



## Critical Appraisal of Challenges and Prospects of Ethiopia's National Dialogue

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### Abstract

Before the end of 2021, on December 29, the Ethiopian Parliament adopted a law establishing a National Dialogue Commission with the objective of bolstering national consensus and restoring social values in Ethiopia. Since then, a number of other actions have been taken, including the establishment of a list of eleven people to function as commissioners. Despite its establishment by the house of people representative, various stakeholders have expressed their ambitions and worries about the success of the dialogue commission and its impartiality and inclusiveness. A principled national dialogue has been shown to build national consensus on social, political, or economic issues through an open and tolerant exchange of ideas. Such a national dialogue must encompass a broad range of stakeholders in all three phases—preparation, process, and implementation—in order to succeed. However, there are concerning issues that should be considered as a challenge in all three phases, including but not limited to partiality, the active fighting in the region, and exclusionary. The challenges would lead to the aborting of the objectives of the national dialogue unless they were dealt with carefully and with strong regard in all stages of the national dialogue. If it is done carefully, it has the prospects of creating legitimacy for national institutions, and then, afterward, it could pave the way for the smoothing of national dialogue, which has the vision of creating a common future among nations. and acceptance in the process of the national dialogue. This paper has the objective of assessing the prospects and challenges of the Ethiopian

national dialogue and to recommend a better approach to counter the undermining factors in the dialogue process. In doing so, it assesses the prospects and challenges of national dialogue from the perspective of other states' experiences in the same milieu. Against this background, the study employs an extended literature review method from the touch stones of Berghof foundation reports on the national dialogue. After a profound assessment of the prospects and challenges of Ethiopian national dialogue, building peace in the war-torn areas of the country, and the willingness and commitment of political parties, are some of the tangible challenges. whereas, creating an inclusive nation-building process, enhancing rule of law, and democratization are the prospects of the national dialogue. The study makes the recommendation that, for a successful national dialogue in Ethiopia, peace building with political parties in the northern part of Ethiopia, a ceasefire agreement with the OLF (aka Shane), consultation with major stakeholders, extending the term limits of the national dialogue commission, establishing ad hoc panel of historians, including major political parties, securing the impartiality of the conveners of the national dialogue, mainly in the process phase, and limiting the involvement of the executive branch from interference in all stages are necessary

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**Keywords:** Ethiopia, National Dialogue, National Dialogue Commission, Challenges, Prospect

## 1. Introduction

National dialogue is an instrument for political transformation and conflict resolution. It is also a mechanism for rebuilding a nation divided due to a deep-rooted historical rift. It is also a political dispensation saga that allows the people to debate their own fate outside of the regular decision-making mechanism that is already in place. Various nations, including Yemen, Afghanistan, Benin, and South Africa, have used the national dialogue platform to reconcile their socio-political differences and beyond.<sup>1</sup> In chorus, on December 29, 2021, Ethiopia's house of people's representatives (HoPR) approved the establishment of the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission under Proclamation No. 1265/2021.<sup>2</sup> The proclamation establishing the Commission stated the importance of conducting an inclusive national dialogue for bolstering national consensus

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<sup>1</sup> Thania Paffenholz, Anne Zachariassen and Cindy Helfer, 'What Makes or Breaks National Dialogues?' 10.

<sup>2</sup> Addis Standard, 'Analysis: Ethiopia's National Dialogue: Views of Hopes, Aspirations and Concerns from Amhara Region' (*Addis Standard*, 25 July 2022) <<https://addisstandard.com/analysis-ethiopias-national-dialogue-views-of-hopes-aspirations-and-concerns-from-amhara-region/>> accessed 6 January 2023.

and restoring social values in Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup> The proclamation addressed the need for the national dialogue to be broad-based and inclusive enough in its ins and outs. The proclamation clearly listed out the key principles of national dialogue.

Despite the establishment of Ethiopia's national dialogue commission, various stakeholders have expressed their ambitions, worries, and prospects for the anticipated national dialogue, cognizant of challenges including but not limited to the impartiality of the conveners, the active fighting in Oromia, and the exclusivity of the process. Whereas, if it has curbed these challenges, done so, it has the prospects of enhancing peace and security, democratization, constitutionalism, and, most essential, it serves as a catalyst for the national building process.

This paper evaluates the prospects and difficulties of the Ethiopian national dialogue process and suggests a better strategy to counter the undermining factors in the dialogue process. In doing so, it evaluates the opportunities and difficulties of national dialogue from the standpoint of other states' experiences within the same environment. In light of this, the study uses an expanded literature review methodology.

The assessment questions:

- What are the factual and procedural challenges for the success of Ethiopia's national dialogue?
- What are the prospects of the national dialogue if all the challenges are fully scrutinized and responded to accordingly according to the right tenets of national dialogue?

By way of providing answers to this question, the study makes formidable recommendations as a way forward. The study proceeds as follows: the first section discusses the notion of national dialogue from its conceptual touchstone. In this section, the phases of national dialogue, the methodology employed, and its objectives are discussed. The second section outlines the legal regime establishing Ethiopian national dialogue. The third section assesses the challenges and prospects of Ethiopian national dialogue. In this section, the facts, challenges, and prospects are examined. Other countries' experiences with similar situations are also considered in between. The last section is devoted to ways forward and the conclusion.

## **1.2. Methodology of the study**

The study is purely qualitative as it employs qualitative data from secondary sources. The data on the challenges and prospects of Ethiopian national dialogues were collected from secondary sources such as books, reports,

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<sup>3</sup> 'Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission Establishment Proclamation No. 1265-2021' para 2

websites, newspapers, and journals. The collected data were analyzed using the touchstones of successful national dialogues tools provided under Berghof foundation.

## 2. Understanding National Dialogue

National Dialogues offer a broad, open, and participatory official negotiation framework that can help countries move into new political regimes and resolve political crises.<sup>4</sup> National Dialogues are held to discuss topics of national importance, usually long-standing causes of conflict that have been forced to the forefront by political protest or armed revolt. Its mandates typically include political reforms, constitution-making, and peacebuilding.<sup>5</sup> A principled national dialogue has been shown to build national consensus on social, political, or economic issues through an open and tolerant exchange of ideas. As per the experiences of states that have undergone national dialogue, it typically starts when the existing national process is ineffective, nonexistent, lacking in legitimacy, and not inclusive enough.<sup>6</sup>

Plenary sessions and working groups are frequently combined in National Dialogues, which also have established structures, standards, and processes for deliberation. They can endure anywhere from a few days to several years, and can vary in size and composition from a hundred people to several thousand.<sup>7</sup> In order to inform the public about the discussions' conclusions and take their demands into consideration, larger-scale societal consultations are frequently performed in conjunction with national dialogues. They could be put into action through consultations, commissions, high-level problem-solving meetings, and/or referendums. Including the entire society in a National Dialogue encourages ownership of its conclusions and strengthens the sustainability of execution.<sup>8</sup>

In order to consider a given dialogue process as a national process, there must be certain elements that have to be fulfilled from the outset. The process must be on a national scale, address national issues, and involve honest and constructive<sup>9</sup>. The immediate reasons are bottom-up movements, either through protests or revolts, despite the fact that national dialogues are held to address long-standing and long-lived political and historical issues inside a single country. As a result, the incumbent is compelled to start the national debate in order to clarify its legitimacy and increase its authority,

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<sup>4</sup> Paffenholz, Zachariassen and Helfer (n 1) 11.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Katia Papagianni, 'National Dialogue Processes in Political Transitions' 1.

<sup>7</sup> Paffenholz, Zachariassen and Helfer (n 1) 11.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* 14.

<sup>9</sup> Christina Murray, 'National Dialogues and Constitution Making' 4.

while the forces of change utilize it as a vehicle to address the country's structural issues.

## **2.1. National Dialogue's Goals**

National dialogues are set up in response to a range of situations. They are held to discuss important national issues that have an impact on the entire nation. Such examples include serious political deadlocks or hindered political institutions. In these situations, they serve as crisis managers by working to defuse tensions, get political support, or even establish new institutional structures. Nationwide discussions also take place when a nation is recovering from a civil war or has undergone a political transition since these situations call for lengthier procedures and the delegitimization of the previous political institutions. According to the purpose they aspire to serve, the Berghof Foundation has divided national dialogue objectives into two categories: Using national discourse as a tool for crisis management and transformation at the root causes.<sup>10</sup>

### **2.1.1. National Dialogue as Mechanisms for Crisis Prevention and Management**

Under the following precise goals, a national debate on crisis management and prevention may be organized.

- A tactically undertaken shorter-term project to resolve or stop the escalation of armed conflict.
- The main goals are to end political impasses and restore a minimal level of political consensus so that additional reform and change-related initiatives can be discussed.
- Important features include smaller size and shorter duration, which are indicative of regulations with less restrictions.
- They are frequently simpler to manage because there are usually fewer individuals engaged, but they may also indicate a less inclusive structure, making it challenging to achieve widespread society buy-in for desired changes.<sup>11</sup>

### **2.1.2. National Dialogues as Mechanisms for Fundamental Change**

- Longer-term initiatives envisioned as a way to reshape state-society relationships or create a new "social contract"
- Longer-term initiatives envisioned as a way to reshape state-society relationships or create a new "social contract" Yemen is a good

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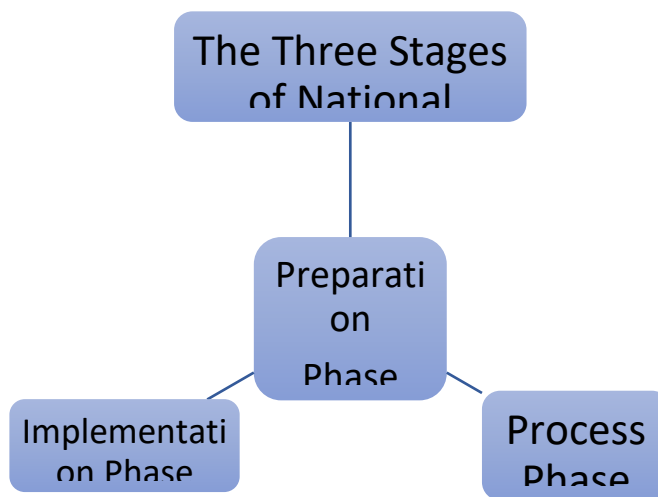
<sup>10</sup> Berghof Foundation (ed), *National Dialogue Handbook: A Guide for Practitioners / Berghof Foundation* (Berghof Foundation Operations GmbH 2017) 20.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

- example of this. ○ Important traits: broad mission and frequently rather substantial size
- attempting to garner widespread support and involve a significant portion of society. They must deal with the difficulties of managing complicated processes.
- Efforts with a longer-term trajectory, envisioned as a means to redefine state-society relations, or establish a new ‘social contract.’<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2. Phases of National Dialogue

The national dialogue has three consecutive phases. preparation, process, and implementation stages.



**Figure 1.** Phases of National Dialogue

### 2.2.1. Preparation Phase

Every national dialogue process includes a stage for preparation, and this stage is crucial. The practices of states depicted that the preparation stage contained a mini-negotiation stage to build confidence among parties, elites, and the general public.<sup>13</sup> This primarily functions in war-torn or conflict-ridden countries. The agreements focus on averting violent conflict, mending the bonds between the state and society, and working to rebuild the political order and infrastructure after a conflict. Furthermore, it is a time frame to negotiate constructive frameworks for the process.<sup>14</sup>

The phase incorporated mini-basic sub-stages such as, exploration, consultations between parties and across party lines, mandate setting, the

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid* 38.

<sup>14</sup> Berghof Foundation, ‘National Dialogue Handbook A Guide for Practitioners’ 2.

official announcement of the National Dialogue, and the establishment of a planning framework. Participants and inclusionary methods are identified within such sub-phases, together with pertinent information regarding the national dialogue and an awareness of the positions and viewpoints of various stakeholders. The establishment of the agenda, its structure, and the choice of participants will come next.<sup>15</sup>

### 2.2.2. The Process Phase

The process phase occupies the monumental phase of a national dialogue. The National Dialogue's process phase is the most well publicized, and the real involvement of every stakeholder is practically perceived. The same as the preparation phase, the process phase also has significant tasks, stated below in the table.

No.	Tasks	Issues covered
1	Setting the agenda	It lays out the agendas that will be discussed in order. The sub-phase aids in fostering and generating among the populace a common understanding of positions and vision.
2.	Finding a trusted and credible convener	It is the procedure for selecting numerous reliable conveners from various societal and institutional groups.
3.	Determining size	In this sub-phase, the makeup and projected sizes of the groups participating in the discourse are decided.
4.	Selecting participants	The purpose of this subphase is to decide who will participate in the dialogue. A complex, multi-step process is frequently used to choose participants, and it should be planned to reflect the sociological makeup of the society in relation to the issue(s) at hand.
5.	Setting guiding principles and ground rules:	The ability to watch the process and engage effectively is supported by procedural fairness, which is a crucial component in building legitimacy.
6.	Developing decision-making and consensus building modalities	The majority of processes feature built-in defence mechanisms and a multi-step development process. It encourages legitimacy and a strong commitment from a wide variety of actors to the process and its results when done correctly.
7.	Engaging the public	Public outreach and consultation are required to ensure that the procedure will be followed by society as a whole. Public support and buy-in are increased when people can participate in the process and follow it while offering comments at various points.
8.	Creating support structures, deadlock-breaking mechanisms and safety nets:	These frameworks have been specifically created to aid in breaking through impasses and stalemates and to maintain the fundamental discourse and negotiation process. It is crucial to make use of national customary methods and tools that have been employed to forge agreements and end impasses.

**Figure:2**<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Berghof Foundation (n 10) 39.

<sup>16</sup> Berghof Foundation (n 14) 3.

### 2.2.3. The Implementation Phase

The third and the last phase of national dialogue is implementation phase. The phase mainly emphasis on the manner of changing commitments made in the whole process into action and the process is nailed.

The implementation phase is the third and last stage of the national dialogue. The process is nailed at this phase, which mostly focuses on how to put promises made during the entire process into action. Both short-term and long-term results are applied during the implementation phase. Results could be tangible or intangible. Changes to the constitution, security transition, dealing with the past, and transitional justice are the immediate results. While relationship building and civic education are intangible results.<sup>17</sup>

The proper implementation of the outcomes in the entire process, several strategies, such as (1) infrastructure for implementation, (2) guarantees and monitoring systems, and (3) follow-up dialogue forums, can aid in the implementation phase. It is possible to encourage thorough implementation and deepen change processes by sticking to the spirit of the process and developing the implementation phase in an open and participatory way.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, maximum care should be taken while practically putting promises into action during the implementation phase. Vital concerns include managing excessive expectations and ambition through inclusion of all, transformation, and being open to dialogue.<sup>19</sup>

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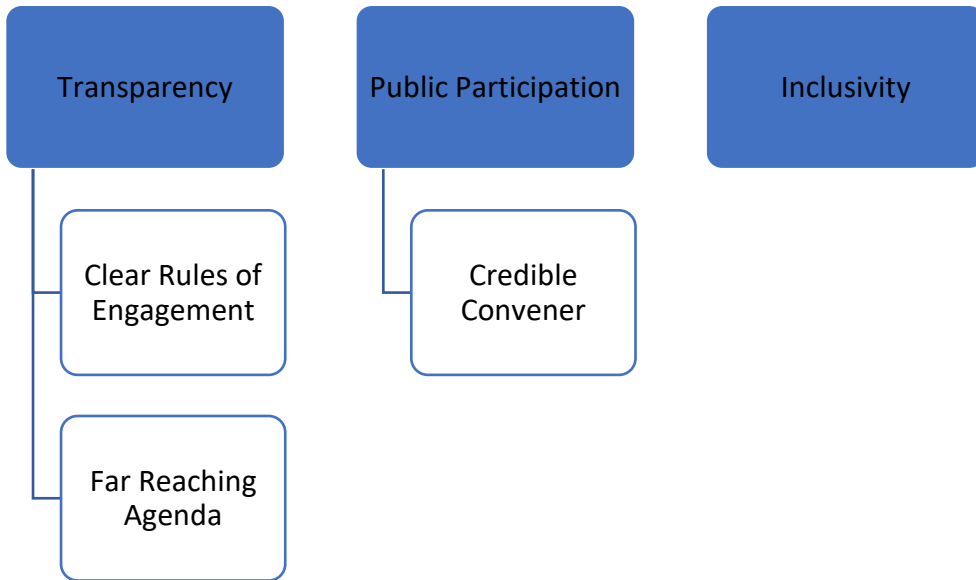
<sup>17</sup> *ibid* 4.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid* 7.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid* 4.



### 2.3. The Key Principles of National Dialogue



**Figure two:** Key Principles of National Dialogue.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. A Basic Overview of Ethiopia’s National Dialogue

Ethiopia is a country with a proud history of continuing statehood and a magnificent record of anti-colonial struggle against external domination.<sup>21</sup> It is also an iconic nation for its perpetual legacy as a cradle of human civilization and the leadership of the Pan-African movement.<sup>22</sup> Ethiopia has gone through several governance systems including autocratic monarchy, military dictatorship, and a federal system of government based on ethno-regional political dispensation.

Despite an extended statehood and perpetual governance system, Ethiopia is unable to create a system in which all of the country's nations and people share a similar fate and vision. Ethiopian state-building (formation) process, from emperor Tewodros to the current administration run by the Prosperity Party (PP), demonstrates some continuity in the attempt to control

<sup>20</sup> ‘Principles on National Dialogue: Drawing Lessons from Abroad – The National Transitional Justice Working Group’ <<https://ntjwg.org.zw/principles-on-national-dialogue-drawing-lessons-from-abroad/>> accessed 21 February 2023.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Envisioning The Prospects of The National Dialogue | The Reporter | Latest Ethiopian News Today’ (30 July 2022) <<https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/25344/>> accessed 21 February 2023.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

a vast territory through an administrative and bureaucratic control structure, through which the central government's authority is maintained and enforced over the people within its jurisdiction; financial, military, and international assistance to legitimize and reinforce. Nonetheless, the process of building a country is still ongoing and could not move forward by drawing the lessons of state perpetuality.<sup>23</sup>

Many backyard reasons can be claimed for the slow move of the national building process, which resides in competing identities and political visions, conflicting memories, a proclivity toward, and resistance to, a univocal memorialization of the past, a contested and ambivalent pedagogy of history, and a clash of competing future visions.<sup>24</sup> Under the backdrop of bolstering national consensus and restoring social values, the Ethiopian government launched a national dialogue on December 29, 2021, and the House of People's Representatives (HoPR) approved the establishment of the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission under Proclamation No. 1265/202. The proclamation establishing the Commission stated the importance of conducting an inclusive national dialogue for bolstering national consensus and restoring social values in Ethiopia.<sup>25</sup>

The national discussion commission may choose to focus on one or more of the diverse agendas that various political parties and individuals in Ethiopia have, some of which have already been identified as untouchable. Nevertheless, in large part, the outstanding items of the proposed dialogue may include, but are not limited to: the status of the FDRE Constitution; the type of federalism to consider, adopt, and pursue as the country's promising and credible system of governance; the principal colors and symbols to opt for in crafting the national flag; national heroes; contested regional states boundaries; and the preference of individual rights over collective or group rights.<sup>26</sup> Aside from mentioning the agenda for the commission established to carry out the main task of the dialogue, the success of any national dialogue is dependent on anticipating the challenges it will face and working on a mechanism to address those challenges. The subsequent section of the paper scrutinizes the challenges and prospects of Ethiopia's national dialogue.

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<sup>23</sup> Estifanos Balew Liyew, 'GERD: A Catalyst for Nation-Building Process in Ethiopia' [2022] Qeios <<https://www.queios.com/read/LJ39BR>> accessed 26 February 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Tegbaru Yared, 'Ethiopia's National Dialogue: Reconciling Competing Approaches' 11.

<sup>25</sup> 'Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission Establishment Proclamation No. 1265-2021' para 2

<sup>26</sup> 'Envisioning The Prospects of The National Dialogue | The Reporter | Latest Ethiopian News Today' (30 July 2022) <<https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/25344/>> accessed 12 February 2023.

### **3.1. The Legal Regime Governing National Dialogue in Ethiopia**

#### **3.1.1. The National Dialogue Commission Establishing Proclamation.**

The house of representatives enacted a proclamation cited as "The Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission Proclamation No. 1265/2021." The proclamation has five parts: the preamble, general provisions, establishment of the commission, the commissioners, and the structure of the commission and miscellaneous. The proclamation was issued with the goals of strengthening national consensus along the way, creating a culture of trust and collaboration, and mending damaged social values in order to restore social values.<sup>27</sup> And this has been done because of the existing differences of opinion and disagreements among various political and opinion leaders and also segments of society in Ethiopia on the most fundamental national issues.<sup>28</sup>

The proclamation defined national dialogues as a consultation of different bodies facilitated by the Council of Commissions at the Federal and Regional levels on the agendas identified by the act and the commission.<sup>29</sup> It has also established the Commission containing 11 members nominated, appointed, and accountable to it by HoPR for three years of the term office.<sup>30</sup> The proclamation clearly listed out the key principles of national dialogue conveners and the general aspect of it, namely, inclusivity; b) transparency; c) credibility; d) tolerance and mutual respect; e) rationality; f) implementation and context sensitivity; g) impartiality and capability for the purposes of legitimacy, depth, and relevance of agendas; i) democracy and the rule of law; j) national interest; k) using national traditional knowledge and values.<sup>31</sup>

### **3.2. Assessing the Challenges and Prospects of Ethiopia's National Dialogue**

Multiple states have undertaken the initiative of national dialogue for the purposes of solving their political, social, and economic problems. Nonetheless, only a few of the states that have participated in the national dialogue have succeeded, while others have been unable to execute properly and have thus failed. For instance, Tunisia has undertaken the national dialogue that can save the country from collapse in 2013. Sudan, on the other hand, initiated a national dialogue that was later abandoned due to the ruling

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<sup>27</sup> 'Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission Establishment Proclamation No. 1265-2021' (n 3) para 2.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid* 1.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid* 2(3).

<sup>30</sup> *ibid* 11.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid* 3.

party's interference in 2014-2016.<sup>32</sup> It is clear that there are numerous factors that will influence the success or failure of a national dialogue. The factors begin with the political environment and the process, which were particularly crucial in permitting or limiting the outcomes of national dialogues.<sup>33</sup>

In the upcoming section, I assess the challenges and prospects of Ethiopia's national dialogue, respectively, by contending and listing out arguments based on the experiences of other states and facts on the ground from the side of Ethiopia and other prospective stakeholders.

### **3.2.1. The Challenges of Ethiopia's National Dialogue**

#### **3.2.1.1. The Continuing Active Fighting with Insurgents in the Regional States of Oromia**

Every national dialogue should confer the features of inclusivity and credibility from the start, and there must be an enabling political and social environment to foster conversations, forge agreements, and build consensus on the fundamental political questions among all political parties and interested groups.<sup>34</sup> Put simply, nobody should be left out of the national dialogue that could determine its fate.

The active war in Southern and Western Oromia with OLA, aka Shane, renders the national dialogue process meaningless.<sup>35</sup> By temporarily setting aside the legitimacy of the insurgent group's concerns towards the Federal Government of Ethiopia, Ethiopians cannot find common ground on the future of the country by engaging in half-hearted and exclusionary processes of national dialogue. Crucially, a genuine dialogue cannot unfold while major armed conflicts are ongoing. The government must seek a peaceful end to the conflict with the Oromo Liberation Army. This must happen for the success of the national dialogue in all its forms.

Important lessons from the national dialogues in Tunisia and Yemen should be taken into account and drawn. For example, in some circumstances, the complaints of secessionist movements should be

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<sup>32</sup> Dehinasew Shemelis Andualem, 'National Dialogue of Ethiopia: Is It on the Right Track?' (2022) 18 *European Scientific Journal*, ESJ 71, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Paffenholz, Zachariassen and Helfer (n 1) 12.

<sup>34</sup> Awol Allo, 'Ethiopia's National Dialogue Needs to Include Everyone' (*Foreign Policy*, 24 January 2022) <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/24/ethiopian-national-dialogue-needs-to-include-everyone/>> accessed 12 February 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Addis Standard, 'Commentary: Ethiopian National Dialogue Proclamation: A Camouflage for Monologue?' (*Addis Standard*, 6 September 2022) <<https://addisstandard.com/commentary-the-ethiopian-national-dialogue-proclamation-a-camouflage-for-monologue/>> accessed 6 January 2023.

addressed independently before entering into a national dialogue.<sup>36</sup> This has the potential to help in the process of fostering trust within and among political groups involved in conflict with the ruling party and those who are vying for power through peaceful methods, as well as in the implementation of the results of the national conversation. Additionally, it decreases the national dialogue's tasks in advance.

The recent peace talks between the Federal Government of Ethiopia and the OLF-OLA, alias Shane, in Tanzania, under the auspices of IGAD and the Norwegian government, are a positive development for both the national dialogue and the peace and security of the nation. While this paper is being written, the first round of peace negotiations came to a close with disagreements on both sides but a positive understanding of how to move forward.

Even though there would be a compromise on both sides right away, the Horn States' experiences show that limiting the participation of military factions in the national dialogue could leave the highly anticipated national dialogue without a deal and lead to a miscarriage of the dialogue's results. The best example in this regard was the national dialogue between Sudan, South Sudan, and Kenya.<sup>37</sup>

The dialogue between the current presidents of Sudan and South Sudan were launched without the involvement of many significant opposition or military groups. This turned out to be a flaw, eroding the credibility of the conversations during the planning stage and later impeding the execution of outcomes.<sup>38</sup>

In fact, every stakeholder anticipating to take part in the national dialogue have to make itself ready for significant and painful compromises from the outset. The same goes to the OLA and the Federal government of Ethiopia.

### **3.2.1.2. A Steadfast Opposing Historical Narratives**

Ethiopia is the home of a "war of visions" as to its future.<sup>39</sup> For some Ethiopia has a glorious history. For others, it's a colonial state that was a prison for nations and nationalities.<sup>40</sup> The thesis and antithesis of these two

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<sup>36</sup> Hannah Hamidi, 'A Comparative Analysis of the Post- Arab Spring National Dialogues in Tunisia and Yemen' 23.

<sup>37</sup> ISSAfrica.org, 'Ethiopia Can Learn from Its Neighbor's about National Dialogue' (*ISS Africa*, 7 September 2020) <<https://issafrika.org/iss-today/ethiopia-can-learn-from-its-neighbours-about-national-dialogue>> accessed 21 February 2023.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Standard, 'Analysis' (n 2).

<sup>40</sup> Yared (n 24) 10.

mutually exclusive approaches are the source of Ethiopia's historical and political kinks. In chorus, finding the common ground between Ethiopian elites and politics is tiresome. Even a glimmer of hope among political parties is dependent on political alliance calculations rather than facts or the outcome of consensus.

Ethiopians don't agree on history, heroes, flags, statues, the anthem, or other national symbols and many more.<sup>41</sup> A myriad of historical narratives are the source of deep-rooted cleavage, and they have been used as tools to incite violence. From all, the vision of centralization and the decentralized system approaches are the two anchor debatable approaches in Ethiopia.<sup>42</sup> The centralization strategy is motivated by a desire to recapture quasi-unitarian powers that have, at least de jure, been lost through the years. On the opposing side, there is a vision of Federalism that includes increased power devolution, increased autonomy, confederal arrangements, self-determination, and possibly even secession.<sup>43</sup>

In light of this, the rival political parties and the central government's internal structure and machinery are deeply ingrained with distinct narratives. It would be difficult to resolve the sharp narrative disparities and reach an agreement, which would be the main impediment to Ethiopia's national dialogue.

### **3.2.1.3. Partiality of the Conveners of the National Dialogue**

Public trust in the person who convenes a national dialogue is especially critical in a deeply polarized society like Ethiopia. A credible, broadly accepted, independent, respected, and charismatic convener, mediator, or facilitator can significantly affect the strength of the national dialogue, indicating seriousness and trust in the process.<sup>44</sup> The whole process depends on the integrity, impartiality, and public perception of the conveners. Even though having an impartial convener is so critical, the commission should need to select a convener who has credibility.

The experiences of many states depict that national dialogues are more legitimate when they are led by trustworthy individuals and organizations. The legitimacy of the process and its results depend on the organizers' selection, vetting, and appointment procedures.

The presidents of South Sudan and Sudan chose the organizers of their respective nations' discussions, with little to no consultation with armed opposition groups and opposition parties. The event in Kenya was arranged by the African Union Panel of Eminent African Personalities, which is led by

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<sup>41</sup> Allo (n 34).

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Huma Haider, 'National Dialogues: Lessons Learned and Success Factors' 3.

former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan. As a result, accusations of partiality against the KNDR were greatly diminished. Yet, it did increase opposition to the notion of local ownership.<sup>45</sup>

In Ethiopia's national dialogue, several opposition political party members, for example, claim that the government placed restrictions on their ability to participate in the National Dialogue Commission's appointment and the proclamation's drafting process.<sup>46</sup> They claimed that the government influenced the PPJC's discussion of the draft Bill by acting both as a party and as the government.<sup>47</sup> As per the study recently conducted by the final 11 commissioners as mostly sympathetic to Abiy's government, a perception that prompted one observer to describe the national dialogue as "an intra-party negotiation within the ruling Prosperity Party that will not resolve the country's intractable political debates."<sup>48</sup>

### 3.2.1.3. Withdrawal and Boycott of Political Parties and Exclusivity of the National Dialogue Process.

The degree of inclusiveness, and extent to which different political actors and segments of society are included, shapes significantly whether stakeholders view the national dialogue as a valid way in which to address their grievances and aspirations.<sup>49</sup> Following exclusionary methods followed by the parliament, three main opposition parties have joined the boycott and withdrawal from the national dialogue process. These were withdrawn from the national dialogue, including OFC, ONLF, and OLF.<sup>50</sup>

In the peace process held in Sudan in a consistent failure of past negotiations in Sudan is that they most often involved only the belligerents: the government and armed rebels. The silent majority was never defeated. involved, including, for example, victims of conflict such as refugees and the internally displaced.<sup>51</sup>

The transformative potential of national dialogues can only be realized if they are genuinely inclusive of all segments of political parties; if

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<sup>45</sup> ISSAfrica.org (n 37).

<sup>46</sup> Yared (n 24) 15.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> 'Ethiopia Launches a National Dialogue, but Divisions Run Deep' (*The New Humanitarian*, 18 April 2022) <<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2022/04/18/ethiopia-launches-national-dialogue-divisions-run-deep>> accessed 12 February 2023.

<sup>49</sup> Berghof Foundation (n 10).

<sup>50</sup> Addis Standard, 'News: Ruling Party Reiterates Inclusive Dialogue Wont Include "terrorist" Groups' (*Addis Standard*, 16 February 2022) <<https://addisstandard.com/news-ruling-party-reiterates-inclusive-dialogue-wont-include-terrorist-groups/>> accessed 1 March 2023.

<sup>51</sup> '2829-SDFG-National-Dialogue-in-Sudan-Report-Final.Pdf' 2.

an inclusive approach is not followed, the legitimacy of the process and a sense of ownership could be undermined from the outset. The degree of inclusiveness affects whether stakeholders accept the mandate, agenda, or other decisions made. In Tunisia, the national dialogue was, in fact, seen by all as an opportunity to peacefully re-establish order in a country that prided itself on being the original and most pacific of the Arab Spring countries.<sup>52</sup>

As per the statements of Rahel Bafe, chairwoman of the Ethiopian Political Parties Joint Council (EPPJC), a coalition of more than 50 opposition groups, said 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 levelled.<sup>53</sup> She is critical of the selection process that appointed the national dialogue's 11 commissioners. They were chosen on 21 February from a 42-person short-list issued by parliament, which was itself based on a longer list of 623 candidates.<sup>54</sup> Rahel said that, the selection process for the commissioners was "not clear" and claims that opposition parties were not consulted.<sup>55</sup> To this end, the withdrawal and boycott of political parties from the national dialogue in advance would critically undermine the success of the national dialogue with no reservation.

#### **3.2.1.4. The Ills and Consequences of the Tigray War**

The two-year conflict between the Tigray regional state and ENDF and its affiliates had resulted in the deaths and displacement of more than hundred thousand. As per the estimates provided by Ghent University, Belgium, 600,000 non-combatants died during the Tigrayan War between November 2020 and November 2022. Many of them starved to death. If one adds fighters who died in combat, the total number of deaths could approach 1 million.<sup>56</sup>

The civil war mostly affected the regional states of Tigray, Amhara, and Afar. Despite the fact that the civil war ended as a result of the peace accord signed in Pretoria, South Africa, on November 2, 2022, the people of the Amhara regional states did not warmly accept the pacts. Specifically, the Nairobi Declaration of the Senior Commanders on the Modalities for the Implementation of the agreement for Lasting Peace Through Permanent Cessation of Hostilities Between FDRE and TPLF paragraph 2(2.1) (d) has been the Pandora box.

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<sup>52</sup> Hamidi (n 36) 9.

<sup>53</sup> 'Ethiopia Launches a National Dialogue, but Divisions Run Deep' (n 48).

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> 'Ethiopia's Tigray War and the "Big Lie" behind the 600,' <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-02-22-ethiopias-tigray-war-and-the-big-lie-behind-the-century-defining-600000-civilian-deaths/> accessed 11 May 2023.



As per the reading of the declaration; “Disarmament of heavy weapons will be done concurrently with the withdrawal of foreign and non-ENDF forces from the region”.<sup>57</sup>

The clause vividly ordered the reinstatement of the controversial areas of Welkait and Raya to the Tigray regional states. Welkait and Raya, the subject of the debate, are areas that the Amhara people have claimed since the creation of the present federal system.<sup>58</sup> However, since the commencement of the war in 2020, Amhara regional state forces have been in charge of the regions. As a result, the projected implementation of the peace agreement between the peoples of the two regions did not proceed very far. The Ethiopian National Defence Force's allies in the battle, the peoples of the neighboring nations and the armed militias known as the Fanno, have also lost faith in them as a result. Under this scenario, the mistrust and suspicion between the two peoples could hinder the success of the national dialogue and jeopardize the peace and security of the Horn of Africa as well as the two neighboring regions.

### **3.2.2. The Prospects of Ethiopia’s National Dialogue**

#### **3.2.2.1. Enhancing Peace and Security.**

National dialogues' radical potential can only be achieved if all political party factions are actually included in them. The validity of the process and a sense of ownership could be compromised from the start if an inclusive approach is not used. Whether or if stakeholders embrace the mission, agenda, or other decisions made depends on how inclusive the process is.

Guns will be silent and all disagreements will be resolved at the table as the number of participants in the dialogue increased, including insurgent groups and unorganized armed groups. This will increase peace and smooth governance that is not threatened by the evil deeds of organized and unorganized armed groups. Also, there would be a greater sense of belongingness and everyone's whims and woes would be heard without any obstacles. Democratic institutions won't be tied to the goals of the current administration; instead, they'll support inclusive, populist goals and formally bestow legitimacy.

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<sup>57</sup> AU, ‘Declaration of the Senior Commanders on the Modalities for the Implementation of the Agreement for Lasting Peace Through Permanent Cessation of Hostilities Between FDRE and TPLF’ para 2(2.1) (d).

<sup>58</sup> ‘Welkait, Ethiopia: Geo Strategic Importance and the Consequential Annexation by TPLF’ <<https://www.hornofafricainsight.org/post/welkait-ethiopia-geo-strategic-importance-and-the-consequential-annexation-by-tplf>> accessed 11 May 2023.

### **3.2.2.2. Consensus on the Basic National Ethos, Including Constitutional Provisions**

The provisions of the FDRE constitution are without a doubt formidable part of the forthcoming discussion. It is still cited as the origin of all evil in modern-day Ethiopia. The dialogue has a chance to succeed if the intimidating ideas of the FDRE constitutions are turned into topics for in-depth discussion and configuration in the national dialogue process in areas like political rights, fundamental freedoms, individual and group rights, institutional reform, election procedures, and government structure such as federalism or devolution. Furthermore, if a national dialogue is conducted in accordance with recognized national dialogue principles, a sense of legitimacy will be established without anyone being left out.

### **3.2.2.3. A Catalyst for National Building Process**

The basis for Ethiopia's national dialogue is the belief that there are fundamental discrepancies in how Ethiopians understand and interpret their history, which is impeding the development of a single social, political, and economic society. The national dialogue is thought to be the vehicle through which the challenges will be overcome. Moreover, if all historical divisions and rhetoric were bridged, the path to the national building process would be made easier. It will then open the door for a shared vision, objective, and aspiration.

## **4. Recommendations**

In view of Ethiopia's national dialogue challenges and prospects, the following recommendations should be implemented in order to make the national dialogue contribute to strengthening national consensus and restoring social values.

- **Extending the Term Limit of the National Dialogue Commission**

Three years is the maximum duration for Ethiopia's national dialogue, which is short to address all the issues presented in the paper's previous section. Specifically, the commission's slow progress since its establishment by not concluding all of the preparation phase's sub-stages; the country's dearth of historical narrative and discourse mutual understanding, which would take a year; and the commission's term, which is undoubtedly being consumed by the ongoing peace negotiations with non-state entities and insurgent groups. In light of the aforementioned difficulties, the House of Representatives representative should increase the term's length to five years.

- **Peace agreements with the Insurgent Groups.**

The Ethiopian federal government ought to vigorously carry on the peace negotiations that have already begun with the insurgency groups. Furthermore, every effort should be made to guarantee the inclusion of all major forces and the success of the goals of the national dialogue.

- **Ensuring Criminal Responsibility Through Transitional Justice**

The criminal responsibility of those who commit egregious human rights crimes should not be ignored as a result of the national dialogue. Transitional justice should be suggested as a solution to be put into practice in order to take into account all previous violations. Justice is the only way out of the historical and political impasse, as nations have both been the victims and the perpetrators of egregious human rights atrocities.

- **Improving and Refining the Conveners**

Conveners must be refined with careful consideration by the national dialogue commission. The panel must choose the national dialogue's organizers while taking into account their position in Ethiopian politics. This is carried out since their propensity for political parties barely threatens the viability of the national discussion.

- **Ensuring Inclusivity of all Stakeholders in the National Dialogue Process**

It is important to continuously consider the justification behind certain political parties' exclusion and boycott. In order to achieve this, the commission should develop a legitimate excuse for political parties to continue participating in the eagerly awaited national dialogue. This will guarantee the participation of foundational political parties and specific political party constituencies.

- **Establishing Panel of Experts on History**

The fundamental cause of Ethiopia's chaotic political and social life is the narrative and discourse that are currently being spread among the populace by various elite groups. Such an infectious historical discourse requires a thorough and rigorous investigation by merit-driven experts. To do this, the commission must first organize a group of national and international history experts before delving into the contours of the national dialogue.

## **Conclusion**

National dialogue is a tool employed to restore social cohesion in a fragile society. It allows political and civil society actors to air their grievances and make concrete recommendations for the long-lasting resolution of conflict and development thereof. On the same note, Ethiopia's national dialogue process has provided a huge glimpse of hope for many Ethiopians since the initiation stage. It was believed that all the sources of

the mess would come to an end with the commencement of the national dialogue. The same ambitious terms were stipulated in the proclamation of the national dialogue commission: that it will bolster national consensus and restore social values. At the same time, there were some who were skeptical of the national dialogue process due to certain pressing challenges.

The paper discovered that extending the term limit of the national dialogue commission, reaching peace treaties with insurgent groups, and ensuring the inclusion of all stakeholders in the national dialogue process are the bedrocks for achieving the people's whims and wills on the national dialogue process.

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