



National Dialogue of Ethiopia: is it on the right track?

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Abstract

National dialogues are nationally owned political processes made when there happen profound political crisis that the existing government of a given country cannot solve. Ethiopia too is on the process of conducting national dialogue. This paper analyses the ongoing process of the dialogue against national dialogue principles that the United States Institute of Peace, Berghof Foundation, and others use to predict the success or the failure of a national dialogue. The data were collected from secondary sources such as books, televisions channels, websites, and so on. Then the collected data were qualitatively analyzed to evaluate the process of the dialogue. After analyzing the views of political elites, and other concerned citizens of the country towards the actual process of Ethiopia's national dialogue in terms of the principles used as yardsticks, the paper concludes that the ongoing process of the planned national dialogue of Ethiopia is not on the right way to achieve the desired goal.

Keywords: National Dialogue, Ethiopia, Principles, Process, the Right Track

1. Introduction

Researchers such as Odivilas (2016) witness that peaceful community develops better in several aspects. However, violent conflicts that lead to mass distraction of human lives and properties have been part of people's lives in many portions of our planet nowadays (Kungu, Omari, Kipsang, 2015), but

the good news is that there are mechanisms to tackle conflicts that appear in a country. One of such mechanisms is national dialogue.

National dialogues are political processes that are made and owned nationally to generate consensus among a broad range of national stakeholders when there happen deep political crisis in a given country and when the needs come to manage post-war situations or far-reaching political transitions (Blunck et al., 2017). National Dialogues can also be defined as official negotiations forums which are typically convened to address far reaching national concerns which are often long-standing root causes of violent conflicts that political protest or armed insurrection have brought to the fore (Inclusive Peace, (nd)). Such dialogues can transform a given country from a dictatorship system where war is possible to democratic system where peace prevails as liberalists argue that democracy avoid conflicts and promote cooperation (Ozkan and Cetin, 2016). National Dialogues, therefore, can be forums to ease tensions, manage political crisis and deadlock, reach political agreement and reestablish a new institutional framework, and transit from civil war (Berghof Foundation, 2017). In other way, national dialogues are made for broad-based change processes like negotiating a new social contract or narrower objectives (Haider, 2019).

Nowadays, National dialogues are common tools to reform political, social, and economic structures where parties or group are under-represented or marginalized (Harlander, 2016). Especially, for countries where there are ethnic tensions like in Ethiopia, inclusive and genuine dialogue is vital to maintain peace. Such countries have entered into bloody civil war because they failed to solve their problems through dialogues. For instance, nations in countries of the Balkans like Yugoslavia first lost their central cohesion under the name of self-rule, but later, they led themselves towards bloody civil war and disintegration (Ariye, 2015). If they had under gone all-encompassing and honest dialogue among themselves, there would have been a chance to curb the civil war and the disintegration they went through.

Seemingly taking a lesson, Ethiopia, too, is on the process of national dialogue. This national dialogue was announced by the administration of Prime minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed after what he called victory over TPLF and in late December 2021 and proclamation was passed by the Ethiopia's parliament to establish a commission to the national dialogue (Gedamu, 2022). This national dialogue is thought to solve the political crisis and keep the integrity of the country by paving the way for national consensus of the citizens, mainly interest groups (Gedamu). Similarly, Legesse Tulu, Government Communication Service Minister of Ethiopia, states to CGTN Africa on January 15, 2022 that this national dialogue is expected to bring long lasting peace in Ethiopia by strengthening the unity of the country. Taking

this purpose, the commission has been established and the commissioners have been elected.

However, it does not mean that all countries which conduct national dialogue can succeed; some countries have solved their political problems through national dialogues, but others did not. For example, Tunisia has undergone national dialogue and solved its political crisis in 2013 and saved the country from collapse (Kraetzschmar, 2015). Sudan, on the contrary, had held national dialogue from 2014–2016 and failed because the ruling party interfered in the process (Institute for Security studies [IFSS], 2020). This means that there are situations where national dialogues are successful or futile.

There are pre-dialogue, during dialogue and post-dialogue factors which contribute for the success or failure of national dialogues. The pre-dialogue and during dialogue factors are related to the general principles of national dialogues whereas post dialogues are related to implementations of the agreed upon points (IFSS, 2020). According to Haider (2019), USIOP (2015), Berghof Foundation (2017), and IFSS (2020), the key national dialogue principles which must be contextualized are inclusion; transparency and public participation; credible and neutral convener; clear mandate and appropriately tailored structure, rules, and procedures; agreed mechanism for outcomes implementation; the interference of foreign countries; and political context. Following these principles of national dialogue from the beginning to the end of the process is decisive for the success of national dialogues (United States Institute of Peace [USIOP], 2015)

The ruling party vows that the national dialogue in the process will be a solution for the ongoing political crisis in Ethiopia, but studies concerned with experiences of other countries which conducted national dialogue show that fruitful national dialogues are dialogues done properly from the beginning to the end based on the aforementioned principles. What about Ethiopia's national dialogue? Is it on the right way? This paper answers the question by evaluating the process (from the beginning to the present status) of the planed national dialogue, using the discussed principles as yardsticks.

2. Method

This research is purely qualitative as it employed qualitative data. The data concerning the process of Ethiopia's national dialogue were collected from secondary sources such as books, newspapers, websites, televisions channels, and social media. Then the collected data were analyzed in terms of internationally accepted national dialogue principles to evaluate the process of Ethiopia's national dialogue.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Inclusion

One of the key principles that contributes a lot for the success of a given national dialogue is that it includes and convenes all sets of stake holders or key interest groups for the process so that underlined real drivers of conflicts can be addressed (Berghof Foundation, 2017; IFSS, 2020; Haider, 2019; USIOP, 2015;). However, scholars argue that the ongoing process of Ethiopia's national dialogue seems to lack this principle. For instance, Edjeta (2022) contends that the government has formed the national dialogue commotion, excluding the opposition parties. Ekubamichael and (2022), and Gemechu (2022) support this idea by stating that the ongoing process of the national dialogue led indirectly by the ruling party is going on forward, excluding key stakeholders like civic institutions, political parties, and religious institutions. Even though one of the purposes of the national dialogue is to end the conflict in the country, TPLF and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), the key players for the violent conflict, have been excluded (Gemechu, 2022). If one of the aim of the dialogue is to solve the ongoing violent conflict and bring lasting peace, excluding the armed groups and the main players of the violent conflict puts the dialogue into question.

Similarly, Ekubamichael (2022,p.2) states that “Three main opposition parties: Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) issued a statement saying the process of the nomination of Commissioners was not impartial [OFC], was unknown [OLF] and lacked representation [ONLF].” In fact, other political parties, too, did not accept it fully. Concerning this, Edjeta (2022; 5) asserts that Ethiopia's national dialogue commission, the beginning of the dialogue process, “came into being without consensus-building among political parties and other stakeholders.” Rahel Bafe, who is chairwoman of the Ethiopian Political Parties Joint Council (EPPJC), a coalition of more than 50 opposition groups, claims that the government did not consult opposition parties when the commissioners were selected (The New Humanitarian [NH], 2022). This shows that the inclusiveness of the national dialogue of Ethiopia has fallen under quotation marks. Whether what the opposition parties argue is true or false, it clearly shows that the planned national dialogue did not get a buy-in in the opposition parties for its success as they felt the government is not neutral, which, in turn, means that the national dialogue loses political will and elite agreement which are, as Haider (2019) says, highly important for a national dialogue to be successful, but Ethiopia's national dialogue seems to lack it.

3.2. Transparency and Public Participation

A national dialogue cannot be successful if it does not facilitate and give adequate opportunity for the public to be informed and participate. Even a dialogue that includes all major interest groups risks losing legitimacy if there are not sufficient opportunities for the public to remain informed about and feed into the dialogue (Haider, 2019, USIOP, 2015, Berghof Foundation, 2017; and IFSS, 2020). The process of national dialogue of Ethiopia, however, has been blamed of its opaqueness from its beginning. For example, Oromo Liberation Front claims that process of the commissioners' nomination is not known (Ekubamichael, 2022). Similarly, Rahel (2022) as cited in the New Humanitarian (NH) (2022:4) complains that "the selection process for the commissioners was 'not clear' and claims that opposition parties were not consulted." This means the dialogue does not allow the actors to be part of the process. Let alone the political parties, all the concerned citizens (youths, adults, elders, girls, boys, women, and men) are expected to participate transparently in the dialogue to be successful (USIOP, 2015). This indicates that, as national dialogues are not one-sided, they should engage divers interests in the negotiation process, but such an aforementioned complain has its own black point on the success of the national dialogue of Ethiopia.

3.3. A Credible and Neutral Convener

Credible, respected and political interest-free convener which can take a form of an organization, or a coalition of organizations, a single person, a group of people is of the extreme importance as it is a key to bring stake holders to the dialogue by reducing and avoiding the perception of bias (Haider, 2019, USIOP, 2015, Berghof Foundation, 2017; and IFSS, 2020).

In the case of Ethiopia's national dialogue, what is questioned is the influence of the ruling party. The initiative was taken by the ruling party rather than by a credible and respected neutral body. Edjeta (2022:6) states the initial process of the national dialogue as "The draft proclamation was prepared by the Council of Ministers, a core part of the executive. Later, it was enacted by parliament, a body controlled overwhelmingly by the ruling party. Thus, the commission's formation was not neutral." The Proclamation cited here refers to proclamation of the national dialogue of Ethiopia, which is the start of the process. In the aforementioned extract, the commission's formation is said to be not neutral because the convener (government) is suspected to use the dialogue for its political interest.

In the first place, national dialogues are carried out when the sitting government and the existing institutions are not able to solve the crisis a country is facing or when they are seen as illegitimate or incredible (USIOP, 2015).

In the case of Ethiopia's national dialogue, however, it is the government (parliament and the council of the minister) that ratified not only the proclamation but also the election of the commissioners who were given to lead the dialogue. Still, it does not mean that the ruling party should not be included, but as has been aforementioned, that is to mean that the ruling party should not lead the process (Woldegiorgis, 2022). Equbamichael (2022) states that the main armed groups, and the main opposition parties do not trust the one who lead the dialogue process of Ethiopia. It is probably the interference of the ruling party which has drawn the process of the national dialogue of Ethiopia into doubt of opposition parties or the people. This is one of the initial defects of the Ethiopia's national dialogue process.

3.4. Agenda that Address the Root Causes of Conflicts.

National dialogue thought to kick its goal does not dangle on superficial and one sided interest based agenda. Rather, it should be based on key issues which are and can be actual or potential root causes of violent conflicts a country is confronting or likely to confront and which can be reached upon with long time (months or even years) negotiating (Haider, 2019, USIOP, 2015, Berghof Foundation, 2017; and IFSS, 2020).

Concerning the far reaching root causes that can be raised in the national dialogue of Ethiopia, they are not yet known.

As far as the knowledge of this essay author is concerned, the system of government (unitary, federalism, confederate -Ethnic or geographical), the issue of constitution, contested historical narratives may be some of the hot agenda that can be discussed. However, the government is blamed from the inception not to be willing to put some of these agenda for discussion. For example, concerning the oppressor and oppressed narration based constitution which is said to be the source of political problems in Ethiopia, Buayalew (2022) states that the government is not willing to amend it.

Whatever the agenda are, that sounds that the interest of the ruling party will dominate them as it has already put its hand in the process. To substantiate this, Rahel (2022) as cited in NH (2022, 5) claims that "the Prosperity Party is approaching the dialogue as the arbiter of the process, rather than as another equal stakeholder against whom accusations will eventually be leveled." This indicates that the ruling party is dominating the process of the national dialogue.

That is one of the reasons that it is recommended that the ruling parties should not take the mandate to process the dialogue. For instance, Woldegiorgis (2022, p.2) argues that "The government cannot be a convener, nor should it have any role in the selection of the participants of the National Dialogue for obvious reasons." However, this is not the case in the national dialogue of Ethiopia.

3.5. Clear Mandate and Appropriately Tailored Structure, Rules, and Procedures

If it is needed to undergo a national dialogue which can achieve its set goals, it should have its own clear mandate which gives purpose and authority to a national dialogue, set of transparent and carefully tailored procedures with mechanisms to break deadlocks and rules so that transparent decisions should be made and composes the nature of far-reaching agenda (Haider, 2019, USIOP, 2015, Berghof Foundation, 2017; and IFSS, 2020).

In this case too, a clear mandate and authority of the planned national dialogue has not been clearly seen so far to address different issues that should be raised in the dialogue.

There are 11 simplistic tasks and responsibilities listed in the Draft Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission Establishment Proclamation, but the game seems to be over when the ruling party interfered in the process. Based on the back ground of the elected commissioners, one can say the mandate of the commission is not different from the mandate of the ruling party (Mulatu, 2022).

3.6. Agreed Mechanism for Implementation of Outcomes

The success of national dialogue is judged not only on the dialogue process and the dialogue itself but also on the interpretation of the dialogue outcomes into practice. Therefore, national dialogues to be successful should put agreed upon plans that can ensure that the recommendation gained from the dialogue can be implemented, being incorporated in new constitution, policy, law, and other programs (Haider, 2019, USIOP, 2015, Berghof Foundation, 2017; and IFSS, 2020).

Since the Ethiopia's national dialogue has not been undergone yet, one cannot definitely conclude about the mechanisms of outcome implementation, but except stating that the commission facilitates to implement the recommendations, the Draft Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission Establishment Proclamation does not state any mechanism that shows how the recommendations are implemented on the ground.

3.7. The Role of External Actors and National Ownership

To conduct national dialogue that can be fruitful for its purpose, the responsible body should keep the balance between external interference like in support (political, financial and Technical support) or resistance of external actors and national ownership which is more decisive than the former (Haider, 2019, USIOP, 2015). When one sees in the ongoing national dialogue of Ethiopia, the government officials who took the initiative seem to have lost confidence. For the success of the dialogue, they have given emphasis to foreign organizations rather than national ownership of the dialogue. For

example, Ambassador Tekeda Alemu, co-chair of the steering committee for an inclusive national dialogue in Ethiopia, and former state minister of foreign affairs and permanent representative of Ethiopia to the United Nations, says to Berghof Foundation (an organization whose base is in Germany), “The fact that there is great need for national consensus in Ethiopia has become more clear than ever... Without the support of the Berghof Foundation, it would not have been possible to achieve what we have been able to do so far.” (Berghof Foundation, 2022:2). This means it is not possible to achieve the goal of the national dialogue without the support of this foreign organization, but the support like this is likely to open the door for the interference of external actors who come under the disguise of technical, financial, and political support (Haider, 2019, USIOP, 2015).

This, in turn, indicates that there may be interference of other foreign organizations and countries behind the scene of the national dialogue of Ethiopia.

The aforementioned principles alone cannot guarantee the success of a national dialogue. Even a national dialogue that fulfills those principles cannot be fruitful if other factors out of the dialogue are not conducive (Haider, 2019). Hidedr states that one of such factors is political context in which a national dialogue is carried out and some of the factors in political context are political will and elite agreement, the links to other transitional processes like constitution-making, Common ground among parties, Public buy-in, the past experience (Haider, 2019). However, the national dialogue of Ethiopia has been planned to take place in the absence of such features.

Conclusion

In Ethiopia’s national dialogue process, the conveners’ neutrality which is the key for other principles of national dialogue has been put under question from the beginning, so have other principles of national dialogue such as representation and inclusiveness. As the initiative for the dialogue has been taken and some of the activities have been done exclusively by the ruling party, it sounds that the ruling party has influenced the ongoing process of the national dialogue. The opposition political parties which should have a buy-in for the dialogue to be successful have already started complaining about being excluded from the initial process of the dialogue. Moreover, the armed groups which are the main players in the political crisis of Ethiopia are not still part of the dialogue process. Based on all these, one can conclude that the national dialog of Ethiopia is not going in the right way to be a solution for the political crisis we see in Ethiopia these days. If it is not corrected from the beginning, the national dialogue is going to be futile as they say, “You cannot change the fruit without changing the root.”

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