Convening a national dialogue in a highly volatile political environment will impact its potential success. To succeed, the National Dialogue Commission, the government and most opposition parties in Ethiopia must reconcile their conflicting concepts of national dialogue before the process starts. This report examines the competing conceptual frameworks used by political actors across the aisle, and situates the national dialogue initiative within the debates on contemporary theories of democracy.
Key findings

- Convening a national dialogue in a highly volatile political environment will impact its potential success. If it is to succeed, the commission, the government and most opposition parties must reconcile their concepts of national dialogue before the process starts.
- The Ethiopian state has not reckoned with past wrongs. Its determination to conduct politics through the prism of ‘the dominant’ and ‘the dominated’, the ‘oppressor’ and ‘the oppressed’, and resistance to this approach, has become embedded in the political space.
- The government and opposition visions of national dialogue are diametrically opposed. Both frame their support for, and scepticism about, the national dialogue in procedural terms. However, a close reading reveals that their divergent positions are more about different concepts of the process than disagreements over procedure.
- As a severely divided society, a sustained and relational dialogue might lay the foundation for reconciliation among Ethiopia’s diverse social groups.
- It is unlikely that such a dialogue can resolve Ethiopia’s political divisions about ‘fundamental national issues.’ The best that can be hoped for is that a ‘conflictual consensus’ will be reached on, among other things, democracy and constitutionalism.

Recommendations

The government should:
- Ensure that the process is relational, transformative and not necessarily destined to forge consensus over the ‘most fundamental national issues.’
- Amend the National Dialogue Commission objectives, so that it is geared towards ‘transforming’ rather than ‘resolving’ differences.
- Moderate its expectations and use this opportunity to deal with the past.
- Design a comprehensive plan to bring armed groups into the fold and create a stable environment to buttress the process.
- Use the opportunity to reinvigorate democratic institutions such as the courts, media and civil society organisations.
- Not interfere with the commission’s efforts to invite and include all stakeholders.

The commission should:
- Craft a strategy designed to mend inter-group relations and transform socio-political cleavages.
Introduction

With the example of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the 1990s and the dialogue initiatives in Tunisia and Yemen in 2013–2014, national dialogue has emerged as an instrument for transforming cleavages in post-conflict and/or severely divided societies.

The Ethiopian government, led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali, initially rejected calls for a national dialogue process primarily because it believed that the opposition would use it to advance its repeated call for a ‘transitional government’. However, it later changed its stance and joined the Multi-stakeholder Initiative for National Dialogue-Ethiopia (MIND-Ethiopia), finally establishing a National Dialogue Commission on 29 December 2021. Although the legitimacy of the commission and the inclusivity of the process leading up to its establishment were challenged, it has officially started work and recently declared that it had completed what it called the ‘pre-preparatory phase’ and started the ‘preparatory phase’ of the process. The ‘dialogue’ stage is scheduled to start in November 2022, even though, at the time of writing, the commission is yet to launch the process.

Ethiopia has not reckoned with past wrongs as it conducts politics through the prism of ‘the dominant’ and ‘the dominated’

Since the government announced that it would initiate the process academics, the opposition and policy think tanks have scrutinised the initiative, questioning how credible it would or could have been had the government adhered scrupulously to normative and highly procedural principles of national dialogue such as inclusivity, transparency and impartiality during the lead-up to the establishment of the commission. Some have questioned the neutrality of the commissioners and are sceptical about the commission’s independence.

Little has been said or written about the rationale behind the initiative and the national elites’ competing conceptualisations of the process and outcome of the national dialogue. Thus, instead of analysing the initiative according to the ‘how to’ type procedure-laden manuals, this report largely situates Ethiopia’s national dialogue within the debates in contemporary theories of democracy. The report examines the competing conceptual frameworks political actors across the Ethiopian political divide seem to have deployed. It asks fundamental questions:

- How do the government, the opposition and other stakeholders conceive of national dialogue?
- How do they envisage conducting dialogue in a severely divided society, such as that of Ethiopia?
- Is there a need to reconcile and/or contextualise the procedural approach with the political reality?

By way of providing answers to these questions the report puts forward a fresh argument. It alludes to the need for an agonistic approach to the inter-group dialogues at grassroots level, as opposed to the deliberative/procedural approach to which the government and the commission seem to subscribe.

More importantly, the report argues that all stakeholders must strive to transform issues of conflict into issues of political disagreement rather than raise expectations by declaring openly that the process is aimed at forging ‘national consensus’. It does so with the aim of persuading all the players to reassess their approach to the process and its possible outcomes. It is hoped that all stakeholders appreciate the gravity of conducting or participating in a such grand national project and are able to reconcile their competing conceptual frameworks to reach a consensus about how and to what end the national dialogue process is being conducted.

It attempts to caution stakeholders that their competing conceptualisations could potentially further deepen the political divide if they fail to compromise and reconcile their approaches.

Methodology

The report is based on primary and secondary data. Fieldwork was conducted between late June and July 2022. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify the 19 key informants interviewed. The informants come from different backgrounds and have different political views.
An open-ended format and in-depth interviews were used to gather opinions and expert assessments of the initiative. Representatives of government agencies, party officials, civil society organisations (CSOs) and think tanks were also interviewed. Respondents included senior government officials, the office of the speaker of the House of People’s Representatives, members of the commission, leaders of opposition parties, leaders of the Ethiopian Political Parties Joint Council (PPJC), the founders of MIND-Ethiopia, former and current advisors to key government ministries and CSOs and experts.

To further enrich the data and buttress the analysis the writer consulted reports of public interviews given by the stakeholders and press releases and media reports. The report uses a mix of interpretative discourse and document analysis to make sense of the data and interrogate the ‘exploratory and preparatory phases’ of Ethiopia’s national dialogue initiative.

Scheduled to start in November 2022, at the time of writing, the commission had not launched the ‘dialogue’ process.

The report is divided into six sections. The next deals with the debate about contemporary theories of democracy and the utility of ‘the public sphere’ and lays the conceptual foundation to situate and interrogate the initiative. The third relocates the country’s political divide within the context of the initiative.

Section four deals extensively with the post-2018 political environment and the rise of concerted efforts to initiate a national dialogue process. This section also delves into the political backdrop that expedited the establishment of the National Dialogue Commission and interrogates the conceptual frameworks of actors and interest groups aligned with the state (the government) and the opposition political camp.

Section five summarises prior discussions and, by way of conclusion, situates national dialogue in general and the Ethiopian national dialogue initiative in particular within the debates on the conflict transformation-resolution continuum. The last section makes policy recommendations.

The debate

The concept of national dialogue is a fairly recent entrant in the theoretical debate about how politics should be conducted. What is new is the fact that the subject has re-emerged as a conflict transformation tool in post-conflict and severely divided societies.

The post-cold-war era and the resurgence of ethnic politics exposed the limits of representative democracy and the classical liberal political order. Detractors of liberal and highly individualistic political theories challenged the former by introducing accommodationist theories to tame the ‘politics of difference’. Hence, the likes of Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka introduced concepts of politics of recognition and multicultural citizenship to the terrain of political theory.

The debate about the imperatives of the liberal and multiculturalist or accommodationist conceptions of democracy underpins the politics of reconciliation and conflict management in democracies, both those in transition and those that are consolidated. It informs instruments of conflict management in divided societies.

Deliberative democracy, deliberative dialogue

Liberal theorists such as Habermas introduced the notion of the ‘public sphere’ and ‘rational discourse’ to correct the ‘vices’ of the classical liberal theories of democracy. While the modernisation and advancement of literature as a means of mass communication contributed to making the public sphere more critical, Habermas argues, the excess of capitalist inclinations and the proliferation of commercial mass media lowered the quality of public debate.

According to him, the domination of party politics and the mass media as the sole conduit for discourse on matters of public policy made the public a passive consumer. This development and the resultant intrusive nature of the welfare state and its democratic institutions into the public sphere contributed to the eventual decay of discourse and the normalisation of the ‘representational’ rather than the ‘participatory’ aspect of Western democratic political orders.14

Habermas offers ‘deliberative democracy’ as a sophisticated theoretical alternative and means of conducting politics, emphasising the participatory
aspect of democracy. In so doing, he insists that the public sphere will reinvent itself as an effective means for citizens to engage in reasoned, rational and deliberative public discourse on matters of public policy.

As a divided society, sustained dialogue might set the pace for reconciliation among Ethiopia’s diverse social group.

By way of conferring the utmost relevance on what he calls the ‘ideal speech situation’, in which citizens articulate their arguments without predetermined interest or bias; evaluate each other’s arguments rationally, based on their merits and engage as equals without undue influence from or coercion by state/non-state actors, Habermasian deliberative democrats are said to have claimed to ‘introduce questions of morality and justice into politics.\textsuperscript{15}

According to this argument, through reasoned deliberations citizens can reach a rational consensus on issues that affect everyone. For that to happen there must be a public sphere unconstrained by external influence or coercion, open to all and excluding no agenda. The underlying assumption here is that deliberations will be conducted according to certain norms and under conditions in which those participating in the public discussion argue for and/or against a particular interest or public policy with reason and logic.

The corollary would be, they argue, that a rational consensus will be reached over the well-argued interest or policy preference because those who lose will be under moral constraint to object to or not abide by the decision. Hence, ‘the central claim of deliberative democracy is those collective decisions are more legitimate to the extent that they are the outcome of public reasoning among free and equal persons’\textsuperscript{16}
and are morally binding to the extent that they are made inclusively.

Proponents of the Habermasian model of deliberative democracy argue that the constituting principles of the theory are essentially egalitarian, hence inclusive of segments of society that claim to have been subjected to historical oppression or marginalisation.

The assumption that deliberations are conducted between equals, they insist, lends legitimacy not only to the process but also to the outcome, which, they contend, would be the result of a rational consensus. Habermas believes that reaching a rational consensus would be an attainable goal because citizens would engage in intersubjective communication aimed at reaching a consensus on the most reasoned and well-argued position or preference on public policy.

However, the relevance of most of the cardinal principles of deliberative democracy notwithstanding, the theory has its detractors. One of the emerging critiques of Habermasian deliberative democracy relates to the assertion that it disregards the socio-political context of societies in transition, post-conflict and severely divided. On this front, proponents of agonistic pluralism/democracy have been the loudest and harshest critics of deliberative democracy.

**Agonistic democracy, agonistic dialogue**

While some question the validity of the principles of Habermans theory equality, inclusiveness, rationality and consensus others have strongly challenged the models adoption of a universalistic prescriptive approach, while failing to domesticate the politics of highly divided societies with competing identities. As Bashir puts it:

> [The] inclusive, empowering and transformative potentials of Habermas deliberative democracy falter when confronted with a particular type of historical injustice. Put differently ... when dealing with historical injustices Habermas theory of deliberative democracy pays little attention to the historical dimension of injustices and the demands to which it gives rise. The historical dimension of a long-standing injustice gives rise to a set of distinctive demands, such as remembrance, acknowledgment, responsibility, and apology and reparations. Indeed, these demands go beyond the type of democratic inclusion that is often offered by deliberative democracy and require a special form of politics; namely, a politics of reconciliation.17

Bashirs criticism of deliberative democracy and espousal of the politics of reconciliation is framed in the context of consolidated democracies. This, however, reaffirms the argument that deliberative democracy falters when if it is applied to issues of historical injustice in severely divided societies with multiple identities and apparently irreconcilable grievances.

**Deliberative democracy falters when/if it is applied to issues of historical injustice in severely divided societies**

Habermans critics largely subscribe to the agonistic democracy model. Proponents of agonistic democracy challenge one of the premises behind deliberative democracy, which claims that citizens interests and preferences are apolitical and responsive to reasoned arguments. They also question the notion that complex political divides and drivers of conflict in divided societies, such as competing identities, can be resolved for good through rational discourse and consensus.

According to agonistic democrats, commonality, the presupposition of the liberal theorists, is oblivious to politics of difference and verges on imposing the hegemony of those in power in the name of legitimacy and morality/justice through mere procedural inclusiveness and the normative conception of equality as in deliberation between equals. Undertaking a deliberative-democracy-modelled conversation in divided societies, they argue, will impose the hegemonic discourse of the state by suppressing the voices of the oppressed other.18

Chantal Mouffe, one outspoken critic of Habermas model and advocate of agonistic democracy, captures the central theses in the two principles she accuses the deliberative democrats of avoiding power and antagonism. Rational public discourse, she argues, cannot be both rational and inclusive, for social objectivity is constituted through acts of power; the
socially objective is political and has a tendency to exclude the ‘other’.\textsuperscript{19}

In the ‘public sphere’, proponents of agonistic democracy argue, the point of convergence between objectivity and power is hegemony.\textsuperscript{20} Hence, the ‘rational consensuses’ dictum ‘too often become[s] a way of coopting radical challenges to the dominant interests within a society’,\textsuperscript{21} perpetuating the power imbalance in the ever-contested power relations between competing identities.

There is a dearth of academic literature about the politics of reconciliation in consolidated democracies, more so in severely divided and post-conflict societies. However, the theory of agonistic democracy seems to lend some critical conceptual framework to how to approach reconciliation in societies animated by the politics of difference.

In what they call ‘agonistic pluralism’, the agonistic democrats have introduced an alternative model that distinguishes between ‘the political’ and ‘politics’:

‘The political’ refers to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human society, antagonism that can take many different forms and can emerge in diverse social relations. ‘Politics’, on the other hand, refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses, and institutions that seek to establish a certain order to organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of ‘the political’.\textsuperscript{22}

Agonistic democrats believe that conflict and confrontation are unavoidable and inherent in human interaction. They argue that politics should be about domesticating conflict and transforming antagonism into agonism (a way of life and mode of conducting politics) and enemies to adversaries. For the agonistic democrats, agon and contestation are integral to democracy and the attempt to end them by mere procedural ‘rational consensus’ places in question the relevance of democracy as a mode of conducting politics.

The ‘rational discourse’ argument of the deliberative democrats, they contend, disregards the passion and emotion that often envelop the grievances of social groups who claim to have been historically oppressed and excluded. More often than not, it is the suppression of such passions and emotions that trigger and escalate conflict in divided societies.

**Reckoning with the past**

Although public forums like national dialogue often necessitate reckoning with history and past injustices there is no one-size-fits-all model of conducting politics of reconciliation in divided societies. However, the literature on the subject suggests some major principles and approaches.

Firstly, those involved in momentous events of reconciliation such as national dialogue should navigate effectively the terrains of collective memory to understand what animates ethnic rivalries, political polarisation and violent confrontation. For the social group that alleges historical injustices of exclusion and marginalisation collective memory is a weapon of self-defence in the battle over history. As Bashir argues, collective memory is often deployed:

… to challenge the depiction of the excluded and oppressed as unreasonable or irrational. It does so by according a significant role for narration, story-telling and other forms of speech to unmask exclusions and inequalities and their sources and causes.\textsuperscript{23}

Bashir’s criticism of adopting the politics of reconciliation is framed in the context of consolidated democracies

Social groups craft and perpetuate ‘competing collective memories’ and deploy them as a mode of engagement to resist the hegemony of discourse, narration, form of governance and their relations with the state. This tendency is more prevalent in severely divided societies where one or more groups conduct politics to avoid domination by the ‘other’ and in a constant state of security dilemma.\textsuperscript{24} For such groups, historical injustices and violations, real or perceived, are as much about the future as they are about the trauma of the past: [A] nation can overcome an evil past and attempt to move to a better future by forgiving and
The need for institutional reform is also often compounded by the ‘excluded’ groups’ yearning for symbolic and material compensation, restitution or reparation. The symbolic aspect of redress, such as memorialisation, commemoration, national apology and inclusion among national symbols and heroes, is as healing and reconciliatory as the material aspects. There is no denying, however, that it is not easy to reckon with past wrongs in divided societies. In such societies, which are often characterised by inter-group mistrust, ethnic and inter-communal animosity, fragile social fabric and elite rivalry, there is a need for a well-designed instrument to right the wrongs.

Grievance-induced tensions and conflicts undergirded by historical injustices and past wrongs are not necessarily vertically oriented, they may also have a horizontal impact, resulting in inter-group conflict. It is at this juncture that national dialogue serves as both a re-constitutive and a reckoning moment. How such a forum of national reconciliation is conceptualised determines the success or failure of both the process and the outcome.

However, these strategies seldom bring about lasting peace and harmony, they often deepen divisions, animate polarisation and ‘may incite revenge for both the original act and its burial’. The other factor that must be considered is the aggrieved group’s expectation of recognition. Memories of historical injustices are often framed in pain and communicated with the emotive equivalence of the pain a particular group claims to have lived through. As Crocker argues:

‘In any society attempting to reckon with an evil past, victims … should be provided with a platform to tell their stories and have their testimony publicly acknowledged … for secrecy about human rights abuses enforced through violence and intimidation, was one of the conditions that made possible extensive campaigns of terror.’

National dialogue in such divided societies would therefore serve as the right forum to reckon collectively with the past, recognise past wrongs through painful yet redemptive vertical and horizontal deliberations and kickstart a national reconciliation process. In other words, intense, sustained and relational national dialogue and reconciliation in divided societies are not successive political events, they are interlinked and mutually reinforcing.

Nonetheless, to deliver reconciliation effectively, that society should go one step further and devise a judicious redress. A redemptive public discourse on issues of historical injustices should allow the grievances of social groups to be raised and listened to. This will not only give both ‘victim’ and ‘victimiser’ a cathartic and redemptive space – it will illuminate what should be done to redress past wrongs. According to Bashir:

‘… the memory of exclusion reveals the unbalanced relationships between the dominant and the excluded, and it concurrently identifies ways in which inviting the historically excluded to participate as formally equal individuals within existing institutions is problematic, ignoring the need to transform those institutions.’

The need for institutional reform is also often compounded by the ‘excluded’ groups’ yearning for symbolic and material compensation, restitution or reparation. The symbolic aspect of redress, such as memorialisation, commemoration, national apology and inclusion among national symbols and heroes, is as healing and reconciliatory as the material aspects. There is no denying, however, that it is not easy to reckon with past wrongs in divided societies. In such societies, which are often characterised by inter-group mistrust, ethnic and inter-communal animosity, fragile social fabric and elite rivalry, there is a need for a well-designed instrument to right the wrongs.

Grievance-induced tensions and conflicts undergirded by historical injustices and past wrongs are not necessarily vertically oriented, they may also have a horizontal impact, resulting in inter-group conflict. It is at this juncture that national dialogue serves as both a re-constitutive and a reckoning moment. How such a forum of national reconciliation is conceptualised determines the success or failure of both the process and the outcome.

National dialogue in divided societies serves as a forum to reckon collectively with the past and kickstart reconciliation

As suggested above, agonistic dialogue presupposes that conflict and animosity in pluralistic and divided societies can only be transformed, not resolved, and that national dialogue should be designed to transform inter-group relations from a state of antagonism and enmity to adversarial politics. National dialogue would therefore be a painful and therapeutic process, with the outcome a ‘conflictual consensus’.

According to Maddison, agonistic dialogue in divided societies is more likely to be transformative if it is sustained, intensive and relational. Transforming deep-seated cleavages requires designing strategies and processes, not events – the fundamentals of national dialogue. Sustained engagement between competing identities, emotive and unsettling as it is, fosters empathy and mutual recognition. For that reason, in such discussions the focus is on changing
relationships rather than making policy decisions and is designed specifically for groups and communities experiencing deep-rooted conflict or tension across a range of ethnic, racial, religious, historic, material or personal barriers. The sustainability of the dialogue exposes representatives of groups not only to the perspectives of the other’s grievances and narratives but also to the underlying factors that animate their differences. Maddison also argues that agonistic dialogue should be intense; that the intensity of the engagement will buttress the quality of the deliberations. While this might have a cathartic and redemptive value, it could also potentially animate groups to incite confrontation inspired by reigniting old grievances.

Skilled facilitators also decipher the success or failure of the dialogue, which is ‘relational in focus’

One could also argue that the mutual recognition and empathy between competing identities awakened by the sustained nature of the dialogue could insulate the process from turning confrontational. However, that alone would not guarantee that it does not falter. In this regard, the role of conveners and facilitators is invaluable. As Maddison puts it:

[S]killed facilitators bring a set of key pedagogical tools. These include content learning, which may involve activities such as set readings about the historical and contemporary nature of the conflict along with personal narratives of individual experience, writing tasks, and questions designed to stimulate discussion and reflection. Facilitators will engage the group in structured interactions, working to establish the group’s rules of engagement and building structured activities that illustrate the process of critical engagement.

The relevance of the skills of facilitators also translates into determining the success or failure of the dialogue, which is ‘relational in focus’. Issues of interests and needs may be settled by means of rational discussion among citizens in the public sphere. This is more so in the case of inter-elite deliberations about some conventional issues of policy.

Conversely, identity-based conflicts are seldom negotiated and settled unless the horizontal-cum-relational element is addressed. Such conflicts between groups often reveal and accentuate the power imbalance, the markers of boundaries of identity and the animus that exists in contrasting collective memories. These would, in turn, result in disagreements that might have an impact on a successful solution. It is often argued that:

… to address identity-based conflicts, relationship building is valued over immediate resolution; recognition of human impact of conflict is valued over managing solutions; and retooling with new ways of thinking and relating in the context of justice is valued over existing conflict resolution methods that maintain the power hierarchy.

According to the agonistic democrats, public discourse and dialogue in divided societies should be sustained, relational, transformative and agonistic. They argue that such a cathartic and transformative process will eventually bring about empathy and reciprocity among the aggrieved and ‘the other’. It will also, they believe, nurture compromise and forge ‘conflictual consensuses’ on issues while ensuring that democracy is conceived as a national ethos in which politics is conducted and political competitions are adjudicated.

There seem to be several ways in which agonistic dialogue might transform Ethiopia’s political fault lines and politics of resentment, victimhood and ethnic outbidding, at least within the broader community. On the other hand, once or while inter-communal conflicts are being transformed through agonistic community dialogue, elite-level dialogues may be undertaken, informed largely by the agonistic model, with the deliberative model used to mediate differences over some mutually selected and agreed agenda items.

Relocating Ethiopia’s political divide

The debate among academics and the political class over (re-)defining Ethiopia as a political community has animated political crises in the country. The Ethiopian state has long been a battleground for conflicting political
imaginations. For some, Ethiopia is an ‘historically antique polity’ with a glorious past. To others, it is a colonial state that forcefully incorporated multiple ‘nationalities’ during the time referred to as ‘the Scramble for Africa’. The advent of the Ethiopian Student Movement in the 1970s gave rise to variants of the latter narrative, precipitating the downfall of the monarchy. Later, leftist political organisations offered a narrative and reinterpretation of the country’s founding myth and political history anchored in class analysis and national oppression, intimating the persistence of ‘ranked ethnic relations’ and citizenship. Leaders of the student movement challenged the structures, institutions, symbols and myths of the Ethiopian state to a point of promoting a political project of completely reconstructing both the state and society.

The post-1991 ethno-regional political dispensation enshrined in the 1994 constitution essentially reconfigured both the political history and the political geography of the state. The country was divided initially into 14 ethno-regional states, later to be reduced to nine regions with two chartered cities. Now there are 11 regions and there may be more in the future.

The reconfiguration of the regional states along ethnic lines, coupled with the ethnic structuring of the ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), elevated ethnicity as the cardinal and organising principle of politics and state affairs. Put otherwise, the founding movement of the ‘ethno-nationalist political camp’, the Ethiopian Student Movement, and political organisations it inspired defeated the ‘traditional Ethiopian nationalists’. Unfortunately, the 1994 constitution did not emanate from a negotiated political settlement among contending political groups. As Lovie noted:

Although the transitional conference that was held just after EPRDF came to power in 1991 included a wide spectrum of political parties [with many Pan-Ethiopian political organisations excluded], their views were hardly taken into consideration and the EPRDF’s agenda for the transitional period was adopted largely unmodified.

Almost three decades later the preamble to and some of the provisions of the constitution are among the most highly contested political documents in the country. Academic and policy discussions in Ethiopia seem to revolve around obsessive debates for or against the country’s brand of federalism. There is little effort to substantiate the arguments about the federal structure. Factors such as competing political memories, the proclivity to perpetuate the politics of victimhood informed by politics of memory and residual structural social inequalities (land tenure and the resultant socio-economic disparity) are yet to be fully interrogated.

The political legitimacy of institutions and systems within the Ethiopian state has always been contested

Arguably, Ethiopia’s contemporary political crises are neither a by-product entirely of the 1994 constitution and the federal dispensation nor of the resurgence of the politics of multiculturalism. While both these factors contributed significantly to the political quagmire the country is in, it would be too simplistic to limit the analysis to them.

The ‘affective and evaluative’ allegiance to systems and institutions of a state is often affected by events of historical significance, for ‘a group will regard a political group as legitimate or illegitimate according to the way in which its values fit in its primary values’. Politics and civil discourse in Ethiopia have long been hampered by inherited and cumulative structural and social cleavages. The political legitimacy of institutions and systems within the Ethiopian state has always been contested, however repressive and authoritarian successive regimes were.

This is often manifested through differences over national values, historical figures, political heroes, symbols and policies. Simply put, the legitimacy of a political system is often measured against the ‘burdens of history’. The political history of the state, the nature of structures and systems it originally championed and the groups it benefited/protected or deprived/repressed are fundamental to determining its political legitimacy.

In divided societies such as that in Ethiopia the legitimacy of political systems is predicated on how
systems and institutions of the state have attempted to resolve political differences and whether those differences are settled or perpetuated:

Essentially the character and content of the major cleavages affecting the political stability of a society are largely determined by historical factors which have affected the way in which major issues dividing society have been solved or left unresolved over time.\(^{45}\)

Attempts to redress socio-political cleavages by imposing authoritarian measures also perpetuate the illegitimacy of systems and institutions. Despite some efforts such as Dergue’s land reform\(^{46}\) and the EPRDF’s constitutional secularism and ethno-regional federalism to resolve inherited political divisions, the political and structural cleavages animating Ethiopia’s political crisis linger.

The recurrent debate over land ownership and the form and design of the federal structure and disagreements about the relationship between the state and religions are testament to the fragility of such efforts, for they were conducted by institutions and systems with little to no political legitimacy.

According to a recent study, Ethiopia’s contemporary political preoccupations expose a fragile liminality caught between conflicted identities, contradictory political imaginations, contrasting memories, the proclivity to and the resistance against a univocal memorialisation of the past, a contested and ambivalent pedagogy of history\(^{47}\) and a clash of visions of a common future.

According to a study done in 2020, most of the close to 30 items identified by major political actors for national dialogue are issues of contested political history and competing collective memory. The study, depending largely on the literature on the mandates of conveners of national dialogues, classified the items into four categories: ‘political reform mandate, peacemaking mandate, constitution [making] mandate, and others.’\(^{48}\)

Some of the items identified by key stakeholders are:

- The right to self-determination
- The structure of the regional states and regional administrative boundaries
- Creating a common understanding of the country’s political history, state symbols and so on
- The national flag as a shared symbol of the state
- Creating a shared vision for the state (based on consensus about its political history and national symbols and the divergent narratives and visions).\(^{49}\)

The items in the categories of ‘peacemaking mandate’, ‘constitution mandate’ and ‘other’ are fundamentally linked with those mentioned above because although they are about the future, they are viewed through the prism of ‘the past’. Along with issues of regional boundaries, identity-based conflicts, ‘non-titular’ minorities in ‘titular states’,\(^{50}\) rewriting the constitution, federal working languages and the status of Addis Ababa, the capital city, they are fundamentally about the ‘politics of memory’ and ‘identity politics’. A close look at the nuances of the agenda items reveals disagreements that are not about policy but about the past.

The post-1991 ethno-regional political dispensation reconfigured the political history and geography of the state

It seems the Ethiopian state has not reckoned with past wrongs. The determination to define and conduct politics through the prism of ‘the dominant’ and ‘the dominated’, the ‘oppressor’ and ‘the oppressed’, and resistance against such a dichotomised view has embedded the politics of memory in the political space.

Although informed by the past, however, it also animates the present, as is evident from recent political events. Ethnic determinism, or what Donald Horowitz calls ‘cultural revivalism’ as a tool of resisting a hegemonic discourse of identity, was at the heart of popular resistance and social protest. Re-appropriating stereotypes, reviving and revitalising hitherto sidelined cultural attires, using sports teams as markers of ethnic/ethno-regional enclaves, competing for ethno-cultural mainstream media spaces were all deployed as modes
and instruments of resistance. On the other hand, these instruments were equally used to construct, revive and ossify identities.

This deep-seated political divide has provoked several armed and political confrontations between the state and contenders for power, the latest of which are the recent war between the federal government and the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) and the militarised conflict in Oromia. In effect, it has become self-evident for some time now that the country is in a state of political crisis and, of late, in a state of war, with far-reaching political consequences warranting, among other remedies, national dialogue as a tool of conflict transformation.

National dialogue initiative

Both academics and opposition politicians have been calling for some form of national forum for political dialogue; calls that were repeatedly rebuffed by the then ruling EPRDF. These suppressed voices were revived and joined by many more after the political reform of 2018. However, they diminished as the early days of political reform brought a semblance of stability, raising the expectations of many observers of Ethiopian politics of a smooth transition to democracy.

The political measures the newly appointed prime minister introduced in the early months of his administration were tantamount to a fully-fledged transitional justice policy. They included amnesty, the establishment of a national reconciliation and boundary and identity affairs commissions and pledges to reform the security sector and so-called institutions of democracy.

The proliferation of ethnic and inter-communal conflict in the country and the political polarisation reignited calls not only for national dialogue but also for the constitution of a national transitional government. The opposition insisted that such dialogues should be conducted before the national elections, scheduled for June 2020. The calls for a transitional government startled the government, which accused opposition parties of using the concept of national dialogue as a shortcut to an illegitimate scheme to share power.

The subsequent postponement of the national elections, ostensibly because of the COVID-19 pandemic, fuelled the polarisation of the political space, with some opposition parties and the TPLF, which was formerly in a coalition with the EPRDF (now called the Prosperity Party), questioning the legitimacy of the federal government after September 2020. These problems would later be compounded by a series of ethnic clashes including the militarised conflict between the TPLF and the federal government on 4 November 2020. However, an effort was made to initiate sustained political dialogue. This was accompanied by a series of disjointed inter-elite interactions for over a year.

From quasi-CSO led to government-initiated dialogue

In 2019, on the heels of the political reforms, a series of discussions was held among influential political and public figures across the political spectrum, facilitated by a local civil society organisation called Destiny Ethiopia, whose members, describing themselves as ‘concerned citizens’, tried to bridge the political fault lines through roundtable discussions and dialogue.

At the formative stage of the initiative, they consulted with and approached major stakeholders, including the prime minister, who encouraged them and advised them to make sure they avoided duplicating efforts and forged a consolidated hub in their effort to kickstart the dialogue.

The rise of ethnic and inter-communal conflict, as well as political polarisation, have reignited calls for national dialogue

Facilitators of Destiny Ethiopia used transformative scenario planning (TSP) in their interactions with 50 influential political and public figures for six months, in four rounds of roundtable sessions. On 3 December 2019 in a nationally televised event attended by the then Minister of Peace, Muferihat Kamil, Destiny Ethiopia and the 50 participants launched ‘four scenarios’ that might be tried between 2020 and 2040.

The participants, who included politicians who now lead major political parties such as the Amhara National Movement (NAMA), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA), the Prosperity Party and representatives of the TPLF, among others,
declared in unison that of the four scenarios they preferred ‘Dawn on Ethiopia’ and pledged to work collectively to make it happen.\(^{62}\) The TSP exercise was important, raising the hopes and expectations of many observers of Ethiopian politics. While Destiny Ethiopia was facilitating conversations and after the launch of the ‘four scenarios’, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia facilitated discussions with and among political parties under the auspices of the PPJC, a consortium of 53 parties including the ruling Prosperity Party.\(^{63}\) These inter-party discussions\(^{64}\) were aimed at toning down and reining in the increasingly polarised political discourse prior to the national election, which had now been scheduled for late August 2020.

Eventually, and in a bid to avoid duplication of efforts and draw lessons from the relative success of Destiny Ethiopia, a consortium consisting of Destiny Ethiopia, the PPJC and the Ministry of Peace formed what they called a Multi-stakeholder Initiative for National Dialogue (MIND)-Ethiopia on 8 October 2020.\(^{65}\) The initiative was ‘recognised’ by the Ministry of Peace and ‘the memorandum of understanding signed with the ministry [affirmed the government’s will] to provide the necessary administrative, political and security support’.\(^{66}\) The mere presence in the consortium of the Ministry of Peace and, later, the Reconciliation Commission was momentous as it was considered to be a sign that the government bought into the initiative. Its composition lent it an aura of credibility and trustworthiness.\(^{67}\) The fact that it was initiated by civil society organisations that were successful and had earned credibility in the transformative scenario planning exercise persuaded the opposition political parties to participate.

Despite this, members of MIND-Ethiopia allege that the government was deliberately ambivalent throughout the process, although it did extend full security and political and administrative support to the events the initiative organised.\(^{68}\) Despite these reservations, MIND-Ethiopia conducted a year-long series of discussions among political parties, historians, community members, media stakeholders and government.\(^{69}\)

On the eve of the sixth general elections MIND-Ethiopia announced that it had been ‘developing a concept note on national dialogue, preparing a strategic plan, setting up an institutional arrangement, developing a code of conduct and communication strategy’ and had identified key agenda items (constitutional design, competing historical narratives and the need for national consensus).

It was in the process of forming a national consultative forum comprising 22 carefully selected representatives of various sections of society including farmers, pastoralists, youth, university students, women, marginalised communities, employees, employers, people with disabilities, business communities, teachers, retirees, excluded Ethiopians, scholars and celebrities, elders and traditional leaders, representatives of religious institutions, civil society and the media, bloggers, representatives of the diaspora and government, political parties and security forces.\(^{70}\) It would launch a national dialogue process after the election, while conducting political dialogue sessions with and among key stakeholders.\(^{71}\)

The mere presence in the consortium of the Ministry of Peace was a momentous sign that government backed the initiative

Although it was exceptionally well designed and rigorous in its facilitation procedures and relatively successful in pinning down major issues, MIND-Ethiopia’s conceptual framework was entirely informed by theoretical orientations of deliberative democracy. It also faced four political bottlenecks.

The first challenge was the death of the prominent Oromo singer Hachalu Hundessa in June 2020, which triggered communal violence followed by a government crackdown that resulted in the detention of thousands in Oromia and beyond.\(^{72}\) The anger was compounded by the imprisonment of prominent politicians including Jawar Mohammed and Bekele Gerba of OFC and Lidetu Ayalew and Yilikal Getinet of the Hibir Ethiopia Party.

The next problem, and perhaps the toughest of all, was the war that broke out between the federal government and TPLF in November 2020, which inflamed nationalisms compounded by war rhetoric, exacerbating the already tense political environment. In their bid to forge coalitions the warring parties resorted to invoking historical and contemporary narratives of victory and triumph, victimhood and agony, consolidating discourses
of mutual animus and enmity. The war and the war discourse escalated, casting an ominous shadow over major national events, including the general elections, and making MIND-Ethiopia’s attempts to interest the public and stakeholders in the national dialogue a daunting task.

It was impossible to hold meaningful political dialogue sessions while the two parties, with their contrasting ideological inclinations and contradictory interpretations of the political history of the state were at war. The problems were further compounded by the proliferation of episodic ethnic and inter-communal violence. As the war and the violence intensified, the state gravitated to scrutinising public discourse, which had a huge impact on the programme.

Another challenge was a lurking suspicion within certain quarters of the opposition that the initiative might not be impartial. This perception was inspired as much by the war and wartime political positioning as it was, inadvertently or otherwise, by members of the initiative miscalculating in their ‘strategic convening’.

Although almost all the major opposition parties supported the federal government’s initial military and ‘law enforcement’ campaign against the TPLF, some started to voice concerns as the war raged on and the government mobilised citizens and resorted to war rhetoric. When MIND-Ethiopia engaged with government agencies it was perceived to be supporting the war; when it failed to engage it was considered to be opposed to it, factors that would start to affect its credibility.

The fourth and equally consequential challenge was what some members called the government’s ‘deliberate ambivalence’ about formally endorsing MIND-Ethiopia’s activities and plans. This had far-reaching consequences, with some political parties becoming indifferent to the process. According to a senior EZEMA official:

… a national dialogue becomes successful when the government takes full ownership. MIND [was] not a national dialogue process. It was like any project a non-governmental organisation might implement.

As the sole agency representing the government, the Ministry of Peace was often reluctant to assure the leading members of the initiative that they had the full backing and commitment of the government.

**National Dialogue Commission**

On 29 December 2021 the House of People’s Representatives approved a Bill, proclamation 1265/2021, establishing a National Dialogue Commission. Almost two months later, on 21 February 2022, Parliament appointed 11 people to the commission. The process leading up to the appointment was marked by protests and political posturing within the government and the opposition. While some opposition members were merely ambivalent, others were adamantly opposed to the whole process. Despite these reservations the government continued to ‘call upon the opposition and the public to own the initiative as is.’

Since its establishment the commission has undertaken several commendable activities. Its first act was to familiarise its members with the spirit and text of the law under which it had been established. It invited the experts who had drafted the law to brief the members, drawing on examples from global national dialogues. It also invited experts from the MIND-Ethiopia initiative to share their experiences.

While some opposition members were merely ambivalent, others were adamantly opposed to the whole process

The commission’s first public outing was a meeting with religious and traditional leaders, a strategic move, signifying the solemn nature of the process. It then met with media stakeholders, the joint council of political CSOs and some individuals and opposition parties. Its engagement continued with visits to the executives of all the regions, except for Tigray, and the two city administrations – Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa. The final meeting was with the prime minister and the president to brief them on its work.

It presented its budget to the house and began to convene consultative meetings, seeking feedback on and insights into its strategic plan. It also developed a ‘design' for convening public input across the country, which was intended to culminate in a national plenary.
commissioners were sent to regional states to discuss the methods and logistics of kickstarting the process in November 2022.

**Elite buy-in and resistance**

As indicated above, although political parties and interest groups have been calling for decades for a national dialogue process, the initiative is now dividing opinions. The recurring problem is the competing conceptualisations of the process and the outcome of the national dialogue. The government is adamant that the process will ‘resolve differences of opinion and disagreements’ over ‘most fundamental national issues.’ According to a senior official:

… the national dialogue initiative is a by-product of the ruling party’s historical and contemporary political analysis; that the country’s foundational problems are the absence of national consensus on most important national issues and lingering failure of institution building.  

The same official says the government believes that after national problems have been aired in an open, contentious issues of inclusion will be adjudicated by a popular referendum. This sentiment has also been echoed by the prime minister on several occasions. The yearning to ‘resolve’ differences through a majoritarian public referendum negates the notion of compromise required by dialogues in divided societies. On the other hand, the assumption that fundamental differences can be ‘resolved’ rather than transformed through national dialogue suggests an inclination to adjudicate the impasse using the classic liberal democratic approach.

Government officials accuse the opposition parties of making the national dialogue initiative a political space for power play because, they allege, they are primarily concerned with power politics. This sentiment is also expressed by some experts who observe the process from the outside. According to one, the politics of some opposition parties of boycott and withdrawal is an extension of ‘their strategy of perpetual political posturing’. Some in the MIND-Ethiopia initiative resent the ‘politics of boycotting’, arguing that their disagreement with the government is essentially about ‘roadmap rather than content or process’. In some ways, this assertion intersects with the government’s accusations about the attitude of the opposition. One informant believed the opposition wanted to conduct some form of dialogue before the election, then share power as a compromise until, after the elections the elected government would initiate a national dialogue process.

Given the plethora of calls in the past three decades for a transitional government, and in the face of ‘the roadmap’ factor, it is incontrovertible that ‘power politics’ is involved in the arguments of the opposition camp. However, the other side of the argument should not be glossed over. These disagreements are as much about the trust deficit between the opposition parties and the government as they are about power politics. There is also a fear that such endeavours will enable the reaffirmation of the hegemonic discourse of the government.

Government officials accuse opposition parties of making the national dialogue initiative a political space for power play

These fears accord with what Mouffe calls ‘politics’ and ‘the political’. ‘Politics’ – the institutions, institutional mechanisms, norms and procedures – is what alarms the opposition camp. They fear that in an attempt to ‘resolve’ the differences that animate the political divide the state will use institutions and structures such as the National Dialogue Commission to impose its hegemonic narrative and ideology in the name of broad-based, inclusive and transparent deliberations.

While this is one explanation for the objections, another is that, like the government, the opposition often uses procedure to justify its arguments. According to some members of the PPJC, for instance, their involvement from the drafting stage of the proclamation and the appointment of members of the National Dialogue Commission was constrained by the government. They accuse the government of playing both as a party and as the government, influencing the PPJC’s deliberations over the draft Bill.

Members claim that the only amendment they tabled that was given real attention was the one giving the speaker of the house rather than the prime minister the power to nominate the commissioners. Some suggest the
process would be more credible and the commission considered more legitimate if the government had done as it did with the appointment of members of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia. In that case, the prime minister established an independent committee led by a cardinal of the Ethiopian Catholic Church to identify potential candidates. This process was followed by a discussion between the prime minister and leaders of the opposition parties.92

While some members of the government concede that more could have been done to make the process more credible, they reiterate that litigating the past will not help the process. The government also argues that opposition parties were given ample opportunity to deliberate on the draft Bill and believes it should be praised for compromising over the constitutional prerogative of the prime minister to nominate commissioners.93

The differences between the two sides go beyond procedures and processes, they relate to competing conceptual frameworks which will eventually affect both the process and the outcome of the national dialogue. Failure to reconcile them openly may further polarise politics in the country.

Towards a conceptual analysis

A closer look into the disputes suggests that the differences are both procedural and conceptual. In most cases the opposition’s conceptual objections are framed and communicated in procedural terms, emphasising specifically the ‘exploratory and preparatory phases’ that ushered in the establishing proclamation and the commission.

The government and some in the opposition camp too frame their argument in procedural terms because they expect the procedures of the ‘dialogue’ phase of the process to buttress the ‘right outcome’.

The ‘deliberative alliance’

The ‘deliberative alliance’ is composed of the government, some opposition parties and an institution (the commission). This ‘alliance’ is undergirded by a rare ideological intersection point that converges them to the ‘traditional Ethiopianist’ camp of the Ethiopian political spectrum. Among the prominent opposition parties that criticise the initiative, primarily the ‘exploratory and preparatory phases’, in procedural terms are the EZEMA and NAMA. The former is a pan-Ethiopia party primarily advocating ‘civic citizenship’ and national unity, while the latter advocates for Amhara nationalism as a means of political struggle to a pan-Ethiopianist end.94

The government’s doctrine of ‘politics of convergence, medemer, also alludes to the need for an unqualified political ‘unity’ without sidelining ‘diversity’. This point of conversion between these entities seems to have helped forge the ‘conceptual alliance.’ The odd party in this ‘alliance’ is the commission. As an independent institution its conceptual framework could not be cast in political terms. The only factor that makes it party to the alliance is the spirit and content of the law that established and mandated it.

It can be argued that the disagreements among ‘segments of society’ are informed by perceptions of historical injustice

The government considers the national dialogue process to be a way of negotiating “the differences of opinions and disagreements among various political and opinion leaders and also segments of society in Ethiopia on the most fundamental national issues.”95 This rationale requires examination.

To start with, the fact that the law does not specify what is meant by ‘the most fundamental national issues’ complicates the commission’s task of identifying agenda items.96 Remarks by senior government officials, including the prime minister, suggest that the government has a simplistic concept of the matter, believing these fundamental national issues to be confined to the design of the federal structure and the constitution and of flags and emblems.

The problem with this perspective is that it disregards the importance of the debates about political history. What animates the political fault lines over these issues is the competing interpretations of the past. Those who support the current federal arrangement as is, the restructuring of state and society along ethnic lines, believe that the constitution and the federal arrangement
are institutional mechanisms to redress the ‘historical injustices’ they claim to have suffered.\textsuperscript{37}

Despite these reservations, the dialogue process might prove to be therapeutic and transformative if it is envisaged in agonistic dialogue terms, aimed at bringing about comprise among competing visions. Framed that way it might also inspire a horizontal and cathartic inter-communal dialogue.

It can be argued that the disagreements among ‘segments of society’ are informed by perceptions of historical injustice endured in the form of cultural, economic and political marginalisation.\textsuperscript{98} Issues of historical injustice and claims of injury caused by brute force and violence are often difficult to debate in ‘the public sphere’ without evoking emotions, passions and rhetoric that revive old wounds and historical animosities.

This shows that the government’s conceptualisation is heavily informed by the cardinal principles and presuppositions of theories of deliberative democracy. According to the proclamation, the national dialogue process has been initiated because ‘it is a necessity to resolve differences and disagreements through broad based dialogue that engenders national consensus.’\textsuperscript{99}

To that end, Article 3/e prescribes ‘rationality’ as one of the principles that guide the process. One of the main objectives is ‘the creation of a new political dispensation’ (Article 6/3). It is clear that the government envisages the process as a conflict resolution mechanism and the outcome as a rational consensus. This, one could argue, is political naiveté borne out of an ahistorical and misguided analysis of Ethiopia’s political fault lines. The proclamation clearly attests to the country’s political problem as one ‘that has been simmering for centuries’ (Article 6/5) and has hindered ‘the building of a state with strong legitimacy’ (Article 6/7).

Conflicts animated by such socio-structural cleavages are seldom ‘resolved’ or adjudicated through rational consensus in public deliberations. They must be transformed. In this regard, the government’s approach to the national dialogue process and the (expected) outcomes is misguided because the deliberative democracy framework is entirely bereft of the politics of reconciliation in severely divided societies such as that of Ethiopia.

While the commission’s concept of the process is also influenced by the ‘deliberative’ conceptual framework, many of the criticisms and issues related to its legitimacy are expressed in procedural rather than conceptual terms, for example, that the process leading up to the commission’s establishment was not inclusive, participatory and transparent. These assertions stem largely from the trust deficit mentioned above.

The deficit, in turn, is exacerbated by historical anecdotes and suspicion that the government might co-opt the process and consolidate the hegemony of the ‘ethnic origins of the nation.’\textsuperscript{100} Given the gravity of the commission’s responsibilities and its achievements in the 11 months since its establishment, some believe it has been unfairly criticised by commentators and political parties alike.\textsuperscript{101}

According to one commissioner, all the commissioners are well intentioned and responsible individuals who are trying their best to conduct a genuine national dialogue and live up to expectations.\textsuperscript{102} They are cognisant of the fact that it is challenging to conduct such a dialogue in a volatile political environment. They also struggle to find ways to persuade the government to secure peace and stability for the success of the dialogue.\textsuperscript{103}

The ‘deliberative alliance’ is composed of the government, some opposition parties and an institution (the commission)

They are concerned that whichever path they choose will be perceived as favouring one side or the other and will have an impact on perceptions of the commission’s impartiality.\textsuperscript{104} ‘Releasing this or that statement could be easy, but expecting the desired impact with certainty in such a polarised political space is naïve.’\textsuperscript{105} The commission is, however, convinced that it can reclaim legitimacy through assertive and impartial engagement with all actors across the political divides.

Members of the commission assert that they are determined to insulate themselves from political interference from either the government or the opposition, citing a statement by the chief commissioner that they will take their responsibilities seriously and he will resign when and if he feels the government
is interfering. In a meeting with the parliamentary committee over their annual budget commissioners had warned members of the committee ‘to refrain from attempting to micromanage the commission’s activities’, rebuffing what they sensed to be an attempt at financial arm twisting.

Although assertiveness is one way of reclaiming legitimacy, members of the commission understand that ‘inclusivity’ is important to the credibility of the process and its outcome. Efforts are being made to contact and invite those opposition parties that have rejected the process entirely as well as political groups designated by the government as terrorist organisations.

However, some members of MIND-Ethiopia believe that inclusivity is not necessarily about who participates in the process or who is or is not represented in the commission. They argue that it is not possible to represent all 80-plus ethnic groups. What matters most to them is that the agenda covers the concerns of all groups.

While the commission seems to be ready to reclaim its legitimacy through inclusivity, impartiality and rigour, it appears that it has not recognised why its legitimacy was challenged in the first place. The opaque process of drafting the proclamation, the nomination, shortlisting and approval of the commissioners and the allegation by the opposition that it was excluded were key factors. But they were not the only ones. The fundamental problem is the trust deficit that is inherent in Ethiopian politics. This mistrust is also informed by political fault lines relating to the past wrongs.

The commission’s effort to reclaim legitimacy by ‘credibly’ convening the national dialogue is commendable. However, there is a glaring and problematic gap in its conceptualisation of the process and the outcome. In its unofficial draft strategic plan, it alludes to ‘manufactured/false narratives’ as a potential challenge to success. The false or manufactured narrative is a politically loaded term often used by ‘traditional Ethiopianists’ to criticise ethno-nationalist political positioning, while the national dialogue process is intended precisely to mediate contending narratives, however ‘manufactured’ or ‘false’ some might claim they are.

This characterisation of competing narratives, coupled with what some might contend is a partisan statement by some members of the commission, among them the chief commissioner, who has stated that the process is open to all agendas ‘except negotiating on “Ethiopiawinet” (Ethiopian-ness).’ This not only adds to the trust deficit, it reaffirms the ‘deliberative dialogue’ approach to which the commission subscribes – an approach that could inadvertently further widen the political divide.

The ‘deliberative dialogue’ approach is also visible in the way it has planned and structured the process. Its intention is to convene close to 6,000 public conversations across the country, a ‘bottom-up’ approach it believes will cover most of the issues and redress them at municipal, zone and regional levels.

One leader of the Amhara National Movement starkly illustrated the problems of bringing together historical enemies, stating that NAMA would speak to this implicit scepticism as it relates to the failure to deal with grievances of an historical or contemporary nature. According to this informant, ‘NAMA would automatically withdraw from the talks if the TPLF was invited to participate.’

The trust deficit that is inherent in Ethiopian politics is informed by political fault lines relating to the past wrongs.

We think genuine national dialogue is a sine qua non both for addressing the hitherto historical injustices as well as for making historical compromises to build the country on a new democratic foundation. Without a shadow of doubt, trying to gloss over it is not going to be helpful to anybody.
government believe that Ethiopia’s political fault lines are perpetuated by the political elite. The ‘bottom-up’ approach is often prescribed to bypass the elite and reach to the masses, with the assumption that the masses can live in peace and harmony once the government manages to deny the elite its base. This approach was also used during the MIND-Ethiopia and Ministry of Peace’s joint ‘community dialogue’ prior to the 2021 elections.

The intention behind the public deliberations is primarily to identify issues, conveners and participants for the national plenary session, a problematic approach that assumes the fault lines are entirely elite driven and vertical and ignores the fact that horizontal inter-communal tensions also require attention. This vertically oriented approach sidelines the relational aspect that, with targeted structural redress by the federal state, could very well transform inter-communal relations.

The approach also assumes ‘rationality and reasoning’ in an otherwise highly divided and polarised society. Local-level conflicts are often relational, reflecting contending narratives and grievances, with animosity to the ‘other’ often invoked in historical terms. An attempt to scratch the surface in these environments could potentially provoke tension and conflict unless dealt with through a sustained, intense, relational and transformative approach.

The ‘deliberative dialogue’ approach plans to convene close to 6,000 fact finding public conversations across the country.

Given the number of intractable horizontal conflicts and the inter-ethnic animus in the country, the national dialogue demands a sustained and systemic approach at a local level. The commission’s goal should extend beyond collecting agenda items for the national plenary, it requires a horizontal track aimed at transforming inter-group relations and creating fertile ground for reconciliation.

Transforming inter-group relations also means providing the space for conflicting groups to speak out about their grievances. With skilled and culture-sensitive facilitators, the underlying factors animating conflict could be transformed through sustained, intense, and relational dialogue.

Another problematic element is the selection of conveners. It cannot be assumed that those who will participate are apolitical and prepared to be convinced by reasoned and rational discourse. In such a divided society preferences and interests are framed in identity terms and are seldom susceptible to change in such a way.

The ‘opposition’

Some prominent political parties in the opposition camp objected strenuously to the process leading up to the adoption of the proclamation and the establishment of the commission, while others have moved the goalposts along the way. According to an official of the OFC, at the consultation forum with the Ministry of Justice and senior Prosperity Party officials some 43 of the 53 members of the PPJC voiced serious reservations about the draft Bill.

The OFC, along with the two other prominent ethno-national parties, the OLF and the ONLF, would later, in a joint statement, announce that they would boycott the national dialogue process. Their reason was the proposed exclusion of the armed political groups, the TPLF and the OLA. However, after some senior Prosperity Party officials and some in the commission intimated that all stakeholders, including those currently involved in armed conflict with the government, might be invited, they did not revise their decision.

The three parties, proponents of the ‘Ethiopian brand of federalism’ and sceptical about the current administration’s ‘right-leaning’ concept of the country’s past and future, later spearheaded the establishment of the Caucus of Opposition Parties (COP) to oppose the proposed form of the process. They were later joined by the Arena Tigray (for Democracy and Sovereignty), the Wolayta National Movement, the Afar People’s Party and others. The COP wanted:

- A cessation of hostilities in all conflict areas, monitored by an external body
- Guarantees from the ruling party and essential stakeholders that the commission would be restructured and further processes would be inclusive
- Diversification of the agenda to be tabled for discussion
• The inclusion in the discussions of third parties (non-Ethiopians), who might contribute necessary expertise
• The enforcement by the government of trust-building measures, including the assurance of security for key participants, the release of political prisoners, unhindered assistance to those in desperate need and international oversight.

The fact that the opposition explicitly demanded that third parties facilitate or lead the process speaks to the magnitude and depth of the trust deficit.

As suggested above, the variable that has a far greater impact in this political divide as it relates to the national dialogue process is divergent political ideologies. Those political parties in the opposition camp who rejected the initiative are some of the leading members of the ‘ethno-nationalist’ camp in the political spectrum. They have a significant base in the country and are proponents of the ‘Ethiopian brand of federalism’, critical of the ‘mainstream’ narration of Ethiopia’s political history’, and sceptical about the current administration’s ‘right-leaning’ concept of the country’s past and future.

In a nutshell, their political worldview is ‘that not only the structure of the state but also the culture should be redefined and make way for the historically marginalised cultures and reconstitute the state’. The (re-)alignment of political forces in line with the political fault line for/against the current national dialogue initiative begs for revisiting the conceptual frameworks of both the ‘deliberative alliance’ and the ethno-nationalist opposition

Conclusion

In severely divided societies such as that in Ethiopia, national dialogue is often used to transform rather than resolve conflict, with a view to installing, retaining or consolidating a democratic dispensation. The Ethiopian national dialogue project, including the much-hailed MIND-Ethiopia initiative, has largely failed to appreciate the political implications of the horizontal tensions and politics of difference that have shaped state-society relations for almost five decades.

The government must seriously reconsider its preoccupation with ‘resolving’ through a ‘rational, inclusive and participatory dialogue’ the ‘problems’ that have been ‘simmering for centuries’. The opposition should reconsider its politics of boycott and reframe its arguments and recalibrate its approach to the national dialogue process.

Those involved in national dialogue initiatives should start by appreciating the pluralistic nature of the politics that underpin both conflict and conflict transformation processes. ‘Memories of oppression, exclusion, and violence become constitutive of individual and community identity, often defined against the “other”’, rendering the shift from the individual to the public in public deliberations, as the liberal theorists would have it, challenging.

The opposition’s express demand for a third party facilitator to lead the process speaks to the deep trust deficit

All actors must appreciate that conflict is a fact of life and agon, struggle among contenders, is not something to be eradicated but to be tamed. National dialogue, in these circumstances, should be envisaged as an instrument to transform violence into disagreements and reinvent democracy as a national ethos, the only battleground on which differences are fought out.

The commission, the government and most of the opposition parties must revisit and reconcile their conceptual frameworks before the commission starts its work. Stakeholders should also be prepared for a sustained and transformative agonistic dialogue.

Recommendations

Given the severity of the political divide and its potential for cataclysmic violence, the government must revisit its conceptual framework of the process and the outcome and make sure the process is relational, transformative, and not necessarily destined to forge a rational consensus on the ‘most fundamental national issues.’

Ethiopia’s political fault lines are informed and animated by contrasting ‘collective memories’ and inter-communal tensions seem to have been predicated increasingly on competing identities. Expecting to ‘resolve’ differences on ‘the most fundamental national issues’ through national dialogue is a lofty and idealistic
goal. Reaching a ‘rational consensus’ on these issues is equally challenging.

Accordingly, the government should prepare itself and moderate its expectation and use this opportunity as a moment of reckoning with the past, laying the foundation for a cathartic vertical and horizontal reconciliation, with a ‘conflictual consensus’ among political elites on democracy as a national ethos of conducting political differences.

The government should, therefore, participate in the project and take the opportunity to:

• Transform intractable identity conflicts between ethnic groups.
• Forge a ‘conflictual consensus’ between national elites on democracy as the sole principle of resolving political differences.
• Refrain from insisting on a majoritarian approach to resolving differences over constitutional issues without transforming horizontal inter-communal tensions and conflicts.
• Re-engage political actors and interest groups and demonstrate compromise on the composition, objectives, and mandate of the commission. A non-dogmatic approach could help the commission reclaim legitimacy and project credibility.
• Exercise its law enforcement powers legitimately and judiciously to secure peace and refrain from encroaching on the civic and political rights of citizens.
• Amend the proclamation and give the commission the mandate to ensure the outcomes of the national dialogue process are implemented.

The commission:

• Should plan for a horizontal, sustained, intense and relational dialogue among conflicting communities and a deliberative dialogue among political elites at both local and national levels about carefully selected and mutually agreed topics.
• Should design its own rules and procedures with core principles guiding the media’s reporting of the issues.
• Work actively with the government, the opposition, CSOs and other stakeholders to bring conflicting parties to a peaceful resolution of hostilities.
• Request the House of People’s Representatives to amend the establishing proclamation and add a limited number of commissioners who might have the respect of those stakeholders opposed to the process or constitute a national advisory council reflecting gender, political, ethnic and religious diversities, to advise on matters of process.
• Request an amendment of the proclamation to mandate either the commission or another equivalent independent organ to ensure the implementation of the recommendations of the process.

The media should:

• Discourage war rhetoric and antagonistic discourse and concentrate on discussing peace and stability.
• Ensure that the national dialogue becomes a national preoccupation.
• Manage public expectations about the objectives and outcomes of the process.
• Local media should ensure that local communities are informed about the initiative and participate in the process.
• Emphasise in their reporting the therapeutic and cathartic value of the national dialogue.

The international community should:

• Apply pressure to all conflicting parties to ensure that mediation and negotiation processes augment the national dialogue process.
• Support the commission financially without endangering its independence.
Ethiopia’s National Dialogue: Reconciling Competing Approaches

Notes


4 MIND-Ethiopia is a consortium of civil society organisations and government agencies that initiated inter-elite and community dialogue immediately after the 2018 political reforms were instituted.


7 Ibid.


10 Wikipedia defines agonism as ‘a political and social theory that emphasises the potentially positive aspects of certain forms of conflict. It accepts a permanent place for such conflict in the political sphere but seeks to show how individuals might accept and channel this conflict positively’.

11 It appears that the government and some of the commissioners believe the process is destined to ‘resolve’ differences of opinion and disagreements among various political and opinion leaders over the most ‘fundamental national issues’ and ‘bolster national consensus’. The Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission Establishment Proclamation No. 1265/2021.


16 A Schaap, Agonism in Divided Societies, Philosophy and Social Criticism 32(2), 2006, 200, 275.

17 B Bashir, Reconciling Historical Injustices: Deliberative Democracy and the Politics of Reconciliation, Res Publica 18, 2012, 128, Bashir’s critique of deliberative democracy in favour of the politics of reconciliation is framed in the context of consolidated democracies. This reaffirms the argument that deliberative democracy falters if it is applied to issues of historical injustice in severely divided societies with multiple identities and seemingly irrecconcilable grievances.

18 Used here in the Gramscian sense that it is a way of ruling with the consent of the ruled. For more on Gramscian Hegemony, see AP Otruba, The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony, and Marxism, Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory 40(3), 2012, 465–464.


20 Mouffe, Deliberative Democracy.

21 A Schaap, Agonism in Divided Societies, 257.

22 Mouffe, Deliberative Democracy, 754.

23 Bashir, Reconciling Historical Injustices, 139.


26 Ibid.

27 Ibid, 11.

28 Bashir, Reconciling Historical Injustices, 139.


30 S Maddison, Relational Transformation and Agonistic Dialogue in Divided Societies, Political Studies 63, 2015, 1014–1036.


32 Maddison, Relational Transformation, 1025.

33 Ibid.


35 Maddison, Relational Transformation.


37 Ibid.


44 Ibid, 86. Lipset measures the legitimacy of political systems through the prism of ‘effectiveness’ and settled cleavages. Effectiveness denotes the ‘actual performance of the system’ in delivering ‘basic functions of government …by an efficient bureaucracy and a decision-making system which is able to resolve political problems’. On the other hand, ‘the extent to which contemporary democratic political systems are legitimate depends in large measure upon the ways in which the key issues which have historically divided the society have been resolved’.


47 Maddison, Relational Transformation.

48 For a detailed discussion of these items, see Dawit Yohanis, Mapping Ethiopian Stakeholders’ Positions towards a National Dialogue: A Background study prepared by the Institute for Security Studies for the Berghof Foundation, 2020.

49 Ibid.


Discussions at these gatherings, parties, among them the Freedom and Equality Party, pushed their call for a National Dialogue process one step further with recommendations as to how to go about it. Several conferences were organised to discuss the transition process, for instance, suggested that convening a national dialogue should be a precondition to conducting a free, fair and credible election and resolve the trust deficit between the government and the opposition. See, Abdulkadir Adem, National Dialogue in Ethiopia: Towards sustainable peace and democratic transition, www.fepeethiopia.com/sites/default/files/2020-09/National_Dialogue_in_Ethiopia_Towards_sustainable_peace_and_Democratic.pdf, 2020.

66 Interview, senior NAMA official and MP, Addis Ababa, July 2022. NAMA now dissolved Ethiopian Democratic Party on the need for ‘A National Salvation and Transitional Government’ through an all-inclusive national dialogue, www.facebook.com/HibirEthiopiaDemocraticParty/posts/pbid675m5kCnWd4fNPJhtkBEeU7wvVwH950wHfFzgTdfRIMu9gT-vKF9Zk1KGCPnqdpJeql_28 September 2020, pfbid0TsmUCkLWcdPNZ-JhtkBEeU7wvVwH950wHfFzgTdfRIMu9gT-vKF9Zk1KGCPnqdpJeql, 28 September 2020.

67 Ibid.

68 Interview, commissioner, Addis Ababa, June 2022.

69 Interview, member of MIND-Ethiopia initiative, Addis Ababa, July 2022.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Interview, former advisor to the Ministry of Peace, Addis Ababa, July 2022.

75 Interview, member of MIND-Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, July 2022.

76 Ibid.


78 Interview, senior official of the Prosperity Party, Addis Ababa, June 2022.

79 Interview, commissioner, Addis Ababa, June 2022.

80 Interview, member of the MIND-Ethiopia initiative, Addis Ababa, July 2022.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

84 Interview, senior government official and regional MP, Addis Ababa, June 2022.

85 Ibid.

86 Interview, member of the joint council, Addis Ababa, July 2022.

87 Ibid.

88 Interview, senior NAMA member, Addis Ababa, July 2022.

89 Ibid.

90 Interview, deputy secretary of the Office of the Speaker, Addis Ababa, July 2022.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.

100 Interview, senior official of the OFC, Addis Ababa, June 2022.

101 Interview, commissioner, Addis Ababa, June 2022.

102 Ibid.

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid.

105 Ibid.


107 Interview, commissioner, Addis Ababa, June 2022.


109 Interview, senior NAMA official and MP, Addis Ababa, July 2022. NAMA was founded on the basis of a claim of oppression by the TPLF during its 27 years in power.

110 Interview, senior NAMA official and MP, Addis Ababa, July 2022. NAMA was founded on the basis of a claim of oppression by the TPLF during its 27 years in power.

111 Unofficial draft Strategic Plan of the National Dialogue Commission, 2022.

112 Interview, senior OFC member, Addis Ababa, July 2022.

113 Virtual interview, ONLF member, June 2022.


115 Bashir, Reconciling Historical Injustices, 132.
About the author
Tegbaru Yared is a Researcher in the Horn of Africa Security and Analysis Programme at the ISS in Addis Ababa. His research focuses on ethnicity and nationalism, memory studies, conflict and peace studies and federalism.

About ISS East Africa Reports
East Africa Reports provide the results of in-depth research on the latest human security challenges in the region. Some reports analyse broad conflict trends and threats to peace and security in specific East African countries. Others focus on challenges in the region such as terrorism, migration or intra-state violence.

About the ISS
The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) partners to build knowledge and skills that secure Africa’s future. The ISS is an African non-profit with offices in South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia and Senegal. Using its networks and influence, the ISS provides timely and credible policy research, practical training and technical assistance to governments and civil society.

Development partners
This report is funded by the Government of the Netherlands. The ISS is also grateful for support from the members of the ISS Partnership Forum: the Hanns Seidel Foundation, the European Union, the Open Society Foundations and the governments of Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.