

Research article

Challenges of nation building in Ethiopia: Focus on the authoritarian nature of political regimes' since 1930s

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**Abstract:** This study examines the adverse impact of Ethiopia's entrenched authoritarian political regimes on the nation-building process. Nation-building, shaped by historical, political, economic, and social factors has faced persistent challenges in Ethiopia across various regimes. The research employed a qualitative approach, using critical analysis of secondary data sources. The findings reveal that authoritarianism, mainly rooted in the political elite's efforts to centralize power, has consistently hindered Ethiopia's efforts to build a cohesive nation. These political regimes have often justified their dominance by invoking the need to combat regionalism and promote a unified national identity. However, the study's comparative analysis, drawing on cases such as Switzerland, highlights that successful nation-building hinges on principles like social justice, inclusiveness, individual freedom, and political settlement – principles largely

absent in Ethiopia's political landscape. The political elite's imposition of authority by force, alongside societal tendencies to either support the regime or disengage politically, has fueled recurrent rebellions, prolonged conflicts, and external vulnerabilities. These factors have significantly undermined Ethiopia's nation-building efforts. The enduring authoritarian culture remains a significant barrier to contemporary nation-building, underscoring the need for transformative governance and political culture.

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## 1. Background of the Study

Nation-building is a complex, contested process central to political science, sociology, and international relations. While some scholars highlight its role in promoting stability through shared culture and national identity (Huntington, 1993: 74; Gellner, 1983: 3), others caution that overemphasizing cultural homogeneity can marginalize minorities and

incite conflict (Sen, 2007: 32; Brubaker, 1996: 56). Sen and Brubaker underscore the need to balance national identity with minority rights, particularly in multi-ethnic states. Debates also extend to the role of external actors. Fukuyama (2004: 130) argues that foreign involvement can support nation-building, while Chabal and Daloz (1999: 17) warn it may lead to weak institutions.

In spite of ongoing debates, Anderson defines nation-building as “a process of creating an imagined political community” (2006: 6). For him, nations are considered “imagined communities” because they exist in the minds of their citizens, who may never meet or know each other but still share a sense of belonging to a larger, collective identity. Fundamentally, nation-building involves “the creation of a national consciousness and identity,” which is essential for fostering shared values among diverse groups within a state (Smith, 1991: 12). Nation-building, then, is not merely a top-down state project, but a collaborative effort involving civil society, political leaders, and institutions (Linz & Stepan, 1996: 15). It is an evolving, generational process requiring continuous reaffirmation of shared identity and values in response to societal change (Dobbins et al., 2003: 92; Gellner, 1983: 6-7).

Table 1: The differences between nation-building and state-building

| Item           | Nation-building                                                                              | State-building                                                                                              |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Leading actors | Political and community leaders, representing identity groups                                | Political representatives, elected by the population                                                        |
| Instrument     | Stories, myths, statues, heroes, cultural traditions                                         | Laws, state organizations                                                                                   |
| Process        | Building commitment and mutual understanding; adding and enriching                           | Offering solutions by setting rules, regulations; codifying                                                 |
| Result         | Mutual understanding between different groups, a shared sense of belonging; the ‘we’-feeling | Well-organized state institutions that deliver without discrimination security, justice and social services |
| Time frame     | Open-ended, constantly evolving                                                              | Results within time frame of political election cycle                                                       |
| Reference      | Self-referential; internal domestic process of selecting and forgetting                      | Reference found in international community of states, international laws, treaties, conventions             |

Source: Adopted from René Grotenhuis (2016)

While not the sole determinant, the nature of political regimes plays a crucial role in

shaping a country's nation-building success. Andreas Wimmer (2023:154) argues that inclusive leadership and broad national identification among diverse groups are essential for nation-building. Political regimes influence this process through decisions about inclusion, representation, and resource distribution, which can either foster unity or deepen divisions (Horowitz, 1985: 285). Wimmer (2023: 157) contrasts cohesive states like Switzerland with fragmented ones like Somalia, where clan-based governance and unequal resource allocation have impeded development.

Authoritarian regimes, in particular, undermine the institutional foundations necessary for nation-building. Defined by centralized control, suppression of dissent, and restricted freedoms (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), such regimes concentrate power in the hands of a few, eroding trust in institutions and fostering alienation (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Historical examples include the Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin, where centralized rule and repression stifled pluralism (Zaslavsky, 2018:74), and Syria, where successive authoritarian governments imposed an exclusive Arab nationalist identity, marginalizing groups like the Kurds and Alawites (Hinnebusch, 2004).

In Africa, authoritarianism has heavily influenced post-independence nation-building, contrasting sharply with Western democratic traditions (Sharp, in Lappin, 2010: 181). This pattern reflects the legacy of colonial rule, ethnic divisions, and institutional fragility (Ake, 1996). However, scholars also note the agency of African citizens in resisting authoritarianism and advocating democratic change (Branch & Mampilly, 2015), underscoring that outcomes are not uniform across the continent.<sup>1</sup>

Despite its long history of sovereignty and rich cultural heritage, Ethiopia's nation-building has been repeatedly undermined by political instability, ethnic divisions, and authoritarian rule (Clapham, 2017; Abbink, 2017; Markakis, 2011). Successive regimes – from the Imperial era to the current Prosperity Party – have maintained centralized power, suppressed dissent, and limited political representation, often relying on coercion, patronage, and rent-seeking to govern (Markakis, 2011; Asnake, 2013; Assefa, 2023; Lidetu, 2010; Andargachew, 1993). These authoritarian tendencies have weakened social

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<sup>1</sup> Authoritarianism is not universally harmful; in some post-conflict contexts, it can offer short-term stability and spur development (Hagmann & Péclard, 2010). Rwanda under Paul Kagame, for instance, has achieved notable economic growth and social cohesion through centralized, authoritarian governance (Booth & Golooba-Mutebi, 2012). However, such cases highlight the complex trade-offs between stability, development, and democratic principles.

cohesion, fueled recurring crises, and impeded development. This article explores how Ethiopia's authoritarian political trajectory has negatively affected its nation-building efforts.

### 1.1. Research gaps

Nation-building – the process of fostering shared national identity and cohesion – is widely seen as essential for political stability and development (Huntington, 1993; Gellner, 1983). In multi-ethnic states like Switzerland, inclusive nation-building has helped reconcile historical divisions and promote unity and development (Anderson, 2006). In contrast, Ethiopia's efforts have been repeatedly undermined, partly, by authoritarian regimes that centralize power and suppress pluralistic representation (Assefa, 2023; Asnake et al., 2021). Scholars describe Ethiopia's political history as one marked by recurrent conflict and deep societal fractures (Markakis, 2011; Merera, 2003).

Much of this instability stems from contested narratives about the formation of the modern Ethiopian state. Merera (2003) traces these tensions to competing ethnic nationalisms, while Levine (1968) attributes them to entrenched hierarchical social structures. Puluha (2004) highlights patrimonialism as a key obstacle to nation-building, and Markakis (2011) underscores the spatial divides between the political center and marginalized peripheries. While these perspectives reveal the depth of Ethiopia's fragmentation, there remains limited analysis of how authoritarian governance has structurally undermined nation-building.

This article examines Ethiopia as a critical case study of how authoritarian regimes have shaped – and consistently undermined – its nation-building trajectory. Spanning from the Haile Selassie<sup>2</sup> era to the current Prosperity Party, it analyzes how successive regimes, despite ideological differences, have prioritized centralized power, suppressed pluralism, and engaged in rent-seeking practices, rather than fostering inclusive governance and national cohesion. These recurring patterns have fractured political

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars such as Habtamu (2017), Markakis (2011), and Merera (2003) argue that Haile Selassie's 1930 coronation marked a key moment in Ethiopia's nation-building, as earlier efforts lacked cohesion despite events like the 1896 Adwa victory. Habtamu (2017:144) describes the early state as "a bond without blood and soul," while Markakis (2011:110) highlights the difficulty of integrating southern territories. Ras Teferi's exposure to European ideas of the nation-state during his travels influenced his later centralizing policies (Merera, 2003:95).

elites and weakened national unity. The central question guiding this analysis is: How have authoritarian regimes since 1930 structurally impeded Ethiopia's nation-building?

By addressing this question, the article makes a timely contribution to both academic and policy debates. It fills a critical gap in the literature by offering theoretical insights and a historical account relevant to multi-ethnic states. The study highlights the dangers of centralized, exclusionary governance and draws lessons for promoting inclusive nation-building through decentralization, power-sharing, and conflict prevention. Beyond Ethiopia, the findings have comparative relevance for other diverse societies grappling with authoritarian rule. By integrating political science, history, and sociology, the paper adopts an interdisciplinary lens useful to students, educators, policymakers, and practitioners.

The article is structured as follows: Section one introduces the concept of nation-building and explores how authoritarianism undermines this process, drawing on comparative examples. Section two outlines the conceptual framework and methodology. Section three presents the results and discussion, analyzing the impact of authoritarianism under Haile Selassie, the Derg, the EPRDF, and the Prosperity Party. The final section offers concluding reflections on the findings and their broader implications.

## **1.2. Conceptual framework of the study**

Political science research has extensively explored authoritarianism and its impact on nation-building. Authoritarian regimes are broadly defined as non-democratic systems characterized by concentrated power, limited political pluralism, restricted civil liberties, and exclusion of challengers (Linz, 2000; Brooker, 2011; Chebankova & Dutkiewicz, 2021). Linz (2000) emphasizes that such regimes suppress political mobilization and pluralism, consolidating authority in a single leader or elite group. Despite shared traits, authoritarian regimes vary significantly. Geddes (1999) categorizes them into personalist monarchies, totalitarian, military, single-party, and hybrid types, each posing distinct nation-building challenges.

Personalist monarchies feature inherited rule by royal elites with control over the military and political institutions (Brooker, 2011). Totalitarian regimes, by contrast, use

extreme repression and terror to maintain control (Kendall, 2019). Military dictatorships involve rule by a collective officer corps (Geddes, in Kendall, 2019), while hybrid regimes – now common in the developing world – combine democratic and authoritarian elements, often eroding democratic norms through elected incumbents (Geddes, 2018; Kendall, 2019).

Tables 2: Model of Authoritarian Regimes and their impact on nation-building

| Type         | Defining Features                                                                             | Control Mechanisms                                                                                                                      | Nation-Building Impact                                                                                                                               |
|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Monarchy     | Hereditary rule, personalist power                                                            | Cult of personality, suppression of dissent, patronage networks, reliance on loyalty rather than competence                             | Undermines institutional development; fosters instability upon leader's departure; neglects equitable representation                                 |
| Military     | Post-coup military rule                                                                       | Use of force, suspension of constitutions, rule by decree, and direct control over key state institutions                               | Limits political pluralism, prioritizes regime's security over development, and often fails to address power sharing, ethnic and regional grievances |
| Totalitarian | Single-party ideological dominance                                                            | Monopoly over political competition, propaganda, coercion of opposition, control of elections, integration of party and state apparatus | Stifles diversity of ideas; imposes ideological conformity; and creates resistance from marginalized groups                                          |
| Hybrid       | The mix of democratic and authoritarian elements; elections exist but are heavily manipulated | Electoral manipulation, media censorship, judicial interference, selective repression, and co-opting opposition groups                  | Erodes trust in democratic institutions; creates political stagnation and limited civic engagement                                                   |

Sources: Linz (2000), Geddes (1999), Levitsky & Way (2010).

The regime of Emperor Haile Selassie epitomized personalist monarchy, with political power concentrated solely in the emperor's hands (Semahegn, 2014; Teshale, 1995; Andargachew, 1993). As Görden (2024: 40) observes, such centralization often sidelines

large segments of the population from political life. Though Haile Selassie promoted a unified national identity, his regime failed to incorporate Ethiopia's cultural and political diversity, reinforcing the argument that monarchies tend to hinder the development of inclusive national consciousness. Symbolic authority frequently eclipsed democratic processes, limiting institutional reform and pluralism (Bahru, 2015: 211; Markakis, 2011; Merera, 2003).

The Derg military regime that followed further entrenched authoritarianism, prioritizing regime survival over civic engagement. Reflecting Geddes' (1999: 120) typology of military dictatorships, the Derg suppressed civil society and brutally eliminated opposition, most infamously through the Red Terror (Clapham, 2017; Merera, 2003). This repression severely restricted public participation and undermined efforts to forge a cohesive national identity. In more recent decades, the EPRDF and its successor, the Prosperity Party, represent hybrid regimes blending formal democratic processes with entrenched authoritarian practices (Assefa, 2023; Lidetu, 2020; Abink, 2017). Despite holding elections, these regimes have relied on manipulation, censorship, and repression to maintain control (Semahegn, 2014). While the Prosperity Party introduced limited reforms, core authoritarian dynamics – such as constrained political competition and media control – persist, continuing to impede inclusive nation-building.

## 2. Methods and Materials

This article investigates the detrimental impact of authoritarian regimes on Ethiopia's nation-building process through a qualitative research approach<sup>3</sup>, structured around three key pillars: (1) research design, (2) data collection, and (3) data analysis and interpretation. The research design combines descriptive and explanatory approaches. Descriptive research is used to present historical evidence, while the explanatory approach contextualizes these findings to establish causal links between authoritarian governance and national cohesion challenges. This dual approach facilitates the identification of recurring themes and systemic issues in Ethiopia's political history. Secondary data sources were utilized, with materials drawn from published and

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<sup>3</sup> According to Hennink et al. (2020), Qualitative methodology makes the most sense for two main reasons. First, the study questions and objectives demand a qualitative investigation and analysis of a small number of instances, both of which call for in-depth and nuanced qualitative responses. Second, qualitative analysis procedures are required because of the nature of the qualitative data (P: 10).

unpublished documents, including books, articles, conference papers, reports, and media. These sources were purposefully selected and analyzed to explore the adverse effects of authoritarian regimes on Ethiopia's nation-building, with a focus on ideas regarding authoritarian features and their consequences for national unity.

The data analysis method integrates historical and critical analysis to examine how authoritarian regimes from Haile Selassie to the Prosperity Party era have structurally impeded nation-building. The historical method helps trace Ethiopia's political trajectory, identify recurring themes (such as power centralization and dissent suppression), and contextualize findings within historical, social, and political frameworks (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Critical analysis, on the other hand, critiques the power structures and ideologies that perpetuated systemic fractures and suppressed opposition. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of how the ideologies of each regime (Haile Selassie's modernization rhetoric, the Derg's socialist revolution, and the EPRDF's ethnic federalism) masked authoritarian practices and deepened ethnic and political divisions. By combining these methods, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of how authoritarianism in Ethiopia has hindered nation-building, providing valuable insights for both academic discourse and policymaking.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

#### **3.1. Authoritarianism in Haile Selassie's Ethiopia: Implications for nation-building**

Emperor Haile Selassie ascended to the throne in November 1930 with a clear vision of centralizing power and modernizing Ethiopia (Clapham, 2017; Addis Hiwet, 1975). His regime framed these reforms as necessary remedies for the country's perceived backwardness, which it attributed to centuries of political fragmentation, regionalism, and internal conflict (Asnake et al., 2021: 47). By blaming traditional forces – embodied in powerful regional nobles and warlords – for Ethiopia's lack of social peace and economic progress, Haile Selassie justified dismantling traditional power structures in favour of a centralized imperial state.<sup>4</sup>

This strategy drew heavily from European modernization theory, which posited that strong, centralized governments were prerequisites for ending regional fragmentation

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<sup>4</sup> Mesay Kebede. (August, 2022). *Challenges and prospects of modernization in Ethiopia* [Seminar]. Held with Bahir Dar University, PSIS PhD, students, 5th Cohort.

and achieving progress (Asnake, 2013; Merera, 2003; Addis Hiwot, 1975). According to this theory, European countries modernized by centralizing state power, thereby overcoming the fragmented and decentralized system of feudalism (Merera, 2003:94). Haile Selassie's regime applied this logic to Ethiopia, arguing that the country's historical weakness stemmed from the dominance of regional forces and the absence of a strong central authority (Addis Hiwet 1975: 7). However, this narrative overlooked Ethiopia's unique historical context.<sup>5</sup> While European centralization emerged from internal socio-economic shifts, Haile Selassie's policies were top-down impositions designed to concentrate authority in his office (Habtamu, 2017:147). Moreover, the regime's rhetoric downplayed external factors, such as global trade disparities and political economy, which also contributed to Ethiopia's challenges.<sup>6</sup>

To consolidate his power, Haile Selassie systematically reduced the influence of traditional counterforces, particularly regional nobles<sup>7</sup> and the Church.<sup>8</sup> The emperor sought to position himself as the sole inspirer, planner, and executor of Ethiopia's modernization (Merera, 2003:69). He replaced the ancient practice of power regionalization with a modern bureaucratic state, ensuring that offices were always occupied but officials were regularly rotated to prevent the emergence of rival power bases (Teshale, 1995: 120). Land was used as a tool to reward loyal associates and compensate the nobility for their political losses.<sup>9</sup> However, as the state assumed the military and administrative roles traditionally held by the nobility, these land grants gradually transformed the nobility into a parasitic class. The strengthening of the military was particularly crucial in asserting the emperor's dominance over traditional competitors (Bahru, 2015:209; Andargachew, 1993: 58).

As John Markakis observed, Haile Selassie's centralized power structure reduced even the highest officials to a state of subservience:

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Mesay Kebede, (personal communication, September 13, 2022, unreferenced).

<sup>7</sup> As Teshale (1995) noted, regional forces are considered a threat to the central government, as many age-old conflicts throughout Ethiopia's political history have emerged between the Crown and regional nobility.

<sup>8</sup> According to Messay (2022), despite the suspension of the Alexandrian link has been praised as an important achievement of Haile Selassie. Yet, since the nomination of Ethiopian Abunas could no longer occur without his approval, the real fallout of the reform is that the Ethiopian Church came "more under imperial control."

<sup>9</sup> Mesay Kebede, (personal communication, September 13, 2022, unreferenced).

Both losers and gainers who come in contact with Haile Selassie – the highest officials and dignitaries of the realm not excluded – comport themselves like children confronted by a stern paterfamilias and treated accordingly. All proposals, recommendations, suggestions, and advice are put to him as humble requests; and explicit or direct disagreement is unthinkable for those who value their position (cited in Teshale, 1995:120).

The diminishing of power of regional nobilities and the establishment of a modern bureaucracy also allowed Haile Selassie to control the state apparatus through patrimonialism (Clapham, 1969:47). In this system, the emperor represented the highest authority, and an individual's power was determined by their proximity to him. Losing the emperor's favour meant the end of one's position, as power flowed solely from the emperor and not from the people (Teshale, 1995: 122). This excessive concentration of power bred complete subservience among officials, who avoided making independent decisions and instead deferred to the emperor. Consequently, officials became irrelevant in building a power base within the society they ruled, further entrenching the emperor's dominance (Andargachew, 1993: 17).

Haile Selassie's commitment to centralizing absolute power crystallized in 1931 with Ethiopia's first written constitution. This document legally codified the emperor's supremacy, declaring him "sacred" and "indisputable" in authority. Article 2 explicitly vested ownership of the land, law, and people in the emperor, reducing citizens to subjects obligated to obey his decrees.<sup>10</sup> The constitution also centralized power, granting Haile Selassie exclusive control over administrative, legislative, and judicial functions (Andargachew, 1993: 16). For instance, the *Chilot* – the imperial court – symbolized his unchecked judicial power. As Reden notes, Haile Selassie, "considered the ultimate source of justice," could override formal laws to rule based on personal notions of fairness, effectively rendering him above the law (cited in Teshale, 1995: 126).

This legal framework was reinforced by Haile Selassie's cultivation of a quasi-divine image. This was manifested as the emperor increasingly portrayed himself as *Seyume Egzeabeher* ("the anointed of God"), a ruler endowed with supernatural legitimacy (Bahru, 2015:209). Bahru further argued that the state-society relationship facilitated

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<sup>10</sup> See article 11 of the 1931 constitution.

Haile Selassie's ambition to consolidate absolute rule, noting the public's unrealistic admiration, exemplified by the notion of *Tsehayu Negus*. For instance, according to Teshale, "all one needed to do to stop anyone from alleged wrongdoing was to say *ba Haile-Selassie amlak kum* (in the name of Haile Selassie's God, stop!). If one dared to violate this veto against movements, it was tantamount to violating the divine rights of the king and the authority of the emperor". Such rhetoric transformed loyalty to the emperor into a moral and religious obligation (1995: 127).

Another manifestation of Haile Selassie's personalist authoritarianism was the formulation of socio-economic and cultural policies aimed at creating a centralized nation-state (Semahegn, 2014: 189). The Revised Constitution of 1955 institutionalized the policy of "one culture, one language, one people, one nation," promoting Amharic and Orthodox Christianity as the state's sole official language and religion (Levine, 1974:148-152). This policy did not include all Ethiopia's linguistic and religious diversity, as other languages and faiths were de-emphasized (Asnake et al., 2021). According to Markakis, Haile Selassie viewed the imperial crown as a unifying symbol capable of transcending Ethiopia's ethno-cultural and religious divisions (cited in Habtamu, 2017: 156).

Moreover, Emperor Haile Selassie's centralization agenda deeply shaped his economic and political strategies, particularly in land allocation, taxation, and governance. In the southern provinces, land from imperial estates was granted to loyalists to reinforce the regime's control (Bahru, 2015: 199). However, this practice marginalized local communities, limiting their access to land and fueling resentment (Mesay, 2022<sup>11</sup>; Merera, 2020). Coupled with oppressive taxation – especially in Bale, Gedeo, and Gojjam – these policies triggered widespread discontent and, in some cases, violent resistance (Bahru, 2015: 199).

Haile Selassie's personalist rule and centralized governance significantly hindered nation-building by deepening regional, ethnic, and religious divisions. His policies, while aimed at unification, often alienated regional elites and suppressed local autonomy (Bahru, 2015; Teshale, 1995). For example, Tigrayan elites, feeling politically marginalized after the fall of Emperor Yohannes IV, grew increasingly hostile toward the central

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<sup>11</sup> Mesay Kebede, (personal communication, September 13, 2022, unreferenced).

government. This culminated in the *Kedamay Woyane* rebellion – an armed uprising that severely strained state-society relations and contributed to the fragmentation of national identity (Heinze, 2000). Such episodes polarized collective memory and eroded state legitimacy, framing the state as an oppressor in the eyes of many (Smith, 2007: 34).

Furthermore, the regime's efforts to promote a singular Ethiopian identity through socio-cultural policies – such as promoting Amharic and Orthodox Christianity as national standards – also backfired (Semahegn, 2014: 93). These efforts, rather than fostering unity, triggered resistance from various ethnic groups who felt excluded from the national narrative. As Semahegn (2014) argues, the imperial vision of nationalism failed to accommodate Ethiopia's cultural diversity. Consequently, politically active elites from marginalized regions – Tigray, Eritrea, Oromia, and Somali – began mobilizing along ethnic and linguistic lines, framing the state as an oppressive force (Merera, 2003; Teshale, 1995).

This fragmentation of identity weakened the foundation for nation-building, fostering competing loyalties and obstructing efforts to forge a shared national project. The rise of Marxist-Leninist ideology in the 1960s further compounded these challenges. As revolutionary groups emerged, civil war and political fragmentation intensified, solidifying a culture of violent resistance that continues to shape Ethiopia's political landscape today (Lidetu, 2010; Andargachew, 1993). This legacy of authoritarianism, identity-based mobilization, and ideological polarization has left a lasting impact on the country's efforts to build an inclusive and cohesive national identity.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.2. The Derg's Authoritarianism and its obstacles to Ethiopia's nation-building

The late 1960s marked the emergence of Marxism-Leninism as the dominant ideology among Ethiopian students, offering a framework for addressing societal ills and inspiring progressive movements (Bahru, 2003, cited in Asnake, 2013). This Marxist-informed student movement, alongside other societal sectors, played a pivotal role in overthrowing Ethiopia's imperial regime in 1974. Upon the removal of the ancient

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<sup>12</sup> Mesay Kebede. (August, 2022). *Challenges and prospects of modernization in Ethiopia* [Seminar]. Held with Bahir Dar University, PSIS PhD, students, 5th Cohort.

imperial regime, two contrasting emotions emerged. While the people – especially the youth – welcomed the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie with joy, the rise of the Derg as his successor came as a shock, particularly among the same youth who had initially supported the revolution (Merera, 2015: 35). This duality of hope and disillusionment set the stage for the Derg's transformation into a militaristic authoritarian regime.

The Derg was established in 1974 with the primary aim of detaining officials from the ancient regime, who were accused of obstructing the work of Endalkachew's new cabinet, and bringing them to justice alongside their imprisoned colleagues (Messay, 2023: 97). Another key objective was to coordinate the armed forces and prevent internal bloodshed (Andargachew, 1993:65). In line with these goals, the Derg adopted a policy statement titled '*Ēthiopia Tikdem*' (Ethiopia first) on July 10, 1974. This document, which the Derg referred to as its motto, slogan, and ideology, outlined thirteen sections addressing the pressing issues of the time.<sup>13</sup> Despite its initial commitment to limited responsibilities and allegiance<sup>14</sup> to the Crown, the Derg soon began to consolidate power in ways that contradicted its stated principles (Markakis, 1979: 7).

By September 1974, the Derg had formally overthrown Emperor Haile Selassie's government and declared itself the collective head of state (Asnake et al., 2021:59; Andargachew, 1993:65). This marked the beginning of its transformation into a militaristic authoritarian regime. The Derg proclaimed itself a "provisional military government," a move that effectively excluded popular participation in decision-making processes (Markakis, 1979: 10). Shortly after its establishment, the regime banned strikes and demonstrations as contrary to its goal of achieving change without bloodshed. It imposed harsh measures, including military trials without the right of appeal, against those who defied its provisions.<sup>15</sup> However, on a propaganda level, the Derg still presented itself as a transitional body that would transfer power to a people's government once a new constitution was adopted. It simultaneously branded its opponents as "remnants of the ancient regime" and called on the public to identify and

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<sup>13</sup> Examples of this are: allegiance to the King and Crown, cabinet reform, the trial of the corrupt and inept officials, speedy implementation of the draft constitution, close collaboration with the cabinet, the continuation of humanitarian aid to the drought-affected people, foreign aid from friendly countries in general and expansion of tourism (Andargachew T. 1993:66).

<sup>14</sup> According to Andargachew (1993), 'Ethiopia First' to exercise increasingly significant executive and legislative functions to the detriment of the powers of the cabinet, the King and parliament – a move which has aptly been described as the 'creeping coup'.

<sup>15</sup> Article 9 of Proclamation 1, and Article 8 of Proclamation 1, 1974.

hand over those who opposed its rule.<sup>16</sup> This dual approach – claiming to act in the people's interest while suppressing dissent – revealed the regime's authoritarian tendencies.

The Derg's consolidation of power was marked by a series of draconian laws and brutal tactics aimed at quelling opposition. On November 16, 1974, the regime issued four stringent laws to suppress dissent, both from external groups and within its own ranks.<sup>17</sup> These laws were later used to justify the summary execution of over sixty detainees, many of whom had been associated with the imperial regime (Messay, 2023: 96). Among those executed was Lt. Gen. Aman Andom, the Derg's chairman, who was killed without trial. The regime justified these executions as a 'political decision' (Andargachew, 1993: 81), likely aimed at appeasing the civilian left, the only vocal political group at the time, by eliminating perceived threats (Messay, 2023: 97). This marked a turning point in the Derg's trajectory, as it signaled the regime's willingness to use extreme violence to maintain control.

The Derg's authoritarian trajectory was further cemented by internal power struggles, most notably Mengistu Haile Mariam's 1977 coup that eliminated key rivals, including General Teferi Benti, and marked the beginning of Mengistu's unchallenged rule (Messay, 2023: 98). As chair of the Commission for Organizing the Party of the Working People of Ethiopia (COPWE), Mengistu centralized decision-making and monopolized political authority (Markakis, 1981: 25). This consolidation of power under a militarized framework eliminated collective governance, institutionalized fear, and entrenched authoritarian control.

The regime's repression extended beyond internal purges to the systematic eradication of political opposition. Framing dissenters as "anti-revolutionary," the Derg launched the Red Terror in 1977 – a brutal campaign targeting groups like the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), originally allies in overthrowing the monarchy (Semahegn, 2014: 119; Redie, 2013; Tronvoll & Hagmann, 2012). Thousands were subjected to arbitrary arrests, torture, and executions, exemplified by Mengistu's notorious rallying

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<sup>16</sup> 'An Explanation by the Government', Addis Zemen, no. 389, 24 April 1974.

<sup>17</sup> *The first* establishing a military court with a mandate to try any offences; the *second* describing new offences in addition to those provided for in the existing Penal Code of Ethiopia; the *third* providing for special procedures for the military court; and the *fourth* declaring an emergency law authorizing the Minister of the Interior to conduct search and seizure without warrant. (1993:77).

cry: “Death to the counter-revolutionaries”. This campaign not only eliminated organized opposition but also instilled a legacy of trauma and political fear.

While some ethnic nationalist groups initially welcomed the Derg’s reforms – especially land redistribution – they quickly turned against the regime due to its failure to address the ‘national question’ (Asnake et al., 2021; Semhaegn, 2014). Rather than alleviating ethnic grievances, the regime’s centralist policies were perceived as a continuation of imperial oppression (Asnake et al., 2021). This perception fueled the mobilization of ethno-nationalist insurgencies, notably the TPLF, EPLF, and OLF, which challenged the regime’s legitimacy (Merera, 2003; Lidetu, 2010). Most importantly, what aggravated these conflicts was the Derg’s rigid response to Ethiopia’s ethnic diversity. Rather than engaging with grievances, the regime imposed a top-down socialist framework that marginalized ethnic identities and exacerbated social cleavages (Markakis, 1989: 122). Its reliance on military force over dialogue entrenched cycles of conflict, contributing to the emergence and persistence of armed insurgencies. These dynamics severely compromised the state’s capacity to build a unified and inclusive national identity.

The consequences of these policies were catastrophic for Ethiopia’s nation-building efforts. Prolonged instability, widespread rebellion, and full-scale war resulted in significant loss of life, destruction of resources, and erosion of social cohesion (Lidetu, 2010; Merera, 2003). Equally important, the Derg’s inability to manage ethnic and regional conflicts not only weakened its legitimacy but also sowed the seeds for its collapse in 1991. This downfall marked a transformative moment in Ethiopia’s political history, paving the way for a federal system designed to address longstanding ethnic grievances. However, the legacy of the Derg’s militaristic-authoritarian rule – characterized by violence, repression, and mismanagement of diversity – left deep scars on Ethiopia’s nation-building project.

### **3.3.EPRDF's Federal Authoritarianism and Ethiopia's nation-building challenges**

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which assumed power in 1991 following the collapse of the Derg, initiated a radical federal restructuring aimed at addressing the failures of previous regimes in managing Ethiopia’s ethnic diversity (Asnake, 2013: 3). By institutionalizing ethnicity as the primary basis for political representation and state organization, the EPRDF sought to redress perceived historical

injustices and establish a new social contract among the country's ethnic groups (Merera, 2020; Tronvoll & Vaughan, 2003). Ethnic identity thus became central to accessing political, economic, and social power, reinforcing the role of ethnic elites in the new federal arrangement (Asnake et al., 2021; Semahegn, 2014). Despite this structural transformation, the EPRDF retained authoritarian governance practices. From the outset of the transitional period (1991–1995), the political process was tightly controlled by the victorious coalition, particularly the TPLF-led core of the EPRDF, which marginalized alternative political actors and excluded significant groups – such as the Amhara – from key decisions,<sup>18</sup> including the delineation of federal regions and the drafting of the 1995 constitution (Abbink, 2017: 2; Asefa, 2016: 127). State institutions were restructured to reflect the EPRDF's dominance, with former TPLF fighters occupying key positions in the military and bureaucracy.<sup>19</sup>

This authoritarian continuity was rooted in the EPRDF's ideological orientation. Drawing on Marxist-Leninist principles, particularly democratic centralism, the party centralized authority while suppressing dissent (Semahegn, 2014: 127; Lidetu, 2010). Internal debate was discouraged, and executive decisions were rarely contested, reinforcing the notion of the party as an infallible vanguard. This ideological rigidity facilitated the consolidation of power and entrenched authoritarian rule under the guise of federalism (Abbink, 2017; Semahegn, 2014).

In addition to its ideological underpinnings, the EPRDF strategically utilized federal restructuring to reinforce authoritarian rule through a 'divide and rule' strategy (Cochrane & Bahru, 2019; Semahegn, 2014). This strategy involved exploiting ethnic divisions to maintain power, often at the expense of shared national values. For example, when the EPRDF faced a significant challenge to its power during the 2005 elections – losing Addis Ababa to the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) – it sought to mobilize the Oromo against the Amhara, whom it accused of supporting the CUD in the capital (Gebru Asrat, 2014). Such tactics not only deepened ethnic animosities but also

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<sup>18</sup> For example, according to Lidetu, the Amhara region was not represented in the transition process, UMD Media. (2022, January 5). *Conversation with Lidetu Ayalew on call for peace: What, why, who, and how?* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhwARI41rHA&list=PPSV>.

<sup>19</sup> In *Yetizta Feleg*, Assefa Chebo notes that ethnic elites—particularly from the TPLF and OLF—perceived Ethiopia's pre-1991 defense forces as instruments of a centrist nation-building agenda that suppressed the political autonomy of ethnic groups and treated them as adversaries.

reinforced the regime's grip on power by framing opposition groups as threats to the country's national security (Semehagn, 2014; Gebru, 2014).

EPRDF's authoritarianism<sup>20</sup> was also institutionalized through oppressive legal and administrative measures. The regime established an atmosphere of intolerance within the legal system, mass media, civil society, and public life, perpetuating practices such as torture and arbitrary arrests (Abbink, 2017: 3). To consolidate its control, the EPRDF introduced a series of restrictive laws, including the Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation (No. 590, 2008), the Charities and Societies Proclamation (No. 652, 2009), the Anti-Terrorism Law (No. 652, 2009), and the Computer Crime Proclamation (2016). These laws were often used to suppress opposition voices and political activities, which were routinely labeled as subversive (Abbink, 2017: 3-4). As a result, the regime employed excessive and intimidating force against perceived opponents or suspects, further entrenching its authoritarian rule.

The government justified these measures as necessary to limit foreign interference in national politics.<sup>21</sup> Opposition parties and activists were frequently portrayed as 'messengers of foreign powers' or 'neo-liberal agents,' a narrative that served to delegitimize and exclude them from the political arena (Ababu, 2012: 43). For instance, the Charities and Societies Proclamation restricted the activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) by prohibiting them from engaging in activities deemed 'political' if more than 10% of their funding came from foreign sources. This effectively silenced many civil society organizations that advocated for human rights and democratic reforms (Abbink, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2010<sup>22</sup>). Similarly, the Anti-Terrorism Law was used to criminalize dissent, with journalists, activists, and opposition members often charged under its broad and ambiguous provisions (Amnesty International, 2012).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Abbink (2017) argues that the EPRDF exploited its post-9/11 alliance with the U.S. to entrench authoritarian rule. By aligning with U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the Horn of Africa, the regime secured external support while using anti-terror rhetoric to suppress dissent and justify repressive laws, notably the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation.

<sup>21</sup> Issues of in Building Democratic System(2005), prepared by FDRE, Ministry of Communication Affairs

<sup>22</sup> Rights Watch. (2010). *World report 2010: Ethiopia*. Retrieved February 23, 2025, from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2010/country-chapters/ethiopia>

<sup>23</sup> Amnesty International. (2012). Ethiopia must improve its human rights record to be a credible candidate for election to the Human Rights Council. Retrieved February 23, 2025, from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/012/2012/en/>.

Ethiopia's nation-building under the TPLF-led EPRDF regime faced profound obstacles rooted in its authoritarian political practices and manipulation of socio-cultural dynamics. A key challenge was the regime's systematic narrowing of the political space. Opposition actors and dissenting voices were routinely subjected to imprisonment, intimidation, and violence, while intra-party discourse was limited to the executive, with minimal room for substantive debate (Ababu, 2012; Lidetu, 2010). Legal institutions and state media were instrumentalized to reinforce regime dominance, stifling political pluralism and weakening the institutional foundations necessary for inclusive nation-building (Abbink, 2017; Asnake, 2013). The regime further eroded social cohesion by instrumentalizing ethnic identities to entrench its authority. Through patronage networks and the elevation of loyal ethnic elites, the EPRDF fostered inter-ethnic mistrust, particularly targeting advocates of pan-Ethiopian unity, which it perceived as a threat (Semehagn, 2014). This approach deepened divisions and obstructed the formation of a shared national identity.

Moreover, the EPRDF's interference in religious and cultural affairs exacerbated societal fragmentation. By fueling inter-religious tensions and manipulating cultural narratives, the regime diverted attention from its authoritarianism while further weakening social solidarity (Wale, 2013: 118; Haustein, 2023: 20). Collectively, these strategies entrenched a legacy of division, undermining the prospects for a cohesive and inclusive Ethiopian nation-state.

### 3.4. Authoritarianism since 2018 and its impact on Ethiopia's nation-building

Ethiopia's 2018 political transition, following prolonged protests and the fall of the EPRDF, initially raised hopes for democratization under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (Assefa, 2023: 8; Lidetu, 2020: 14). Early reforms aligned with public expectations, but optimism quickly gave way to widespread crises – including ethnic conflicts, political assassinations, and civil war (Messay, 2023<sup>24</sup>; Lidetu, 2020). Scholars and political elites

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<sup>24</sup> Mesay Kebede. (August, 2022). *Challenges and prospects of modernization in Ethiopia* [Seminar]. Held with Bahir Dar University, PSIS PhD, students, 5th Cohort.

remain divided on whether post-2018 developments signify democratic reform or authoritarian continuity. Cochrane and Asnake (2019) describe the transition as marked by fluidity, where the collapse of the old order without the consolidation of a new one has fostered instability. Daniel (2023)<sup>25</sup> attributes the current turmoil to the political opening and the disruptive influence of social media.

Conversely, others argue the transition has deepened authoritarian rule. Lidetu (2020) contends Abiy's administration, rooted in EPRDF authoritarianism, has pursued centralization rather than democratization – evidenced by election postponements, emergency decrees, repression of dissent, and widespread human rights abuses (Assefa, 2023: 295). The 2020 merger into the Prosperity Party, excluding the TPLF, is viewed as a strategic move to neutralize rival forces, provoking backlash from ethno-nationalist groups (Assefa, 2023: 301). These authoritarian tendencies have severely impeded nation-building. As Merera (2020) notes, the absence of an inclusive political settlement has fueled instability, social fragmentation, and foreign interference. The TPLF–federal government war and ongoing regional violence have eroded national consensus, undermining Ethiopia's prospects for unity and sustainable development (Lidetu, 2024<sup>26</sup>; Mesay, 2023<sup>27</sup>).

#### 4. Conclusion

The persistence of authoritarian political culture in Ethiopia has consistently undermined nation-building across regimes. Scholars such as Lidetu (2010), Poluha (2004), and Vaughan and Tronvoll (2003) note that hierarchical socio-cultural practices – often reflected in traditional ceremonies – have reinforced authoritarianism by valorizing obedience and central authority. Yet, the most enduring characteristic of Ethiopia's political system remains, mainly, the ruling elite's drive to consolidate power, a pattern rooted in the modern state's formation.

Haile Selassie's centralizing modernization policies politicized ethnicity and destabilized integration efforts (Asnake et al., 2021). The Derg's military authoritarianism exacerbated repression and division, while the EPRDF and its successor, the Prosperity

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<sup>25</sup> (Daniel Kibret, personal communication, April 8, 2024, unreferenced)

<sup>26</sup> (Lidetu Ayalew interview on Mengizem media, April 14, 2024; unreferenced)

<sup>27</sup> (Mestawet Reeyot Alemu personal communication with Prof. Messay Kebede, December 7, 2023; unreferenced).

Party, continued the legacy through electoral manipulation, suppression of dissent, and ethnic federalism as a control mechanism. This deepened ethnic polarization and fragmented national identity. Across all regimes, power centralization has trumped inclusive governance, obstructing the formation of a unified national community. Authoritarianism has also shaped Ethiopia's economic trajectory. Haile Selassie's feudal land system entrenched rural poverty and regional inequality (Markakis, 2011; Clapham, 1969). The Derg's nationalization policies curbed private growth and fostered corruption (Merera, 2020; Andargachew, 1993). Though the EPRDF pursued state-led growth, these efforts were undermined by inefficiency, conflict-related economic shocks, and persistent unemployment.

Socially, the authoritarian disregard for state-society relations has intensified national crises. Historical efforts to conceal or downplay disasters – from famine under Haile Selassie and the Derg to more recent repression – have worsened vulnerabilities (Bahru, 2015). Ethnic federalism, implemented in 1991 to manage diversity, instead fueled division and displacement (Cochrane & Asnake, 2019). Since 2018, the government's failure to protect citizens' rights and ensure stability has deepened humanitarian crises. In regions like Amhara, Tigray, and Oromia, millions face food insecurity and displacement, with women and children particularly affected.<sup>28</sup> These overlapping crises expose the fragility of Ethiopia's nation-building project and underscore the urgent need for inclusive, democratic governance.

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<sup>28</sup> According to the World Food Program recently published report, 20.1 million people in Ethiopia are in need of food assistance. <https://www.wfp.org/countries/ethiopia>. Retried on 22/06/2024.

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