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# **Conflicting Narratives, the Emergent Third Way, and Peace: A Constructivist Approach to Ethiopia's Conflicts**

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Tadesse Biru Kersmo



# Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b><i>i</i></b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b><i>ii</i></b>
<b>Declaration of Originality</b> .....	<b><i>iii</i></b>
<b>Part I: Background, Concepts, and Theoretical Approaches</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Background, Aim, Methodology, and Design</b> .....	<b>4</b>
Overview .....	4
Background .....	5
Research Aim and Design .....	16
Limitations of the Research.....	26
Ethical Considerations.....	27
<b>Chapter 2: Theories and Concepts</b> .....	<b>30</b>
Prelude.....	30
A Political Theory Relevant to this Thesis.....	32
Conflict, Peace, and Peacebuilding.....	42
Ethnicity and Ethnic Politics .....	56
Narratives and Conflict .....	58
A Constructivist Approach to Political Elites Study .....	73
<b>Part II: Conflicts in Ethiopia</b> .....	<b>97</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Narratives and Conflicts in Ethiopia</b> .....	<b>99</b>
Opening Framework.....	99
The Two Core Narratives in Ethiopia's Political Discourse .....	102
Narrative One: Ethiopia is a Cradle of Civilisation and Freedom .....	103
Narrative Two: Ethiopia is a Prison of Nations and Nationalities.....	109
Consequences of the Conflicting Narratives .....	115
<b>Chapter 4: Political Parties in Politicising Ethnicity</b> .....	<b>131</b>
Political Party Orientations .....	131
Typology of Political Parties .....	134
Ethnic Parties and Ethnic Conflict.....	143
Programmacy of Political Parties .....	148
Political Parties in Ethiopia.....	153
<b>Part III: Evidence from Qualitative Field Research</b> .....	<b>168</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Conflicting Views on Ethiopia and Federalism</b> .....	<b>176</b>
Introduction.....	176
"Cradle of Civilisation", "Prison of Nations," and the Mid-way.....	181
Federalism and the Structure of the Ethiopian State .....	193
Analysis: Narrating the Nation .....	200
Key Insights.....	209
<b>Chapter 6: Narratives, Conflicts, and Organisations</b> .....	<b>212</b>
Introduction.....	212
Narrative as Tools of Weaponising History .....	217
Narratives as Catalysts for Conflict Proliferation in Ethiopia .....	225
Narratives as Tools of Contestation Over Ethiopian Cities .....	237
Narratives as a Tool of Political Organisation .....	246
Narratives and Media.....	252

Narratives and Academia.....	256
Analysis: Narratives as Drivers of Conflict in Ethiopia.....	260
Key Insights.....	272
<b>Chapter 7: Suggested Solutions and Lessons Learnt.....</b>	<b>275</b>
Introduction.....	275
Dialogue.....	280
Constitutional Reform.....	290
Leadership.....	297
Peace Education.....	306
Media Reform.....	308
Lessons Learnt.....	311
Key Insights.....	321
<b>Part IV: Conclusion.....</b>	<b>325</b>
Recapitulation of Core Arguments and Findings.....	325
Theoretical and Policy Implications.....	334
Policy Recommendations:.....	335
Concluding Reflection.....	337
References:.....	340

## Acronyms and Abbreviations

A	
AEUP:	All Ethiopian Unity Party
ALDE:	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
ALF:	Afar Liberation Front
Alliance	Alliance for Multination Democratic Federalism
ANC:	African National Congress (South Africa)
B	
BDS:	Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (movement)
BPLM:	Benishangul People's Liberation Movement
C	
CNDD-FDD:	National Council for the Defense of Democracy (Burundi)
CUD:	Coalition for Unity and Democracy
D	
Dergue	Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC),
E	
ECHAT:	Ethiopia Opposed Revolutionary Struggle (from Amharic Abbreviation)
EDL:	Ethiopian Democratic League
EDP-Medhin:	Ethiopian Democratic Party-Medhin Party
EHRC/OHCHR:	Ethiopian Human Rights Commission / Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
ELF:	Eritrean Liberation Front
ENDF:	Ethiopian National Defence Force
ENLF:	Ethiopian National Liberation Front
EPLF:	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF:	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP:	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
ESUE:	Ethiopian Students Union in Europe
F	
FANO:	Amhara nationalist movement (often written as Fano)
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
FGDs:	Focus Group Discussions
G	
GERD:	Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam
GLF:	Gambella Liberation Front
I	
IDPs:	Internally Displaced Persons
IFIT:	Institute for Integrated Transitions

ISEN:	Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities
M	
MDC:	Movement for Democratic Change (Zimbabwe)
Medrek	The Ethiopian Federal Democratic Unity Forum
MEISON:	All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement
N	
NEBE:	National Election Board of Ethiopia
NGOs:	Non-Governmental Organisations
NPF:	Narrative Policy Framework
O	
OAU:	Organisation of African Unity
OLA:	Oromo Liberation Army (aka Shene or OLF-Shene)
OLF:	Oromo Liberation Front
ONLF:	Ogaden National Liberation Front
P	
PDP:	People's Democratic Party (Nigeria)
PMAC:	Provisional Military Administrative Council (The Derg)
PP:	Prosperity Party
R	
R2P:	Responsibility to Protect
RPG:	Responsible Party Government
S	
SDP:	Social Democratic Party (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
SNNP:	Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' (Regional State)
T	
TDF:	Tigray Defence Force
TLF:	Tigray Liberation Front
TPLF:	Tigray People's Liberation Front
U	
UN:	United Nations
UNHCR:	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNP:	United National Party (Sri Lanka)
W	
WPE:	Workers' Party of Ethiopia (Derg's political wing)
WSLF:	Western Somali Liberation Front
Y	
YCDF:	Youth and Community Development Forum



## **List of Figures**

- Figure 1: Ethiopia – Regional States and Chartered Cities map
- Figure 2: Approximate Share of the Populations of Regional States and Chartered Cities
- Figure 3: Trajectories of Transformation Among National Elite Structures
- Figure 4: Flags of African Countries
- Figure 5: Internal Map Proposed by Barro Tumsa (1973, p. 135)
- Figure 6: Types of Political Parties (produced by the author)
- Figure 7: The FGDs and their Themes

## **List of Tables**

- Table 1: List of Political Parties that Claim to Be Civic
- Table 2: Medrek Coalition
- Table 3: Alliance for Multination Democratic Federalism
- Table 4: Suggested Amendment to the Existing Constitution

## Abstract

*This thesis employs a social constructivist framework to analyse how competing narratives and identity politics drive elite polarisation and perpetuate conflict in Ethiopia. Despite its ancient heritage and symbolic status as an uncolonized African state, modern Ethiopia is characterised by profound internal strife. The research focuses on the 1995 constitutional institution of ethnic federalism—a mechanism intended to redress historical grievances, yet frequently implicated in exacerbating societal fragmentation and inter-group tensions.*

*The study investigates two dominant, antagonistic narratives: one framing Ethiopia as a unified ‘Cradle of Civilisation and Freedom’, and the other as an oppressive ‘Prison of Nations’. It examines how these socially constructed narratives shape elite perceptions, political alliances, and conflict dynamics. Through qualitative methodology—including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and secondary analysis—the research reveals a deeply contested political landscape. While support for a federal structure is unanimous among elites, significant debate persists over its ethnic versus civic orientation, prompting calls for constitutional reform.*

*A nascent, third narrative emerges, seeking to reconcile Ethiopia’s historical unity with its multicultural reality; however, its state-led articulation risks undermining its authenticity. The findings further indicate profound distrust in existing institutions, notably the ruling Prosperity Party and the National Dialogue Commission, highlighting a critical deficit of inclusive dialogue. The thesis concludes that sustainable peace necessitates genuine, participatory processes to renegotiate a shared national identity. Recommendations include restructuring the national dialogue, constitutional reform to balance autonomy with cohesion, and promoting peace education and media literacy to counter divisive narratives.*

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*I am also immensely grateful to the numerous participants - including leaders of political parties, community leaders, academics, and media professionals in Ethiopia - who generously contributed to this research. Their willingness to engage in open dialogue, particularly on politically sensitive issues within a context of considerable instability, demonstrated remarkable trust and generosity. Their invaluable insights were fundamental to this study, which would not have been possible without their courage and cooperation.*

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## **Declaration of Originality**

*I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own independent research and has not been submitted, either in its entirety or in part, for any other academic award or qualification at this or any other institution.*

*The work presented herein is original and unpublished, except where explicitly stated. Certain sections of this thesis incorporate and expand upon material from my previously published works, all of which have been appropriately cited. All references to third-party sources, including texts, data, and ideas, have been duly acknowledged in accordance with academic conventions.*

*To the best of my knowledge, all contributions from other authors, whether in collaborative publications or referenced works, have been properly attributed. Any instances of quotation, paraphrase, or reliance on external sources are accompanied by full and accurate citations.*

**Conflicting Narratives, the  
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## **Part I: Background, Concepts, and Theoretical Approaches**

This thesis examines the role of socially constructed narratives and identity politics in perpetuating conflict within Ethiopia, with a specific focus on elite polarisation. Comprising two chapters, Part I establishes the contextual, conceptual, and theoretical foundations of the research. It situates Ethiopia's complex socio-political dynamics within a constructivist framework, exploring the interplay between narratives, identity, and institutions in sustaining conflict and shaping prospects for peacebuilding.

Chapter 1 introduces Ethiopia's historical and political landscape, characterised by its ancient civilisational heritage, profound ethnic diversity, and protracted internal strife. It provides a critical evaluation of the 1995 Constitution's institutionalisation of ethnic federalism - a framework designed to address historical marginalisation, but which frequently exacerbates ethnic tensions and elite fragmentation. The chapter delineates the research aim: to investigate how divergent narratives and identity politics drive conflict dynamics. A qualitative, constructivist methodology is employed, utilising in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and secondary source analysis.

Chapter 2 develops a comprehensive theoretical framework grounded in social constructivism. It explores core concepts including ethnicity, conflict, peace, peacebuilding, and the role of political elites. The chapter critiques materialist and rationalist perspectives, advocating instead for a constructivist lens that emphasises intersubjective meanings, narrative formation, and the social construction of identity.

By examining processes of elite socialisation, persuasion, and institutional bricolage, the chapter highlights the potential for elite agency to foster sustainable peace.

Collectively, these chapters provide a robust foundation for analysing Ethiopia's conflicts, underscoring the pivotal role of narratives and elite dynamics in both perpetuating division and enabling reconciliation.

# Chapter 1: Background, Aim, Methodology, and Design

## Overview

Ethiopia, one of the world's oldest continuous civilisations, occupies a unique position within Africa's political and historical landscape. Renowned for its considerable cultural diversity, ancient heritage, and historical independence, the nation has nonetheless contended with complex internal conflicts throughout its modern history. The underlying causes of these conflicts are deeply intertwined with questions of identity, governance, and competing narratives, all of which have fundamentally shaped the contours of the Ethiopian state and society. While acknowledging that external actors - such as the Soviet Union during the Cold War and contemporary regional interests involving China and the UAE - have influenced the nation's trajectory, this study deliberately focuses on internal Ethiopian political dynamics. The research maintains that domestic elite narratives and internal power struggles are the primary drivers of the country's modern conflicts.

A defining feature of Ethiopia's contemporary political architecture is its adoption of ethnic federalism, institutionalised under the 1995 Constitution. This framework, which grants significant autonomy to ethnically defined regional states, was conceived to address historical grievances and foster self-determination among the nation's diverse ethnic groups. However, although designed as an instrument of inclusivity, this model of federalism has frequently been implicated in exacerbating societal fragmentation, fostering inter-regional competition, and intensifying identity-based conflicts.

This research interrogates the role of social narratives and identity politics in deepening polarisation among Ethiopia's political elite and fuelling persistent conflicts. By examining the historical construction of narratives - whether emphasising national unity or professing ethnic victimhood - the study explores how such narratives shape elite perceptions, alliances, and rivalries. It further investigates how the institutional framework of ethnic federalism intersects with these narratives, thereby influencing patterns of political mobilisation and conflict dynamics.

Through a methodological combination of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and analysis of secondary sources, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the ideological and structural factors perpetuating conflict in Ethiopia. In doing so, it endeavours to contribute valuable resources for re-evaluating the role of narratives and identity politics in the pursuit of sustainable peace and national cohesion.

## **Background**

The *Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE)*, as it is officially designated, presents a paradox of nomenclature. Each component of this title - federal, democratic, republic, and even Ethiopia - is laden with contested meanings that reflect the nation's tumultuous sociopolitical landscape.

Ethiopia's federal structure, allegedly designed to decentralise power, address historical grievances and promote inclusivity, remains one of the most polarising features of its political architecture. The practical realities on the ground do not allow

for the application of consistent criteria in the establishment of regional states. As a result, the regional states display significant disparities in both population size and territorial extent (see Figure 1). Although ethnic federalism was intended to redress historical marginalisation, it has instead been associated with the exacerbation of both intergroup and intragroup tensions, as well as the fragmentation of national cohesion (Balcha, 2008; Kefale, 2017) (Transcript Civic Parties, 2024). The ethnic configuration of modern Ethiopia is a product of its historical development. During the Imperial era, the centralisation of power under the Solomonic dynasty often prioritised a singular, 'Abyssinian' cultural identity, which provided the blueprint for later grievances (Zewde, 2001). Following this, the Marxist (Derg) period (1974–1991) introduced the 'National Question,' using Stalinist interpretations of 'nations and nationalities' to mobilise the masses (Berhe, 2004; Nego, 2023). This period was critical in transforming cultural identities into political ones, as the regime paradoxically reinforced ethnic awareness while attempting to build a class-based socialist state. The creation of ethnically demarcated regions - such as Oromia, Amhara, Tigay, Somali, Harrari and later Sidama - has catalysed further demands for more power, autonomy and territories. The existence of multiethnic regional states, such as Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz, the South Ethiopia Regional State, the Southwest Ethiopia Regional State, and the Central Ethiopia Regional State, demonstrates that multiethnicity is an inescapable reality in Ethiopia. The inherent instability of Ethiopia's federal model raises fundamental questions regarding the legitimacy of its designation as a "federal" system.

The constitutional claim of Ethiopia as a "democratic" state remains deeply contested. Notwithstanding the presence of ostensibly multiparty elections, wherein the ruling

party's victory is virtually assured, pervasive systemic shortcomings - such as electoral irregularities, the stifling of dissent, and the marginalisation of opposition entities - continue to prevail (Gedamu, 2022). These dynamics stand in marked opposition to the principles of democratic governance, rendering Ethiopia's self-proclaimed democratic status more a superficial veneer than a substantive reality.

Ethiopia's republican pretensions clash with its reality of elite dominance. Analysts argue that power remains concentrated within a narrow political elite, contravening principles of popular sovereignty (Vaughan, 2003). This centralisation, evident in the dominance of successive ruling coalitions - notably the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and its successor, the Prosperity Party (PP) - suggests oligarchic tendencies rather than equitable republican governance.

Even the nation's name is contested. Certain groups assert that "Ethiopia" historically pertains to the northern Abyssinian region, neglecting the diverse identities of other ethnicities. This dispute reflects deeper fissures in national identity and historical narratives, complicating efforts to forge an inclusive sociopolitical consensus.

There is significant debate surrounding Ethiopia's population figures. According to Worldometer (2025), the population was estimated at 134,401,022 as of March 9, 2025. However, alternative estimates vary considerably, reflecting discrepancies not only in data sources and methodologies but also in underlying political motives.

The Ethiopian population is characterised by significant ethnic diversity, comprising approximately 85 distinct ethnic groups, none of which constitutes a majority.

However, the two largest groups, the Oromo and Amhara, collectively account for over 60% of the population, while the ten largest ethnic groups represent more than 85% of the total population. Consequently, nearly 90% of Ethiopia's ethnic groups are relatively small in size (Kersmo, 2021a). This demographic asymmetry, coupled with the country's pronounced ethnic diversity, has been identified as a contributing factor to the complexity and persistence of conflicts within the nation.

The 1995 constitution established a federal structure, dividing Ethiopia into nine regional states, six of which are ethnically designated. In response to sustained popular demand, a new ethnically defined region—the Sidama Regional State—was established on 18 June 2020, following a referendum and its subsequent split from the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' (SNNP) Regional State (Paravicini, 2019). This trend continued with the creation of the Southwest Ethiopia Peoples' Regional State on 23 November 2021, a multi-ethnic entity also carved out of the SNNP (ENA, 2021). Most recently, on 19 August 2023, the South Ethiopia Regional State was formed following a referendum, with the remaining territory becoming the Central Ethiopia Regional State, effectively dissolving the SNNP Regional State (ENA, 2023). Despite these developments, demands for regional statehood persist within the former SNNP region, as well as in Tigray, Amhara, and Oromia.

The Ethiopian constitution, particularly Articles 8 and 39, plays a central role in shaping the country's political landscape. Article 8 stipulates that “All sovereign power resides in the Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples of Ethiopia” (Proclamation No. 1, 1995, p. 4), while Article 39 grants every nation, nationality, and people “an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession” (pp.13-14). These provisions

have been widely cited as both a foundational principle of Ethiopia's federal system and a source of ongoing ethnic tensions (Aalen, 2002; Vaughan, 2003; Balcha, 2008; Kefale, 2017). The constitution's emphasis on ethnic federalism has contributed to the instability of regional states, as ethnic and sub-ethnic groups increasingly seek greater autonomy. This has led to the proliferation of regional military capabilities, often under the guise of "Special Forces," "Regional Police," and "militias," exacerbating ethnic security dilemmas. Regional states frequently perceive neighbouring entities as potential threats, further intensifying inter-regional tensions.

Identity politics plays a significant role in exacerbating urban conflicts. Major cities, including the capital Addis Ababa, as well as Agaro, Dire Dawa, Harrar, Hawassa, Shashemene, Welkite, and Yabello are divided along ethnic lines, reflecting broader societal cleavages. Consequently, Ethiopia's internal conflicts can be broadly categorised into two main types: (1) conflicts between regional states, which may also be described as interethnic conflicts, and (2) conflicts within regional states, which may also be characterised as intraethnic conflicts. These dynamics underscore the challenges of managing ethnic diversity within a federal framework, particularly in a context where constitutional provisions for self-determination and secession remain contentious and politically charged.

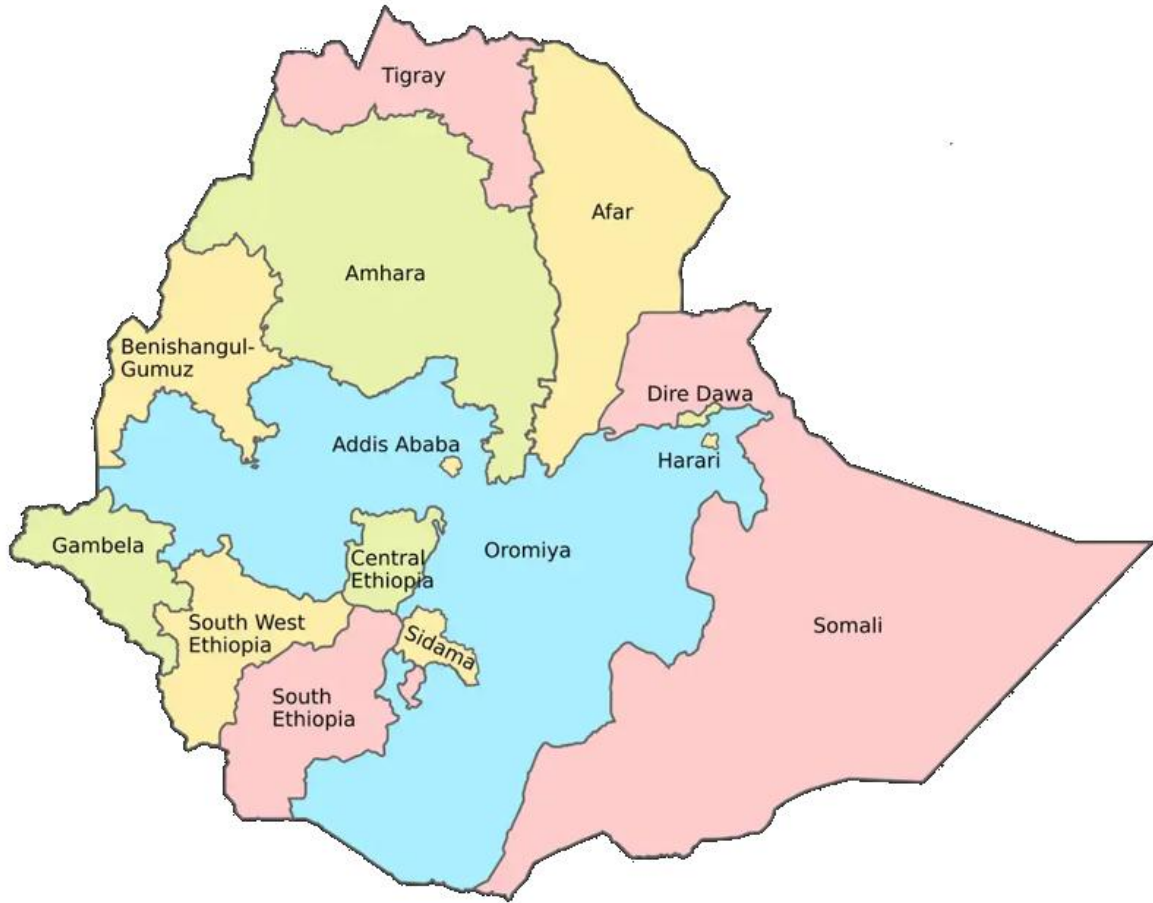


Figure 1: Ethiopia – Regional States and Chartered Cities map

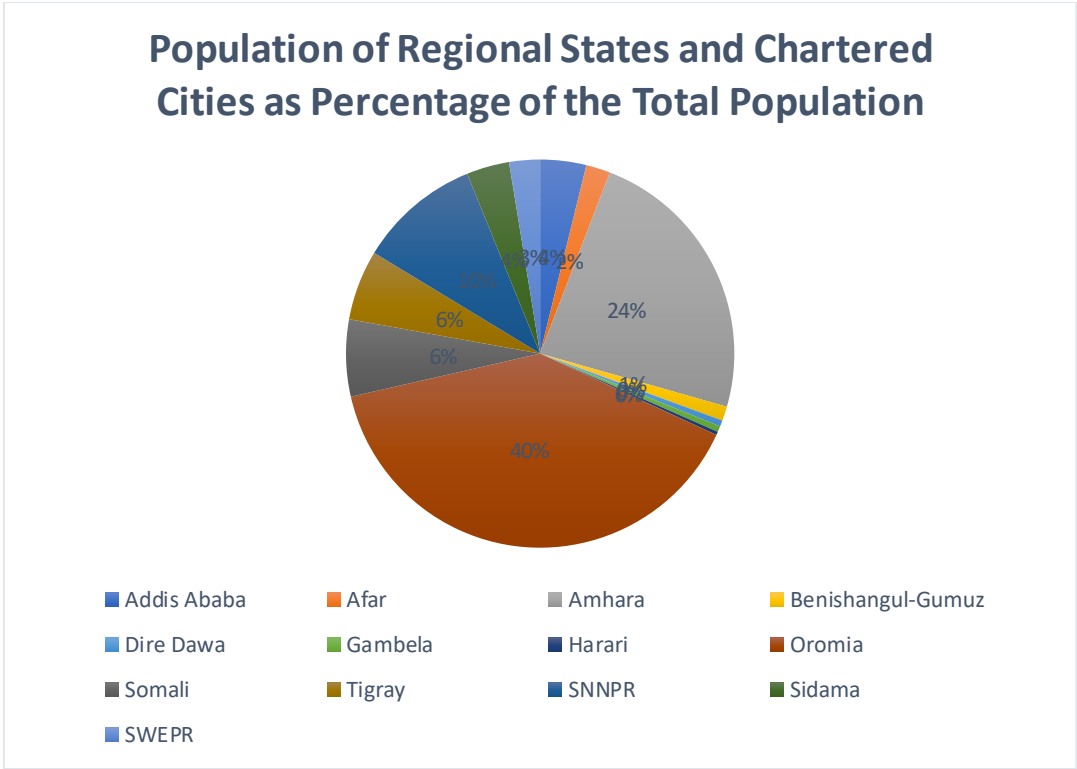


Figure 2: Approximate Share of the Populations of Regional States and Chartered Cities Source 2017 National Statistics

In 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed assumed office with a reform agenda centred on the concept of *medemer*, an Amharic term meaning “adding” or “coming together.” Abiy articulated *medemer* as a synergistic process aimed at uniting individuals, religious and ethnic groups, leaders, and institutions to collaborate more effectively for the common good and in the public interest (ዐቢይ አህመድ, 2012; Ahmed, 2019). This vision was intended to address Ethiopia’s deeply polarised identity politics by fostering tolerance, understanding, and reconciliation. However, the implementation of this agenda faced significant challenges, particularly in the context of Ethiopia’s complex political landscape.

In 2019, the EPRDF, the ruling coalition dominated by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), was dissolved and replaced by the Prosperity Party (PP). The PP was formed by merging the three EPRDF member parties and five affiliated regional ruling parties. However, the TPLF, the core of the former EPRDF, rejected this decision and refused to join the new party (Gedamu, 2022, ch. 10). In response, the TPLF withdrew its members from federal executive offices and its supporters from the national army, escalating its opposition to the federal government. The TPLF-led regional government of Tigray began to challenge federal authority, notably by disregarding federal orders, such as refusing to arrest individuals suspected of criminal acts (Yusuf, 2019, p. 5).

Tensions further intensified when the Federal Parliament postponed the sixth national election, initially scheduled for 2020, citing the COVID-19 pandemic. In defiance of this decision, the Tigray regional government held its own election on September 9, 2020, which the Federal Parliament declared null and void. Efforts by the federal government, traditional elders, civil society, and the international community to de-escalate the conflict through both traditional and modern conflict resolution mechanisms proved unsuccessful.

TPLF forces attacked Federal military bases in Tigray on 4 November 2020. It was a coordinated attack on several bases such as Mekelle, Adigrat, Agula, Dansha, and Sero. Gashaye Tenaw, a victim of the incident, has authored a widely read memoir detailing the atrocities he claims to have endured. He contends that the attack on the Northern Command was meticulously planned, intended to dismantle all units of the Command simultaneously, and executed with maximum precision (Gashaye Tenaw,

2022). However, TPLF argues that it was a pre-emptive defensive measure against an imminent attack from Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) (Ahmed, 2020; BBC, 2020; Walsh, 2021). A high-ranking commander of the Tigray Defence Force (TDF) indirectly corroborated this claim to the researcher as follows:

*We decided to defend ourselves. The next question was how and with what. We didn't have sufficient armaments to defend ourselves. The best decision was to convince the ENDF high-ranking officers in Tigray to surrender their ammunition to TDF. We conducted secret talks with commanders, and the talks were largely successful. An operation was conducted on November 3 - 4, 2020, to take ENDF's ammunition. Ninety percent agreed to surrender, 5 percent were uncertain, and 5 percent resisted. There was an exchange of fire only with those who resisted.*

(Transcript Tigray Elite 2, 2024)

This attack has triggered a full-fledged war between forces loyal to TPLF and the Federal Government. Tigray Defence Force (TDF), a force loyal to TPLF launched rocket attacks on Bahir-Dar, Gonder, and Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea (France-Presse, 2020). Eritrean forces crossed the border and were involved in the war in Tigray supporting the Ethiopian Federal Forces. There have been claims and counterclaims of human rights atrocities including massacres of civilians in Maikadra and Aksum (Amnesty International UK, 2020). There have been multiple reports of horrendous human rights atrocities such as sexual violence against women and war crimes (EHRC/OHCHR, 2021; Matfess, 2021).

TPLF is a key actor to understand Ethiopian politics and the ongoing conflicts in Ethiopia. It emerged as a leftist ethnic-nationalist movement with a strong admiration for Albanian socialism (Gebregziabher, 2019, pp. 463, 473), and allied with the

Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) to fight against the Military administration in Ethiopia. It was the de-facto controller of EPRDF when it took power in 1991. TPLF/EPRDF led the country with an iron fist rebranding its ideology as “Revolutionary Democracy”, which it was again rebranded as “Developmental State” after the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1998-2000. TPLF/EPRDF ruled Ethiopia for 27 years, and Tigray for more than 30 years. Following lengthy popular protests and internal fights, TPLF fell out of EPRDF, attacked the ENDF’s Northern Command, and reverted to rebellious activities. The Ethiopian Parliament designated TPLF as a terrorist organisation on May 5, 2021.

The Tigray Defence Force (TDF), the military wing of the TPLF, is a well-trained and well-staffed army. During the war, it was estimated to have around 250,000 personnel - a figure greater than that of the federal government’s armed forces at the time of the open conflict in November 2020. The TDF was led by former senior officers of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) who had defected to the TPLF, including Lieutenant General Tsadkan Gebretensae, former Chief of Staff of the ENDF; Lieutenant General Tadesse Werede; Lieutenant General Fisseha Kidanu; Brigadier General Migbey Haile; and Brigadier General Abraha Tesfay (Horton, 2021), along with over forty other generals and hundreds of high-ranking military officers. Although an agreement to disarm, demobilise, and reintegrate TDF combatants was signed as part of the Pretoria Agreement for a “permanent cessation of hostilities” on 2 November 2022 (Mekonene, 2022), the possibility remained that the TPLF would continue to play an influential role in Ethiopian politics.

The TPLF is not the sole actor opposing the ENDF. The Amhara nationalist Fano movement - a grassroots, ethno-nationalist, and decentralised organisation primarily active in the Amhara region - has emerged as a significant force. It asserts the defence of Amhara interests against the PP government, in response to perceived threats to the Amhara people and their interests. This development is particularly significant within the context of Ethiopia's intricate system of ethnic federalism and the broader political tensions that characterise the nation. The Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) (also known as Shene or OLF-Shene) is another rebel organisation that should be taken into consideration. OLA is a splinter of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), one of the oldest political organisations in Ethiopia formed in the 1970s (Oromo Chronology, 2013) "to lead the national liberation struggle of the Oromo people against the Abyssinian colonial rule" (OLF Mission, no date). OLA is accused of ethnic-based human rights atrocities in Welega Zone, West, Kellam, Horo, Illu and several other towns of Oromia (Amnesty International UK, 2020; Zelalem, 2021). Gambella Liberation Front (GLF) is another group that "announced rebellion against Ethiopia's Prosperity Party-led government" in 2021 (GLF, 2021). The actual military capacity of GLF is not known, however, it has carried out several sudden attacks on government officials and citizens. In January 2022, GLF and OLA carried out a joint operation to seize Gambella city; however, the government forces controlled the city "after hours-long fighting" (Mekonene, 2022). Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State is bordering with Sudan and is home to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM) is a rebellious organisation that aims to liberate Benishangul. The strategic location of Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State makes BPLM pivotal for the stability of Ethiopia as a whole. Al-Shabaab the fundamentalist Islamist terrorist organisation is a threat not only to Somalia but also to Ethiopia.

Evidence from security analysts indicates that Al-Shabaab has attempted to establish operational presence or cells within the Somali Regional State of Ethiopia, seeking to exploit regional instability (Afsaruddin, 2020). However, the primary focus of this study remains the internal domestic tensions between state actors and local ethnic movements.

Ethiopia's political landscape has long been characterised by deep polarisation among its elite, a factor that has significantly contributed to the country's recurring conflicts. This division, often rooted in ethnic, ideological, and historical grievances, has hindered cohesive governance and exacerbated tensions, leading to violent confrontations. The polarisation of Ethiopia's political elite not only reflects broader societal fractures but also actively fuels instability, making conflict resolution increasingly difficult.

## **Research Aim and Design**

### **Research Aim**

This thesis aims to critically investigate the underlying causes of conflicts in Ethiopia, focusing particularly on the role of socially constructed narratives and identity politics in shaping the polarisation of the national political elite. Using review of literature, interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), the study seeks to explore how contested narratives have contributed to the fragmentation of political elites and the exacerbation of intergroup and intragroup tensions. By analysing these ideological cleavages, the research endeavours to offer a nuanced understanding of how competing interpretations of history and identity perpetuate conflict, while identifying

avenues through which these divisive narratives might be reimagined to support sustainable peace and national unity. Furthermore, this research investigates a nascent 'third narrative' that has begun to emerge in the political discourse. This narrative seeks to reconcile the historical pride of the 'Cradle' vision with the demands for justice in the 'Prison' vision, offering a syncretical approach to national identity.

## **Research Objectives**

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To analyse the ways in which divergent narratives and identity shape the perceptions and interactions of the national political elite of Ethiopia.
2. To examine the extent to which these narratives contribute to elite fragmentation and the perpetuation of conflict in Ethiopia.
3. To explore the interplay between identity politics and narratives in shaping conflict dynamics in Ethiopia.
4. To investigate potential strategies for deconstructing destructive narratives in the interest of promoting inclusive national identities and peacebuilding in Ethiopia.

## **Research Design**

This research adopts a constructivist framework, based on the premise that reality is socially constructed and mediated through shared meanings, symbols, and narratives.

The study is organised into three primary sections, and the fourth summarises the entire study.

**Part One: Background, Concepts, and Theoretical Approaches** - lays the conceptual and theoretical groundwork for the study. Chapter 1 introduces the research aims and objectives, along with the country context under investigation. Chapter 2 defines key concepts - such as conflict, peace, peacebuilding, narratives, and political elites - and provides a rationale for adopting social constructivism as the most appropriate theoretical lens for the research.

**Part Two: Conflicts in Ethiopia** - Conducts a comprehensive analysis of conflicts in Ethiopia based on a review of the literature and other secondary sources. Chapter 3 explores the relationship between divisive narratives and the fragmentation of the Ethiopian political elite, drawing on secondary sources such as literature reviews and public interviews with leading political figures. Chapter 4 extends this analysis to political parties and organisations, examining how identity-driven narratives shape their very existence, objectives, and strategic orientations.

**Part Three: Evidence from Qualitative Field Research** - Presents the empirical evidence addressing the research question, which includes in-depth interviews and FGDs. These data explore divergent perspectives on governance, identity, and political mobilisation. Chapters 5 and 6 synthesise the findings, investigating the interconnections between narratives, political organisations, and the dynamics of conflict in Ethiopia. Chapter 7 concludes with recommendations provided by members

of the political elite, aimed at fostering elite convergence and promoting peacebuilding efforts. **Part Four** summarises the entire study.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative research approach is employed, specifically targeting the perspectives of national political elites. This focus is intentional, as constructivist theory suggests that elites act as ‘narrative architects’ (Turchin, 2023) who frame the social realities that the general public adopts. Therefore, the data reflects the strategic interpretations of influential actors rather than broad public opinion, a choice justified by the elites' disproportionate role in conflict escalation and peacebuilding.

A qualitative research approach is optimally suited to studies grounded in constructivism, which posits that reality is socially constructed through human interactions and shared meanings (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Bertucci, Hayes and James, 2018). Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative methodology facilitates an in-depth exploration of participants' subjective perspectives, experiences, and the contextual nuances that shape their understanding of political dynamics (Creswell, 2014). By employing techniques such as interviews and thematic analysis, qualitative research captures the complexity of socially constructed realities, aligning with constructivism's emphasis on interpretive depth (Wertz, 2011). This approach ensures a rich, contextual understanding of phenomena, prioritising meaning-making over statistical generalisation (Bertucci, Hayes and James, 2018).

Qualitative research seeks to elucidate the intricacies of human experience through non-numerical data, encompassing language, imagery, and artefacts. By prioritising depth and contextual understanding, it yields rich insights into social phenomena, cultural practices, and individual perspectives. Grounded in interpretive methodologies, qualitative research explores the meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences and lives. Anchored in interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, it foregrounds depth, context, and subjective interpretation over quantification (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Qualitative approaches are particularly adept at generating nuanced understandings of behaviours, motivations, beliefs, and social interactions within their naturalistic settings, making them indispensable for exploratory and context-sensitive inquiries. In contrast to quantitative methods, which pursue generalisable findings, qualitative research enables a detailed exploration of how individuals interpret and construct social and political realities, aligning with the constructivist focus on subjective meaning-making (Bryman, 2016).

Qualitative data collection emphasises flexible, context-sensitive methods to capture nuanced and contextually embedded evidence. Common approaches include in-depth interviews, FGDs, participant observation, ethnography, and document analysis. In-depth interviews involve one-to-one conversations between the researcher and the participant, enabling the exploration of personal experiences, beliefs, and emotions. Typically, semi-structured or unstructured, these interviews utilise a flexible protocol to guide the discussion while allowing emergent topics to surface (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018).

Focus group discussions bring together small cohorts - usually comprising six to ten participants - for facilitated discussions on a specific topic. This method is particularly effective in uncovering group dynamics, shared values, and diverse perspectives. Participant observation and ethnography involve prolonged immersion in a social setting, wherein researchers observe and engage in participants' everyday lives to document behaviours, interactions, and cultural norms. These approaches are especially well-suited to capturing tacit knowledge and contextual subtleties (Sahoo, Jeyavelu and Kurane, 2023).

This study employs qualitative methods to understand the role of narrative in Ethiopia's conflicts and the polarisation of its political elite. Primary data are collected through FGDs, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Secondary sources include public speeches, media interviews, policy documents, academic literature, and archival records. This comprehensive approach enables a nuanced exploration of narratives shaping conflict dynamics and elite polarisation. By synthesising these sources, the research aims to provide a robust analysis of narrative influences, enhancing understanding of conflict processes and political divisions in Ethiopia's contemporary socio-political landscape. FGDs facilitate dynamic dialogue, enabling the researcher to observe how participants negotiate and co-construct meanings in a group context (Kitzinger, 1995). This method is particularly adept at revealing shared norms, divergent perspectives, and the discursive strategies employed by political actors (Morgan, 1996). By fostering interactive exchanges, FGDs provide rich insights into the collective dynamics and narrative construction processes that shape political discourse and polarisation, especially in conflict settings like Ethiopia. Their strength lies in capturing the interplay of individual and group perspectives, offering a nuanced

understanding of socio-political phenomena. Complementing the FGDs, in-depth interviews provide a platform for eliciting detailed, individual narratives. This method enables participants to articulate their perspectives without the influence of group dynamics, offering deeper insights into personal experiences, motivations, and decision-making processes (Seidman, 2019). The combination of FGDs and interviews ensures a comprehensive understanding of both collective and individual constructions of political reality.

Qualitative research utilises purposive sampling to select participants who provide rich, contextually relevant insights into the research question, prioritising theoretical or conceptual saturation over statistical representativeness. Saturation occurs when additional data yield no new themes, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Silverman, 2020). Purposive sampling strategies include snowball sampling, which uses referrals to access hard-to-reach groups, convenience sampling, which involves readily available participants, and maximum variation sampling, which captures diverse perspectives. These approaches construct a sample that reflects the multifaceted nature of the research focus (Patton, 2002).

This study investigates the role of narrative in Ethiopia's conflicts and the polarisation of its political elite, employing purposive sampling to engage individuals with specific expertise or authority. This method is apt for research requiring participants with direct influence over the phenomenon under study (Given, 2008). The sample comprises executive committee members of influential political parties, high-ranking government officials, prominent media personnel, respected community leaders, and distinguished academicians in political science and governance. This selective approach ensures

data are rich, relevant, and derived from key informants shaping Ethiopia's political discourse.

Although purposive sampling does not aim for statistical representativeness, it enhances theoretical depth by focusing on participants whose insights align with the research objectives (Silverman, 2020). The researcher's deep knowledge of Ethiopian politics facilitated the identification and engagement of these elite participants, fostering trustful relationships critical for obtaining candid perspectives. By targeting individuals with significant decision-making power, the study elucidates the complex dynamics of narrative construction and elite polarisation, contributing to a robust analysis of conflict processes and their implications for governance.

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of London Metropolitan University in November 2023 (Chandler, 2023). The committee emphasised the need for a thorough risk assessment prior to fieldwork in Ethiopia, which was meticulously conducted and documented, receiving approval from the university's health and safety officer (Kuzmina, 2024). A detailed project information sheet outlining the study's objectives, methodology, and ethical considerations was submitted and approved.

To engage Ethiopia's political elite, the researcher conducted three month-long visits: 21 April to 14 May 2022, 17 February to 19 March 2023, and 18 August to 18 September 2023. Fieldwork occurred from 19 April to 20 May 2024. Daily email correspondence with supervisors ensured robust oversight, prompt resolution of

challenges, and continuous monitoring of progress, safeguarding the researcher's well-being and maintaining the study's integrity.

Participants, defined as political elites occupying influential roles within organisations shaping Ethiopian politics, included senior political party leaders, high-ranking officials, community leaders, media professionals, and academics. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used. A preliminary respondent list was approved by the ethics committee, and participants received a consent form detailing the study's objectives, their role, and their right to withdraw without consequence, ensuring ethical compliance and a comprehensive understanding of elite perspectives.

Qualitative data analysis is an iterative and interpretive process that often begins during data collection and continues to evolve throughout the study. Thematic analysis - a method employed in this research - involves identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns or themes within the data. This process typically unfolds in several stages: becoming familiar with the data, coding meaningful segments, generating initial themes, reviewing and refining those themes, and synthesising the findings into a coherent narrative that addresses the research question (Allsop *et al.*, 2022). The FGDs and in-depth interviews in this research were conducted based on predetermined discussion themes, and the collected data were subsequently categorised according to these thematic areas.

Coding represents a foundational step in the analytical process, wherein researchers assign labels to segments of data that reflect particular ideas, concepts, or emotions.

Codes may be developed inductively from the data or derived deductively from existing theories or conceptual frameworks.

The researcher employed NVivo and Zotero software to ensure methodological rigour in analysing Ethiopia's complex conflict dynamics. NVivo facilitated systematic qualitative analysis by enabling coding, thematic categorisation, and data linkage across diverse sources, including interviews, policy documents, and media reports, thereby enhancing transparency in identifying conflict patterns (Bazeley 2013). Zotero streamlined literature management by automating metadata retrieval, PDF organisation, and citation generation in Harvard style, ensuring consistency in referencing academic and grey literature (Munoz and Haeger 2018). NVivo's analytical depth complemented Zotero's bibliographic efficiency, allowing cross-referencing of emerging themes with existing scholarship on ethnic tensions and regional instability. This dual approach strengthened data triangulation while maintaining citation accuracy, critical for a study examining multifaceted conflict drivers in Ethiopia's socio-political context.

Qualitative research prioritises research rigour over conventional notions of reliability and validity by employing a range of methodological strategies designed to enhance the credibility, authenticity, and robustness of the findings. Among these, triangulation is key; it involves corroborating data from multiple sources, methods, or perspectives to ensure a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the research phenomena. Cross checking was also employed in this study, whereby interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations were shared with participants to confirm the

accuracy of their representations and to minimise the risk of misquotation or misrepresentation.

Additionally, the study utilised thick description to provide rich, contextually grounded accounts of events, behaviours, and perspectives, thereby enabling readers to assess the transferability of the findings to other settings. The researcher also engaged in continuous reflexive practice, critically examining their own positionality, potential biases, and influence on data interpretation throughout the research process. These measures, taken together, significantly enhanced the rigour and dependability of the study's findings, in line with established qualitative research standards (Lincoln, 2007; Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

## **Limitations of the Research**

Several limitations have been identified in the conduct of this research:

1. Gaining access to members of Ethiopia's national political elite presented considerable challenges, largely due to their highly polarised positions, prevailing security concerns, and demanding schedules. In order to establish the necessary contacts and build trust, the researcher undertook three preliminary field visits, each lasting approximately one month. These preparatory visits were essential in facilitating rapport-building and securing participant engagement. The actual data collection and fieldwork were subsequently conducted over a dedicated period from 19 April to 20 May 2024.

2. **Inaccessibility of Armed Groups:** It proved impossible to directly access or engage with key actors currently involved in armed struggles against the Ethiopian government, such as members of Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), FANO and other militant organisations. This limitation restricted the study's ability to capture perspectives from all sides of the conflict.
3. **Political Sensitivities:** Given the highly charged political climate, some respondents may have exercised caution in their responses, potentially leading to partial disclosures or guarded opinions.
4. **Dynamic Conflict Environment:** The rapidly evolving nature of Ethiopia's political and security landscape posed a challenge in capturing a static picture of conflict dynamics. The conclusions of this study, therefore, should be contextualised within the specific time period during which data was collected.

## **Ethical Considerations**

This research adheres to rigorous ethical standards, ensuring the safety, dignity, and well-being of all participants involved. The following key principles guided the research process:

1. ***Informed Consent.*** Participants were fully informed about the purpose, scope, and potential implications of the study prior to their participation. Clear explanations were provided regarding their voluntary involvement and written, or verbal consent was obtained in all cases.
2. ***Confidentiality and Anonymity.*** To protect the privacy and security of participants, all data were anonymised. Personally identifiable information was

either omitted or securely stored, ensuring that sensitive opinions or disclosures could not be traced back to individual respondents. Data storage procedures complied with London Metropolitan University's data protection policies.

3. *Voluntary Participation and Right to Withdraw*. Participants retained the right to withdraw from the research at any stage without providing justification and without facing any negative consequences.
4. *Well-Being of Respondents*. Given the politically sensitive nature of the topics discussed - including identity, historical grievances, and ongoing conflicts - special care was taken to ensure that participation did not expose respondents to psychological distress, political repercussions, or social ostracization. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in a manner that respected participants' emotional boundaries and socio-political circumstances.
5. *Neutrality and Researcher Reflexivity*. Throughout the research process, the researcher maintained a neutral stance, acknowledging personal biases and actively working to mitigate their influence on data collection, interpretation, and presentation. Reflexivity was practised to ensure that findings were grounded in participants' lived experiences, not shaped by preconceived assumptions.
6. *Conflict Sensitivity*. Recognising the volatile and polarised environment in which the research was conducted, a conflict-sensitive approach was integral to the study. This entailed:
  - *Avoiding Harm*: Care was taken to ensure that the research did not inadvertently exacerbate tensions, fuel existing grievances, or deepen divisions among the political elite or broader communities.

- *Contextual Awareness:* The research design, data collection methods, and dissemination of findings were informed by an in-depth understanding of the Ethiopian socio-political landscape. This included recognising power asymmetries, local sensitivities, and the broader conflict dynamics.
  - *Inclusive Engagement:* Efforts were made to include a diversity of perspectives, ensuring that the research did not privilege or marginalise specific groups. Where direct access to armed groups was impossible, the researcher acknowledged this limitation transparently without making assumptions about their positions.
  - *Ethical Dissemination:* Findings will be shared in a manner that is constructive, mindful of the potential impact on ongoing peace processes, and respectful of the communities and actors involved.
7. *Ethical Approval.* The research obtained the necessary ethical clearance from London Metropolitan University Research Ethics board prior to data collection, ensuring compliance with established research ethics protocols (Chandler, 2023).

## Chapter 2: Theories and Concepts

### Prelude

This chapter investigates the theoretical underpinnings of narratives, ethnic politics, and peace in Ethiopia through a social constructivist lens. It posits that ethnic conflict within the nation cannot be sufficiently explained by materialist or primordialist frameworks, but rather emerges from socially constructed narratives, ideational contests, and strategic interactions amongst political elites. These processes are deeply embedded within specific historical and socio-political contexts that serve to shape and potentially transform conflict dynamics.

Social constructivism provides a robust framework for comprehending the ideational and symbolic dimensions of conflict, elucidating how actors interpret identity, history, and power. In contrast to rationalist or structuralist approaches, which prioritise material interests or immutable group characteristics, constructivism emphasises the formative role of ideas, collective memory, norms, and intersubjective meanings. In the Ethiopian context, where identity politics are inextricably linked with elite competition and state formation, conceptions of ethnicity, peace, and conflict are fluid constructs, perpetually negotiated through narratives that define group identities, distinguish 'self' from 'other,' and legitimise political claims.

The chapter establishes a theoretical framework to examine the nexus of narratives, ethnic mobilisation, and peacebuilding in Ethiopia, drawing upon constructivist conflict studies, narrative theory, elite theory, and peacebuilding scholarship. It advances the proposition that political elites, functioning as norm entrepreneurs and narrative architects, perform a crucial role in shaping collective memory and political subjectivity. Their discursive practices and institutional decisions fundamentally mediate the legitimacy of political structures and the social vision of peace.

The discussion is organised around several key themes. Firstly, it explores the relevance of social constructivism to conflict analysis, with a specific focus on the social production and contestation of norms, identities, and meanings. Secondly, it examines how historical narratives and collective memory serve to perpetuate or transform ethno-political divisions, utilising illustrative examples from Ethiopia's imperial legacies and debates concerning regional autonomy. Thirdly, it applies the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) to analyse how narratives exert influence on policy, elite behaviour, and intergroup relations within conflict-prone settings.

The chapter further reconceptualises political elites as agents who construct either inclusive or divisive identities, thereby shaping institutional outcomes and political discourse. It also reviews prevailing peacebuilding paradigms, extending Johan Galtung's concepts of negative and positive peace through constructivist perspectives that conceptualise peace as a socially negotiated and ideationally embedded process. Locally grounded, narrative-informed approaches that prioritise reconciliation and inclusive identity formation are accorded particular emphasis.

This theoretical foundation lays the necessary groundwork for analysing Ethiopia's profoundly polarised narratives - exemplified by "Ethiopia as a Cradle of Civilisation" versus "Ethiopia as a Prison of Nations" - which have fundamentally shaped its political imagination, elite dynamics, and state-building processes. The adopted constructivist approach offers critical insights for diagnosing Ethiopia's political crises and for envisioning viable pathways towards a sustainable peace.

## **A Political Theory Relevant to this Thesis**

The primary conflicts in Ethiopia are predominantly political in nature; hence, it is crucial to clarify the meaning of "politics" within the context of this research. There are two broad theoretical approaches to defining "politics" (Lowndes, Marsh and Stoker, 2018, pp. 7–9). The first approach conceptualises politics as the domain of formal political actors, including governmental institutions, parliaments, political parties, and interest groups. This perspective frames politics as "occurring within certain limited 'arenas'" (p.7), focusing primarily on decision-making processes and the behaviour of political actors. Theoretical frameworks such as Rational Choice Theory, Game Theory, and certain strands of Institutionalism align with this approach. According to this view, political actors are rational agents who seek to maximise benefits and minimise costs within given constraints. Consequently, if structural limitations are known, the behaviour of political agents can be predicted irrespective of identity, historical context, or cultural background. Within this framework, factors such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or class are treated as exogenous variables or

mere constraints, rather than intrinsic determinants of political behaviour, rendering them irrelevant to shaping agents' political actions.

The second approach interprets politics as a process through which power is controlled and "inscribed" (Lowndes, Marsh and Stroker, 2018, p. 7). This perspective offers a more expansive understanding, as power relations permeate nearly all facets of social life - from familial and corporate structures to state institutions. Politics, in this view, is an omnipresent phenomenon shaped by historical legacies, cultural norms, religious beliefs, class structures, and other socio-political factors. Certain groups may possess disproportionate influence over power and resources due to historical privilege or socio-economic advantages, while others may be systematically marginalised. Unlike the first approach, this perspective asserts that political behaviour is deeply intertwined with identity. Agents may act in accordance with collective norms, asserting, "this is how we behave". Identity, in this context, encompasses variables such as ethnicity, language, and religion, class, and gender - all of which may influence an agent's response to situations involving power and resource distribution. Theoretical traditions such as Constructivism, Poststructuralism, Marxism, Feminism, and certain institutionalist theories align with this approach.

The researcher adopts the second approach, as it provides a more comprehensive framework for analysing Ethiopia's conflicts. Constructivism is selected as the most suitable theoretical lens, given its emphasis on the role of identity, norms, and social constructs in shaping political behaviour. The following section concisely examines the application of social constructivism in conflict studies, emphasising its theoretical underpinnings and practical implications. It serves as the foundation for analysing

Ethiopia's political narratives, providing a sophisticated perspective to explore societal divisions.

### **Social Constructivism in Conflict Studies**

Unlike realism or liberalism, which prioritise material power and institutional structures, constructivism underscores the significance of non-material factors - such as ideas, norms, and identities - in shaping political outcomes (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p. 914; Hopf, 1998; Wendt, 1999, pp. 1–7). This theoretical lens facilitates a more nuanced comprehension of politics by accounting for the influence of cultural and historical contexts on political agency. The constructivist approach to politics contends that political realities are not objective or immutable but are instead socially constructed through continuous interaction and shared cognitive frameworks (Acharya, 2018). One of the foundational theorists of social constructivism, Max Weber (1946), argues that human action is fundamentally shaped by ideas, as demonstrated in his seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. This perspective challenges Karl Marx's materialist assertion that economic structures determine ideological superstructures, instead contending that cultural and ideational frameworks underpin social and political behaviour (Marx, 1844; Weber, 1946; Meadows, 2017).

In conflict analysis, constructivist approaches shift attention from objective or material causes – such as territorial disputes, competition over resources or power asymmetries – to the ways in which such issues are narratively framed, legitimised, and contested through socially embedded discourses (Autesserre, 2014, pp. 42–45;

Levinger and Roselle, 2017, p. 96; Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2017, pp. 118–120). Rather than viewing conflict as an outcome of immutable interests, this perspective emphasises the intersubjective construction of meaning, where actors interpret events, construct identities, and mobilise around shared narratives of victimhood (Jacoby, 2015, pp. 511–530; Vandermaas-Peeler, Subotic and Barnett, 2024, p. 174), resistance (Green and Ward, 2019), or historical injustice (Howe, 2020, p. 111). Narrative framing becomes central in shaping not only how conflicts are understood, but also how they are sustained or transformed. From a constructivist perspective conflicts arise from socially constructed identities, norms, narratives, perceptions, memories, and interests where enmity or cooperation is shaped by historical, cultural, and political discourses (Hopf, 1998, p. 171; Kaufman, 2001, p. 15).

### **Identity and Difference**

Conflicts frequently arise from competing or incompatible identities, where individuals and groups define their sense of self in opposition to an ‘other’, fostering division and hostility. These identities are shaped by narratives that delineate group boundaries, often leading to polarisation (Nyhan and Zeitzoff, 2018, pp. 615–618) and “opposing versions of what happened” (Garagozov, 2015, p. 10). In the Ethiopian context, the narrative-based competition between ethnic groups such as the Amhara and Tigray, as examined in this thesis, vividly illustrates this dynamic. These opposing identity constructions, perpetuated through political discourse, media, and narratives, have intensified polarisation, contributing to violent conflicts in Ethiopia (International Crisis Group, 2021; Pamba, 2021). Ethnic conflicts are thus often exacerbated by

constructed identities rooted in historical narratives and reinforced through propaganda and socialisation processes (Kaufman, 2001, chs 2 & 7; Levinger and Roselle, 2017, pp. 94–98).

### **Norms and Social Structures**

Conflicts may emerge when actors adhere to conflicting norms or when dominant norms marginalise certain groups. Norms establish expectations for behaviour, and disputes arise when these expectations are breached or interpreted differently (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, pp. 889–915). In Ethiopia, differing norms between ethnic groups such as the Amhara and Oromo can precipitate tensions. For instance, the Amhara's historical association with centralised governance and bureaucracy contrasts with Oromo norms that often prioritise ethnic autonomy and cultural distinctiveness (Jalata, 2010; Jalata, Schaffer and Div, 2010). Such divergences in normative expectations, reinforced through political rhetoric and social practices, exacerbate misunderstandings and contribute to ethnic-based conflicts (Ting-Toomey and Tenzin Dorjee, 2019, ch. 10).

### **Perception and Miscommunication**

Constructivists underscore how misperceptions and divergent interpretations of actions contribute to conflicts. As reality is socially constructed, misunderstandings of intentions or symbolic acts can escalate disputes (Jervis, 1976, pt 3). In community settings, for example, the meanings ascribed to the Ethiopian tricolour flag (green, yellow, and red) may vary significantly between the Amhara and Oromo communities.

A gesture or symbol intended as unifying - such as the display of national emblems - may be perceived as exclusionary or hegemonic due to differing historical and cultural frameworks. Such perceptual gaps, when politicised, can deepen divisions and reinforce antagonistic identity narratives (Garagozov, 2015, pp. 13–15).

### **Historical Narratives and Collective Memory**

Conflicts are often sustained by socially constructed historical narratives that interpret past events in ways that legitimise grievances or perpetuate hostility. These narratives - transmitted through storytelling, formal and informal education, and media - shape collective memory (Halbwachs and Coser, 1992, pp. 52–54; Cobb, 2016, p. 216). For instance, narratives surrounding the Anole massacre of the Oromo people in Arsi under Emperor Menelik II in the late nineteenth century (Bulcha, 2005, p. 22), or the reprisals following the peasant uprising during *Kedamawi Weyane* in Tigray under Emperor Haile Selassie (Berhe, 2004, p. 572), illustrate how contested histories fuel contemporary divisions. The Anole narrative has been amplified by cultural artifacts such as Tesfaye Gebreab's novel *Yeburqa Zimita* and the erection of commemorative monuments, despite ongoing debates about their historical accuracy. Similarly, the *Kedamai Weyane* uprising has been politically instrumentalised, notably through the TPLF appropriation of the term *Weyane* in its Tigrigna nomenclature. Such narratives, whether memorialised in literature, political discourse, or symbolic gestures, reinforce ethno-political grievances, justify demands for restitution or autonomy, and entrench antagonisms by framing the past as an unhealed wound (Garagozov, 2015, p. 12; International Crisis Group, 2021).

## **Interests as Socially Constructed**

Constructivists argue that interests are not inherently fixed but emerge “in the process of defining situation” (Wendt, 1992, p. 398). Conflicts emerge when divergent interpretations of interests develop among actors, often rooted in competing claims over territory, identity, or historical legitimacy. For example, disputes over land use frequently extend beyond material considerations to encompass socially constructed values, such as the symbolic significance of land as ancestral heritage. This dynamic is evident in Ethiopia’s contested territorial claims. The OLF frames Addis Ababa (Finfinne) as the historical homeland of the Oromo people, despite the Oromo demographic minority status in the city today. This homeland narrative underpins the OLF’s demands for preferential treatment in political representation, cultural recognition, and resource allocation (Sirna, 2018). Similarly, competing ethnonationalist narratives between Amhara and Tigray elites centre on Welkayit, with both groups asserting exclusive historical rights to govern the territory based on ancestral ties (Abetew, 2021; John, 2021). Such cases illustrate how conflict is not merely driven by tangible resources but by the politicisation of memory, identity, and competing visions of territorial legitimacy.

## **Power of Ideas and Discourse**

Ideas and discourses fundamentally shape how actors perceive threats and articulate their objectives. Conflicts often arise when dominant discursive frameworks systematically marginalise alternative viewpoints or construct binary oppositions that

frame social issues in inherently adversarial terms. This process is particularly evident in media representations that reduce complex identities to reductive stereotypes, thereby exacerbating intergroup tensions by positioning certain communities as existential threats (Hamelink, 2016). A striking historical example of this dynamic emerged during the ideological conflicts of 1970s and 1980s Ethiopia, when leftist movements employed linguistic markers as political litmus tests. Terms such as *inachenfalen* (እናቸንፋለን) and *inashenfalen* (እናሸንፋለን), or *labader* (ላብአደር) and *wezader*<sup>1</sup>, (ወዛደር) functioned as discursive boundary markers that categorised individuals as either revolutionary allies or reactionary enemies. These linguistic binaries not only reflected the polarised political climate but actively contributed to its intensification, demonstrating how discourse can weaponize language to enforce ideological conformity and justify exclusion. Such historical cases underscore the constitutive power of discourse in shaping conflict dynamics by transforming abstract ideological differences into concrete social divisions. Social constructivism highlights three key processes through which conflicts are produced and sustained: socialisation, persuasion, and institutional bricolage.

## 1. Socialisation

Socialisation refers to the process of “inducting actors into the norms and rules of a given community” (Checkel, 2005, p. 804) through institutions such as education, media, and political elites. In conflict settings, socialisation reinforces antagonistic

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<sup>1</sup> The phrases *inachenfalen* and *inashenfalen* both translate to the revolutionary slogan, “We Shall Win!”. *labader* and *wezader* are alternative equivalents for “proletariat.” The EPRP and anti-Dergue movements adopted *inachenfalen* and *labader*, while MESON and pro-Dergue factions favoured *inashenfalen* and *wezader* as linguistic identifiers of political allegiance. These distinctions reflect how minor phonetic variations were politicised during this period (Tareke, 2009, pp. 144–147).

group identities. For instance, in the Rwandan genocide, state propaganda systematically dehumanised Tutsis, conditioning Hutus to perceive them as existential threats (Melvern, 2006). Similarly, militant groups like ISIS use religious indoctrination to construct an exclusionary worldview that justifies violence (Hegghammer, 2017). This thesis demonstrates how segments of the Ethiopian political elite have been socialised into antagonistic camps, thereby contributing to the persistence of protracted conflicts.

## **2. Persuasion and Discursive Framing**

Persuasion involves the strategic use of language and symbols to shape perceptions of conflict. Political leaders, media, and advocacy groups frame disputes in ways that mobilise support for war or peace (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, pp. 895–905). For example, the U.S. "War on Terror" discourse framed counterterrorism as a moral struggle, legitimising military interventions (Jackson, 2005). Conversely, peace movements employ counter-narratives to delegitimise violence, as seen in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle (Lederach, 1997, ch. 4). This thesis examines the role of academia and the media in both the escalation and de-escalation of conflicts in Ethiopia.

## **3. Institutional Bricolage**

Institutional bricolage describes how actors adapt existing norms and structures to serve new purposes in conflict (Cleaver, 2017). Post-conflict societies often blend international norms (e.g., human rights) with local traditions to create hybrid governance systems. Rwanda's gacaca courts, for instance, combined customary

justice with formal accountability mechanisms to address genocide crimes (Clark, 2010). However, elites may also manipulate institutions to entrench power, as seen in post-colonial states where legal systems perpetuate ethnic hierarchies (Richmond, 2011).

### **Critiques of Social Constructivism**

Despite its strengths, social constructivism has been subject to several critiques. One major limitation concerns its lack of predictive power, as the emphasis on ideational variables often impedes the formulation of empirically testable hypotheses (Checkel, 1998, pp. 344–347). Moreover, critics have highlighted its material blind spots, noting a tendency to underestimate the role of economic and military factors in driving conflict (Mearsheimer, 1994, 6 2018). Another significant concern is the tension between agency and structure: while the framework adeptly foregrounds the influence of structural norms, it is occasionally criticised for neglecting individual agency, particularly in the context of actors strategically manipulating identities to serve specific interests (Brubaker, 1996).

Nevertheless, constructivism serves as the principal theoretical framework guiding this research, providing a robust lens through which to examine the dynamics of ideational factors in shaping political realities. Specifically, it enables a nuanced exploration of how political narratives, as socially constructed discourses, play a pivotal role in the formation, reinforcement, and perpetuation of divisions within the Ethiopian political landscape. By foregrounding the interplay of ideas, identities, and social interactions, constructivism illuminates the mechanisms through which competing narratives -

rooted in historical, cultural, and ideological contexts - contribute to the structuring of political cleavages and the entrenchment of societal fragmentation in Ethiopia. This approach underscores the significance of subjective meanings and collective understandings in driving political processes and outcomes, offering a comprehensive perspective on the complex interplay of power, identity, and discourse in the Ethiopian context.

## **Conflict, Peace, and Peacebuilding**

### **Conflict**

From a constructivist point of view, conflict is understood as a socially constructed process arising from incompatible meanings, identities, and normative frameworks. It emerges through intersubjective interactions where actors interpret and assign significance to their experiences, histories, and relationships (Jabri, 1996, pp. 121–126). From this perspective, conflicts do not merely arise from tangible competitions over resources, territory, or political power; rather, they are deeply rooted in the social construction of identities, values, and meanings that are perceived as incompatible. Vivienne Jabri (1996, pp. 120–131) conceptualises conflict as an expression of contested discourses and practices through which social actors negotiate their identities and interests. From this perspective, conflict emerges not merely from the pursuit of incompatible material objectives, but from the confrontation between competing narratives and the meanings ascribed to political, historical, and cultural symbols. In this sense, conflict becomes a struggle in which different groups articulate divergent and often antagonistic versions of reality, typically grounded in identity,

memory, and exclusion. As Jolle Demmers (2016, p. 16) notes, “violent conflict is rooted in social constructions of identity and difference, and it is shaped by the ways actors frame their interests, grievances and enemies.” Similarly, Oliver Richmond (2020, pp. 249–252) emphasises that conflicts arise from divergent interpretations of legitimacy, justice, and power embedded in social and political structures. In this view, conflict emerges not from objective conditions alone but from the normative frameworks through which actors make sense of their world. Ted Gurr (2000, ch. 3) reinforces this constructivist understanding by highlighting the significance of identity-based perceptions and symbolic exclusion. He asserts that ethno-political conflict often stems not from material deprivation per se, but from perceived group marginalisation and identity threats reinforced by political and symbolic exclusion (pp. 54–57). These perspectives collectively underscore the centrality of meaning, identity, and perception in the genesis and perpetuation of conflict. Conflicts can have far-reaching outcomes: one side may change, one side may be eliminated, both sides may change, neither side may change, or both sides may be eliminated (Barash and Webel, 2002, p. 26).

Every conflict comprises at least three fundamental elements: incompatibility, actors, and actions (Wallensteen, 2023, ch. 2). *Incompatibility* may be understood as referring to the underlying “material” of conflict, encompassing not only tangible interests but also deep-seated and often mutually exclusive interpretations of concepts such as history, justice, pride, and legitimacy. These incompatibilities extend beyond physical disputes over territory or resources and instead reside in the normative and symbolic realms that structure how groups perceive themselves and others. Constructivist scholarship contends that such incompatibilities are not fixed or objective realities but are socially constructed and continually reshaped through interaction (Berger and

Luckmann, 1966, pp. 15–17). They evolve in response to shifting social, political, and historical contexts - particularly in situations where actors perceive existential threats, systemic marginalisation, or unresolved historical grievances. Perceptions of victimhood, entitlement, and exclusion play a central role in shaping these incompatibilities, as they inform group narratives and collective memories that legitimise claims and mobilise action (Gurr, 2000, pp. 54–57; Brubaker, 2006, pp. 10–12). In this sense, incompatibility is not simply a disagreement over interests, but a manifestation of how different groups construct their identities and the moral frameworks through which they interpret the world. Such constructions are sustained and reinforced through discourse, socialisation, symbolic representation, and political rhetoric, thereby perpetuating divisions and, in many cases, intensifying conflict (Jabri, 1996, pp. 122–124; Demmers, 2016, pp. 15–19).

*Actors* in a conflict encompass a diverse array of stakeholders, including individuals, groups, formal or informal organisations, state and non-state entities, each with varying degrees of interest, agency, and power. Constructivist approaches to conflict analysis underscore that these actors are not merely rational utility-maximisers driven by material interests but are profoundly shaped by narratives - intersubjective frameworks of meaning, historical accounts, and collective memories - that define their identities, perceptions of self and others, and interpretations of conflict dynamics (Wendt, 1999, p. 224). Mary Kaldor (2012, p. 161) complements this perspective by describing actors as a complex network of state and non-state entities - such as paramilitary groups, warlords, private security contractors, criminal organisations, and terrorist networks - that operate in globalised, decentralised systems. These actors leverage narratives, that “holds together dispersed loose networks” (p.215),

particularly those rooted in identity politics, to mobilise support and justify violence, often blurring the boundaries between political conflict, organised crime, and human rights violations (p.6). The roles of actors in conflict vary considerably in terms of significance and influence. Significance reflects the extent to which an actor is materially, emotionally, or ideologically invested in the conflict, often shaped by narratives that resonate with their collective identity or historical experience. Influence, conversely, is determined by an actor's capacity to shape the conflict's trajectory through actions, resources, or symbolic authority, frequently amplified by their ability to control or manipulate narratives. Key actors, therefore, are those who combine high stakes with substantial influence, often occupying strategic positions within political, military, or socio-cultural hierarchies. Political elites, for example, wield significant influence by shaping public narratives through control over institutions and media, positioning themselves as defenders of collective identity or national interests (Burton, 1990, pp. 39–42; Darby and Mac, 2008, pp. 15–20; Zuckert, 2017, pp. 22–24). Constructivist scholars argue that agency is contextually embedded and relational, with actors' choices contingent on how they interpret social structures, histories, and available options through narrative lenses (Checkel, 1998, pp. 328–330; Risse, 2000, pp. 8–10). A comprehensive understanding of conflict, therefore, must prioritise the interplay of strategic interests, and the narrative frameworks through which actors constitute themselves, their adversaries, and the broader conflict landscape.

*Actions* refer to what conflict actors do - or choose not to do - in response to perceived incompatibilities. These actions and subsequent counteractions shape the dynamics of a conflict, contributing to its escalation, de-escalation, or stagnation. The actions undertaken by actors - whether diplomatic, violent, discursive, or symbolic - function

not merely as reactions to conflict, but as mechanisms through which conflict is continuously produced and reproduced over time (Darby and Mac, 2008, pp. 67–69; Richmond, 2020, pp. 89–92). Constructivist perspectives emphasise the central role of discourse in shaping these dynamics. Narratives and rhetorical strategies frequently act as catalysts in either intensifying or alleviating tensions. For instance, framing a conflict as an existential threat may entrench identities, reinforce zero-sum thinking, and hinder compromise. In contrast, promoting narratives of shared identity and mutual recognition can create the conditions necessary for dialogue, trust-building, and reconciliation. Furthermore, certain actions - particularly those involving violence - can produce irreversible consequences, entrenching divisions and foreclosing future avenues for peaceful resolution.

At a societal level, conflicts may manifest as intragroup, intergroup, intrastate, interstate, or class-based phenomena. Intragroup conflicts occur within entities such as teams, organisations, political parties, families, or broader collectives like ethnic or religious communities and elite factions, where group dynamics interplay with interpersonal tensions. Intergroup conflicts arise between entities such as organisations, ethnic groups, or religious communities. Intrastate conflicts, such as civil wars, unfold within a single state, while interstate conflicts involve two or more states and may escalate to subregional, regional, or global wars. Class conflicts pertain to disputes between socioeconomic strata. Notably, a conflict may transcend these categories; for instance, it might simultaneously exhibit intrastate and interstate characteristics.

Another key concept in conflict analysis is the distribution of power. Conflict can be either *symmetric* where there is an even or close to equal distribution of power between the conflicting parties; or *asymmetric* when there is a big power imbalance (Mitchell, 1991; Hüffmeier and Mazei, 2019). These differences affect the strategies and tactics available to actors in designing and execution of their actions. They also influence the choice of instruments of intervention to support a peacebuilding process.

If a destructive conflict is allowed to escalate, it may lead to violence or abuse. According to Johan Galtung (1990), violence is “avoidable insults to basic human needs, and more generally to life, lowering the real level of needs satisfaction below what is potentially possible” (p.292). Acts of violence may be physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, spiritual (religious) or cultural, whereas abuses may be verbal or financial abuses or neglect. Violence consists of actions, words, attitudes, structures or systems that cause physical, psychological, social or environmental damage and/or prevent people from reaching their full human potential (Fisher *et al.*, 2020, ch. 1). War is an extreme manifestation of violence which require social organisation (Barash and Webel, 2002, ch. 3).

However, it is pertinent to note that not all conflicts are destructive; some are constructive. Conflicts can benefit the conflicting parties in various ways such as by creating new alliances, norms and institutions (Andakulova, 2021). They also can benefit the third party by weakening potential opponents or creating new opportunities. With effective conflict management, some destructive conflicts can be transformed into constructive conflicts.

From a constructivist perspective, effective conflict transformation is grounded in several core principles that address the socially constructed nature of conflicts. Firstly, understanding that realities are socially constructed enables practitioners to challenge entrenched perceptions (Gergen, 2009). Reframing narratives is crucial for reshaping conflict stories into opportunities for coexistence (Cobb, 2013, 2016). Fostering open dialogue, as advocated by Bohm (1996), facilitates mutual understanding and reduces hostility. Exploring identities helps address how group affiliations shape conflict dynamics (Black, 2008), while building relationships fosters trust and collaboration (Kelman, 2005, 2007). Contextual awareness ensures interventions are tailored to specific cultural and historical settings (Jabri, 1996). Promoting agency and participation empowers stakeholders to actively shape outcomes (Bush, 2005), and embracing flexibility and creativity allows for innovative solutions (Schirch, 2014). Conflict transformation thus involves cultivating inclusive identities, fostering new narratives of coexistence, and establishing cooperative interaction norms. To maximise positive outcomes and minimise harm, interventions must be conflict-sensitive, requiring a nuanced understanding of the conflict's context and the cultures of key actors. By integrating these principles, conflict transformation can facilitate sustainable peacebuilding, addressing both immediate tensions and underlying structural issues.

This research adopts a constructivist perspective, defining conflict as a socially constructed process grounded in contested identities, meanings, and normative frameworks. Building on this tradition, the thesis examines the dynamics of conflict in

Ethiopia, a nation deeply fractured along historical, ethnic, and ideological lines. In this context, divisive narratives have been instrumental in instigating, legitimising, and sustaining conflict.

## **Peace**

Etymologically, peace (the Greek *Eirene* and Semitic including Amharic *Salam*) refers to well-being, harmony, agreement, wholeness, greetings, and good wishes. The scholarly definition of peace refers to a social condition that is free from violence (Galtung, 1964, 1969; Barash and Webel, 2002). The key term in this definition is “violence.” Those who limit violence to physical harm conceive peace as a social condition free from direct violence, such as war. In contrast, those who understand violence to include indirect violence and the “fear of violence” have a broader concept of peace. A situation free from direct violence is referred to as “Negative Peace,” while a situation free from all forms of violence is known as “Positive Peace.”

Johan Galtung (1964) is the first to distinguish negative peace as an absence of direct, organised or collective violence between large groups of people such as nations and even between classes, races, and ethnic groups (Galtung, 1964, 1990; Grewal, 2003; Fischer, 2007; Williams and McDonald, 2018) and positive peace as the prevalence of “social and economic justice, environmental integrity, human rights, and development” and contribute to the structural “integration of human society” (Galtung, 1964). Positive peace activities require “building a life-sustaining economy at the local, national and global level in which everyone's basic needs are met, good governance

and participation, self-determination, and human rights” (Fischer, 2007, p. 188). Although important, “negative peace is insufficient” (Ercoşkun, 2021, p. 3).

Negative peace, characterised by the absence of violence, war, verbal assaults, forced displacement, intimidation, antagonistic neighbourhoods, and the fear that any of these may imminently occur, may be achieved through non-peaceful means, including policing, the balance of power, self-defence, and strategic alliances with regional hegemons. Negative peace can exist without justice and establishes a system in which individuals do not fear for their lives. It is founded upon tolerance and is encapsulated by the motto: “*Live and let live.*” Conversely, positive peace is defined by the presence of cooperation, compassion, mutual respect, the exchange of information and resources, mutually empowering neighbourhoods, and a collective sense of hope for the future. It can only be attained through peaceful means, such as fairness and equity, cooperation and fraternity, freedom and liberty, and socio-economic development. Positive peace is inextricably linked to justice and fosters a system wherein individuals take pride in themselves and their communities, striving to realise their full potential. It promotes mutual support and is guided by the mottos: “*If we do not all row, the boat will not go*” and “*United we stand, divided we fall.*”

Regardless of whether it is perceived as negative or positive, peace should not be understood as a singular event or act but rather as a dynamic social process that unfolds across time, space, and specific contextual conditions. This process evolves through multiple stages, influenced by the actions and interactions of diverse actors. Diamond and McDonald (1996, ch. 1) provide a nuanced conceptualisation of peace,

characterising it as a fluid and evolving condition - both a potential state and a directional objective to be pursued incrementally. Crucially, peace extends beyond the mere absence of conflict; it constitutes an ongoing, multifaceted process and a long-term aspiration. As a social process, peace is inherently subject to interpretation, rendering it vulnerable to misunderstanding, misrepresentation, underestimation, or exaggeration (Galtung, 1969). From this standpoint, peace can be understood as a *socially constructed phenomenon*.

Within the framework of social constructivism, "peace" is not an objective or universally fixed state but a dynamic concept that emerges from social processes, shaped by shared meanings, beliefs, and interpretations within specific societal contexts. Berger and Luckmann (1966, pts 2, Section 1) argue that reality is constructed through human interaction, suggesting that peace - whether conceptualised as the absence of conflict, a state of harmony, or an embodiment of justice - is a product of collective negotiation rather than an inherent truth. This perspective underscores the fluidity of peace, as its meaning varies across cultures, communities, and historical moments, contingent upon the interplay of social actors and their interpretive frameworks. Bakalova and Jüngling (2020, p. 154) reinforce this view, asserting that "there is no single objective or normative view of peace, but many subjective, actor-specific 'peaces'," highlighting the multiplicity of interpretations shaped by identities, interests, and power dynamics. In contexts characterised by ethnic politics and diverse narratives, this approach reveals how competing visions of peace can coexist; what is understood as peace by one group may not be conceived in the same way by another. By recognising peace as a socially constructed phenomenon, constructivism emphasises the importance of

agency, context, and narrative reframing in fostering sustainable conflict transformation.

The fluidity of peace's definition is evident across theoretical lenses. The concept of peace is shaped by the intersubjective meanings and social practices that define it within specific historical and cultural contexts. Constructivists argue that peace is not an objective condition but a socially constructed phenomenon, emerging from shared understandings, norms, and identities (Wendt, 1992, p. 405; Adler, 1997, pp. 346–347). For offensive realists, peace is equated with dominance, a meaning rooted in power-centric narratives (Mearsheimer, 2001, ch. 2; Snyder, 2002, p. 156; Kapteijns, 2013, ch. 4). Defensive realists, however, construct peace as a balance of power, where collective security norms foster stability (Waltz, 1979, p. 118; Walt, 1985, pp. 5–8; Layne, 1993, pp. 8–16). Liberals, influenced by Kantian ideals, define peace through cooperative identities forged via democratic institutions, trade, and global governance (Kant, 1795, p. 11; Lake, 1992, p. 26; Rousseau *et al.*, 1996, p. 513). These meanings are sustained by discursive practices that prioritise interdependence. In contrast, religious communities often frame peace as a divine gift, a normative belief shaped by spiritual narratives and communal rituals (Dion, Anderson and Dion, 1992, p. 47; Musto, 2002, ch. 1, p.16; Farneubun, 2013; Afsaruddin, 2020, p. 32). From a constructivist perspective, these divergent interpretations highlight how peace is constituted through social interactions and evolving identities. Rather than a fixed state, peace reflects the dynamic interplay of ideas, discourses, and contexts, underscoring its contingent nature. As actors negotiate their understandings, peace remains an ever-evolving construct, deeply embedded in the social fabric of human experience.

Power dynamics further complicate this constructivist understanding. Dominant groups, such as state authorities, may impose a version of peace that preserves order, as Johan Galtung (1969, p. 183) critiques in his distinction between negative and positive peace, while marginalised actors might contest it as oppression (Foucault, 1980, p. 93). These competing definitions play a pivotal role in the initiation, conduct, and resolution of conflicts, as well as in peacebuilding. Thus, from a social constructivist perspective, peace emerges as a dynamic, human-made construct, perpetually negotiated and redefined through social interaction.

## **Peacebuilding**

The concept of peacebuilding has undergone significant theoretical evolution, shifting from a narrow institutional focus to a more holistic and socially embedded process. Initially, Johan Galtung (1976, p. 297) conceived peacebuilding as the establishment of structures to address the root causes of war and to propose alternative mechanisms for managing emerging tensions. While this foundational approach emphasised institutional and structural responses, subsequent theorists have expanded its scope. John Paul Lederach (1997, p. 20, 2015, ch. 3), for instance, advanced a more relational and inclusive framework, highlighting peacebuilding as a dynamic and multi-layered process involving diverse actors, practices and levels of engagement aimed at transforming conflictual relationships into just and sustainable social arrangements.

From a constructivist perspective, peacebuilding is not a static outcome but an ongoing process of meaning-making, shaped through collective identities, shared norms, and evolving discourses (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p. 895). This lens underscores the centrality of ideas, narratives, and social interactions in the construction of peace, suggesting that sustainable peace cannot be achieved solely through institutional engineering but requires the reconstitution of the normative and ideational foundations of post-conflict societies. Building on this, scholars such as Roland Paris (2004, p. 187) and Oliver Richmond (2005, p. 12) argue that peacebuilding must address not only the reconstruction of political, economic and social institutions but also the transformation of the societal frameworks that underpin conflict. They caution against externally imposed liberal peace models and advocate for context-sensitive strategies that promote local agency. These constructivist and critical contributions point to the need for an integrated peacebuilding approach - one that simultaneously reforms institutional mechanisms and reimagines the social norms, identities and narratives that sustain either conflict or reconciliation.

Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1992, p. 8), former Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), reintroduced the concept of peacebuilding as entailing “rebuilding the institutions and infrastructures of nations torn by civil war and strife; and building bonds of peaceful mutual benefit among nations formerly at war”. He further emphasised that peacebuilding must be considered alongside peace-making, defined as “efforts aimed at resolving the issues that have led to conflict” (p.8), as interconnected components of a holistic approach to conflict resolution. The contemporary UN conceptualises peacebuilding as “a complex, long-term process of creating the necessary conditions for sustainable peace... [which] addresses core issues that affect the functioning of

society and the State, and seek[s] to enhance the capacity of the State” (UN Peace, 2008, p. 18). However, definitions of peacebuilding vary significantly among international and local nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), as these entities often adapt the term to align with their respective mandates, operational specialisations, and institutional interests (Barnett *et al.*, 2007, p. 53).

Beyond organisational differences, interpretations of peacebuilding diverge across theoretical paradigms. Realist scholars attribute the absence of peace primarily to weak or absent state authority and institutional frameworks (Tschirgi, 2003, p. 5, 2015, p. 83). Consequently, they advocate for state strengthening measures as the central objective of peacebuilding, applicable at both interstate and intrastate levels. Key realist prescriptions include reinforcing law enforcement agencies (e.g., police and local militias), upholding the rule of law, and ensuring accountability (Tschirgi, 2015). From this perspective, peace is undermined when deterrence mechanisms fail, and violations go unpunished. At the interstate level, realists associate peace with a balance of power or alignment with regional hegemony, while intrastate peacebuilding prioritises the consolidation of policing and security apparatuses. In contrast, liberal theorists associate conflict with a deficit of consensus and thus emphasise democratic institution building, participatory governance, and the proliferation of local and international civil society networks as essential peacebuilding activities (Barnett *et al.*, 2007). Liberals also endorse the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), asserting that the international community bears an obligation to safeguard civilian populations (ICISS, 2001). For constructivists, peacebuilding entails mitigating ideological polarisation, fostering intergroup harmony, and cultivating norms and narratives conducive to peaceful coexistence (Paris, 2004, p. 189). This thesis adopts

a constructivist understanding of peacebuilding, given its emphasis on normative and identity-based dimensions of conflict resolution.

## **Ethnicity and Ethnic Politics**

Leach, Brown, and Worden (2008, p. 761) contend that ethnicity is the most prevalent descriptor of group identity globally, largely due to its multifaceted nature. Ethnicity encompasses a wide range of group identity markers, including race, culture, geographical region, language, religion, and occasionally, social or economic status. The authors further assert that ethnicity played a critical role in the early formation of nation-states, which remain the dominant political structures today (p.762). Francis Fukuyama (2018b, p. 126) argues that in contemporary society, diversity - encompassing race, ethnicity, religion, ... - is both an inevitable reality and a cherished principle.

According to Leach, Brown, and Worden (2008, p. 763), ethnic identity serves at least four essential psychosocial functions for its members: (1) fostering self-esteem, (2) conferring social status, (3) providing existential security and knowledge, and (4) offering social protection. Modernisation has spurred ethnic consciousness, which may prompt demands for recognition. These demands encompass not only claims for equal recognition - often unattainable - but also assertions of superiority over others (Fukuyama, 2018b, p. 108). Ethnic identities are inherently relational, defined in part by their interactions with other groups. Their boundaries are often shaped by conflict, both as a consequence of and a catalyst for conflict (Coulmas, 2019, p. 30). As a

result, "ethnic identity" serves as the foundation for various concepts, including "ethnic diversity," "ethnic politics," "ethnic conflict," and "ethnic parties."

The term "ethnic politics" refers to a political context in which ethnic identity is mobilised to gain support, with individuals tending to back leaders from the same ethnic group (Lynch, 2015, p. 1). It can also be described as political engagement centred on ethnic identity, employed by both dominant and subordinate groups to rally support and pursue power. Dominant groups leverage it to sustain their authority, while subordinated groups utilise it to strengthen their collective identities and to promote their claims for material resources, psychosocial support, and political influence (Leach, Brown and Worden, 2008). Ethnic politics may also be seen as a contest for control of the state between ethnically defined organisations and their constituencies (Cederman, Wimmer and Min, 2010, p. 95). In societies where ethnic politics dominate, political elites in power are likely to favour co-ethnics when forming alliances or allocating public resources (Wimmer, Cederman and Min, 2009, p. 317). Consequently, political dynamics revolve around competition for control of state institutions, with ethnically defined actors vying for power.

In polities where ethnic politics prevail, officeholders frequently prioritise co-ethnics in the allocation of public goods and governmental roles (Cederman, Wimmer and Min, 2010, p. 94). Voters may favour parties led by co-ethnics, while individuals may seek co-ethnic judges or police officers (Wimmer, 2002; 2010, p. 94). This dynamic can lead to the capture of the state by ethnic elites and their constituents, transforming the state into a tool of ethnic dominance, with other groups relegated to bystanders or outsiders. Thus, it is unrealistic to conceive of ethnic conflict in contemporary settings as a simple

confrontation between two or more ethnic groups with the state acting as a neutral entity. In reality, the state is neither a neutral actor nor a passive arena within which ethnic groups operate (Wimmer, Cederman and Min, 2009, p. 337). Even in times of relative peace, ethnic politics create incentives for the cyclical control of state power, which often leads to the looting of national resources by competing ethnic factions (Fukuyama, 2018b, p. 125), as leaders may justify it by claiming that it is their 'turn to eat' (Wrong, 2010). In most modern ethnic conflicts, both central and regional states are seen as prizes, fiercely contested by ethnic groups seeking to control the state and use it as an instrument for their own interests.

## **Narratives and Conflict**

Narratives are socially constructed stories, either spoken or written, that are linked to perceived or actual events. The concept of 'narrative' encompasses not only a series of events but also the contextual elements accompanying their progression (Bartel and Garud, 2009; Sergeeva and Ninan, 2023).

Yuval N. Harari (2014) argues that the capacity of *Homo Sapiens* to construct and collectively uphold shared stories distinguishes them from other species. These shared stories - narratives - as noted by the Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT, 2022, p. 1), “shape how we understand ourselves and our relationship to our social group and others, as well as the way we mobilise for social and political actions.” Furthermore, narratives serve as “tools to understand, negotiate, and make sense of situations we encounter; ... They are ‘equipment for living’” (Adams, 2008, p. 175; Graef, Da Silva and Lemay-Hebert, 2020, p. 431).

Narratives significantly influence the way conflicts are framed and comprehended. Through processes of storytelling and mythmaking, they transmit collective traumas or prides across generations (Volkan, 2001, p. 79). They are instrumental in demarcating boundaries between “in-group” and “out-group”, or “us” and “they”, facilitating the formation of collective identities and symbols. Consequently, narratives may escalate or de-escalate conflicts (Funk and Said, 2004, p. 3; Ehrmann and Millar, 2021, p. 604), polarise or unite communities, depending upon the nature of the narrative and its conveyers (Leonard, 2010, pp. 364, 368; Ehrmann and Millar, 2021, p. 604). Moreover, narratives can “create the physical world” (Law, 2000; Federman, 2016, p. 155), as large-scale human cooperation fundamentally rests upon myths (Harari, 2014, p. 39). Yuval Harari (2014) argues that “the way people cooperate can be altered by changing the myths – by telling different stories” (pp. 39–40). Additionally, narratives play a pivotal role within the policy process, shaping public opinion, influencing decision-makers, and informing each stage of policy formulation and implementation (Crow and Jones, 2021, pp. 35–43).

Sara Cobb (2016) observes that “the intersection of narrative and conflict is inherently complex” (p. 127), noting that narratives are simultaneously an object of analysis and a focus of intervention. In wartime contexts, societies and nations frequently develop narratives that they perceive as the sole truthful and morally superior account (Adwan and Bar-On, 2004, p. 514). These narratives “devalue and even dehumanize their enemy’s right for a narrative” (p.514), legitimising one group’s grievances while portraying others as villains and drivers of conflict (IFIT, 2022, p. 3).

Divergent narratives frequently lead to differing interpretations and understandings of the same conflict. The narratives individuals choose to endorse and disseminate exert considerable influence on the duration and intensity of conflicts. Negative and divisive narratives foster blame, anger, and hatred, thereby intensifying conflict. Conversely, narratives grounded in empathy, mutual understanding, and peacebuilding contribute to the de-escalation and resolution of conflict. Within peace studies, narratives are broadly classified into two categories: simplified and complex (Cobb, 2013, 2016). Simplified narratives are typically constructed around a singular interpretation of events or history, excluding alternative perspectives. They characteristically portray the narrators as innocent victims while demonising the “other” as perpetrators and inherently evil (Smith, 2005). Such narratives often call for actions aimed at exterminating, suppressing, or subduing those deemed enemies, with tangible and adverse consequences. These simplified narratives serve as catalysts for polarisation; the coexistence of a limited number of such narratives within a nation commonly results in communal fragmentation and violent conflict.

In contrast, complex narratives accommodate multiple interpretations. They provide space not only for the narrator’s perspective but also for alternative views, including those of perceived adversaries. Complex narratives challenge the oversimplification inherent in simplified narratives, reminding audiences that reality is neither binary nor static. They acknowledge the fluidity of victimhood and perpetration, recognising that individuals or groups can occupy both positions simultaneously. As Frank (2014) articulates, within complex narratives “circularity replaces linearity” (p.451). Such narratives cultivate “a complex and multilayered sensibility” (Cobb, 2013, p. 197), fostering the inclusion of intermediate, marginalised, and alternative stories alongside

dominant discourses. Forgiveness, it is argued, necessitates complex narratives. Griswold (2007) argues that engaging with complex narratives allows individuals to reframe the past “without undoing it, or ignoring, avoiding, rationalizing, or forgetting it. One may adopt a different perspective on it, attach a different meaning to it, respond to it in a different way, adapt it to one’s evolving life story” (p.100). In this regard, complex narratives serve as enablers of peace. Crucially, from this perspective, “peace is not the outcome of a ‘shared narrative’ where all people must tell the same story, but rather the result of a rich landscape of many different narratives” (IFIT, 2022, p. 6). This research endeavours to analyse the deleterious consequences of two polarised and oversimplified narratives on Ethiopia’s peace and stability.

## **Narratives and Policies in Conflict Settings**

Narratives and policies exhibit a complex and dynamic interdependence in conflict settings, each profoundly shaping the other. Far from being neutral accounts, narratives carry moral weight and evoke emotional responses, influencing public opinion and steering policy trajectories. Six points illustrate how narratives serve as both a foundation and a catalyst for policymaking in such contexts:

### **1. Shaping Public Opinion and Policy Trajectories**

Narratives in conflict settings wield significant power to frame societal challenges and solutions, often determining the legitimacy of policy interventions. By embedding moral and emotional dimensions, narratives shape public and elite perceptions of conflict dynamics (Bruner, 1990, ch. 2). For example, a narrative portraying a conflict as a struggle for self-determination may galvanise international support for diplomatic

interventions, such as sanctions or peacekeeping missions, while a narrative framing the same conflict as terrorism may justify military policies, as seen in the U.S. response to 9/11 (Hodges, 2011, p. 35). The disparity in the international community's stance - supporting Ethiopia's military efforts against Al-Shabaab in the Somali region while condemning its operations against the TPLF in Tigray - can, to some extent, be explained by the dominant narratives framing these conflicts.

## **2. Constructing Identity and Reflecting Policy Frameworks**

Narratives are instrumental in constructing collective identities in conflict contexts, defining adversaries and allies (Somers, 1994, p. 616). Policies often reflect these identity narratives, either fostering reconciliation or entrenching divisions. For instance, a narrative emphasising ethnic unity in post-conflict Bosnia underpinned power-sharing policies under the Dayton Agreement (Bieber, 2006, p. 85), whereas divisive sectarian narratives in Iraq have fuelled exclusionary governance policies, perpetuating conflict (Haddad, 2011, chs 4–5). Similarly, the narrative that reduces Ethiopia to a "prison of nations and nationalities," which this study systematically interrogates, has played a significant role in exacerbating and prolonging deep-seated socio-political crises.

## **3. Mobilising Agency and Garnering Support**

Compelling narratives can mobilise agency in conflict zones, rallying communities, governments, or international actors around peacebuilding or conflict escalation (Bartal, 2000, chs 4–6). A powerful narrative of victimhood, for example, may inspire humanitarian aid policies or military intervention, as seen in the Rwandan genocide's

aftermath, where narratives of suffering drove global support for transitional justice mechanisms like the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (Moghalu, 2005, chs 5–6). In the Ethiopian context, the two dominant narratives - “Ethiopia as the cradle of freedom and civilisation” and “Ethiopia as a prison of nations and nationalities” - have mobilised significant political agency and garnered substantial support, further polarising conflict dynamics.

#### **4. Sustaining Policy Longevity**

Narratives underpin the legitimacy and endurance of conflict-related policies by aligning them with societal or international values (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, pp. 904–905, 910). Policies rooted in narratives of justice or reconciliation, such as South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, gain sustained support when they resonate with collective aspirations for peace (Tutu, and Tutu, 2014, chs 4 & 7; Andrews, 2019, chs 3 & 5). Conversely, policies lacking narrative alignment, such as imposed top-down disarmament programmes, often fail due to insufficient public legitimacy (Pouligny, 2006, pp. 138–165).

#### **5. Unequal Narrative Capital and Power Disparities**

The ability to craft and disseminate narratives in conflict settings is unevenly distributed. Dominant actors - state governments, international organisations, or militant groups - often control narratives through media or propaganda, shaping policies to their advantage (Cobb, 2013, ch. 3). For instance, state-driven narratives in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict often overshadow Palestinian voices, influencing policies like settlement expansions (Barak, 2005, p. 633). This disparity reinforces

power imbalances, marginalising weaker parties' policy priorities. In the Ethiopian context, the EPRDF's post-1991 political ascendancy transformed the "prison of nations" narrative into a state-driven ideological framework. This narrative was systematically institutionalised through constitutional entrenchment and operationalised as a foundational principle of federal governance, effectively reconfiguring Ethiopia's statehood along explicitly ethno-nationalist lines.

## **6. Catalysing Change Through Counter-Narratives**

Counter-narratives in conflict settings can challenge dominant policy frameworks and drive transformative change (Andrews, 2004, ch. Introduction). Marginalised groups, such as non-violent resistance movements, use counter-narratives to reframe conflicts and advocate for inclusive policies. The Palestinian narrative of occupation, for example, has fuelled global boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movements, pressuring policy shifts towards accountability and human rights (Qumsiyeh, 2011, chs 7 & 10). In the Ethiopian context, three pivotal developments - the contentious 2005 national elections, the transformation of the EPRDF into the Prosperity Party (PP), and the Adwa Zero project - can be understood as manifestations of the counter-narrative promoting Ethiopia as the "cradle of freedom and civilisation." These events reflect attempts to reassert a unifying civilisational identity in response to the dominant ethno-nationalist framework.

To summarise, the interplay between narratives and policies in conflict studies is multifaceted and reciprocal. Narratives shape perceptions, identities, and actions that influence conflict-related policies, while policies reinforce or challenge dominant

conflict narratives. Marked by emotional resonance, power dynamics, and transformative potential, this relationship underscores the critical role of narratives in shaping policies that govern conflict and peacebuilding processes, from fostering reconciliation to legitimising interventions or advocating for justice.

### **The Narrative Policy Framework**

As Elizabeth Shanahan et al. (2018, p. 173) assert, “narratives are the lifeblood of politics.” This statement underscores the central role that stories and collective interpretations play in shaping political realities, mobilising support, and legitimising actions. Within the context of the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), narratives are seen as powerful tools through which policy actors interpret complex realities, frame problems, assign blame or responsibility, and propose solutions. Policy interventions, in this framework, refer to intentional strategies adopted by governments, political elites, and civil society organisations to influence or transform dominant narratives. These efforts often aim to reconstruct socially constructed stories that shape public perceptions, influence group identities, and determine policy directions. Such interventions are particularly critical in divided or conflict-prone societies, where polarising or exclusionary narratives fuel mistrust, resentment, and violence. By replacing these with narratives that emphasise common values, shared histories, and collective aspirations, policy actors seek to foster unity, cooperation, and societal cohesion. The NPF highlights the malleability of narratives - how they can be reinterpreted, reconfigured, and realigned to serve particular political or social agendas. In this sense, narrative interventions are not just tools of communication but

instruments of social and political transformation, capable of reshaping how communities understand themselves and relate to others.

The NPF is a theoretical framework that elucidates how policy narratives influence public opinion, group dynamics, and elite behaviour across micro, meso, and macro levels (Jones and McBeth, 2010; Shanahan *et al.*, 2018). It dissects narratives into form and content. Narrative form, defined as “the structure of narratives” (Shanahan *et al.*, 2018, p. 175), comprises enduring elements that persist across contexts. *The setting* establishes the narrative’s relevance by outlining its geographical, demographic, ethnic, religious, political, economic, and cultural dimensions. *Characters* function as the actors within the narrative, typically categorised as *victims* (those who suffer harm), *villains* (those who inflict harm), and *heroes* (those who provide solutions), with additional roles including beneficiaries, allies, or charismatic experts. *The plot* serves as the organisational framework, connecting characters through their motives, relationships, and temporal-spatial contexts. Finally, *the moral of the story* conveys the narrative’s overarching purpose, often presenting a policy solution or call to action - what Shanahan *et al.* (2018) describe as giving “purpose to the characters’ actions and motives (p. 176).”

Narrative content pertains to “the policy context and subject matter” (Shanahan *et al.*, 2018, p.175). It examines belief systems and narrative strategies shaping policy communication and interpretation. Belief systems reflect how individuals interpret narratives through personal experiences and frameworks, informed by theories such as cultural theory (Jorgensen, Song and Jones, 2018, pp. 661–662) or Lakoff’s moral

politics (Knackmuhs, Farmer and Knapp, 2020, pp. 410–412). Strategies involve actors manipulating narratives to achieve objectives, employing tactics like the scope of conflict, which defines conflict boundaries from localised disputes to systemic issues (Stephan, 2020, pp. 860–861); the devil/angel shift, framing actors as villains or heroes to evoke specific responses (Merry, 2019, pp. 577–578); and causal mechanisms, attributing causality to explain policy problems or solutions (Shanahan *et al.*, 2018, p. 186).

For example, Haddis Alemayehu's 1968 novel (1996), *Fikir Iske Mekabir (Love unto Crypt)*, established a literary cornerstone for the Ethiopian student movement's depiction of imperial Ethiopia as a feudal system that perpetuated the oppression of the rural poor and marginalised ethnic identities (Transcript Academicians, 2024). The novel's incisive critique of aristocratic hegemony, religious complicity, and entrenched social stratification resonated with the students' Marxist critique of the state as an oppressive imperial apparatus that entrenched systemic inequalities. Employing indigenous literary devices such as *sem-enna werq* ("wax and gold"), the text allegorically represented the systematic suppression of subaltern voices, thereby serving as a powerful discursive tool for the movement's radical vision of transforming Ethiopia from a repressive state into a pluralist society.

### **Narratives in the NPF**

The NPF conceptualises narratives as knowledge, meaning, or metaphor, each offering distinct insights into their societal role.

## **Narratives as Knowledge**

Narratives function as repositories of collective wisdom, encapsulating insights gleaned from socialisation and lived experiences. As Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy (2005, p. 291) argue, actors engage in thinking and knowing through stories, highlighting the role of narratives in preserving tacit cultural knowledge. This knowledge enables communities to address contemporary challenges by drawing on historical insights. For example, traditional narratives may reveal strategies for conflict resolution or resource management, offering practical approaches to modern policy dilemmas. By uncovering this embedded knowledge, policymakers can design interventions that align with cultural values, thereby enhancing their legitimacy and efficacy (Jorgensen, Song and Jones, 2018). Such an approach ensures that policies are rooted in the lived realities of communities, fostering more effective and contextually relevant solutions to conflicts and societal challenges.

## **Narratives as Meaning**

Narratives serve as vital expressive mechanisms through which individuals, as purposeful social actors, articulate their beliefs and interpret their realities within conflict settings. As Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy (2005, p. 281) contend, narratives employ language and symbolic tools to elucidate actors' sensemaking processes. In the realm of policy, narratives significantly influence how conflicts and issues are framed, shaping both public and elite perceptions. For instance, a narrative framing a post-conflict reconciliation process as a shared journey towards healing may foster cooperation among communities, while one emphasising retribution may perpetuate division and hostility. Policymakers can strategically leverage narratives to align public

sentiment with intended policy outcomes, using targeted communication to evoke empathy or galvanise support (Stephan, 2020). This expressive power positions narratives as a potent instrument in conflict studies, facilitating the creation of shared meanings that bridge societal divides and foster resolution.

### **Narratives as Metaphor**

Beyond serving as tools, narratives shape human existence, reflecting deeper social structures and holding ontological and epistemological significance. They offer glimpses into societal undercurrents often obscured from casual observation. As metaphors, narratives define collective identities and worldviews, influencing how communities perceive their place in the world (Federman, 2016). For instance, a narrative portraying a nation as a “beacon of freedom” may underpin policies promoting decolonisation. By engaging with narratives at this level, policymakers can address fundamental societal tensions, fostering inclusive identities that transcend divisive rhetoric. This metaphorical role underscores the profound impact of narrative interventions in reshaping societal values and priorities (Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2019).

### **Policy Interventions**

The NPF proposes four metaphorical strategies for narrative reconstruction: excavation, crafting, demolition, and afforestation. Each approach leverages narratives’ malleability to promote societal cohesion.

## Narrative Excavation

Narrative excavation involves rediscovering and revitalising cohesive narratives sidelined by dominant, often divisive, discourses. This approach treats narratives as knowledge, tapping into traditional wisdom embedded in community histories, folklore, and oral traditions. For example, excavating stories of interethnic cooperation in post-conflict societies can counter narratives of division, fostering reconciliation. Practitioners analyse archival records, conduct community dialogues, and engage with elders to unearth narratives of mutual respect and collaboration. By reintegrating these stories into public discourse, policymakers can strengthen social bonds and promote inclusive policy frameworks (Lowndes, 2017; IFIT, 2021). Excavation ensures that interventions are rooted in authentic cultural narratives, enhancing their resonance and sustainability.

Endalegeta Kebede's *Embitta* (1996) exemplifies narrative excavation, breathing new life into the story of *Yeqaqe Wurdwet*, a woman from Ethiopia's Guraghe region born approximately 160 years ago. Through this novel and its subsequent theatrical adaptation, Endalegeta Kebede elevates *Wurdwet* from a figure of Guraghe oral tradition to a national symbol of resilience and gender equality. By seamlessly bridging folklore with contemporary literary and theatrical forms, Endalegeta Kebede's work underscores the vital role of preserving Ethiopia's rich cultural heritage while championing progressive social change.

## **Crafting Narrative**

Crafting narratives entails the deliberate creation of stories to advance peace and development. Political elites and community leaders co-create narratives to reflect shared values and aspirations, using them as expressive tools to address conflict and build resilience. For instance, a government might craft a narrative portraying a diverse society as a unified “mosaic” to counter ethnic tensions. This process involves stakeholder consultations, media campaigns, and public events to disseminate the narrative effectively. As Sarah Federman (2016, p. 162) suggests, crafting narratives that promote resilience can address both “latent as well as overt conflict”, fostering sustainable policy outcomes. Crafting allows policymakers to proactively shape public discourse, aligning it with goals of unity and progress (Lowndes, 2017).

## **Demolishing Narratives**

Demolishing narratives targets those that perpetuate inequality or marginalisation. Such narratives, often deeply entrenched, may legitimise discrimination or exclusion. Demolition strategies vary by context: some narratives, like those overtly promoting hate, require outright eradication through legal bans or public condemnation; others, such as subtle biases in educational materials, may necessitate gradual reform through awareness campaigns and curriculum changes. Policymakers must balance decisive action with cultural sensitivity to avoid alienating communities, ensuring demolition paves the way for constructive alternatives (Shanahan *et al.*, 2014; Merry, 2019). This approach is critical for dismantling harmful narratives that obstruct social cohesion and equitable policy outcomes. For instance, the widespread narratives in

Ethiopia that dehumanise social groups such as potters and blacksmiths must be directly challenged.

### **Afforesting Narratives**

Afforestation involves cultivating a diverse “forest” of narratives to counter polarisation caused by competing dominant stories. Rather than imposing a single narrative, this approach introduces multiple storylines to create a balanced narrative ecosystem. As Sarah Federman (2016) notes, “counterstories challenge those dominant beliefs” (p. 156), enabling marginalised voices to gain prominence. For example, in polarised societies, policymakers might support community-led storytelling initiatives that amplify diverse perspectives, reducing the dominance of divisive narratives. A healthy narrative landscape, where counter-stories coexist harmoniously, is a hallmark of sustainable peace (Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2019; IFIT, 2021). Afforestation fosters pluralism, ensuring narrative interventions promote inclusivity and resilience.

The NPF underscores the transformative potential of narratives in shaping policy and societal outcomes. By understanding narratives as knowledge, meaning, and metaphor, policymakers can design interventions that resonate with cultural and social realities. Strategies like excavation, crafting, demolition, and afforestation offer practical tools for reconstructing narratives to promote unity and resilience. As societies navigate complex challenges, harnessing the power of narratives through informed policy interventions remains a critical pathway to fostering inclusive and sustainable futures.

## **A Constructivist Approach to Political Elites Study**

Hugh Miall (2004, p. 9) contends that positive peace necessitates five types of transformation, or transformers: (1) context transformations, (2) structural transformations, (3) issues transformations, (4) actors transformations, and (5) elite transformations. These five types of transformation are interconnected; a change in one may potentially instigate changes in the others. Ismayilzada and Önsoy (2022, pp. 174–175) agree that a successful transformation of conflict requires significant changes in these key elements. When these five elements are effectively transformed, conflicts that are life-destroying can become life-affirming.

The *context* of a conflict encompasses the economic, legal, political, and social environments in which it unfolds. These environments include prevailing cultural values, governance systems, institutional frameworks, social roles, and normative structures within society (Miall, 2004, p. 88). Crucially, the interpretation of this context by actors is paramount. A shift in interpretation may prove more significant than alterations in the objective environment itself. A positive change in either the context or its interpretation can foster transformations in the conflict's structure, issues, actors, and elite dynamics. Such changes can facilitate conflict resolution or escalation, depending on how actors perceive and respond to the evolving contextual landscape, highlighting the interplay between perception and structural factors.

*Conflict structure* refers to the underlying system of relationships, power dynamics, and institutional or social arrangements that shape the emergence, evolution, and trajectory of a conflict. It encompasses the actors involved, their issues, incompatible

goals, and the nature of their relationships. Conflict may arise between actors with relatively equal (symmetric) power and resources or between those with significant disparities (asymmetric relations). The structure of a conflict influences the strategies, tactics, and actions available to the actors. Certain social structures serve to legitimise and perpetuate unequal relationships, often resulting in marginalisation, alienation, perceived injustice, and repression. The role of structural factors becomes particularly pronounced in conflicts involving injustice, discrimination, inequality, or other human rights violations (Ismayilzada and Önsoy, 2022, p. 175). In such contexts, transforming the underlying structural conditions and promoting a more equitable social order can play a pivotal role in converting destructive conflicts into constructive and sustainable forms of engagement.

A *conflict issue* refers to the underlying problem that generates incompatibilities between parties. In contrast to materialist approaches, which attribute incompatibilities to competition over resources, territories, governance, or power, constructivism emphasises the significance of subjective, socially constructed phenomena (Wendt, 1992). As discussed in an earlier section, from a constructivist perspective, conflict issues are rooted in the social construction of identities, norms, perceptions, narratives, interests, and discourses. By highlighting the subjective and relational nature of these phenomena, constructivism offers a nuanced framework for understanding the origins of incompatibilities across various conflict contexts. A conflict issue can expand by incorporating more issues and actors, intensify in severity, deepen as it increasingly preoccupies those involved and overshadows other divisions, and generate subsidiary conflicts (Miall, 2004, p. 14). A conflict issue can be simplified by breaking it into smaller components. Issue transformation can also be

understood as “reformulations of positions that parties take on key issues at the heart of the conflict as well as the way in which parties redefine or reframe those positions in order to reach compromises or resolutions” (p.10).

*Actors*, as discussed above, are individuals, groups of persons, formal or informal organisations, or governments that directly or indirectly participate in a conflict; they are stakeholders in the conflict. Actors differ in various aspects including their importance (measured by their attachment to the conflict) and power (measured by their ability to win the conflict). Key actors are those who are both powerful and important. Actions and counteractions of the major actors can escalate, de-escalate or stagnate a conflict. Actors may change their attitudes and behaviours due to internal and external pressures; or when the context and structure force them to reconsider their strategies.

*“Elites”* denotes individuals whose decisions and perspectives wield considerable influence across all five dimensions of conflict transformation - namely, context, structure, issues, actors, and elite dynamics. It is crucial to distinguish between *actors* and *elites*. While any individual or entity involved in a conflict may be considered an *actor* - whether a natural or legal person - *elites* constitute a subset of actors who, by virtue of their strategic positions within powerful institutions, exert substantial and consistent influence over political outcomes (Burton, Gunther and Higley, 1991, p. 9), the outcomes of the conflict. As Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters (1995, p. 147) observe, elites are those who “make the rules... articulate ideologies, make constitutions, and enter agreements with actors”. Political elites, more specifically, are defined as “individuals and small, relatively cohesive, and stable groups with

disproportionate power to affect national and supranational political outcomes on a continuing basis” (Best and Higley, 2018, p. 3). Elites play a critical role in the construction, reconstruction, or deconstruction of collective identities (Lane, 2011, p. 926), and are central to the development and maintenance of social networks - “without elites, there are no social networks” (Casas i Klett and Cozzi, 2021, p. 6). Typically, elites exert control over other actors, and their decisions are shaped by a combination of factors, including their conception of the public good, their organisational affiliations and interests, as well as personal ambitions (Howe, 2020, p. 116). Consequently, a change in elite perspectives at key historical or political junctures can have transformative effects (Best, 2010; Vergara, 2013; Hirblinger *et al.*, 2019; Bozóki, 2022).

Peter Turchin (2023, pp. 78–80:) explores elite dominance as a product of contested power and legitimising narratives, not a fixed societal feature. Elites gain control through institutional processes, using discourses like meritocracy to justify inequality. Their behaviour, shaped by ideology and counter-elite pressures, varies between self-enrichment and systemic stewardship. Prioritising short-term gains weakens institutions, driving political disintegration. However, this is not inevitable, as elite choices, influenced by alliances, dissent, and narrative shifts, can alter outcomes. Turchin’s work suggests that renegotiating social cohesion could prevent crisis.

Elites play a pivotal role as norm entrepreneurs, actively contributing to the construction and evolution of societal norms through their actions, discourses, and ideational influence. Their ideas, discourse, and practices significantly shape the normative architecture of society, particularly in contexts marked by tension, division,

or post-conflict reconstruction. Their influence on political culture and institutional legitimacy makes it imperative to interrogate the socialising forces that mould elite behaviour. These forces include their historical experiences, educational exposure, value orientations, belief systems, cultural identities, and the prevailing socio-political environment. Such an inquiry is especially salient in divided or transitional societies, where elite behaviour can either entrench conflict dynamics or facilitate transformative peacebuilding. As Howe (2020, p. 116) contends, “it is important to focus on the socialization of elites as a path to peace,” highlighting the potential of elite engagement with democratic norms, inclusive governance, and ethical leadership to foster conditions conducive to sustainable peace. In this regard, the socialisation of elites involves more than the transmission of technical knowledge; it demands a deep-rooted engagement with the principles of justice, reconciliation, and the negotiation of contested identities, which are central to conflict transformation.

Elite theory possesses a long-standing and influential intellectual lineage, emerging from foundational ideas in political philosophy and maturing into a distinct analytical framework in the early twentieth century. Early thinkers such as Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes explored the nature of political authority and control, prefiguring later developments in elite theory (Pakulski, 2018, p. 9). However, it was Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923) and Max Weber (1864–1920) who offered systematic treatments of elite dynamics. Pareto distinguished between leonine elites - those who use force and dominance - and vulpine elites, who exercise power through manipulation and strategic persuasion (ibid). Weber, in contrast, emphasised the emergence of elites within rational-legal bureaucracies, shaped by organisational logic and legitimacy (ibid, p.19). While classical elite theory has often been interpreted through a structural or

materialist lens, contemporary reinterpretations increasingly integrate constructivist perspectives on conflict. From this viewpoint, elite behaviour and conflict are not merely outcomes of objective interests or institutional positions, but are deeply embedded in socially constructed meanings, narratives, and identities. Constructivist approaches argue that elites do not simply wield power - they shape, negotiate, and reproduce the very frameworks through which power, legitimacy, and collective identity are understood (Guzzini, 2000, 2013; Jackson and Nexon, 2004). In this sense, elite configurations are not only indicators of political organisation but also producers of interpretive frames that influence how conflicts are perceived, experienced, and enacted. For instance, discursive strategies (deliberate use of language, narratives, and stories to shape perceptions, frame identities, interests, and conflicts) employed by elites can frame particular groups as threats or allies, construct national identities, and define the boundaries of inclusion or exclusion. These symbolic constructions are especially salient in societies marked by identity-based divisions, where conflict is less about material scarcity and more about contested meanings, recognition, and legitimacy (Wendt, 1999; Pospisil and Kühn, 2016). Moreover, elite cohesion or fragmentation often influences not just institutional stability but the degree to which collective narratives of unity or division take root. As John Higley (2017) notes, power is concentrated in the hands of elites, but how that power is legitimised and communicated is shaped by discursive processes. In this regard, elite discourse becomes a central site for the construction and contestation of social order. Constructivist conflict theory thus shifts the analytical focus from elite interests alone to the meaning-making practices through which elites mediate conflict, identity, and social norms. Integrating elite theory with a constructivist understanding of conflict enriches the analytical toolkit for scholars and practitioners alike. It enables a deeper

grasp of how power operates not only through structures but through the production of knowledge, norms, and collective identities - making elite discourse a critical factor in both the escalation and resolution of conflict.

Political transitions - particularly those characterised by processes of democratisation - are predominantly elite-driven, with the strategic interactions among political elites playing a decisive role in shaping trajectories of conflict and stability within political systems. As Bozóki (2022) highlights, these transitions are rarely spontaneous or mass-led; rather, they emerge from calculated negotiations and compromises among elite actors who seek to preserve or advance their own interests within an evolving political landscape. These elite bargains, often institutionalised through formal pacts or informal understandings, are instrumental in constructing democratic frameworks. By reconciling competing interests, such agreements can serve as mechanisms for conflict mitigation and political stabilisation (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 2013). Nevertheless, the concentration of power within elite circles renders these processes inherently fragile. The same actors who facilitate democratic openings may also become sources of instability, whether through exclusionary practices, strategic manipulation of institutions, or the erosion of democratic norms and accountability mechanisms. Thus, while elite agency is central to democratic transitions, it simultaneously constitutes a potential source of conflict and systemic vulnerability.

Conversely, elites can exacerbate conflicts that undermine political stability, particularly through the rise of populism and authoritarianism. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018) argue that populist leaders, often elected legitimately, can destabilise democracies by fostering intolerance and exploiting constitutional

mechanisms for partisan gain. Such leaders polarise societies by framing politics as a binary struggle between a virtuous “people” and a corrupt “elite” (Silva, 2017, p. 16). This populist rhetoric, while anti-elite in tone, paradoxically elevates charismatic leaders who consolidate power, intensifying intra-elite conflicts and societal divisions (Mangset *et al.*, 2019). The resulting polarisation can erode the mutual toleration and institutional forbearance essential for democratic stability (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

The nexus between elites and conflict is further complicated by their role in either mitigating or amplifying societal tensions. Elite pacts can reduce conflict by fostering cooperation, yet exclusionary or self-serving elite behaviour risks escalating tensions, as seen in cases of populist backlash or institutional decay (Higley and Burton, 2006). For instance, when elites manipulate democratic processes to entrench power, they may provoke resistance from marginalised groups, fuelling civil unrest or systemic crises (Engelstad *et al.*, 2019). Thus, the dynamics of elite interactions - whether cooperative or antagonistic - critically shape the trajectory of conflicts.

The structure and configuration of the national political elite constitute a critical determinant of peace and stability within any state. As Aron (1950) contends, “a unified elite means the end of freedom. But when the groups of the elite are not only distinct but become a disunity, it means the end of the State” (p. 143). This paradox underscores the delicate balance required in elite cohesion: excessive unity risks authoritarianism, whereas profound fragmentation threatens state collapse. Thus, a moderated and dynamic equilibrium - a state of partial integration - is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for sustainable peace in divided or transitioning societies.

Elite integration, as a field of inquiry within conflict and peace studies, necessitates a nuanced analysis of three core relationships: (1) the inter-relations among different factions of the national elite; (2) the intra-relations among individual elite actors within each faction; and (3) the relationship between the national elite as a collective and the broader public (Engelstad, 2018, pp. 439–454). These relational dimensions are essential in evaluating the capacity of elites to manage political contestation without recourse to violence. Of particular importance is the notion of *consensual elite integration*, which does not presume uniformity of opinion but rather a shared commitment to political coexistence and institutional continuity. Fredrik Engelstad (2018, p. 440) emphasises that “‘agreeing to disagree’ is a core aspect of consensual elite integration”, highlighting the importance of tolerance, mutual recognition, and procedural legitimacy in elite negotiations. Such integrative mechanisms are indispensable in post-conflict contexts and fragile democracies, where the interplay of elite cooperation and elite competition frequently determines trajectories of peace or relapse into conflict (Lijphart, 1977; Higley and Burton, 1998, 2006).

According to Burton, Gunther and Higley (1991, pp. 10–13) and Higley and Burton (2006), national elites can be categorised into three principal types, differentiated by the extent of structural integration and value consensus: *disunified*, *ideologically unified*, and *consensually unified*. The concept of *structural integration* refers to the degree of inclusiveness within formal and informal networks of communication and influence among elite individuals, groups, and factions. In contrast, *value consensus* denotes the level of agreement among elites on both formal and informal rules of political engagement, as well as on the legitimacy of existing political institutions.

A *disunified national elite* is characterised by a profound lack of both structural integration and value consensus. In such contexts, elite factions exhibit deep-seated mistrust towards one another, with communication and influence networks failing to transcend factional boundaries. There is minimal, if any, agreement among elites on the legitimacy or functionality of prevailing institutions and political norms. Consequently, elite actors frequently seek to undermine or dismantle the regime rather than reform it. Political transitions in such settings are often marked by coercion, instability, and violent contestation for power, where politics is construed as a zero-sum game (Burton, Gunther and Higley, 1991, pp. 10–13; Higley and Burton, 2006). In such environments, what is termed "peace" may represent a temporary cessation of hostilities following the total victory of one faction.

In contrast, an *ideologically unified national elite* manifests high levels of structural integration and value consensus, albeit within a narrow and centralised ideological framework. While communication and influence networks may be extensive, they are typically monopolised by a dominant faction, often entrenched within a ruling party or movement. This hegemonic configuration produces a rigid value consensus, wherein dissent is marginalised, and the dominant ideology is projected as universal. In such political systems, participation is often equated with conformity, and governance becomes synonymous with obedience (Burton, Gunther and Higley, 1991; Linz, 2000). Although negative peace - defined as the absence of direct violence (Galtung, 1969) - may be sustained under such regimes, it rests upon coercive stability rather than inclusive dialogue or democratic legitimacy.

The third configuration, a *consensually unified national elite*, is characterised by relatively high levels of structural integration and value consensus, without the dominance of any single faction. Communication and influence networks in such systems are inclusive and cross-cutting, facilitating access to decision-making across a broad spectrum of elite actors. Political competition among factions is robust yet bounded by a shared commitment to institutional norms and the rules of the democratic game. Importantly, elites in this configuration perceive political engagement in *positive-sum* terms - where negotiation, compromise, and strategic bargaining are essential tools for conflict resolution (Burton, Gunther and Higley, 1991, p. 11). Despite ideological and policy divergences, elites consciously avoid polarising issues that could threaten the political order. Rather than seeking the annihilation of rivals, elite factions aim to contain conflicts and minimise the costs of political defeat through power-sharing, mutual restraint, and mechanisms of elite accommodation (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 2013; Engelstad *et al.*, 2019). In this sense, consensually unified elite structures are conducive to the establishment and consolidation of positive peace and democratic governance.

According to Higley and Burton (2006), elite transformations can occur through six possible pathways, contingent upon changes in structural integration and value consensus over time. These transformations are often shaped by significant internal or external shocks - such as regime collapse, social movements, external mediation, or elite bargaining - that reconfigure elite relations. Figure 1 below presents a stylised theoretical model of elite transformation, illustrating the pathways through which elite

configurations can evolve from disunity or ideological uniformity towards consensual unification. Such transformations are critical for transitioning from conflict-prone political orders to stable, democratic, and peaceful societies.

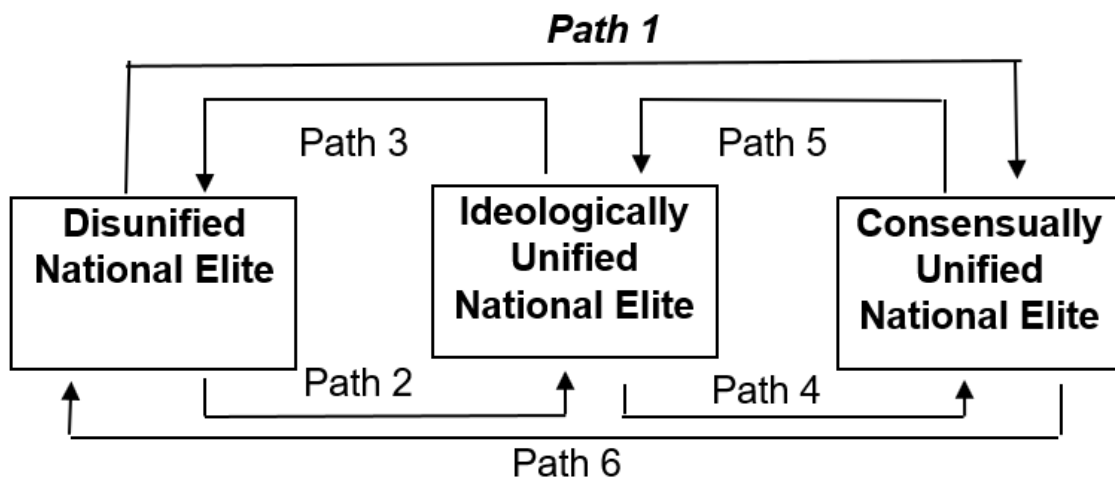


Figure 3: Trajectories of Transformation Among National Elite Structures

As depicted in Figure 3, six distinct trajectories of transition can be conceptualised between the three principal types of national elite structures. These transitions are as follows:

- Path 1 – From a *disunified* to a *consensually unified* national elite structure;
- Path 2 – Transition from a *disunified* to an *ideologically unified* national elite structure;
- Path 3 – Regression from an *ideologically unified* to a *disunified* national elite structure;
- Path 4 – Transformation from an *ideologically unified* to a *consensually unified* national elite structure;
- Path 5 – Regression from a *consensually unified* to an *ideologically unified* national elite structure; and
- Path 6 – Breakdown from a *consensually unified* to a *disunified* national elite structure.

These paths underscore the dynamic nature of elite structures and the potential for both progressive consolidation and regressive fragmentation, depending on prevailing political, institutional, and socio-economic conditions.

A consensually unified national elite is widely regarded as a "prerequisite for the attainment and maintenance of a lasting stability" (Prodanov, 2015, p. 3). While the study of elite transformations may serve various scholarly and policy-related purposes, students and practitioners of Peace and Conflict Studies are particularly concerned with those transitions whose outcomes contribute to sustainable peace and political legitimacy. In this regard, elite transitions culminating in a consensually unified national elite are of critical interest, given their capacity to support the institutionalisation of non-violent conflict resolution, inclusive governance, and democratic consolidation. Consequently, special analytical focus is placed on Path 1 - the transition from a disunified to a consensually unified elite - and Path 4 - the transformation from an ideologically unified to a consensually unified elite. These two trajectories represent, respectively, the movement from elite fragmentation and polarisation, and from hegemonic domination, toward a mode of elite interaction grounded in mutual recognition, negotiated rules of engagement, and cooperative political behaviour.

### **Path 1: From Disunified to Consensually Unified National Elite Structure**

In the context of Conflict Studies, Path 1 marks a profound transformation from fragmentation and violent elite rivalry to cooperative elite bargaining and institutional legitimacy. Disunified elite structures are symptomatic of deeply polarised societies

where elite factions are embedded in antagonistic identity, ideological, or regional cleavages (Azar, 1990; Gurr, 2000). In such settings, the absence of both *structural integration* and *value consensus* renders politics a zero-sum game, often framed as existential conflict. The shift toward a consensually unified elite configuration requires more than strategic alliance building; it demands a multi-dimensional process of *elite socialisation, persuasion, and institutional bricolage*.

Transitions along Path 1 remain vulnerable to reversal, particularly if elite socialisation is shallow, persuasive leadership is absent, or bricolaged institutions fail to mediate emerging disputes. Sustained peace requires not only the settlement of past grievances but the institutionalisation of elite cooperation through ongoing dialogue, iterative norm-building, and inclusive governance.

#### **Path 4: From Ideologically Unified to Consensually Unified National Elite**

##### **Structure**

Path 4 captures the reconfiguration of elite politics from monolithic domination to negotiated pluralism - a transformation of acute interest in Conflict Studies, especially in the study of post-authoritarian transitions. In ideologically unified regimes, a single faction monopolises both discourse and decision-making through hierarchical and centralised structures. While such systems may exhibit stability, they tend to suppress dissent and foreclose genuine elite competition (Linz, 2000; Diamond and Morlino, 2005). The movement towards consensual unification entails the disembedding of ideological rigidity and the establishment of a framework that accommodates elite

diversity. In a similar way as in Path 1, this transition, Path 4, is also mediated by the three interrelated processes: *elite socialisation*, *persuasion*, and *institutional bricolage*.

Elite pluralisation through Path 4 carries inherent tensions. If dominant elites perceive liberalisation as a threat to their existential security, they may sabotage the process. Conversely, opposition elites may reject incrementalism in favour of radical rupture. Successful transitions thus require patient norm-building, credible guarantees, and the sustained presence of integrative institutions capable of mediating competing interests.

The constructivist approach to conflict studies and peacebuilding provides a nuanced and multidimensional framework for analysing and transforming the attitudes, behaviours, and institutions that underpin elite dynamics. Central to this perspective is the assertion that identities, norms, interpretations, and historical narratives are socially constructed and play a pivotal role in shaping elite behaviour. Constructivism foregrounds ideational factors and the intersubjective meanings that actors attach to their social environment (Wendt, 1999; Adler, 2013). This thesis identifies three core constructivist tools in both Path 1 and Path 4 transitions - elite socialisation, persuasion and leadership, and institutional bricolage - that merit further exploration.

### **Elite Socialisation**

Elite socialisation is the process of inducting actors into the norms and rules of a political community, enabling them to interpret political developments, construct narratives, and build coalitions (Higley and Burton, 2006, p. 12). This process is

inherently constructivist, rooted in the mutual constitution of identities and interests through sustained engagement (Adler and Pouliot, 2011). Situated within the broader framework of political socialisation, elite socialisation involves the internalisation of politically significant values, beliefs, and norms through interactions with various socialising agents (Eisenstadt, 2002, pp. 45–47). In contrast to general political socialisation, elite socialisation focuses on actors in positions of influence, occurring within and across factions and between elites and the wider public (Engelstad, 2018, p. 442).

Elite socialisation is a dynamic, transformative process through which political actors co-construct shared norms, values, and practices that underpin cooperative engagement and sustainable political stability. From a constructivist perspective, this process is not merely a functional outcome but a relational and iterative endeavour, where identities, interests, and behaviours are renegotiated through dialogue and interaction.

Socialisation occurs across diverse arenas, including families, peer networks, political parties, educational institutions, civil society, and the media (German, 2014; Jennings and Niemi, 2015). These agents facilitate both formal and informal learning, shaping elite behaviours throughout their political trajectories. In transitional or post-conflict contexts, socialisation is particularly critical, as elites must adapt to new institutional norms and navigate shifting power dynamics (Nocoń, 2021). The constructivist lens underscores how these interactions foster shared understandings, enabling elites to transition from adversarial to cooperative relationships (Johnston, 2001, pp. 488–496).

Institutional frameworks, such as transitional parliaments, joint commissions, or dialogue forums, serve as pivotal arenas for elite socialisation. These 'safe political spaces' allow elites to experiment with cooperative behaviours, mitigating fears of betrayal or loss (Engelstad *et al.*, 2019). Through iterative interactions, mutual trust and collective identities emerge, enabling former adversaries to co-construct shared norms (Higley and Burton, 2006). For example, legislative forums and policy consultations acculturate emerging elites to institutional rules while encouraging incumbent elites to embrace dissent and compromise.

Communicative practices are central to this process. Narrative construction within these arenas reinforces commitments to democratic norms, as elites collaboratively shape discourses that bolster political stability (Chadwick and Dennis, 2017). The rise of digital platforms has further expanded opportunities for elite interaction, creating virtual spaces for norm diffusion (Norris and Inglehart, 2018). However, these processes are not automatic and require deliberate efforts to establish inclusive environments where elites can engage without fear of marginalisation or reprisal. Elite socialisation is closely intertwined with elite bargaining, which involves the explicit renegotiation of power and resource allocation

## **Persuasion and Leadership**

*Persuasion*, defined as the intentional effort to alter others' beliefs, behaviours, or attitudes, constitutes a fundamental mechanism of elite influence (Gass and Seiter,

2022, p. 4). Within political elite theory, persuasion transcends rhetorical strategies, acting as a constitutive force that reshapes the meanings and identities underlying political contestation (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, pp. 106–114). Elites strategically harness symbolic resources - such as collective memory, cultural values, and existential threats - to reframe intergroup relations and redefine legitimacy in political discourse (Lindemann, 2011; Johnson, 2023). In transitional or fragile contexts, where institutional authority is often contested, the persuasive capacity of elites is pivotal for reimagining political communities and establishing new social contracts.

Persuasion and leadership serve as critical mechanisms for transforming social realities, particularly in settings marked by conflict or transition. As norm entrepreneurs, political elites wield persuasive influence to redefine collective identities, norms, and expectations, thereby constructing social imaginaries that prioritise cooperation over antagonism (Galtung, 1996; Lederach, 1997). This process is central to fostering sustainable peace and political stability.

Reformist factions within dominant regimes exemplify this dynamic, functioning as intermediaries who persuade hardliners to embrace controlled liberalisation while reassuring opposition actors of inclusive intentions. This requires sophisticated political communication, strategic narrative reframing, and the cultivation of cross-elite alliances. Such processes align with constructivist principles, which conceptualise leadership as a relational, co-constructed endeavour shaped by shared meanings and contextual interpretation (Grint, 2005, pp. 1467–1492; Haslam, Reicher and Platow, 2011, pp. 165–192; German, 2014, ch. 2).

Transformational leadership, characterised by charisma, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration, is particularly effective in peacebuilding (Bass and Riggio, 2006; Wang *et al.*, 2011, pp. 223–270; Northouse, 2018, ch. 8). Unlike transactional approaches that focus on immediate interests, transformational leaders articulate inclusive narratives and shared moral visions, fostering long-term commitment and emotional engagement (Northouse, 2018, ch. 8; Escortell, Baquero and Delgado, 2020). By evoking moral dissonance, as posited by Marshall Ganz (2008, ch. 19), such leaders catalyse collective agency, enabling elites to mobilise social capital - networks of trust and reciprocity - to sustain action in uncertain environments (Putnam, 1993, pp. 167–177, 2001, pp. 18–28).

Historical figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela exemplify the potency of transformational leadership. Their influence stemmed not only from charisma but also from their ability to foster committed followership through empathetic engagement and reconciliatory approaches (Miller and Green, 2015; Benson, Hardy and Eys, 2016). Peter Northouse (2018, pp. 293–302) contends that leadership is inherently dialogical, rooted in identity formation and reciprocal interactions between leaders and followers. In elite theory, this underscores the necessity of elite-society engagement, where grassroots involvement ensures the legitimacy and sustainability of leadership efforts. Elites must balance inspirational rhetoric with strategic competence to translate persuasive efforts into concrete outcomes.

Social capital is a critical enabler of elite persuasion. Networks of trust and reciprocity facilitate collective action, yet their absence in deeply divided societies can hinder leadership initiatives (Fukuyama, 1996; Putnam, 2001). Transformational leaders must therefore prioritise the cultivation of these networks, fostering empathy and optimism to bridge divides (Miller and Green, 2015). Furthermore, the legitimacy of elite persuasion depends on its ethical grounding. Leaders who prioritise personal gain over collective welfare risk eroding trust, highlighting the importance of authenticity and moral integrity in leadership practices (Johnson, 2023).

In political elite theory, persuasion and leadership are interlinked processes that shape social realities through the construction of shared meanings and identities. Transformational leadership, with its emphasis on ethical vision and emotional engagement, offers a robust framework for peacebuilding in contested or transitional contexts. By mobilising symbolic resources, cultivating social capital, and fostering committed followership, political elites can reimagine political communities and forge sustainable pathways to peace.

### **Institutional Bricolage**

Institutional bricolage, as conceptualised by Cleaver (2001), refers to “a process by which people consciously or unconsciously draw on existing social and cultural arrangements to shape institutions in response to changing situations” (p. 26). This adaptive process entails the creative recombination of traditional and modern, formal and informal elements to address emergent challenges (Cleaver and de Koning, 2015; Cleaver, 2017). In contrast to comprehensive institutional design, bricolage leverages

familiar norms, practices, and hybrid arrangements to construct credible governance structures (Lund, 2006). It is particularly effective in conflict-affected contexts, where external models often lack legitimacy, and local actors must navigate complex power dynamics and resource constraints (Weick, 1993; Langevang and Namatovu, 2019).

In peacebuilding, institutional bricolage provides a constructivist lens for understanding the adaptive recombination of social, cultural, and institutional resources to address conflict and foster sustainable governance. Rooted in anthropological and sociological traditions (Cleaver, 2001, pp. 26–34; Andrew and Karetai, 2022, pp. 95–99), institutional bricolage emerges as a contextual problem-solving strategy that prioritises local legitimacy and hybridity over externally imposed frameworks.

Bricolaged institutions are inherently hybrid, blending inherited authoritarian structures with pluralist mechanisms or layering new rules onto existing frameworks (Thelen, 2010, pp. 13–16, 40–42:). These institutions serve as pragmatic tools for mediating elite rivalries, facilitating value convergence, and fostering dialogue (Scott, 2014). Examples include power-sharing constitutions, hybrid judicial bodies, and customary conflict-resolution mechanisms, which integrate global norms with local exigencies to create contextually relevant solutions (Bond and Mkutu, 2018; Beresford and Wand, 2020).

In conflict-affected settings, elite transitions often rely on bricolage to adapt inherited structures for democratic purposes. Rather than pursuing institutional rupture, elites engage in creative adaptation, embedding pluralist mechanisms within centralised frameworks or incrementally reforming legal systems (Thelen, 2010, pp. 13–16).

Hybrid legislatures and transitional constitutions exemplify this approach, enabling consensual elite structures without provoking systemic collapse. These “good enough” frameworks mediate competing interests and foster gradual alignment among elites, aligning with constructivist principles of inclusive dialogue and identity transformation (Lund, 2006; Björkdahl, 2012).

A prominent example is South Africa’s transitional justice framework, which integrated global human rights norms with local exigencies through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Beresford and Wand, 2020). By combining formal state mechanisms with community-based dialogue, this framework embodied the hybridity of bricolage, fostering legitimacy and social cohesion. Similarly, Ghana’s Local Peace Councils and Kenya’s Village Peace and Development Committees blend formal and informal mechanisms to mediate conflict, deriving legitimacy from their embeddedness in local culture (Cleaver and de Koning, 2015; La Sala, Fuller and Calabrese, 2022).

Ethiopia’s post-2018 political transition under the Prosperity Party (PP) government provides a compelling case study of institutional bricolage. The Ministry of Peace, established in 2018, was a unique institution tasked with conflict prevention and community-based peace initiatives (Proclamation No.1097, 2018). Unlike traditional security ministries, it integrated formal state structures with community-driven mechanisms, drawing on Ethiopia’s diverse cultural and social traditions to foster peacebuilding (Bond and Mkutu, 2018; La Sala, Fuller and Calabrese, 2022). By embedding peacebuilding within local norms and practices, the Ministry of Peace exemplified bricolage, enhancing its legitimacy and efficacy in a culturally heterogeneous society.

Institutional bricolage, as a constructivist approach, underscores the importance of context-specific, adaptive governance in peacebuilding. Unlike rationalist paradigms that prioritise universal templates and strategic incentives (Fearon, 1995; Mesquita *et al.*, 2005), bricolage embraces the fluidity of social realities, recognising that institutions are shaped by evolving identities, norms, and power dynamics (Wendt, 1999; Cleaver, 2001). This approach facilitates the creation of governance structures that resonate with local actors, thereby fostering trust and cooperation in conflict-affected settings (Lund, 2006; Björkdahl, 2012).

The strength of bricolaged institutions lies in their ability to mediate competing interests and foster incremental change without destabilising fragile systems. By blending formal and informal, traditional and modern elements, these institutions create flexible frameworks that accommodate diverse stakeholders (Thelen, 2010; Scott, 2014). For instance, hybrid judicial systems, such as those combining customary law with statutory frameworks, enable elites to address grievances while maintaining social cohesion (Beresford and Wand, 2020). Similarly, power-sharing arrangements, like those in post-conflict Bosnia or Northern Ireland, layer pluralist mechanisms onto existing structures to promote dialogue and prevent renewed violence (Bond and Mkutu, 2018).

However, institutional bricolage is not without challenges. The reliance on existing norms and power structures can entrench inequalities or reinforce elite dominance, particularly in deeply divided societies (Cleaver and de Koning, 2015). Moreover, the hybrid nature of bricolaged institutions may lead to tensions between global standards

and local practices, potentially undermining their coherence or legitimacy (Langevang and Namatovu, 2019). Effective bricolage thus requires careful negotiation, ensuring that adaptations are inclusive and responsive to marginalised voices (Andrew and Karetai, 2022).

## **Part II: Conflicts in Ethiopia.**

Part II of this study examines the socio-political dynamics driving conflicts in Ethiopia, a nation defined by ethnic diversity and historical complexity. Through a constructivist lens, it explores how competing narratives and the politicisation of ethnicity shape Ethiopia's political landscape, fostering both unity and division. The analysis highlights narratives and political parties as co-constructed social realities influencing identity, collective action, and policy outcomes.

Chapter 3, "Narratives and Conflicts in Ethiopia," analyses two dominant narratives: Ethiopia as a "Cradle of Civilisation and Freedom" and a "Prison of Nations and Nationalities." The former, rooted in the Kingdom of Aksum, the Battle of Adwa, and Pan-Africanism, promotes national pride but often marginalises ethnic diversity. The latter, emerging from 1960s student movements and institutionalised via ethnic federalism, champions self-determination but intensifies ethnic tensions, as seen in the Tigray War (2020–2022) and Amhara conflicts. This narrative divide fuels elite purges, ethnic victimisation, and mass displacement. Interventions like narrative excavation are proposed to foster inclusive identities.

Chapter 4, "Political Parties in Politicising Ethnicity," investigates how political parties amplify or mitigate ethnic divisions. It categorises parties as civic (accommodationist or integrationist) or particularistic (ethnic), noting that 95% of regional parties are ethnic, reinforcing exclusionary identities and the ethnic security dilemma. Programmatic weaknesses and elite fragmentation hinder inclusive political visions.

Policy responses, such as ethnic party bans, are evaluated for promoting civic unity while considering risks to democratic freedoms. These chapters underscore the transformative potential of narratives and parties in fostering sustainable peace and democratic consolidation.

## Chapter 3: Narratives and Conflicts in Ethiopia

### Opening Framework

Narratives constitute a fundamental component of political discourse, shaping how societies perceive their past, interpret their present, and envision their future. In Ethiopia, a nation distinguished by a rich and complex historical tapestry, two profoundly oppositional narratives dominate the political landscape: one venerating Ethiopia as a Cradle of Civilisation and Freedom, and another condemning it as a Prison of Nations and Nationalities. These narratives, far from remaining abstract intellectual constructs, have been actively weaponised, institutionalised, and contested, thereby profoundly impacting the nation's unity, stability, and developmental trajectory.

selection of the "Cradle of Civilisation" and "Prison of Nations" narratives as the primary objects of study is based on their hegemonic status in Ethiopian discourse. These two narratives represent the fundamental ideological poles around which the Ethiopian elite has organised for over half a century. No other interpretive frameworks possess the same degree of institutionalisation or mobilising power, making them the essential starting points for any constructivist analysis of the conflict.

The Cradle of Civilisation narrative draws extensively upon Ethiopia's ancient heritage, religious significance, and historical resistance to colonialism. It portrays the nation as

a singular symbol of African pride and sovereignty, one that successfully defied European domination and inspired continental liberation movements. Embedded within educational curricula, cultural traditions, and national mythology, this narrative presents Ethiopia as a perennial beacon of independence and spiritual greatness. Conversely, the Prison of Nations narrative, rooted in Marxist and ethno-nationalist intellectual currents, emerged prominently during the 1960s and 1970s as a critique of centralised and oppressive state structures. It depicts Ethiopia as an artificial empire, historically dominated by a single ethnic elite, a characterisation which resonates powerfully with historically marginalised groups and has fuelled demands for self-determination, autonomy, and secession. This narrative provided the foundational ideology for armed struggles, subsequent political reforms, and Ethiopia's contentious ethnic federalism system.

The dialectical tension between these two narratives has been a primary driver of Ethiopia's most significant conflicts. The 1974 revolution, initially sparked by economic inequality and feudal oppression, rapidly became an ideological battleground for these competing visions of Ethiopia's future. The Derg regime's subsequent Red Terror campaign devastated the educated class and deepened societal fractures along ethnic lines. The 1991 ascendancy of the EPRDF introduced a constitutional order based on ethnic federalism, granting regional states self-determination, including the right to secession. Although intended to ameliorate historical grievances, this institutional framework has frequently exacerbated inter-group divisions, with major urban centres such as Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa becoming persistent flashpoints for ethnic contestation over land, language, and political representation.

Recent conflicts, including the Tigray War (2020–2022) and ongoing unrest in regions such as Amhara and Oromia, reflect battles over identity and historical interpretation, not merely contests for material power or resources. A pervasive ethnic security dilemma fuels profound distrust and cyclical violence, resulting in millions displaced and the progressive weakening of national institutions. Nevertheless, the Cradle of Civilisation narrative endures, frequently evoked during moments of national pride, such as commemoration of the Battle of Adwa, or in political rhetoric espoused by leaders like Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed promoting national unity. However, the potent forces of ethno-nationalism and the structural realities of the federal system present formidable obstacles to genuine reconciliation.

This chapter will analyse how these master narratives have shaped Ethiopia's political trajectory, from its anti-colonial struggles to its contemporary crises. It will examine their historical origins, ideological evolution, and concrete impact, highlighting how stories of collective glory or grievance can define a nation's fate. It concludes by posing critical questions concerning the possibility of reconciliation in a polity where history itself remains a fiercely contested domain, offering insights pertinent to scholars and practitioners addressing the shared futures of similarly divided societies.

## **The Two Core Narratives in Ethiopia's Political Discourse**

The constructivist approach asserts that narratives are co-created, modified, and disseminated by both speakers and listeners, particularly by influential actors (Bruner, 1991, p. 4; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2013, pp. 12–18); indeed, “there are as many narratives as there are actors” (Sergeeva and Ninan, 2023, p. 198). The real challenge with narratives, as Yuval N. Harari (2014, p. 38) observes, “lies not in telling the story, but in convincing everyone else to believe it”. The role of influential actors is, therefore, indispensable. These actors include elites from political, economic, cultural, media, and academic institutions. Narratives crafted by elites based on their group's experiences exert significant influence on collective mobilisation (UN and WB, 2018). The ability of elites to shape collective perception through narratives is critical, as it can guide societies towards either peace or conflict. Their authority within influential institutions enables them to play a central role in determining which narratives gain prominence. This power facilitates the reproduction or establishment of certain narratives as dominant, while marginalising others (van Dijk, 1999, pp. 67–75; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2013, pp. 8–15; 45–52). According to this framework, narratives are co-constructed across multiple contexts: interactional, historical, institutional, and discursive (Riessman, 2007).

The constructivist approach to conflict resolution emphasises the importance of recognising the multiple narratives that emerge in a conflict and how these narratives shape the perceptions and actions of various actors. Social and political transformations are “connected to actors' struggle to formulate and tell their stories

and, perhaps even more importantly, to have them heard” (Graef, Da Silva and Lemay-Hebert, 2020, p. 434).

Simplified narratives have played a significant role in Ethiopia’s conflicts. Two highly polarised simplified narratives - each portraying Ethiopia in vastly different lights - have deeply divided the nation. These two polarised narratives can be articulated as follows: one portrays Ethiopia as a Cradle of Civilisation and Freedom, while the other characterises it as a Prison of Nations and Nationalities. Both are supported by an extensive range of oral and written traditions, as well as institutional and collective endorsement.

### **Narrative One: Ethiopia is a Cradle of Civilisation and Freedom**

For the Pan-African movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries, “Ethiopia” symbolised far more than a specific geographic entity. Ethiopianism, as it came to be known, was “a kind of religion for some blacks through which they saw a ray of hope in the wilderness of history” (Metaferia, 1995, p. 302).

*“Most black people believed there was an order higher than the Constitution... the Bible had promised redemption for the black world: ‘Princes come out of Egypt. Ethiopia stretches forth her hands unto God.’ This passage was as important to Pan-Africanist and emigrationist sentiment as the book of Exodus, becoming the theological basis for what became known in the nineteenth century as Ethiopianism. Ethiopianism spread throughout the black world, from the Americas to Africa, calling for the redemption of Africa by any means necessary... black people the world over considered it [Ethiopia] the cradle of civilisation. Ethiopia... might be called an African Jerusalem” (Kelley, 2002, pp. 19–21).*

Ethiopia served as an enduring symbol of hope and inspiration to black populations globally. In South Africa during the 1890s, for instance, African ministers broke away from the Anglican Church to establish an independent African church called the “Ethiopian Church”. This institution espoused the doctrine of “Africa for Africans” and contributed to significant resistance movements, such as the Zulu rebellion of 1906 and the Nyasaland uprising of 1915 led by John Chilembwe, founder of the independent Providence Industrial Mission (Adejumobi, 2007). Ethiopianism thus came to embody early movements for religious and political freedom, the reclamation of African dignity, and the cultivation of patriotism.

Originating in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Ethiopianism emerged from the shared political and religious experiences of Africans in British colonies. It underscored African identity, history, and cultural traditions (Graves, 1962; Barnett, 2006; James, 2020). It deeply influenced African Americans, with figures like Marcus Garvey and the Rastafari movement placing Ethiopia at the heart of their spiritual and political ideologies. Haile Selassie, Ethiopia’s last Emperor, was revered as a messianic figure (Barrett, 1997; Edmonds, 2012). The Rastafari movement remains rooted in Ethiopianism and Pan-Africanism, focusing on justice and equality (Clarke, 1986). Furthermore, Meskerem Lechissa (2016, 2022, 2023) contends that 16th-century classics such as *Utopia*, *City of the Sun*, and aspects of the Italian Renaissance were inspired by the laws, morals, and faith of medieval Ethiopian Christian civilisation, significantly contributing to the European Renaissance.

This narrative is not confined to Christianity. All of Ethiopia's major religions – Christianity, Islam, and Judaism - contribute to the portrayal of Ethiopia as a sanctuary and symbol of spiritual and moral significance. According to the Islam, a Messenger of Allah advised persecuted followers of Prophet Muhammad to seek refuge in Abyssinia, where they would find “a king who does not wrong anyone” (Hijira, 2009). The Messenger added, “It is a friendly land, and you could stay there until Allah grants us relief” (ibid), prompting the First Hijira and the construction of the Al Nejashi Mosque in Tigray, one of Islam's oldest sites. In addition, Harar, in Ethiopia's east, is considered Islam's fourth holiest city (Ġayyūsī, 2008). Temesgen Gebeyehu Baye (2018) argues that the Kingdom of Aksum was the first foreign nation to accept Islam, and that the religion remains integral to Ethiopia's national identity. The Jewish Ethiopian community, meanwhile, ties the nation's legacy to King Solomon and the Ark of the Covenant, believed to rest in Aksum at the Church of St. Mary of Zion (Britannica, 2023).

Beyond spiritual heritage, Ethiopia's historical record underscores its longstanding resistance to colonialism. It stands as the only African country to preserve its sovereignty throughout the colonial era - unlike Liberia and Haiti, whose independence was neither protected by significant military victories nor preserved through comparable geopolitical resilience. Ethiopia has managed to preserve its sovereignty against the brutal balkanisation of the Horn of African by the three major colonial powers, Britain, France, and Italy (Gebrekidan, 2012, pp. 71–83). Ethiopia's victory over Italy at the Battle of Adwa in 1896 was pivotal: not only did it preserve Ethiopia's independence (except Eritrea), but it also boosted national morale and global prestige. “Ethiopia's triumph over Italy at the battle of Adwa in 1896 catapulted to the world

stage the once obscure East African Kingdom” (Gebrekidan, 2012, p. 73). This victory inspired African liberation movements and symbolised the possibility of African resistance and sovereignty (Zewde, 2001; Yemane, 2021). The Italian occupation of Ethiopia from 1935 to 1941, though severe, did not succeed in suppressing Ethiopia’s national identity or dismantling its governance structures. This resilience is underscored by Roman Prochazka’s (1936) alarmist depiction in “*Abyssinia: The Powder Barrel*”. Roman Prochazka (1936, p. 7) asserted that “the numerous tribes who inhabit the Ethiopian state are being forcibly kept from European colonialism by Abyssinian rulers whose aim is to act as champions of all black people so as to attack and destroy Western culture”.

Roman Prochazka’s fears were not entirely misplaced. Many post-colonial African states - including Cameroon, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Republic of Congo, Sao Tome & Principe, Senegal, and Togo - adopted Ethiopia’s flag colours (green, yellow, and red) to symbolise anti-colonial resistance. Numerous African nations incorporate at least one of the three colours found in Ethiopia’s flag. These countries adopted similar flag colours as a homage to Ethiopia’s enduring history of resistance against colonial powers and its distinction as one of the few African nations to have successfully maintained independence during the colonial era. Ethiopia’s example reinforced the legitimacy of African independence and resilience (Weitman, 1973; Chojnacki, 1980). Importantly, colonialism is not merely history; its consequences still shape African geopolitics.

Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, closed his speech at the inaugural Organisation of African Unity (OAU) summit with a poem titled *Ethiopia Shall Rise*, celebrating Ethiopia's heritage and symbolising Pan-African unity (OAU, 1963):

***Ethiopia Shall Rise***

*Ethiopia, Africa's bright gem  
Set high among the verdant hills  
That gave birth to the unfailing  
Waters of the Nile  
Ethiopia shall rise  
Ethiopia, land of the wise;  
Ethiopia, bold cradle of Africa's ancient rule  
And fertile school  
Of our African culture;  
Ethiopia, the wise  
Shall rise  
And remould with us the full figure  
Of Africa's hopes  
And destiny.*

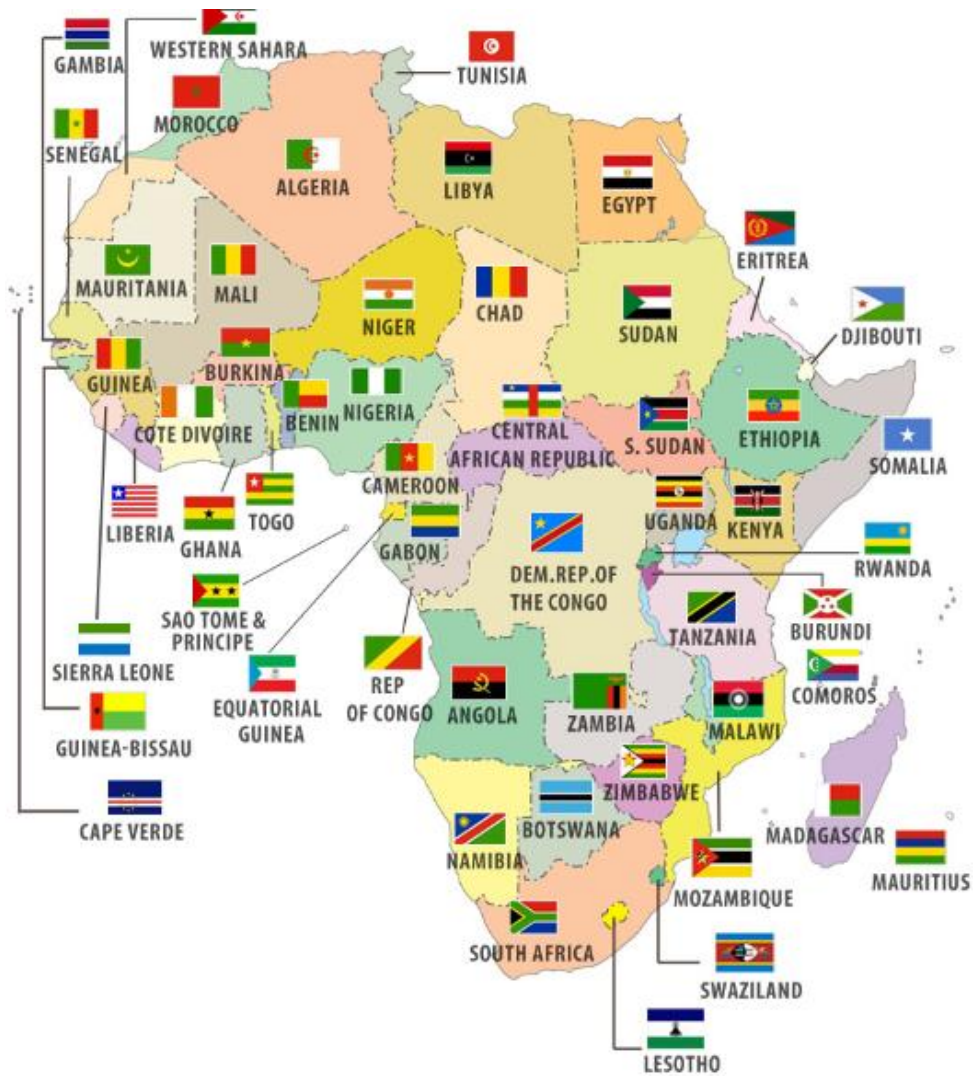


Figure 4: Flags of African Countries

As illustrated in Figure 4, the influence of Ethiopia's symbolic legacy is visible across the continent. The map highlights the numerous African states that adopted the Ethiopian tricolour - green, yellow, and red - following their independence. This visual evidence supports the "Cradle of Civilisation" narrative by demonstrating Ethiopia's historical status as a beacon of anti-colonial resistance and Pan-African pride.

Ethiopian historiography promotes the narrative of Ethiopia as a *cradle of civilisation and freedom* by depicting it as the origin of humankind, anchoring its statehood in the ancient Kingdom of Aksum (c. 100–940 CE), a symbol of continuous statehood for over three millennia, and a resilient defender against Ottoman, Mahdist, and European encroachments. The Solomonic dynasty's 225 monarchs (1270–1974) exemplify its continuity. Educational curricula, especially prior to 1991, were strongly aligned with this narrative. Although the “Cradle of Civilisation and Freedom” narrative manifests in multiple forms - varying by religion, region, and academic discipline - it consistently glorifies Ethiopia and Ethiopianism.

## **Narrative Two: Ethiopia is a Prison of Nations and Nationalities**

Narrative Two stands as a direct antithesis to the previous account. It portrays Ethiopia not as a beacon of freedom but as a prison of nations, nationalities, and, by extension, its citizens. The “national question” in Ethiopia has remained a persistent political challenge since the rise of the student movement in the 1960s. As Gebru Tareke (2009, p. 24) observes, “Ethiopian history since the 1960s is incomprehensible without the student movement”, which, according to him, opened a political “*pandora's box*”.

Alem Habtu (2010, 2015) recalls that this issue was first explicitly raised at a meeting of the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE) held in Zagreb in 1968. A year later, at a Philadelphia meeting, it was discussed more deeply under the rubric of “regionalisation”. The challenge was how to galvanise and lead a revolutionary class struggle amidst Ethiopia's ethno-cultural diversity. These Marxist–Leninist student

activists recognised that repression manifested differently across societal segments, with women and marginalised groups often suffering most. Their strategic aim was to incorporate these forms of repression into a unified revolutionary framework to bring about “a shortcut to progress, combining development and social justice” (Tareke, 2009, p. 29).

A pivotal contribution to this discourse was made in 1969 by Wallelign Mekonnen in his seminal paper. A Political Science student at Haile Selassie I University and a vocal activist, who was killed during a failed aeroplane hijacking on 10 December 1972, Wallelign argued that “Ethiopia is not really one nation. It is made up of a dozen nationalities...” (Mekonnen, 1969, p. 1). He further characterised Ethiopian nationalism as a “fake nationalism” propagated by the ruling elite and “unwillingly accepted and even propagated by innocent fellow travellers” (p.2). For Wallelign, Ethiopianism was essentially “simply Amhara and to a certain extent Amhara-Tigre supremacy” (p. 2).

The paper had a galvanising effect. Abdul Mohamed (2010, p. 102), a contemporary of Wallelign, recalls that the paper “raised the already heated atmosphere on campus to fever pitch”. Gebru Tareke (2009, p. 31) noted that Wallelign’s identity - he was an ethnic Amhara from Wello, a diverse province where Christians and Muslims, as well as Amhara, Tigray, Oromo, and Afar ethnicities are mixed - gave his critique added weight. While Wallelign championed the support of national movements, this was not an end in itself but rather a means to establish an “egalitarian and democratic” society, which he equated with a socialist state. He clarified:

*“Mind you, I am just saying that these movements are not lasting solutions for our goal - the set-up of a genuine Nationalist Socialist State. I am all for them, ..., to the extent that they have challenged and weakened the existing regime and have created areas of discontent to be harnessed later on by a genuine Socialist revolution”*

(Mekonnen, 1969, p. 3)

According to Dima Nego, a founding member of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), argue that “Wallelign Mekonnen’s presentation should not be taken as his alone; rather it was a collective declaration of a study group in the university” (Interview 2023, loc. 22:02). In 1970, a follow-up article written under the pseudonym “Tilahun Takele<sup>2</sup>” went further, asserting the right of nations to self-determination “up to and including secession” (Tareke, 2009; Habtu, 2010). Tilahun argued that the national question was of equal weight to class struggle, thereby redefining revolutionary priorities. His phrase “up to and including secession” profoundly influenced subsequent relations between the Ethiopian student movement and ethno-nationalist liberation fronts in Eritrea and the Ogaden region<sup>3</sup>.

However, these student intellectuals often overlooked the fluid and socially constructed nature of identity. As Tareke (2009, p. 32) observed, “communal identities are socially constructed, contingent, porous, and continually negotiated”. The concept of Ethiopia as a “polyglot empire” formed through conquest - a mosaic of unequal ethnicities - divided the movement into divergent factions. One faction maintained that

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<sup>2</sup> The paper is believed to have been authored by Berhane Meskel Redda, who later rose to prominence as a senior official in the EPRP. The pseudonym Tilahun Takele was used to honour the martyrs Tilahun Gizaw and Takele WoldeHawariat (Dejazmach).

<sup>3</sup> Tadellech Haile-Michael, the widow of Berhane-Meskel Redda (Tilahun) and a prominent activist in her own right, defended the students’ stance on “the right of self-determination up to and including secession” as a mobilisation slogan, arguing that it could not be realised in any way (Tadellech H/Michael, 2012, p. 424)

each nation and nationality possessed a distinct history and culture, thus justifying self-determination and, in certain cases, secession. This faction supported or formed ethnic liberation fronts, such as the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), and others like ONLF, OLF, SLF, SALF, TLF, and TPLF. With over 80 ethnic groups in Ethiopia, elite affiliations were dispersed across numerous small, often fractious organisations.

Another faction acknowledged Ethiopia's multi-ethnic character but saw a shared historical and cultural destiny. For them, the national question was instrumental - a rallying point for wider class struggle. They focused on political organisations built on ideological rather than ethnic lines. Yet this group was also divided: one camp favoured gradual, peaceful revolution (the "long journey" or ረጅም ገዢ), while the other endorsed immediate armed insurrection (the "short journey" or አጭር ገዢ). From these differences arose two major Marxist–Leninist organisations. The All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement (MEISON), founded in 1968, adopted the long journey and advocated peaceful reform. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), formed in 1972, chose armed struggle. Both recognised the right of self-determination but differed in its scope: EPRP supported secession, while MEISON insisted on preserving Ethiopia's territorial integrity (Tareke, 2008, p. 191).

Baro Tumsa, a prominent figure in the student movement and a founder of the Ethiopia Oppressed Revolutionary Struggle (ECHAT), argued in his 1973 thesis that Ethiopian nationalism did not exist. According to him, the Ethiopian state was an empire of "several nations such as the Amhara nation, the Tigre nation, the Oromo nation, the

Somali nation, the Gurage nation, the Wollamo nations, etc.” (Tumsa, 1973, p. 3). He concluded that all previous nation-building efforts - from King Tewodros to Haile Selassie - had failed due to institutional biases favouring particular ethnicities. Baro Tumsa contends that “when a neutral state that is not identifiable with any ethnic group is established, the grounds for ethnic dissension and feuds will disappear” (ibid, p.9). Accordingly, he advocated a federal structure comprising five autonomous regions, each devoid of association with a singular ethnic identity, alongside three peripheral nationality zones, as a resolution to Ethiopia’s “prison of nations” crisis.

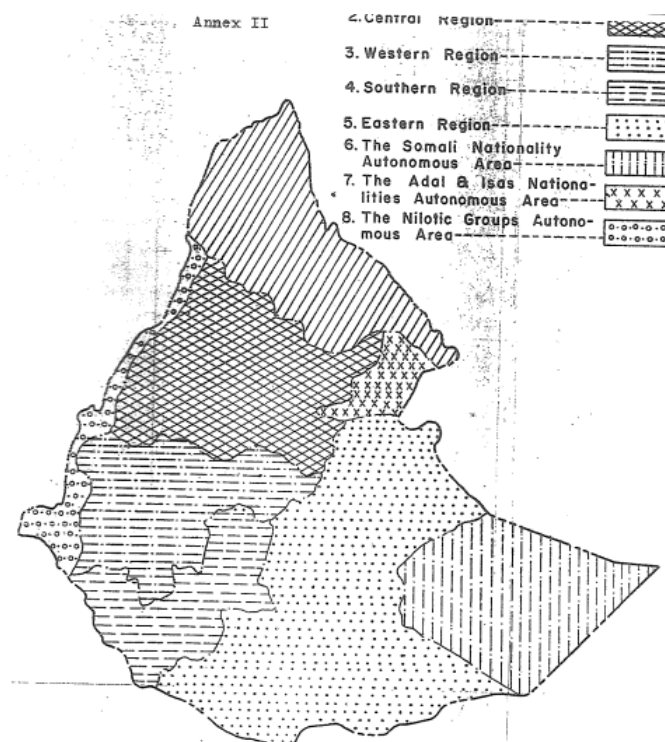


Figure 5: Internal Map Proposed by Barro Tumsa (1973, p. 135)

However, Over the following three years, Baro became increasingly radical, prioritising national liberation over class struggle. His evolving stance placed him at odds with MEISON, EPRP, and even ECHAT. Ultimately, he became a founding member of the

OLF and was martyred for his beliefs (Interview Yideruru, 2017). His legacy endures, particularly among Oromo activists, as a symbol of opposition to the "Cradle of Civilisation" narrative.

More radical interpretations of Narrative Two emerged within various liberation fronts. For instance, Bonnie Holcomb and Sisay Ibssa (1990) argued that Ethiopia was a "dependent colonial state". They claimed "the imperialist powers struck an alliance with the Abyssinians in order to get access and indirect control over the inner parts of the Horn of Africa" (cited in Asfaw, 1991, p. 80). They conclude that "peace can be attained only when colonial relations are dismantled and the principle of self-determination recognized and implemented" (p.80). Mekuria Bulcha (2005) similarly contends that Ethiopia's modern statehood was established through genocidal warfare against non-Abyssinians, particularly the Oromo, perpetrated by successive rulers of modern Ethiopia, namely Tewodros, Yohannes, Menelik, Haile Selassie, the Derg, and the EPRDF.

In 1984, the Derg established the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities (ISEN) to conduct research on Ethiopia's governmental structure and ethnic groups, and to develop criteria for delineating administrative-territorial units (Wubneh, 2017). Following ISEN's recommendations, the Derg reconfigured Ethiopia's internal administrative boundaries, with ethnicity (nationality) serving as a key factor. This restructuring resulted in the creation of five autonomous territories (Eritrea, Tigray, Assab, Dire Dawa, and Ogaden) and twenty-four administrative units, all within a unitary government framework. However, the Derg was overthrown in 1991 by the

EPRDF, a coalition of four ethno-nationalist groups, before the new administrative structure could be fully consolidated. The political elite associated with the Derg and its political wing, the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE), were disgraced, imprisoned, or exiled.

## **Consequences of the Conflicting Narratives**

The political reality in Ethiopia substantiates the argument presented in Chapter 2 of this thesis, which posits a strong relationship between narratives and policies in conflict settings. The dire political situation in which Ethiopia currently finds itself is, to a significant extent, the result of two competing narratives, particularly when examined in the context of the post-1974 revolution period.

Economic grievances, including widespread famine, calls for higher wages and salaries, land reform, escalating food prices and taxes, and pervasive corruption and nepotism, were the primary catalysts of the 1974 revolution (Mehretu, 2017). The “national question” played a negligible role, if any, in sparking the revolution. Paradoxically, it was the revolution itself that intensified the national question and deepened the narrative divide. This divergence produced several severe consequences, including the extermination of the educated elite, the victimisation of certain ethnic groups (Amhara, Tigray, Gurage), and the internal displacement of citizens.

## **Extermination of the Educated Elite**

Nazi Germany systematically executed tens of thousands of members of the Polish intelligentsia as part of the *Intelligenzaktion* campaign, aimed at eradicating Polish cultural and intellectual leadership to facilitate the Germanisation and annexation of Poland (Altman, 2005). Similarly, Ethiopia underwent a comparable purge of its educated elite during the Derg (1974–1991) and the EPRDF (1991–2018) regimes. This systematic targeting was driven by the ideological conflict between two dominant narratives: one portraying Ethiopia as a “Cradle of Freedom,” emphasising a unitary, centralised national identity, and the other characterising Ethiopia as a “Prison of Nations and Nationalities,” advocating ethno-nationalist aspirations for ethnic self-determination. The purges, marked by executions, imprisonments, and forced exiles, particularly targeted intellectuals, professionals, and political figures perceived as threats to the prevailing regimes’ ideological stance. This decimation of the intelligentsia weakened Ethiopia’s social and institutional fabric, exacerbated ethnic tensions, and contributed to long-term political instability, mirroring the devastating impact of the *Intelligenzaktion* on Polish society.

The 1974 revolution that ended Emperor Haile Selassie’s nearly 45-year reign ushered in a new political elite. The aristocracy was overthrown with minimal resistance, and the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), commonly known as the Dergue, assumed power. The Dergue was composed largely of middle- and lower-ranking military officers, while the revolution elevated student activists into full-time political actors. Despite their internal disagreements, these revolutionary actors broadly agreed on the importance of addressing the national question - a core concern

of the era. The former students became leaders of various organisations: some joined civic pan-Ethiopianist groups like MEISON or EPRP; others allied with ethnic liberation movements. A few served under the Dergue. As liberation fronts proliferated and the “prison of nations” narrative gained traction, support for the right of nations to self-determination - including secession - became widespread, even before any concrete definition of “nation” or “nationality” in the Ethiopian context had been agreed upon. The Dergue itself had no clear ideological foundation but was compelled to adopt the language of “nations and nationalities” to maintain legitimacy. It vacillated between the two narratives: its motto *Itiopia Tikdem* (ኢትዮጵያ ትቅደም! “Ethiopia First”) echoed the first narrative, while its efforts to undermine Ethiopia’s imperial past placated advocates of the second. It deployed Narrative One during conflicts with Somalia and Eritrean separatists but simultaneously portrayed itself as a Marxist–Leninist regime aligned with Narrative Two.

In November 1974, the Dergue initiated a campaign of extermination. Sixty high-ranking imperial officials, including two former prime ministers - Tsefai Tazaz Aklilu Habte-Wold and Lilj Endalkachew Makonnen - were executed (Spencer, 1984; Tiruneh, 1995). These men represented some of Ethiopia’s most experienced statesmen. Their execution marked only the beginning of the elite purge. Over subsequent years, the Dergue hunted down remaining members of the imperial regime. The violence soon extended to revolutionary elites. MEISON, which had favoured peaceful transition and offered critical support to the Dergue, clashed with EPRP, which demanded the immediate establishment of a Provisional Popular Government and pursued armed struggle. An urban war ensued between the two

groups. Eventually, the Dergue crushed both through the infamous Red Terror, which decimated an entire generation of educated youth.

As Gebru Tareke (2009) points out, the Red Terror was unique in that it pitted two modern political organisations with similar ideologies and strategic goals against each other. “It was comrades against comrades” (p.204). Revolutionary Guards (*Abyot Tibeka*), formed within *kebeles* (urban neighbourhood associations) and Peasants’ Associations, were empowered to eliminate suspected opponents without restraint. With approximately 2,000 *kebeles* and 23,500 peasant associations, the Red Terror was vast in scope. The death toll remains contested, ranging from 10,000 to as many as 500,000. Far more fled into exile (Tola, 1989; Tadesse, 1998). René Lefort (1984) estimated that “of ten civilians who had actively worked for a radical transformation of Ethiopia, only one escaped arrest, imprisonment, torture, execution or assassination” (p. 257). The long-term cost included severe brain drain. As Solomon Getahun (2002) notes, the estimated 5,000 Ethiopians already in the United States by the time of the revolution largely remained abroad due to political instability (p. 54). During the 1980s and 1990s, tens of thousands more, many of them highly educated, migrated to Europe and North America. Ethiopia lost much of its intellectual capital (Lefort, 1984; Tola, 1989; Tiruneh, 1995; Bulcha, 2005; Tareke, 2008, 2009). Perhaps the most enduring consequence was the weakening of pan-Ethiopian leftist movements and the corresponding emboldening of ethno-nationalist forces, thereby entrenching Narrative Two in the country’s political fabric.

## **Victimising Amhara, Tigray, and Gurage**

### **Amhara**

During the 1970s and 1980s, Ethiopian Marxist–Leninists conceptualised the nation’s challenges through the lens of a “triple adversary”: imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism, and feudalism. This framework, rooted in the Marxian notion of class struggle, aimed to dismantle hierarchical structures and establish an egalitarian, classless society. However, the emergence and widespread adoption of the narrative that “Ethiopia is a Prison of Nations and Nationalities” disrupted this ideological paradigm, reframing the class struggle as an “ethnic struggle” characterised by ethnic blame and antagonism. If Ethiopia is portrayed as a prison encompassing captive nations and nationalities, it follows logically that the identity of the jailer must be established. Aregawi Berhe, a founding member of the TPLF, articulated this concept succinctly: the “Showan-Amhara feudal class, that fostered its ethnic hegemony and kept Ethiopia in the dark, was the prime cause for ethnic resistance” (Berhe, 2004, p. 580). Subsequent discourse has consistently clarified that the Amhara people as a whole are not the adversary; rather, it is the Amhara ruling class that is implicated. Nevertheless, deeply entrenched narratives of blame politics targeting the Amhara community have persisted, manifesting in tangible and often detrimental ways (Workneh, 2023, p. 10).

The rise of the “Ethiopia is a Prison of Nations and Nationalities” narrative has introduced an additional dimension to the political struggle, operating alongside the traditional class conflict. This narrative has recast political contestation as a dichotomy pitting the Amhara against other ethnic groups, with the rhetoric of “self-determination

of nations and nationalities, up to and including secession” further exacerbating inter-ethnic tensions. This ethnically charged rearticulation of political conflict has transcended theoretical discourse, resulting in significant adverse consequences for the Amhara community.

Recent analyses suggest that the victimisation of Amhara individuals has become increasingly pronounced, particularly within the framework of ethnically based federalism established after 1995. Historical contingencies and government resettlement policies have led to the dispersal of many Amhara beyond their traditional homelands, particularly to urban centres where they are often politically under-represented. This dispersion has rendered them susceptible to discriminatory practices and targeted violence in regions where local administrations may lack the authority, willingness, or capacity to ensure their safety (Yetena, 2022). Moreover, evidence from human rights organisations indicates that the Amhara face systemic marginalisation. The growing dominance of ethnic politics in state–society relations has fostered an environment in which the Amhara are collectively stigmatised, rendering them susceptible to socio-economic disenfranchisement and intermittent politically motivated violence. Evidence from human rights organisations, including Amnesty International (2022) and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (2021), corroborates claims of targeted violence and systemic marginalisation against Amhara communities living outside their regional state. The inability of the Amhara Regional State to safeguard the rights and security of Amhara citizens residing outside its territorial jurisdiction underscores the broader challenges inherent in Ethiopia’s federal structure and the politicisation of ethnicity.

## **Tigray**

The ascendancy of the EPRDF to power in 1991, with the TPLF holding a disproportionately large influence, fostered a perception that Tigrayans were dominating other ethnic groups. This has fostered a narrative positing that the opportune moment has emerged for Tigrayans to exploit national resources, perpetuating a perception that ethnic politics enables "ethnic groups to take turns to loot the country" (Fukuyama, 2018b, p. 126). This sentiment persisted until internal divisions led to the EPRDF's restructuring, culminating in the TPLF's withdrawal from the coalition and its retreat to the Tigray Regional State in 2018.

Since the outbreak of conflict in November 2020, the Tigray region has endured extreme levels of victimisation linked to the broader ethnicisation of Ethiopian politics. International human rights organisations have documented systematic abuses, including forced displacement, extra-judicial killings, and widespread sexual violence. These acts constitute not only grave violations of humanitarian law but also reflect deeper historical patterns of political exclusion and ethnic targeting (Amnesty International, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

The conflict in Tigray arose amidst longstanding grievances concerning Ethiopia's ethnic federalism framework. The TPLF, which once held a dominant position in Ethiopia's governance, faced heightened tensions with federal authorities following the political reorganisation under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Ethnic narratives have

increasingly been employed to rationalise policies and military actions that marginalise Tigrayans, with some analysts contending that such rhetoric dehumanises the population, thereby facilitating targeted violence (Reuters, 2021). In this context, victimisation extends beyond being a mere consequence of military operations; it serves as a deliberate tool for ethnic exclusion and political reconfiguration.

Some evidence suggest that the tactics employed against Tigrayans have been both deliberate and systematic. Numerous reports document individuals being forcibly displaced from their homes and relocated to other regions of Ethiopia, often accompanied by threats imbued with ethnic animosity. Similarly, widespread accounts of sexual violence have emerged, with survivors recounting assaults that appear designed to terrorise communities and erode the cultural identity of the Tigrayan people (Alemu and Berhe, 2024). These actions reflect a pattern of ethnic profiling, whereby Tigrayans are targeted for mistreatment based on their identity, perpetuating historical marginalisation while embodying contemporary political rivalries.

Furthermore, the Ethiopian state's response to these abuses has drawn significant international scrutiny. Critics contend that the government has frequently minimised or denied allegations of ethnic cleansing and war crimes, thereby obstructing accountability and impeding reconciliation efforts. This reluctance to engage transparently with the international community exacerbates the vulnerability of Tigrayans and reinforces the perception that ethnic politics remain central to Ethiopia's domestic conflicts (New Lines Institute, 2024).

The victimisation of Tigrayans in Ethiopia is not merely a byproduct of armed conflict but is deeply entrenched in the ethnic politics that have long shaped the nation's political landscape. The interplay between historical marginalisation and current power struggles highlights the urgent need for a comprehensive transitional justice process - one that addresses both immediate human rights violations and the structural inequalities perpetuating ethnic animosities.

## **Gurage**

The Gurage people, renowned for their entrepreneurial and artisanal contributions, have long faced marginalisation within Ethiopia's ethnically charged political landscape. Historically integral to the nation's urban economy, the Gurage have been systematically sidelined by the advent of ethnic federalism and the rise of ethno-nationalist agendas, which have curtailed their political and economic influence.

Urban displacement has emerged as a particularly detrimental consequence for the Gurage. Gurage communities have been forcibly evicted from key commercial and residential areas, notably Addis Ababa's Merkato district and cities such as Dire Dawa, Harar, Shashemene, and Awassa. These evictions are widely perceived as ethnic gentrification efforts, designed to shift demographic and economic power towards dominant groups, eroding the Gurage's economic foundation and cultural presence in urban centres (Bitew, Sewenet and Fentahun, 2021). Such actions have deepened socio-economic disparities and fragmented community cohesion.

This pattern underscores the structural flaws of Ethiopia's ethnic federalism. Conceived to foster self-rule and cultural autonomy, the system has instead entrenched divisions, marginalising minority groups like the Gurage. The Gurage experience highlights how ethnic federalism, lacking inclusive safeguards, can perpetuate inequality rather than resolve it.

The integration of ethnic narratives into Ethiopia's political framework has generated a complex and multifaceted struggle. While historical Marxist–Leninist critiques aimed to eliminate class divisions, the incorporation of ethnic blame politics has introduced an additional layer of conflict, resulting in the sustained victimisation and marginalisation of the Amhara, Tigray, and Gurage communities. This reconfiguration of political allegiances and enmities necessitates a critical reassessment of Ethiopia's ideological foundations and a re-evaluation of federal policies to mitigate inter-ethnic tensions and ensure equitable protection for all citizens.

### **Internal Displacement of Citizens**

The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, endorsed by the United Nations (UN, 1996; UNHCR, 2004), define internally displaced persons (IDPs) as individuals or groups compelled to flee their homes or habitual residences due to armed conflicts, widespread violence, human rights violations, or natural and human-made disasters, without crossing an internationally recognised state border.

Since the 1970s, internal displacement has posed a severe and persistent challenge in Ethiopia, driven largely by ethnic conflicts and exacerbated by the “Ethiopia is a Prison of Nations and Nationalities” narrative. The Derg regime’s resettlement programme forcibly relocated approximately 600,000 people from northern regions (Amhara and Tigray) to the southwest, often under harsh conditions. These displaced individuals were frequently perceived as alien settlers by indigenous communities, leading to social tensions and marginalisation. Tragically, the descendants of these settlers now face renewed displacement, compelled to return to their parents’ ancestral regions, perpetuating a cycle of upheaval across generations (Bulcha, 2005). Since the ascendancy of the EPRDF to power in 1991, particularly since 2018, internal displacement due to ethnic conflicts has persisted unabated.

The scale of internal displacement in Ethiopia has grown dramatically, positioning the country as the leading source of IDPs in Africa. By 2019, over 3 million IDPs were recorded, with approximately 2.3 million displaced due to ethnic conflicts (NRC, 2018; Yigzaw and Abetew, 2019). Ethnic strife, rooted in competing narratives of national identity, remains the primary driver of displacement, followed by natural disasters (Sewell and Hulusi, 2016; Maru, 2017). This crisis underscores the profound humanitarian consequences of Ethiopia’s ethnic federalism and the urgent need for policies to address conflict-induced displacement and foster inclusive coexistence.

## **Emergence of Contested Cities**

Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia has transformed some urban centres into sites of contestation where multiple ethnic groups assert competing claims over territorial jurisdiction, political representation, and resource allocation. Cities such as Addis Ababa, Agaro, Dire Dawa, Harar, Hawasa, Welkite, and Yabelo have become focal points of political and territorial disputes arising from constitutional ambiguities, divergent historical narratives, and the politicisation of ethnicity in urban governance (Worku, 2017; Sirna, 2018). The Ethiopian Constitution institutionalises ethnic federalism while creating tensions in multi-ethnic cities, particularly regarding Addis Ababa. Article 49(5) recognises the undefined "special interest" of the Oromia region in Addis Ababa due to its geographical location (Proclamation No. 1, 1995), leading to persistent disputes over administrative control and resource distribution. This constitutional ambiguity has fostered competing interpretations, with Oromia asserting socio-economic and political privileges (Záhořík, 2017; Sirna, 2018) while Addis Ababa's diverse population resists perceived regional dominance.

The governance of multi-ethnic urban spaces presents particular challenges, as exemplified by Dire Dawa. Despite neither Oromos nor Somalis constituting a demographic majority, both regional states claim jurisdiction over the city (Worku, 2017). The resulting "40:40:20" power-sharing formula, allocating government positions along ethnic lines (Hagmann and Abbink, 2011), risks institutionalising ethnic quotas while marginalising minority communities. Similarly, Yabelo's display of three flags - federal, Oromia, and Somali - symbolises unresolved territorial claims (Markakis, 2011; EthiopiaNege, 2017), while Welkite remains contested between

Qebena and Gurage groups asserting historical rights (Zewde, 2001). These urban conflicts highlight how ethnic federalism struggles to manage diversity, potentially exacerbating divisions as cities become arenas for competing ethno-nationalist narratives (Clapham, 2017). The absence of clear legal frameworks intensifies tensions, with power-sharing models potentially reinforcing ethnic patronage systems rather than promoting inclusive citizenship (Turton, 2006; Taye, 2017). These urban contestations reveal systemic weaknesses in Ethiopia's governance framework, where constitutional ambiguities and ad hoc arrangements fail to reconcile regional autonomy with national cohesion.

### **Proliferation of Ethnic Parties**

The proliferation of ethnic-based political parties and the growing ethnicisation of politics constitute significant adverse consequences of the “Ethiopia is a Prison of Nations and Nationalities” narrative, which will be examined in greater depth in the subsequent chapter.

### **Escalation of Ethnic Conflicts**

The narrative “Ethiopia is a Prison of Nations and Nationalities” have entrenched Ethiopian ethnic groups in a profound ‘ethnic security dilemma’ (Kersmo, 2021b; FGD with Academicians 2024), fostering a pervasive sense of mistrust and self-reliance among communities. Each ethnic group increasingly perceives its survival as contingent on securing its own safety, viewing others as potential threats. This

dynamic has precipitated widespread ethnic conflicts across nearly every *Zone* and *Wereda* of Ethiopia, with major violences erupting in regions such as Tigray, Oromia, Amhara, and Sidama (Yared, 2021). These conflicts, driven by the subjective construction of meanings, identities, and narratives, give rise to deep-seated grievances that are often obscured by disputes over political marginalisation and intense competition for land and resources. They have triggered profound humanitarian crises, displaced millions and claimed countless lives (GRID, 2019). The Tigray War (2020–2022) and the ongoing Amhara conflict (2023–present) stand as stark manifestations of this dilemma, marked by mass casualties, forced migrations, and acute shortages of food and medical aid.

The EPRDF, which dominated Ethiopian politics from 1991 to 2017, institutionalised the “Prison of Nations” narrative, fundamentally reshaping the country’s political landscape. By dismantling the unitary state and enacting the 1995 federal constitution, the EPRDF sought to redress “historically unjust relationships” (Proclamation No. 1, 1995 Preamble). The constitution, framed as a covenant among nations, nationalities, and peoples, vested sovereign power in ethnic groups (Art. 8) and enshrined an unconditional right to self-determination, including secession (Art. 39.1). This radical framework, surpassing the aspirations of revolutionary figures like Walleign Mekonen and Tilahun Takele, elevated ethnicity as Ethiopia’s primary identity, effectively marginalising a cohesive national identity (Mehretu, 2017; Moody, 2023, pp. 21–23). While intended to empower ethnic groups, this system deepened divisions, fostering a fragmented polity where regional states competed for dominance. After a decade of fragile peace, Ethiopia’s internal security deteriorated rapidly, with inter-regional territorial disputes, separatist movements, and irredentist claims proliferating, further

destabilising the nation. Sarah Federman's (2016) assertion that narratives can "create the physical world" (p.155) has proven profoundly accurate in the context of Ethiopia under the EPRDF, as the post-1991 political order was fundamentally shaped by the "Ethiopia is a Prison of Nations and Nationalities" narrative.

The "Cradle of Freedom" narrative, despite efforts to suppress it, has endured in Ethiopia's social and political consciousness, embodying a vision of unified national identity. Its resilience was evident in the 2005 general elections, when four Ethiopianist parties - Ethiopian Democratic League (EDL), All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP), Ethiopian Democratic Party-Medhin Party (EDP-Medhin), and Rainbow Ethiopia - formed the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD). The CUD's electoral success in Addis Ababa and other urban centres underscored the enduring appeal of a pan-Ethiopian identity. Similarly, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's 2018 inaugural speech rekindled this narrative, invoking a shared Ethiopian heritage and sparking widespread hope for unity (Ahmed, 2018). The Adwa Victory Memorial Museum, inaugurated in February 2024, further reinforces this narrative, celebrating Ethiopia's historic triumph over colonialism and its Pan-African legacy (Kahsay, 2024; Interview with a High-Ranking Gov Official 2024). Yet, this vision struggles against the entrenched ethnic divisions perpetuated by the federal system.

The ethnic security dilemma has exacerbated inter-group tensions, as communities arm themselves in anticipation of conflict, driven by ethno-nationalist rhetoric and historical animosities. The EPRDF's federal model, while empowering certain groups, has fuelled mistrust and competition, undermining national cohesion. Ethnic militias

have proliferated, and border disputes have escalated, with regions asserting territorial claims that inflame tensions. The resurgence of Narrative One, while inspiring unity, often clashes with the ethnic framework, creating a volatile interplay of identities. This polarisation has entrenched a cycle of violence, displacement, and economic disruption, with minority groups frequently caught in the crossfire. The enduring legacy of these narratives lies in their capacity to fragment Ethiopia's social fabric, perpetuating a state of perpetual insecurity and hindering the emergence of a shared national vision.

## **Chapter 4: Political Parties in Politicising Ethnicity**

### **Political Party Orientations**

The study of political parties in Ethiopia affords a critical perspective on the interplay of identity, power, and social construction within a multi-ethnic state. From a constructivist standpoint, political parties are dynamic entities that both shape and are shaped by shared narratives and social practices. In Ethiopia, where profound ethnic diversity and historical grievances define the political terrain, parties function as principal platforms for negotiating identities, articulating collective goals, and contesting state power. This chapter examines the typology, programmatic coherence, and policy responses pertaining to Ethiopian political parties, with a specific focus on their role in the politicisation of ethnicity. It contends that parties are simultaneously products and producers of social realities, influencing and reflecting the intersubjective meanings that constitute Ethiopia's political discourse.

Constructivism posits that political phenomena emerge from ongoing social interactions and processes of meaning-making. Within the Ethiopian context, political parties actively construct identities through their programmes, leadership selections, and modes of engagement with constituencies. Their narratives - whether framing Ethiopia as a unified nation or a contested space of rival ethnic groups - fundamentally shape citizens' perceptions of their role and belonging within the polity. This study investigates how political parties either reinforce or challenge ethnic divisions, promote

or hinder social cohesion, and ultimately contribute to nation-building within a fragmented societal context.

Ethiopia's political party system, while relatively young, reflects the nation's complex socio-political dynamics. Having emerged in the 1960s and evolved through imperial, Marxist-Leninist, and federalist transitions, parties range from civic to ethnic in orientation and from national to regional in scope, thereby mirroring the country's diversity of identities and interests. The pronounced prevalence of ethnic parties underscores the centrality of ethnicity as a vector for political mobilisation, which constructivism interprets not as a reflection of fixed primordial divisions but as a socially constructed and politically instrumentalised phenomenon.

This study categorises parties into civic and particularistic types. Civic parties, which may be accommodationist or integrationist in approach, promote a conception of inclusive citizenship that transcends ethnic particularism. Conversely, ethnic parties prioritise the interests of specific groups, a focus that often deepens societal divides. These typologies are fluid, shaped by evolving party programmes, leadership decisions, and electoral strategies. However, the dominance of ethnic parties and the programmatic weaknesses observed across both civic and ethnic formations severely limit opportunities for collaborative engagement, thereby obstructing the development of shared political visions.

Programmatic coherence - defined as the adherence to stable ideological commitments - is crucial for democratic consolidation. Constructivist theory suggests

that programmatic parties foster participatory environments, thereby enhancing political accountability. Yet, Ethiopian parties frequently rely on charismatic leadership and ethnic affiliations rather than clear policy platforms, which constrains their broader appeal and undermines the dialogic processes essential for constructing collective identities. The lack of programmatic clarity, particularly among ethnic parties, indicates a broader failure to engage in the social negotiation required for democratic legitimacy.

Policy responses, such as legal prohibitions on ethnic parties, aim to promote issue-based politics but necessitate complementary participatory mechanisms to address underlying grievances. Within Ethiopia's anocratic context, which blends authoritarian and democratic features, balancing stability with democratic freedoms remains a critical challenge. By fostering inclusive dialogue and undertaking institutional reforms, governments can potentially reshape ethnic identities in ways conducive to peacebuilding, a prospect aligned with constructivism's emphasis on human agency and the malleability of social structures.

This study situates Ethiopia's experience within broader scholarly debates concerning ethnicity, democracy, and social cohesion. It underscores the imperative for developing robust civic parties endowed with programmatic coherence to counter ethnic divisions and foster a cohesive national identity. As Ethiopia continues to navigate its contested democratic transition, parties capable of prioritising dialogue over division are indispensable for the achievement of sustainable peace and national cohesion.

## Typology of Political Parties

Under Ethiopian law, a “Political Party” or “Political Organisation” is defined as “an entity with a political programme established by organised citizens and registered ... to hold political power by contesting in elections at the National, Regional or Local levels” (Proclamation No. 1162, 2019 Art. 2, Sub-Art. 13). Entities resembling this definition did not exist in Ethiopia until the 1960s. Consequently, the history of political parties in Ethiopia spans less than six decades.

In contemporary global political systems, political parties are fundamental, serving as platforms for “differing opinions in the marketplace of ideas” (Hofmeister, 2022, p. 19). Their primary functions encompass “representation, elite formation and recruitment, goal formulation, interest articulation and aggregation, socialisation and mobilisation, and organisation of government” (Hofmeister, 2022, pp. 24–25). This study focuses particularly on the functions of elite formation and recruitment, interest articulation and aggregation, and socialisation and mobilisation, as these align with the constructivist approach to political studies and elite theory. Notably, the elite formation and recruitment function is central to this thesis, as it provides insight into the dynamics of Ethiopia’s political elite. Political elites establish political parties, yet parties also shape elites. The nature of a country’s political elite is significantly influenced by the types of political organisations developed within it (Matlosa and Shale, 2008; Detterbeck, 2012; Kölln, 2015; Flinders and Hinterleitner, 2022).

Drawing on Donald Horowitz (1985), Kanchan Chandra (2005, 2011), and Cera Murtagh (2020), this thesis categorises political parties into two broad types: civic and

particularistic. Cera Murtagh (2020) defines civic parties as those that “attempt to draw support from and represent all significant groups in a divided society, to the exclusion of none” (p. 75). A civic party seeks to appeal to and garner support from all voters within a polity, irrespective of ethnic, religious, or other identity group affiliations, and explicitly defines itself in these inclusive terms. Operating universalistically within the polity, civic parties view politics as a means to deliver public goods accessible to all. In divided societies, they function as centripetal forces, promoting “convergence, centrism, or bringing together towards the middle” (O’Leary and McGarry, 2012, p. 89). This does not imply that civic parties are oblivious to the concerns of specific ethnic or other groups. While they may address such concerns, civic parties refrain from excluding any individual or group based on particularistic identities (Murtagh, 2020, p. 75).

Civic parties are divided into two subcategories: accommodationist and integrationist (see Figure 9). Civic-accommodationist parties acknowledge ethnic groups as distinct entities with specific political demands and endeavour to address those demands deemed just and legitimate. These parties operate on the premise that “ethnic identities in segmented societies are resilient and not susceptible to short-term transformation” (Kant, 1795, p. 113). Consequently, “political prudence and morality requires adaptation, adjustment, and consideration of the special interests, needs, and fears of national and ethnic groups so that they regard the state in question as fit for them” (O’Leary and McGarry, 2012, pp. 88–89; Kant, 2019). They may also strive to ensure each ethnic group has the public space necessary to express its identity, make decisions in areas of critical importance, and protect itself against the majority (Kant, 2019).

Civic-accommodationist parties can be further classified as multi-ethnic or cross-ethnic. A multi-ethnic civic-accommodationist party functions as a coalition of distinct ethnic groups, integrating their representation within its organisational structure. The National Council for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) in Burundi exemplifies this, incorporating both Hutu and Tutsi representation within its ranks (Vandeginste, 2017). Similarly, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria seeks to balance Christian and Muslim interests at the federal level (Kendhammer, 2010). India's Congress Party also fits this category, operating as a "collection of state-based parties" that reflect India's territorial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and social diversity (Bogaards, 2014). The United National Party (UNP) in Sri Lanka has historically aimed to represent both Sinhalese and Tamil communities within its structure, promoting a multi-ethnic framework despite challenges (DeVotta, 2004). Additionally, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in Zimbabwe, particularly in its early years, sought to unite diverse ethnic groups, including Shona and Ndebele, under a broad-based coalition to challenge the ruling ZANU-PF (Raftopoulos, 2006).

In contrast, a civic-accommodationist cross-ethnic party explicitly addresses ethnic issues as part of broader peace and reconciliation processes, engaging with oppressed or marginalised ethnic groups to champion their aspirations and grievances. Such parties are "more likely to emerge in transitional settings prior to consolidation of power-sharing institutions when space for a mediating party arises" (Murtagh, 2020, p. 84). The Democratic Party in South Africa, an opposition party in the apartheid-era white-only parliament, serves as an example, having played a key role in brokering agreements between the African National Congress and the National

Party during the transition to democracy (Mitchell, 2002). The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition also exemplifies this approach, promoting a "cross-community" stance by advocating for quotas to ensure equal gender and religious representation in public institutions, such as the police service (Tonge, 2005; Murtagh, 2020). The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland has similarly championed cross-community reconciliation, appealing to both Protestant and Catholic voters to foster a shared political identity (Tonge *et al.*, 2024). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) works to bridge divides between Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats by advocating for inclusive policies and a unified national framework in a post-conflict society (Kapidžić, 2020).

The second category of civic parties comprises civic integrationist parties, which emphasise engagement with individuals rather than ethnic group identity (Murtagh, 2020). These parties prioritise "equal citizenship" and deliberately "turn a blind eye to differences for public purposes" (O'Leary and McGarry, 2012, p. 83). They oppose the "ethnicization of political parties or civic associations" (*ibid*) and advocate constitutional strategies that cultivate a shared public identity. This identity transcends, crosscuts, and minimises ethnic cleavages while preserving ethno-cultural diversity in the private sphere (Kant, 2019, p. 114). Civic integrationist parties are subdivided into non-ethnic and post-ethnic types.

Civic integrationist non-ethnic parties adopt an "ethnic blind" stance, maintaining that ethnic differences "should not be taken into account when decisions are made, impressions are formed, and behaviours are enacted" (Kant, 2019, p. 111). They advocate for an "ethnic blind constitution" that ensures equal recognition for all citizens

without acknowledging ethnic distinctions (p.112). These parties treat ethnic demands as cultural issues, positing that ethnic grievances will fade if broader challenges - such as economic development, governance, social progress, or environmental concerns - are addressed (Murtagh, 2020). Examples include the Liberal Party of Canada, which promotes inclusive policies centred on individual rights and national unity (Johnston, 2017); the Democratic Party of the United States, which emphasises universal democratic values over ethnic divisions (Polsby *et al.*, 2024); and many Labour or Socialist parties in Europe, such as the Labour Party in the United Kingdom, which focuses on class-based and universal welfare policies to foster social cohesion (Thorpe, 2015). The African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa also exemplifies this category, advocating a non-racial national identity to unify diverse ethnic groups (Bogaards, 2014). Additionally, the New Democratic Party (NDP) in Canada promotes progressive policies that prioritise economic and social equity, sidelining ethnic distinctions in favour of a cohesive national framework (Laycock and Erickson, 2015).

Civic integrationist post-ethnic parties, in contrast, aim to transcend ethnicity entirely (Murtagh, 2020, p. 76). They address ethnic issues alongside broader solidarity concerns, striving to build a polity that moves beyond ethnic cleavages. Green parties and single-issue parties - where the issue is not ethnicity- typically fall into this category. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), which champions a unified “European identity” over ethnic or cultural differences, is a prominent example (Hix and Lord, 1997). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Our Party (Naša Stranka) seeks to counter nationalist dominance by promoting a civic identity that transcends Bosniak, Serb, and Croat divisions (Naše Stranka, 2016). Similarly, the Green Party of Germany (Die Grünen) prioritises environmental and social justice

issues, fostering a post-ethnic political identity that appeals across cultural and ethnic lines (Langguth, 2019). In New Zealand, the Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand advocates for environmental sustainability and social equity, appealing to a broad electorate while minimising ethnic-based politics (Ford, 2015). Furthermore, the Pirate Party in Iceland, which focuses on digital rights and transparency, exemplifies a single-issue post-ethnic party that sidesteps ethnic cleavages to promote universal civic goals (Beyer, 2014).

Particularistic parties are political entities that advocate for the interests of specific societal segments, often defined by ethnic, religious, or other identity-based affiliations. Almond and Coleman (2016) define “particularistic parties” as those rooted in “an ethnic, racial or tribal basis” (p. 556). These parties are “identified completely with the interests of a particular ethnic or religious group ... recruit members of the society out of a particular subculture – religious communities, statuses, classes, ethnic communities, and the like” (ibid, pp.31,44). They focus on mobilising and training members to promote the values, aspirations, and interests of their designated group, often prioritising group-specific agendas over broader societal concerns. In divided societies, particularistic parties frequently act as centrifugal forces, deepening social and political cleavages by reinforcing group-based identities and exacerbating tensions. These parties can be classified into ethnic, religious, and other identity-based categories, depending on the nature of the subculture they represent. This thesis places particular emphasis on ethnic parties, given their significant influence on the political dynamics under investigation. The role of ethnic parties in shaping elite

formation and political competition in Ethiopia is central to the research, as they often dominate in ethnically diverse and fragmented polities.

An ethnic party is characterised by its advocacy for “the particular interests of one ethnic category or set of categories” while excluding others based on ethnicity (Chandra, 2011, p. 155). Its defining feature is exclusion rooted in ethnic identity, shaped by three key aspects: particularity, centrality, and temporality of the interests it champions. These aspects distinguish ethnic parties from civic ones and highlight their role in ethnically divided societies.

*Particularity* refers to the exclusionary nature of an ethnic party, which implicitly or explicitly sidelines certain ethnic groups. This exclusion can manifest in the party’s rhetoric, policies, or membership practices, which prioritise one ethnic group over others. For instance, a party may focus on the rights or resources of a specific ethnic community, thereby excluding others from its agenda (Chandra, 2011). Donald Horowitz (1985, p. 291) notes that such parties often reinforce ethnic boundaries by framing political competition as a zero-sum game, where gains for one group come at the expense of others.

*Centrality* indicates that the core mission of an ethnic party is the wellbeing of a designated ethnic group or groups. The party’s policies, campaigns, and resource allocation centre on advancing the interests, cultural preservation, or political power of this group (Chandra, 2011). This focus often overshadows broader societal issues, as the party aligns its identity with ethnic-specific grievances or aspirations. Van der Brug

and Fennema (2007, p. 357) argue that this centrality can entrench ethnic divisions, as parties mobilise support by appealing to group loyalty rather than universal values.

*Temporality* acknowledges that a party's ethnic orientation may shift over time. A party classified as ethnic in one period may adopt a civic stance in another, or vice versa, depending on political contexts, leadership changes, or strategic needs (Chandra, 2011). This fluidity reflects the dynamic nature of ethnic identities and political strategies. For example, Benjamin Reilly (2006, p. 811) observes that parties in post-conflict societies may transition from ethnic to civic orientations to broaden their appeal during democratic consolidation.

Ethnic parties often conceive politics as a club good, delivering benefits exclusively to their target ethnic group(s), sometimes by "identifying the common ethnic enemy to be excluded" (Chandra, 2011, p. 237). A party can be identified as ethnic if it explicitly commits to an ethnic group in its name or programme. Alternatively, it may be classified as ethnic based on seven parameters outlined by Chandra (2011, p. 162): (1) Societal section advocated for - the specific ethnic group the party represents, evident in its policy priorities or public statements; (2) Issues advocated for - whether the party focuses on ethnic-specific concerns, such as cultural preservation or territorial autonomy; (3) Implicit campaign messages - subtle ethnic appeals embedded in slogans or rhetoric that resonate with a particular group; (4) Support base - the ethnic composition of the party's voters, indicating reliance on a specific group; (5) Composition of the vote - the demographic breakdown of electoral support, showing ethnic concentration; (6) Composition of leadership - the ethnic identity of party leaders, often reflecting the group championed; and (7) Arena of contestation -

the geographic or political spaces where the party competes, often tied to ethnic strongholds. Similarly, David Berat (2017, p. 117) proposes six indicators grouped into two categories: Group 1 (best indicators) includes (1) the name of the political party, which may explicitly reference an ethnic group (e.g., “Kurdish People’s Party”, or “Oromo Liberation Front”); (2) the programme of the political party, outlining ethnic-specific goals; and (3) the statute of the party, formalising its commitment to an ethnic group. Group 2 (good indicators) includes (4) the members of the political party, reflecting the ethnic homogeneity of its membership; (5) the ethnic heritage of the party leader, indicating alignment with the championed group; and (6) the campaign programme during elections, which may prioritise ethnic issues or appeal to ethnic voters.

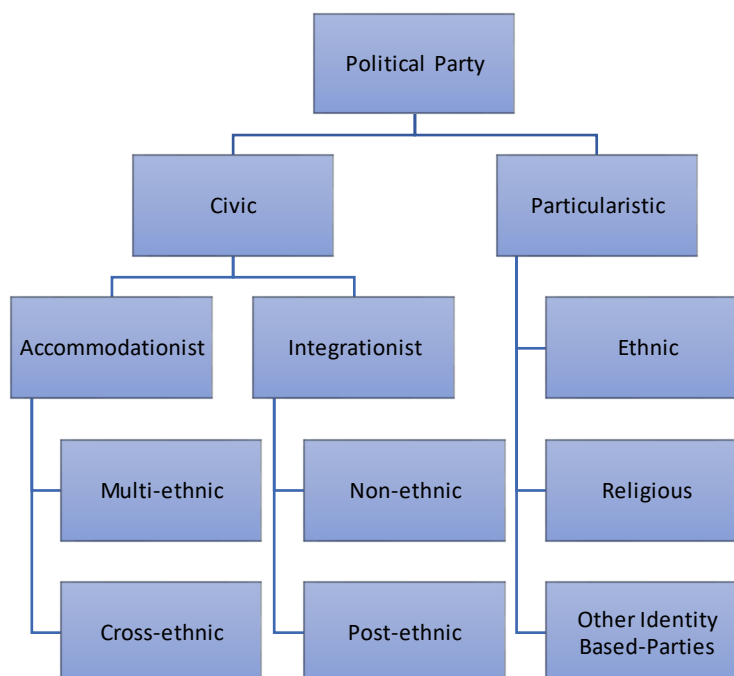


Figure 6: Types of Political Parties (produced by the author)

## **Ethnic Parties and Ethnic Conflict**

Barbara Walter's (2022a, pp. 11–12; 15–17) identification of anocracy and ethnic fragmentation as primary drivers of civil wars underscores how intersubjective meanings, identities, and social practices shape conflict dynamics. Constructivism theorises that political phenomena are not merely structural but emerge from the ways actors interpret, narrate, and enact their social realities, making anocracy and ethnic fragmentation critical sites of identity construction and contestation.

*Anocracy* is understood as a socially constructed political condition, “neither full autocracies nor democracies but something in between” (Walter, 2022a, p. 12), where competing narratives of legitimacy and authority collide. In this transitional space, weak institutions fail to sustain a shared “social contract,” fostering distrust and competing claims to power. As Fearon and Laitin (2003, p. 85) note, anocracies “are weak regimes, lacking the resources to be successful autocrats or containing an unstable mix of political forces that makes them unable to move to crush nascent rebel groups”. Barbara Walter (2022b, 9–10) asserts that anocracies are especially prone to civil war when political transitions or power vacuums erode public trust in governance. The instability of anocracy, therefore, stems from contested meanings of political order and weak institutions, where actors' interpretations of legitimacy drive conflict rather than resolve it.

Ethnic fragmentation describes a societal condition where political parties are predominantly organised along ethnic, religious, or racial lines, with the primary objective of securing power for their respective groups. These ethnic parties articulate

exclusionary narratives to mobilise support. Barbara Walter (2022b, 2022a) describes this as a context where political competition is framed as a struggle for group dominance, reinforcing “us versus them” identities. Constructivists view this as a process of identity formation, where, as Chandra (2011, 2012) argues, ethnic parties narrate politics as a club good, delivering benefits to their group while marginalising others. Horowitz (1985, p. 291) notes that such parties reify ethnic boundaries by embedding group loyalties in political discourse, shaping social realities that prioritise division over unity. Ethnic fragmentation thus emerges from shared meanings that harden group identities, making conflict a product of how actors construct and perform their ethnic roles.

Francis Fukuyama’s (2018a) observation that contemporary politics is “defined less by economic or ideological concerns than by questions of identity” (p. 91) highlights how intersubjective meanings and socially constructed identities shape political dynamics. Fukuyama (2018b) notes that many individuals now articulate their aims through the “dignity of the groups of which they [are] members ... [since] individual self-esteem is related to the esteem conferred on the larger group with which one is associated” (p. 107), reflecting how shared narratives of group identity become central to political action. The proliferation of ethnic parties, in this view, emerges from the construction of political elites’ identities along ethnic lines, mirroring societal cleavages through discursive practices. Politicians, acting as ethnic entrepreneurs, reinforce these identities by narrating politics as a struggle for group-specific benefits, often marginalising others. Fukuyama (2018b) argues that “identity claims are usually non-negotiable: rights to social recognition based on race, ethnicity, or gender are based on fixed biological characteristics and cannot be traded for other goods or abridged in

any way” (p. 122). He argues that this inflexibility renders conflicts sparked by identity-based demands particularly intractable, as they resist compromise and challenge the possibility of inclusive resolutions. Constructivists, however, interpret this inflexibility as rooted in deeply entrenched narratives that solidify identities as immutable, rendering conflicts resistant to resolution.

The dominance of ethnic parties in political systems shapes political socialisation and mobilisation through ethnically centred narratives, reinforcing group-based identities over collective national ones. Francis Fukuyama’s (2018b) observation that “ethnic groups take turns in power to loot the country” (p. 126) reflects how actors construct political realities in which power is narrated as a group entitlement, with each group awaiting its “turn to eat” (Wrong, 2010). These narratives normalise a cyclical struggle for ethnic control, embedding exclusionary identities within the political culture. The proliferation of ethnic parties, in this view, intensifies ethnic conflict by solidifying divisive social realities. Kanchan Chandra (2005, p. 234) highlights that such parties construct politics as a zero-sum game, amplifying perceptions of ethnic rivalry that threaten peace and security. Tina Reuter (2023, p. 47) further notes that these dynamics can escalate into severe human rights violations, including genocide, as groups perform identities that justify violence.

David Chapman’s (2004) analysis of ethnically divided societies highlights the role of mono-ethnic parties in shaping exclusionary political realities. A mono-ethnic party is a political party that primarily represents and mobilises a single ethnic group, focusing on its specific interests and identity while often excluding or marginalising others. Chapman argues that in an ethnically divided country, “when parties are mono-ethnic,

it is unlikely that a government can be created which is stable and equitably responsive to all ethnic groups” (p.57). When a mono-ethnic party gains control of the government, it tends to construct policies that favour its ethnic constituents, reinforcing divisive identity narratives and undermining social cohesion. Similarly, if no party secures a majority and a coalition of a few mono-ethnic parties forms a government, the exclusion of other groups perpetuates competing identity narratives, fostering instability.

Ethnic parties exacerbate the ethnic security dilemma by constructing and disseminating narratives that heighten fears of group survival, such as the “fear of ethnic extinction” (Tang, 2011, p. 533). The ethnic security dilemma arises when ethnic groups, perceiving the central government as too weak to guarantee their safety, assume sole responsibility for their own security. This perception - shaped by exclusionary discourses - drives groups to strengthen their defences, which, in turn, provokes fear among others. This dynamic may trigger an intra-state ‘arms race’ and further deteriorate the overall security environment (Tang, 2011; Kersmo, 2021a). These narratives and fears incite communities to arm themselves, intensifying mutual suspicion and increasing the potential for violent confrontation. Ethnic parties representing majority groups often promote “the political, cultural, and economic suppression and exclusion of minorities” (Basedau *et al.*, 2007, p. 620), thereby embedding narratives of dominance within public discourse. Conversely, ethnic parties representing minorities in opposition to a majority or majority-led coalition may “resort to non-democratic and even violent means to protect their interests,” potentially establishing “repressive, non-democratic regimes against the majority” (p.620) Regardless of demographic status, ethnic parties “raise the stakes in the political

game, fanning emotions and increasing the likelihood of disturbances of public order” (p.620). They “entrench societal divisions” by prioritising ethnic group loyalty over the collective good (p.621), and they “politicise ethnic differences” in both policy-making and public discourse (Flesken, 2018, p. 967). This process heightens ethnic salience, fosters “ingroup cohesion and outgroup rivalry,” and ultimately undermines national unity (Lieberman and Singh, 2012; Michelitch, 2015; Flesken, 2018, p. 967).

Ethnic identity and ethnic security are socially constructed phenomena, shaped by shared meanings, narratives, and practices. As Shipping Tang (2011) asserts, “security and identity can be constructed and thus reconstructed, it is possible, although much more difficult, to reconstruct ethnic identities to build ethnic peace” (p. 533). This perspective highlights the transformative potential of agency, where actors can reshape divisive identities through inclusive discourses and institutional reforms. With appropriate ideations, institutions, and leadership, the ethnic security dilemma can, in principle, be resolved to mitigate conflict and foster peace. Various legislative measures can support this reconstruction. For instance, banning ethnic parties, as examined by Basedau et al. (2007), Becher and Basedau (2008), and Moroff (2010, 2013), seeks to disrupt exclusionary ethnic narratives by reducing the political salience of ethnic divisions. Similarly, distributive alternative voting systems, discussed by Chapman (2004), Reilly (2006, 2021), Cederman, Gleditsch, and Hug (2013), and Michelitch (2015), promote cross-ethnic cooperation by incentivising parties to appeal beyond their ethnic constituencies. These mechanisms aim to cultivate shared political identities and diminish zero-sum ethnic competition, aligning with constructivist insights that peace emerges from redefining social realities through deliberate institutional and ideational interventions.

## **Programmacy of Political Parties.**

The programmacy of political parties - defined as their adherence to well-structured and stable ideological commitments - forms a critical foundation for meaningful political engagement, transcending the dichotomy of civic or particularistic orientations. According to Luna, Rosenblatt, and Toro (2014, p. 1), a party is programmatic if it is guided by “well-structured and stable ideological commitments” that underpin: (1) its connection with its constituency; (2) electoral competition; and (3) the policymaking processes. Such parties offer citizens “meaningful choice over policies by reaching out to them through coherent political programmes” (Luna, Rosenblatt and Toro, 2014, p. 14). From a constructivist perspective, which posits that knowledge and meaning are co-constructed through social interaction and collective engagement (Kolb, 2015), programmatic parties foster political engagement by collaboratively developing ideological frameworks that resonate with constituencies, thereby facilitating shared understanding and active participation.

Members of programmatic parties are primarily motivated by the party’s ideological orientation or policy platform, rather than by personal or material benefits. These parties compete electorally based on the strength of their programmes, and their members actively contribute to policy formulation processes rooted in the party’s overarching ideological commitments (Cheeseman *et al.*, 2014, p. 2). Programmatic parties exhibit several defining characteristics: (a) a coherent, publicly recognisable, and stable set of policy positions that form a structured political programme; (b) internal consensus among members on these policy positions; (c) a commitment and

capacity to implement core programmatic promises when in office; and (d) the use of the party programme as the primary mechanism for attracting and mobilising membership (Cheeseman *et al.*, 2014, pp. 2–4; Blings, 2020). In a constructivist framework, these characteristics reflect a party's ability to engage constituencies in iterative, dialogic processes that co-create a collective political identity, aligning with the principles of experiential learning and social negotiation (Westholm and Niemi, 1992; Lave and Wenger, 2009).

Programmatic parties are distinguished by their clearly articulated and consistent ideological commitments, which serve as the foundation for: (1) building robust connections with the electorate; (2) competing effectively in electoral contests; and (3) shaping the policymaking process (Geburu, 2014; Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2018; Ishiyama, 2021). The constructivist lens highlights that such parties succeed by fostering participatory environments where constituencies and members collaboratively construct policy platforms, ensuring that political engagement is both meaningful and inclusive. By prioritising ideological coherence over personalistic or clientelistic appeals, programmatic parties enhance democratic accountability and strengthen the link between citizens and the political process (Luna, Rosenblatt and Toro, 2014, p. 1).

Programmatic political parties form an essential pillar of democratic systems, providing a structured mechanism for transforming societal conflicts into constructive dialogue and policy solutions. By advocating transparent and clearly articulated policy agendas, these parties channel diverse interests into peaceful, institutionalised processes of negotiation and compromise (Kitschelt, 2000; Cheeseman *et al.*, 2014; Luna,

Rosenblatt and Toro, 2014). In contrast to polarising or confrontational methods, programmatic parties prioritise policy-oriented discourse, fostering mutual understanding over division or factionalism. When parties place coherent policy objectives above personal ambitions or narrow interests, they establish a robust foundation for political stability and social cohesion, promoting collaborative governance that mitigates tensions and enhances unity (Mainwaring, 2018, ch. 3).

Both civic and particularistic parties may adopt programmatic approaches. Civic parties ground their programmes in inclusive ideological principles, advocating policies such as universal healthcare, primary education, fair employment opportunities, and environmental protection, uniting diverse constituencies through a shared commitment to collective well-being (Stokes, 1999). Conversely, particularistic parties focus on representing the specific needs of distinct communities, such as ethnic groups, developing tailored policies that reflect their unique priorities (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007). Whilst programmatic civic parties foster broad collaboration through universalist principles, programmatic particularistic parties can enhance democratic participation by amplifying marginalised voices, contributing to a balanced and inclusive policy environment, or advocating for the specific demands of the communities they represent.

The establishment of a responsible party government (RPG) hinges on the programmatic integrity of the most influential political parties within a political system. An RPG is characterised by a governance model wherein parties compete on the basis of distinct and transparent policy platforms, enabling electors to make informed choices aligned with their values and priorities (Wattenberg and Dalton, 2002; Roberts,

2022). In such systems, programmatic parties distinguish themselves through substantive policy commitments, avoiding dependence on charismatic leadership or populist appeals, thereby facilitating a deliberative electoral process where citizens engage with substantive ideas and solutions (Luna, Rosenblatt and Toro, 2014). This approach cultivates trust and encourages active participation in democratic processes, ensuring governance reflects societal aspirations.

Furthermore, the programmatic nature of parties bolsters democratic accountability by promoting transparency and predictability in governance. By aligning their actions with stated policy objectives, parties provide a clear framework for electors to assess their performance, thereby reinforcing confidence in democratic institutions (Kitschelt, 2000). This accountability fosters a culture of constructive feedback and continuous improvement, ensuring governance remains responsive to evolving public needs. Conversely, a departure from programmatic principles towards clientelism or short-term gains risks eroding public trust, potentially leading to disengagement (Mainwaring and Scott, 1995). Empirical evidence from Latin American democracies indicates that programmatic party systems are associated with enhanced stability and institutional trust, underscoring their role in nurturing resilient, collaborative societies (Luna, Rosenblatt and Toro, 2014).

In contrast to programmatic parties, non-programmatic parties frequently possess documents nominally referred to as “party programmes”; however, these seldom inform political practice or organisational conduct. Rather, such parties tend to rely on a repertoire of non-programmatic strategies to mobilise support and consolidate authority. These include particularistic material exchanges, clientelist networks,

patronage-based appointments, and the distribution of identity-targeted benefits, often justified or legitimised through populist rhetoric and charismatic leadership (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007; van de Walle, 2007, p. 2). The prevalence of non-programmatic parties is closely linked to the fragmentation of national political elites, particularly in fragile or post-conflict contexts.

Constructivist perspectives in conflict studies and political sociology stress that these behaviours are not merely the outcome of weak institutional arrangements; rather, they are embedded in historically constituted understandings of legitimacy, identity, and political authority (Checkel, 1998, pp. 324–330; Wendt, 1999, pp. 185–224). Elite fragmentation - where political leaders prioritise identity-based or regional loyalties over national ideological cohesion - exacerbates these dynamics. In the absence of consensus on foundational state narratives, elites tend to resort to personalised or ethnically driven mobilisation, rather than engaging in programmatic consensus-building. This contributes to a volatile political landscape in which elites compete for resources and influence through informal and exclusionary mechanisms, as opposed to institutionalised deliberation or democratic negotiation (Lemay-Hébert, 2009).

In such environments, elite fragmentation impedes the formation of broad-based, ideologically unified coalitions, instead fostering the proliferation of segmented patronage networks. These networks are maintained through symbolic centre - such as ethnic identity or collective historical grievance - rather than through a shared political vision or cohesive policy objectives (Bratton and Walle, 1997). Consequently, political competition becomes increasingly polarised and exclusionary, reinforcing zero-sum mentalities that deepen intergroup animosities and hinder inclusive

peacebuilding process. Thus, the persistence of non-programmatic political practices should not be viewed solely as a symptom of institutional weakness, but rather as a manifestation of elite fragmentation, deeply rooted in the socio-political and historical trajectories of state formation and conflict (Bates, 2008, pp. 70–75).

### **Political Parties in Ethiopia.**

Compared to many African countries, “political parties emerged very late in Ethiopia and when they emerged these parties were not an extension of the political parties of other countries” (Petros, 1991, p. 141). The 1960 military coup attempt by the Imperial Bodyguard was a turning point in the political history of Ethiopia (p.142). The 1970s can be referred to as an era of political awakening to the urban Ethiopian elite. It was during this period both civic and ethnic political parties emerged (Aaron, 2006). The Ethiopian National Liberation Front (ENLF) declared its program in August 1971, followed by the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) in March 1975. The Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) officially announced its formation in August 1975 after three and a half years of underground operations. The Ethiopian Oppressed Peoples Struggle (ECHAT) declared its program on December 19, 1975, while the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (ME’ISON), a clandestine movement formed in 1968, officially announced itself in April 1976. The Woz League also declared its program in April 1976, and Abiyotawi Seded (Revolutionary Flame) was established in late 1976. EMALEDEH (The United Front of Ethiopian Marxist-Leninist Organizations) declared its program in February 1977 (Petros, 1991). These parties were the forerunners of Ethiopian civic parties. Membership to these parties was open to every Ethiopian

citizen; and the parties claimed to further their agenda without excluding anyone based on ethnicity, religion, or gender. All had written party programmes also their programmaticity varies widely. EPRP, for example, practiced collective leadership to avoid dependence on charismatic leadership, whereas Abiyotawi Seded became closely associated with its chairman, Mengistu Hailemariam. In terms of ideology, there was far more similarity than differences among them, as all, except EDU, were fervent Marxists. However, subtle variations in their interpretations of Marxist principles had significant implications. This phenomenon, termed the "narcissism of small differences" by Sigmund Freud (1930, pp. 61–62), illustrates how minor ideological distinctions can lead to profound consequences, shaping the trajectory of political movements and their societal impact. This observation also supports the constructivist perspective, which postulates that individuals' interpretations of phenomena are more significant than the phenomena themselves (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 47; Chaudhry, Nawab and Shafi, 2020, pp. 112–113). The conflict among civic parties over the "purity of Marxism-Leninism" precipitated what Waugh and Gallagher (2009) and Pischedda (2018) describe as "wars within wars." Gebru Tareke (2009, pt 2) characterises this as a "war of comrades against comrades," while the public referred to it as "White Terror versus Red Terror." These internal conflicts significantly weakened the civic parties, thereby facilitating the success and proliferation of ethnic parties in Ethiopia.

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was established in 1973, the Afar Liberation Front (ALF) in 1975, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in February 1975, and the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) in 1976. These organisations were explicitly ethnic-based parties, as evidenced by their names and programmatic declarations.

Most had formal written programmes, though many have undergone multiple amendments over time. In a similar vein to the civic parties, the majority of these ethnic-based political organisations adopted Marxism-Leninism as their principal ideology (Young, 1997).

According to data obtained from the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), as of 26 November 2023, there are 58 licensed political organisations in Ethiopia, comprising 17 national and 41 regional parties, alongside two coalitions (NEBE, 2023). Additionally, 12 political organisations were in the process of formation during this period. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) had its licence revoked but continues to operate officially, with its representatives dominating the Interim Regional Administration of Tigray. Consequently, for the purposes of this analysis, the TPLF is included, increasing the number of regional parties to 42. Of these, 40 explicitly declare their commitment to specific ethnic groups in their names and programmes, making them unambiguously ethnic-based parties. Only two regional parties, the Renaissance Party and the Union for Democracy and Freedom Party, require further investigation to determine their ethnic affiliations. Thus, approximately 95 per cent of Ethiopia's regional parties are ethnic parties. Five of the 17 national parties explicitly declare their allegiance to specific ethnic groups in their names and programmes, making them unambiguously ethnic. This constitutes approximately 29 per cent of national parties. The remaining 12 national parties claim to be civic, resulting in 15 out of 58 licensed political organisations (approximately 26 per cent) being potentially civic.

The parties are:

	<b>Name of the Party</b>	<b>Type of Civic Party</b>	<b>Remark</b>
1	All Ethiopian Unity Party	Accommodationist Multi-Ethnic	Disproportionate support from Amhara Most of its statements are Amhara focused
2	Enat Party	Integrationist non-ethnic	Disproportionate support from Orthodox Christian Most of its statements are Amhara focused. Claims to be a conservative party
3	Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice Party	Integrationist non-ethnic	
4	Ethiopian Democratic Union	Integrationist non-ethnic	Conservative
5	Ethiopian National Unity Party	?	
6	Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party	Integrationist non-ethnic	
7	Ethiopian Social Democratic Party	Accommodationist Multi-Ethnic	Disproportionate support from South-Western Ethiopia
8	Freedom and Equality Party	Integrationist non-ethnic	Disproportionate support from Muslim Ethiopian
9	Hibir Ethiopia Democratic Party	Accommodationist Multi-Ethnic	
10	New Generation Party	?	
11	One Ethiopia Democratic Party	?	
12	Prosperity Party	Accommodationist Multi-Ethnic	Internally federated party. PP resembles a coalition of 85+ ethnic parties each representing an ethnic group. It doesn't exclude anyone, rather encouraged ethnicities to organise their PP chapter based on ethnicity.
13	Renaissance Party	?	
14	Union for Democracy and Freedom Party	?	

Table 1: List of Political Parties that claim to be civic

The two coalitions are of special interest. The Ethiopian Federal Democratic Unity Forum /Medrek/ is a coalition of four ethnic and one civic party.

	<b>Name of the Party</b>	<b>Category</b>
1	Afar People's Justice Democracy Party	Ethnic
2	Ethiopian Social Democratic Party	Civic
3	Oromo Federalist Congress	Ethnic
4	Sidama Liberation Movement	Ethnic
5	Union of Tigrians for Democracy and Sovereignty	Ethnic

Table 2: Medrek Coalition

Medrek, as a coalition, may be categorised as civic since it is open to every Ethiopian through its member civic party.

Alliance for Multination Democratic Federalism /Alliance/ is composed of four ethnic parties.

	<b>Name of the party</b>	<b>Category</b>
1	Oromo Liberation Front	Ethnic
2	Ogaden National Liberation Front,	Ethnic
3	Mocha Democratic Party,	Ethnic
4	Agew National Congress	Ethnic

Table 3: Alliance for Multination Democratic Federalism

A coalition of ethnic parties is unlikely to be considered civic unless it includes representation from every ethnic group in Ethiopia; therefore, the 'Alliance,' a coalition of several ethnic-based parties, remains ethnic in character as it comprises four ethnic parties and excludes the vast majority of Ethiopia's ethnic groups.

The programmatic coherence of the *Medrek* and the *Alliance* primarily engage in cooperation during electoral periods and occasionally issue joint statements, yet there is a noticeable absence of shared policy documents, a unified vision, or a cohesive ideological framework. From a constructivist perspective, which asserts that knowledge and meaning are co-constructed through social interaction and collective engagement, the failure of *Medrek* and *Alliance* to develop a shared programmatic foundation undermines their ability to foster a collective political identity or mobilise

sustained support among Ethiopia's diverse electorate. This absence of a shared vision hampers Medrek's ability to construct a coherent political narrative, a critical process in constructivist theory, which emphasises collaborative meaning-making as foundational to collective action (Wenger *et al.*, 2023, p. 53). Similarly, the Alliance for Democracy exhibits comparable programmatic deficiencies. Historical accounts suggest that the Alliance, like Medrek, has engaged in sporadic electoral collaborations but lacks evidence of sustained efforts to develop common policy documents or a shared ideological framework. From a constructivist lens, this fragmentation reflects a failure to engage in the iterative, dialogic processes necessary to co-construct a shared political identity or programme, limiting the *Alliance's* capacity to challenge the dominant EPRDF and its successor, the PP.

In accordance with the Political Parties Registration and Election's Code of Conduct Proclamation 1162 (2019), political parties in Ethiopia are required to have a memorandum of association, a political programme, and by-laws. An examination of the officially submitted programmes of Ethiopian political parties reveals a binary classification rooted in the two prevailing narratives: *Ethiopia is a cradle of civilisation and freedom*; and *Ethiopia is a prison of nations and nationalities*. From a constructivist perspective, these narratives constitute competing frameworks through which parties forge political identities and engage their constituencies. The adoption of these narratives not only shapes the behaviours of the party and its members but also influences the broader political discourse within Ethiopia's multi-ethnic society. The first narrative, which praises Ethiopia as a cradle of civilisation, is frequently adopted by civic parties that champion national unity. Almost all ethnic parties subscribe to the second narrative, reflecting their advocacy for regional autonomy or self-

determination. Apart from this glowing narrative landscape, the ideological landscape - liberalism versus conservatism - and the issues landscape - education, healthcare, infrastructure, human rights, justice, etc. - are blurred among Ethiopia's political parties. The prominence of these two narratives risks intensifying political polarisation, as parties prioritise exclusionary narrative-driven identity politics over relatively inclusive ideology- and issues-driven politics.

For most parties, aside from the segment of their programme that delineates their stance on identity politics, the officially submitted programmes exert minimal influence in establishing connections with constituencies. As noted by scholars, such as Yohannes Petros (1991), Solomon Gebreyohan Gebru (2014, p. 421), and Ayenew Birhanu Worku (2021, p. 114), the prominence of party leaders often overshadows both the party and its programme, with leaders' names enjoying greater recognition than the organisations they represent. From a constructivist perspective, this reliance on charismatic leadership and ethnic affiliations reflects a failure to engage constituencies in collaborative processes that could generate shared political visions. Instead, parties depend heavily on the charisma of their leaders and the mobilisation of ethnic or interest groups, rather than on robust programmes or active membership.

In public debates, Ethiopian political parties sometimes mention their programmes; however, it is uncommon for them to develop comprehensive policy documents based on these programmes, except for the segment that defines their position on the continuum of identity politics. This trend is evident across both ethnic and civic parties, as well as the ruling PP. In the 2021 general election, the PP's campaign strategy centred overwhelmingly on the personal popularity of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed,

creating the impression that he was a candidate in every electoral district. Voting for any PP candidate was widely perceived as an endorsement of Abiy, who was arguably Ethiopia's most prominent politician at the time (Lyons and Verjee, 2022, p. 340). This leader-centric approach, which sidelines programmatic substance, undermines the constructivist ideal of fostering participatory, dialogic processes to co-create policy platforms that resonate with diverse constituencies.

The lack of clear programmatic distinctions is particularly pronounced among parties that purport to represent the same ethnic group. For instance, among Oromo-based parties - the Geda System for Oromo Liberation Party (Geda Liberation), Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and the Oromia Chapter of the Prosperity Party (PP-Oromia) - no noticeable programmatic differences exist. Constituents primarily identify these parties by their leaders rather than their policy platforms. A similar pattern is observed among Sidama-based parties such as the Sidama People's Unity Democratic Organization, Sidama Unity Party, and PP-Sidama. Likewise, Tigray-based parties such as the National Congress of Great Tigray, Salsay Weyane Tigray, Tigray Democratic Party (TDP), and Union of Tigrians for Democracy and Sovereignty exhibit programmatic ambiguity in differentiating their policy agenda. From a constructivist lens, this lack of differentiation suggests a failure to engage in the iterative, social processes necessary to articulate distinct political identities, limiting these parties' ability to mobilise support beyond ethnic loyalties.

Civic-oriented parties also suffer from a lack of programmatic clarity. Seven national parties - All Ethiopian Unity Party, Enat Party, Ethiopian Democratic Union, Ethiopian National Unity Party, Freedom and Equality Party, New Generation Party, and One

Ethiopia Democratic Party - claim to uphold liberal democratic principles, yet their programmes lack specificity or distinction. Similarly, parties such as the Ethiopian Social Democratic Party, Hibir Ethiopia Democratic Party, Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, and Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice Party all identify as social democratic, but their policy platforms are virtually indistinguishable. This homogeneity reflects a broader challenge: Ethiopian political parties have not prioritised the collaborative development of nuanced policy frameworks that could engage constituencies in meaningful political discourse.

The survival of Ethiopian political parties, including the ruling PP, hinges not on their programmes but on their ability to mobilise support from ethnic or interest groups they claim to represent. This dynamic is exacerbated by Ethiopia's electoral authoritarian context, where systemic barriers - such as state-controlled media, restrictive laws, and alleged electoral irregularities - limit opposition parties' capacity to develop and promote robust programmes (Lyons and Verjee, 2022; Gardner, 2024). However, a constructivist perspective underscores that internal factors, such as the parties' overreliance on charismatic leadership and ethnic affiliations, compound these external constraints. By failing to engage constituencies in co-constructing policy platforms, parties miss opportunities to build inclusive, programmatic identities that could challenge the ruling party's dominance.

The programmatic weaknesses of Ethiopian political parties - both ethnic and civic - stem from their reliance on leader-centric and ethnic-based mobilisation rather than on substantive, differentiated policy platforms. A constructivist analysis reveals that

these parties have not sufficiently engaged in the social, dialogic processes needed to co-create meaningful programmes that resonate with their constituencies.

## **Policy Responses to Party Civility and Programmacy**

To ensure the stability of a nation's political system and counteract the divisive impact of particularistic parties, especially those with ethnic, extremist, or separatist agendas, governments implement various administrative and legal measures, including the potential prohibition of such parties. This practice, well-documented in Europe since the conclusion of World War II, targets parties deemed to threaten democratic principles or national cohesion, such as extremist, separatist, or irredentist groups (Bourne, 2011b, 2011a). In recent years, the rise of far-right movements has elevated party banning to a prominent position on Europe's political agenda, reflecting heightened concerns about political extremism. Party banning represents a deliberate intervention to shape political discourse and foster a cohesive national identity. However, such measures must balance the promotion of stability with the preservation of democratic freedoms to avoid alienating constituencies and undermining participatory governance. The practice of party banning is not merely a reactive policy but a socially constructed response to perceived threats to democratic institutions. In Europe, bans have historically targeted parties advocating ideologies incompatible with democratic values, such as neo-Nazism or separatism, as documented by Angela K. Bourne (2011a, 2011b). The resurgence of far-right movements has prompted renewed debates about the legitimacy and efficacy of such measures, with bans seen as a tool to protect democratic norms while risking the suppression of political expression (Kirchick, 2023).

In Africa, administrative measures governing political parties are notably rigorous, particularly in response to the perceived threats posed by ethnic, religious, or other identity-based parties, which are often associated with inciting violent conflict. Anika Moroff (2010, 2013) observes that many African nations have instituted outright bans on such parties to forestall their emergence and mitigate associated tensions. These bans represent a deliberate endeavour to shape political discourse towards inclusivity and programmatic coherence. By discouraging divisive identity-based politics, such measures seek to cultivate a unified national identity, although their efficacy depends on incorporating participatory processes to address underlying grievances and ensure democratic legitimacy.

Becher and Basedau (2008) articulate several rationales for supporting ethnic party bans in Africa:

1. Mitigating ethnic tensions: Ethnic parties frequently mobilise support by promoting ethnocentric narratives that exacerbate divisions. Prohibiting such parties fosters political platforms that prioritise national interests, potentially alleviating ethnic tensions and promoting harmonious coexistence amongst diverse communities.
2. Encouraging issue-based politics: Ethnic parties often prioritise the concerns of specific groups, which can obstruct the development of policy-oriented politics. Bans redirect focus towards policies and ideologies that address the broader needs and aspirations of all citizens, cultivating an inclusive political dialogue centred on ideas rather than ethnic affiliations.

3. Strengthening democratic institutions: By leveraging ethnic mobilisation, such parties may undermine democratic institutions, circumventing transparent and equitable processes. Bans establish a level playing field for political actors, reinforcing the principle that politics should prioritise public goods over exclusive benefits and be guided by universal values.
4. Promoting social cohesion: Prohibiting ethnic-based parties encourages the formation of parties that transcend ethnic divisions and represent diverse constituents. This approach fosters a shared national identity, unity, and social cohesion by motivating political leaders to forge broader alliances across ethnic groups.
5. Facilitating inclusive governance: Ethnic party bans may stimulate the emergence of political organisations that champion inclusive governance and citizen participation, leading to more accountable and representative governments that prioritise the welfare of all citizens, irrespective of ethnic origins.

The efficacy of party bans, particularly those targeting ethnic or particularistic parties, relies on their integration into broader social processes that engage citizens in co-constructing inclusive political identities. Without participatory mechanisms to address underlying grievances - such as socio-economic disparities, cultural marginalisation, or historical injustices - bans risk exacerbating tensions, alienating communities, and undermining democratic legitimacy (Lave and Wenger, 2009; Ishiyama, 2021). By judiciously combining legal interventions with inclusive governance and dialogue, governments can enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of bans, mitigate the risks

posed by divisive parties, and foster a democratic environment conducive to social cohesion and collective meaning-making.

It is imperative to carefully consider dissenting perspectives on ethnic party bans, particularly those advocating for the protection of individual rights to association, as well as collective and cultural rights. Critics argue that prohibiting ethnic parties infringes upon fundamental human rights, potentially exacerbating conflict (Basedau *et al.*, 2007). Conversely, proponents assert that “democracy’s greatest threat is democracy itself” (van Goor, 2014, p. 4), necessitating protective measures that may, paradoxically, contravene democratic principles. In the absence of robust control mechanisms, transitioning from authoritarian rule to democracy may lead to anocracy - a hybrid regime blending autocratic and democratic features. Such regimes are often highly conflict-prone due to the inherent tensions between these divergent governance models (Walter, 2022b, 2022a). Consequently, the prohibition of ethnic parties should prioritise fostering peace, democracy, and inclusivity, rather than suppressing legitimate political expression. Moreover, a comprehensive approach addressing the root causes of ethnic politics - such as socio-economic disparities and historical grievances - must be pursued alongside regulatory measures to ensure lasting peace and democratic stability.

Numerous African nations implement diverse legal frameworks to curb the proliferation of ethnic-based political parties, with some adopting stringent measures, including outright prohibitions. For instance, Article 55, Sub-Article 4 of the Constitution of the Republic of Ghana (1992) stipulates that “Every political party shall have a national

character, and membership shall not be based on ethnic, religious, regional or other sectional divisions". Additionally, to register for elections, Article 55, Sub-Article 7 mandates that "a) there is ordinarily resident, or registered as a voter, in each district of Ghana, at least one founding member of the party; (b) the party has branches in all the regions of Ghana and is, in addition, organised in not less than two-thirds of the districts in each region; and (c) the party's name, emblem, colour, motto or any other symbol has no ethnic, regional, religious or other sectional connotation or gives the appearance that its activities are confined only to a part of Ghana" (ibid). If legislation similar to Ghana's Article 55 were implemented in Ethiopia, it would likely preclude the existence of not only ethnic parties but also many civic parties.

In East Africa, Kenya regulates political parties through its Political Parties Act, Tanzania utilises both its Constitution and Political Parties Act, and Uganda enforces the Political Parties and Organisations Act to govern political organisations and mitigate the formation of ethnic-based parties (Moroff, 2010, 2013). These legal frameworks, which mandate national character and prohibit ethnic exclusivity, reflect a constructivist commitment to civic unity, aiming to curb ethnic fragmentation in diverse societies.

Anika Duut van Goor (2014, pp. 33–34) argues that the effectiveness of ethnic party bans in Africa depends on two key factors: (1) the justification for the ban, and (2) the broader institutional context in which it is implemented. Specifically, such bans have proven more successful when they are either grounded in documented war crimes committed by the party or when they are based on pre-existing legal frameworks.

Additionally, Duut van Goor emphasises that bans are more likely to achieve their intended outcomes when accompanied by complementary institutional reforms - such as incentives for interethnic cooperation and measures that foster cross-cutting cleavages - thereby mitigating the risks of exacerbating ethnic divisions. The wars in the Tigray, Amhara, and Oromia regions may have created a psychosocial environment conducive to such a decisive measure.

## **Part III: Evidence from Qualitative Field Research**

Part III of this thesis, encompassing Chapters 5, 6, and 7, provides a comprehensive analysis of Ethiopia's socio-political landscape through qualitative field research conducted from 19 April to 20 May 2024. The objective of this fieldwork was to evaluate the analysis presented in Part II regarding conflicts in Ethiopia by collecting data from key decision-makers, specifically the Ethiopian political elite and influential figures. Grounded in constructivist theory, which suggests that social realities are shaped by intersubjective meanings and narratives, these chapters explore how competing discourses shape Ethiopia's governance, identity, conflicts, and pathways to reconciliation. Utilising data from five focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews with political elites, academics, media professionals, and community leaders, the research elucidates the role of narratives in Ethiopia's pluralistic society and proposes strategies for promoting unity and sustainable peace.

Chapter 5 – *Conflicting Perspectives on Ethiopia and Federalism* – examines the current dynamics of two polarised narratives, namely “Ethiopia is a Cradle of Civilisation and Freedom” and “Ethiopia is a Prison of Nations and Nationalities”, as explored in Part II of the thesis. This investigation is conducted through FGDs and in-depth interviews with political party leaders, academics, media professionals, and community leaders. The research demonstrates that these two polarised narratives continue to profoundly shape Ethiopia's political landscape. Furthermore, it identifies an emergent third narrative that seeks to reconcile these opposing views by advocating a federal system that balances ethnic autonomy with national sovereignty. The research reveals unanimous support for federalism among participants, although

debates persist regarding its ethnic versus civic orientation. Cross-factional demands for constitutional reform, particularly concerning provisions such as secession rights and state boundaries, underscore the fluidity of Ethiopia's political constructs, aligning with constructivist principles of negotiated identities.

Chapter 6 - *Narratives, Conflicts, and Organisations* - examines how narratives fuel Ethiopia's conflicts and shape political organisations. Historical grievances, such as Tigray or Oromo marginalisation, drive ethnic and intra-ethnic tensions, often amplified by media and academic complicity in divisive discourses. The chapter highlights how Ethiopianist and ethno-nationalist narratives delineate civic and ethnic parties, despite shared ideological roots. Proposed solutions include inclusive dialogue, constitutional reform, authentic leadership, youth-focused peacebuilding, and media and academic reforms to promote critical thinking and unity. Critiques of the Prosperity Party's leadership and the National Dialogue Commission's legitimacy underscore the need for transparent, inclusive processes to co-construct a shared national vision.

Chapter 7 - *Suggested Solutions and Lessons Learnt* - synthesises the findings to propose actionable solutions for peacebuilding. It advocates for inclusive, independent dialogue platforms to address historical grievances and rebuild trust, alongside constitutional reforms shifting to geographic federalism to mitigate ethnic tensions. Youth empowerment through education and civic engagement, media reforms promoting ethical journalism, and academic reforms fostering critical thinking are emphasised as critical steps. The chapter highlights the need for transformational and authentic leadership to bridge divides, supported by training programmes to cultivate

integrity and inclusivity. Lessons learnt underscore the emergence of a third narrative, cross-factional support for reform, and the necessity of community participation, aligning with constructivist views on co-constructing equitable social realities.

The following Figure detail the five focus group discussions conducted with various respondents, highlighting the principal themes explored.

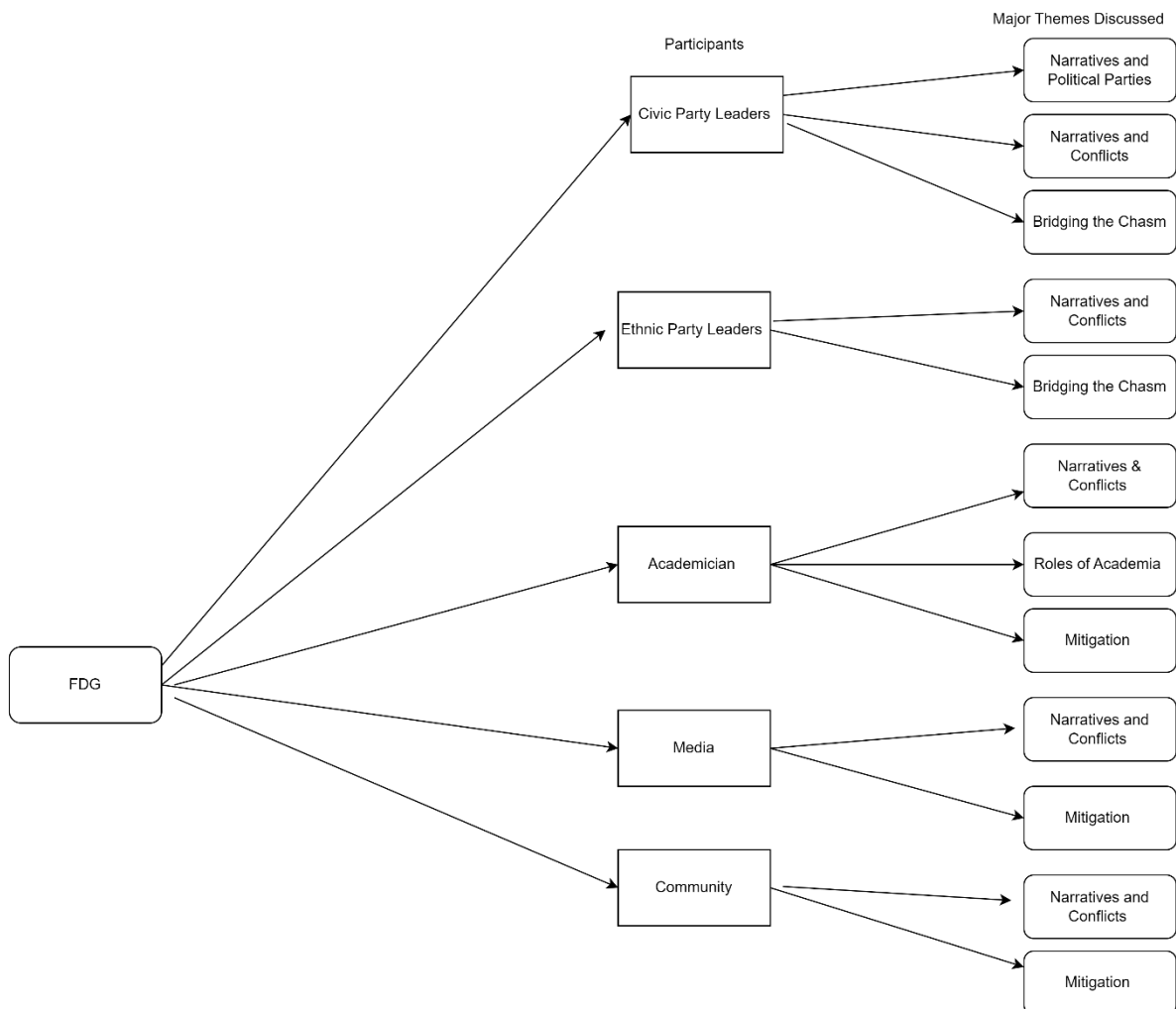


Figure 7: The FGDs and their Themes

The FGD with leaders of civic political parties took place on 1 May 2024 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. There were thirteen participants, five of whom were women, drawn from eight civic political parties. Each participant is a member of the executive committee of their respective party. The discussion lasted for three hours. The issues discussed included: the description of Ethiopia, narratives and conflicts in contemporary Ethiopia, narratives and political parties in contemporary Ethiopia, and bridging the chasm between political elite factions in Ethiopia.

The FGD with academicians took place on 9 May 2024. It lasted for four hours. There were ten participants and numerous attendees. Each participant, with the exception of one student, is an expert in Political Science and Ethiopian Politics. The nine discussants, two of whom were women, were drawn from four different universities. The issues discussed included: the nexus between narratives and conflicts in Ethiopia, the nexus between narratives and history in Ethiopia, the role of academia in creating and solidifying narratives, and strategies to mitigate the disruptive effects of divisive narratives.

The FGD with community leaders took place on 11 May 2024 in Dilla Town, Ethiopia. There were fourteen participants, six of whom were women, drawn from various sectors of the Gedeo Zone and Dilla town community. This zone was selected for its demonstrated opposition in voting for opposition parties, which is believed to provide the community with relative freedom to express their beliefs without fear of government repression. The FGD was organised in collaboration with a local NGO, the Youth and Community Development Forum (YCDF). The discussion lasted for three hours. The

issues discussed included: an assessment of the current situation, the role of narratives in instigating and exacerbating conflicts, as well as facilitating and strengthening peace, and strategies for peace - actions and measures needed to restore and maintain peace.

The FGD with media personnel took place on 12 May 2024 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Ten media professionals representing a broad spectrum of the industry participated in the discussion: three from state-owned outlets, four from private mainstream media, and three creators from alternative platforms such as YouTube. Among them, four were women, highlighting gender diversity within the group. The issues discussed included: the role of media in creating and disseminating conflicting narratives in Ethiopia, and what the media elite can do to mitigate the destructive effects of divisive narratives.

The FGD with leaders of ethnic political parties was held on 16 May 2024 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. There were ten participants, two of whom were women, drawn from ten ethnic political parties. Each participant is a member of the executive committee of their respective political party. The discussion lasted for 3:30 hours. The issues discussed included: the description of Ethiopia, narratives and conflicts in contemporary Ethiopia, and bridging the chasm between political elite factions in Ethiopia.

The following discussion rules were observed in all the FGDs:

- *Stay on Topic:* Keep the discussion focused on the subject at hand.
- *Use "I" Statements:* Speak from your own experience to avoid generalisations and assumptions. Although you are leaders of political parties, please speak here as individuals. The research needs the opinions of individual political elites.
- *Respect and Listen:* Everyone should have the opportunity to share their perspective without interruption.
- *One Person Speaks at a Time:* Ensure that each speaker's opinion is heard.
- *Be Open-Minded:* You may hear opinions you do not agree with. However, everyone should be tolerant and open to changing their views if new information is presented.
- *No Dominating:* Ensure that no single participant dominates the conversation. Everyone should have an equal chance to contribute.
- *Confidentiality:* What is shared in the group should stay in the group to create a safe space for open communication.
- *Constructive Criticism:* Disagree without being disagreeable. Focus on the ideas, not the person.
- *Be Present:* Engage fully in the discussion. If you need to step out, do so respectfully

In addition to the focus group discussions (FGDs), in-depth interviews were conducted with two senior government officials in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, three senior military officers, and two founding members of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in

Mekelle, Ethiopia. These individuals were either unwilling or unable to participate in the FGDs.

The researcher has consistently demonstrated a high level of conflict sensitivity throughout this research, showcasing a deep awareness of the potential for conflict and taking deliberate, thoughtful steps to avoid exacerbating existing tensions. Specifically, he has been meticulous in avoiding discussions that could trigger negative emotions, ensuring that sensitive or inflammatory topics are not addressed in ways that might harm participants or reignite conflicts. To maintain a respectful and considerate approach, the researcher has implemented the following measures:

- *Conducted a Thorough Context Analysis:* Prior to commencing the research, he carried out an in-depth analysis of the social, cultural, and historical context to identify potential sources of conflict and understand the sensitivities of the participants. This foundational step allowed him to navigate the research process with awareness and care.
- *Engaged with Participants Respectfully:* The researcher maintained open, respectful, and empathetic communication with all participants before, during, and after the research, ensuring their perspectives and experiences were acknowledged, valued, and integrated into the research process.
- *Avoided Sensitive Topics:* Recognising the potential for certain subjects to cause distress or reignite conflicts, he deliberately avoided discussing past grievances or controversial issues that could provoke negative emotions or tensions among participants.
- *Promoted a Safe and Inclusive Environment:* By fostering a safe, supportive, and non-judgmental environment, he encouraged participants to share their views and experiences freely, without fear of retribution or discomfort.

- *Adapted Research Methods as Needed:* Demonstrating flexibility and responsiveness, he adjusted his research methods when necessary to prevent any actions or approaches that might inadvertently cause harm or discomfort to participants.

Through these deliberate and thoughtful measures, the researcher has ensured that the research process is not only informative and rigorous but also deeply respectful of the participants' well-being and the broader social and cultural context. This approach underscores his commitment to ethical research practices and conflict-sensitive engagement. The English translations of the transcripts from the FGDs and interviews have been shared with participants to ensure their authenticity. NVivo and Zotero software were utilised for robust data analysis, triangulation, and ensuring precise citation accuracy.

## Chapter 5: Conflicting Views on Ethiopia and Federalism

### Introduction

Ethiopia, a nation renowned for its intricate historical tapestry and profound ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, stands as a compelling embodiment of both unity and division. Often likened to a mosaic of peoples, Ethiopia's multifaceted identity has fostered a deep sense of shared heritage while simultaneously giving rise to persistent socio-political tensions. This rich diversity, encompassing over 80 ethnic groups and a complex historical legacy, is both a source of cultural vibrancy and a catalyst for competing narratives that shape the nation's political discourse. These narratives - ranging from visions of Ethiopia as a unified beacon of ancient civilisation to a contested empire accused of oppressing its constituent ethnic groups - are not mere reflections of historical events but socially constructed frameworks that profoundly influence collective identities, power dynamics, and aspirations for the nation's future. This chapter analyses these conflicting perspectives, drawing on empirical data derived from five FGDs and in-depth interviews conducted between August and September 2024 with political, academic, media, and community elites. By grounding the analysis in a constructivist framework, it explores how these narratives actively construct Ethiopia's socio-political reality, highlighting the fluidity of identity and governance as they are negotiated through ongoing social and political interactions.

At the core of Ethiopia's political discourse lies a fundamental dichotomy between two dominant narratives: the "Cradle of Civilisation and Freedom" and the "Prison of

Nations and Nationalities.” The former celebrates Ethiopia’s ancient heritage, its storied resistance to European colonisation - most notably during the Battle of Adwa in 1896 - and its enduring status as a symbol of African independence. This narrative, often aligned with Ethiopian nationalism, prioritises a cohesive national identity that transcends ethnic particularism, emphasising shared historical achievements and cultural pride. It portrays Ethiopia as a historic state with a legacy of sovereignty and resilience, fostering unity among those who view the nation as a singular entity rooted in its millennia-old traditions. However, this perspective has faced significant challenges, particularly since the 1970s, as Dr Rahel Balcha, a participant in the FGD with academics, poignantly observed:

*Consider the names given to people who adhered to the "Ethiopia the Cradle of Freedom" narrative during the Derg regime. They were labelled as feudals, reactionaries, and hoddams<sup>4</sup>, and many were assassinated for their beliefs. ... Even today, if you promote this narrative, you may be labelled as "nostalgic for the old system."*

*(Transcript Academicians, 2024)*

Dr Rahel Balcha’s reflection underscores the stigmatisation faced by proponents of this narrative, particularly during the Marxist-Leninist Derg regime (1974–1991), which sought to suppress nationalist sentiments in favour of a socialist framework. The enduring risk of being labelled as nostalgic for the imperial past highlights the narrative’s contested nature, revealing how it can marginalise ethnic identities by prioritising a monolithic national identity.

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<sup>4</sup> “hoddam” is a derogatory Amharic word representing glutton and obese

In stark contrast, the “Prison of Nations and Nationalities” narrative frames Ethiopia as an imperial construct that has historically marginalised and oppressed its diverse ethnic groups. Rooted in the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s and 1970s, this perspective portrays the state as a contested entity that requires radical restructuring to address ethnic grievances and ensure equitable representation. It emerged as a critique of the centralised power of the imperial regime, which was perceived as favouring certain ethnic groups, particularly the Amhara, while subjugating others. A founder of the TPLF articulated the origins of this narrative during an in-depth interview:

*The Ethiopian student movement was a leftist, pro-poor, and pro-modernity movement that challenged the feudal, aristocratic, and archaic rule of the Imperial regime. The movement had three demands: 'land to the tiller', equality of nations, and democracy. The Derg addressed the land issue but suppressed the other two. ... I joined the TPLF because of the two unaddressed questions.*

*(Transcript Tigray Elite 4 & 5, 2024)*

The TPLF founder’s reference to “equality of nations” reflects a demand for the equitable recognition and representation of Ethiopia’s diverse ethnic groups, a principle that continues to resonate in contemporary debates over federalism and self-determination. This narrative, celebrated as progressive and revolutionary during the anti-imperial struggles, remains a potent mobilising force for ethnic-based political movements, particularly those advocating for greater autonomy or even secession. It empowers ethnic groups to assert their rights but risks exacerbating divisions by framing Ethiopia as a fractured polity rather than a unified nation.

These competing narratives have profound implications for Ethiopia's socio-political landscape, shaping not only political ideologies but also the lived experiences of its people. The "Cradle of Civilisation" narrative fosters pride and cohesion among those who prioritise national unity, yet it can marginalise ethnic identities by downplaying historical grievances. Conversely, the "Prison of Nations" narrative amplifies the voices of historically oppressed groups, legitimising their demands for self-determination, but it can fuel separatist sentiments and undermine national cohesion. The tension between these perspectives has manifested in political mobilisation, institutional arrangements, and even violent conflicts, as groups leverage historical narratives to assert power, claim territory, or contest national symbols. The constructivist framework adopted in this study illuminates how these narratives are not static but are actively constructed and contested through intersubjective interactions, where actors' identities and historical experiences shape their perceptions and preferences (Wendt, 2015, pp. 149–185). This lens reveals the fluidity of Ethiopia's social reality, where narratives serve as both tools of division and potential pathways for reconciliation.

The empirical data from the FGDs and interviews reveal an emergent third narrative - a reconciliatory perspective that seeks to bridge the polarised visions of Ethiopia's past and future. This narrative acknowledges the nation's ethnic diversity and the legitimate political demands of its constituent groups without endorsing secession or fragmentation. It advocates for a federal system that balances regional autonomy with national sovereignty, fostering a shared identity that embraces Ethiopia's multiplicity while promoting unity. Participants across the FGDs, including community leaders and political elites, expressed a desire for this middle ground, recognising the need to move beyond binary framings that pit national unity against ethnic rights. This

perspective aligns with constructivist principles, which emphasise the potential for renegotiating social realities through dialogue and mutual recognition (Adler, 2013, pp. 112–144). By fostering inclusive interactions, this third narrative offers a pathway to transcend the divisive legacy of competing historical interpretations.

The methodology of this study ensures the authentic representation of stakeholders' voices, safeguarding against misrepresentation through the extensive use of direct quotations. The FGDs, conducted with senior leaders from civic and ethnic political parties, community figures, academics, and media professionals, provide a broad spectrum of perspectives, capturing the diversity of Ethiopia's socio-political landscape. These discussions were complemented by in-depth interviews with high-ranking government officials and other prominent figures, offering insights into the power dynamics and institutional constraints shaping the nation's challenges. The use of verbatim quotations not only preserves the integrity of participants' views but also grounds the analysis in their lived experiences, aligning with constructivist epistemology, which values subjective meanings as central to understanding social realities (Checkel, 2018, pp. 82–86).

The significance of this chapter lies in its ability to dissect the complex interplay of narratives, identities, and power in Ethiopia's political discourse. By analysing the "Cradle of Civilisation" and "Prison of Nations" narratives alongside the emergent reconciliatory perspective, it highlights how these frameworks shape collective identities and governance structures. The constructivist approach underscores the malleability of these narratives, suggesting that through dialogue and negotiation,

Ethiopia can reimagine its socio-political reality to foster unity without erasing diversity. The chapter sets the stage for a deeper exploration of the empirical findings, offering a nuanced understanding of how historical narratives drive conflict and how a reconciliatory approach might pave the way for sustainable peace and inclusive governance.

### **"Cradle of Civilisation", "Prison of Nations," and the Mid-way**

The FGDs and numerous interviews conducted with political, academic, media, and community elites substantiated the argument posited in Chapter 3 of this thesis that Ethiopian politics is profoundly shaped by a dichotomy between two prevailing narratives about the nation: the "Ethiopia is a Cradle of Civilisation and Freedom" narrative and the "Ethiopia is a Prison of Nations and Nationalities" narrative. From a constructivist perspective, these narratives are not merely historical accounts but socially constructed discourses that carry significant political weight. They shape how diverse groups conceptualise the Ethiopian state, its legitimacy, and the form of governance they envision. The 'Cradle of Civilisation' narrative celebrates Ethiopia's ancient heritage and unity, while the 'Prison of Nations' narrative highlights historical oppression and ethnic marginalisation, framing the state as a contested entity. These competing discourses influence group identities, power dynamics, and political aspirations, perpetuating division. However, the empirical research revealed an emergent third narrative that seeks to reconcile these polarised perspectives. This mediating narrative, grounded in dialogue and mutual understanding, aligns with constructivist principles, emphasising the role of shared meaning-making in reshaping

political realities. By fostering inclusive discourse, this narrative offers potential for transcending entrenched binaries, encouraging a reimagined Ethiopian identity that acknowledges diversity while promoting cohesion. This finding underscores the constructivist notion that identities and political structures are fluid, contingent on ongoing social interactions and negotiations.

### **The "Cradle of Civilisation" Narrative**

As it is discussed in the chapter three of this thesis, the "Ethiopia is a Cradle of Civilisation and Freedom" narrative portrays Ethiopia as a beacon of freedom and independence, with a history that stretches back millennia. This narrative emphasises Ethiopia's unique status as one of the few African nations to resist European colonisation, most notably during the Battle of Adwa in 1896, where Ethiopian forces defeated the Italian army. This narrative is often associated with Ethiopian nationalism and is particularly influential among those who identify as Ethiopianists, rather than with a specific ethnic group. Proponents of this narrative may acknowledge the existence of various ethnic groups; however, they recognise them as cultural and linguistic entities, not as political entities. In the FGD with civic political party leaders, Kebede Assefa, an executive committee member of a civic political party, articulated this perspective:

*While I acknowledge and respect the existence of various ethnic, religious, and other groups, none of these groups should be considered nations. I personally describe Ethiopia as a sovereign nation that consists of various ethnic and social groups. If I had the opportunity to draft a constitution for Ethiopia, it would refer to the country as a single*

*sovereign entity ... Therefore, the constitution should build on the centuries-long shared history of its people. My constitution would begin with, "We the people of Ethiopia."<sup>5</sup>*

*(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)*

Tessema Hailu, a participant of the same FGD supported Kebede Assefa:

*Unfortunately, the current constitution places too much emphasis on language diversity, which should not have been such a significant factor. I agree with Ato Kebede's description of Ethiopia as a state comprising many language groups, similar to many other countries on the continent. Sovereignty should lie with the federation, not the member states<sup>6</sup>.*

*(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)*

Azalech Demisse also support this stance:

*I prefer to describe our country in a positive light, highlighting the unity and cooperation between various nations and nationalities rather than exaggerating conflicts and divisions.*

*(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)*

In the discussion with academicians, Tarekegn Lemma expressed his dismay at why this narrative has been criticised in the first place.

*I don't see a problem with having a positive self-image, such as the "Ethiopia is a Beacon of Freedom" narrative. This narrative helps us feel proud of being Ethiopians. ... I believe this is a narrative we should all advocate.*

*(Transcript Academicians, 2024)*

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5 The current constitution begins with: "We the nations, nationalities, and people of Ethiopia"

6 . Article 8.1. of the current constitution reads: "All Sovereign power resides in the Nations, Nationalities, and People of Ethiopia."

Tollosa Gabisa, a participant in FGD with leaders of civic parties pinpointed the confusing terms:

*... the term "nation" is ambiguous. Personally, I understand "nation" to mean "Ethiopia" or "the country as a whole," as in "National Bank of Ethiopia," "National Anthem," "National Holiday," etc. Others, however, understand "nation" as an ethnically homogeneous large group like the Oromo, Amhara, etc.*

*My generation is deeply confused by these conflicting definitions. In school, I learned about Ethiopia's glorious, uninterrupted history spanning millennia. Outside school, I was told of an Ethiopia built on the blood and tears of oppressed nations. These polarised definitions share no common ground.*

*(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)*

From a constructivist perspective, the positions articulated by the discussants reflect a collective effort by a faction of the national political elite to negotiate and construct a unified national identity for Ethiopia, prioritising a shared narrative over fragmented ethnic or linguistic distinctions (Birhan, 2024). Kebede Assefa, Tessema Hailu, and Azalech Demisse advocate for a singular, sovereign Ethiopian identity that transcends ethnic and linguistic diversity, emphasising a cohesive historical and cultural narrative. These discussants seek to forge a collective “we” through a constitution or discourse that underscores unity and cooperation. Their rejection of ethnic-based “nations” in favour of a singular national identity suggests an attempt to reshape social realities by redefining the boundaries of belonging, rooted in a shared history rather than divisive markers of difference.

Conversely, Tarekegn Lemma and Tollosa Gabisa highlight the challenges of reconciling competing narratives within this constructivist framework, revealing the contested nature of Ethiopia's national identity. Tarekegn Lemma's defence of a positive national narrative, such as "Ethiopia is a Beacon of Freedom," reflects a desire to cultivate pride and solidarity through a constructed self-image, aligning with constructivism's focus on the role of ideas and narratives in shaping collective identity. However, Tollosa Gabisa's observation of the ambiguous term "nation" and the polarised historical narratives - glorious unity versus oppression - underscores the difficulty of achieving a consensual identity. These conflicting definitions illustrate how identity construction is an ongoing, contested process, shaped by differing interpretations of history and terminology, which constructivism views as central to the formation of social and political realities.

### **The "Prison of Nations" Narrative**

In the FGD with leaders of ethnic political parties, Yared Tesfaye, a member of executive committee of an ethnic party articulated this perspective clearly:

*Whether we like it or not, Ethiopia remains an old-fashioned and underdeveloped empire. Its more *organised* components, such as the Oromo, Amhara, Tigray, Sidama, Afar, and Somali, have established *polities*. Meanwhile, the less organised groups are still in the process of developing and defining their identities. I prefer to preserve this rather peculiar state of 'Ethiopia' under the current constitution, which allows secession without any precondition. Anything less than this would not reflect the reality on the ground and, therefore, would not be acceptable.*

(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)

In an in-depth interview, one of the founders of the TPLF compared Ethiopia with Austro-Hungarian Empire indicating that each component (nation) can potentially be a country. He said:

*In principle, the national question is an issue of the bourgeoisie. We were compelled to address it due to our societal backwardness. This process mirrors the formation of many European nations, many of which were once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.*

(Transcript Tigray *Elite* 4 & 5, 2024)

Terfassa Negassa's comment in FGD with top leaders of ethnic parties was more belligerent:

*Ethiopia is an empire dominated by Northerners, who identify as Abyssinians<sup>7</sup> and are primarily Orthodox Christians. ... This self-identification has alienated the Cushitic-speaking peoples (Oromo, Somali, Beja, Afar, Hadiyya, Kambaata, and Sidama) and the Omotic-speaking peoples (Wolaytta, Dorze, Gamo, Gofa, Dawro, Bench, Hamer, etc.). This dominance has persisted for centuries. Although some changes have occurred since the fall of the Derg in 1991, this influence continues to the present day.*

(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)

Terfassa Negassa's position closely aligns with that of Walelegn Mekonen, the presumed author of this narrative during the student movement, as discussed in Chapter 3 this thesis. Such a statement, of course, is an offence to an Amhara nationalist, and therefore, it prompted Haile Meketaw's rebuttal:

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<sup>7</sup> Here, the term "Abyssinians" is understood as semitic people mainly ethnic Amhara and Tigray.

*Ethiopia is a nation that has placed blame on the Amhara people, despite their significant contributions to modernising the state and preserving its sovereignty. This narrative was initially propagated by European colonial powers, particularly Italy, to weaken Ethiopia. Over time, it has been perpetuated by left-wing revolutionaries. Amhara culture has been increasingly targeted, including attacks on the Orthodox Church and the suppression of the Geez script. These actions threaten the religious institutions, cultural heritage, and linguistic traditions of the Amhara people. As a result, Ethiopia today appears to be undermining itself by targeting the very group that has historically acted as its guardian, the Amhara.*

(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)

The "Prison of Nations" narrative does not make peace even among ethnic parties, since every one of them describes itself as a victim. Nevertheless, it has been a powerful mobilising tool for ethnic-based political movements, which argue that the only way to achieve justice and equality is through the recognition of the right to self-determination for all ethnic groups, including the right to secede. This narrative has been enshrined in Ethiopia's current constitution, which grants nations, nationalities, and peoples the right to self-determination, including the right to secession. A TPLF veteran defended this stance in the following way:

*Even today, I don't think there will be any better constitution than this. The problem is whether the constitution has been implemented properly. After the EPRDF, the struggle should have been on the implementation of the constitution. What happened is the reverse.*

(Transcript Tigray Elite 3, 2024)

The perspectives of Yared Tesfaye, the TPLF founder, Terfassa Negassa, and the TPLF veteran collectively construct Ethiopia as a fragmented imperial entity, where

ethnic identities and demands for self-determination shape political discourse. Tesfaye's portrayal of Ethiopia as an underdeveloped empire with distinct ethnic polities, some more organised than others, underscores a constructed reality where the current constitution's secession clause is seen as essential to reflect diverse ethnic realities. The TPLF founder's analogy to the Austro-Hungarian Empire further frames ethnic groups as potential independent nations, constructing the "national question" as a response to societal backwardness, akin to European nation-building. Terfassa Negassa's narrative of Abyssinian dominance alienating Cushitic and Omotic groups reinforces a historical grievance, aligning with Walelegn Mekonen's "Prison of Nations" framework, which constructs Ethiopia as an oppressive empire. These views collectively legitimise the constitutional right to self-determination, illustrating how narratives shape political realities in a constructivist lens.

In contrast, Haile Meketaw's rebuttal and the broader "Prison of Nations" narrative reveal the contested nature of these identity constructions, as each group vies for legitimacy within Ethiopia's fractured polity. Haile Meketaw constructs the Amhara as scapegoated guardians of Ethiopian sovereignty, blaming external colonial powers and internal revolutionaries for targeting Amhara culture, including the Orthodox Church and Geez script. This counter-narrative challenges the ethnic victimhood paradigm, reframing the Amhara as central to Ethiopia's survival. The TPLF veteran's defence of the constitution as ideal but poorly implemented highlights a constructivist focus on the enactment of shared frameworks, suggesting that political realities depend on how narratives are operationalised. The "Prison of Nations" narrative, while divisive, remains a potent mobilising force, embedding self-determination in the

constitution and perpetuating a cycle of competing victimhood claims that shape Ethiopia's ongoing identity negotiation.

### **The Emerging Mid-Way**

One of the encouraging findings of this research is the emergence of a third, intermediary narrative. This emerging narrative elevates ethnic communities beyond mere cultural and linguistic groups, yet refrains from equating them with "nation-states." It acknowledges that these communities may have certain political demands and, therefore, does not strongly oppose referring to them as "nations" or "nationalities." However, it opposes the constitutional enshrinement of the right to self-determination, including secession. According to this narrative, sovereignty must remain vested in Ethiopia, while nations and nationalities may exercise the right to self-governance within the framework of Ethiopian sovereignty. Interestingly, this qualitative research reveals that elements of this narrative are being echoed by polarised factions of the political elite.

Azalech Demmise, a member of executive committee of a civic political party, notes:

*Although I do not agree with the notion that pre-EPRDF Ethiopia was an empire or a colonial state, it nevertheless consists of social groups that have not only distinct languages but also their own systems of governance and political cultures. Therefore, I don't have a problem with describing Ethiopia as a mosaic of nations and nationalities. I personally describe Ethiopia as a country where various nations and nationalities have lived in both conflict and harmony at different times in*

*history. The conflicts and cooperations between these groups have shaped contemporary Ethiopia.*

*(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)*

She further explains the policy implications of her conviction:

*I also have concerns with the current constitution because it emphasises conflicts rather than harmonies. I prefer to describe our country in a positive light, highlighting the unity and cooperation between various nations and nationalities rather than exaggerating conflicts and divisions. I support a federal arrangement where federal states have substantial administrative control, except for defence, foreign relations, and the right to secession.*

*(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)*

Gebre-Kirstos Kahssay, a member of the executive committee of another civic party and a participant in the same FGD, explicitly supported Azalech Demmisse in the following manner:

*I agree with W/o Azalech. Reducing nations to the level of linguistic groups will not foster harmony. Every group desire respect and recognition, and the quest for these is a major driver of ethnic conflict. I describe Ethiopia in a way that addresses these needs. Therefore, I portray Ethiopia as a mosaic of nations and nationalities. I support a federal system that grants substantial and genuine power to member states. However, sovereignty should reside with the Ethiopian people as a whole, rather than with individual nations, nationalities, or any other social groups.*

*(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)*

Mohammed Hassen, an executive committee member of an ethnic party, made the following unexpected statement during the FGD with leaders of ethnic parties:

*Personally, I aspire to a political system where ethnic parties do not dominate the scene. I would be delighted to witness a country where ethnic parties do not exist at all. However, this is merely a wish. The political reality in Ethiopia compels us to organise and join ethnic parties. ... I am obliged to join an ethnic party due to the absence of any [political] party in Ethiopia willing to defend my ethnic community. ... Under such ethnically charged politics and under ethnic federalism, I believe ethnic parties are indispensable.*

(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)

It seems paradoxical for an ethnic party leader to argue against the politicisation of ethnicity. This implicitly suggests a call for a third way.

PP official is even more straightforward:

*The Prosperity Party (PP) is a centrist political organisation. We reject the notion that Ethiopia is a homogeneous entity where its people have historically lived in harmony and equality. ... We also disagree with those who characterise Ethiopia as an empire that has suppressed nations deserving of independence. Instead, we recognise the many commonalities among Ethiopia's diverse nations and nationalities. This is why we advocate for a balanced approach, striving for multi-national unity while acknowledging and respecting the unique identities within our country.*

(Transcript PP Official, 2024)

The emerging mid-way narrative articulated by Azalech Demmise, Gebre-Kirstos Kahssay, Mohammed Hassen, and the PP official represents a deliberate attempt to construct a balanced national identity for Ethiopia that navigates between the extremes of unitary nationalism and ethnic separatism. This narrative acknowledges ethnic communities as distinct entities with political and cultural significance, described

as “nations and nationalities,” yet firmly situates sovereignty within a unified Ethiopian state. Azalech Demmise and Gebre-Kirstos Kahssay construct Ethiopia as a “mosaic” shaped by both conflict and cooperation, promoting a federal system that grants substantial autonomy to ethnic groups while rejecting the constitutional right to secession. This framing reflects constructivism’s emphasis on identity as socially negotiated, seeking to foster harmony by recognising ethnic diversity without endorsing fragmentation. The PP's claimed centrist stance further reinforces this by constructing a narrative of multi-national unity that respects unique identities while highlighting shared commonalities, aiming to reshape Ethiopia's political reality through an inclusive, balanced discourse.

However, Mohammed Hassen’s paradoxical position reveals the complexities of this identity construction within Ethiopia’s ethnically charged political landscape. His aspiration for a political system free of ethnic parties, despite his leadership in one, underscores a tension between personal ideals and the constructed realities of ethnic mobilisation. Mohammed Hassen’s reluctant embrace of ethnic politics as a necessity - due to the absence of parties defending his community - illustrates how social and political structures shape identity choices, a core tenet of constructivism. This mid-way narrative, while promising, remains contested, as it seeks to reconcile competing narratives of unity and diversity without fully resolving the underlying ethnic grievances. By advocating for a federal framework that respects ethnic identities but subordinates them to Ethiopian sovereignty, these discussants are actively constructing a new social reality, one that aims to mitigate conflict and foster coexistence through a carefully negotiated national identity.

## **Federalism and the Structure of the Ethiopian State**

The second significant issue identified by this empirical study is the unanimous support for federalism among participants. In the context of Ethiopian politics, it is a common practice to label proponents of the "cradle of freedom" narrative as unitarists. This characterisation is perpetuated by the EPRDF, PP, and nearly all ethnic parties. However, the findings of this research reveal no endorsement for a unitarist state in Ethiopia. Instead, the core disagreement centres on the specific model of federalism to be implemented. Ethiopia's current constitution, adopted in 1995, established a federal system based on ethnicity, primarily identified by the language spoken, granting significant autonomy to regional states defined along ethnic lines. While this system was intended to address historical grievances and promote equality among Ethiopia's diverse ethnic groups, it has instead become a source of tension and conflict.

Proponents of ethnic federalism argue that it is the only way to ensure that all ethnic groups have a voice in the political process and to prevent the domination of the state by a single ethnic group. In the FGD with ethnic party leaders, Terfassa Negassa defended the current constitution, arguing that it is ideally suited to Ethiopia's reality:

*I believe that the current constitution, which grants nations and nationalities the right to self-determination, is ideally suited to Ethiopia's reality. However, the problem lies in its implementation. The TPLF interpreted the constitution in a way that ensured its hegemony over*

*political power. Member states never had independent power; they were designed to serve the TPLF through the camouflage of the EPRDF. Strict implementation of the constitution can solve many of our current problems.*

*(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)*

The TPLF founding member's account cited above is relevant here as well. He said: "Even today, I don't think there will be any better constitution than this." It is interesting to note that this person cannot imagine any better constitution than the current one, even after witnessing the recent devastating war in Tigray. Another veteran TPLF top leader who actively participated in drafting the constitution argued:

*This constitution is truly distinctive in a profoundly positive way. .... the federal parliament comprises two chambers: The House of Representatives and the House of Federation. The latter is an assembly of nations and nationalities. Regardless of the size of a nationality, it is guaranteed at least one representative. In addition to having one representative, they also have one more representative for every 1 million people. Naturally, larger nationalities will have a greater number of representatives. The crucial point here is that every group is represented in the House of Federation. The House of Federation is an institution that ensures the equality of nations<sup>8</sup>.*

*(Transcript Tigray Elite 4 & 5, 2024)*

Yared Tesfaye, a participant in the FGD with ethnic party leaders, strongly supported the existing constitution, stating his position in the following manner:

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<sup>8</sup> The claim that the House of Federation embodies true equality is unfounded. Oromia holds 31 seats and Amhara 29, while over 50 other groups have only one each, based on the "1 plus 1 per million" formula. Hence, dominant groups in the House of Representatives also prevail in the House of Federation. The drafting process marginalised dissenting voices, as shown in official minutes and related publications (ሰሜንህ ኪሮስ አሰፋ, 2015).

*Please do not forget that the most important achievement of the EPRDF is granting nations and nationalities the right to self-determination, including the right to secession. Without this right, there would be no Ethiopia.*

(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)

However, critics of ethnic federalism argue that the constitution has exacerbated ethnic tensions and created a fragmented political system. In the FGD with civic party leaders, Kebede Assefa criticized the current constitution for emphasising ethnic divisions:

*The constitution assumes that each of these fictitious nations, nationalities, and peoples had its own state and that they came together to form a federation. For them, Ethiopia is a newly formed federation of nations. In fact, the constitution they produced resembles more of a 'confederation' rather than a 'federation.' I do not agree with this description of Ethiopia. While I acknowledge and respect the existence of various ethnic, religious, and other groups, none of these groups should be considered sovereign nations.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

This critique was echoed by Tessema Hailu, who argued that the emphasis on language as a criterion for delineating regional boundaries has created unnecessary divisions:

*In the current constitution, language is the most important criterion for delineating regional state boundaries. Speaking a distinct language is considered an indisputable marker of uniqueness. However, language diversity is not unique to Ethiopia. Many countries are far more linguistically diverse. For example, Indonesia has about 700 languages, yet it remains a republic. Cameroon has more than 200 languages; it started as a federal state at independence but moved to a unitary state in 1972. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) also has more than*

*200 languages, yet it is a centralised constitutional republic. Many other countries have even greater linguistic diversity. Compared to these countries, Ethiopia's language diversity should not be exaggerated.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

It is interesting that some ethnic parties opposed the fundamental pillars of the constitution. Mohammed Hassen, a participant of the FGD with ethnic party leaders was the most vocal in this regard. He said:

*I believe the current constitution is part of the problem. ... Interestingly, this constitution did not even serve its primary author, the TPLF, as it failed to prevent the recent war in Tigray. The constitution itself is one of the causes of the war that devastated Tigray by promising sovereignty that cannot materialise. The constitution they authored has locked them into a position as a permanent minority in Ethiopian politics. You might have noticed that there is a growing voice against the constitution in Tigray.*

*I believe the current constitution does not foster sustainable peace because it perpetuates the marginalisation of some regional states. Major regions like Oromia and Amhara dominate both chambers of parliament. We need states of comparable size and equal representation in the House of the Federation to ensure fairness and stability.*

(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)

While all participants of the civic parties support constitutional amendment, some participants of ethnic parties also support this. The following table compares the constitutional amendments required as they were explained by participants of FGD with civic parties and ethnic parties.

<b>Suggested Amendment to the Constitution as Presented by:</b>	
Fantahun Gebre, a participant of FGD civic political parties	Mohammed Hassen, a participant of FGD ethnic political parties
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>The Preamble: There are substantial percentage of people who prefer the constitution to start with "We the people" rather than "We nations, nationalities, and people." Additionally, the phrase "rectifying historically unjust relationships" is contentious as it points a finger at Amhara.</i></li> <li>2. <i>Article 6 on Nationality: The term "Nationality" is ambiguous in the current constitution; this needs to be ratified. In addition, there is a demand for dual nationality (citizenship).</i></li> <li>3. <i>Article 8: This article confers sovereignty to nations, nationalities, and people. There is a call that sovereignty should be conferred to people of Ethiopia that may be exercised through their elected representatives.</i></li> <li>4. <i>Article 39: This article, which grants nations, nationalities, and people the right to self-determination including secession, is the most controversial. There is incessant call to cancel this article altogether; however, there are also its ardent supporters.</i></li> <li>5. <i>Article 40: This article grants ownership of land to nations, nationalities, and people. There are arguments that the land ownership issue must be revised.</i></li> <li>6. <i>Article 45: This article institutes a parliamentary form of government, though many prefer a presidential or semi-presidential form of government.</i></li> <li>7. <i>Article 46: This article lists the criteria for the demarcation of member states. There is a demand that geography, rather than language, should be a major criterion.</i></li> <li>8. <i>Article 49: This article concerns the capital city, Addis Ababa. There is a call for Addis Ababa to be a city-regional state. The same may be considered for Dire Dawa and possibly a few other cities.</i></li> <li>9. <i>Article 54, Sub Article 2: This institutionalises elections in each electoral district by a plurality of the votes cast. There is persistent demand for proportional representation.</i></li> <li>10. <i>Part Two: This entire part deals with The House of The Federation. The part that deals with the House of Federation requires overall revision since the House does not have any legislative power but has taken the prerogatives of the judiciary in interpreting the constitution.</i></li> <li>11. <i>Chapter 7: This chapter deals with the Republic's president. If the system changes to a presidential one, this chapter must be rewritten.</i></li> <li>12. <i>Chapter 8: This chapter deals with the Executive.</i></li> <li>13. <i>Articles 104 and 105 – those dealing with amendment of the constitution</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Changing criteria for the delimitation of member states, especially the weight given to geography and convenience for administration vis-à-vis language.</i></li> <li>2. <i>Deciding the type of government: Parliamentary, Presidential, or Mixed.</i></li> <li>3. <i>Choosing the electoral system: First-past-the-post, proportional, or others.</i></li> <li>4. <i>Determining whether Addis Ababa (and possibly other cities like Dire Dawa, Hawassa, and Bahir Dar) should be City-states.</i></li> <li>5. <i>The emblem on the national flag.</i></li> </ol>

Table 4: Suggested Amendment to the Existing Constitution

There was a strong critical voice against the exiting constitutional order in the discussion with community leaders as well: Kassahun Ollone, a community leader said:

*The existing political system, as enshrined in the constitution, inherently restricts the formation of a government that genuinely represents all Ethiopians. Under the current framework, the most we can hope for is a rotation of power among dominant ethnic groups, which falls far short of establishing a government that derives legitimacy from all - or at least a majority - of Ethiopia's diverse ethnic communities.*

*(Transcript Community, 2024)*

The third finding of this research is that the call for constitutional amendments enjoys cross-factional support. In Ethiopian politics, there has been a blanket assertion that only political elites from civic political parties advocate for constitutional amendments. However, this research demonstrates that there are voices from all sides of the political spectrum who also seek amendments to the current constitution.

From a constructivist perspective, proponents of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, such as Terfassa Negassa, Yared Tesfaye, and TPLF leaders, advocate a narrative that prioritises ethnic identity as the cornerstone of political organisation. For these advocates, the 1995 Ethiopian Constitution embodies a commitment to ethnic self-determination, deemed essential for ensuring equitable representation and preventing historical domination by any single ethnic group. Their support for the constitution, despite its imperfect implementation, reflects a belief in ethnic federalism's potential

to renegotiate power relations among Ethiopia's diverse communities. The emphasis on the House of Federation as a guarantor of equality underscores their view of federalism as a mechanism for institutionalising ethnic pluralism, legitimising collective identities through political representation.

Conversely, critics such as Kebede Assefa, Tessema Hailu, and Mohammed Hassen challenge the constitution's ethnic-centric framework, arguing that it entrenches divisions and undermines national cohesion. Through a constructivist lens, their stance reflects an alternative vision of Ethiopian identity, prioritising civic unity over ethnic particularism. They contend that the constitution's focus on language and ethnicity as markers of statehood fosters a fragmented political reality, resembling a confederation rather than a federation. Drawing on comparative examples, such as Indonesia and Cameroon, they question the necessity of ethnic federalism for Ethiopia's linguistic diversity, advocating for a national identity rooted in shared citizenship. Their calls for constitutional amendments, particularly to redefine sovereignty and state boundaries, aim to reshape the intersubjective norms governing Ethiopia's political structure, promoting a more integrative social reality.

Cross-factional support for constitutional reform, voiced by civic and ethnic party leaders alongside figures like Kassahun Ollone, highlights the dynamic nature of Ethiopia's political discourse within a constructivist framework. Constructivism emphasises that social structures are contingent and subject to reinterpretation through dialogue and contestation. Diverse proposals for reform, from revising the preamble to reconfiguring electoral systems, reflect a collective effort to renegotiate

the shared meanings underpinning Ethiopia's federal system. Despite differing visions, the engagement of proponents and critics in this debate signifies a broader struggle to redefine the norms and identities shaping the Ethiopian state. This process of contestation, rooted in competing conceptions of fairness, representation, and unity, underscores the fluidity of federalism as a social construct, open to reinterpretation as Ethiopia navigates its complex socio-political landscape.

## **Analysis: Narrating the Nation**

The narratives that define the Ethiopian state are not merely historical recountings or neutral descriptions of the past. Rather, they are dynamic, socially constructed discourses imbued with power, identity, and legitimacy. At the heart of Ethiopia's political contestation lie competing narratives: the vision of Ethiopia as a "Cradle of Civilisation and Freedom," juxtaposed with that of a "Prison of Nations and Nationalities," and more recently, the emergence of a middle-ground narrative that seeks to reconcile these polarised positions. These narratives, articulated vividly by political elites and participants in FGDs conducted between August and September 2024, serve as discursive battlegrounds through which identities are constructed, legitimacies are claimed, and political futures imagined. By interpreting these competing visions through a constructivist lens, this analysis reveals how intersubjective meanings and negotiated identities shape Ethiopia's national project.

### **I. The "Cradle of Civilisation and Freedom" Narrative: Constructing a Singular Ethiopian Identity**

The narrative of Ethiopia as a "Cradle of Civilisation and Freedom" rests upon a historically grounded yet discursively elaborated image of a unified, sovereign state that resisted colonisation, exemplified most iconically by the victory at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. This account celebrates Ethiopia's long-standing independence and views the country as an ancient polity that has stood as a beacon of African resistance and civilisation. Participants such as Kebede Assefa and Tessema Hailu, vocal proponents of this narrative in the FGDs, advocate for a civic-national identity that transcends ethnicity and is anchored in shared historical pride and continuity.

Kebede Assefa's call for a constitutional preamble that begins with "We the people of Ethiopia," instead of ethnically segmented identifiers, underscores a constructivist effort to shape collective identity through deliberate discursive choices. His vision is not simply nostalgic; it is normative and performative, aiming to actively forge a sense of national belonging rooted in common heritage and political unity. This aligns with Checkel's (2006) assertion that identities are constructed through political discourse and social interaction rather than being primordial or static.

Tessema Hailu similarly echoes this vision by advocating for a civic nationalism that frames Ethiopia as "one people," arguing that ethnic-based federalism undermines national cohesion. He, like other discussants from this school of thought, draws upon symbolic markers—language, shared history, religious unity—to construct a national narrative that is inclusive in theory, though often critiqued for marginalising ethnically specific experiences in practice. This view resonates with J. Abbink's (2006)

observation that Ethiopianist narratives often utilise triumphalist histories, such as the resistance to Italian invasion, to legitimise centralised authority and cultivate national pride.

This discursive framing, however, is not without contention. Tollosa Gabisa challenges the epistemological and semantic vagueness surrounding the term "nation" in Ethiopia's political discourse. His critique underscores a fundamental dilemma: whether Ethiopia should be imagined as a single nation composed of citizens or as a federal arrangement of ethno-national communities. The contestation over definitions itself demonstrates a core constructivist claim—that meaning, identity, and institutional legitimacy are socially negotiated rather than objectively fixed (Hopf, 2002).

Furthermore, the singular narrative promoted by proponents of the "Cradle of Civilisation" school often obscures the multiplicity of lived realities across Ethiopia's diverse regions. The discomfort with this erasure is evident in the voices of those who subscribe to the alternative vision of Ethiopia as a "Prison of Nations and Nationalities."

## **II. The "Prison of Nations and Nationalities" Narrative: Identity, Marginalisation, and Ethnic Liberation**

In stark contrast to the above, the "Prison of Nations and Nationalities" narrative constructs Ethiopia as a historically repressive empire built through conquest and dominated by a centralising Abyssinian elite. This perspective is articulated by

discussants such as Yared Tesfaye and Terfassa Negassa, who portray the Ethiopian state as one that has systematically marginalised non-Abyssinian groups, particularly the Oromo, Somali, Sidama, and Southern Nations.

Yared Tesfaye's account presents Ethiopia as an "underdeveloped empire," and Terfassa Negassa reinforces this portrayal by invoking the 1995 Constitution's provision for self-determination and secession. This constitutional arrangement is celebrated as a necessary corrective to historical injustices, recognising the right of ethnonational groups to assert their identity, language, and governance. This view echoes the long-standing claims of ethno-nationalist movements and draws significantly from Walelegn Mekonen's 1969 treatise that Ethiopia is a colonial empire requiring radical transformation.

Terfassa's interpretation is also influenced by comparative historical analogies, such as likening Ethiopia to the Austro-Hungarian Empire - an arrangement of loosely bound ethnic groups united under an imperial framework. The analogy, first invoked by TPLF founders, is intended to normalise the view of ethnic groups as proto-nations, entitled to self-governance and even secession. Such perspectives, while controversial, demonstrate the deep-rooted normative commitments that guide political identity construction in Ethiopia. As Asnake Kefale (2017) notes, ethnic federalism in Ethiopia was designed to institutionalise group rights and collective identities, rooted in a post-Marxist understanding of self-determination.

Nevertheless, this narrative is itself deeply contested. Haile Meketaw's rebuttal to the portrayal of the Amhara as historical oppressors introduces a competing victimhood discourse. He argues that the Amhara, often vilified in the federalist discourse, have themselves been guardians of national unity and have suffered as much under successive regimes. This points to what Christopher Clapham (2017) refers to as the "fractured polity" of Ethiopia, where competing claims of marginalisation and entitlement make reconciliation exceedingly difficult. In this context, even victimhood is a socially constructed category, employed discursively to assert legitimacy and negotiate power.

### **III. The Emergent Mid-Way Narrative: Constructing Inclusive Political Imaginaries**

In light of the limitations and polarising effects of the aforementioned narratives, a third, more conciliatory narrative has begun to emerge among some political elites. This narrative seeks to acknowledge Ethiopia's ethnic diversity while also affirming the viability and desirability of a united state. This position is articulated by Azalech Demmise, Gebre-Kirstos Kahssay, Mohammed Hassen, and representatives of the Prosperity Party, and can be seen as an effort to move beyond binary thinking.

Azalech and Gebre-Kirstos articulate Ethiopia as a "mosaic of nations and nationalities," an image that captures both the richness of Ethiopia's diversity and the importance of preserving a unified political entity. This framing embraces a form of federalism that accommodates diversity without necessarily endorsing secession. It

resonates strongly with the early calls of Barro Tumsa (1973), who advocated for a political system that could balance autonomy with unity, reflecting the dual need for recognition and integration.

Constructivist theory provides useful tools to interpret this emergent narrative. Alexander Wendt (1999, pp. 92–100) and Emanuel Adler (2013, pp. 120–125) emphasise the contingency and negotiability of identities, suggesting that political communities can be constructed through shared norms and sustained dialogue rather than essentialist categories. In this sense, the mid-way narrative seeks to foster a civic culture of negotiated co-existence, recognising difference while aiming for a shared political project.

Mohammed Hassen's position reflects the internal contradictions of this narrative. While he leads an ethnic-based party, he expresses a desire for post-ethnic politics - one that transcends narrow identity boundaries. This paradox is not unique to him. As Terrence Lyons (2019, pp. 45–48) observes, many Ethiopian political actors operate within institutional structures that reinforce ethnic cleavages, even as they rhetorically espouse unity. This demonstrates a key constructivist insight: actors are often embedded in and shaped by the very norms and structures they seek to transform.

However, this mid-way narrative remains fragile and contested. It requires sustained dialogue, mutual trust, and political will—conditions that are not always present in Ethiopia's highly polarised environment. As Jon Abbink (Abbink, 2011, p. 612) warns,

efforts to balance unity and diversity must avoid superficial consensus and instead address the underlying grievances that fuel ethnic mobilisation.

#### **IV. Federalism as a Site of Narrative Contestation**

The debate over Ethiopia's federal arrangement is not merely a legal or institutional matter. It is deeply entangled in the country's competing narratives of identity, legitimacy, and historical justice. The 1995 Constitution is at the centre of this debate. Proponents such as Terfassa Negassa and leaders of the TPLF construct the constitution as a foundational text that empowers ethnonational groups, viewing the House of Federation as a guarantor of collective rights.

Asnake Kefale (2017) supports this interpretation, suggesting that ethnic federalism provides a framework for managing diversity and preventing majoritarian domination. Yet critics like Kebede Assefa and Tessema Hailu challenge the constitution's emphasis on ethnicity, warning that it entrenches division and undermines national solidarity. Their call for a civic federalism mirrors broader regional trends in constitutional reform where ethnicity is replaced by citizenship as the basis of political rights.

Semahegn Gashu Abebe (2014, pp. 60–75) situates Ethiopia's arrangement within the context of post-Cold War transitions, describing it as the last standing socialist-inspired federation. He notes that while the system offers recognition, it also fragments

authority and weakens the state's integrative capacity. Mohammed Hassen's critique of the constitution's failure to prevent the Tigray conflict further supports this point. He argues that formal legal provisions are insufficient if they are not accompanied by inclusive political practices and shared commitment to peace - echoing Clapham's (2017, p. 88) argument that institutions are only as robust as the political cultures that animate them. Berhane Tsegab's work, "The EPRDF's Downward Journey (2010–2018): A Tale of Its Meetings"<sup>9</sup>, highlights the bureaucratic inertia and internal contradictions that plagued the ruling coalition, contributing to its eventual decline. These insights underscore the fact that constitutional frameworks are discursive instruments as much as legal ones - they gain or lose legitimacy based on how they are interpreted, enacted, and revised.

The cross-factional support for constitutional reform, as voiced by Fantahun Gebre and Kassahun Ollone, signals an important shift. It demonstrates a shared recognition that Ethiopia's federal system must evolve to reflect new social realities and aspirations. This aligns with Adler's (2013, pp. 125–130) notion of the "evolution of social orders," whereby institutional legitimacy emerges through the renegotiation of shared meanings and collective understandings.

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<sup>9</sup> Berhane Tsegab, a CC member of TPLF and EPRDF (2012–2018), published his memoirs, "The EPRDF's Downward Journey (2010–2018): A Tale of Its Meetings". The book exposes the dysfunction, infighting, and corruption plaguing both organisations during this period (Běrhāna Şėgāb, 2018).

## **Narratives, Identities, and Constructivist Lessons**

The Ethiopian case vividly demonstrates the power of narratives in shaping political identities, legitimising institutions, and structuring possibilities for peace or conflict. The competing images of Ethiopia as a “Cradle of Civilisation” or a “Prison of Nations” are not just rhetorical tropes but deeply embedded stories that inform political behaviour and elite discourse. The emerging mid-way narrative offers a glimmer of hope for a reconciled polity, one that acknowledges diversity while striving for unity.

Using a constructivist lens, this analysis has shown how Ethiopian political actors—through FGDs and interviews—mobilise narratives to construct meanings, identities, and policy preferences. As the scholarship of Abbink (2006, 2011), Checkel (2006), Hopf (2002), Vaughan (2011), Clapham (2017), Kefale (2017), Lyons (2019), and Adler (2013)(2013) suggests, political identities are not fixed essences but mutable constructs negotiated within social and institutional contexts.

The challenge for Ethiopia lies in navigating these competing narratives without descending into polarisation or fragmentation. This requires not only institutional reform but also discursive transformation - a reimagining of the Ethiopian nation as a shared project, rooted in mutual recognition and collective imagination. In this sense, the power of narrative is both a source of division and a potential tool for peace.

## Key Insights

This analysis yields several key insights into the contested nature of Ethiopian national identity and its federal governance. The empirical findings reveal that political reality is constituted through a dynamic interplay of discursive struggle, institutional negotiation, and the continuous reimagining of collective belonging. Competing narratives are not static but function as fluid social constructs, actively shaped by and shaping the evolving dynamics of power, constitutional arrangements, and elite bargaining. Through a constructivist lens, Ethiopia's political trajectory is understood as an ongoing project of social construction, wherein identities and institutions are perpetually reconstituted through a dialectical engagement between antithetical frameworks of meaning.

A fundamental insight concerns the dichotomous narratives that underpin visions of state legitimacy. The "Cradle of Civilisation" narrative, championed by Ethiopianist elites, constructs a unitary polity with an unbroken sovereign lineage, privileging a homogenising national identity and shared symbols. Conversely, the "Prison of Nations" narrative, articulated by ethno-nationalist intellectuals, deconstructs the state as an imperial edifice founded on subjugation, advocating for ethnic self-determination as reparative justice. This framework found institutional expression in an ethnic federal system that, while empowering certain communities, has entrenched a zero-sum political calculus, prioritising communal rights over cross-cutting solidarity and revealing the system's profound fragility when centrifugal forces overwhelm centripetal safeguards.

Amid this polarisation, a nascent third-way discourse seeks to transcend the binary opposition by acknowledging pluralism while resisting disintegration. This perspective advocates for a federal model that balances substantive regional autonomy with an indissoluble national union, conceptualising Ethiopia as a mosaic of nations and nationalities. It opens a discursive space for nested identities, positing that ethnic and national belonging can coexist within a framework of mutual interdependence. However, the viability of this project remains contingent upon elite willingness to relinquish maximalist positions and the design of institutions capable of managing diversity without institutionalising division.

A further critical insight is the emergence of a near-universal elite consensus on federalism as the foundational principle of governance, a rare point of convergence. The central dispute, therefore, concerns not the desirability of federalism but its architecture: namely, whether it should be predicated on ethnic-based boundaries or territory-based arrangements. This debate reflects fundamentally different understandings of how diversity should be managed. Furthermore, support for constitutional reform is shown to be cross-cutting, challenging the assumption that amendment demands originate solely from unitarist quarters. This indicates an incipient recognition that federal systems require periodic recalibration to maintain an equilibrium between autonomy and cohesion.

From a theoretical standpoint, Ethiopia's experience exemplifies the constructivist premise that political realities are socially constituted through narrative contestation

and institutional adaptation. The competing discourses performatively enact competing visions of the future, shaping the possibilities for collective action. Three imperatives are consequently critical for the federal project's sustainability: narrative reconciliation to cultivate a shared meta-narrative; institutional innovation to depoliticise ethnicity without negating its significance; and transformed elite bargaining to foster positive-sum negotiation. Ethiopia's struggles illuminate the universal tensions in plural societies navigating self-rule and shared rule, serving as a caution against treating federalism as a technical fix rather than an evolving political settlement requiring continual democratic renewal. The ongoing journey underscores that nations and federal systems are not discovered or designed but are built and evolve through sustained, inclusive engagement.

## Chapter 6: Narratives, Conflicts, and Organisations

### Introduction

This chapter employs a constructivist lens to explore the profound role of historical narratives in shaping Ethiopia's social, political, and cultural landscapes. Constructivism, rooted in the works of scholars such as Alexander Wendt (1999), Nicholas Onuf (2012), and Peter Katzenstein (1996) in International Relations, and John Paul Lederach (1997), Vivienne Jabri (2010), and Elise Boulding (2000) in peace and conflict studies, posits that social realities are not objective facts but emerge through shared meanings, negotiated discourses, and institutional practices. In Ethiopia, these socially constructed narratives have become powerful instruments for defining ethnic identities, justifying territorial disputes, and mobilising political action, often with divisive and destabilising consequences. By examining how narratives are produced, institutionalised, and contested, this chapter seeks to illuminate their role as both drivers of conflict and potential pathways for reconciliation in Ethiopia's complex socio-political environment.

At the heart of Ethiopia's challenges lies the interplay between historical narratives and the construction of collective identities. In Ethiopia, historical narratives have been instrumental in forging distinct ethnic identities, often by framing certain groups as perpetual victims or aggressors. These narratives are not passive reflections of history but active tools that shape group consciousness, reinforce divisions, and mobilise communities for political ends. As Benedict Anderson (2006) argues, such 'imagined

communities' are bound by shared myths and memories, which in Ethiopia often amplify ethnic particularism over national cohesion.

The power of narratives lies in their ability to transform historical events into politically salient 'truths' that resonate with collective identities. Constructivism highlights the role of actors - political elites, institutions, media, and academia - in producing and sustaining these narratives. In Ethiopia, political elites have strategically mobilised historical grievances to consolidate power, framing contemporary struggles as continuations of past injustices. The reinterpretation of the *Kedamawi Weyane* uprising, originally a peasant rebellion against administrative injustices in the 1940s, as an ethnic Tigrayan resistance movement exemplifies this process. By selectively reconstructing historical events, elites align them with present-day agendas, legitimising claims to power or territory. Similarly, urban spaces like Addis Ababa have become discursively contested through competing narratives of ownership. Oromo nationalists emphasise the city's pre-Menelik Oromo habitation to assert territorial rights, while others highlight its multi-ethnic development under Amhara leadership and contributions from other communities. These competing narratives, as Almaz Mameye notes, transform cities into 'living archives' of overlapping histories, yet their politicisation fuels conflict rather than fostering unity.

Ethiopia's ethnic federalism, enshrined in the 1995 Constitution, plays a critical role in institutionalising these narratives, embedding them into the state's governance structures. Constructivism underscores how institutions formalise particular interpretations of reality, lending them durability and legitimacy. By recognising

'nations, nationalities, and peoples' as distinct political units with ethno-territorial rights, Ethiopia's federal system codifies competing historical claims into rigid political facts. This institutionalisation transforms fluid historical debates into zero-sum disputes over land, identity, and representation. For example, the constitutional recognition of ethnic sovereignty has intensified contests over cities like Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, and Welkite, where narratives of prior habitation or multi-ethnic collaboration clash. As Asnake Kefale (2017) argues, this federal structure amplifies narrative-driven territorial disputes, often overshadowing structural issues like resource scarcity or economic inequality. The result is a political landscape where historical narratives are structurally embedded, perpetuating division and constraining possibilities for compromise.

Media and academia serve as key sites for the production, dissemination, and contestation of these narratives. Constructivist theory highlights the role of discourse in shaping perceptions, and in Ethiopia, media outlets - ranging from state-controlled to opposition and social media platforms - function as narrative battlegrounds. Social media, in particular, amplifies divisive narratives by enabling rapid dissemination of grievance-based rhetoric across geographic and generational lines. As Fikirte Lakew observes, platforms like Facebook and TikTok often serve as incubators for conflicts that later manifest in reality, particularly among Ethiopia's youth. Similarly, academia has historically legitimised exclusionary narratives by providing intellectual frameworks that justify ethnic or ideological positions. The adoption of Stalinist terminology like the 'Prison of Nations' by Ethiopian student activists in the 1970s, as Dr. Rahel Balcha notes, illustrates how imported theoretical constructs were localised to reshape political discourse. These knowledge-producing institutions do not merely

reflect reality but actively construct it, determining what is accepted as ‘true’ or ‘legitimate’ within different communities.

The implications of this narrative-driven dynamic are profound. Constructivism suggests that because conflicts are socially constructed, they can also be socially transformed through dialogue, counter-narratives, and institutional reform. However, the entrenched nature of Ethiopia’s narrative divisions poses significant challenges. Decades of narrative reinforcement have created path dependency, where even well-intentioned reforms are interpreted through lenses of suspicion and rivalry. For example, calls for national unity are often dismissed as attempts to suppress ethnic identities, while demands for decentralisation are framed as secessionist threats. This narrative rigidity limits the scope of perceived solutions, as seen in the ongoing disputes over Addis Ababa’s status or the vandalism of historical monuments like Ras Mekonnen’s in Harar. Yet, constructivism also offers hope by emphasising the malleability of social realities. By fostering inclusive dialogue that acknowledges historical multiplicity, Ethiopia can begin to renegotiate its narratives, constructing identities that bridge ethnic divides rather than deepen them.

The weaponisation of history through narratives is a central theme of this chapter. As Tollosa Gabisa’s allusion to Orwell’s “1984” suggests, controlling the past enables groups to shape the present and future, often by vilifying others. Narratives portraying the Tegar as ‘power and money mongers’ or Oromos as victims of centuries-long genocide are not neutral descriptions but deliberate constructions that justify political action and exclusionary policies. These narratives, amplified by media and legitimised

by academic discourse, transform historical events into tools of division, as seen in the contested histories of Welkayt or the reinterpretation of literary works like Tesfaye Gebreab's (2002) novel *Yeburqa Zimita* to support ethno-nationalist agendas. The constructivist lens reveals that these narratives are not inevitable but are actively produced and sustained, offering opportunities for intervention through counter-narratives that promote coexistence.

This chapter also examines how narratives shape political organisation, often overshadowing ideological alignments. The historical 'wars against comrades' in the 1970s and 1980s, despite shared Marxist-Leninist ideologies, were driven by competing narratives of Ethiopia as a unified polity versus a 'Prison of Nations.' This dynamic persists today, with contemporary parties divided along Ethiopianist and ethno-nationalist lines, as Siraj Namaga and Beza Tadesse note. The ethnicisation of civic movements, such as the transformation of EPRP splinters into the Amhara-centric ANDM, illustrates how narratives reconfigure political landscapes, aligning with Solomon Gebreyohans Gebru's (2014) findings that Ethiopian politics is driven by identity-focused narratives rather than programmatic ideologies.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that understanding the constructed nature of Ethiopia's conflicts is essential for meaningful intervention. By addressing the discursive frameworks that sustain division - through media reform, academic reorientation, and inclusive dialogue - Ethiopia can begin to reimagine its social and political realities. The constructivist perspective offers a dual insight: while narratives have entrenched conflict, their malleability provides a pathway for transformation. By fostering shared

narratives that celebrate Ethiopia's diversity as a source of strength, the nation can move towards a more cohesive future, where cities, symbols, and identities are spaces of unity rather than contestation.

## **Narrative as Tools of Weaponising History**

The conflicts in Ethiopia have been profoundly shaped by the deliberate use of historical narratives as tools of division and conflict. These narratives, often manipulated to serve political ends, have exacerbated tensions and fuelled violence across the nation. Through interviews and FGDs with military leaders, intelligence officers, and academics, a clear pattern emerges of history being weaponised to marginalise and vilify specific groups, notably the Tegar people, while deepening ethnic and regional divisions.

A high-ranking military leader from Tigray, a Lieutenant General, provided a detailed account of the historical and ongoing marginalisation of the Tegar, attributing the conflict's roots to a sustained campaign of negative stereotyping:

*There have been relentless assaults of false narratives against the Tegarus<sup>10</sup>. Stories have circulated that we, the Tegarus, have captured both "the banks and the tanks," portraying not only members of the TPLF but also the entire population of Tigray as power and money mongers. ....*

(Transcript Tigray Elite 2, 2024)

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<sup>10</sup> "Tegarus" denotes ethnic Tigrayans

This officer traced the origins of these narratives back over a century, noting key historical moments of exclusion:

*The narratives against the Tegarú people have deep historical roots, extending far beyond the Abiy administration. This long-standing marginalisation can be traced back over a century: King Menelik II alienated King Yohannes IV of Tigray. Emperor Haile Selassie marginalised Tigray's aristocracies. After the Italian occupation, Tegarú were unfairly labelled as collaborators with fascists due to the actions of a single aristocrat, Haile Selassie Gugsa, who surrendered to Italy. During the Derg regime, Tegarú were branded as bandits. Under the Abiy administration, these negative characterisations have intensified, with Tegarú being depicted as "cancers" and "day-time hyenas." Tigray has been blamed for many of Ethiopia's problems, including its landlocked status. This historical context highlights the persistent and evolving nature of the discrimination faced by the Tegarú people.*

*(Transcript Tigray Elite 2, 2024)*

This military officer identified the Shewa Amhara as the principal adversary to the Tigrayans.

*The primary group responsible for these narratives is the Shewa Amhara. Historically, there has been rivalry between the Tegarú and the Shewa over accession to the throne. After the EPRDF came to power, the unitarist camp<sup>11</sup> began to view Tigray as an internal enemy. Those who opposed the changes brought by the EPRDF, such as federalism and the equality of nations and nationalities, started to demonise Tigray. You know very well that opposition groups and their media have incessantly attacked Tigray.*

*(Transcript Tigray Elite 2, 2024)*

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that this research did not identify any political elite advocating for a unitary government in Ethiopia. The actual debate centres on the type of federalism, whether ethnic or otherwise. However, as the above statements indicate, there are still individuals who blame the Ethiopianist camp for being ardent advocates of a unitary state.

This perspective was echoed by an intelligence officer from the Tigray forces, who described a concerted effort to vilify the Tegraru through media propaganda:

*[The enemy] fabricated brutal narratives against Tigray. ESAT<sup>12</sup>, OMN<sup>13</sup>, and many other media outlets disseminated hate propaganda against the Tegraru, portraying them as corrupt, power-hungry, and chauvinistic. They initiated mass protests in Oromia and Amhara and facilitated the formation of an alliance between Oromia and Amhara, the so-called Oromara, against Tigray. The Ethiopian state media joined forces with them, leading to the demise of the EPRDF. Unsatisfied with this outcome, they waged a genocidal war against Tigray.*

*(Transcript Tigray Elite 2, 2024)*

Tollosa Gabisa, a member of the executive committee of a civil political party and a participant of the FGD with leaders of civic parties explained the role of destructive narratives in weaponising history in the following way:

*There are two, three, or sometimes more accounts of the same place and period. For example, the histories of Welkayt, Humera, Raya, Ogaden, and Addis Ababa are marked by multiple conflicting stories. Only God knows which of these is the true history. Ethnic entrepreneurs weaponise history to attack their adversaries. If you analyse the rhetoric of conflicting groups in Ethiopia, each side uses history as a weapon. Groups who hold power today rewrite the past to seek retribution for the alleged injustices their ancestors suffered. It reminds me of George Orwell's "1984": "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past".*

*(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)*

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<sup>12</sup> ESAT – The Ethiopia Satellite Television -

<sup>13</sup> OMN – Oromo Media Network

Dr. Temesgen Desalegn, in a FGD with academicians, provided a more detailed account of the weaponisation of history.

*... Ethiopian history has been ridiculed by some as bedtime stories fabricated to lionise the Northerners.*

*Often, territorial claims are justified by narratives. Take Welkite<sup>14</sup>, the very town we are in now, for instance. Both the Gurage and Kebena claim Welkite as their capital city. Each has narratives that give them exclusive rights to Welkite. Hence, Welkite is a contested town, much like Addis Ababa. History cannot provide a definitive verdict, as both sides have their "historical" evidence. It is tragic that several lives have already been lost, and an enormous amount of property has been destroyed over such a seemingly trivial issue. The same is true for Meskan and Mareko<sup>15</sup>. All contested territories, including Welkayit, Raya, Humera, Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, and many others, possess dual histories inflamed by rival groups. I doubt we will ever ascertain which side is true, as truth itself lies in the hands of the powerful.*

(Transcript Academicians, 2024)

Semira Mohammed, a participant from the same FGD, shared her understanding that narratives in Ethiopia are more potent drivers of conflict than differences in ethnicity, territorial claims, or religion.

*The current territorial claims by regional states or so-called nations and nationalities are a post-1991 phenomenon. However, well-crafted narratives have allowed adversaries to present their claims as if they are based on centuries-old evidence. Each group has developed compelling victim narratives. The conflicts between Amhara and Tigray, Tigray and Afar, Afar and Somali, Somali and Oromo, Oromo and Amhara, Oromo and Sidama, and others are essentially wars of narratives.*

*Tigrayans recount stories of marginalisation by Amhara nobilities over hundreds of years. Amharas speak of their sacrifices to build Ethiopia,*

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<sup>14</sup> . Welkite is the capital city of Gurage zone, contested by Gurage and Kebena ethnic communities.

<sup>15</sup> . Meskan and Mareko are weredas (lowest administrative unit) of Gurage Zone that are locked in territorial dispute

*feeling betrayed by both Oromo and Tigray. Oromos have bitter memories of what they describe as centuries-long genocide by Amhara nobilities. This pattern continues across more than 85 ethnic groups in the country. These divisive narratives incite people, leading to barbaric confrontations.*

*(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)*

Dr. Rahel Balcha in FGD with academicians gave dreadful examples of the effects of weaponising history.

*Consider the names given to people who adhered to the "Ethiopia the Cradle of Freedom" narrative during the Derg regime. They were labelled as feudal, reactionaries, and hoddams<sup>16</sup>, .... Numerous ardent propagators of this narrative were killed. ... Even today, if you promote this narrative, you may be labelled as "nostalgic for the old system".*

*The history of Wolkayt, Tsegete, and Tselemt or "Western Tigray" has been subject to multiple reinterpretations, often from fundamentally opposing viewpoints. A recent publication by Gondar University<sup>17</sup> reflects an Amhara perspective; however, numerous other works present a contrasting narrative from the Tigray perspective.*

*..., the interpretation of events and history often matters more than the events themselves when considering their impact on peace or conflict. ... This makes the world we live in quite frightening.*

*(Transcript Academicians, 2024)*

Dr. Rahel Balcha's remarks underscore the lethal consequences of historical reinterpretation, where narratives not only shape perceptions but also justify violence.

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<sup>16</sup> "hoddam" is an Amharic word for "glutton", with extreme negative connotation

<sup>17</sup> She is referring to the book published in Amharic by Gondar University, titled *Invasion and Ethnic Cleansing in Welkait, Tsegede, and Tselemt* (2014). The book includes a list of 1,564 individuals from Welkait, Tsegede, and Tselemt who were allegedly assassinated by the TPLF-led government.

Assgedech Gelagay, a participant in FGD with leaders of ethnic political parties, drew a sobering comparison between Ethiopia's situation and the Israel-Palestine conflict:

*Although most social conflicts are backed by some forms of narrative, the situation in our country is exceptionally grave. The only analogy I can think of is the Israel-Palestine conflict. Every social group in Ethiopia complains about historical injustice, subjugation, and exploitation, including the Amhara, who are often blamed by others as oppressors.*

(Transcript Academicians, 2024)

This comparison highlights the depth and complexity of Ethiopia's narrative-driven conflicts, where each group perceives itself as a victim of historical injustice.

Ato Estifanos Egata, a participant in FGD with academicians, offered concrete examples of how historical events have been repurposed to serve contemporary political agendas:

*It's fascinating - and at times concerning - how historical narratives can be reshaped to serve purposes quite different from their original intent. Take the Kadamawi Weyane uprising of the 1940s: by all credible accounts, this was essentially a peasant rebellion protesting administrative injustices, with little evidence suggesting it was conceived as an ethnic movement. Yet in later decades, the TPLF strategically appropriated this legacy, reimagining it as an ethnic struggle and incorporating its name into their own movement's identity. Similarly thought-provoking is how Haddis Alemayehu's 1969 masterpiece "Fikir Iske Mekabir" (Love unto Crypt)<sup>18</sup> - fundamentally a critique of class inequality and feudal oppression - was reinterpreted by student activists to bolster their 'Ethiopia as a prison of nations' thesis.*

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<sup>18</sup> . Haddis Alemayehu's (1996) (ፍቅር እስከ መቃብር) "Love unto Crypt" remains a beloved Amharic novel, vividly reflecting life under feudal rule in northern Ethiopia. Its timeless portrayal of societal struggles resonates with youth activists, who draw inspiration from its themes to mobilise support for social justice and reform, amplifying its enduring cultural impact.

*While the novel offers rich social commentary, its redeployment to support primarily ethnic arguments arguably represents a significant departure from the author's apparent intentions. What these examples reveal is a recurring pattern where political movements selectively engage with history, emphasising certain aspects while downplaying others to suit contemporary agendas. This isn't to say such reinterpretations are always invalid - history inevitably gets revisited through new lenses. However, it does underscore the importance of distinguishing between historical events themselves and the various purposes to which they've been put in subsequent political discourse.*

(Transcript Academicians, 2024)

Estifanos Egata's analysis illustrates the selective reinterpretation of historical events, such as the Kedamawi Weyane uprising and literary works like *Fikir Iske Mekabir*, to advance ethnic and political agendas.

Dr. Aklilu Tesemma highlighted the dangers of exceptionalist narratives and the blending of fiction with historical fact:

*I would like to express concerns about the politicisation of history, which poses challenges to fostering unity. First, there is the issue of exaggerated exceptionalism. While every community has distinctive qualities, overemphasising these traits can lead to significant tensions. Some ethnonationalist groups, including certain Amhara and Tigrayan advocates, have prominently highlighted their communities' perceived superiority. They often claim, with limited supporting evidence, exceptional achievements in areas such as warfare, governance, and cultural unity. For instance, some Amhara nationalists portray the Gonder dynasty as a solely Amhara legacy, while certain Tigrayan nationalists similarly present the Axumite Empire as exclusively Tigrayan. Likewise, the Kedamai Weyane peasant uprising, originally a rebellion against feudal oppression, has been reinterpreted by some as an ethnic movement tied to a specific region, which oversimplifies its historical context.*

*Second, there is the concern of blending fictional narratives with historical events. The writer Tesfaye Gebreab, in his novel "Yeburqa*

*Zimita”, significantly dramatised the events at Anole. Some Oromo nationalists have taken this fictionalised account as factual, leading to the construction of a monument based on the narrative. Rather than promoting healing and understanding, this monument has, in some instances, contributed to further division.*

(Transcript Academicians, 2024)

Dr. Aklilu Tesemma’s critique of exceptionalist narratives and the misuse of fictional accounts as historical fact underscores how such distortions deepen division and hinder reconciliation.

The deliberate weaponisation of historical narratives in Ethiopia has profoundly exacerbated ethnic and regional conflicts, perpetuating division and violence. Through the selective reinterpretation of history, groups have been marginalised who have faced sustained campaigns of negative stereotyping rooted in historical rivalries and political agendas. These narratives, often amplified by media and political actors, have transformed historical events and cultural legacies into tools for vilification and exclusion, as seen in contested territories like Welkite and Wolkayt. The manipulation of history, whether through exaggerated exceptionalism or the conflation of fiction with fact, undermines efforts towards unity and reconciliation. Ethiopia’s complex socio-political landscape, likened to the intractable Israel-Palestine conflict, underscores the urgent need for a critical examination of historical narratives.

## Narratives as Catalysts for Conflict Proliferation in Ethiopia

Narratives, often rooted in ethnic, religious, and historical identities, play a significant role in exacerbating conflicts in Ethiopia. These narratives not only fuel divisions between ethnic groups but also permeate intra-ethnic, religious, and symbolic domains, creating a complex web of tensions. Insights from FGDs with civic and ethnic political party leaders, as well as academicians, reveal the multifaceted ways in which narratives contribute to conflict proliferation, threatening national cohesion.

### Intra-Ethnic Divisions and the Myth of Ethnic Unity

Ethnic identities in Ethiopia are frequently portrayed as monolithic, yet internal divisions within these groups are a significant source of conflict. Almaz Mameye, a civic political party leader, highlighted this issue during an FGD with civic political party leaders:

*Interestingly, within each [ethnic] group, subgroups often blame each other, making it inaccurate to consider the so-called “nations and nationalities” as unified entities. For instance, in Tigray, there are significant differences between Adwa, Shire, Aksum, and other areas, as well as between sub-ethnic groups such as Enderta, Agame, Tembien, and Kilite Awlalo. Many Tegarus complain about the supremacy of ASA (Aksum, Shire, Adwa). Among the Oromo, there are rifts between Arsi, Borana, Guji, Karrayyu, Tulama, and Wollo subgroups, with complaints of Tulama supremacy. Similarly, there are substantial disparities between Gojam, Gonder, Shewa, and Wello Amhara, with complaints of Shewa supremacy. Within ethnic subgroups, there is often clan supremacy. This pattern continues across all the so-called “nations and nationalities.” Consequently, these narratives have sown seeds of division and hatred that threaten to consume us all eventually. Politicising ethnicity is one of the surest ways to lead a nation into an abyss.*

*(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)*

Almaz Mameye's observations underscore how narratives of subgroup supremacy within ethnic groups - such as the perceived dominance of certain regions or clans - fragment communities that are often assumed to be cohesive. These intra-ethnic tensions, amplified by political rhetoric, deepen divisions and undermine efforts to foster unity, creating fertile ground for conflict escalation.

### **Religious Narratives and the "Prison of Religions"**

Beyond ethnic divisions, narratives surrounding religion further complicate Ethiopia's social fabric. Semira Mohammed, a participant in the same FGD, articulated how religious narratives exacerbate tensions:

*The conflict fuelled by narratives extends beyond ethnic groups. The "Cradle of Civilisation" narrative often depicts Ethiopia as a "Christian Island" which does not provide comfort to Muslim Ethiopians like me. Moreover, describing Ethiopia as predominantly Orthodox Tewahido Christian marginalises other Christian sects such as Protestants and Catholics. Thus, the "Prison of Nations" narrative has evolved into "Prison of Religions," further aggravating conflicts between religious groups. There have been at least two significant historical incidents where Muslim grievances have had far-reaching implications: during the 1960s revolution against the imperial regime and the recent 2010s protests against EPRDF rule. In both cases, there has been an undertone of outcry against the 'imprisonment of Islam' in Ethiopia. This issue must be regarded as a warning of a potential severe conflict based on religious grounds.*

*(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)*

Semira Mohammed's remarks highlight how narratives that privilege one religious identity—such as the portrayal of Ethiopia as a "Christian Island" - alienate religious minorities, including Muslims and non-Orthodox Christians. The reframing of the

"Prison of Nations" narrative into a "Prison of Religions" illustrates how exclusionary rhetoric can deepen interfaith tensions, with historical grievances potentially foreshadowing more severe conflicts.

### **Global Influences on Local Narratives**

The proliferation of conflict narratives is not confined to Ethiopia's borders but is influenced by global political trends. Tollosa Gabissa, another FGD participant with civic party leaders, drew connections between international populism and local ethnic movements:

*The rise of right-wing populism in the West presents an additional challenge to Ethiopia. Movements like "America First" and "Brexit" have, for example, emboldened our "Oromo First," "Amhara First," and "Tigray First" movements, even if they may not openly admit it. Right-wing populism in Europe and the USA provides ammunition to our ethnic political entrepreneurs.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

Tollosa Gabissa's analysis suggests that global populist movements provide a template for Ethiopia's ethnic-based political narratives, amplifying local demands for ethnic primacy. This external influence complicates efforts to address domestic conflicts, as it emboldens ethnic entrepreneurs to pursue divisive agendas.

## **The Spread of Conflict Across Institutions**

Academic perspectives further illuminate how narratives can transport conflicts across geographical and institutional boundaries. Dr. Tsege Semahegn, during an FGD with academicians, provided a striking example:

*Narratives can transport conflict from place to place. For example, if two students from different ethnic groups fight for any reason, say, at the University of Harromaya in East Oromia, and one of the students gets harmed, their co-ethnics may seek revenge at another university, such as Welkite or Bahr Dar. It is irrational to seek revenge for a conflict in which one has no personal stake; however, narratives often find ways to rationalise such absurd actions. Consequently, every university remains on high alert, as it cannot predict when and how conflicts between students may erupt. We are living in such challenging times that controlling the spread of destructive narratives is virtually impossible.*

*(Transcript Academicians, 2024)*

Dr. Tsege Semahegn's example illustrates how narratives can transform localised incidents into broader conflicts, with universities becoming battlegrounds for ethnic vendettas. This phenomenon underscores the difficulty of containing narratives once they gain traction, as they rationalise irrational actions and perpetuate cycles of retaliation.

## **Language Policies and National Cohesion**

Language, as a marker of identity, is another arena where narratives fuel conflict. Haile Meketaw, a participant in an FGD with ethnic political party leaders, addressed claims of linguistic marginalisation:

*The claim that Oromiffa faces systemic marginalisation is certainly a serious one that deserves careful scrutiny. At the same time, it is equally problematic to imply that Amharic belongs solely to the Amhara people. In reality, Amharic has evolved as Ethiopia's lingua franca through centuries of use and adaptation by all communities. It is a language that has been shaped by Oromo, Gurage, Tigrayan, and other Ethiopian speakers, making it a shared national asset rather than an ethnic possession. The restrictions on Amharic in urban centres like Adama, Wolleso, and Jimma - where it remains widely spoken - seem counterproductive to national cohesion. Language policies should aim to facilitate communication and mutual understanding, not enforce exclusion. The short-sighted decision by Oromo nationalists to abandon the Ge'ez script in favour of the Latin script for writing Oromiffa has served neither the Oromo people nor the wider community; instead, it has fostered division. When young Oromo students enter university, they often struggle with communication in both Amharic and English, as the Oromiffa writing system differs significantly from both. This has left many young people without a shared linguistic and written framework to bridge ethnic divides. Moreover, this ill-considered move has eroded the collective pride of belonging to a nation with its own distinct script.*

*(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)*

Haile Meketaw's critique highlights how language policies, driven by ethnic narratives, can undermine national unity. According to him, the shift to the Latin script for Oromiffa, intended to assert cultural distinctiveness, has instead created educational and communicative barriers, further entrenching divisions.

### **National Symbols as Flashpoints for Conflict**

National symbols, such as flags and monuments, have become potent sources of division. Rediet Nesru, an FGD participant with ethnic political party leaders, expressed concern over their misuse:

*... national symbols like our flag continue to provoke unnecessary divisions. During public celebrations, we have sadly seen these emblems*

*become flashpoints for conflict - it is troubling how many citizens have faced detention or violence simply for displaying the traditional tricolour flag. This situation strikes me as entirely disproportionate. Rather than involving itself in such symbolic disputes, the government would do better to focus on more substantive national concerns. These controversies ultimately distract from the real work of building unity and addressing our country's pressing challenges.*

*(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)*

Rediet Nesru's remarks underscore how symbols meant to unify can become battlegrounds when competing narratives imbue them with divisive meanings. The politicisation of the national flag, particularly the traditional tricolour versus the starred federal flag, exemplifies this challenge.

Yared Tesfaye, another participant in the same FGD, elaborated on the tension surrounding regional and federal symbols:

*Looking back at our history of public monuments, we've traditionally had rather few, with most honouring either the Imperial family or Orthodox Christian figures. Understandably, this narrow focus may have caused some discomfort among our diverse population. However, since 1993 we've seen positive changes in this regard, with towns across Ethiopia now erecting monuments to commemorate their own local heroes. While I might personally question the wisdom of glorifying TPLF combatants in Tigray's Wereda towns, I do support the broader principle of communities honouring figures significant to their local history and identity. When it comes to flags, my main concern lies not with the debate over the federal flag's star, but rather with the growing prominence of regional state flags. I believe these regional symbols should not dominate official or cultural gatherings—they ought to remain secondary to our federal emblem, no more prominent than local insignia. Recent trends, however, have been troubling. During events like the Irecha festival, for instance, Addis Ababa is so densely adorned with the Oromia flag—which bears a passing resemblance to Egypt's—that one might mistakenly assume the city had been overrun by a foreign power. Elsewhere, particularly in Tigray, regional flags have been elevated above the Ethiopian flag, a practice that became even more pronounced during the recent conflict. If left*

*unaddressed, this trend risks fostering a generation more deeply connected to regional symbols than to our shared federal identity.*

(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)

Yared Tesfaye's observations highlight the tension between regional and national identities, with regional flags and monuments often overshadowing federal symbols. This trend risks fragmenting Ethiopia's collective identity, as regional loyalties take precedence.

Hailemeleket Tezera, a participant in an FGD with civic political party leaders, further emphasised the divisive role of national symbols:

*I would like to draw your attention to another sensitive dimension of this debate - the contentious role of national symbols like flags and monuments. In our current climate of competing narratives, finding common ground on these symbolic representations has become virtually impossible. Many ethnonationalists view the traditional Ethiopian tricolour (without the central star) as representing the Solomonic Dynasty and Orthodox Christian dominance. Regrettably, both the EPRDF and Prosperity Party governments have arguably reinforced this perception by legally mandating the official flag—the starred version—as the only flag that can be waved. These symbolic disputes frequently erupt into public confrontations. I have witnessed cases where youth were physically injured in clashes sparked simply by which flag they chose to wave. Similarly, what should be our proud commemoration of the Adwa victory is increasingly overshadowed by clashes surrounding Emperor Menelik's monument in Addis Ababa. This situation presents a profound challenge: how does one foster national unity when even the most basic symbols of nationhood become sources of division?*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

Hailemelekot Tezzer's remarks highlight the profound challenge of fostering unity when symbols meant to represent shared heritage are co-opted by competing narratives, leading to public confrontations and deepening divisions.

### **Vandalism and the Erasure of Historical Narratives**

The destruction of historical monuments reflects the broader struggle over Ethiopia's historical narratives. Misrak Shemsu, a participant in an FGD with civic political party leaders, expressed concern over this trend:

*You've reminded me of the troubling vandalism of Ras Mekonnen's monument in Harar—an incident that speaks volumes about our current tensions. While one might reasonably critique aspects of his governance, we cannot deny Ras Mekonnen's legacy as a patriot, skilled diplomat, and moderniser who transformed Harar. Such destructive acts dishonour our collective history. Equally concerning are the ongoing calls to remove Emperor Menelik's monument in Addis Ababa. While historical figures should be examined critically, erasing physical memorials risks severing our connection to complex but important chapters of our past. Perhaps most poignant is the struggle faced by artist Alemtsehay Wedajo to erect a monument honouring Queen Taytu, the visionary founder of Addis Ababa. It's deeply ironic that a city which celebrates international figures like Bob Marley cannot properly commemorate its own founding mother. This selective memorialisation reveals much about our unresolved historical narratives.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

Misrak Shemsu's perspective underscores how vandalism and selective commemoration reflect unresolved tensions over Ethiopia's historical narrative, with the erasure of monuments threatening to disconnect the nation from its past.

Dr. Rahel Balcha, an academician, echoed these concerns:

*... the late Prime Minister's controversial description of our national flag as 'a piece of rag' being one particularly painful example, especially considering the many sacrifices made under that very emblem. Similarly, the ongoing debates surrounding Emperor Menelik's monument in Addis Ababa and Ras Mekonnen's memorial in Harar aren't merely about statues, but represent deeper clashes over competing historical narratives. Until we can develop more shared understandings of our past, these symbolic conflicts will likely persist, preventing us from moving forward as a nation.*

*(Transcript Academicians, 2024)*

*Dr. Rahel Balcha's comments highlight the need for a shared historical narrative to resolve conflicts over symbols, which currently serve as flashpoints for division rather than unity.*

Dr. Aklilu Tesemma, another academician, addressed the politicisation of historical narratives through monuments:

*... The controversial writer Tesfaye Gebreab, in his novel Yeburqa Zimita, dramatically embellished the atrocities committed at Anole. Oromo nationalists, however, treated this fictionalised account as historical truth and erected a monument based on it. Rather than fostering reconciliation, the structure has become a symbol of division.*

*(Transcript Academicians, 2024)*

Dr. Aklilu Tesemma's example illustrates how narratives, even when rooted in fiction, can be weaponised to erect divisive symbols, further entrenching ethnic tensions.

To summarise, narratives in Ethiopia act as powerful catalysts for conflict proliferation, intensifying divisions across ethnic, religious, linguistic, and symbolic domains. Intra-ethnic rivalries, fuelled by narratives of subgroup supremacy, fragment communities, while religious narratives alienate minorities, transforming the "Prison of Nations" into a "Prison of Religions." Global populist trends amplify ethnic-based movements, and narratives transport conflicts across institutions, such as universities, perpetuating cycles of retaliation. Language policies driven by ethnic agendas erode shared communication frameworks, and national symbols, including flags and monuments, become flashpoints for division, with vandalism and selective memorialisation reflecting unresolved historical tensions. These narratives collectively deepen Ethiopia's social and political fault lines, entrenching a cycle of conflict.

Almaz Mameye, a civic political party leader participating in the FGD with leaders of civic political parties explained how inter-ethnic conflicts can spread to intra-ethnic conflicts:

*Interestingly, within each [ethnic] group, subgroups often blame each other, making it inaccurate to consider the so-called "nations and nationalities" as unified entities. For instance, in Tigray, there are significant differences between Adwa, Shire, Aksum, and other areas, as well as between sub-ethnic groups such as Enderta, Agame, Tembien, and Kilite Awlalo. Many Tegarus complain about the supremacy of ASA (Aksum, Shire, Adwa). Among the Oromo, there are rifts between Arsi, Borana, Guji, Karrayyu, Tulama, and Wollo subgroups, with complaints of Tulama supremacy. Similarly, there are substantial disparities between Gojam, Gonder, Shewa, and Wello Amhara, with complaints of Shewa supremacy. Within ethnic subgroups, there is often clan supremacy. This pattern continues across all the so-called "nations and nationalities" Consequently, these narratives have sown seeds of division and hatred that threaten to consume us all eventually. Politicising ethnicity is one of the surest ways to lead a nation into an abyss.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

Semira Mohammed, a participant in the same FGD, showed another area of proliferation of conflicts.

*The conflict fuelled by narratives extends beyond ethnic groups. The “Cradle of Civilisation” narrative often depicts Ethiopia as a “Christian Island” which does not provide comfort to Muslim Ethiopians like me. Moreover, describing Ethiopia as predominantly Orthodox Tewahido Christian marginalises other Christian sects such as Protestants and Catholics. Thus, the “Prison of Nations” narrative has evolved into “Prison of Religions,” further aggravating conflicts between religious groups. There have been at least two significant historical incidents where Muslim grievances have had far-reaching implications: during the 1960s revolution against the imperial regime and the recent 2010s protests against EPRDF rule. In both cases, there has been an undertone of outcry against the ‘imprisonment of Islam’ in Ethiopia. This issue must be regarded as a warning of a potential severe conflict based on religious grounds.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

Tollosa Gabissa, a participant in FGD with leaders of civic parties related narratives with the international political environment. He said:

*The rise of right-wing populism in the West presents an additional challenge to Ethiopia. Movements like “America First” and “Brexit” have, for example, emboldened our “Oromo First,” “Amhara First,” and “Tigray First” movements, even if they may not openly admit it. Right-wing populism in Europe and the USA provides ammunition to our ethnic political entrepreneurs.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

The discussion with academicians revealed dimensions that may not be taken into consideration by politicians. Dr. Tsege Semahegn gave striking example how narratives transport conflicts from place to place:

*Narratives can transport conflict from place to place. For example, if two students from different ethnic groups fight for any reason, say, at the University of Harromaya in East Oromia, and one of the students gets harmed, their co-ethnics may seek revenge at another university, such as Welkite or Bahr Dar. It is irrational to seek revenge for a conflict in which one has no personal stake; however, narratives often find ways to rationalise such absurd actions. Consequently, every university remains on high alert, as it cannot predict when and how conflicts between students may erupt. We are living in such challenging times that controlling the spread of destructive narratives is virtually impossible.*

(Transcript Academicians, 2024)

The evidence presented in this study underscores the profound role of narratives in perpetuating and exacerbating conflicts across Ethiopia's ethnic, religious, linguistic, and symbolic landscapes. Far from being passive reflections of identity, these narratives actively shape perceptions, fuel grievances, and rationalise divisions, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of discord. Intra-ethnic tensions, often overlooked in broader political discourse, reveal deep-seated fractures within supposedly cohesive groups, as narratives of subgroup supremacy - whether regional, ethnic-based, or ideological - fragment communities and erode solidarity. Similarly, religious narratives that privilege certain faith traditions while marginalising others transform Ethiopia from a "Prison of Nations" into a "Prison of Religions," heightening interfaith tensions with potentially explosive consequences.

Global political trends further complicate these dynamics, as the rise of exclusionary populism abroad emboldens domestic ethnic entrepreneurs, reinforcing narratives of ethnic primacy at the expense of national cohesion. Meanwhile, the spillover of conflicts into institutional spaces, particularly universities, demonstrates how narratives transcend geography, turning isolated incidents into catalysts for broader retaliation. Language policies, rather than fostering unity, have become another battleground, with script reforms and linguistic marginalisation deepening divides rather than bridging them.

Perhaps most striking is the politicisation of national symbols - flags, monuments, and historical commemorations - which, instead of unifying, have become potent markers of division. The vandalism of historical monuments and the contentious debates over their preservation reflect a struggle over Ethiopia's collective memory, with competing narratives weaponising the past to justify present grievances. If left unaddressed, these narrative-driven conflicts threaten to entrench fragmentation, making national reconciliation an increasingly distant prospect.

## **Narratives as Tools of Contestation Over Ethiopian Cities**

The role of historical narratives in disputes over Ethiopian cities is a delicate and potentially divisive topic, capable of undermining the collaborative atmosphere of FGDs. The sensitivity of these discussions was acknowledged by participants, who nonetheless engaged with the issue, presenting competing perspectives on the

historical and political claims to urban spaces such as Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, Harar, and Yabelo.

Terfassa Neggassa, a participant in the FGD with leaders of ethnic parties, highlighted the profound significance of the debate over Addis Ababa, referred to by its Oromo name, Finfinnee:

*Of all the issues you mentioned, the question of Finfinnee is the most sensitive, at least to me, and I fear that discussing it openly could lead to unproductive disagreements. However, it's a conversation that needs to be approached with care and respect for historical truth.*

*(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)*

Terfassa Neggassa elaborated at length on his perspective regarding entitlements to cities, framing Finfinnee as a cornerstone of Oromo identity and heritage, and extending his concerns to other urban centres:

*Personally, I avoid using the name 'Addis Ababa' in daily conversation because it overlooks the city's deeper heritage. Its original name, Finfinnee, holds far greater significance - not just as a geographical marker but as a symbol of Oromo identity. Finfinnee has always been central to Oromia, both culturally and politically, and it should remain an inseparable part of it.*

*Long before Minilik's expansion, Finfinnee was the homeland of the Tulama Oromo. Its takeover in the late 19th century was not a peaceful transition but a conquest, accompanied by displacement and the imposition of a new order. The proof of this is etched into the city itself - neighbourhoods like Gullele, Shegole, Bole, Akaki, and Burayu all bear Oromo names, a living testament to its origins. To anyone familiar with Ethiopia's history, the Oromo identity of Finfinnee is undeniable. Yet, despite this, the Oromo people have been systematically marginalised in*

*their own land, their connection to the city weakened through coercion and political manoeuvring. Some would argue this goes beyond mere dispossession - it constitutes a form of cultural erasure with devastating consequences.*

*The same pattern repeats elsewhere. In Dire Dawa, Harar and Yabelo, Oromo communities have faced similar exclusion, relegated to second-class status in their own regions. Even today, under the current constitution, Oromos in urban centres often find themselves politically and economically sidelined. Far from addressing historical injustices, the system has entrenched them, leaving many Oromos feeling that their rights and heritage remain under threat.*

*(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)*

Haile Meketaw, another leader from the same FGD, expressed reluctance to delve into this contentious issue but felt compelled to offer a counter-narrative to Terfassa Neggassa's claims, maintaining a respectful tone in line with the FGD's code of conduct:

*There's no denying that these are deeply sensitive historical questions, and some might reasonably argue that they are best approached with caution - or even left undisturbed entirely. However, since Ato Terfassa has thoughtfully presented his perspective, I believe it is important to offer a counterbalance to ensure that his interpretation does not go unchallenged.*

*(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)*

Haile Meketaw provided a detailed rebuttal, challenging the Oromo-centric narrative and emphasising the multi-ethnic history of Addis Ababa:

*While I fully agree with his principle that historical truth must be respected, I find myself differing significantly on what that truth actually entails. The available historical and anthropological evidence suggests that the area now known as Addis Ababa was largely uninhabited or only sparsely populated at the time of its founding in the late 19th century. This makes*

*sweeping claims of mass evictions difficult to substantiate with reliable documentation. Moreover, following the Oromo expansions into the region during the 16th century, the entire Shewa region developed into a decidedly multi-ethnic space, with various communities coexisting and interacting over centuries. Consequently, portraying Addis Ababa as having ever been the exclusive domain of any single Oromo clan risks oversimplifying a far more complex demographic reality.*

*Regarding the name 'Finfinnee' - yes, it certainly refers to the natural hot springs in the area, and that local name persists quite rightly for that specific geographical feature. However, we should be careful not to conflate 'Finfinnee' - a single landmark - with the broader urban entity that became Addis Ababa. The transformation of this landscape from largely uncultivated land into a thriving capital was the result of collective effort. Amhara leadership played a central role, but Oromo, Gurage, and other communities also contributed significantly over generations. To diminish any group's role in shaping the city would be to distort history in favour of a singular narrative.*

*It is also worth noting that some historians argue Addis Ababa represents a revival of the older Amhara settlement of 'Berera', for which there is stronger documentary evidence than for 'Finfinnee' as a substantial pre-existing village. This is not to dismiss the Oromo connection to the land but to emphasise that multiple historical layers exist, and no single claim should monopolise the city's identity.*

*Urban development, by its very nature, involves some degree of displacement - an unfortunate but near-universal phenomenon seen in cities across the world. While some relocation undoubtedly occurred during Addis Ababa's expansion, this reflects broader patterns of urban growth rather than any targeted persecution. Cities evolve, and with that evolution comes demographic and spatial change. This is not unique to Ethiopia but is part of a global historical process.*

(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)

Mohammed Hassen, representing a non-Oromo, non-Amhara ethnic party, introduced a broader perspective, rejecting the binary framing of Addis Ababa as an Oromo-Amhara contest and advocating for a more inclusive approach:

*There seems to be a common misconception that Addis Ababa is solely an Oromo-Amhara matter, with the city framed as some sort of ethnic battleground. This narrow view does a great disservice to historical reality. ..., I must emphasise that we too consider Addis Ababa part of our ancestral lands. Our forefathers played significant roles in transforming what was essentially grazing land into the thriving capital we know today. The same can be said for numerous other Ethiopian communities whose contributions are too often overlooked in this debate. Claiming entitlement to a city based on an argument for owing a grazing land cannot hold water. Likewise, mass eviction of the Oromo clan is unfounded, at best, exaggerated.*

*The proposal to exclusively assign the city to either Oromia or Amhara would be historically inaccurate and politically unwise. In my view, the most equitable solution would be granting Addis Ababa a special administrative status as its own regional state. This would properly recognise its unique position as both Ethiopia's capital and a city that truly belongs to all Ethiopians equally.*

(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)

In the FGD with leaders of civic political parties, Fantahun Gebre linked the contestation over cities to Ethiopia's constitutional framework, highlighting its role in exacerbating territorial disputes:

*... ethnic groups perceive their ill-defined borders as sovereign borders. This is a unique situation not commonly seen in other countries. Now, it is common to hear Tigray nationalists talking about their sovereign territories; the same is true for the Oromos, Amharas, and Somalis. Furthermore, Oromia claims ownership of Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, and Harrar. The contest over Addis Ababa, in particular, will have far-reaching consequences given the significance of the city to the entire country and beyond, and the key role played by non-Oromo Ethiopians in its development. These claims and counterclaims over territories and cities are tearing the country apart.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

Almaz Mameye, another participant in the civic parties' FGD, built on Gebre's remarks, offering a nuanced analysis of how historical narratives fuel urban conflicts:

*Fantahun has highlighted a critical issue that warrants careful consideration. Examining Ethiopia's contested urban spaces - particularly Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa - reveals how competing historical narratives don't just describe these conflicts but actively fuel them. These aren't mere disputes over territory; they represent profound clashes over identity, memory, and who has the right to define a city's soul.*

*The endurance of these conflicts stems from how historical narratives shape contemporary politics. For Oromo nationalists, Addis Ababa's expansion remains inextricably linked to 19th century displacements, with recent policies like the 'Addis Ababa Master Plan' seen as perpetuating historical dispossession. Conversely, Amhara narratives root present tensions in the 16th century Oromo expansion, framing the city's evolution as part of broader regional transformations. While both perspectives contain valid historical elements, their politicisation transforms nuanced history into absolute claims, making compromise appear as surrender. There's a profound paradox here: Ethiopia's most ethnically diverse cities, which should exemplify unity, instead become battlegrounds precisely because their layered histories allow multiple groups to assert exclusive ownership. Contrast this with more homogeneous urban centres in Tigray or Amhara regions, where dominant narratives leave little room for such contestation.*

*The solution lies not in arbitrating which narrative 'wins', but in developing frameworks that acknowledge cities as living archives - places where different communities' stories overlap, sometimes uncomfortably. Until we can embrace this complexity, seeing contested spaces as shared rather than exclusive, these cycles of conflict will continue. True urban reconciliation requires remembering multiplicities rather than enforcing singularities.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

Kebede Assefa, also from the civic parties' FGD, extended the discussion by emphasising the constitutional underpinnings of these urban disputes:

*That's a fair point, but we shouldn't overlook the constitution's role in these tensions. While Ethiopia's diversity long predates the current constitution, we hadn't seen urban conflicts of this nature before its adoption. By formally recognising ethnic groups as 'nations and nationalities' with theoretical rights to self-determination, the document has created a framework where control over cities becomes politically charged. When territorial claims are tied to constitutional recognition of ethnic sovereignty, it's hardly surprising that urban centres become flashpoints. Historically, controlling cities has always been a strategic prize in conflicts, and the current constitutional arrangement appears to have elevated this dynamic in Ethiopia's political landscape.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

The contestation over Ethiopian cities - Addis Ababa (Finfinnee), Dire Dawa, Harar, and Yabelo - reveals how historical narratives are not passive reflections of the past but active instruments in political struggle. These narratives serve as frameworks through which competing claims to space, identity, and belonging are legitimised, contested, and institutionalised. The discussions from the FGDs demonstrate that disputes over urban centres are not merely about territorial control but about the very meaning of history, the construction of collective memory, and the assertion of political legitimacy.

At the heart of these conflicts lies the tension between exclusivist and pluralist interpretations of urban history. The Oromo nationalist narrative, as articulated by Terfassa Neggassa, positions Finfinnee as an ancestral Oromo space, framing its incorporation into the Ethiopian state as an act of conquest that necessitates rectification. This narrative is rooted in claims of prior habitation, cultural erasure, and systemic marginalisation, reinforcing a discourse of historical dispossession that demands recognition and restitution. Conversely, Haile Meketaw's counter-narrative challenges this exclusivity, emphasising the multi-ethnic development of Addis Ababa

and questioning the extent of pre-existing Oromo settlement. His argument constructs the city as a product of collective endeavour rather than unilateral imposition, thereby undermining the notion of exclusive Oromo entitlement.

Mohammed Hassen's intervention complicates this binary, rejecting the Oromo-Amhara dichotomy and advocating for a more inclusive conception of urban belonging. His perspective highlights how other ethnic groups - Gurage, Somali, and others - also lay claim to these spaces, revealing the limitations of framing urban disputes through a narrow ethno-nationalist lens. This multiplicity of claims underscores the constructed nature of historical narratives, where competing groups selectively emphasise certain facts while marginalising others to bolster their political agendas.

The civic political party participants, particularly Fantahun Gebre and Almaz Mameye, situate these urban conflicts within Ethiopia's constitutional and institutional frameworks. The ethnic federalist system, by formalising territorial claims along ethno-linguistic lines, has politicised urban spaces in unprecedented ways. Cities, which historically functioned as sites of interethnic interaction and economic exchange, have become battlegrounds for competing sovereignties. Kebede Assefa's observation that Ethiopia did not experience urban conflicts of this nature prior to the 1995 constitution suggests that the institutionalisation of ethnic territoriality has transformed cities from shared spaces into contested ones.

Almaz Mameye's analysis further illuminates how historical narratives are weaponised in these disputes. The politicisation of Addis Ababa's expansion under Menelik II, the

reinterpretation of the 16th-century Oromo migrations, and the selective memorialisation of urban development all serve to reinforce contemporary political positions. These narratives are not static; they are continually reshaped to fit present-day struggles, demonstrating the malleability of historical memory in service of political objectives.

Ultimately, the conflicts over Ethiopian cities are not resolvable through appeals to an objective historical truth, because no such singular truth exists. Instead, they are struggles over whose narrative gains primacy in defining the past - and, by extension, the future. The endurance of these disputes lies in their embeddedness within larger structures of ethnic federalism, where control over urban spaces is not just a matter of administrative jurisdiction but of symbolic and material power. Until these narratives are disentangled from institutionalised ethnic territoriality, urban contestations will persist, not because of an irresolvable historical grievance, but because the political system incentivises and sustains them.

The case of Ethiopian cities thus serves as a potent example of how history is not merely recounted but actively constructed, contested, and deployed in the service of political projects. The conflicts are not about the past as it was, but about the past as it is remembered - and who gets to decide what that remembrance entails.

## Narratives as a Tool of Political Organisation

In the 1970s and 1980s, with the exception of the EDU, all political organisations in Ethiopia adhered to Marxism-Leninism. This ideology was embraced by both civic and ethnic political parties. However, despite sharing the same ideology, these groups did not cooperate or form alliances. Instead, as discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis, they engaged in "wars against comrades," resulting in the total annihilation of some organisations and causing substantial and lasting destruction to the most educated youth of the time.

In contemporary Ethiopia, most political parties, whether civic or ethnic, identify themselves as liberal or social democrats. Despite this shift in ideological stance, they continue to vehemently oppose each other. Participants of the FGDs and in-depth interviews in this research attribute this rather peculiar reality to the significant role that narratives play in driving political organisations, rather than any established ideology.

Siraj Namaga, a member of the executive committee of a civic political party, and a participant of FGD with leaders of civic political parties explained:

*Narratives shape how we organise ourselves. In Ethiopia, political parties emerged in the late 1960s, reflecting two major narratives about the country. Those who saw Ethiopia as a single polity rallied around Ethiopianist political parties such as EPRP and MESON. Conversely, those who viewed ethnic groups as independent polities organised their respective liberation organisations. Today, we find ourselves in a similar situation, with two types of political parties: Ethiopianists and Ethno-nationalists. ... Such a clear dichotomy is a product of the polarised narrative on which Ethiopian politics is based.*

*(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)*

Yared Tesfaye, an executive member of an ethnic party and a participant of FDG with leaders of ethnic parties, commented:

*The narratives inspired the political elites of the Amhara, Oromo, and Tigray to establish political organisations, such as liberation fronts or [civic] political parties, aligned with these narratives and to engage in prolonged conflicts. Consequently, we have been at war with ourselves for the past fifty years.*

*(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)*

Beza Tadesse, a member of the executive committee of a civic political party and a participant in the FGD with civic party leaders, explained that narratives determine not only the formation of political parties but also the degradation of some civic parties into ethnic parties.

*Not only have narratives determined the types of political organisations we have today, but ... also ... the metamorphosis of political parties. The narrative that glamorises Ethiopia as a beacon of freedom was more articulate in northern Ethiopia, especially in Amhara and Tigray. Many of the top leaders of EPRP, EDU, and WPE were either of Tigray or Amhara origins. On the other hand, as the competing narrative of "Ethiopia is a prison of nations" emerged, Tigray, Oromia, and Somali became fertile incubators of liberation fronts. As civic parties weakened due to internal divisions and external pressures, ethnic parties started to flourish. The ethno-centric TPLF wiped out the Ethiopianist EPRP and EDU. It converted the EPRP splinter group to form the Amhara-centric ANDM. Since then, the Ethiopianist parties of the north have been continuously ethnicised. This process of the decay of civic politics in Ethiopia continues to date. For example, the current Fano movement is no less ethnocentric than the OLF or TPLF.*

*(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)*

Tessema Hailu, a participant in FGD with leaders of civic parties criticised the National Election Board of Ethiopia's (NEBE) classification of political parties:

*The NEBE classifies political parties into two categories: Countrywide (operating in multiple regions) and Regional (operating in a single region). In my view, this classification is superficial and administrative rather than ontological, as it does not reflect the fundamental nature of the parties. ... Fundamentally, political parties should be classified based on their programmes. In this regard, all regional and some countrywide parties are ethnic parties that claim to liberate their constituents from what they describe as a prison called Ethiopia. These parties are the brainchildren of Barro Tumssa and Sibhat Nega<sup>19</sup>.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

Hailu Meketaw, a top leader of an ethnic party and a participant of FGD with leaders of ethnic parties gave surprising statement without elaborating the essence. He said:

*[Narratives] have served the interests of external enemies, making it nearly impossible to politically organise people in any way other than through these highly polarised narratives.*

(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)

The political landscape of Ethiopia during the 1970s and 1980s was profoundly shaped by the interplay of narratives that constructed competing social realities, despite the shared ideological framework of Marxism-Leninism. As noted, all political organisations, barring the EDU, adhered to this ideology, yet failed to unite, instead engaging in destructive "wars against comrades." Groups such as the EPRP and MESON framed Ethiopia as a unified polity, while ethnic liberation fronts viewed ethnic

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<sup>19</sup> Barro Tumssa is a founder of OLF, while Sibhat Nega that of TPLF

groups as distinct polities requiring autonomy. These conflicting narratives, rather than the shared ideology, defined group identities and fuelled internal conflicts, resulting in significant losses among Ethiopia's educated youth and the annihilation of some organisations. This illustrates how socially constructed meanings, embedded in narratives, can override ideological alignment, shaping political behaviour and outcomes in profound ways.

The political trajectory of Ethiopia, both during the Marxist-Leninist era of the 1970s–1980s and in the contemporary period of liberal and social democratic alignments, demonstrates that political mobilisation is not primarily driven by formal ideology but by competing narratives that construct divergent social realities. Despite shared ideological frameworks - whether Marxism-Leninism in the past or liberalism and social democracy today - political organisations in Ethiopia have remained deeply antagonistic, engaging in violent conflict or irreconcilable opposition. This persistent division underscores the power of narratives as the foundational force behind political organisation, shaping identities, allegiances, and enmities in ways that abstract ideologies cannot.

The Marxist-Leninist period exemplifies this dynamic starkly. While nearly all major political groups professed the same ideological doctrine, they were fractured by irreconcilable narratives about the nature of Ethiopia itself. Ethiopianist parties like the EPRP and MESON envisioned the country as a singular polity requiring revolutionary transformation, while ethnic liberation fronts such as the TPLF and OLF framed Ethiopia as an oppressive empire that necessitated national self-determination for its

constituent groups. These narratives were not secondary to ideology but rather the primary lenses through which political action was organised. Conflict persisted between organisations on the same side, such as the EPRP and MESON, due to subtle interpretational differences. The result was not ideological solidarity but fratricidal conflict - "wars against comrades" - that decimated entire movements and claimed a generation of educated youth. The shared vocabulary of class struggle and revolution could not bridge the chasm between these competing visions of political community.

In the post-1991 era, despite the formal abandonment of Marxism-Leninism, the same pattern persists. Political parties now espouse liberalism or social democracy, yet their divisions remain as entrenched as ever. As Siraj Namaga and Yared Tesfaye observe, the fundamental cleavage remains between Ethiopianist and ethno-nationalist narratives, each structuring political organisation in mutually exclusive ways. The Ethiopianist narrative continues to inspire civic parties that advocate for a unified polity, while ethno-nationalist narratives sustain regional and liberationist movements that reject centralised Ethiopian identity in favour of ethnic self-rule. This dichotomy is not merely rhetorical but organisational, determining the very structure of political parties and their modes of mobilisation.

Beza Tadesse's analysis further reveals how narratives have not only shaped the formation of parties but also driven the "metamorphosis" of civic movements into ethnic ones. The decline of Ethiopianist organisations like the EPRP and the rise of ethno-nationalist alternatives (e.g., ANDM, OLF, TPLF) illustrate how dominant

narratives can reconfigure political landscapes, compelling even initially non-ethnic movements to adopt ethnic frameworks to remain relevant. The recent emergence of ethnocentric movements like Fano, despite their ideological diversity, reinforces the observation that narratives of ethnic sovereignty or Ethiopian unity exert a gravitational pull on political organisation, often overriding formal ideological commitments.

Tessema Hailu's critique of NEBE's classification system highlights the inadequacy of administrative categorisations (countrywide vs. regional) in capturing the ontological divide between Ethiopianist and ethno-nationalist parties. The true fault line is not geographic scope but the foundational narratives that define a party's vision of political order - whether Ethiopia is a single nation or a federation of distinct ethnic polities. This divide is so fundamental that it renders superficial classifications meaningless in explaining political behaviour.

Hailu Meketaw's cryptic remark about narratives serving "the interests of external enemies" hints at another dimension: the susceptibility of these politically mobilising narratives to external manipulation. Whether through historical grievances, geopolitical interference, or diasporic influence, narratives are not merely endogenous products of Ethiopian political thought but are shaped by - and sometimes weaponised through - external forces. This further complicates efforts to transcend polarisation, as competing narratives become entrenched in broader networks of power and resistance.

Ultimately, the Ethiopian case illustrates that political organisation is not a neutral process guided by abstract ideologies but a contested field where narratives construct social realities, define in-groups and out-groups, and legitimise certain forms of action while delegitimising others. The persistence of conflict despite ideological shifts proves that narratives, not doctrines, are the true architects of political mobilisation. Until these narratives are critically examined and their hold on political imagination loosened, Ethiopian politics will remain trapped in cycles of polarisation, where even shared ideological labels cannot mask deeper, irreconcilable visions of the polity.

## **Narratives and Media**

Ten media professionals, representing a diverse cross-section of the industry - including three from state-owned outlets, four from private mainstream media, and three content creators from alternative platforms such as YouTube - participated in a FGD with the researcher. The discussion centred on two key themes: the role of media in shaping and disseminating conflicting narratives in Ethiopia, and the potential actions media elites can take to mitigate the harmful effects of divisive narratives.

Fikirte Lakew, a female participant, noted:

*The conflict patterns in Ethiopia are clear: wars start on social platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube before they manifest in reality. The level of animosity on these platforms is unbearable, yet their audiences continue to grow. It's particularly disturbing that the majority of their audience is young people. Villains can easily and effectively spread*

*their toxic narratives. If we could stop these media wars, it would likely lead to a significant reduction in actual conflicts.*

*(Transcript Media, 2024)*

Another participant Zerihun Tessema said:

*Ethiopia is known for its strict control over media, with state-controlled outlets dominating the government narrative. During the Imperial Regime, state-owned media propagated the "cradle of freedom" narrative. As the student movement gained momentum in the 1970s, semi-clandestine and clandestine print media emerged, including publications like Tagel, Struggle, Democracia, and Yehizb Dimts. These publications disseminated the "Prison of Nations" narrative, illustrating the presence of media on both sides of the ideological divide. I am uncertain if this is a universal trend, but in Ethiopia, people tend to believe news and rumours that are censored by the government; consequently, the 'Prison of Nations' narrative spread like wildfire in summer.*

*In recent years, opposition media has gained strength. ... Nowadays, we are overwhelmed with media outlets, and I fear that our audiences are becoming more confused rather than better informed.*

*(Transcript Media, 2024)*

Kebede Gudetta provided a more structured analysis of the role of media in the dissemination of narratives.

*There are several shortcomings faced by Ethiopian media that have profound implications for their ability to disseminate narratives. I will mention three of them.*

- 1. Political Bias: The most significant shortcoming is political bias. Ethiopian media outlets, especially on social media, are often aligned with specific political parties or movements, presenting biased reports that favour one side over another. ... This alignment can lead to conflicting narratives about political events and policies.*
- 2. Ethnic Loyalty: Another critical issue is loyalty to certain ethnicities. In Ethiopia, it is common to classify media outlets as Amhara, Oromo, Tigray, Somali, Afar, etc. Given Ethiopia's diverse ethnic composition, some media outlets cater to specific*

*ethnic groups, promoting narratives that may conflict with those of other groups. This can exacerbate ethnic tensions and divisions.*

- 3. Sensationalism: To attract audiences, some media outlets may sensationalise events, focusing on dramatic or controversial aspects. This often distorts the reality of situations and creates conflicting perceptions among the public.*

*... Unfortunately, divisive and destructive stories tend to propagate more quickly than constructive ones. .... To a large extent, I believe the media is responsible for disseminating conflicting narratives, which contributes to both violent and non-violent conflicts in Ethiopia.*

*(Transcript Media, 2024)*

The Ethiopian media landscape, whether state-controlled, private, or alternative, does not merely report on societal divisions - it actively shapes, reinforces, and accelerates them. The discussions with media professionals reveal a troubling pattern: narratives that fuel conflict spread faster and more effectively than those promoting cohesion, and media platforms - particularly digital ones - have become battlegrounds where competing visions of Ethiopia's past, present, and future are weaponised.

Fikirte Lakew's observation that "wars start on social platforms before they manifest in reality" underscores the dangerous symbiosis between digital media and real-world violence. Platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, with their algorithmic amplification of polarising content, have become incubators for extremist rhetoric, conspiracy theories, and dehumanising discourse. The fact that young Ethiopians - the country's largest demographic - are the primary consumers of this content suggests that media is not just reflecting societal fractures but actively socialising a new generation into antagonistic worldviews.

Zerihun Tessema's historical analysis highlights a persistent dynamic in Ethiopian media: the state's attempts to control narratives often backfire, driving audiences toward oppositional and clandestine outlets. The imperial regime's "cradle of freedom" propaganda was undermined by the underground press of the 1970s, which popularised the "Prison of Nations" counter-narrative. Today, despite - or perhaps because of - the proliferation of media outlets, the public is not better informed but more fragmented, with each group retreating into its own informational echo chamber. This fragmentation exacerbates distrust, making consensus or even constructive debate increasingly difficult.

Kebede Gudetta's threefold critique - political bias, ethnic loyalty, and sensationalism - explains why Ethiopian media often inflames rather than informs. When media outlets function as extensions of political factions or ethnic entrepreneurs, their reporting ceases to be about truth and instead becomes a tool for mobilisation. Sensationalism further distorts reality, privileging outrage over nuance and deepening societal polarisation. The consequence is a media ecosystem where destructive narratives thrive, not in spite of their harmfulness, but because of their emotional and ideological potency.

While media professionals acknowledge their role in disseminating harmful narratives, the structural incentives of the industry - click-driven revenue, political patronage, and audience segmentation - make meaningful reform difficult. State-controlled media remains a mouthpiece for government narratives, while opposition and ethnic-aligned outlets often prioritise partisan agendas over factual reporting. Social media, with its

lack of editorial oversight and algorithmic rewards for engagement, amplifies the most extreme voices.

The result is a vicious cycle: narratives of grievance and victimisation generate more engagement than messages of unity, ensuring their dominance in public discourse. Until media stakeholders - whether journalists, platforms, or regulators - grapple with these systemic issues, Ethiopian media will continue to be a force for division rather than understanding. The challenge is not simply to produce "better" content but to reshape the very architecture of media consumption, where truth and reconciliation are rewarded over conflict and sensationalism.

Ultimately, the Ethiopian case demonstrates that media does not exist in a vacuum - it is both a product and a producer of the narratives that define political and social life. Without addressing the underlying incentives that make divisive narratives so effective, attempts at media reform will remain superficial, leaving the country trapped in a cycle of narrative-driven conflict.

## **Narratives and Academia**

In the discussion with academicians, several interesting insights were raised regarding the role of academia in creating and disseminating narratives in Ethiopia. Dr. Alazar Teffera related the role of the intelligentsia in disseminating narratives, giving a dreadful example he observed in his young age.

*Unfortunately, Ethiopian academicians have a dismal record in this regard. Some have fabricated and disseminated false narratives to support their theories. I personally recall an instance when a self-proclaimed Marxist informed us that a grain mill owner in our small town, who employed three people, was a capitalist, and the employees were proletariats, while teaching us from Marx's "Capital." During the so-called "revolution," the grain mill was nationalised, the owner was killed, and the three workers became "armed revolutionary guards." These guards later killed many young and educated people in our town, including the same Marxist who had taught us and them [about revolution].*

(Transcript Academicians, 2024)

Dr. Rahel Balcha told the audience that Dr. Alazar's remark, quoted above, had reminded her of "many mishaps committed by the Ethiopian intelligentsia." She then provided two examples of these 'mishaps':

*The infamous "Prisons of Nations" narrative was adopted from Joseph Stalin by Ethiopian academics, the student movement activists. The Nazi slogans "Germany above all" (Deutschland über alles) and "One People, One Reich, One Leader" (Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer) were modified as "Ethiopia First" and "One country, One Leader, Mengistu" by intellectuals serving the Derge. I think we all remember "Ethiopia First" was the official slogan of the Derge.*

(Transcript Academicians, 2024)

The discussion with Ethiopian academics reveals a troubling pattern: rather than serving as impartial producers of knowledge, intellectuals have frequently acted as ideological entrepreneurs - formulating, legitimising, and weaponising narratives that have fuelled real-world violence. The examples provided by Dr. Alazar Teffera and Dr. Rahel Balcha illustrate how academic discourse, when detached from empirical rigour and ethical responsibility, can become a destructive social force.

Dr. Alazar's recollection of the self-proclaimed Marxist lecturer who incited class conflict in his small town serves as a microcosm of a broader phenomenon - the dangerous interplay between abstract theory and lived experience. The lecturer's reductive application of Marx's "Capital" transformed a modest grain mill owner into a "capitalist exploiter" and his three employees into "proletarian revolutionaries." This narrative, though academically tenuous, had deadly consequences: the mill owner was killed, the workers became executioners, and eventually, the lecturer himself fell victim to the revolutionary fervour he had stoked. This episode underscores how intellectual elites, by distilling complex social realities into ideological caricatures, can unleash forces they cannot control.

Dr. Rahel Balcha's observations further demonstrate how Ethiopian academia has historically functioned as an echo chamber for imported extremist ideologies, repackaging them into local narratives of division. The adoption of Stalin's "Prison of Nations" rhetoric by student activists and the Derg's repurposing of Nazi-style slogans ("Ethiopia First," "One Country, One Leader") reveal a disturbing trend: Ethiopian intellectuals have often been more invested in ideological mimicry than in critical, context-sensitive analysis. Rather than challenging these toxic frameworks, they amplified them, embedding them into political discourse with devastating long-term consequences.

These cases expose a paradox: while academia is presumed to be a space for reasoned debate and truth-seeking, in Ethiopia, it has repeatedly served as an incubator for extremist narratives. This raises critical questions:

- Why has Ethiopian academia been so susceptible to ideological capture? The answer likely lies in the politicisation of intellectual life, where scholarship has often been subordinate to political agendas rather than rigorous inquiry.
- How have these narratives persisted despite their catastrophic consequences? Once embedded in institutional memory, divisive narratives become self-replicating, passed down through generations of students who treat them as dogma rather than hypotheses to be tested.
- Can academia reform itself to become a force for reconciliation? Given its historical complicity in legitimising destructive ideologies, meaningful change would require a fundamental reorientation - away from partisan advocacy and towards evidence - based, ethically grounded scholarship.

The legacy of these academic missteps persists today. The "Prison of Nations" narrative, initially propagated by student activists, continues to underpin ethno-nationalist movements, while the Derg's authoritarian slogans find echoes in modern-day exclusionary rhetoric. The grain mill anecdote, though a localised tragedy, symbolises a broader pattern in which intellectual abstractions - untethered from reality - have justified violence and upheaval.

If there is a lesson to be drawn, it is that Ethiopian academia must reckon with its own role in the country's cycles of conflict. Until scholars critically examine how their work has been used to legitimise division - and commit to producing knowledge that resists ideological manipulation - they risk remaining complicit in the very narratives that continue to fracture the nation. The challenge is not merely to study history, but to cease repeating it.

### **Analysis: Narratives as Drivers of Conflict in Ethiopia**

Empirical data from the in-depth interviews and FGDs illuminate how narratives have been employed to weaponise history, constructing polarised identities and perpetuating conflict in Ethiopia. These narratives, articulated by Tigrayan elites, political parties leaders, and academics, are not mere reflections of historical events but active instruments that influence political organisation, media discourse, and academic contributions, often exacerbating ethnic and social divisions. This analysis applies constructivist theory to interpret these dynamics, linking empirical data to scholarly works to elucidate how narratives construct social realities and fuel conflict.

### **Narratives as Constructors of Identity and Conflict**

The narratives recounted by Tigrayan military and intelligence officers demonstrate how historical accounts are weaponised to portray the Tegararu as marginalised victims

under the current administration. These narratives, rooted in historical grievances from the reigns of Menelik II, Haile Selassie I, and the Derg, construct a collective Tigrayan identity as perpetually oppressed, fostering distrust towards groups such as the Shewa Amhara. This recalls the highly controversial book in Amharic authored by GebreKidan Desta (2006), *The Tigray People and the Conspiracy of Chauvinists: From Yesterday to Today* (የትግራይ ህዝብና የትምክህተኞች ሴራ ከትላንት እስከ ዛሬ), published in 2006. GebreKidan Desta's work is a polemical defence of Tigrayan nationalism, presenting Tigray as a historically oppressed region that has resisted domination by Ethiopian centralist forces. The book aligns with TPLF narratives, portraying Tigray's political struggles as a fight against systemic discrimination. The notion that narratives of historical marginalisation strengthen ethnic identities, often to the detriment of national cohesion, has been explored in the works of Legesse Tigabu Mengie (2015) and Bekalu Atnafu Taye (2017). The Tegarü officer's assertion that the Shewa Amhara are the "principal adversary" reflects a constructed rivalry, where narratives of historical contests for the throne and post-EPRDF federalism debates shape contemporary antagonisms, as noted by Jon Abbink (2011), who highlights how ethnic narratives in Ethiopia entrench zero-sum political competition.

Likewise, Tollosa Gabisa's allusion to Orwell's "1984" underscores how individuals or groups construct their own versions of history to justify current territorial claims, such as those over Welkayt (አቻምየለህ ታምሩ, 2012; ዳኝነት አበበ, 2012; ጎንደር ዩኒቨርሲቲ., 2014; Abetew, 2021) or Addis Ababa (ኤርሚያስ ለገሰ, 2006; አምባ የጥናት እና ምርምር ክፍል, 2009; ሀብታሙ መንግሥቱ ተገኘ, 2013). In certain instances, personal and family memoirs have been employed as evidence to substantiate contemporary territorial claims, as exemplified by Andargachew Tsege's memoir, *Let the Generation Not Be Deceived, and We Speak*

(ትውልድ አይደናገር እኛም እንናገር) (አንዳርጋቸው ፅጌ, 2011), with respect to Addis Ababa. This aligns with constructivist perspectives on the malleability of truth, where 'historical evidence' is shaped less by objective facts and more by narrative constructions that legitimise group claims (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 13). Dr. Temesgen Desalegn's account of contested territories like Welkite, where both Gurage and Kebena assert exclusive rights, exemplifies how competing narratives construct irreconcilable realities, leading to violence. Asnake Kefale (2017) corroborates this, arguing that Ethiopia's federal structure amplifies narrative-driven territorial disputes, as ethnic groups leverage historical claims to assert dominance, often overlooking structural challenges such as resource scarcity.

Semira Mohammed's observation that narratives are more potent than ethnicity or religion in driving conflict further supports a constructivist lens. Her depiction of victim narratives among Tigrayans, Amharas, and Oromos illustrates how each group constructs its identity through accounts of historical injustice, inciting "barbaric confrontations." This aligns with the studies by Tewodros Workneh (2021) and Jemal Mohammed Haile (2024) on the role of social media in exacerbating conflict through the fabrication and dissemination of divisive narratives of victimhood, which contribute to self-reinforcing cycles of mistrust and violence. These narratives, as Semira Mohammed notes, are post-1991 phenomena, suggesting that Ethiopia's federal system has provided a structural context for constructing ethnicised realities, a point echoed by Assefa Fiseha (2023), who critiques federalism's role in institutionalising divisive ethnic narratives.

## **Narratives as Tools of Contest over Cities**

The contestation over Ethiopian cities, as elucidated in the FGDs with leaders of ethnic and civic political parties, and academicians underscores the pivotal role of historical narratives in shaping urban disputes. Adopting a constructivist perspective, this analysis interprets these narratives as socially constructed instruments that frame collective identities, legitimise territorial claims, and fuel political contestation over urban spaces such as Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, Harar, and Yabelo.

Historical narratives, as intersubjective constructs, serve as mechanisms through which groups articulate their identities, assert legitimacy, and contest power. In the Ethiopian context, cities such as Addis Ababa are not merely physical spaces but symbolic battlegrounds where competing narratives of belonging and ownership intersect. These narratives are rooted in historical events but are selectively constructed to serve contemporary political ends, reflecting what Benedict Anderson (2006) describes as 'imagined communities' that bind groups through shared myths and memories. The FGDs reveal how ethnic and civic leaders deploy these narratives to claim urban spaces, with each narrative reinforcing a particular vision of identity and entitlement.

*Finfinnee as a Symbol of Identity and Dispossession.* Terfassa Neggassa's contribution to the FGD exemplifies an Oromo-centric narrative that constructs Addis Ababa, referred to as Finfinnee, as a cornerstone of Oromo identity and heritage. His rejection of the name 'Addis Ababa' in favour of 'Finfinnee' is a deliberate act of

narrative construction, emphasising the city's Oromo roots and framing its transformation under Emperor Menelik II as a violent conquest. This narrative aligns with constructivist principles, as it prioritises the intersubjective meaning of Finfinnee as a symbol of Oromo cultural and political centrality over empirical debates about historical events. By invoking Oromo place names such as Gullele and Bole, Terfassa Neggassa constructs a continuity of Oromo presence, positioning the community as the rightful stewards of the city. His narrative of dispossession and cultural erasure reflects a broader Oromo discourse that views urban marginalisation as a continuation of historical injustices (Jalata, 2005). This narrative serves multiple functions. Firstly, it reinforces Oromo identity by anchoring it to a tangible geographical and cultural space. Secondly, it legitimises territorial claims by framing Oromo exclusion from urban governance as a violation of historical rights. Thirdly, it mobilises political action by presenting contemporary policies as perpetuations of past wrongs. From a constructivist perspective, Terfassa Neggassa's narrative is not merely a recounting of history but an active tool for shaping Oromo collective consciousness and challenging dominant power structures.

*Multi-Ethnicity and Historical Complexity.* Haile Meketaw's response introduces a counter-narrative that challenges the Oromo-centric framing of Addis Ababa's history. By emphasising the multi-ethnic composition of the Shewa region and questioning claims of mass eviction, Haile Meketaw constructs a narrative of shared urban development. His reference to anthropological evidence and the transformation of 'uncultivated land' into a capital city underscores a collaborative, multi-ethnic history involving Amhara, Oromo, Gurage, and other communities. This narrative aligns with a constructivist understanding of history as a contested space where multiple truths

coexist, each shaped by the interests and identities of the narrator (Hobsbawm, 1997). Haile Meketaw's invocation of 'Berera'<sup>20</sup> as a potential Amhara precursor to Addis Ababa further illustrates the strategic use of historical narratives to assert alternative claims. By framing the city's development as a collective endeavour, he seeks to delegitimise exclusive ethnic claims and promote a pluralistic urban identity. This narrative serves to counterbalance Oromo assertions while reinforcing Amhara contributions to the city's history, reflecting the constructivist notion that identities are negotiated through competing discourses (Wendt, 1999).

Mohammed Hassen's contribution further complicates the narrative landscape by rejecting the binary Oromo-Amhara framing. His assertion that Addis Ababa belongs to all Ethiopians, including non-Oromo and non-Amhara groups, constructs the city as a shared national space. This narrative aligns with civic nationalism, which prioritises collective citizenship over ethnic particularism (Ignatieff, 1994). Mohammed Hassen's proposal for a special administrative status for Addis Ababa reflects a constructivist approach to conflict resolution, seeking to reframe the city's identity as inclusive rather than contested. By emphasising the contributions of diverse communities, he challenges exclusionary narratives and advocates for a reimagined urban identity that transcends ethnic boundaries.

*Constitutional and Structural Dimensions.* The FGD with civic political party leaders shifts the focus from ethnic narratives to the structural and constitutional factors that

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<sup>20</sup> See Amba Study and Research's "Addis Ababa is Berera; Berera is Addis Ababa" (አምባ የጥናት እና ምርምር ክፍል, 2009); and Habtamu Megistu's "Berera the Predecessor of Addis Ababa" – The Untold History (ሀብታሙ መንግሥቱ ተገኘ, 2013)

amplify urban contestation. Fantahun Gebre's analysis highlights how Ethiopia's federal constitution, by recognising ethnic groups as 'nations and nationalities' with rights to self-determination, transforms urban spaces into sites of territorial competition. This perspective aligns with constructivist arguments that institutional frameworks shape social realities by legitimising certain identities and claims (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). The constitution's emphasis on ethnic sovereignty constructs cities like Addis Ababa as prizes in a zero-sum game, where control over urban spaces becomes synonymous with political power and legitimacy.

Almaz Mameye's contribution deepens this analysis by framing historical narratives as active agents in fuelling conflict. Her observation that competing narratives transform nuanced histories into absolute claims reflects the constructivist principle that narratives are performative, shaping perceptions and driving political action (Ricœur and McLaughlin, 2009). Almaz Mameye's call for recognising cities as 'living archives' of overlapping stories offers a constructivist solution, advocating for a shared urban identity that embraces historical complexity rather than enforcing singular narratives. This approach challenges the politicisation of history and seeks to reconstruct urban spaces as sites of coexistence.

Kebede Assefa's emphasis on the constitution's role in elevating urban disputes further underscores the interplay between institutional frameworks and narrative construction. By formalising ethnic identities, the constitution creates a discursive environment where territorial claims are legitimised through appeals to historical

sovereignty. This dynamic illustrates how state structures and narratives mutually constitute each other, shaping the social reality of urban contestation (Barnett, 2012).

*Implications for Urban Reconciliation.* The FGDs reveal that historical narratives are not static but dynamically constructed to serve contemporary political ends. From a constructivist perspective, these narratives are both products and producers of social reality, shaping group identities and legitimising territorial claims. The competing narratives of Oromo dispossession, multi-ethnic collaboration, and civic nationalism reflect the multiplicity of Ethiopia's urban history, but their politicisation risks perpetuating conflict. To move towards reconciliation, a constructivist approach suggests reframing cities as shared spaces where multiple narratives coexist. This requires institutional mechanisms, such as special administrative statuses, that recognise urban diversity without privileging one group's claims over others.

Moreover, the FGDs highlight the need for dialogue that acknowledges the emotional and symbolic weight of historical narratives. By fostering spaces for mutual recognition of competing histories, Ethiopia can begin to construct a shared urban identity that transcends ethnic divisions. This aligns with constructivist theories of conflict resolution, which emphasise the transformative potential of dialogue in reshaping intersubjective meanings (Lederach, 1997, pp. 26, 39).

The contestation over Ethiopian cities, as articulated in the FGDs, underscores the power of historical narratives in shaping urban identities and conflicts. From a constructivist perspective, these narratives are not mere reflections of history but active tools that construct social realities, legitimise claims, and fuel disputes. The Oromo narrative of dispossession, the multi-ethnic counter-narrative, and the civic call for inclusivity each reflect distinct visions of urban belonging, shaped by the interplay of identity, history, and power. The discussions surrounding Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, Harar, and Yabelo can be extrapolated to other Ethiopian cities, such as Agaro, Moyalle, Shashemene, Welikite, and Weliso where similar dynamics of competing historical narratives and ethnic claims likely shape urban contestation. This analysis underscores the constructivist insight that social realities are malleable, offering hope for reconciliation through the reimagination of urban narratives.

### **Narratives as Tools of Ethnicising Political Organisations**

The empirical data on political organisation reveal how narratives shape Ethiopia's political landscape, often superseding ideological alignments. In the 1970s and 1980s, despite a shared adherence to Marxism-Leninism, groups such as the EPRP, MEISON, and ethnic liberation fronts like the TPLF, OLF, and ONLF engaged in "wars against comrades." These conflicts were driven by competing narratives - whether Ethiopia should remain a unified polity or be viewed as a "Prison of Nations". Constructivism explains this as a clash of socially constructed identities, where narratives defined group boundaries more than ideology (Wendt, 1999, pp. 224–225). Siraj Namaga's dichotomy of Ethiopianist versus ethno-nationalist parties in

contemporary Ethiopia reflects the persistence of these narrative divides, as does Beza Tadesse's account of the ethnicisation of civic parties, such as the Amhara-centric ANDM. This supports Solomon Gebreyohans Gebru's (2014) research finding that Ethiopia's political parties are not ideologically driven or programmatic, but are instead shaped by identity-focused narratives. Hailu Meketau's enigmatic remark about narratives serving "external enemies" suggests that global discourses, such as right-wing populism, interact with local narratives to reinforce divisions, a point Tollosa Gabissa connects to movements like "Oromo First" and "Amhara First." This reflects constructivism's emphasis on the intersubjective nature of reality, where external and internal meanings co-construct conflict dynamics (Checkel, 2006, p. 76). It is also consistent with Andrés Velasco's (2020, pp. 42–43) observation that populism and identity politics are closely interconnected.

Several survivors of the 1970s student activist movement have documented their experiences in Amharic. These predominantly personal stories provide valuable insights into the reciprocal relationship between narratives and political parties, demonstrating how narratives shape political parties and, conversely, how political parties influence narratives. Furthermore, these stories, albeit indirectly, corroborate that the interdependence of narratives, political parties, political elites, and power dynamics has contributed to the ethnicisation of their political platforms (አንዳርጋቸው ጽጌ, 1997; ካሕሳይ አብርሃ ብስራት, 2005; ሕይወት ተፈራ, 2010; Tadellech H/Michael, 2012; ክፍሉ ታደሰ, 2013).

## Media and Academia as Narrative Amplifiers

The media's role in disseminating divisive narratives, as discussed by Fikirte Lakew and Kebede Gudetta, underscores how social platforms and biased outlets construct polarised realities. Fikirte Lakew's observation that conflicts originate on platforms like Facebook highlights how media narratives shape youth perceptions, aligning with Workneh's (2021) and Piazza's (2022) findings on social media's role in escalating Ethiopia's ethnic tensions. Kebede Gudetta's critique of political bias and ethnic loyalty in media reflects constructivism's view of media as a site of meaning-making, where narratives reinforce group identities over national unity (Kefale, 2017).

Academia, as described by Dr. Alazar Teffera and Dr. Rahel Balcha, has also constructed divisive realities by fabricating narratives, such as the Marxist misapplication leading to violence or the Derge's adoption of Stalinist and Nazi-inspired slogans.

A similarly grim historical episode to the one recounted by Dr Rahel Balcha during the focus group discussion with academics - concerning a Marxist student activist who raised "vultures" that later turned against him - unfolded on a larger scale, as described in the memoir እኛና አብዮቱ (*We and the Revolution*) by Fikresillase Wegderes, who served as Prime Minister under the Derg military regime. He recalls that the military organising committee (the Derg) was formed on three separate occasions. The first iteration, comprising approximately thirteen low-ranking officers, secured a pay rise, praised the Emperor with wishes for his eternal reign, and subsequently disbanded.

The second formation was dissolved as a result of infiltration by government agents. However, Marxist students denounced the military as *hoddam* (gluttonous) and agitated for radical change. Their mobilisation succeeded, leading to the formation of a more radical third Derg, composed of around 108 members. This third Derg initially targeted and eliminated members of the aristocracy, before ultimately turning against the very Marxist students who had catalysed its rise (Feqraśelāsé Wagedaras, 2014, pp. 45–79).

These examples illustrate how intellectuals shape social realities through narrative production, often with catastrophic consequences. Gedu Andargachew Alene (2024) critiques the role of Ethiopian academia in legitimising ethnic narratives, noting that intellectual discourses often prioritise collective rights and group grievances over individual rights and inclusive historical accounts, thereby perpetuating conflict. Barhu Zewde's (2010) remarkable work, *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement: An Exercise in Oral History*, illustrates how intellectual infantilism and revolutionary zeal consumed the brightest minds of the 1960s and 1970s, ultimately leading them to be swept away by the ideological fervour surrounding the "National Question."

To sum up, narratives in Ethiopia are not passive accounts of history but active instruments that construct social realities, identities, and conflicts. The empirical data reveal how political elites, civic leaders, media, and academics employ narratives to frame historical grievances, shape political organisations, and amplify divisions. Scholars such as Jon Abbink (2011), Alene (2024), Berger and Luckmann (1966), Checkel (2006), Fiseha (2023), Gebru (2014), Haile (2024), Kefale (2017), Mengie

(2015), Piazza (2022), Taye (2017), Velasco (2020), Wendt (1999), Workneh (2021), and Zewde (2010) underscore how these narratives, embedded in Ethiopia's federal structure and amplified by media and academia, entrench ethnicised realities.

## **Key Insights**

Employing a constructivist lens, this analysis reveals that historical narratives in Ethiopia function as potent instruments of social and political construction, rather than as passive recollections of the past. Empirical evidence, gathered from FGds and in-depth interviews with a spectrum of military, intelligence, political, media, and academic figures, demonstrates that these narratives actively forge collective identities, legitimise territorial claims, and perpetuate conflict across ethnic, urban, political, and symbolic spheres. The analysis identifies a self-reinforcing cycle wherein narratives shape identities, which in turn solidify those very narratives, rendering disputes over land, representation, and history seemingly intractable. This dynamic is notably evident in the entrenched rivalry between Tigrayan and Shewa Amhara groups, where historical grievances are framed within a paradigm of perpetual victimhood.

The institutionalisation of these divisions through Ethiopia's ethnic federalism has codified competing historical claims into governance structures, thereby transforming fluid historical debates into rigid political realities. Urban centres such as Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, Harar, and Yabelo become exemplary sites of contestation, where competing narratives construct exclusive claims to space and belonging, effectively

transforming cities into living archives of overlapping histories. Concurrently, political organisation is shown to be driven more by these foundational narratives than by ideological alignment, a phenomenon observable in historical conflicts between Marxist-Leninist groups and in the contemporary polarisation between Ethiopianist and ethno-nationalist parties.

Furthermore, the media and academia are identified as critical sites for the production and amplification of divisive narratives. Digital media platforms socialise youth into polarised worldviews, while sections of academia have historically legitimised toxic discourses, illustrating their complicity in shaping conflictual social realities. The implications of these findings are dualistic. On one hand, the deeply embedded nature of these narratives within institutions presents a formidable challenge, often leading to a rigidity wherein political reforms are interpreted through lenses of suspicion, thereby perpetuating cycles of conflict.

On the other hand, the constructivist emphasis on the malleability of social realities offers a pathway for mitigation. The potential exists to transcend divisive narratives through a multi-faceted approach. This includes institutional reforms to de-emphasise ethnic territoriality, such as re-framing contested cities as shared administrative spaces. Media regulation and initiatives to promote civic content are critical to countering sensationalism and misinformation. Academia is urged to shift from ideological advocacy towards evidence-based scholarship that documents diverse perspectives, thereby fostering a more inclusive national memory. The establishment of dialogue platforms is essential for the mutual recognition of grievances and the

renegotiation of exclusivist claims. Additionally, addressing the politicisation of national symbols by reframing them as shared heritage is paramount. Ultimately, the challenge involves cultivating counter-narratives of coexistence that embrace Ethiopia's diversity as a source of strength, thereby moving beyond a fragmented political imagination towards a more cohesive national future.

## **Chapter 7: Suggested Solutions and Lessons Learnt**

### **Introduction**

This chapter offers a comprehensive synthesis and critical evaluation of recommendations derived from an extensive qualitative study conducted in Ethiopia between August 18 and September 18, 2024. The research draws upon (FGDs) with senior leaders from civic and ethnic political parties, alongside community leaders, academics, and media professionals. These discussions were complemented by in-depth interviews with high-ranking government officials, military officers, and other prominent figures, creating a rich and multifaceted tapestry of perspectives from Ethiopia's political and social elite. By foregrounding verbatim quotations from participants, this chapter ensures that the authentic voices of those deeply embedded within Ethiopia's socio-political structures remain central to the analysis. This approach not only amplifies their insights but also grounds the discourse in the lived realities of the nation's complex dynamics, offering a nuanced understanding of its challenges and opportunities.

The study adopts a constructivist theoretical framework, which provides a robust lens for examining the interplay of identity, power, and narrative construction in shaping Ethiopia's polarised socio-political landscape. Constructivism postulates that social realities are not fixed or objective but are co-constructed through intersubjective interactions, where actors' identities, historical experiences, and shared meanings inform their perceptions, preferences, and actions (Checkel, 2006; Hopf, 2007, pp.

55–84; Adler, 2019, pp. 35–72). This perspective is particularly apt for analysing Ethiopia, where competing historical narratives - such as Ethiopia as a “cradle of civilisation” celebrating its ancient statehood and resistance to colonialism, or a “prison of nations” highlighting histories of subjugation and exclusion - have long fuelled conflict and division. The FGDs and interviews reveal the emergence of a third, reconciliatory narrative that seeks to bridge these extremes, alongside practical proposals for fostering peace and unity. These include inclusive dialogue, comprehensive constitutional reform, leadership transformation, and institutional reforms targeting academia and media. Each recommendation is deeply embedded in the subjective realities of Ethiopia’s diverse stakeholders, reflecting the constructivist emphasis on negotiated meanings and collective identity formation.

The centrality of dialogue as a proposed solution underscores a shared normative commitment among participants to resolve Ethiopia’s deep-seated conflicts through mutual engagement. Father Haddis Meleket’s assertion that the government must “use its ears more than its arms” encapsulates this belief, reflecting a consensus that dialogue is essential for building lasting peace. However, scepticism about the NDC reveals significant challenges in translating this norm into practice. Critics, including opposition leaders and community representatives, question the NDC’s independence, viewing it as a tool of the ruling PP rather than a genuinely inclusive platform. This distrust, particularly pronounced in regions like Tigray and Amhara, highlights the difficulty of achieving mutual understanding in a context marked by historical grievances and ongoing instability. Constructivism suggests that dialogue’s success depends on fostering shared meanings and trust, which requires

acknowledging past injustices and ensuring broad participation from marginalised groups.

Constitutional reform emerges as another pivotal recommendation, reflecting a broad consensus on the need to address structural flaws in Ethiopia's ethnic federalism framework. The 1995 Constitution, with its emphasis on ethnic-based autonomy and provisions like the right to secession, is seen by many as exacerbating tensions and hindering national unity. Proposals for reform range from shifting to geographic federalism and creating equal-sized states to banning ethnic-based political parties. However, supporters of the current framework, particularly from ethnic parties like the TPLF, argue that it safeguards marginalised groups, attributing conflicts to implementation failures rather than design. This divergence underscores how constitutional reform is interpreted through competing identities and narratives of fairness, aligning with constructivist insights into the role of power and identity in shaping institutional legitimacy. A successful reform process must navigate these divides through inclusive dialogue, balancing regional autonomy with national cohesion to forge a shared constitutional vision.

Leadership transformation is a recurring theme, with widespread dissatisfaction towards the PP and its leader reflecting a crisis of legitimacy. Critics highlight a disconnect between the party's civic-oriented rhetoric and practices perceived as authoritarian, including ethnic favouritism and political repression. The infusion of religious narratives, particularly linked to prosperity gospel, raises concerns about violations of Ethiopia's secular constitutional order, potentially sowing seeds for new

conflicts. Conversely, some participants commend the PP's efforts to foster unity through initiatives like the Pretoria Agreement. These contrasting perspectives illustrate how leadership legitimacy is constructed through narratives and lived experiences, as constructivism posits. Calls for authentic and transformational leadership - emphasising integrity, transparency, and inclusivity - reflect a desire for leaders who can transcend ethnic and religious divides, inspiring a collective vision for Ethiopia's future.

Institutional reforms targeting academia and media are proposed to counter divisive narratives and empower youth, who constitute Ethiopia's demographic majority. Participants advocate for integrating critical thinking and peace education into university curricula, reviving academic debate, and fostering collaboration with non-academic actors to challenge toxic narratives. Similarly, media reforms focus on establishing independent fact-checking mechanisms, promoting media literacy, and incentivising peace-oriented content to reshape public discourse. These recommendations align with constructivist principles, recognising academia and media as critical sites for narrative construction that can either perpetuate division or foster unity. By empowering youth and promoting critical engagement with narratives, these reforms aim to cultivate a shared national identity rooted in mutual understanding.

The methodological approach of this study, combining FGDs and in-depth interviews, ensures a robust and inclusive dataset that captures the diversity of Ethiopia's socio-political landscape. Conducted across multiple regions, the FGDs involved senior

leaders from civic and ethnic political parties, community figures, academics, and media professionals, providing a broad spectrum of perspectives. The in-depth interviews with government officials, military officers, and other elites further enriched the analysis, offering insights into the power dynamics and institutional constraints shaping Ethiopia's challenges. By prioritising verbatim quotations, the chapter ensures that participants' voices are not only heard but also critically engaged within broader academic and policy debates. This approach aligns with constructivist epistemology, which values subjective meanings and lived experiences as central to understanding social realities.

The findings highlight both the promise and peril of Ethiopia's current trajectory. The emergence of a reconciliatory narrative, alongside consensus on dialogue, constitutional reform, and leadership transformation, signals a latent capacity for change. However, entrenched distrust, identity-based divisions, and ongoing conflicts in regions like Amhara and Oromia pose significant obstacles. The NDC's lack of legitimacy, rooted in perceptions of PP control, risks reproducing exclusions unless restructured to include dissenting voices. Constitutional reform, while widely supported, must navigate competing identities to avoid alienating groups who value ethnic autonomy. Leadership transformation requires moving beyond populist rhetoric to actionable commitments, addressing ethnic and religious grievances. Academic and media reforms offer opportunities to reshape societal narratives, but their success depends on institutional independence and public engagement.

This chapter's significance lies in its ability to capture the intricate interplay of political, social, and cultural dynamics in Ethiopia's evolving landscape. By grounding the analysis in the voices of its participants, it offers a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing the nation. The constructivist framework illuminates how narratives, identities, and power shape Ethiopia's conflicts and potential solutions, underscoring the transformative potential of co-constructed approaches. The chapter delineates a roadmap for advancing peace, stability, and sustainable development, emphasising inclusive dialogue, structural reform, and authentic leadership. It highlights the lessons learnt from this comprehensive research, providing policymakers and scholars with a conceptual toolkit to navigate Ethiopia's complex socio-political terrain. Ultimately, it underscores the possibility of reimagining Ethiopia as a shared home, where diverse histories are woven into a cohesive narrative of unity and prosperity.

## **Dialogue**

All participants expressed their belief that public and/or elite dialogue is essential for addressing Ethiopia's deep-seated conflicts and building a foundation for lasting peace. Father Haddis Melekot, a member of the clergy, emphasised the role of dialogue during the FGD with community leaders, without directly commenting on the ongoing process. He stated:

*The solution .... lies in the government prioritising dialogue and understanding over force. It must learn to use its ears more than its*

*arms. Only through such an approach can we hope to achieve lasting peace and stability*

*(Transcript Community, 2024)*

However, there is a split regarding the practicality of dialogue under the current National Dialogue Commission (NDC). Most participants of the FGD are sceptical about the NDC and its processes, while a few argue that perfectionism is not what is needed now. Below are the direct quotations from the participants of the FGDs and interviewees.

### **Suggestions Supporting the Ongoing Process**

The high-ranking government official, who is also a member of the central committee of PP, stated the following in an in-depth interview with the researcher:

*The Ethiopian parliament enacted Proclamation No. 1265, which constituted the National Dialogue Commission. This legislation outlines the framework and objectives for the commission, aiming to facilitate inclusive and constructive dialogue among various stakeholders in Ethiopia. The success of this commission could lead to solutions for many of the problems we currently face due to conflicting narratives.*

*... This is truly an exceptional opportunity. We Ethiopians have never had such an opportunity before. Any issue is open for discussion, and what is needed are plausible arguments. Based on the outcome of the dialogue, the commission has the mandate to propose amendments to the constitution. Issues that cannot be resolved through discussion may be put to a referendum. Sadly, some political parties have failed to understand this and have sabotaged the process by officially withdrawing from the dialogue.*

*... The commissioners are assigned by the parliament based on popular nominations. I am not saying the process is 100% clean - there is no*

*such thing. ... For any good-intentioned person, the right thing to do is to actively participate in the National Dialogue.*

(Transcript Gov Official, 2024)

A PP executive committee member stated the following in an in-depth interview with the researcher:

*From its inception, the PP has prioritised engaging all political parties and social groups in meaningful dialogue. One of the first major decisions made by our President, who also serves as the Prime Minister, was the establishment of two critical commissions: the Reconciliation Commission and the Borders and Identity Commission. Notably, leaders from opposition parties were appointed as commissioners, reflecting our commitment to inclusivity. However, these commissions faced challenges, primarily due to the inactivity of some commissioners. Recognising these shortcomings, the PP conducted an internal evaluation and established the National Dialogue Commission, which is currently in the process of collecting agendas for dialogue. We remain hopeful that this initiative will pave the way for a more harmonious and unified society. Regrettably, some political parties have chosen to withdraw from this process, citing reasons that lack substantive merit. Nonetheless, the PP remains steadfast in its commitment to fostering open and inclusive dialogue with all political stakeholders, irrespective of ideological differences, to bridge divides and build consensus on pressing national issues.*

....

*The PP has consistently prioritised peace and dialogue as central pillars of its governance. Initiatives such as the establishment of the National Dialogue Commission and the inclusion of opposition leaders in government demonstrate our commitment to resolving conflicts through inclusive and democratic means. However, peacebuilding is a complex and often arduous process. Setbacks are inevitable, particularly when certain groups choose to pursue violence over dialogue. It is important to acknowledge that there are political elites and factions who perceive peace as a threat to their interests. These actors will go to great lengths to undermine the peacebuilding process, perpetuating instability for their own gain.*

(Transcript PP Official, 2024)

Mohammed Ahmed, a member of the executive committee of a civic party and a participant in the FGD with leaders of civic political parties, was the only person in the FGD to speak in support of the ongoing national dialogue process. He stated:

*I have two main concerns regarding this issue. First, several political parties demand an ideal situation for dialogue, even though they know such a situation doesn't exist. ... . If we wait for an ideal situation, we are bound to fail. Second, I am concerned because these parties seem detached from the communities they claim to represent. So far, not a single sector of society has opposed the national dialogue - only political parties have. This suggests to me that these parties fail to understand the will of the people.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

### **Suggestions Expressing Concern on the Ongoing Process**

Ato Kassahun Ollone, the former member of the Reconciliation Commission stated the following in FGD with community leaders:

*The core issue lies not in identifying the right strategy but in its implementation. It is widely acknowledged that a national dialogue can serve as a pathway to reconciliation, constitutional reform, internal restructuring, and other critical solutions. However, for such a dialogue to be effective, it must be genuine and inclusive. If the process is politicised, manipulated, or corrupted, it will fail to achieve its intended outcomes. Unfortunately, the current government appears to view these processes primarily as tools for propaganda rather than meaningful engagement. This approach undermines the potential of national dialogue and leaves me sceptical about its effectiveness. Moving forward, what is needed is a truly authentic and participatory national dialogue - one that diverges significantly from the superficial and politically motivated version proposed by this government.*

(Transcript Community, 2024)

Mirsak Shemsu of FGD with civic party leaders stated:

*... the PP government has theoretically taken the right steps, but their practical execution is problematic. Initially, there was the Reconciliation Commission, which, after a few years of inactivity, was quietly dissolved without proper scrutiny. A thorough assessment of the successes and failures of the Reconciliation Commission could have provided valuable insights, but to my knowledge, this has not been done.*

*The National Dialogue Commission is currently in charge. While I believe such a commission is essential for facilitating genuine dialogue among various societal groups, this one has faced significant challenges from the start. It lacks broad acceptance, with several political parties, including mine, accusing it of lacking independence and viewing it as an instrument of the PP. Additionally, the commission has been unable to operate in several regional states and zones, including Tigray (due to dissatisfaction with the process) and Amhara (due to a lack of enabling peace and security). These issues make me sceptical about the commission's effectiveness.*

*So far, major political parties such as the Enat Party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) have boycotted the commission. As we know, these parties are among the most influential in our country. I suggest that the government ensure an acceptable level of peace and stability in the country. Then, the existing commission should first build its credibility by engaging with various stakeholders and making necessary arrangements, or the entire process should be restarted.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

Tessema Hailu, a participant in the FGD with leaders of civic political parties, underlined that although national dialogue is virtuous, it is currently premature and untimely. He stated:

*I haven't heard anyone oppose the virtuous of national dialogue. However, those who distance themselves from the current process emphasise three issues: (1) the need for stability before dialogue, (2) the legitimacy of the process through which the commission members*

*were elected, and (3) the impartiality of the commission members. I personally share all these concerns.*

*Today, our country is at war with itself. Although the guns are silent in Tigray, the security situation remains fragile due to unresolved issues, including territorial claims. The active conflict has shifted to Amhara and parts of Oromia, and the new regional states in the South are not at peace. Effective dialogue cannot occur under such conditions. I agree with those who argue that stability must precede dialogue. Furthermore, the election process for the commissioners lacked inclusivity and consultation, raising concerns about the commission's impartiality. Therefore, I believe the national dialogue initiative is premature and untimely.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

Beza Tadesse, a participant of FGD with leaders of civic political parties stated:

*For me, the solution is clear: we need an elite dialogue<sup>21</sup>. The current process has key shortcomings that must be addressed. Peace and stability should be restored, and an amicable political environment should be built for effective dialogue. This process should be led by an independent body and must be inclusive and participatory. If these prerequisites are met, I anticipate several positive outcomes from this dialogue, such as a broader consensus on a unified narrative about the concept of Ethiopia. I hope this narrative will be rooted in the shared history of the Ethiopian people.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

Mohammed Hassen from FGD with leaders of ethnic parties stated:

*.... the country urgently needs elite dialogue. The national dialogue proposed by the PP could be a good solution if we had a reliable mediator and trustworthy leadership; sadly, we currently have neither.*

(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)

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<sup>21</sup> . Some participants use “elite dialogue” and “public dialogue” interchangeably

Assgedech Gelagay of FGD with leaders of ethnic political parties stated:

*... national dialogue can be a solution; however, the independence of the NDC is questionable. Many [political] parties, including mine, have withdrawn from the process due to a lack of confidence in the commissioners. ... it is futile to expect anything positive from the PP.*

*We desperately need new leadership with a unifying agenda for constitutional reform through open and genuine dialogue.*

....

*... . As things are unfolding, the national dialogue will take place without the participation of most regional political parties. The PP claims that the people are represented by various associations. However, ... these associations are undercover PP. Therefore, it seems the PP is ready to hold a dialogue with itself. Although I am an ardent supporter of national dialogue, I do not see much prospect with the current process.*

*(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)*

Tamerat Lemma, a participant of the same FGD stated similar opinion:

*... . The PP is willing to dialogue only with itself and a few like-minded parties. For instance, Tigray is not fully part of the dialogue. Most of Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, and a substantial part of Oromia cannot participate due to stability issues. Political parties are withdrawing from the dialogue one after another due to a lack of confidence in the process and unlawful repression of their leaders and members. The complete capture of the civil service and civil society is what the PP inherited from the EPRDF; therefore, the so-called people and civil society representatives are PP members. I don't think the public dialogue will be successful under PP leadership.*

*I believe the right course of action is as follows: First, the government should ensure at least relative peace and an acceptable level of human security across the country. Then, it should invite stakeholders to restart the process. The ongoing process is flawed; it is dead on arrival.*

*(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)*

In the interview with the researcher, a high-ranking military officer and member of the Interim Government of Tigray stated:

*My expectations for the commission are low. There have been two previous commissions whose outcomes and dissolutions remain a mystery to us. Moreover, the establishment of the Ministry of Peace by this government has not yielded any significant results, despite its clear mandate. Under their supervision, we have only seen our situation worsen. I hold little hope that the new NDC will bring about any change. In contrast, what you are currently undertaking, specifically independent academic initiatives, may prove more effective than these government-endorsed, partisan displays.*

*(Transcript Tigray Elite 1, 2024)*

In an interview, a veteran ideologist of the TPLF asserted:

*The first step is to acknowledge that we are in trouble. Then, the political elite must engage in genuine dialogue. If there is genuine dialogue, solutions will be discovered. I am not referring to the national dialogue that the government is promoting loudly. This dialogue has alienated Tigray from the start. A genuine dialogue must recognise the atrocities committed in Tigray and deliver justice. Only after that can we search for solutions.*

*(Transcript Tigray Elite 4 & 5, 2024)*

Based on the data gathered from the FGDs and interviews, the following points can be highlighted regarding the respondents' views on the benefits of dialogue in Ethiopia and the role of the NDC.

1. Dialogue as a Shared Norm.

All respondents endorse dialogue as essential for addressing Ethiopia's conflicts, aligning with constructivism's emphasis on intersubjective norms

(Checkel, 1998, 2018; Fierke, 2015). Father Haddis Melekot's call for the government to "use its ears more than its arms" (Transcript Community, 2024) reflects a shared belief in dialogue as a normative pathway to peace. However, the divergence in views on the NDC's legitimacy reveals how differing interpretations of "genuine" dialogue are shaped by social and political identities. Constructivism holds that norms gain legitimacy through mutual understanding; however, the scepticism expressed by many respondents indicates a lack of shared meaning regarding the purpose and process of the NDC.

## 2. Identity and Trust in the NDC

Supporters of the NDC, such as the PP official and Mohammed Ahmed, frame it as an inclusive, unprecedented opportunity (Transcript Civic Parties, 2024; Transcript Gov Official, 2024). Conversely, critics like Kassahun Ollone and Mirsak Shemsu question the NDC's independence, perceiving it as a tool of PP propaganda (Transcript Community, 2024; Transcript Civic Parties, 2024). For Tigrayan respondents, the National Dialogue Commission's failure to address past atrocities undermines its credibility, as they believe that any meaningful dialogue must first acknowledge their collective suffering. This aligns with constructivist arguments that trust emerges from shared historical narratives (Risse, 2000, pp. 2–25; Björkdahl, 2012, pp. 83–90), which the NDC currently lacks.

## 3. Power and Narrative Construction.

Constructivism highlights how power influences the construction of narratives (Jabri, 1996, p. 12; Barnett, 2011). The PP's narrative of inclusivity, articulated

by the government official and PP executive, seeks to legitimise the NDC by emphasising its parliamentary mandate (Transcript Gov Official, 2024; Transcript PP Official, 2024). However, critics like Tessema Hailu and Assgedech Gelagay argue that the PP's control over civil society and commissioner appointments renders the process exclusionary (Transcript Civic Parties, 2024; Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024). This contestation reflects a struggle over who defines the "national" in national dialogue, with the PP accused of monopolising the narrative to marginalise dissenting voices. The call for stability as a prerequisite for dialogue, voiced by Beza Tadesse and Tamerat Lemma, underscores how material conditions shape constructed meanings (Transcript Civic Parties, 2024; Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024). Ongoing conflicts in Amhara and Oromia create a context where dialogue is seen as premature, highlighting the interplay between physical security and discursive legitimacy.

#### 4. Implications for Peacebuilding.

From a constructivist lens, the NDC's success hinges on fostering a shared understanding among Ethiopia's diverse actors. The current polarisation suggests that without addressing issues of trust, inclusivity, and historical grievances, the dialogue risks reinforcing divisions rather than resolving them. An independent, transparent NDC that prioritises regional engagement and acknowledges past injustices could align with these principles, creating a space for co-constructing a unified Ethiopian narrative.

The respondents' positions on Ethiopia's national dialogue reflect a constructivist dynamic where meanings, identities, and power shape the legitimacy of peacebuilding efforts. While dialogue is a shared norm, its practical realisation is contested due to divergent identities and distrust in the NDC's process. A genuinely inclusive dialogue, grounded in mutual recognition and historical accountability, is essential for constructing a shared path to peace.

## **Constitutional Reform**

The second most frequently mentioned solution in the FGDs and in-depth interviews has been constitutional reform. Many participants called for comprehensive constitutional reform as a means of addressing Ethiopia's long-standing conflicts. Most participants argued that the current constitution, which grants significant autonomy and the right to secession to ethnicity-based groups referred to as "nations" or "nationalities", has exacerbated ethnic tensions and hindered national unity. However, some respondents expressed support for the existing constitutional framework.

### **Voices Supporting the Current Constitution**

Yared Tesfaye and Terfassa Negassa, participants in the FGD with leaders of ethnic political parties, have strongly advocated for the current constitution. Their full statement is cited in Chapter 5 of this thesis. Specifically, Yared Tesfaye expressed a firm stance, affirming that "anything less than [the right to secession] would not reflect

the reality on the ground and, therefore, would not be acceptable” (Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024). Two founding members of the TPLF, along with a high-ranking military officer, have also defended the constitution, arguing that it is the most appropriate framework for Ethiopia’s socio-political realities. According to them, the issue lies in its poor implementation (See reference in Chapter 5).

### **Voices for Constitutional Reform**

Tessema Hailu identifies the issue of sovereignty as a critical matter necessitating constitutional amendment:

*The naivety of the leftist movement cost Ethiopia in many ways. The secession of Eritrea, the failure to secure access to the sea, and the adoption of a Yugoslavian and Soviet-style constitution are all consequences of this insensitivity.*

...

*Unfortunately, the current constitution places too much emphasis on language diversity, which should not have been such a significant factor. ... Sovereignty should lie with the federation, not the member states.*

(FGD Civic Parties, 2024)

Beza Tadesse stated “I look forward to amending the constitution, particularly the articles that have been toxic and divisive” (FGD Civic Parties, 2024). She further pinpointed Article 8, Article 39, and Article 40 of the constitution as “toxic” (see section 5). Fantahun Gebre listed 12 major changes (FGD Civic Parties, 2024) he wants to see in the constitution (See Table 4 in Section 5).

Misrak Shemsu, a participant of FGD with leaders of civic party leaders, stated that she wants the constitution to ban ethnic parties She stated:

*I prefer that the new constitution include an article prohibiting the organisation of political parties on ethnic grounds. Some African countries have such constitutional provisions and are doing much better than us in this regard. Alternatively, this provision could be enacted through party law. In any case, I want to use this opportunity to highlight the banning of ethnic parties as a solution to the problems we face today.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

Gebre-Kirstos Kahssay, a participant in FGD with leaders of civic political parties, gave his detailed suggestions of what he wants to see in the revised constitution:

*Apart from the details, the essential issues we want the new constitution to address are: (1) a shift from ethnic federalism to geographic federalism; (2) a stronger federal state than the current arrangement; (3) a presidential rather than a parliamentary form of government; and (4) a proportional electoral system instead of the current first-past-the-post system. Personally, I support banning ethnic parties, although I am sceptical about its practicality.*

*While I support a federal arrangement, the criteria for creating member states should not be based on language or ethnicity. Instead, every member state should be multi-ethnic and multi-religious. "Purity" should not be an explicit or hidden criterion. It is also essential to consider the relative sizes of the member states. For example, look at the disparity between Oromia and Harari. Oromia is about 1,050 times larger than Harari, 54 times larger than Sidama, and 12 times larger than Benishangul-Gumuz. Nevertheless, Oromo nationalists have territorial claims against all their neighbours. I don't think we can have a healthy federalism with such a huge disparity.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

Mohammed Hassen, a participant in the FGD with leaders of ethnic parties, expressed his desire to see member states of comparable size.

*We are products of this constitution. Without it, we could have been leaders or members of political parties open to all citizens, rather than representing specific groups. Interestingly, this constitution did not even serve its primary author, the TPLF, as it failed to prevent the recent war in Tigray. The constitution itself is one of the causes of the war that devastated Tigray by promising sovereignty that cannot materialise. The constitution they authored has locked them into a position as a permanent minority in Ethiopian politics. You might have noticed that there is a growing voice against the constitution in Tigray.*

*I believe the current constitution does not foster sustainable peace because it perpetuates the marginalisation of some regional states. Major regions like Oromia and Amhara dominate both chambers of parliament. We need states of comparable size and equal representation in the House of the Federation to ensure fairness and stability.*

(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)

In an in-depth interview the PP official expressed his party conviction regarding constitutional amendment: “Any constitutional amendment is possible, provided that it adheres to the proper procedures. One of the significant advantages of a national dialogue is its potential to facilitate discussions on such critical issues” (Transcript PP Official, 2024). The high-ranking government official also gave similar statement: “Based on the outcome of the dialogue, the commission has the mandate to propose amendments to the constitution. Issues that cannot be resolved through discussion may be put to a referendum (Transcript Gov Official, 2024).

Based on the data gathered from the FGDs and in-depth interviews, the following points can be highlighted concerning the respondents' positions regarding constitutional reform in Ethiopia.

### 1. Constitutional Reform as a Contested Norm

The call for constitutional reform emerges as a prominent solution to Ethiopia's conflicts, yet its meaning is contested. Critics like Tessema Hailu and Gebre-Kirstos Kahssay argue that the current ethnic federalism exacerbates divisions, advocating amendments to foster national unity (Transcript Civic Parties, 2024). Conversely, supporters such as Yared Tesfaye and TPLF members defend the constitution's ethnic-based autonomy, particularly the right to secession, as essential to Ethiopia's diverse reality (Transcript Civic Parties, 2024). This divergence underscores how the norm of constitutional reform is interpreted through differing lenses of identity and historical experience.

### 2. Identity and the Constitution's Legitimacy

Supporters of the current constitution, including TPLF founders and ethnic party leaders, view ethnic federalism as a safeguard for marginalised groups, reflecting identities tied to ethnic and/or regional autonomy. Their defence of provisions like the right to secession stems from a narrative of historical marginalisation, where the constitution is seen as a protective framework. In contrast, critics like Beza Tadesse and Misrak Shemsu, often aligned with civic or pan-Ethiopian identities, perceive the constitution as divisive, blaming articles like 8, 39, and 40 for fuelling ethnic tensions (Transcript Civic Parties,

2024). Their call for banning ethnic parties or shifting to geographic federalism reflects their prioritising national cohesion over ethnic particularism. Mohammed Hassen's critique, as an ethnic party leader, illustrates a nuanced identity conflict. He acknowledges the constitution's role in enabling his political existence but argues it marginalises smaller regions like his, advocating for states of comparable size. This highlights how even within ethnic-based identities, perceptions of fairness and representation vary, shaped by regional power disparities.

### 3. Power and Narrative Construction

Constructivism emphasises how power influences narrative construction (Guzzini, 2013). Critics like Gebre-Kirstos Kahssay challenge the constitution's ethnic federalism, citing disparities between regions like Oromia and Harari as sources of instability (Transcript Civic Parties, 2024). Their narrative frames the constitution as a product of flawed leftist ideologies, linking it to Eritrea's secession and Ethiopia's loss of sea access. This narrative seeks to redefine sovereignty as residing with the federal state, challenging the current decentralised model.

Supporters, however, wield the narrative of ethnic self-determination, rooted in the TPLF's historical struggle, to legitimise the constitution. Their claim that poor implementation, not the constitution itself, is the issue reflects an attempt to preserve a power structure that empowers regional elites. The PP official and government official's openness to amendments through dialogue (Transcript

PP Official, 2024; Transcript Gov Official, 2024) suggests a strategic narrative, positioning the ruling party as flexible while maintaining control over the reform process, aligning with constructivist views on power in shaping discourse (Guzzini, 2013).

#### 4. Implications for Conflict Resolution

From a constructivist perspective, constitutional reform's success depends on forging a shared understanding among Ethiopia's diverse actors. The polarisation between ethnic and civic identities indicates that reform risks entrenching divisions unless it addresses competing narratives of fairness and unity. Constructivism advocates inclusive, iterative processes to build trust (Adler, 2013). A dialogue-driven reform process, as suggested by PP officials, could facilitate this, but only if it genuinely engages marginalised voices and acknowledges historical grievances, particularly from regions like Tigray and Amhara (Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024).

The respondents' positions on constitutional reform reflect constructivist dynamics where identities, power, and narratives shape Ethiopia's constitutional debate. While reform is a shared goal for many, its interpretation varies, with ethnic federalism seen as both a solution and a problem. A transparent, inclusive reform process is essential to co-construct a constitution that balances regional autonomy with national unity, fostering sustainable peace.

## Leadership

Many participants of FGDs and interviews expressed their strong resentment and dissatisfaction toward the ruling party, PP, as well as its chairman, who serves as the PM of the federal government; although there are few who expressed their support.

## Voices Supporting PP

Tollosa Gabisa, a participant of FGD with leaders of civic political parties, stated:

*... The PP emerged in December 2019 with a civic-oriented programme that respects and acknowledges the diverse nations and nationalities within Ethiopia. This was achieved through a merger of eight ethnic parties, three of which were members of the EPRDF. I think this is a significant step in the history of Ethiopia's political parties. While I do not agree with the PP in many other areas, I commend its efforts to gradually move away from ethnic politics toward civic politics.*

(FGD Civic Parties, 2024)

The other positive comments about the PP heard by this researcher were from the PP leaders themselves. A high-ranking government official, who is also a central committee member of the PP, praised his own party as follows:

*... The PP demonstrated leadership by taking decisive steps to end the conflict through the Pretoria Agreement and has since focused on reconstruction, reconciliation, and the implementation of the agreement. ....*

*The PP has consistently prioritised peace and dialogue as central pillars of its governance. Initiatives such as the establishment of the National Dialogue Commission and the inclusion of opposition leaders in government demonstrate our commitment to resolving conflicts through inclusive and democratic means. ....*

*The PP remains steadfast in its vision of a united, prosperous, and inclusive Ethiopia. ... The PP... remains committed to fostering national unity, economic development, and a peaceful future for all Ethiopians.*

(Transcript PP Official, 2024)

### **Voices Criticising PP and Its Leadership.**

Siraj Namaga of FGD with leaders of civic political parties said “I don't believe PP is genuinely moving towards civic politics. Instead, civility seems to be a facade for PP” (FGD Civic Parties, 2024). Almaz Mameye, a participant of FGD with civic party leaders, expressed her resentment in the following way:

*I find it very difficult to accept PP as a political party in the liberal sense. It operates more like a state party, similar to the Communist Party of China. How can we call it a political party when it enlists the majority of civil servants and teachers from state-owned schools into its 15 million members?*

....

*The current PP leadership is religious, left-wing, and populist. It claims to know what is good for the Ethiopian people better than the people themselves. It needs to be replaced by centrist, secular, and realist leadership.*

(FGD Civic Parties, 2024)

Zerihum Metaferia, a participant of FGD with leaders of ethnic parties, compared the characteristics of PP, the organisation, with those of its president, the person:

*The characteristics of PP resemble those of its leader, Dr. Abiy Ahmed. There is a significant discrepancy between its appearance and its reality. If you look at the party's program, bylaws, and organisational structure, it appears to be a civic party. It does not exclude anyone from membership and claims to represent all Ethiopians. There is only one General Assembly, Central Committee, Executive Committee, and Chairman. However, in practice, every member is focused on their ethnic group, worrying about the supremacy of their specific nation or nationality. Personally, I do not have a problem with its program, but PP needs to live up to it.*

*(FGD Ethnic Parties, 2024)*

Beza Tadesse, a participant of FGD with leaders of civic political parties was passionate and thorough as she expressed her disappointment with the leadership of the PP. She stated:

*I was one of the many Ethiopians who cheered when Dr. Abiy ascended to power. I trusted his words. However, my trust faded within the first two years because I didn't see his promises materialising. He didn't present a solid ideology or roadmap, instead relying on concepts like "Medemer", pseudo-sciences such as the "power of attraction," and daydreaming. He promised a unified Ethiopia, but what we have now is a badly broken Ethiopia. We experienced fierce civil wars in Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, and many other places. It has never been so scary to travel 30 kilometres outside Addis Ababa. Kidnapping for ransom was unheard of in Ethiopia five or six years ago; now it has become common. Anarchy is on the rise. I believe a major cause of these evils is a lack of effective leadership.*

*Dr. Abiy promised that his government would not arrest without evidence, but the reality now is worse than it was during the EPRDF era. As opposition leaders, we live in fear. There is no guarantee that I will not be arrested for making this very statement. Many top opposition leaders are now in prison, some in unknown locations.*

*(FGD Civic Parties, 2024)*

Azalech Demmisse of FGD with leaders of ethnic parties was equally passionate raising different issues to express her disappointment of PP and its leadership:

*During the EPRDF era, we complained about the supremacy of the Tigray ethnic group over the rest of us. At that time, the vast majority of Army Generals and heads of key government offices were from the Tigray community, leading to obvious over-representation. Now, in a similar manner, the Oromo are over-represented in all key army and government offices. In some places, it is worse than the situation during the EPRDF. It seems the Oromos, under the leadership of Dr. Abiy, are saying, "It is our turn to eat." If you are not Oromo and cannot speak Oromiffa, do not expect fair treatment of your cases.*

*Political assassinations are becoming alarmingly common. The high-profile killings of Engineer Simegnaw Belete (Chief Engineer of the Renaissance Dam), Dr. Ambachew Mekonen (President of Amhara Regional State), General Se'are Mekonnen (ENDF Chief of Staff), Artist Hachalu Hundessa, Girma Moges (an opposition political party representative in Debre Zeit (Bishoftu)), and Bette Hurgessa (an opposition political leader) have never been duly investigated.*

*The scale of internal displacement has reached unprecedented levels. Internal displacement has increased manyfold due to the ongoing wars in Tigray, Amhara, and Oromia. Additionally, a new type of displacement has emerged: urban displacement driven by the so-called "Corridor development," a form of urban development. The PP fails to conduct cost-benefit analyses for its development projects, which appear superficial and suspicious. How can projects like the construction of a multi-billion-dollar palace, and lavish resorts be justified in a country where a third of the population lives in abject poverty? How can these projects be justified when millions of people are displaced to beautify urban streets?*

*The cost of living is staggering. Teachers can barely feed themselves, and nurses are struggling to care for their patients. Everywhere you go, human dignity is being undermined. The democratic space is shrinking. Opposition parties' offices outside Addis Ababa are closing one after another due to relentless repression from the security forces. Local NGO leaders who work in human rights are either abandoning the field or going into exile. There is an exodus of journalists to Uganda and Kenya. Neither political nor civil society activists feel safe in the country. We are walking on a tightrope. This is why most of us do not want our voices recorded or our real names used.*

*Dr Abiy Ahmed has consistently avoided public scrutiny. Several matters necessitate thorough, independent public inquiries, including*

*the conflicts in Tigray and Amhara, the construction of palaces and resorts, the performance of the now-defunct Reconciliation Commission, and the Identity and Border Issues Commission. A leader who evades accountability is unfit to govern.*

*(FGD Ethnic Parties, 2024)*

Misrak Shemsu a participant of FGD with leaders of civic political parties criticised the religious inclination of PP.

*The constitution clearly mandates the separation of state and religion. However, the PP appears to tacitly violate this fundamental principle. It is widely recognised that many of PP's slogans and mottos are derived from the Pentecostal sect, specifically the prosperity gospel movement. In fact, the party's name itself is inspired by this church. While I respect the beliefs of Pentecostal followers, it is crucial to highlight the potential dangers of a governing party favouring a particular religious sect in our country.*

*Over the past six years, the percentage of followers of traditional religions - Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Roman Catholicism - has been rapidly declining, while Protestantism has been on the rise. This shift raises concerns about the potential for religious conflict, which could be even more severe than ethnic conflict. A few years ago, we saw a warning sign when the Orthodox Church protested. The traditional Orthodox Church is struggling for its survival; the Oromo Church attempted to break away but failed, at least for now, while the Tigray Church succeeded. In some parts of Ethiopia, such as Shahemene, Arsi, and Jimma, Orthodox believers have faced mob harassments, and some have lost their lives. In its infancy, the EPRDF aspired to the communists' dream of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat.' Now, the PP seems to yearn for a 'dictatorship of the Protestants.' Both are problematic in their own ways.*

*(FGD Civic Parties, 2024)*

Zerihum Metaferia a participant of FGD with leaders of ethnic political parties gave elaborated explanation on PP leadership:

*In addition to my role as a party leader, I have academic interest in leadership. I teach management and leadership courses at a university, which allows me to explore leadership from multiple perspectives. Currently, the issue of political leadership is a global concern. We are living in an exceptionally challenging period for political leadership, with right-wing populist leaders rising in countries such as the USA, UK, France, and Italy, to name a few. I believe we are also victims of populism, though not from the right wing.*

*Populist leaders, whether from the right or left, inherently carry risks. They can lead their countries into turmoil when their popularity wanes. Populist leaders often erode democratic norms. While they may initially seem to unite the country, they ultimately deepen polarisation as their popularity declines.*

*I am concerned that the leadership in Ethiopia today is populist in nature. Dr. Abiy Ahmed, the leader of the PP, has enjoyed unprecedented popularity during his first two years in power. However, after this initial period, the country has experienced some of the worst conflicts in its history. I fear these conflicts will continue if this leadership remains in power.*

*Furthermore, the PP appears to be a camouflaged religious party, affiliated with prosperity theology, as evidenced by the actions and rhetoric of its leaders. The PP's ideology, Medemer (Synergy), resembles the prosperity gospel. This raises concerns that Ethiopia may face not only ethnic but also religious conflicts in the future.*

*The current constitution prohibits the mixing of religion with politics, and there is no open disagreement on this provision. The leadership must abide by it. However, the PP leadership has set a dangerous precedent by tacitly injecting religion into party politics. There are rumours that some political parties are following the PP's footsteps, showing an inclination towards certain religions. This is dangerous. Ethiopia needs secular and authentic leadership.*

*(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)*

Siraj Namaga, a participant in the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with leaders of civic political parties, delivered a scathing critique of the leadership of the PP's president.

*I believe the major shortcoming of Dr. Abiy's leadership style is a lack of authenticity. His words and actions often do not align, leading to perceptions of dishonesty, arrogance, ignorance, shallowness, and a lack of transparency. While he promises a paradise on Earth, many*

*people feel they are experiencing the opposite. The training sessions he conducts for his cadres are often seen as laughable, with much of the content seemingly sourced from platforms like YouTube and TikTok. The trust that was once placed in him when he ascended to power has significantly eroded. Unfortunately, his leadership serves as a cautionary tale of how quickly a leader can lose trust. Many now refer to him as "Cheqla" (a child). In his place, the country needs an authentic leader - someone who is genuine, empathetic, consistent, and transparent. Integrity is essential for our next leader.*

(Transcript Civic Parties, 2024)

Yared Tesfaye described the Prime Minister's leadership as one that is quickly losing its supporters.

*Dr. Abiy Ahmed is facing significant challenges as he loses the support of his close allies. Lemma Megersa, once his closest confidant, has been sidelined. Many, including myself, couldn't imagine Abiy without Lemma. Gedu Andargachew, who played a crucial role in rallying the Amhara people, has also distanced himself and begun to criticise Abiy. Other notable figures like Yohannes Buwayalew, Jawar Mohammed, and Andargachew Tsege have similarly withdrawn their support. A common reason cited by these individuals for their departure is Abiy's perceived lack of trustworthiness and failure to honour promises. They argue that he is not genuine in his commitments. A leader who alienates their supporters cannot sustain their position for long.*

*I agree that we need secular and authentic leadership, but I want to add one more characteristic. We need a leader who can transform the country from an authoritarian to a democratic culture. We need transformational leadership. However, identifying and nurturing such complex leadership is challenging. It requires extensive learning, debate, and a collective effort to cultivate leaders who embody these qualities.*

(Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024)

From a constructivist perspective, the respondents' views on PP and its leader, Dr. Abiy Ahmed, reflect socially constructed realities shaped by their experiences, identities, and interactions within Ethiopia's complex socio-political landscape.

Constructivism asserts that knowledge and meaning are created through social processes, where individuals interpret events based on their subjective realities (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Jabri, 1996; Fierke, 2015). The stark divergence in respondents' perceptions - ranging from cautious support to vehement criticism - underscores how ethnic, political, and religious identities influence their interpretations of PP's leadership and policies. For instance, Tollosa Gabisa's support for PP's civic-oriented programme highlights a belief in its potential to unify Ethiopia's diverse nations, aligning with constructivist notions of collective identity formation. Conversely, critics like Beza Tadesse and Azalech Demmisse perceive PP's actions as misaligned with its stated goals, constructing a narrative of betrayal and authoritarianism rooted in their lived experiences of conflict and repression.

Leadership theories, particularly transformational and authentic leadership, provide further insight into respondents' critiques. Transformational leadership, as articulated by Bass and Riggio (2006) and Northouse (2018, chs 8, 9), involves inspiring followers through a shared vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. Yared Tesfaye's call for a leader to guide Ethiopia's transition from authoritarianism to democracy echoes this model, reflecting a desire for a transformational leader who can foster a shared vision, provide intellectual stimulation, and offer individualised consideration. However, respondents like Siraj Namaga criticise the PM for lacking authenticity - a core tenet of authentic leadership, which emphasises self-awareness, relational transparency, internalised regulation (i.e., authentic behaviour), balanced processing of information, and a positive moral perspective (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008, pp. 92, 95; Northouse, 2018, ch. 9; Nikolić, Kvasić and Grbić, 2020, pp. 178–185). Azalech Demmisse's criticism that the Prime Minister evades public scrutiny by

obstructing inquiries into matters of significant importance aligns with her perception of the leadership as inauthentic. Siraj Namaga's description of Abiy as "Cheqla" (childish) and reliant on superficial rhetoric reflects a perceived disconnect between the PM's promises and actions, eroding trust.

Critics also highlight populist tendencies in PP's leadership, a concern Zerihum Metaferia frames through a global lens of rising populism. Populist leadership often leverages charismatic appeal but risks polarisation when popularity wanes (Mudde, 2017b, pp. 27–47, 2017a). Abiy's initial widespread support, followed by escalating conflicts and alienation of allies like Lemma Megersa, mirrors this trajectory. Furthermore, Misrak Shemsu's critique of PP's religious inclinations - linked to prosperity gospel - raises concerns about the erosion of secular governance, reflecting constructivist fears of competing identity-based narratives (e.g., religious versus ethnic) destabilising Ethiopia's social fabric.

The respondents' emphasis on ethnic over-representation and internal displacement suggests that PP's leadership fails to address structural inequalities, a key expectation of inclusive leadership (Randel *et al.*, 2018, pp. 190–203). Azalech Demmise's comparison of Oromo dominance to past Tigrayan supremacy illustrates a constructed reality where leadership perpetuates ethnic hierarchies rather than transcending them. This perception undermines PP's claims of fostering national unity, as articulated by its leaders.

To rebuild trust, PP's leadership should prioritise authentic and inclusive practices, aligning rhetoric with tangible outcomes. Engaging in transparent dialogue with opposition groups and addressing ethnic and religious grievances could mitigate polarisation. Leadership training programmes, grounded in transformational, authentic and inclusive leadership principles, may equip PP leaders to navigate Ethiopia's diverse identities effectively.

## Peace Education

Molla Takele, a participant from community FGD highlighted the role of education and the youth:

*The government has consistently failed to address the needs and aspirations of Ethiopia's youth. Our nation is endowed with an abundance of young talent and potential, yet it is deeply disheartening to witness how conflict has become the primary occupation for this dynamic generation. Instead of channelling their energy into building a prosperous future, countless young hands are tragically occupied with wielding weapons. On both sides of these conflicts, it is the youth who bear the heaviest burden, paying the ultimate price for decisions beyond their control.*

....

*Ethiopia is undeniably a nation of youth, with a demographic dominated by young people. Yet, it is the older generation that often ignites and fuels these conflicts. This misalignment of responsibility and consequence is a tragedy that must be addressed if we are to secure a brighter, more peaceful future for our country. The youth deserve opportunities, education, and hope - not the burden of wars they did not create. It is imperative that we shift our focus toward empowering this generation, ensuring they are equipped to lead Ethiopia toward stability and prosperity, rather than being sacrificed in the fires of conflict.*

*(Transcript Community, 2024)*

Ato Estifanos Egata, a participant of the discussion with academicians, explained what he believes academicians should do to mitigate conflicts in Ethiopia.

*I believe the first and most important step academicians should take to mitigate the adverse effects of divisive narratives is to teach themselves and their students the art of critical thinking. They must question, and teach their students to question, any information before accepting it. Failure to evaluate information critically exposed us to divisive narratives. This must be stopped. Universities should revise their curricula to ensure that critical thinking is given the weight it deserves. I wish critical thinking were a common course given to all students in higher education.*

*The second important aspect, in my opinion, is conducting research on narratives, their impacts on conflicts, and ways to mitigate the adverse effects. What you are doing now is an excellent example. Such research can help us understand our behaviours and design effective policies. To my knowledge, we do not have similar research. We need more of such research undertakings. Your research findings should be widely disseminated both within and beyond academic circles.*

(Transcript Academicians, 2024)

Dr. Aklilu Tesemma, suggested development of the culture of debate and narrative therapy:

*..., I would like to emphasise the need for open discussions and debates within academic institutions regarding conflict resolution. The culture of academic debate has been deteriorating, and we need to revive it. Academic staff and students should learn conflict resolution techniques not only theoretically but also through practical application. As a community, we need a form of narrative therapy, which we should provide ourselves.*

(Transcript Academicians, 2024)

Dr. Solomon Deres added the importance of collaboration:

*I would like to add one more task for academicians: the need for collaboration. Beyond the academic sphere, many other actors play decisive roles in creating and disseminating narratives. Political parties, media, community leaders, religious institutions, and civic society organisations are some examples. Academicians should collaborate with these actors in their fight against destructive narratives.*

(Transcript *Academicians*, 2024)

Molla Takele highlights the youth's marginalisation, reflecting how societal structures and historical power dynamics exclude young people, pushing them towards violence (Galtung, 2011; Ercoşkun, 2021). Ato Estifanos Egata's emphasis on critical thinking aligns with constructivism's focus on questioning dominant narratives to reconstruct social realities (Wendt, 2015). His advocacy for research further supports co-creating knowledge to challenge divisive discourses. Dr. Aklilu Tesemma's push for academic debate and narrative therapy indicates a constructivist approach to reframing conflict through dialogue, fostering shared understanding (Lederach, 1997, 2003, 2015). Dr. Solomon Deres' call for collaboration extends this, recognising multiple actors in narrative construction, aligning with conflict resolution's emphasis on inclusive processes (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall, 2016, pp. 178–182). They collectively recommend the implementation of peace education curricula in universities, incorporating critical thinking, debate, and collaborative projects with non-academic actors to empower youth and counter divisive narratives.

## **Media Reform**

Suggestions were made with regards to the nexus between media and destructive narratives. Zerihun Bedada, a participant of FGD with media personnel stated:

*One of my biggest concerns about Ethiopian media is the lack of robust fact-checking mechanisms and accountability for spreading misinformation. Ethiopian intelligence and police seem more interested in partisanship than in fact-checking. They view any media content that criticises the government as a threat, which is why Ethiopia is among the highest jailers of journalists. It appears you can spread any lies as long as you don't criticise the government. This approach does not combat destructive media; it intensifies it. Many journalists have been exiled in recent years, and now they have YouTube channels where they spread even more toxic messages than they did at home. The government should encourage the establishment of independent fact-checking organisations.*

*(Transcript Media, 2024)*

Assres Mare, a participant of the same FGD suggested:

*.... Media stifling is not the right strategy in this information age. Instead, effective fact-checking can filter out misinformation. I want to add a couple of strategies:*

- 1. Promote Media Literacy: The government and the Union of Ethiopian Journalists should invest in educating the public on how to critically evaluate news sources and identify misinformation. By doing so, they can empower individuals to make informed decisions and distinguish misinformation and divisive narratives from those promoting unity. Media literacy programs must be integrated into school curriculums and public awareness campaigns. Children should be taught not to trust everything they read or hear from the media.*
- 2. Encourage Diverse Perspectives: Ensuring that a variety of viewpoints are represented in media coverage can help reduce polarisation. This includes giving a platform to underrepresented voices and fostering open, respectful dialogue. More freedom, not less, ensures the dissemination of peace and fraternity.*

*(Transcript Media, 2024)*

Lastly, Selome Hailu, recommended:

.... Supporting media organisations that focus on positive content can make a significant difference. It's well-known that peace and fraternity are not typically seen as attractive topics in the media. Instead, war, conflict, and destruction attract more users and generate more revenue. Given this reality, authorities should design systems that support media outlets prioritising peace, cooperation, development, and optimism.

(Transcript Media, 2024)

From a constructivist perspective, the respondents' views highlight how media narratives shape social realities in Ethiopia. Zerihun Bedada critiques the lack of rigorous fact-checking and government suppression, which cultivate a polarised media landscape that intensifies conflict rather than fostering resolution. This view aligns with Cees J. Hamelink's (2016) analysis in *Media and Conflict: Escalating Evil*, which explores the nexus between media dynamics and conflict escalation. Assres Mare's call for media literacy and diverse perspectives aligns with constructivism by empowering individuals to co-create inclusive narratives, reducing divisive discourse (Couldry, 2012). Selome Hailu's emphasis on supporting positive media content reflects media management strategies that incentivise peace-oriented narratives, countering conflict-driven sensationalism (Gilboa, 2010; Hamelink, 2016). In terms of conflict resolution, these suggestions advocate for structural reforms - independent fact-checking, public education, and inclusive platforms - to mitigate misinformation and foster dialogue (Bratic, 2016, pp. 1–3). The recommendations provided by participants in the focus group discussion with media personnel can be summarised as follows: the Ethiopian government should establish independent fact-checking bodies and integrate media literacy into the education system to foster critical engagement, support national unity, and advance peacebuilding efforts.

## **Lessons Learnt**

The fieldwork conducted between August 18 and September 18, 2024, across various regions of Ethiopia offers a deeply revealing window into the country's socio-political terrain. Drawing upon FGDs and in-depth interviews with a diverse spectrum of participants - including senior leaders from civic and ethnic political parties, community leaders, academics, media practitioners, and high-ranking government officials - this qualitative enquiry captures the subtle yet profound narratives, identities, and meanings that inform contemporary Ethiopian political discourse. Central to this analysis is a constructivist epistemology that recognises reality as socially constructed through intersubjective meanings, language, symbols, and shared histories (Adler, 2013; Checkel, 2018) (Adler, 2013; Checkel, 2018, ch. 11).

The lessons learnt from this research reflect the complex interplay between identity, memory, institutional configurations, and political contestation. They challenge deterministic understandings of conflict and peacebuilding, demonstrating that Ethiopia's challenges and opportunities are best understood not through fixed categories or essentialist frameworks, but through evolving narratives, perceptions, and interactions among elites and communities. What follows is a detailed exposition of these findings, organised around key thematic insights.

### **1. Emergence of a Third Narrative: Between Memory and Reconciliation**

Ethiopia's political landscape has long been framed by two dominant and dichotomous narratives. The first, often invoked by unitary nationalists, portrays Ethiopia as the "Cradle of Freedom and Civilisation," celebrating its resistance to colonialism and its millennia-old statehood. The second, emerging predominantly from ethno-nationalist discourses, depicts the country as a "Prison of Nations and Nationalities," focusing on histories of subjugation, forced assimilation, and political exclusion. Both narratives serve as powerful identity anchors, shaping institutional arrangements, political claims, and collective memory.

The research findings reveal the emergence of a third, more reconciliatory narrative - a middle ground that seeks to simultaneously honour Ethiopia's historical legacy while acknowledging the injustices experienced by various communities. This narrative is rooted in the principles of recognition, inclusion, and mutual respect. It attempts to transcend binary framings by constructing Ethiopia as a "shared home" rather than a battleground of competing historical grievances. As per the NPF, such narrative interventions are crucial in shaping policy discourses and forging pathways to reconciliation (Shanahan *et al.*, 2014, pp. 69–88).

However, participants expressed ambivalence regarding the authenticity of this narrative, particularly when it is advanced through state-sanctioned channels. While initiatives such as Adwa 00KM Museum and the annual "Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Day" are symbolically significant, opposition actors remain sceptical, viewing them as instrumentalised tools of state propaganda aimed at legitimising existing power structures (Transcript Community, 2024). Constructivist theory suggests that

for this third narrative to gain traction, it must be co-produced by multiple voices, including historically marginalised groups. Only through inclusive, dialogical processes can shared meanings be cultivated and narratives reconstituted in ways that foster national cohesion.

## **2. Federalism as Common Ground: Disagreement on Form, Not Principle**

A particularly noteworthy finding from the study is the near-universal support for federalism among participants, cutting across ideological and narrative divides. This challenges the prevailing assumption that unitary nationalism is fundamentally opposed to federal arrangements. Rather, the contention lies in the form that federalism should take. The current ethnic-based federal model, enshrined in the 1995 Constitution, is viewed by many as both a source of empowerment and conflict.

Critics argue that the existing framework perpetuates an "ethnic security dilemma," where political competition is seen through an ethnic lens, leading to zero-sum politics, ethnic favouritism, and territorial disputes - especially given stark disparities in regional sizes and population distributions (Transcript Civic Parties, 2024). For instance, Oromia's vast territorial expanse compared to the compact Harari region fuels resentment and questions of equity. Prominent voices such as Gebre-Kirstos Kahssay advocate for a shift towards geographic federalism with multi-ethnic, equally sized administrative units, which could promote cooperation over competition (Transcript Civic Parties, 2024).

Constructivist insights underline that federalism is not merely a legal or territorial design but a reflection of intersubjectively negotiated identities. Therefore, the transformation of Ethiopia's federal architecture necessitates continuous, inclusive dialogue to build a shared understanding of its objectives—whether to accommodate diversity, ensure equity, or maintain national unity (Adler, 2013, pp. 112–144). These conversations must move beyond legalistic formulations to address historical narratives, fears, and aspirations embedded within federal arrangements.

### **3. Broad-Based Support for Constitutional Reform: A Sign of Maturity**

The study identifies an encouraging level of consensus around the need for constitutional reform. Even staunch defenders of the ethnic-based federal system acknowledge the need for revisions to address persistent structural flaws. Articles 8, 39, and 40 of the Constitution - dealing with sovereignty, the right to secession, and land ownership—are particularly contentious. Some critics argue these provisions entrench ethnic divisions and institutionalise political fragmentation (Transcript Civic Parties, 2024).

Importantly, even those aligned with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) recognise problems with implementation rather than with the principles themselves. This distinction between constitutional ideals and practical governance failures indicates a growing political maturity and willingness to reimagine the legal scaffolding of the Ethiopian state.

Several political leaders reported having developed detailed proposals for reform, suggesting a latent capacity for negotiated constitutional change. However, identity politics remain a formidable barrier. The civic versus ethnic identity divide manifests in debates over banning ethnic parties or preserving secession rights (Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024). Constructivist theory points to the need for processes that bring these divergent perspectives into a shared deliberative space. Dialogues must foreground historical grievances, power asymmetries, and symbolic recognition, which are often as important as legal reforms in creating durable constitutional settlements (Wagenaar, 2014; UN and WB, 2018).

#### **4. Dialogue: A Normative Commitment Facing Institutional Distrust**

There is unanimous agreement among participants on the necessity of dialogue to resolve Ethiopia's enduring conflicts. This reflects constructivist emphasis on intersubjective norm formation as the basis for political consensus (Adler, 2019). However, this normative commitment is undermined by widespread distrust of the National Dialogue Commission (NDC). Major political actors, including the OLF and TPLF, have withdrawn, citing concerns over its independence, representativeness, and procedural integrity (Transcript Civic Parties, 2024; Transcript Tigray Elite 4 & 5, 2024).

Critics point to a lack of public inquiry into the previous Reconciliation Commission and allege that the NDC is a top-down initiative lacking local legitimacy (Transcript Community, 2024). For the ruling PP, the NDC is framed as a historic opportunity to build national consensus (Transcript PP Official, 2024), but opposition voices perceive

it as a state-sponsored mechanism to consolidate hegemony (Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024).

To enhance its legitimacy, the dialogue process must be radically inclusive, particularly in incorporating voices from conflict-affected regions such as Tigray, Amhara, and Oromia. Moreover, it must foreground truth-telling, historical acknowledgment, and power-sharing. Constructivist peacebuilding literature emphasises the need to co-create meaning and legitimacy through dialogue, rather than imposing it through formalistic processes (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall, 2016). If not restructured, the NDC risks reproducing the very exclusions it seeks to overcome.

## **5. Ruling Party Resentment and the Crisis of Legitimacy**

A central theme emerging from all stakeholder groups is profound dissatisfaction with the ruling Prosperity Party and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Accusations range from ethnic favouritism - particularly an alleged dominance of Oromo elites in key federal institutions - to failed promises, insecurity, and a drift towards authoritarianism. Critics such as Beza Tadesse and Azalech Demmisse underscore the gap between the PP's civic rhetoric and sectarian practice (Transcript Civic Parties, 2024; Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024).

Furthermore, the infusion of religious narratives linked to prosperity gospel into governance raises alarms about encroachments on Ethiopia's secular constitutional

order. This religious undertone is perceived as a potential source of future conflict, especially in a religiously diverse country (Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024).

While a few interlocutors commend the PP for articulating a civic national vision (Transcript Civic Parties, 2024), the dominant narrative frames the party as untrustworthy. In line with constructivist theory, legitimacy is constructed through narratives, symbols, and lived experiences (Guzzini, 2013, p. 217). Restoring public trust in governance institutions therefore requires not only reforms but also visible shifts in the government's approach to inclusion, transparency, and dialogue.

## **6. Community Participation: The Missing Link in National Peace Processes**

A striking finding from FGDs is the overwhelming desire for greater community engagement in conflict resolution processes. Many participants feel sidelined by elite-led national initiatives, resulting in a disconnect between formal peace efforts and local realities (Transcript Community, 2024). Constructivist peacebuilding underscores the need for participatory frameworks that allow local actors to define problems, articulate grievances, and propose solutions in ways meaningful to their lived experiences.

Community-driven mechanisms - such as traditional mediation, dialogue forums, and local peace committees - could complement top-down processes, creating a multi-tiered approach to conflict resolution. These local engagements not only enhance legitimacy but also provide a fertile ground for constructing inclusive national narratives (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall, 2016). In the absence of community

ownership, peacebuilding risks becoming an externally imposed process devoid of social resonance.

## **7. Academia and the Production of Divisive Narratives**

The academic sector is also implicated in perpetuating ethnic polarisation. Participants call for urgent reforms to ensure that universities become spaces of critical inquiry rather than ethnic echo chambers. Estifanos Egata advocates integrating critical thinking into the curriculum and fostering research on national narratives (Transcript Academicians, 2024). Likewise, Dr. Aklilu Tesemma emphasises the need to revive academic debate and introduce narrative therapy as a tool for healing collective trauma.

This view aligns with constructivist emphasis on discourse as a site of identity construction and contestation. Reforming academia to produce inclusive knowledge and promote dialogue can serve as a catalyst for broader societal transformation. As Daniel Bar-Tal (2000, 2013, p. 1445) notes, peace education can equip citizens to critically interrogate divisive narratives and embrace pluralistic identities.

## **8. Youth Engagement: From Marginalisation to Agency**

The marginalisation of youth is a recurring concern. Figures like Molla Takele stress that Ethiopian youth, who have borne the brunt of political violence, remain structurally excluded from peace and development processes (Transcript Community, 2024). Given Ethiopia's demographic profile, youth-focused policies are indispensable.

Vocational training, civic education, and peacebuilding programmes targeted at young people can redirect their energy toward constructive engagement. Such efforts align with John Paul Lederach's (2015) model of conflict transformation, which places a premium on empowering local actors to lead change from within. Investing in youth is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for long-term stability.

### **9. Media Reform: Towards a Peace-Oriented Public Sphere**

The Ethiopian media landscape is another arena of concern. Participants note the media's role in inflaming tensions through misinformation, partisanship, and sensationalism. Zerihun Bedada calls for institutional reforms, including the establishment of independent fact-checking mechanisms and legal protections for press freedom (Transcript Media, 2024).

Others, like Assres Mare and Selome Hailu, underscore the importance of media literacy and promoting peace-positive content (Transcript Media, 2024). Constructivist scholars such as Eytan Gilboa (2010, pp. 87–110) and Vladimir Bratic (2016, pp. 1–3) emphasise that media are not passive reflectors but active constructors of political reality. Transforming the media into a peacebuilding institution requires structural changes, capacity-building, and ethical standards that prioritise national cohesion over partisan gain.

## **10. The Leadership Deficit: A Call for Authentic and Transformational Figures**

Finally, the study identifies an urgent need for authentic and transformational leadership. Participants express frustration with current leaders who, despite promises of reform, are perceived as populist, inconsistent, and self-serving (Transcript Civic Parties, 2024; Transcript Ethnic Parties, 2024). Ethiopia requires leaders who can transcend parochial identities and inspire collective vision rooted in integrity and inclusion.

Drawing on the work of Bass and Riggio (2006) and Northouse (2018, ch. 8), transformational leadership is framed as essential to Ethiopia's democratic transition. Programmes that train future leaders in authentic leadership principles - emphasising empathy, transparency, and accountability - could help develop a cadre of political actors capable of navigating Ethiopia's complex identity terrain (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008).

The findings presented here underscore both the promise and peril of Ethiopia's current political trajectory. There is broad consensus on the importance of dialogue, constitutional reform, and federalism. Yet, significant challenges remain, including distrust in state-led processes, deep-seated identity cleavages, and resentment toward existing leadership. Constructivist approaches reveal that addressing these issues requires more than technical fixes; it demands reimagining collective identities, co-producing inclusive narratives, and fostering spaces for mutual recognition. Reforming academia, empowering youth, and creating a responsible media ecosystem are critical to cultivating a shared national story. Above all, Ethiopia must

invest in transformational leadership and community-driven peacebuilding. These insights provide policymakers and scholars with both a roadmap and a conceptual toolkit for navigating the complexities of conflict and reconciliation in Ethiopia.

## **Key Insights**

This chapter synthesises perspectives from Ethiopia's political elite, community leaders, academics, and media professionals, gathered through focus groups and in-depth interviews in late 2024. Employing a constructivist framework, the research illuminates how intersubjective meanings, identities, and narratives fundamentally shape the nation's socio-political landscape, acting as drivers of both conflict and potential reconciliation. The findings reveal a shared normative commitment to several pathways to peace, notably inclusive dialogue, constitutional reform, leadership transformation, and institutional changes within academia and media. However, the implementation of these solutions is profoundly complicated by deep-seated distrust, identity-based divisions, and powerfully competing narratives.

The research identifies dialogue as a universally advocated normative solution, with participants across diverse backgrounds affirming its necessity. This consensus aligns with constructivist principles that posit dialogue as a primary mechanism for negotiating shared meanings and fostering mutual understanding. Nevertheless, the NDC faces significant scepticism regarding its independence and inclusivity, with major political withdrawals underscoring a critical trust deficit, particularly in regions affected by unaddressed atrocities. For dialogue to transcend its current limitations

and gain legitimacy, the research suggests it must be radically inclusive, actively engage marginalised regions, and acknowledge historical injustices to facilitate a co-created process.

Constitutional reform emerges as a second critical area of consensus, aimed at addressing perceived structural flaws within Ethiopia's ethnic federalism. The debate is characterised by a fundamental contestation between those advocating for a shift towards geographic federalism to foster national unity and those defending ethnic-based autonomy as essential for protecting marginalised groups. This divergence exemplifies how competing identities and narratives of fairness shape perceptions of political structure. A constructivist interpretation posits that any successful reform must be a genuinely dialogical process, engaging diverse actors to negotiate a framework that balances regional autonomy with national cohesion.

A third key insight pertains to widespread dissatisfaction with the current leadership and a demand for its transformation. Critics point to a perceived shift from initial civic promises towards authoritarian practices, ethnic favouritism, and the encroachment of religious undertones into the secular state. This polarisation reflects how leadership legitimacy is constructed through narratives and lived experiences; a gap between rhetorical commitments to unity and the realities of conflict and political repression erodes trust. The findings suggest that rebuilding this trust requires leadership that is authentically transformational, secular, and democratic, capable of transcending deep ethnic and religious divides.

The role of academia and media as institutions that either perpetuate or mitigate divisive narratives forms a fourth focal point. The research identifies a pressing need for reform within these sectors. For academia, this entails integrating critical thinking and narrative therapy into educational curricula to challenge toxic historical narratives. For the media, recommendations include establishing independent fact-checking mechanisms, promoting media literacy, and encouraging diverse perspectives to counter misinformation and polarisation. These institutions are recognised as vital sites of narrative construction, whose reform is essential for fostering a more unified and critical public discourse.

The research culminates in several overarching lessons. It notes the emergent but contested 'third narrative' seeking to bridge unitary and ethno-nationalist visions, whose authenticity remains questioned when perceived as state-led. It confirms broad support for federalism in principle, though its ideal form remains intensely contested. Furthermore, while a consensus on the need for constitutional reform signals political maturity, identity-based divides complicate agreement on specifics. The normative appeal of dialogue is simultaneously undermined by distrust in its primary vehicle, the NDC. A significant leadership deficit is identified, alongside a critical lack of community participation in peace processes. The role of academia in perpetuating division requires urgent address, as does the marginalisation of youth and the need for media reform to create a peace-oriented public sphere.

These insights carry significant implications for peacebuilding, suggesting that while conflicts are shaped by malleable narratives and identities, path dependency and

entrenched distrust present formidable challenges. To translate these insights into action, the research proposes several strategies. These include restructuring the NDC to ensure independence and inclusivity, pursuing constitutional reform through a participatory national conference, and establishing leadership development programmes rooted in transformational principles. Additionally, academic reforms should prioritise critical thinking and peace education, while media reforms should focus on creating independent regulatory bodies and integrating media literacy into education. Strengthening community engagement through local peace committees and developing youth-focused initiatives are also deemed essential. Ultimately, these strategies align with constructivist principles, emphasising that a sustainable peace in Ethiopia necessitates the inclusive co-construction of social realities, a shared vision of coexistence, and a sustained commitment to mutual recognition and historical accountability.

## **Part IV: Conclusion**

This thesis has undertaken a comprehensive constructivist investigation into the underlying causes of conflict in Ethiopia, positing that the nation's protracted socio-political crises are not merely the product of material competition over resources or power but are fundamentally rooted in the realm of ideas. Specifically, the research has argued that Ethiopia's conflicts are perpetuated by socially constructed narratives and the ensuing identity politics that profoundly shape the perceptions, alliances, and strategic choices of its national political elite. Through a multi-methodological approach combining theoretical analysis, literature review, and original qualitative fieldwork, this study has delineated how two polarised master narratives - "Ethiopia as a Cradle of Civilisation and Freedom" and "Ethiopia as a Prison of Nations and Nationalities" - have become the primary lenses through which political reality is interpreted, legitimised, and contested. This concluding chapter synthesises the core arguments, empirical findings, and theoretical contributions of the research, reflecting on their implications for understanding conflict dynamics and peacebuilding in Ethiopia and beyond.

### **Recapitulation of Core Arguments and Findings**

The thesis is structured in three integrated parts, each building upon the last to substantiate the central argument. Part I established the conceptual and methodological groundwork. It justified the adoption of a social constructivist framework, rejecting materialist and primordialist explanations as insufficient for

grasping the complexities of the Ethiopian context. This section rigorously defined the core concepts of conflict, peace, peacebuilding, narratives, and political elites, framing them as socially constructed phenomena. The methodology chapter detailed a qualitative approach, employing in-depth interviews and FGDs with members of Ethiopia's political elite to capture the nuanced, intersubjective meanings that underpin their actions. This design was predicated on the understanding that to analyse Ethiopia's conflicts is to analyse a battle of ideas, where historical grievances and future aspirations are constantly negotiated through discourse.

Part II provided the historical and empirical analysis, serving as the evidentiary backbone of the thesis. It traced the genesis and evolution of the two duelling master narratives that have come to define the Ethiopian polity. The analysis demonstrated that these are not recent inventions but are deeply embedded in the country's socio-political history, emerging from specific historical junctures and intellectual movements. This section also examined the tangible, often devastating, consequences of the institutionalisation of the "Prison of Nations" narrative through the 1995 Constitution and the system of ethnic federalism. Furthermore, it presented a meticulous typology of Ethiopia's political parties, revealing a landscape dominated by particularistic ethnic parties and a generalised programmatic weakness that perpetuates elite fragmentation. Together, Parts I and II established that Ethiopia's political elite fragmentation and persistent conflicts are artefacts of a fierce discursive struggle over national identity, historical memory, and state legitimacy.

Part III presented evidence from qualitative field research, grounding the theoretical and historical analysis in the contemporary perceptions of the Ethiopian political elite. The data from FGDs and interviews provided a ground-level validation of the thesis's central claims, confirming the enduring power of the two narratives in shaping political allegiances and fuelling polarisation. Crucially, it also revealed a nascent, third narrative seeking synthesis, offering a glimpse of a potential pathway beyond the current impasse. The findings from this empirical research directly informed the policy recommendations, ensuring they are not merely theoretical but are responsive to the expressed concerns and suggestions of key stakeholders within the Ethiopian political sphere.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations**

The research is unequivocally anchored in social constructivism, a theoretical framework that privileges the role of ideas, norms, and intersubjective meanings in shaping political reality. This lens was selected for its unique capacity to illuminate the processes through which seemingly objective realities - such as ethnic identity, historical grievance, and national interest - are in fact produced and reproduced through social interaction, discourse, and institutional practices. By rejecting purely materialist or primordialist explanations for conflict, the study contends that concepts like ethnicity and enmity are not fixed, biological, or immutable categories. Instead, they are fluid, contested, and continually negotiated. This perspective is not merely appropriate but essential for the Ethiopian context, where political cleavages are deeply inscribed with potent historical narratives of imperial glory, anticolonial resistance, feudal oppression, and ethnic marginalisation. These narratives are not

passive reflections of history but active agents in the present, shaping how resources are allocated, power is contested, and violence is justified.

To navigate this complex ideational landscape, key concepts were rigorously defined. *Conflict* was conceptualised not in a narrow, militaristic sense but as a broader, socially constructed process arising from incompatible meanings, identities, and normative frameworks. This view incorporates direct violence but also encompasses the structural and cultural violence that arises from contested historical narratives and exclusionary identity politics. Similarly, *peace* was understood not as a static endpoint but as a dynamic, socially negotiated condition. This constructivist view encompasses both the absence of direct violence (negative peace) and, more importantly, the presence of justice, equity, and mutual recognition (positive peace). The study's focused investigation into *narratives* highlighted their functional potency as "equipment for living" - discursive tools that groups use to make sense of their collective past, articulate grievances and aspirations in the present, and mobilise for political action in the future. The analysis of *political elites* underscored their privileged role as norm entrepreneurs and the primary architects of these narratives. The thesis applied Higley and Burton's typology of elite structures, arguing that the transition from a *disunified* or *ideologically unified* national political elite to a *consensually unified* national political elite is a critical determinant of whether a society's trajectory will be towards protracted conflict or sustainable peace.

## The Dueling Master Narratives and Their Consequences

The empirical heart of the thesis was the identification and analysis of the two hegemonic, yet diametrically opposed, narratives that structure Ethiopian political discourse and identity.

The *Cradle of Civilisation* narrative is a powerful tale of endurance, sovereignty, and divine favour. It draws upon Ethiopia's ancient heritage as the Aksumite Kingdom, its status as one of the world's oldest continuous states, and its unique successful resistance against European colonialism, epitomised by the 1896 Battle of Adwa. This narrative also leverages the country's significant religious history, encompassing Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, to present Ethiopia as a spiritual sanctuary. Internationally, it frames the nation as a beacon of African independence and a source of Pan-African inspiration. Politically, this narrative has traditionally been associated with a centralised, unitary vision of the state. It promotes a pan-Ethiopian supra-identity that seeks to subsume ethnic differences under a shared historical and cultural destiny, often interpreting calls for ethnic self-determination as threats to national unity and sovereignty.

Conversely, the *Prison of Nations* narrative, which gained prominence through the radical Marxist-Leninist Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s and 1970s, offers a counter-history. It frames the modern Ethiopian state not as a natural, ancient entity but as an oppressive "empire" artificially constructed through the conquest and subjugation of distinct nations and nationalities by the Abyssinian core. This narrative

attributes centuries of historical and contemporary injustices - land dispossession, cultural assimilation, political marginalisation - to the hegemony of a particular ethnic elite (variously described as Amhara or "Showan"). Its central tenet, powerfully simple, is that Ethiopia is a "prison" and its constituent ethnic groups are "captive nations." The logical and liberatory conclusion, therefore, is the championing of the unconditional right to self-determination, up to and including secession, as a legitimate path to liberation for these oppressed groups.

The institutionalisation of this latter narrative following the 1991 overthrow of the Derg regime has had profound and largely destabilising consequences. The 1995 Constitution, engineered by the EPRDF, codified the "Prison of Nations" thesis into law, establishing a system of ethnic federalism that formally restructured the state into ethnically defined regional territories. While conceived as a radical solution to rectify historical grievances and empower marginalised groups, this constitutional order has, in practice, exacerbated the very divisions it sought to manage. The research findings robustly confirm that ethnic federalism has:

1. *Politicised Ethnicity to an Unprecedented Degree*: By making ethnic identity the primary organising principle of political life, the system has hardened otherwise fluid group boundaries. It has fostered a pervasive "ethnic security dilemma" where communities perceive their survival as contingent on their ability to dominate the state apparatus or, failing that, to build their own defensive (or offensive) military capabilities against perceived threats from other groups.

2. *Fragmented the National Political Elite*: The political elite, once divided along ideological lines (e.g., Marxist-Leninist factions), has become almost entirely fragmented along ethnic fault lines. The research finds that this has crippled the possibility of forming a *consensually unified elite* - a prerequisite for democratic stability - and instead has entrenched a *disunified elite* structure characterised by mutual distrust, antagonism, and a zero-sum conception of political competition.
3. *Fuelled Violent Conflict*: The political and territorial reconfiguration of the state along ethnic lines has ignited numerous inter-group and intra-group conflicts over boundaries, resources, and political representation. The devastating Tigray War (2020-2022), the ongoing instability in Amhara and Oromia regions, and the proliferation of armed ethno-nationalist groups like the OLA, Fano, and various regional militias are direct manifestations of the tensions inherent in the system.
4. *Created Contested Urban Spaces*: Multi-ethnic cities like Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, Hawassa, Welikite, and Yabello have become perpetual flashpoints. Constitutional ambiguities over jurisdiction lead to competing administrative claims, social tensions, and episodes of violence, as the model of ethnically pure territorial administration fails to accommodate the complex realities of urban diversity.

## **The Role of Political Parties**

The analysis of political parties provided a critical microcosm of the broader narrative struggle. The study's typology, distinguishing between civic (accommodationist and

integrationist) and particularistic (ethnic) parties, reveals a political landscape overwhelmingly dominated by the latter. Ethnically based parties constitute approximately 95% of regional parties and a significant 29% of **national** parties. These parties are not merely influenced by ethnicity; they are constituted by it. By their very design, names, and programmes, they articulate, reinforce, and politically weaponise exclusionary ethnic identities. They frame politics not as a competition over national policy but as a zero-sum struggle for club goods destined for a specific ethnic constituency. This stands in stark contrast to civic parties, which, despite their own limitations, strive for a more inclusive, programmatic appeal based on ideology or policy rather than ascriptive identity.

A critical and related finding is the pronounced *programmatic weakness* that pervades the entire party system. Most parties, including the ruling PP, lack coherent, detailed, and stable ideological platforms on issues such as economic policy, social welfare, environmental management, or foreign affairs. This deficiency forces them to rely overwhelmingly on charismatic leadership and intuitive ethnic mobilisation for political sustenance. This programmatic vacuity not only undermines democratic accountability and issue-based voting but also actively perpetuates elite fragmentation. It ensures that political competition remains mired in the symbolic politics of historical grievance and ethnic entitlement, rather than advancing to a debate over competing visions for national development and shared prosperity.

### **Evidence from the Field: The Emergence of a Third Narrative?**

The qualitative fieldwork conducted in April-May 2024 provided a nuanced, ground-level perspective that both confirmed the thesis's core analyses and revealed a potentially transformative development. Interviews and FDGs with political elites, academics, media figures, and community leaders confirmed the enduring, often paralyzing, power of the two master narratives in shaping worldviews and fuelling political polarisation. Participants' interpretations of current events, from federal government actions to regional resistance, were almost invariably filtered through the prism of either the "Cradle" or "Prison" narrative.

However, a significant and hopeful finding was the emergence among participants across the ethnic and political spectrum of a marked *third narrative*. This nascent narrative does not seek to vanquish the other two but to synthesise their core, legitimate concerns. It acknowledges the historical injustices, systemic marginalisation, and the profound demand for recognition that underpins the "Prison of Nations" narrative. Simultaneously, it values the national unity, shared sovereignty, and historic achievements emphasised by the "Cradle of Civilisation" narrative. Consequently, proponents of this emerging view advocate for a reformed, sophisticated federalism that moves beyond the current rigid ethnic framework. They envision a system that balances meaningful regional autonomy and cultural rights with a robust, legitimate central government capable of ensuring national cohesion and a strong, overarching sense of Ethiopian citizenship.

This convergence was most evident in the remarkable cross-factional consensus on the urgent necessity of comprehensive constitutional reform. Participants from diverse

backgrounds identified the same contentious issues: the divisive provision of Article 39 (the right to secession), the destabilising process of demarcating internal boundaries along ethnic lines, and the ambiguous status of multi-ethnic cities. This consensus suggests a shared, albeit nascent, understanding that the current institutional framework is unsustainable and that a new social contract, based on a more complex and inclusive story of Ethiopia, is required.

## **Theoretical and Policy Implications**

This research contributes to broader scholarly and policy debates in several significant ways, demonstrating how a deep, context-specific case study can illuminate wider theoretical and practical challenges.

### **Theoretical Contributions:**

1. *Constructivism in Practice*: The thesis serves as a robust and detailed case study demonstrating the superior explanatory power of social constructivism in analysing intrastate conflict, particularly in deeply divided societies. It moves decisively beyond simplistic models that attribute conflict solely to resource scarcity, economic inequality, or institutional failure. Instead, it shows how conflict is woven into the very fabric of social meaning, identity, and historical narrative. The Ethiopian case demonstrates that even well-intentioned institutional designs (like ethnic federalism) can fail catastrophically if they are built upon a foundation of unchallenged, divisive narratives.

2. *Elite Theory and Conflict Transformation*: By integrating constructivist insights with elite theory, the study offers a sophisticated, multi-level framework for understanding conflict dynamics. It moves the analytical focus beyond state institutions and material resources to the agency and interactions of the political elite. The application of Higley and Burton's typology provides a clear diagnostic tool: Ethiopia's fundamental problem is its *disunified elite*. The research further outlines the constructive processes - elite socialisation, transformational leadership, and institutional bricolage - that are essential for forging a *consensually unified elite* capable of managing diversity and achieving sustainable peace.
3. *Narrative and Policy*: The application of the NPF to the Ethiopian context powerfully illustrates that narratives are not merely epiphenomenal "talk." They are active, causal forces that shape policy outcomes, constitutional design, and ultimately, the very reality of conflict and peace. The thesis shows how a narrative ("Prison of Nations") was translated directly into a constitutional order (ethnic federalism), which in turn produced a new, grimmer reality of ethnic polarisation and violence. This underscores the critical importance of narrative analysis for any meaningful peacebuilding or policy intervention.

### **Policy Recommendations:**

Based on its integrated findings, the thesis proposes a multi-faceted, long-term approach to peacebuilding in Ethiopia that addresses both the institutional and ideational roots of the conflict:

1. *Constitutional and Institutional Reform:* A broad-based, inclusive, and transparent process to review the 1995 Constitution is not just advisable but imperative. This process must aim to forge a new national consensus. Key objectives should include moving towards a more civic and territorial form of federalism that de-emphasises ethnicity as the sole basis for political organisation and resource distribution. It must carefully redefine the relationship between the centre and the regions, balancing autonomy with cohesion, and should reconsider the provocative and destabilising provision for secession (Article 39).
  
2. *Genuine National Dialogue:* The current NDC must transcend perceptions of being a state-controlled entity. Its credibility hinges on demonstrable independence and the inclusive participation of all major stakeholders, including representatives from armed groups where feasible. The dialogue cannot be a mere political formality; it must create a safe and structured space for confronting painful historical narratives, acknowledging victimhood on all sides, and collaboratively constructing a new, shared national story that incorporates multiple perspectives and lays the foundation for a common future.
  
3. *Strengthening Programmatic Politics:* To break the cycle of ethnic clientelism, legal and political incentives should be introduced to foster the development of programmatic, civic-oriented political parties. This could involve reforming

laws on party registration to discourage explicitly ethnic parties while encouraging cross-ethnic alliances and policy-based competition. Supporting civic education that encourages issue-based voting is also crucial.

4. *Reforming Socialising Institutions:* The education system, media, and academia have often been conduits for divisive nationalist or ethno-nationalist narratives. A deliberate reform of these institutions is essential. This includes revising national curricula to promote multi-perspective, critical history teaching, fostering media that practices ethical, peace-oriented journalism, and encouraging academic research that bridges communal divides rather than deepening them.
  
5. *Investing in Leadership and Elite Socialisation:* Recognising that elite fragmentation is a core problem, deliberate programmes aimed at fostering interaction, dialogue, and trust-building among the next generation of political leaders from different ethnic and ideological backgrounds are crucial. This long-term investment is essential for breaking the intergenerational cycle of elite fragmentation and mistrust.

## **Concluding Reflection**

Ethiopia stands at a critical historical juncture. The conflicts that have ravaged the country - causing immense human suffering and threatening its very integrity - are the

product of specific historical choices and, most importantly, the powerful narratives that have been used to justify and institutionalise those choices. This thesis has argued that these narratives have become self-fulfilling prophecies: the story of Ethiopia as an prison has, through its institutionalisation in ethnic federalism, created a political system that often feels like one for many of its citizens. Conversely, the story of a unified cradle of civilisation has too often been wielded to dismiss legitimate demands for recognition and equality, thereby fuelling the very resistance it seeks to quell.

The path forward, therefore, lies not in the decisive victory of one narrative over the other, which would only sow the seeds for future conflict. Instead, it resides in the difficult, patient, and collective work of deconstructing both narratives and weaving a new, more complex and inclusive story. This new national narrative must possess the moral courage to acknowledge the dark chapters of conquest and oppression without allowing the nation to be defined solely by them. It must also celebrate the achievements of national sovereignty and cultural richness while making genuine space for diverse identities within a shared political community. Achieving this requires a fundamental transition from the current *disunified* national political elite structure, mired in an existential, zero-sum struggle, towards a *consensually unified* national political elite that can agree on the basic rules of the political game and manage the country's immense diversity through negotiation, compromise, and a commitment to the common good.

The emergence of a third narrative from the fieldwork, alongside the cross-factional consensus on key reforms, is a testament to the latent potential for such a shift. It indicates a deep yearning among many Ethiopians, including within segments of the elite, for a future that transcends the destructive polarisation of the past. Realising this future will demand exceptional leadership, profound courage, historical responsibility, and an unwavering commitment to a peacebuilding process that is as much about rebuilding shared meanings, re-establishing trust, and re-writing the national story as it is about reforming institutions and rewriting laws. The findings of this research suggest that while the challenges are undoubtedly formidable, the intellectual and human resources for renewal - within Ethiopia's rich history, its diverse cultures, and its resilient people - are equally abundant. The task is to harness them.

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## List of Transcripts: FDGs and in-depth Interviews

Transcript Academicians	Discussion with Academicians on Narratives and Conflicts, Welkite, May 9, 2024’.
Transcript Civic Parties	Focused Group Discussion with Leaders of Civic Parties in Ethiopia in Addis Ababa on May 1, 2024’.
Transcript Community	Focused Group Discussion with Community Leaders in Dilla, Ethiopia May 11, 2024’.
Transcript Ethnic Parties	Focused Group Discussion with Leaders of Ethnic Parties in Ethiopia in Addis Ababa on May 16, 2024’.
Transcript Gov Official	Interview with a High-Ranking Government Official. Addis Ababa, May 2, 2024’.
Transcript Media	Focused Group Discussion with Media Personnel in Addis Ababa May 11, 2024’.
Transcript PP Official	Interview with PP Official in Addis Ababa May 7, 2024.’
Transcript Tigray Elite	In-depth Discussion with Tigray Military & Political Elite 1 in Mekelle May 16, 2024’.
Transcript Tigray Elite 2	In-depth Discussion with Tigray Military Elite 2 in Mekelle May 16, 2024’.
Transcript Tigray Elite 3	In-depth Discussion with Tigray Political Elite 3 in Mekelle May 16, 2024’.
Transcript Tigray Elite 4 & 5	Transcript In-depth Discussion with Tigray Political Elite 4 & 5 in Mekelle May 16, 2024’.