

Ethiopian National Dialogue: At Cross-Roads

Dereje Melese Melese

Lecturer of Political Science, College of Social Science and Humanities at Debre Markos University.

Email: zekiyos777@gmail.com

Abstract

National consultations are increasingly becoming appropriate ways to resolve disputes over past abuses, power-sharing, and territorial claims and are crucial tools for addressing the challenges of managing the political transition. Ethiopia, now a day has embarked on preparations for the second national dialogue in the face of political tensions. Accordingly, this study examines the political and process factor contexts that mainly determine the success or failure of the upcoming national dialogue. To address the issue under investigation, the researcher consults experts, scholars, and civil society organizations involved in participating in and supporting these processes. Besides, scholarly articles, different workshops, seminars, conferences, and media outlets on the preparation of the dialogue and the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission Establishment Proclamation (ENDCEP: 1265/2022) document were also deeply considered. The study finds that although the national dialogue is an appropriate mechanism to deal with a deep political crisis in post-war situations or during far-reaching political transitions, the political context and process factors in current Ethiopia are not conducive to holding the dialogue, The prevalence of polarized political camps, poor dialogue experience, presence of external power manipulation, and the convener selection process makes the dialogue a tough national project from the outset. Thus, garnering trust among key actors, linking with other political processes, the inclusion of economic issues, and waiting until the right time is pertinent ahead of the national consultation.

Keywords: national dialogue; political context; process factor; political transition; Ethiopia

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1. Introduction

Persistent instability and state-building processes are much intertwined elements that strongly influence political transition in Africa. An incomplete nature of the state-building process is often full of major fault lines along which political violence is deployed, and the legitimacy of the state is further degraded. Noted by Dawit and Meressa (2020), this is starkly visible in Africa, where state-building processes have, by and large, failed to accommodate divergent visions of statehood, whether in postcolonial Sudan, the newly independent South Sudan, or in Ethiopia, which has a long history and tradition of statehood. Fundamental state-building questions followed by instability hinder political transition in different states of Africa. Such prolonged instability and issue of political transition raise important questions; about how to direct ongoing political transition in the region and how to deal effectively with emergent crises. Although no single solution to these problems, there is a growing need for a national dialogue that will help the country move away from the current and emerging political and security problems (Haider, 2019).

National dialogues are inclusive negotiating processes mainly deployed to influence or shape the decisions taken during periods of political transition. It is a consultation mechanism intended to expand participation in political transitions beyond the political and military elites (Papagianni, 2014). The very ambition is thus to move away from elite-level consultation making by allowing an avenue for diverse interests to influence the transitional negotiations process. National dialogue can be conducted during or post-war situations to rich on national consensus. Parallel to this argument, Blunck et al., (2017:21) conceptualize national dialogue as a “nationally-owned political process aimed at generating consensus among a broad range of national stakeholders in times of deep political crisis, in post-war situations or during far-reaching political transitions.”

Several African countries, including Ethiopia (1991) held national conferences in the early 1990s as they moved from authoritarian to democratic governments such as Benin, Togo, Congo Brazzaville, Niger, Mali, and Zaire, (Papagianni, 2014) and recently neighboring states of Ethiopia-Sudan, South Sudan and Kenya (Dawit and Meressa, 2020), were also undertook national dialogue.

A national dialogue is not a new experience in Ethiopia. The provisional government of the EPRDF, which was established on June 2, 1991, called for a national conference on peace and democracy. The conference was attended by more than 27 representatives of different liberation movements, ethnic groups, and prominent individuals (Tewfik, 2010) yet, the conference was not inclusive. Pan-Ethiopian political groups, for instance, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (its Amharic acronym is MEISONE), which were multinational were intentionally excluded from the national conference (Aaro, 2006). Thus, the peace talk of the 1991 remained impotent to sustain peace among the different people for reasons that range from irreconcilable ethnic demands to unverified history and exclusiveness. Recently, since

2018, different political parties have been calling for an inclusive national dialogue for a sustainable political transition. As a result, Ethiopia has embarked on preparations for the second national dialogue in the face of political tensions. National dialogue in Ethiopia, unless properly managed, will also aggravate instability and war. Thus, the study intends to assess the political context and process factor that determines the failure or success of the ongoing national dialogue in Ethiopia, focusing on the preparatory phase.

2. Research Methods

The study is based on desktop research and interviews with experts, scholars, and civil society organizations involved in participating in and supporting these processes. The study thus employed an exploratory research design approach employing the qualitative research tradition to explore the phenomena more. In addition to scholarly articles, different workshops, seminars, conferences, the Ethiopia national dialogue proclamation 1265/2022, and media outlets on the preparation of the dialogue were deeply consulted to investigate the issue under investigation.

The national dialogues have three pertinent stages (preparation, process, and implementation); the study mainly focuses on the preparatory phase. Besides, while different factors determine the fate of national dialogue, political context and process factors are the concern of this paper. Therefore, this study examines how political and process contexts influence the overall achievement of the ongoing national dialogue in Ethiopia. The primary data had been analyzed qualitatively through critical discourse analysis while the data collected from secondary sources had been analyzed qualitatively through a systematic review.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Why National Dialogue in Ethiopia?

National dialogues are convened when the fundamental nature or survival of a government is in question and are meant to resolve political crises, improve the legitimacy of institutions, and lead countries into political transitions (Paffenholz et al., 2017). The ongoing national dialogue in Ethiopia is perceived to address at least the following twin issues: to support the nation-building process and democratic transition.

1) Nation Building Process

The major underlying cause of instability in third-world countries is internally generated and is linked to the incomplete nature of the nation-building processes (Dawit and Meressa, 2020). The case in Ethiopia is not different. The Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission Establishment proclamation 1265/2022, part two No. 6(7) clearly states that “among the major goals of the national dialogue, one is to bring about national consensus and to build strong and legitimate nation-state on a solid foundation.” Therefore, the national dialogue under the preparatory phase could also revisit the existing social contract aim to end the political deadlock of the past 50 years or more, which was unable to bring about accommodative politics and transform the political dispensation of successive regimes.

2) Democratic Transition:

Generating consensus among a broad range of national stakeholders in times of deep political crisis, in post-war situations, or during far-reaching political transitions is the conventional purpose of national dialogue (Blunck, et al., 2017). As is well known, Ethiopia is embarking on a new political transition under the rule of Abiy Ahmed since 2018.

“The national dialogue in Ethiopia-if properly managed- will perceive to bring national consensus on fundamental national issues and trust among key political actors. Besides, and more importantly, the consultation is helpful to build democratic institutions that are helpful for a genuine political transition.”¹

The institutional building and the democratization process in Ethiopia are not yet well installed. This is because, the political system of Ethiopia is not a product of a political bargain, genuine competition, and a national consensus of an inclusive approach to governance (Kebede, 2013). The political system is characterized by political and economic state capture, absence of genuine competition, and weak and vulnerable national governance institutions thus the national dialogue is expected to bring transition out of such a spoiled political system.

The Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission Establishment proclamation No.1265/2022 under part two, Number 6(3) also stated that the national dialogue is aimed at improving the state-society relationship and establishing a trusted and new political landscape conducive to democratic consolidation. In a nutshell, the main concerns of the national dialogue, nation-building, and political transition, are interdependent and perceived to address the following issues.

¹Mr. WorkuYazie (Asst. Professor), lecturer school of law Bahir Dar University presentation on the role of stakeholder on the national consultation, 30 January 2022.

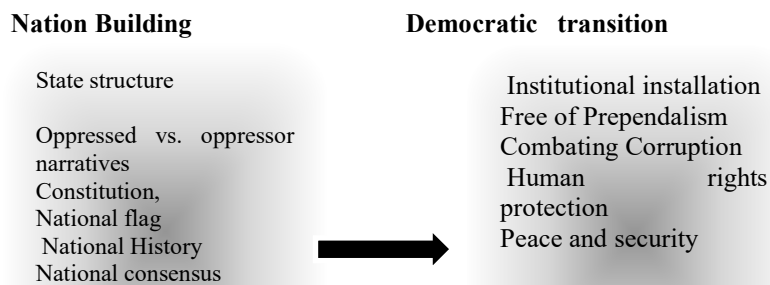


Figure 1: Twin basics of the National Dialogue in Ethiopia

3.2 Neighboring states Experiences

Several African countries were held national dialogue as an instrument of political transition since the early 1990s. Disagreements over the fundamental aspects of state building underlie instability and continue to stunt political transition in Horn of Africa. The problem raises important questions about how to deal ongoing political transition in the region on the one hand and how to chart effectively with emergent crises on the other. Thus, Ethiopia, under preparatory phase to hold a dialogue, shall consider the challenges faced by immediate neighboring states; Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya and others.

Sudan

Sudan, since its independence on 1 January 1956, has been plagued by crises and conflicts relating to questions of identity, development, ethnicity, appropriate form of governance, etc. In 2014, a newly National Dialogue process was launched as means to political transition at the initiative of the Sudanese president, Omer Elbashir. However, from the onset of the dialogue, two main serious questions faced the process; primarily the issue of genuine process (whether it is a genuine project or a survival maneuver for the ruling regime), and secondly, in light of the failure of all previous attempts of dialogue, (the guarantees that this new attempt will not fail) (Saeid, 2017). In the same parlance, the question of genuine dialogue process and poor past dialogue experience are a big deal in the preparatory phase of Ethiopia's current national dialogue.

The call for a comprehensive "national leap" by the then president Omar Al-Bashir on 27th January 2014, had faced different reaction from different actors. Large groups of opposition parties accepted the call and attended the Meeting. However, these parties conditioned their continuation in the Dialogue to the implementation of trust building measures and creation of a fertile environment for the Dialogue, mainly unleashing public freedoms, release of all political detainees, ceasefire in war zones in Darfur, Southern Kordofan and the Blue Nile, and establishment of a transitional government to oversee the Dialogue (ibid). The reaction of the president however was not genuine. Oppressive measures against opponents continued, following the organization of a number of public political activities that were critical of the government, and, thus, political forces were banned from holding any political event outside party houses amid crackdown on the press.

The failure on the part of the governing National Congress Party (NCP) to meet the opposition requirements before joining the dialogue process, i.e., creation of the conducive environment and trust building measures. And on the contrary, the NCP continues its crackdown on opposition and freedoms, confiscating the newspapers and preventing the mass political activities. While many political parties and armed movements attended, the major opposition parties and armed groups boycotted the process, casting serious doubt on its inclusivity and legitimacy (Dawit and Merssa, 2020).

South Sudan

In South Sudan President Salva Kiir launched a national dialogue in May 2017 by presidential decree. The aim of the initiative was 'to end all violent conflicts, constitute national consensus on key national issues, and save the country from the risk of disintegration. Whilst initiated and launched by the President, the National Dialogue is not a government owned process. The Dialogue was perceived to be owned and led by South Sudanese. The President of the Republic or any government institution does not control the National Dialogue and even government resources for support to the National Dialogue was assumed to be managed by an independent entity.

The major criticism however was that the government, especially the NSS, would interfere with the process.

With an increasingly narrowing political space at the time, the view of this group was that the delegates would be intimidated and silenced, turning the process into a pro-government monologue. Like south Sudanese, opposition parties in Ethiopia are asking the unnecessary interference of the incumbent of the formulation of the national dialogue proclamation and the selection process of the convener. The SPLM-IO, the main opposition, held out of the process, objecting to participation due to lack of pre-dialogue consultations with a broad spectrum of the South Sudanese political establishment (Augustino, 2020). Yet the dialogue brings a notable achievement. The last strand of the Dialogue process, the national conference, concluded on the 17th of November 2020. In all of these conferences and consultations, people and communities spoke their minds about how to fix an ailing country. A plethora of official reports resulting from this process, many of them not so kind to the current leaders, have been widely disseminated (ibid). The dialogue was very pertinent in ending all violent conflicts in South Sudan, constitute national consensus, and save the country from disintegration.

Kenya

The Kenya National Dialogue and Reconciliation (KNDR) is an anomaly compared with Sudan and South Sudan dialogues. It involved facilitation by international actors, adding an element of mediation and negotiation and at the same time, the process had a clear dialogic element relating to critical national matters (Dawit and Merssa, 2020). In this regard, the KNDR served the dual objectives of a national dialogue. It started with ‘a clear crisis management approach and became more broad-based as it progressed. The constitution has opened space for new reforms and genuine opportunities for creating a progressive society. The main challenge, however, is Kenya’s political culture; old habits die hard. The dialogue was instrumental in stopping the violence, facilitating humanitarian assistance to the affected population and ending the political crisis through a power-sharing deal that was accepted by both parties. The process also paved the way for addressing the long-term issues that had undergirded the electoral violence through constitutional, legal and institutional reforms (South Consulting, 2011).

Key lessons for Ethiopia

Politicians and scholars believe a national dialogue in Ethiopia is imperative in order to reconcile contending visions of the future and to put the country’s political reforms back on track in a more inclusive manner. However, for a dialogue to be effective transitional instrument, the dialogue should be conducted genuinely. Ethiopia, in its preparatory phase should consider the success and failed factors of its immediate neighbor’s dialogue. First, Sudanese National Dialogue provides Ethiopia a good lesson to carefully consider the inclusion of important actors, especially opposition parties. Inclusion of key political actors and trust buildings are becoming hot issues on the ongoing Ethiopian national dialogue.

Second, unnecessary interference of the incumbent government on the dialogue process makes the dialogue a pro-government monologue in South Sudan. Thus, same critics are evident in Ethiopia from the onset. Monopolization of the convener selection process and establishment of the proclamation poses disagreement with opposition parties from the very beginning. Lastly, the constitution has opened a new reform and genuine opportunities in Kenya. One of the cleavages among political actors in Ethiopia is emanated from the 1995 FDRE constitution. So, amendment of the constitution is a potential success factor for the live Ethiopia dialogue.

Table1: Fundamentals of National Dialogue

Inclusiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equitable and effective participation for all actors with in the state • Giving a voice to actors that are often excluded from decision-making
Joint ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to the process
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflecting on what others say and think • Listening with openness to better understand the problem of the state
Humanity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Willingness to put oneself in somebody else’s place to understand others’ intention. • Expressing what one really is and truly believes on the dialogue
Confidentiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respecting the trust developed during a dialogue is key • Encouraging the freedom for participants to express different viewpoints
Long-term Perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Search for sustainable and lasting solutions • Seeking to transform relationship
Good faith	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No inclusion of hidden agendas or intentions • Showing integrity in sharing knowledge

Developed from (Guide on the National Dialogue Process in South Sudan, 2017)

3.3 Ethiopia’s National Dialogue: At Crossroads

Today, Ethiopia is in a situation whereby careful decision-making is pertinent and associated with the ongoing national dialogue. The evidence suggests that national dialogues have resulted in effective transitions and sustainable peace when they are broadly inclusive, nationally owned, internationally supported, and procedurally

fair. In contrast, if the dialogue is not well harnessed, it will become a pretext for disintegration. The effectiveness of the national dialogue mainly depends on political and process context factors. Entangled with these two determinants of national dialogue, Ethiopia will face a tough national project that potentially leads to a more fragile situation.

The Political landscape

The political context in which a national dialogue takes place can affect the likelihood of success or failure. The success of a national dialogue is often a confluence of many factors some of them are not directly related to the process. Among these, political will, common ground among political parties, links to other transitional processes, public buy-in, the role of major powers and regional actors, and changes in geopolitics or in local dynamics are due to concerns in Ethiopia's national dialogue.

A) External Manipulation (Geopolitics)

Although national dialogues are widely recognized as a nationally owned process, support or resistance from international actors can also influence the degree of success of national dialogues (Odigie, 2017). Associated with the construction of the Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam (GERD), Ethiopia has had acute challenges and confrontations from the neighboring states and other super and regional powers such as the United States. Thus the upcoming national dialogue is highly vulnerable to external actors' manipulation.

*"As clearly observed during the war in between the central government and TPLF rebel forces, neighboring states such as Egypt and Sudan and UN under the auspices of United States have posed a significant challenge on the Ethiopian government. Amid such hostile relation with some neighboring states and others, conducting national dialogue will potentially face resistance or manipulation from external actors."*¹

It can be difficult to navigate the involvement of various foreign actors as they may have opposing objectives or views in supporting the national dialogue. External players can, for example, encourage broad-based representation and the participation of marginalized segments of society, but they can also produce tension if their vision of inclusion differs from locally held ideas (Blunck et al., 2017). The role of the US in the national dialogue of Yemen (2013) and Libya (2014) were very significant and considered by some to be contrary to the broader vision of internal actors (Haider, 2019). Therefore, the national dialogue in Ethiopia will potentially face the same challenge from the US and other neighboring states.

B) Polarized Political Camps

The presence of drastically different views among parties can make the national dialogue more difficult to arrive at a common view or shared objectives, hindering the process to move forward. The case in Ethiopia is evident. In contrast, the absence of polarization between competing opposed political and ideological camps is also a success factor (El-Battahani, 2014). The different agendas of the key conflict actors in Sudan during 2005-2011 (Ibid), for example, and between conflicting factions in Yemen (alongside an externally driven agenda) undermined the development of a common view or shared objectives in dialogue. In the same parlance "extreme nationalism supported by populism is a dominant element that potentially impedes political transition in Ethiopia through the planned national consultation."²

C) Past and present experiences

National dialogues have benefitted or harmed from dialogue expertise and learning from past national dialogue experiences (Haider, 2019). In the past three decades, Ethiopia has been experienced in dealing with nationwide issues peacefully. In July 1991 for example, a peace and democracy conference was held to establish a legitimate broad-based transitional government that can prepare the country for democratic transformation as agreed at the America-brokered London peace conference (Merera, 2004). However, the conference was not inclusive and genuine. Civic self (pan- Ethiopian) political parties (for instance EPRP and MEISONNE) were intentionally excluded from the peace and democracy conference (Aaron, 2006).

In addition, recently *Ethiopia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* was one of the commissions established by law to help bring about a peaceful Ethiopia by studying and working on areas of contention for a lasting solution to the rampant conflict in the country. Despite the hope that the Reconciliation Commission will contribute to maintaining peace, justice, national unity and consensus, and also reconciliation among Ethiopian peoples, its term ended without any significant or visible achievement so far.³ Indeed prior experience with national dialogue negotiations has also helped in terms of learning from the country's own or from other countries' successful and unsuccessful experiences and avoiding the repetition of prior mistakes (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

¹Worku Yazzie(Asst. Professor), lecturer school of law Bahir Dar University presentation on the role of stakeholders on the national consultation, 30 January 2022

²Henock Getachew (Dr.), seminar presentation entitled "Political transition in new/semi democracies: a reflection of global experience, Bahir Dar University, 03 November 2021.

³ Addis Standard magazine, a monthly English private magazine published and distributed by JAKENN Publishing P.L.C March 1, 2022

Process Context Factor

National dialogue processes face strong demands for inclusion from multiple social and political groups which are eager to influence national discussions (Haider, 2019). In a well-articulated dialogue, a diverse and widely representative committee is set up with the responsibility to prepare all aspects of the dialogue. The process of national dialogue can often be lengthy and is central to its success. In the current political economy situation of Ethiopia, multiple process factors are not conducive to holding genuine national dialogue for the intended objective. Some of the major and potential bottlenecks of the dialogue are discussed hereafter.

A) Trust building process

Trust building is pertinent in all stages of the dialogue for its implementation. National dialogues must be going along with a series of steps to attenuate tensions, to build a level of "working trust" to engage in meaningful consultation. Skepticism among and between government officials, citizens, and nations has become a default position in Ethiopian current political practice.

*"Our psycho-social foundation faces serious trust degradation problem over the past three decades. Now a day trust toward government, elites, religious leaders, and elders is highly depleted which was a good asset in Ethiopia. Besides, the general public has no trust up on government institutions such as courts, police, parliament, executive, and others. Thus conducting the dialogue in such volatile circumstances is quite a challenging national project."*¹

Given the existing polarized political discourse and opinions, skepticism among the major political groups and the public at large will make the dialogue difficult to bring political transition. Maintaining the transparency of the process, embarking on an inclusive preparation phase to agree on the substantive and procedural issues of the national dialogue, and designating a neutral convener are important instruments to establish trust (Dawit and Meressa, 2020). However, such requirements are not installed in Ethiopia from the outset. "Trust among actors is important to undertake dialogue, but the default position of political actors in Ethiopia is skepticism."² Therefore, in such a skeptical and self-centered group, hosting a national dialogue may aggravate the problem. In addition, the informant argues that "in an extremely large group identity whereby the group has chosen glory and trauma narrative under populist leadership, reaching on consensus in Ethiopia becomes a far-reaching business."³

B) The Convener Selection Process

The question of the legitimacy of the selection process of the 11-member commissioners is a challenge to the dialogue from the very beginning. A credible, broadly accepted, independent, respected, and charismatic convener, mediator, or facilitator can significantly affect the strength of the national dialogue, indicating seriousness and trust in the process (Haider, 2019). However, the selection of the commissioners is not welcomed by the opposition political parties and armed groups, who are expected to be a participant in the ongoing national dialogue. In this regard "Mr. Mulatu Gemechu in a televised program confronts the selection of the commissioners arguing:

*"The process of the ratification of the proclamation and the selection of the commissioners is not accepted. The incumbent party establishes the proclamation and selects the conveners without barraging with opposition political parties and other armed political actors. The appointment of the commissioners by the parliament whereby 98% of the seat is controlled by the ruling party is also not fair commencing. The government shows undue interference from the outset."*⁴

Besides, other political parties such as Ethiopian Citizen for Social Justice (EZEMA), Balderas for True Democracy (Balderas), and the Amhara National Movement (NaMA) all are questioning the legitimacy of the selection process of the commissioners. Engineer Yilkal Getnet, Chief Secretary of Hibr Ethiopia Democratic party (Hibr Ethiopia) in a televised program argues that "the national dialogue becomes government's private project; the selection process of the conveners is not transparent and conflicting parties are not involved and after all, we have no trusted convener thus we may also require external conveners."⁵ A facilitator that all parties accept and feel comfortable with is often essential to developing trust and ensuring the process produces the maximum amount of giving and takes (Kaplan and Freeman, 2015). A credible, broadly accepted, independent and respected mediator should facilitate the national dialogue, indicating seriousness and trust in the process. The power and mandates of national dialogues is igniting a skepticism that the incumbent government, if not the

¹ Engineer Yilkal Getnet, Chief secretary of Hibr Ethiopia Democratic Party, televised the program 16 march 2022 on Fana TV

² Dr. Adem Kassie, an expert in governance, comparative constitutional design, and human rights and democratization in Africa, presentation on the role of stakeholders in the national consultation, Bahir Dar University, 30 January 2022

³ Degafie Debalkie, Peace and Conflict Analyst, Conflict Resolution Practitioner, Identity Based

Conflict Researcher, a seminar presented on; Large Group Identity: Moving in and out of "Glory" and "Trauma", 28 January 2022 at Bahir Dar University.

⁴ Mr. Mulatu Gemechu, vice chairman of the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) Party, televised an interview with Fana Tv, on 22 March 2022.

⁵ Engineer Yilkal Getnet Chief Secretary of Hibr Ethiopia Democratic Party televised the program on 16 March 2022 on Fana TV.

prime minister, is deciding alone and this seemingly creates doubtfulness on the likeability of the dialogue (Abyssini, 2022). In addition insiders key influential for the ongoing dialogue success. Insider mediators are actors intrinsic to the conflict context and with meditative capacities. They have in-depth knowledge of their local contexts, a high level of personal commitment and the ability to access and influence formal and informal structures. In Ethiopia however, both officially selected conveners and insider mediators are not well considered and it is a big deal and seems challenging to have a genuine facilitator accepted by the conflicting parties.

C) Issue of inclusiveness

The active involvement of conflicting parties is a crucial process for the dialogue to be meaningful. The degree of inclusiveness, and the extent to which different political actors and segments of society are included, shapes significantly whether stakeholders view the national dialogue as a valid way in which to address their grievances and aspirations (CEG, 2017). Engineer Yilkal Getnet in this regard argues that "the preparation phase of the dialogue is not inclusive; conflicting parties including opposition parties and rebel groups (terrorists) are not well-considered and involved who are significant actors."¹ Thus many confrontations from opposition political parties and rebel groups will be a potential challenge that threatens the success of the national dialogue from the very beginning. National Dialogues typically involve key national elites, including the government and the largest (armed or unarmed) opposition parties, and occasionally the military. Other groups who participate include those representing wider constituencies such as civil society, women, youth, business, and religious or traditional actors. So, inclusion of all actors including rebel groups in the dialogue is very crucial for its success.

D) It's very importance

There are also scholars and government officials who quest the very importance of the national dialogue arguing; "National dialogue is not the feasible mechanism because from the very beginning there is no conflict among the people. It is the political elite that poses such a crisis and the solution is not national dialogue instead bargaining among and between incumbent and opposition parties is the more plausible way out."² So, according to this group political and economic instruments are preferable.

3.4 So What? (The way forward)

As clearly depicted in the fore discussion, the context in which the dialogue commences and expectations from the dialogue matter the overall achievement of the consultation for a genuine political transition in Ethiopia. In the rich of the researcher, Ethiopia is not found a safe environment to hold national dialogue (reasons are discussed above 3.2). Thus, though the national dialogue is an important instrument for a political transition in Ethiopia, primary conditions set up otherwise should be taken into bold consideration to harness the dialogue constructively early in the dialogue.

- i) **Timing:** National dialogues have bi-dimensional consequences; one is political transition and to some extent, it also results in disintegration. Therefore, due management of the consultation is quite important. Dr. Adem Kassie in his public lecture at Bahir Dar University argues that "three things are basic for successful dialogue; free of chaos, free of third party intervention, and popular support." However, such requirements do not prevail in Ethiopia. Ethiopia's political transition has unveiled a range of political and security uncertainties (Dawit and Meressa (2020). Besides, the informant argues that "conducting dialogue amid live war, external intervention and instability brings no stable consultation."³ A resurgence of violent conflicts in the past four years and the country's polarized political environment threaten to derail the transition. Silencing the gun and bringing relative stability are prime conditions before commencing the dialogue.
- ii) **Garner trust among the major political actors:** This can be achieved, among other things, through making the process transparent, and inclusive and appointing neutral conveners. It is necessary to establish a level of "working trust", enabling parties to engage in a meaningful dialogue. Besides, public buy-in is crucial to ensure progress in the negotiation and implementation of agreements. Yet, support for the process can decline over time if people become frustrated with delays, diminishing legitimacy, or a lack of progress.
- iii) **Link with other political processes:** National dialogue must complement, and be linked to, other political processes.

The national dialogue is one important element to bring peace yet, it should be supported by different supporting mechanisms. In Ethiopia's context, transitional retributive justice is prominent ahead of the national dialogue. To bring lasting peace and justice, accountability to the offender and appropriate reparation is crucial. And to bring deeper institutional reform

¹ ibid

² Dr. Degu Asress, Assistant professor of Political Science at Debre Markos University interviewed on 7 May 2022.

³ Mr. work Yazzie (Asst. Professor), lecturer school of law Bahir Dar University presentation on the role of stakeholders on the national consultation, 30 January 2022

*reconciliation shall precede the dialogue.*¹

In addition, the preparedness of the actors through workshops and consultations, for example, can facilitate sustainable outcomes, by providing the necessary expertise and tools to make a genuine contribution (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

- iv) **The inclusion of economic issues:** it can open up opportunities to discuss long-term perspectives and peace dividends, which can enhance the legitimacy of national dialogues for the wider population. The quality of development outcomes that are associated with national dialogues can produce the eventual tipping points for the success or failure of such processes. In Yemen, for example, the transitional government decided in 2014 to lift existing fuel subsidies, to reduce the budget deficit (Haider, 2019). This decision hurt socio-economic conditions and contributed to mobilization against the transitional government, violence, and the eventual collapse of the agreements reached at the NDC (Hartmann, 2017). In the same parlance taking economic measures is pertinent for the success of the upcoming national dialogue in Ethiopia.
- v) **Popular acceptance of the Dialogue:** on the one hand there are segment of the population who do not accept the importance of the dialogue as a means to overcome the current crisis. On the other hand significant numbers of rural populations have no awareness on what is going on through the national dialogue. Public support or lack can alter or constrain progress within the national dialogue process. The degree of buy-in is influenced by the supply of public information, smart communication, and media engagement – all of that have an effect on the amount of transparency and understanding of the process. Learning from past experience lies at the heart of a national dialogue. The prime minister in his speech to the member of the parliament noted that “we formerly said that there is no conflict among Ethiopians, and no need of national dialogue, but now it is the quest of the majority then we should properly harness the dialogue for our transformation.”² Therefore, a head of the dialogue Ethiopian should reach on consensus to deploy the dialogue to overcome the current political crisis and to support the political transition.

3.4 Conclusion

National dialogues are convened to resolve political crises and lead countries to political transition. The ongoing dialogue in Ethiopia is expected to support the nation-building process and political transition. For a dialogue to be successful there is a need to have some sort of enabling environment. However, the political conditions (super and regional power interference, drastically different political groups, poor experience) and the process factors (rampant skepticism, convener selection process short of transparency, and issue of inclusiveness of rebel groups) make the upcoming dialogue quite challenging project. Success is often a confluence of many factors; among these are the role of major powers and regional actors and changes in geopolitics or in local dynamics are vital. Therefore, ahead of the national dialogue prerequisite shall be considered in depth. Issue of timing, linking with other political processes, building working trust, and economic measures are pertinent factors for the dialogue to be effective means of democratic transition.

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¹ Mr. Merhatsidk Mekonnen, legal Adviser of Amhara Reginal State president, seminar presentation entitled 'Appraisal of the conflict in the Northern Ethiopia, 25 February 2022, Bahir Dar University.

² Dr. Abiy Ahmed, Prime Minister of Ethiopia, a televised speech to the Parliament of Ethiopia 7 July 2022.

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