucial contemporary records that document political events, state crackdowns, opposition party activities, and the evolving nature of political discourse during the period we're examining. The sources were chosen for their direct relevance to the core research themes of party system evolution, electoral integrity, and state repression.

Researcher carefully chose sources based on their direct relevance to the study's four main research themes: the evolution of the party system, which includes how political parties form, their registration requirements, internal dynamics, and how they position themselves strategically over time; electoral integrity, which looks at the legal framework that governs elections, how bodies like the NEBE manage and conduct electoral processes, and the trustworthiness of the outcomes; state repression, which examines the legal tools used (anti-terror or CSO laws), actions taken against opposition figures, media, and civil society organizations (CSOs), as well as patterns of coercion; and institutional strength/weakness, focusing on the operational independence, capacity, and effectiveness of key democratic institutions, such as the NEBE, the judiciary, and the federal parliament, in limiting executive power and maintaining democratic standards.

To analyze this varied dataset, researcher used a multi-method qualitative approach. Thematic analysis was a main tool, involving systematic coding of data to uncover recurring themes, significant turning points, underlying causal mechanisms that explain institutional performance, and critical contradictions between how institutions are designed (as laid out in constitutions and laws) and how they actually function in practice, especially in the context of multiparty politics. Process tracing was used to examine key events like the significant 2005 election crisis and its violent aftermath, the strategic breakup of EPRDF and the creation of Prosperity Party (PP) in 2019, and the start of the Tigray War in November 2020.

This approach helped to carefully piece together their causes, how they unfolded, and their deep impacts on the structure and sustainability of the multiparty system. Additionally, critical discourse analysis was employed to analyze the language found in official statements, legal documents, and policy announcements from various regimes. This analysis revealed the prevailing narratives, legitimizing discourses, and justifications related to political pluralism, national security needs, and the contentious idea of national unity, highlighting how power was framed and contested through discourse.

3. MULTIPARTYISM UNDER EPRDF (1991-2018): CONTROLLED PLURALISM

During EPRDF era, the groundwork for multiparty democracy was laid, but it was all within a tightly controlled framework known as "revolutionary democracy" (Lefort, 2010; Aalen, 2002).

The 1995 Constitution promised multipartyism and essential freedoms. Yet, the laws that governed political parties like registration rules and vague restrictions on "ethnic" or "religious" parties along with the notorious Charities and Societies Proclamation, created a stifling atmosphere (Abbink, 2006). EPRDF

held a dominant position thanks to its extensive organizational network, control over state resources, and its grip on the NEBE, which many viewed as lacking true independence (Tronvoll, 2009).

The 1995 Constitution (Articles 29, 30, 38) established multipartyism and fundamental freedoms, but the reality was quite different due to restrictive laws. The Political Parties Proclamations from 1993 and 2008 set up tough registration requirements like needing 1,500 members for national parties (as stated in Art. 8(1) of the 2008 version) and included vague rules against parties based on religion, ethnicity, gender, or language (Art. 46(2) in the 1993 version, which was later modified but still left room for confusion). This created a double standard: while EPRDF's own parties Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) were clearly ethnic-based, opposition parties trying to do the same faced obstacles or were branded as divisive. The notorious 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation (Proclamation No. 621/2009) severely restricted civil society by preventing NGOs that received more than 10% of their funding from abroad from engaging in human rights and governance advocacy (Art. 14(2)), effectively silencing important watchdogs. EPRDF maintained its grip on power through its unmatched bureaucratic penetration (Vaughan, 2011) via the party-state structure, which controlled local administrations, the security forces, and, crucially, NEBE. Appointments to NEBE were tightly managed by the ruling party (Tronvoll, 2009), ensuring that election administration and outcomes consistently favored EPRDF.

The elections of 2005 opened a brief window in the political scene, giving us a rare chance to see some real competition, as Dahl would put it. Opposition parties, rallying around the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF), really stepped up, managing to win an impressive number of seats, particularly in urban areas. But then came the harsh state response to the protests that erupted after the elections, along with the imprisonment of opposition leaders. This was a serious blow to inclusiveness, effectively silencing any dissenting voices in the political arena (Lyons, 2006). After 2005, EPRDF ramped up its control, employing legal harassment, co-optation, and intimidation to push the opposition to the sidelines, reducing their role in parliament to little more than a symbolic presence (Aalen & Tronvoll, 2009).

The 2005 Ethiopian elections seemed to open a door to democracy, even if just for a moment. Riding the wave of significant discontent in urban areas, opposition groups mainly CUD and UEDF put up a formidable fight. According to NEBE, the ruling EPRDF and its allies snagged 327 seats (59.8%), while CUD managed to secure 109 seats (19.9%) and UEDF got 52 seats (9.5%). This was a remarkable gain for the opposition, hinting at a possible shift in power. Unfortunately, that momentum was brutally crushed. Widespread and credible claims of fraud during the vote counting sparked massive protests in Addis Ababa and other cities. The government's response was harsh: security forces killed at least 193 protesters, according to official reports, but Human Rights Watch suggested the actual number could be much higher. Thousands were injured, and over 30,000 people were arrested, including the entire leadership of CUD (Lyons, 2006; Abbink, 2006). Prominent figures like CUD Vice Chair Birtukan Mideksa faced years behind bars on charges like "outrages against the constitution".

This severe crackdown, known as 'Qinijit' after the date it escalated on May 15th, effectively snuffed out any real electoral competition for the time being. After 2005, EPRDF systematically worked to dismantle the opposition through a series of coordinated strategies. Legal harassment became a key strategy, taking advantage of the broad provisions in the 2004 Criminal Code like charges of "outrages against the constitution" and "inciting violence" and later the infamous 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (Proclamation No. 652/2009 - Articles 3 & 4) to silence critics, including Andualem Arage from Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) party. Co-optation was also widely used, intentionally breaking apart opposition groups and luring members to switch sides to EPRDF or its affiliated parties. At the same time, a climate of intimidation and violence marked by harassment, beatings, and even killings, especially targeting opposition supporters in rural areas fostered a pervasive sense of fear.

By the time the 2010 elections rolled around, this extensive suppression led to a staggering victory for EPRDF, which "secured" 499 out of 547 seats (91.2%), leaving the opposition with only a token presence and solidifying authoritarian rule (Aalen & Tronvoll, 2009). The hopeful moment of 2005 was effectively shut down.

The ethnic federal structure laid out in Article 39 of the Constitution granting Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples the right to self-determination, including the option to secede has had a profound impact on the party system in Ethiopia. While it allowed for regional self-governance, it also entrenched ethnicity as the main political identity. EPRDF ruled through its ethnic-based member parties, each one holding sway in its own region like the TPLF in Tigray, OPDO in Oromia, ANDM in Amhara, and SEPDM in SNNPR using extensive patronage networks and coercive tactics (Vaughan, 2011).

This setup made it really tough for strong, nationwide parties with clear programs to emerge. Opposition groups had to organize mainly along ethno-regional lines to make any headway, as seen with the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) and the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP), which only added to the fragmentation. Efforts to create pan-Ethiopian parties, such as UDJ after 2005, struggled to find support outside urban areas, facing state repression and the challenge of overcoming the deep ethnic divides that the system itself had created (Turton, 2006). As a result, politics turned into a zero-sum game, pitting ethnic blocs against one another.

The formation and competition of parties were largely shaped by ethno-regional lines, a direct result of the ethnic federal system (Turton, 2006). While it offered recognition and self-governance for major groups, this system entrenched ethnicity as the main political identity, stifling the emergence of cross-cutting, issue-based parties and escalating tensions between different groups. The EPRDF itself was a coalition of ethnically based parties, ruling through a combination of patronage and coercion within each regional state (Vaughan, 2011).

4. THE POST-2018 TRANSITION: UNFULFILLED PROMISE AND RENEWED FRAGMENTATION

When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018, it seemed like a new era of political freedom was on the horizon.

Abiy Ahmed's rise to power in April 2018 marked the beginning of a remarkable political shift in Ethiopia. His government quickly set in motion a wave of important reforms aimed at breaking down the oppressive structures of the past. They suspended or repealed several key repressive laws: the State of Emergency that had been in place since February 2018 was lifted; thousands of political prisoners, including notable leaders from groups like Ginbot 7, OFC, and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), were freed; various exiled opposition groups, particularly Ginbot 7, OLF, and Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), were taken off official terrorist lists and invited back to the country to return peacefully; and the restrictive Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSO law), which had greatly hindered civil society and NGO activities, especially those focused on human rights and advocacy was revised in 2019 to ease burdensome funding restrictions. Additionally, to enhance the integrity of elections, a new, more independent NEBE was appointed, with Birtukan Mideksa, a former judge and political prisoner herself, at the helm.

The sweeping liberalization measures sparked an immediate and unprecedented surge in political party registrations, with NEBE reporting over 120 legally recognized parties by 2021. This newfound pluralism saw the rise of significant explicitly pan-Ethiopianist parties, like Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (Ezema), which boldly challenged the ethnic federalist model that had shaped the state for decades by promoting a unified civic national identity. However, this rapid opening and the ascent of centralizing, pan-Ethiopian forces also triggered a strong ethno-nationalist backlash. Groups within historically

marginalized ethnic communities, especially among Oromo and Tigrayan political leaders, viewed these developments as a serious threat to their constitutionally guaranteed rights to self-determination and ethnic representation (Feyissa, 2021). This backlash led to deep internal rifts: the OLF fractured, with one faction engaging in the reconciliation process while others remained armed. At the same time, the once-dominant TPLF became increasingly estranged from Abiy's federal government, perceiving its reforms and centralizing moves as a direct attack on Tigrayan autonomy and the federal agreement, setting the stage for future, devastating conflict.

Ethiopia held its national and regional elections on June 21, 2021, after facing significant delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic and various logistical challenges. These elections were seen as the most competitive since the crucial 2005 polls. The Prosperity Party (PP), which came into being in December 2019 by merging the three largest regional parties from the former ruling coalition, EPRDF excluding TPLF along with several allied parties, achieved a remarkable landslide victory. This outcome solidified the PP's grip on the federal government and important regional states, signaling a clear political shift away from EPRDF era.

According to the official results from NEBE in 2021, the Prosperity Party achieved an impressive victory, securing 410 out of 436 contested federal parliamentary seats an astounding 94%. They also dominated 5 out of 11 regional state councils that were up for grabs. Voter turnout was remarkable, hitting 90% in the areas where polling occurred, which shows a strong public interest where it was possible. The elections did reveal some positive changes, particularly the noticeable independence of the NEBE under the leadership of former political prisoner Birtukan Mideksa. The NEBE took a bold step by publicly criticizing government actions and logistical issues during the elections, marking a significant shift from their previous compliance. Additionally, some opposition parties found themselves able to campaign more freely in certain regions compared to past elections, hinting at a bit more political space opening up.

While there were some positive points, they were mostly overshadowed by the significant issues pointed out in the EU EOM 2021 Report, which exposed serious shortcomings in both contestation and inclusiveness. The entire process was fundamentally undermined by extreme insecurity and the widespread disenfranchisement of millions of voters in Tigray, Oromia, and other areas, which directly contradicts Dahl's principle of inclusiveness.

In Tigray, where 38 parliamentary seats were at stake, no voting took place due to the ongoing and devastating conflict. Additionally, many constituencies in Oromia, especially in regions like Wollega and Guji along with areas in Benishangul-Gumuz, and parts of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) and Afar, faced severe disruptions or were completely unable to hold elections, disenfranchising millions of eligible voters. To make matters worse, there was widespread harassment and violence aimed at opposition candidates and their supporters, particularly those linked to the Oromo and Sidama parties. This included systematic arrests, intimidation, physical assaults, and even killings, especially noted around the Sidama referendum. Several opposition candidates were arrested right in the middle of their campaigns (EU EOM, 2021).

The playing field was incredibly uneven. The ruling PP had a massive edge, thanks to state-sponsored advantages like almost complete control over media coverage, special access to essential resources such as government vehicles and venues, and the extensive use of state bureaucracy to support their campaign. On the flip side, private media outlets were under heavy pressure and faced numerous restrictions, which stifled critical reporting. To make matters worse, significant 'Boycotts' by major opposition parties further diminished the election's competitiveness and credibility. OLF and OFC completely boycotted the elections in Oromia, the most populous region in the country, citing widespread repression and a perilous security situation. TPLF, caught up in conflict with the federal government, also chose not to participate. These boycotts severely limited meaningful political competition in key areas, paving the way for the PP's overwhelming victory in the contested seats.

The political landscape took a sharp turn when the Tigray War erupted in November 2020, cutting short any hopes for a peaceful opening. This conflict saw federal forces, backed by Eritrean and Amhara militias, clashing with TPLF, leading to horrific atrocities, war crimes, and a dire humanitarian crisis (ICG, 2021, 2022, 2023). The violence quickly spread to neighboring regions like Afar and Amhara. Since late 2021 and early 2022, the political space has shrunk considerably (ICG, 2022, 2023).

After declaring a state of emergency in November 2021, which was lifted in February 2022, Ethiopian authorities began a widespread campaign of arbitrary detentions. This primarily targeted ethnic Tigrayans, with thousands being detained, as well as notable Oromo opposition leaders. The crackdown was largely justified under broad anti-terrorism laws. Among those arrested were high-profile figures like Jawar Mohammed, the leader of OFC and a media mogul, and Eskinder Nega, who heads Balderas for True Democracy. Both were taken into custody in July 2021 and later convicted on charges that many international observers and human rights organizations condemned as politically motivated "terrorism" and "treason." Jawar was initially sentenced to life in prison, though this was later reduced, while Eskinder received a six-year sentence. These actions clearly indicated a significant restriction on political freedoms. (ICG, 2022, 2023).

At the same time, the government ramped up its crackdown on independent media. Many outlets were shut down, including notable ones like Addis Standard (albeit temporarily) and Awlo Media Center. Journalists found themselves facing arrests, with Meaza Mohammed from Ethio-360 being a prime example. Internet blackouts became a common tactic to hinder the flow of information, especially in conflict areas like Tigray and Oromia, as well as during protests in other regions. Importantly, the government increasingly portrayed any form of opposition, dissent, or critical journalism particularly regarding its actions in Tigray and Oromia as backing "terrorists" (targeting groups like the TPLF and OLA-Shene) or as threats to national security. This widespread narrative of "securitization of politics" (as noted by ICG in 2022 and 2023) was used to legitimize harsh repression against civil society organizations, independent media, and opposition parties that didn't align with the ruling PP.

Efforts to initiate a promised national dialogue a crucial part of Ethiopia's declared political transition fell apart amid rising conflict and deep-seated distrust. Although the government set up the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC), its credibility took a significant hit. Major opposition groups, such as TPLF and key factions within the OFC and OLF, either chose to boycott the process or voiced serious doubts about the Commission's true independence and inclusivity. As a result, by late 2021 and throughout 2022, the political landscape in Ethiopia had worsened considerably. The ongoing war, widespread mass arrests, a crackdown on the media, and the increasing repression of dissent created a political environment that had shrunk to levels comparable to, or even worse than, the repression seen during the final years of the previous EPRDF regime (ICG, 2022, 2023). Under these circumstances, genuine multiparty political competition became utterly impossible.

5. ANALYSIS: WHY MULTIPARTYISM FAILED TO ANCHOR DEMOCRACY

The Ethiopian experience offers valuable insights into the challenges multiparty systems face in fragile, diverse nations that are navigating complex transitions:

Just having multiple parties doesn't automatically mean a country is democratic. If there's no real dedication to political pluralism, the rule of law, independent institutions (especially the judiciary and electoral bodies), and the safeguarding of civil liberties, multiparty systems can turn into mere fronts for authoritarianism, what some call "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky & Way, 2010). The elections in 2005 and 2021 really highlight this issue. Even though there were some competitive aspects, the state's grip on the NEBE before 2018, along with tactics like disenfranchisement in Tigray in 2021, harassment of opposition candidates that same year, ongoing media bias, and the legal manipulation through laws like the CSO law from 2009 and the Anti-Terror Proclamation after 2005 and 2020, made it clear that

multipartyism was just a front for the EPRDF/PP's control. This aligns perfectly with Levitsky and Way's (2010) concept of competitive authoritarianism.

Ethnic-based parties can improve representation for marginalized groups in a federal system, but they also have their downsides:

- They can splinter the political landscape, making it tough to build national consensus.
- They may create a zero-sum game mentality and breed inter-ethnic distrust.
- They can hinder the growth of policy-focused, programmatic politics.
- They are often easily exploited by elites for mobilization and power grabs.

In Ethiopia, the emphasis on ethnic identity nearly pushed aside other forms of political organization, which only intensified the forces pulling the country apart. The ethnic federal system established by the EPRDF gave rise to parties like the TPLF, OPDO/PP, and ANDM/PP, while it actively stifled non-ethnic national parties before 2018. After 2018, the emergence of pan-Ethiopianist parties, such as Ezema, sparked a violent backlash rooted in ethno-nationalism and led to fragmentation, including splits within the OLF. This turmoil has made it difficult to build a national consensus and has contributed to the ongoing conflicts in Tigray and Oromia. The way elites have manipulated ethnicity for political mobilization seen in the actions of TPLF, various PP factions, and OLF factions highlights the inherent dangers of this approach.

Democratic institutions like the parliament, judiciary, NEBE, and media have struggled to stand strong and independent from the executive branch throughout various regimes. This lack of autonomy and capability has made it tough to effectively check power and ensure fair competition. The NEBE's struggle for independence under the EPRDF, which was a biased administration, along with its challenges related to capacity and government pressure in 2021 despite some improvements really brings this issue to light. Parliament often just went along with whatever the executive decided. The judiciary's inability to hold the executive accountable, especially seen in the politically charged trials after 2005 and again in 2021 involving figures clearly shows its lack of independence.

The ongoing use of state coercion through arrests, intimidation, and violence against opposition figures, journalists, and activists has consistently eroded trust in the political process and discouraged public participation. The shift towards a more securitized political landscape after 2005 marks a significant step backward. The crackdown in 2005, which involved mass killings and arrests, followed by legal harassment, and the pre-election repression leading up to 2010 and 2015, along with the harsh measures taken like mass arrests, media closures, internet shutdowns, and the tragic killings of protesters in Oromia and Amhara have all played a significant role in eroding trust and discouraging people from participating.

EPRDF and its alliances held onto power by creating extensive patronage networks that controlled state contracts, jobs, licenses, and resources (De Waal, 2015). Those who challenged them were systematically pushed aside through legal, economic, and coercive tactics, which ultimately corrupted the political landscape (De Waal, 2015).

Successive governments have struggled to create a genuine, inclusive national dialogue that could tackle deep-rooted historical grievances, reconcile differing visions of the state like ethnic federation versus unitary, and establish a shared set of democratic rules. It's crucial to recognize that the failure to create a credible and inclusive national dialogue before tensions escalated into the Tigray war and the Oromia conflict serves as a significant lesson. Over the years, various regimes have focused more on maintaining control rather than engaging in meaningful discussions about fundamental issues like the nature of the federation, historical grievances, and citizenship.

6. THE PATH FORWARD FOR ETHIOPIA

The time after 2018 showed us a glimpse of what could be, but it quickly got buried under conflict and a return to authoritarianism. Ethiopia's hopes for a democratic future are still hanging by a thread. To make

real progress, it's not enough to just have multiple political parties on paper; we need a complete shift towards a system that truly values the rule of law, human rights, and institutional integrity. It's crucial that we commit to resolving our differences through peaceful, democratic means instead of resorting to violence. The very survival of Ethiopia as a nation might hinge on embracing these hard-earned lessons. Ethiopia's path to a stable future and its dreams of democracy really depends on a significant change that goes well beyond just the surface-level presence of multiple political parties. Simply having a variety of parties isn't enough; what's truly needed is a real political liberalization that's firmly rooted in the rule of law and a universal commitment to human rights. This is the bedrock upon which everything else must be built. To get there, we need to face some tough lessons from the past and make some serious, systemic changes.

First and foremost, we absolutely need deep institutional reforms. It's crucial that key state institutions, especially the NEBE and the judiciary, are given real independence and protection. This means they should operate freely, without interference from political parties, have enough resources, and be backed by strong legal protections. Without truly independent institutions that can run fair elections and provide unbiased justice, we won't see any real democratic progress. Building trust in these essential pillars is vital for any political process to be seen as legitimate.

It's absolutely essential to put an end to systematic state repression. We need to ensure that fundamental freedoms like the rights to express ourselves, gather, associate, and have a free press are protected for everyone, no exceptions. This includes those who might disagree with the government or voice criticism. The widespread use of arbitrary detention, intimidation, media censorship, and internet shutdowns as means of political control has to stop. We need a safe space where citizens can engage in civic life without fear; that's the foundation of a healthy democracy.

It's really important to nurture a political culture that embraces tolerance and inclusive citizenship. Achieving this goes beyond just talking the talk; we need to put some real systems in place. We should revamp civic education to highlight a shared Ethiopian identity while also honoring our diversity. We need independent public service media that can operate free from government control, allowing them to promote national dialogue and showcase balanced discussions. Plus, initiatives like cross-ethnic youth programs and cultural exchanges can play a big role in breaking down stereotypes and building trust among the younger generation. After years of conflict and division, our social fabric has taken a hit. To mend it, we need to move beyond ethnic or political exclusion and cultivate a strong sense of nationhood, supported by these tangible actions.

At the heart of this change is a credible, inclusive, and truly participatory national dialogue process. This dialogue can't just be for show; it needs to tackle the deep-rooted, contentious issues that have led to instability. These issues include the fundamental structure of the state (federalism versus centralization), unresolved historical grievances, and the very essence of what it means to share an Ethiopian identity and nationhood. For this dialogue to succeed, all key political players, including those who are currently marginalized or in opposition, must have a genuine seat at the table.

The alternative path is both stark and risky. Sticking to a facade of multipartyism, which only hides ongoing authoritarian practices amid growing ethnic divisions, doesn't offer a real future. This strategy has clearly failed, resulting in nothing but repeated violence, instability, and the curtailing of basic rights. Ethiopia is at a pivotal moment: embracing the tough but essential journey of true institutional reform, putting an end to repression, and encouraging inclusive dialogue is the only credible way to achieve lasting peace, stability, and the democratic future that its people truly deserve.

7. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Ethiopia's three-decade journey with multiparty politics clearly shows that just having multiple parties isn't enough to truly solidify democracy. When we look at Dahl's criteria for polyarchy, it becomes evident

that there are ongoing issues with both contestation and inclusiveness. The competitive authoritarian framework proposed by Levitsky and Way perfectly captures a situation where elections take place, but they are consistently manipulated by those in power using state resources.

Ethiopia's experience with ethnic federalism isn't an isolated case; it serves as a powerful example in the realm of comparative politics. Unlike more successful multinational federations such as India or Canada, where a sense of constitutional patriotism and robust central institutions help to counteract divisive forces, Ethiopia's approach has been marked by fragile institutional protections and the manipulation of ethnicity by elites. This situation reflects the difficulties faced by countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina or Iraq. This comparison highlights that the framework of federalism itself is not as important as the political culture and the strength of the institutions that support it.

The journey of multiparty politics in shaping a democratic Ethiopia since 1991 has been quite a mixed bag. Although it was officially embraced as a cornerstone of democracy, its actual functioning has often been stifled, manipulated, and at times outright suppressed. This has led to a failure in fulfilling its fundamental promise of accountable governance and peaceful political transitions.

The lasting impact of centralized governance passed down from earlier regimes, the overpowering influence of ethnonationalism embedded in the federal system, the ongoing fragility of essential democratic institutions like NEBE, the judiciary, and parliament, the systematic repression of dissent (from the 2005 crackdown to the heightened security measures post-2021), and the way elites manipulate patronage networks have all played a significant role in hindering multiparty competition from achieving its democratic goals of accountability and smooth power transitions.

The shift that happened after 2018 showed us a glimpse of what could be possible, highlighted by a notable increase in party registrations and reforms from NEBE. Yet, the lingering issues surrounding identity and power, the way the tragic Tigray conflict has been used to justify a return to authoritarian rule, and the lack of a truly inclusive national dialogue have all contributed to a swift decline in democracy. The jailing of key opposition leaders on politically motivated charges is a clear sign of this troubling trend.

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