

[https://doi.org/10.52326/jss.utm.2024.7\(4\).14](https://doi.org/10.52326/jss.utm.2024.7(4).14)
UDC 323(630)



CHALLENGES OF NATIONAL RECONCILIATION IN ETHIOPIA: REFLECTIONS ON ETHIOPIA'S CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION, NATIONAL COHESION AND PEACE BUILDING

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Received: 11. 29. 2024

Accepted: 12. 28. 2024

Abstract. Ethiopia has been struggling to achieve national reconciliation, conflict transformation, and peace-building since the 1974 revolution and regime changes in 1991 and 2018. Past Ethiopian governments have not given enough attention to reconciliation efforts, despite the urge for it and attempt to establish a reconciliation commission. The study in this article looks at the challenges facing national reconciliation, conflict transformation, social cohesion, and peace-building in contemporary Ethiopia. The researcher used interviews with key informants and qualitatively designed surveys with 165 randomly selected residents of Addis Ababa, Adama, and Mekelle cities. Analysis of documents, literature, research articles, and social media platforms helped to highlight various challenges, including historical context, political and constitutional issues, competing nationalisms, social factors, national identity conflicts, economic disparities, media influence, lack of civil society involvement, the spoiling role of the Ethiopian diaspora, and external pressures. The study recommends a strong political commitment and a comprehensive peace-building strategy involving all Ethiopian elites to achieve lasting political reconciliation, unity, and peace in the country through an elite based negotiated political settlement.

Keywords: *Challenges, Ethiopia, national reconciliation, competing nationalism, historical grievances, negotiated hegemon.*

Rezumat. Etiopia s-a luptat să realizeze reconcilierea națională, transformarea conflictului și consolidarea păcii de la revoluția din 1974 și schimbările de regim din 1991 și 2018. Guvernele etiopiene trecute nu au acordat suficientă atenție eforturilor de reconciliere, în ciuda îndemnului pentru pace și a încercării de a stabili o comisie de reconciliere. Studiul din acest articol analizează provocările cu care se confruntă reconcilierea națională, transformarea conflictelor, coeziunea socială și consolidarea păcii în Etiopia contemporană. Au fost folosite interviuri cu informatori cheie și sondaje concepute calitativ cu 165 de locuitori selectați aleatoriu din orașele Addis Abeba, Adama și Mekelle. Analiza documentelor, literaturii, articolele de cercetare și platformele de social media au ajutat la evidențierea diferitelor provocări, inclusiv contextul istoric, probleme politice și constituționale, naționalisme concurente, factori sociali, conflicte de identitate națională, disparități economice, influență mass-media, lipsa de implicare a societății civile, rolul perturbator al diasporei etiopiene și presiunile externe. Studiul recomandă un angajament

politic puternic și o strategie cuprinzătoare de consolidare a păcii care să implice toate elitele etiopiene pentru a obține o reconciliere politică durabilă, unitate și pace în țară printr-o înțelegere politică negociată bazată pe elită.

Cuvinte cheie: *provocări, Etiopia, reconciliere națională, naționalism concurent, nemulțumiri istorice, hegemon negociat.*

1. Introduction

Ethiopian competing elites are prisoners of the country's political past. Ethiopia's political conflicts stem from its controversial state formation process that culminated in the second half of the nineteenth century. The political center's southward territorial expansion led to mutually exclusive national and ethno-national discourses. Ethno-nationalists view the expansion as colonizing the periphery by the centre, while northerners, except Tigrayan elites, have a nationalistic view and link it to the country's glorious history.

Competing Ethiopian elites' political conflict and contradictions primarily resulted following the 1974 social revolution that overthrew the monarchic regime. Following this, Ethiopia's competing elites have been in political strife despite the call for reconciliation from Ethiopian citizens and the existence of customary traditional institutions and mechanisms of conflict resolution and reconciliation. It has been learned that successive Ethiopian governments have declined the call for reconciliation. For instance, Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), established in 1975, fought against the military dictatorship for seventeen years before establishing the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) led government in 1991 and had the advantage of solving the country's contradictions through reconciliation. However, it applied its revolutionary ideology and material-based class analysis and social contradiction to resolve the country's basic contradiction, which ultimately proved a failure since it was not a genuine and inclusive path towards national reconciliation other than letting it assume state power. Moreover, the EPRDF-led government established a special persecutor to persecute officials of the *Därgue* regime, sidelining issues of reconciliation and national consensus. The EPRDF regime was accused by critics of neglecting national reconciliation in an attempt to avoid losing political power.

The reformist government, which came in 2018, was expected to resolve the country's fundamental problems through national reconciliation. The incumbent Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmad, is the first leader to address peace, unity, and reconciliation through his concept of *mädämär* lit. synergy [1]. As a result, the government established reconciliation commission in February 2019. However, the commission, which was hoped and aimed to address the fundamental issues of Ethiopia, suffered from a legitimacy crisis from its very inception [2] and ended in 2022 without fulfilling its mandates. Despite this, still many Ethiopians anticipated significant progress in national reconciliation. The experience of post-conflict states demonstrates that most countries arising from armed conflicts have actively addressed the issue of reconciliation in the past three decades [3].

Some African countries have established truth and reconciliation commissions and managed their problems peacefully. For instance, Kenya's Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) was established in 2008 to investigate human rights violations between 1963 and 2008. Rwanda and South Africa have also successfully implemented reconciliation processes. However, Ethiopia, which has been ravaged by elite based political conflict since 1974, has not achieved national reconciliation nor transformed its political contradictions and conflicts. This has led to new challenges as new conflicts and contradictions are

complicating existing ones, making reconciliation, conflict transformation and peace-building increasingly challenging.

So far no scholarly work has been done to investigate factors that hinder reconciliation in Ethiopia. Moreover, national reconciliation in Ethiopia is a complex and challenging task due to past and present political conflicts, including center-periphery, ethno-national, and inter-elite conflicts among the competing elites of the three ethnic groups. The transformation of elite-based conflicts into societal-based ones, which affects horizontal social cohesion, is getting critical. Moreover, chronic inter-communal conflicts may take years to heal. However, Ethiopia's government often overlooks these contradictions. Ironically, the academia often views the issue as a government agenda rather than a worthy academic endeavour. This article, however, aims to investigate factors that challenge national reconciliation, conflict transformation and peace building in Ethiopia.

In Ethiopia, the pursuit of national reconciliation, consensus, social cohesion, and peace-building has been a contentious issue among the competing elites and politicians. National reconciliation in the context of this study needs to be situated not from the usual understanding of the reconciliation process and issues of restorative and retributive aspects of transitional justice of post-conflict societies. However, this study situates national reconciliation as a political settlement among the competing elites of the three major ethnic groups of Ethiopia, who have mutually exclusive views and propose different solutions for the country's problems. This not only complicates the understanding of national reconciliation in Ethiopia but also the process and prospects of reconciliation. This poses a challenge for national reconciliation, social cohesion, and peace-building in Ethiopia that has not been addressed adequately and critically. Hence, investigating the factors that hinder national reconciliation, conflict transformation, social cohesion, and peace-building in contemporary Ethiopia is not only an academic endeavor but also critical for the peace and stability of Ethiopia and the greater Horn region.

The study aims to examine the challenges of national reconciliation in Ethiopia, focusing on conflict transformation, social cohesion, and peace-building. So it explores what fundamental issues and contradictions hinder reconciliation in contemporary Ethiopia, complicating the quest for social cohesion and peace building. It contends that reconciliation should not be driven by short-sighted political gains or maintaining the *status quo*, but it should rely on examining the root and route of the country's fundamental political and historical contradictions that begot the challenges for national reconciliation and social cohesion in contemporary Ethiopia.

2. Problem statement

Ethiopia is worth for reconciliation study. The following factors necessitate why Ethiopia provides the impetus for reconciliation study. First, Ethiopia's political culture and the violent state formation process are deeply intertwined with its long history and legacy of conflict. In Ethiopia's political history, governments have come and gone through non-peaceful means, political intrigue, and conflict, laying layers for political contradictions and complementing and complicating existing political contradictions. In the last six decades alone, the country witnessed an abortive coup in 1960, a revolution in 1974 followed by the summary execution of officials of the imperial regime in November 1974, the first of its kind in the country's history that introduced the culture of killing without trial. The country also witnessed seventeen years of civil war and military dictatorship (1975-1991), authoritarian

rule in the guise of democracy, and developmentalism by EPRDF that ruled the country from 1991-2018, which had been criticized for its human rights violations, crimes, and corruption. The reformist government inherited all these background factors that complicate the country's political contradictions and reconciliation process.

Ethiopia is a country known for numerous liberation movements. Recently, it witnessed the world's deadliest civil war, claiming hundreds of thousands of civilian lives. The Tigray War ended in November 2022 by the signing of the Pretoria Agreement. But issues of truth-finding, transitional justice, inclusive dialogue, and reconciliation remain unresolved. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) had been fighting the reformist government since 2018, and its military wing, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), continues to fight for the Oromo people's rights; despite calls to solve the problem through negotiation.

The Amhara region is currently in conflict between *fano* and the federal government. *Fano*, which is locally organized Amhara paramilitary force, accuses the federal government of committing genocide against the Amahara people [4]. *Fano* leaders claim they are committed to stopping the plight of their people and safeguarding their interests. Accordingly, *fano* aims to control the central government, bring regime change, and amend the constitution. However, the study positions that Ethiopia needs national reconciliation to transform existing conflicts and promote lasting peace through a peaceful, inclusive elite-based negotiated settlement, rather than a unilateral approach.

3. Materials and methods

The study used a qualitative exploratory case study design to identify the major challenges of reconciliation in Ethiopia. Data was gathered from both primary and secondary sources. A face-to-face key informant interview was conducted with twenty-two participants identified by purposive sampling. The interviewees' verbatim information is indicated in quotation marks, and block quotations are used using anonymous names. Moreover, a qualitative survey was also conducted on 165 respondents who were selected haphazardly from residents of Addis Ababa, Adama, and Mekelle cities. The respondents were given and filled with open-ended qualitative questions. Secondary sources were consulted, including published documents, dissertations, and scientific articles. Both mainstream and social media platforms were also used as sources. The data was analyzed through content and thematic analysis using critical discourse analysis, which informed data analysis, interpretation, narration, generalization, conclusion and recommendations.

4. Challenges of National Reconciliation in Ethiopia

4.1. The historical context: denial as a challenge

The contested nature of Ethiopia's history is one of the challenges that inhibit reconciliation. Ethiopia's modern history started in 1855 when Emperor Tewodros restored power to the political center. With the coming of Tewodros II (1855–1868), ethnic politics was instituted in Ethiopia because the emperor had a pejorative attitude toward the Oromos [5, 6]. Since then, ethnicity, religion, and region have been the major determinants of Ethiopia's political dynamics (5). Emperor Yohannes (1872-1989) enforced Christian conversion in Wällo, forcing Muslims to leave their land if they refused to adopt the emperor's religion [7, p.19]. King Menelik of Shäwa, a vassal of Emperor Yohannes, expanded his territories at the expense of then autonomous and semi-autonomous principalities, culminating Ethiopia's state formation after assuming state power in 1889 and the post-Adwa

period [8]. The historical context provides the political and historical rifts in Ethiopia, hindering reconciliation among Ethiopia's competing elites.

Ethiopia's modern history and state formation are viewed from two opposing historical perspectives: the state formation and nation-building thesis, which glorifies territorial expansion by Menelik of Shäwa, and the national oppression thesis, which argues that Ethiopia's state formation and southward expansion was conducted at the expense of Ethiopian nations and nationalities. These two form the core of Ethiopia's politico-historical contradictions.

Ethiopian competing elites' denial of historical events and abusing history for political consumption present a challenge to national reconciliation. According to key informants Regassa and Getachew, the historical denial constitutes verbal support or being indifferent to the historical wounds, injustices, and psychological traumas of individuals and communities who suffered during the formation of Ethiopia as a state. Abreha, a key informant from Tigray, argues that "Menelik and his rule were the source of the country's basic problems and should be blamed for the current political, social, and economic issues." He also emphasizes that "if reconciliation is to be achieved, his supporters and Amhara elites must acknowledge the injuries and sufferings of others during Menelik's leadership." He concludes that shifting and denying the root cause of the country's problem is seen as a step backward and a challenge for the country's reconciliation efforts.

The *Anoole* massacre, allegedly committed by Shäwan forces, is a significant historical grievance for Oromo nationalists. According to a key informant from Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), the *Anoole* also known as *Aannolee* (Oromo) statue is erected in 2014 in Arsi, east Oromia, which depicts a mutilated hand holding a mutilated woman's breast in memory of "Oromos murdered by Menelik and his Army." The statue commemorates the massacre of Arusi Oromos who fought against the expanding Shäwan forces from 1882-1886 [9]. Menelik, then King of Shäwa, led numerous campaigns in person [8]. The *Anoole* monument has been a source of controversy between Amhara and Oromo nationalists, who espouse different interpretations and denials [9]. According key informant Regassa, "Amhara and pan-Ethiopianist forces deny the atrocities at *Anoole* and label them as an ethnonationalist fabrication and lie to discredit the achievements of the founding fathers of the country". Similarly, Getachew, another key informant from the south, also argues that "there is still psychological trauma shared by the people, particularly the south, mandating recognition of it crucial for national consensus and reconciliation.

Oromo nationalists' allegations of atrocities are dismissed by Amhara elites and pan-Ethiopianist forces, who argue that the Oromos are rather responsible for the country's current problems. Achamyelah Tamiru [10] denies the atrocity done at *Anoole* and claims no evidence can be presented. On the contrary, he claims that mass atrocities and human rights violations occurred during the sixteenth century Oromo expansion, leading to the extinction and assimilation of around twenty-eight indigenous ethnicities. He also suggests that the *abba gädaas* (fathers) of Oromo should seek forgiveness from the Ethiopian people for the destruction caused by the institutionalization of violence through the *Gädaa system*.

4.2. Political challenges

4.2.1. Border and identity problems

The major political challenge that inhibits national reconciliation in Ethiopia is the identity and demarcation of contested territories. The identity and border demarcation issues

between Amhara and Tigray over *Wälqait* and *Raya*, as well as border claims between Amhara and Oromia in north Shäwa and southeast Shäwa, is a potential source of disagreement and conflict among the competing elites and the respective regional states. Moreover, Amhara elites fear that the Oromo elites may have hegemonic aspirations over Oromo inhabited special zones in Amhara region. These contested territories have historical, cultural, and political antecedents as well as political and economic significance for the concerned regions. Key informant Zelalem argues that, given the complexity of the border and identity issues, it would be unlikely to solve these contested areas peacefully and timely. Hence, the way they can be solved is a source of disagreement and discontent, a challenge to national reconciliation, social cohesion, and peace building in contemporary Ethiopia.

The other identity-related problem that inhibits reconciliation according to Zelalem is the country's political system and the way the constitution and political power are framed and exercised, which marginalizes minorities from holding political power through peaceful means and democratic competition. Zelalem argues that, the constitution and the federal arrangement have made the two biggest ethnic groups and ethnic states (Amhara and Oromo) owners of the state's political power, allowing them to decide on other's fate. This presents the challenge for reconciliation since the disenfranchised minorities may take violence as the only way to have representation or assume political power, complicating national reconciliation.

4.2.2. Ethiopia's political culture: Zero-sum politics

Ethiopia, though rich in its political history and cultural mosaic, is known for its long established institutionalization of violent political culture. Its long history of violent and intriguing political culture has shaped contemporary political dynamics. Ethiopia's political culture in general and the competing elites' political orientation in particular has been competitive, conservative, and hierarchical, hindering the establishment of a peaceful democratic system imperative for peaceful transfer of power and reconciliation. Since the 1974 revolution, the zero-sum principle has guided the elites, sidelining dialogue and compromise. Moreover, Ethiopia's polarized history, identity politics and ethnic divisions, and complex power dynamics further exacerbate this issue. The divergent alignment of forces is due to opposing interpretations of Ethiopia's history by competing ethnic nationalisms. Key informant Zelalem contends that Ethiopia's political culture, influenced by various values, norms, and practices, has hindered dialogue, compromise, and negotiated settlements due to the competing elites' principle of the "winner takes all" and "my way or no way". He also notes that "the elites' uncompromising stance has led to the use of violence as the only solution to problems, making political settlement and reconciliation unrealistic due to the intricate issues and irreconcilable narratives".

4.2.3. The voluntary nature of reconciliation as a challenge

In Ethiopia, there is no consensus on the need for national reconciliation, despite calls from academics and political parties. According to key informant Mossisa, there is no agreement among competing elites on the fundamental problem and contradiction of the country that prevents reconciliation. He further argues that even there is no consensus on the terms or solutions to the problem. Some favor national reconciliation, while others still call it national consensus. Recently, the government established a National Dialogue Commission (NDC), though rejected by major political parties. This shows that the elites have not reached a consensus on the issues and ownership of national reconciliation, consensus or dialogue.

Abreha, Tigrayan nationalist, argues that “we don’t need reconciliation and continue to live with a genocidal state that kills Tigrayans every thirty years.” He further argues that “Ethiopia is an empire and cannot accommodate and reconcile the competing elites’ irreconcilable and fundamental contradictions. Hence, reconciliation is unrealistic other than suffering in a struggling empire”. Bloomfield [11, p. 14] argues that reconciliation is a voluntary act that cannot be enforced on conflicting parties. Hamber & Kelly also note that “reconciliation is a morally loaded concept and different people will bring their own ideological bias to the subject.” They also argue that “individuals’ underlying assumptions and ideologies significantly affect their perception of reconciliation” [12, p. 293].

4.2.4. Competing loyalties: National identity versus civic identity

Ethiopia’s quest for sustainable state-building, reconciliation and social cohesion face challenges due to competing loyalties among elites. The state is a battleground for forming a national Ethiopian identity versus preserving an ethno-national identity due to the country’s diversity and debate over cultural values that underpin Ethiopian civic identity. According to data gathered from interviewees, elites of Oromo and Tigray show ethnic loyalty, while Amhara elites identify themselves as pan-Ethiopianists.

The qualitative interview reveals that Tigrayan and Oromo elites exclusively prioritize their ethnic identity, while Amhara elites believe their ethnic identity and civic nationalism or pan-Ethiopian identity are mutually reinforcing. According to Workneh [13], pan-Ethiopian nationalism envisions a supra-ethnic national identity where ethnic groups must blend to the dominant cultural ethos. However, ethno-nationalists oppose this, arguing it is based on ethno cultural values of a single ethnic group (Amhara) or geographic region (northern) and racial stock (Semitic). An informant argues that “pan-Ethiopianist forces believe that accepting and exercising cultural values of northern Ethiopia is a manifestation of *Itəyopəyawināt* (Ethiopianism), while identifying and practicing one’s culture is considered anti-Ethiopianism”. Key informant Berhanu argues that pan-Ethiopian citizenship is the continuation of imperial Ethiopia’s assimilationist nation-building, which Ethiopian nations and nationalities rejected through their bitter struggle and sacrifices.

Petros, a pan-Ethiopianist key informant, argues that the post-1991 political dispensation, ethnic-based federalism, and emphasis on nation, nationalities, and peoples as the sovereign owners of the constitution and the state have hindered the development of pan-Ethiopian supra-national identity. He further argues that “this approach is against the state’s interests, which seeks unity, cohesiveness, and the principles of equality, humanity, brotherhood, and fostering pan-Ethiopian solidarity.” Similarly, Zelalem argues that the empowerment of ethno-national identities at the expense of the state or the political center is unprecedented in Ethiopia’s political history, as it allows constituent units to dismember the political center, which has the prerogative to defend itself.

4.3. Constitutional challenges: Absence of consensus on the FDRE constitution

4.3.1. The Constitution’s secession clause

The secession clause in Ethiopia’s constitution is a contentious issue among the competing elites, still some questioning its impact on reconciliation. Others argue that consensus on the constitution and its provisions is general and amending it through peaceful means is crucial for peace, democracy, and continuity of the country. Lidetu Ayalew, a pan-Ethiopianist politician, argues that “the constitution strives to make the right to secession,

which is taken as the cornerstone of the constitution, a very simple right that cannot be interfered with by other reason” [14, p. 49].

During interviews, ethno-nationalist and pan-Ethiopianist forces discussed their differing views on the federal order and secession clause. Proponents of the secession clause argue that it is central to the continuation of the Ethiopian state and democratic state-building. Three informants argued for a democratic, peaceful, and legal exit strategy due to Ethiopia's multicultural nature, previous cycles of violence, lack of independent state institutions, and the political center's reliance on violence to center-periphery problems.

Since the drafting of the constitution, opponents of the secession clause have been struggling for its amendment. Key informant Mehret, who identifies himself as Pan-Ethiopianist as well as Amhara nationalist, argues that the constitution's exclusion of Amhara and pan-Ethiopianist forces from the preparation and ratification process and making nations and nationalities, abstract entities, the sole owners of the constitution is the root cause of Ethiopia's problems. Another key informant from National Movement of Amhara (NaMA) argues that “we fear that the constitution's guarantee of an unrestricted right to exercise the secession clause could jeopardize the country's integrity and unity”. He also argues that:

NaMA advocates for a united Ethiopia where all ethnic groups can thrive and enjoy equal representation without compromising the country's unity and territorial integrity. However, the secession clause may lead to abuse by elite interests, causing fragmentation and threatening national reconciliation, consensus, and harmony, while perpetuating suspicion, unrest, and civil wars.

The author's survey revealed that participants hold diverse interpretations and views regarding the FDRE constitution's controversial articles (see Table 1).

Table 1

What is your position about the current FDRE constitution?			
	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
It should be changed since it is a source of problem and controversy.	42	25.5	25.5
It should continue since it best keeps the interest of Ethiopian nations and nationalities.	61	37.0	62.4
It needs to have some amendments on the controversial issues and articles	51	30.9	93.3
I don't have a comment	11	6.7	100.0
Total	165	100.0	

Source: Survey conducted by the author.

Table 1's survey result reveals that 42 (25.5%) of respondents advocate for a change in the FDRE Constitution, citing it as the root cause of problems and controversies. This aligns with the Amhara elites' view that the constitution is the source of the country's problems and they were not represented in the constitutional preparation and ratification process. Afrobarometer report shows that 16.3% of Ethiopians demanded the constitution to be replaced by a new one. However, 61 (37%) of the study's participants believe the current

constitution should continue, as it reflects the best interests of Ethiopian nations and nationalities [15]. In the Afrobarometer report, 16.5% of Ethiopians favor the constitution to be kept without change. However, 51 (30.9%) of the survey participants call for the constitution's amendment to address contentious articles, acknowledging significant socio-economic and political developments since the constitution's ratification in December 1994. This is consistent with the Afrobarometer report, where 66.7% of Ethiopians demand the continuity of the constitution with some amendment.

In conclusion, the majority of ethno-nationalists, the survey participants, and Afrobarometer's national result (83.2%) of Ethiopians favor the constitution to be kept with some amendments. This shows that the controversial nature of the FDRE constitution is primarily for the competing Ethiopian elites and nationalisms, with two out of three nationalism or ethnic groups favoring the continuity of the constitution.

4.3.2. Disagreement over system of government: presidential vs. parliamentary

Ethiopia's three competing nationalisms have contrasting views on the government system Ethiopia should have. Tigrayans support the continuation of the existing parliamentary system, while Amhara and Oromo elites demand a presidential system. The proponents of a presidential system argue that in the current parliamentary system the elected representatives are only loyal to the party rather than their electorates, which has detrimental effect in the articulation and pursuit of public interest. They believe a presidential system is appropriate for real representation of the people if there is a mechanism to prevent the repeated election of a president from dominant ethnic groups. On the contrary, Tigrayan elites argue that parliamentary system protects minorities' interests and prevents discontent resulted from majority rule and domination. They believe that Ethiopia's multicultural and multinational nature necessitates a government system that represents the diverse interests of society, allowing citizens to make political decisions based on their constituency's interests.

4.3.3. Disagreement over state structure: Geographic vs. multinational federalism

Disagreement over Ethiopia's state structure presents a significant challenge to national reconciliation, social cohesion, and peace-building. Unionists and Amhara nationalists oppose ethnic-based federalism, which prioritizes self-determination over national unity. A key informant from the Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice party (EZEMA) argues that "as long as the current federal order persists, Ethiopia will remain in instability and chaos." He further argues that:

Ethnic-based federalism boosts ethnic consciousness, nationalism, and distinctness that leads to ethnic competition, resource conflict, and above all ethnic leaders compete with the notion of a unified national identity and this not only obstructs citizen-based political development but also national reconciliation and social cohesion. We believe that geographic federalism ensures the unity and continuity of the Ethiopian state.

Key informant Zelalem argues that "geographic federalism reduces the existing big ethnic states and may lead to intermingling of peoples, creating a homogeneous national identity".

Ethno-nationalists argue that the Ethiopianist camp's disregard for ethnic federalism is the manifestation of the old regime's desire for nation-building based on a single culture, disregarding ethnic differences and the multicultural nature of the country. In this regard, a

key informant from Tigray argues that “the Ethiopianist or unitarians attempt to challenge the status quo other than ethnic federalism complicates the Ethiopian problem.” Furthermore, he argues that:

Unitarians or proponents of geographic federalism view multiculturalism as a threat rather than unity and beauty. However, ethnic-based federalism is a reality in Ethiopia that we have to accept and work towards accommodating diversity, democratizing it, and rationalizing it towards interest-based politics and harmonious coexistence of ethnic groups.

The data from the qualitative survey revealed that participants hold diverse interpretations and views regarding Ethiopia’s state structure (see Table 2).

Table 2

What do you think is good for Ethiopia's state structure?

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
To dismantle the current ethnic-based federalism and establish geographic federalism.	48	29.1	29.1
To democratize the current ethnic-based federal system.	85	51.5	80.6
To change it into a unitary state structure.	18	10.9	91.5
To allow nations and nationalities to secede and declare their own state.	14	8.5	100
Total	165	100	

Source: Survey conducted by the author.

The above table’s survey result shows that 48 (29.15%) of respondents support a change in the current ethnic-based federalism to a geographic federal structure. This is consistent with Amhara and pan-Ethiopianist elites’ demand to change the ethnic regional arrangement into geographic federalism. The majority i.e., 85 (51.5%) respondents demand the continuation and democratization of the existing ethnic-based federal system, aiming for inclusivity and participatory decision-making among diverse groups of society. These voices advocate for a federal system that upholds democracy and ensures the representation of all citizens’ interests in ethnically entitled titular states. However, only 18 or 10.9% advocate for a radical shift towards a unitary state structure, which is unlikely and does not align with the perceived divisions arising from the existing federal exercise. Ironically, 14 or 8.5% advocate for the right of nations and nationalities to secede and establish their own sovereign states, reflecting a yearning for self-determination and independence, challenging the current *status quo*, and promoting reconciliation, social cohesion, and peace-building.

4.3.4. The issue of official or national language and the ownership of Addis Ababa

The choice of official language in Ethiopia’s current state-building process has been a contentious issue. The FDRE constitution states that Amharic is the federal government’s working language, while all Ethiopian languages are equally recognized by the state (Art. 5). Pan-Ethiopianist forces argue that the absence of one or two national languages serving as means of communication among Ethiopians leads to a lack of consensus on national issues

and social cohesion. Key informant Mehret argues that ethnic federalism and states' right to language choice create mutual distrust and hinder national unity, cohesion, and development, as all Ethiopians cannot move and work across the country.

The case of *Afaan Oromo* has been a contentious issue in contemporary Ethiopia's language politics. A key informant from Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) argues that the denial of *Oromigna* as Ethiopia's official language contributed to the absence of national unity, people's freedom of movement as well as social cohesion. Likewise, Milkesa also argues that the denial of non-Amharic languages, particularly *Afaan Oromoo*, systematically excluded the Oromos from the federal government [16, p.7]. In 2020, the federal government designated four languages (Afar, Oromigna, Tigrigna, and Somali) as official or working languages of the federal government.

Recently, Addis Ababa has witnessed the contested nature of language politics. Addis Ababa, which is the nation's and Oromia regional state's capital, is introducing *Afaan Oromoo* as the city's working language and teaching it in schools, despite opposition from Addis Ababans, pan-Ethiopianist forces, and Amhara elites. Tiruneh, fromn OFC argues that adopting *Afaan Oromo* can promote social cohesion and unity in the city, but the government's handling could lead to misunderstanding, suspicion and may become source of conflict. He suggests that the government should convince the capital city's residents the benefits of learning and speaking *Afaan Oromo* through long-term policies and programs. Pan-Ethiopianists, particularly Amhara nationalists, criticize the ruling Prosperity Party (PP) and Oromia Regional State's language policy, including the inclusion of *Afaan Oromo* into Addis Ababa's education system. In this regard, key informant Getachew argues that:

The forced imposition of the Oromo language on Addis Ababa's people is a social engineering, causing further complications and hindering social cohesion. It is a deliberate policy of engulfing the capital city, controlling resources and water supply, and hindering the city's development. After all, the central issue of Oromumma is the control of the city.

Addis Ababa, a city of historical and political significance, is a subject of conflicting narratives and aspirations among Oromos, Amhara, and pan-Ethiopianist elites, each with historical, cultural, socio-political, and economic positions as for its status and ownership. This has led to irreconcilable views among different political forces. In 2016, Oromo youths, known as *Qeerroo*, protested the EPRDF-led government's Addis Ababa master plan, which aimed to expand the city. Since then, ownership of Addis Ababa has become a priority for both the Oromo nation and those opposing it. An informant from the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) argues that "the ownership of Addis Ababa is non-negotiable and they strongly oppose any resistance to its realization, even if it requires sacrifice". Key informant Gizachew, from the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) argues that:

Addis Ababa, also known as Finfinnee in Oromo, holds significant historical, cultural, and symbolic importance for the Oromo community. The OLF, the pioneering Oromo people's political organization, believes Finfinnee is an integral part of the Oromia region, and Addis Ababa's land belongs to the Oromo people, who have historical and ancestral ties to the area.

A key informant Yohannes, from Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice party (EZEMA), emphasizes the city's role as a melting pot of diverse cultures, where people from different regions contribute to its development, prosperity and social cohesion. This cosmopolitan

nature represents Ethiopia's collective heritage, values, and aspirations, and helps for the eventual unity of the country as the common capital city of Ethiopians. He further argues that:

Addis Ababa, which is both the capital and symbol of Ethiopian and African unity, rightfully belongs to the Ethiopian people as a whole. And no single ethnic group should be entitled to have exclusive ownership over it based on historical, economic, geographic, or other considerations.

4.3.5. The issue of land

The advent of the EPRDF regime in 1991 sparked a profound debate over land ownership between pan-Ethiopianist elites and ethnonationalist forces. While the former advocates for land privatization and ownership, the latter, who focuses on the rights of nations and nationalities, opposes. Pan-Ethiopianist, Amhara elites, and liberal-leaning elites comprise the first camp. Tigrayan and Oromo elites and other ethno-nationalist political forces are in favor of the status quo and oppose any land sale or exchange. An ethno-nationalist informant argues that “in Ethiopia's present context, land is more political than economic since it is associated with ethnicity and identity, and it is the biggest determinant of Ethiopia's politics.

4.4. Social and cultural factors

4.4.1. Diversity as a challenge

Managing diversity has been one of the contentious issues that polarized competing Ethiopian elites and affected state society relation. Before 1991, Ethiopian regimes viewed diversity as a curse and romanticized unity, neglecting cultural diversity. Ethiopia's cultural divide, characterized by northern versus southern and Semitic versus Cushitic, has led to differing understandings and a lack of consensus on national cultural issues and discourses. Key informant Gamta, from OFC, argues that Ethiopia has distinct cultural, religious, and political differences, as well as psychological makeup and understanding of the country's history. He highlights the *Gädaa* System, an indigenous democracy practiced by the Oromo peoples, as a case in point, arguing that these differences should be acknowledged and addressed. The informant laments and criticizes Ethiopian regimes for not incorporating the *Gädaa* system into the country's administrative machinery, arguing that it would have better served the country's needs.

The Oromo culture, which is universalistic and accommodationist, contradicts the exclusionist and hierarchical values of northerners, practitioners of the hitherto cultural facets of Ethiopia. An informant from Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) argues that despite Ethiopia's cultural disparities, the northerners claim to have forged a sense of national identity, which was undermined by the post-1991 regime change and advent of multicultural discourse. Similarly, Mekuria [17, p. 63] argues that Ethiopia's official cultural framework perpetuated racial prejudice and mistrust by breeding “insides” and “outsiders”, making Oromo integration into the Ethiopian state more difficult.

4.4.2. Religious tension

Ethiopia's national reconciliation is hindered by not only ethnic tension between the country's three elites but also religious tension among followers of Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Protestantism. These religious orders compete for expansion, protection, and dominance, endangering peaceful coexistence [18]. The government's promotion of the Prosperity Gospel (PG), the most popular religious sect since the 2018 political reform, at the

expense of others and violating secularism, has increased tension. Balehegn [19] notes that PG has continuously influenced political decisions and government actions despite Ethiopia's nonsectarian government and constitution.

4.4.3. Ethnic prejudice, demonizing the other and provocative speeches

Ethiopian elites pose a challenge to reconciliation due to their deep hatred and polemical discourses. Key informant Zelalem argues that the polemical discourse is complicating political and ideological divisions. According to Lidetu [20], the TPLF was labeled as the sole troublemaker in the country since the 2018 political reform, with the prime minister referring to its leaders as “daytime hyena,” “diehards,” “weeds,” and “anti-reformist.” Lidetu argues that the demonizing discourse extends to the people of Tigray, who were categorically labeled as “cancer” and “weeds”, legitimizing revenge for the TPLF's atrocities during its 27-years' rule. He also argues that the anti-TPLF camp was determined to destroy the TPLF at any cost, even at the expense of the dismemberment of the Ethiopian state. During the Tigray War, Getachew Reda, one of TPLF's leader and now president of interim administration of Tigray, accused Amhara elites of being anti-Tigrayans and willing to remove Tigrayans since they consider them as obstacles for their expansionist and hegemonic aspirations. He promised to “settle accounts” with them, causing resentment among Amhara elites and nationalists who interpreted the speech as targeting the people of Amhara, just for war efforts and mobilization [21].

4.5. Competing nationalisms, suspicion and mistrust

Ethiopia's reconciliation process faces obstacles due to suspicion and mistrust among its three competing nationalisms espoused by the elites of the three ethnic groups of Ethiopia. Historical conflict, political discontent, socio-economic trauma, and other factors are fueling deep resentment and hindering social cohesion and peace-building. According to a key informant, Amhara nationalism poses a significant challenge to national reconciliation, as it disguises nostalgic interests and desires for dominance by upholding “fake Ethiopianist values” but it actually “espouses Amhara chauvinism characterized by expansionism, fascism, and exclusive hegemonic interests.” This nationalism “exacerbates existing problems, undermines interethnic cooperation, and propagates sentiments that perpetuate divisions and historical grievances”. Another key informant from the All Ethiopia Unity Party (AEUP) asserts that “Amhara nationalism emerged as a response to Tigrayan and Oromo nationalisms, which target the Amhara nation and elites, viewing the Amhara as responsible for all political, economic, and social problems in Ethiopia.” He further argues that:

Amhara nationalism aims to preserve Ethiopia's unity and continuity, seen as expansionist and chauvinist, restoring the old imperial system. However, it is defensive and accommodationist, aiming for a democratic Ethiopia as a homeland for all Ethiopians. Other nationalisms are exclusionists, seeking independence and incorporating secession clauses.

4.6. Economic challenges, inequality and state fragility

Economic inequality in societies can exacerbate conflict and be exploited by ethnic and political entrepreneurs. Key informant Zelalem contends that the state's limited capacity to address economic issues and citizens' growing demands may challenge peace and reconciliation processes since reconciliation needs economic incentives. In Ethiopia, historical contradictions, limited economic development, and a patron-client system make

peace nearly elusive. According to a key informant, existing Ethiopian institutions are not strong enough to mediate conflicts and allocate resources equally, indicating state failure. According to Rotberg, state failure requires human agency, and states risk failing when they deceive citizens or unfairly favor one group of elites [22, p. 27]. Inequality also exacerbates political rivalry over resource allocation, making peace fragile as conflict often revolves around resource allocation [23, p. 202].

Three key informants for the study have identified that the country's repressive political culture, absence of democratic practices and institutions, limited political participation, absence of vibrant civil society, the patrimonial relation and unequal access to resources, and absence of transparency and accountability all are contributing factors that hinder and complicate Ethiopia's reconciliation effort.

4.7. Absence of a strong and independent civil society

Reconciliation to be successful requires a strong and vibrant civil society that plays an influential role in the process and outcome. Civil society, considered a voluntary organization between families and the state [24, p. 44], has been absent from ongoing political reform in Africa, impacting legitimate state-society relations, governance, and maintaining linkages between the state and society [25]. Ghana, however, has successfully established civil society, contributing significantly to the restoration of constitutional order in 1992 and the National Reconciliation Commission [26, pp. 105-106]. In Ethiopia, due to different rules and poor democratization processes, civil society has been virtually absent or coopted by successive governments. The absence of a strong and independent civil society has implications for the country's democratization and reconciliation processes. The EPRDF era Charities and Societies Proclamation (2009) has made the expansion and consolidation of Ethiopian civil societies virtually unthinkable.

4.8. Geopolitics and foreign interference

Ethiopia's strategic location and being the source of the Blue Nile River make it vulnerable to foreign interest and interference. This has either positive or negative implications for the country's reconciliation process. Since the coming of *Ras Teferi* in 1916, Ethiopia's internal power struggle has been influenced and shaped by external powers. The US is the biggest influencer in Ethiopia's internal politics, followed by the European Union. From the Middle East, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are the primary actors that affect political developments in the Horn of Africa [27], with a direct and indirect interest in Ethiopia's internal affairs. These countries have influenced Ethiopia's politics during and after the Gulf crisis or Qatar Blockade, which lasted from 2017-2021. UAE has also participated in the two-year Tigray war by providing drones and financial support to the federal government. Gulf countries interest over Ethiopia certainly affects Ethiopia's reconciliation process and its outcome.

From Horn countries, Eritrea has been actively involving in Ethiopia's internal affairs. It had been supporting armed movements like Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), *Ginbot 7*, the Patriotic Front (PF), Tigray People's Democratic Movement (TPDM), and others till the 2018 reform. Eritrea's leader has been praised for his efforts in bringing political change to Ethiopia. After the 2018 political reform, Eritrea's leader expressed a desire for political brainwashing in Ethiopia, particularly in Tigray. Eritrea also participated in the Tigray war, which ended with the signing of the Pretoria Peace Agreement (PPA) in November 2022. Abel [28] argues that the agreement may allow Tigrayan nationalists to maintain control over

Tigray, despite Eritrea's hopes for their complete defeat. Moreover, Eritrea has been expressing its concerns about Ethiopia's constitution, ethnic federalism, and election process and suspicious of Ethiopia's democratization process since 1991, fearing its implications for Eritrea. Oberschall [29, p. 185] notes that external intervention often exacerbates conflict rather than resolving it. Hence, Eritrea's interest, concern, and intervention in Ethiopia may have a detrimental effect on the country's reconciliation efforts.

5. Discussions

In Ethiopia, reconciliation is often linked to the search for truth and acknowledgment of the past. However, Ethiopian competing elites have mutually irreconcilable perspectives and interpretations of the country's history, complicating the quest for truth and reconciliation. Elites' contradictions in historical narratives have led to resentment, distrust, and deepening socio-political fault lines, hindering reconciliation. This is consistent with Yonatan's findings that competing ethnic nationalisms in Ethiopia have opposing interpretations of Ethiopia's history, which accounts for the divergent alignment of forces [30, p. 183]. The complex relationship between truth and reconciliation can make empathy and forgiveness difficult [31, p.14]. However, reconciliation in a divided society requires acknowledging the past, but contradictions and partial denials of crucial events can make reconciliation difficult and superficial [32]. Hence, acknowledging the past, which involves identifying two stories of conflict: grievance and denial, is crucial in a socially, politically, and economically divided society, as the conflicting parties' collective memories of their past sustain existing tension, sow suspicion, and ultimately obliterate peace-building and reconciliation process. Hence, acknowledging the past is essential for fostering reconciliation and overcoming existing tensions [32].

Ethiopia's violent political culture has led to violence as a means to advance personal, regional, or ethnic interests, entangling the culture of violence and an active war in the country's body politics. Ayele [33, pp. 212-213] argues that Ethiopia's history as one of the oldest polities in the world paradoxically reveals its pervasive and perennial culture of political violence. This culture, known for its zero-sum game and winner-takes-all principle, can hinder national reconciliation, conflict transformation, social cohesion, and peace-building in the country. Increased polarization, lack of democratic institutions, erosion of trust, and undemocratic systems contribute to a conflictual political culture, relying on violence as a means to ends and changes. Moreover, Ethiopia's political culture values power and domination, prohibiting dialogue and compromise. Lefort found that Ethiopians perceive power as divine and are receptive to authoritarian governments. Accordingly, "Absolutism is culturally rooted, practically a necessity, and inevitably endured to survive" [34, pp. 212-213]. Similarly, Gebru [35] argues that politics in Ethiopia has been in command, inhibiting dialogue and democratic problem-solving mechanisms essential for reconciliation. Therefore, the absence of a political culture that prioritizes peace and dialogue can hinder national reconciliation, conflict transformation, social cohesion, and peace-building.

Post-1991 Ethiopia's state-building and national reconciliation faced challenges due to the lack of consensus on the FDRE Constitution. This makes the Ethiopian constitution, despite surviving for nearly thirty years, a significant factor in hindering national reconciliation and consensus among the elites. The inclusion of the secession clause has led to incompatible visions and suspicions among Ethiopian elites. Another issue is the transfer of sovereign political power to Ethiopian nations, nationalities, and peoples rather than to

Ethiopian peoples, further hindering reconciliation. However, the relevance of Ethiopia's constitutional experience under the EPRDF regime should be evaluated if it has led to democratization and a republican type of government. Vaughan [36] and Abink [37] argue that the FDRE constitution did not result in a republican political system or culture. Therefore, the real agenda of the competing elites should be how to build a democratic republican system that respects the democratic values of citizens, establish transparency and accountability, and the prevalence of rule of law, equality, and justice that make Ethiopia a common homeland for all Ethiopians, resulting in unity attractive.

Ethiopia's diverse traditions are crucial to its rich history and national identity. Pre-1991 governments considered diversity as a curse and used assimilationist strategy to achieve social cohesion. However, this approach failed, leading to contradictions and hindering reconciliation. The three competing Ethiopian nationalisms emphasize their cultural distinctiveness and value differences. Cognizant of the country's diversity, the post-1991 regime aimed to accommodate diversity through autonomy and multiculturalism. After the 2018 political reform, Ethiopia's diversity is challenged, with government-sponsored open discourse about unitarism and pan-Ethiopianism, which alienated ethno-nationalists. The union of Kushities, aiming to unite all Kushitic language-speaking peoples and form a political bloc against northerner Semites, was established as a response to Ethiopianist discourse, adding fuel to mutual suspicion between Semites and Kushites. Moreover, the reformist government, led by the Oromo elites, is suspected of having an assimilationist tendency, building the new Ethiopia in the image of Kushitic cultural values at the expense of northerners. These extremist positions complicate existing ethno cultural contradictions and may hinder reconciliation, social cohesion, and peace-building.

The advent of the Prosperity Gospel is not only challenging traditional religious practices of peaceful coexistence but also violating constitutional principles of secularism and constitutionalism, leading to suspicion and discord among different religions. Government-supported preachers are undermining the Ethiopian Orthodox Church by conducting religious seminars and awakenings followed by the conversion of Orthodox youths into Protestantism, causing public outrage and fueling religious tension. Moreover, the government is accused of weakening and splitting the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Islam followers along provincial and ethnic lines, potentially obstructing national reconciliation and exacerbating social fractures.

Economic disparities in politically, economically, and culturally divided states significantly impact a nation's prospects for reconciliation, social cohesion, and peace-building. State fragility leads to weak institutions, corruption, and a lack of trust in the state, affecting vertical social cohesion. This hinders policy implementation, the rule of law, justice, and the provision of essential services to citizens. Cox *et al.* [38] argue that the correlation between political systems, resources, and power results in social deprivation and increased social fragmentation among marginalized groups. According to Cox *et al.*, competing groups become distrustful due to ethnic mobilization and power dynamics, leading to protectionist tactics and limited resource allocation. Economic inequality can compromise access to basic necessities like education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Favoritism and patrimonial structures dominate in allocating limited resources, exacerbating existing divisions, deepening the sense of injustice, and fueling grievances. As Sarkin [49] notes, economic disparities in a given society significantly impact a nation's prospects for

reconciliation. When a state cannot maintain law and order, progress is often undermined by persistent inequalities that fuel renewed conflict.

6. Conclusion

The article explored the complexities and challenges hindering reconciliation, conflict transformation, social cohesion, and peace-building in contemporary Ethiopia. It was found that a multiplicity of factors that range from internal to external factors have posed challenges to Ethiopia's efforts to solve its fundamental socio-economic, historical, and political contradictions. The study reveals Ethiopia's historical, political, social, constitutional and other challenges to national reconciliation, conflict transformation, social cohesion, and peace building. One major obstacle is the historical context, where the need for acknowledging historical atrocities and denial marks the historical controversy, hindering national healing and reconciliation.

Political challenges in Ethiopia are causing division and hindering reconciliation efforts. The lack of consensus on the FDRE constitution, border and identity conflicts, competing nationalisms, suspicion, and mistrust exacerbate schisms and hinder social cohesion. Constitutional challenges, intertwined with political dynamics, complicate reconciliation prospects. The lack of agreement on the FDRE constitution, particularly the constitution's secession clause, and the exclusive right given to Ethiopian nations and nationalities as sovereign owners of the constitution and the state, hinders an inclusive democratic system and trust building, making it difficult to balance pan-Ethiopian civic identity with ethno-national identity.

Social and cultural issues in Ethiopia, such as ethnic prejudice, demonization of the "other" and provocative speeches, etc contribute to divisions and hinder reconciliation efforts. The absence of a strong civil society, which is vital for promoting dialogue, democratization, and accountability, further complicates the process of reconciliation. Economic challenges, inequality, and state fragility complicate reconciliation in Ethiopia. Socio-economic disparities fuel conflicts, and addressing these is crucial for a more equitable society and incentivizes reconciliation. Geopolitics and foreign interference intensify divisions and pose external pressures to Ethiopia's reconciliation. Balancing internal concerns and external interests requires prioritizing strategic and national interests from competing Ethiopian elites.

The research findings provide valuable insights for the scientific community, enhancing our understanding of challenges hindering national reconciliation and peace-building in contemporary Ethiopia. Moreover, the study contributes to existing knowledge on reconciliation studies, academic engagement, and policy debates, emphasizing the urgency of addressing the multifaceted challenges of reconciliation in socially and politically divided societies. Despite these profound contributions, it is essential to recognize the limitations inherent in the study and findings. The study may have limitations due to the methodology and its focus on the competing elites of Ethiopia's three major ethnic groups. The complex political landscape and historical, cultural, and political context of Ethiopia necessitate further research into specific sub-themes and dynamics. Future research should explore the interplay between these challenges and explore potential solutions.

Acknowledgment. The author acknowledges those people who collaborated during the preparation of this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding. The author received no financial support for the research and publication.

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Citation: Weldeananiya, S. Challenges of national reconciliation in Ethiopia: reflections on ethiopia's conflict transformation, national cohesion and peace building. *Journal of Social Sciences* 2024, 7 (4), pp. 180-198. [https://doi.org/10.52326/jss.utm.2024.7\(4\).14](https://doi.org/10.52326/jss.utm.2024.7(4).14).

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