

The Roles of Political Parties and Their Challenges in Political Transition: The Case of Ethiopia

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Abstract

The political parties of any country are expected to remain committed to the political and economic improvement of their country. As one of the main intermediaries between the state and citizens, one would therefore expect political parties to have a key role in achieving a democratic and peaceful transition. This article focuses on the contribution, actual or potential, of political parties to political transitions. The objective of this study is to examine the roles of political parties in ongoing reform efforts and the challenges they face in Ethiopia. The paper reports mainly on the findings of semi-structured interviews with local and national politicians carried out during 2020 as well as an analysis of political parties' programs. This study indicates that political parties are the main agents of political representation, and play a crucial role in articulating and aggregating citizens' demands in democracies. As such, this study argues that political parties have a major role to play in political transitions though, in Ethiopia, they have generally not lived up to expectations. The findings reveal that the very nature of transition and the prevailing character of political parties in Ethiopia have inhibited that role. The study concludes that the unpredictability of post-reform trends, a weak political culture, and inefficiency of political parties, which are in turn related to the nature of party systems, prompted political instability which in turn hampered the anticipated political transition in Ethiopia.

Keywords: *Political Party, Political Reform, Political Transition*

Introduction

It is broadly held that political parties are a necessary part of political systems. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) has provided for a representative federal system with a parliamentary democratic government. Yet, Ethiopia remains a one-party dominant system for about three decades of its post-federal arrangement. Evidence indicates that the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) success is largely due to the disorganization and fragmentation of opposition political parties. Recently, after reform, the ruling party has expressed its commitment to a multi-party system and emphasized the need for dealing with opposition political parties, in order to promote dialogue and constructive agreement for a peaceful transition. After the reform, the ruling party began to initiate reforms that involved freeing political prisoners and opening talks with opposition political parties.

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However, it remains highly uncertain how this political change will be translated into a more robust dialogue between political parties. This study attempts to examine the place and the role of the political parties in the Ethiopian transition. It tries also to look at some of the major obstacles to constructive political competition facing the Ethiopian federal system. The broad questions that this study wrestles with are; why are political parties important? What do political parties play in fostering or sustaining democratic political transition? What constraints do political parties in Ethiopia face?

This study relies on key informant interviews and a review of literature and political parties programs. The interviews with key informants are used to gain a general understanding of the current affairs in the country. Unstructured interviews were conducted with leaders of seven major political parties (Prosperity Party (PP), Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (*EZEMA*), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), *Arena* Tigray for Democracy and Sovereignty Party (*Arena* Tigray), National Congress of Great Tigray (*Baytona*), and National Movement of Amhara (NAMA)). A strong effort is made to make contact with senior party officials, such as the chairperson, deputy chairperson, or spokesperson, of each party as key informants for this study. This paper begins with a discussion of literature that sheds light on various studies dealing with countries that witnessed the democratic transition and the role played by their political parties in the transition process. Following this, the roles and problems associated with political parties in Ethiopia are briefly analyzed.

Review of Literature

This literature review looks at the modes of transition and the roles played by their political parties in the transition process in different countries. The review also focused especially on the roles of political parties and their challenges in Ethiopia.

Modes of Transition

Transition, in its broadest sense, can be defined as the period in between the breakdown of one political regime and the installation of a new regime. More precisely, according to Schneider, if the newly installed regime turns out to be a democracy, one can speak of a democratic transition that involves “a process of liberalization” (Schneider, 2006, p.7).

The most prominent classification of transition modes is the one offered by Karl (1990). This classification yields four different modes of transitions: (i) *Pacts* are elite-dominated compromises; (ii) *Impositions* consist of elites using force unilaterally and effectively to bring about a regime change against the resistance of incumbents forcing the transition; (iii) *Reforms* are present when masses mobilize from below and impose a compromised outcome without resorting to violence; whereas (iv) *Revolutions* consist of masses rising in arms and militarily defeat the previous authoritarian rulers. According to Schneider (2006), *pacts* have a positive impact on the prospects for successfully establishing democracy in a country, mainly because they (a) include all significant political actors whose interests must be respected in order to gain their consent on the new political regime and the new distribution of power it brings with; (b) make participating actors mutually dependent on each other; and (c) exclude certain issues from the negotiation table that are of vital interest to some of the participants in the negotiation (such as securing property rights and non-prosecution of human rights abuses). Similarly, Wolfgang Merkel, quoted in Hafez (2010), distinguishes between a number of ways in which transformation can come about including (a) *gradual evolution* – basically the British model of advancing democratization over several centuries; (b) *change initiated by regimes* – the classic ‘reform from above in the style of Gorbachev; (c) *forced system change* – on the French or Iranian model of world-historical revolutions; (d) *regime collapse* – often following wars, as in Iraq in 2003; (e) *negotiated system change* – on the model of numerous processes of democratization in Southern Europe or Latin America.

In fact, in many countries, rather than a straightforward process corresponding precisely to one of these models, the shift to democracy occurred in a hybrid form. The Ethiopian case is based on a combination of strong pressure from the ‘streets’- youth protests and a political transformation supported by a robust opposition within the regime. As such, the Ethiopian case has integrated elements of both popular uprisings and reform from above. In addition to these routes to transformation, we can distinguish a number of important factors that foster the change in the political system. The role of political parties is our focus in the following section.

Political Parties and Political Transitions

An examination of related literature reveals a set of factors that are primarily responsible for post-transition stability. An assessment of the major schools in the study of transition systems

reveals that they focus on different aspects of the systems, and thereby provide different factors with respect to what constitutes the ideal political transition (Norgaard, 1992).

Literature tends to emphasize the unique functions played by political parties in articulating and aggregating public demands, developing alternative visions and policies for governing the state, and testing the public support for those policies in elections (Lipset, 2000; Svasand, 2002a; Power and Shoot, 2011; Buslenko, 2019). Political parties thus provide a choice to voters, a means of selecting political leaders, and a mechanism for holding the government to account. Randall and Svasand (2002a) suggest analyzing parties' contribution in terms of representation, integration into the democratic process, aggregating and channeling political interests, recruitment and (democratic) training of political leaders, making government accountable, and organizing opposition. According to Randall, Parties are initially seen as potential agents of national integration and political stability.

Democracies cannot function without political parties. Parties are expected to reflect citizens' concerns, aggregate and mediate diverse interests, project a vision of society, and develop policy options accordingly. They are supposed to inspire and attract supporters to their cause; their membership levels are important for proving their claim to represent the people (Randall, 2007, p.60).

As one of the main intermediaries between the state and citizens, one would therefore expect parties to have a major role to play in transitions (UNDP, 2012). Parties are unique organizations that fulfill a number of interrelated functions central to the democratic process of governance. Basic party functions include: "Contesting and winning elections; Aggregating and representing social interests; providing policy alternatives; Vetting and training political leaders who will assume a role in governing society" (Power & Shoot, 2011, p.4). Effective political parties need leaders and organizers who understand the role of political parties in a democratic society, and who are able to use modern techniques of organization, communication, fundraising, and training effectively (*Ibid*). Leaders and supporters of political parties have a critical role to play in a successful transition to democracy. To promote democracy in their country, however, political parties themselves must be democratic (*Ibid*). Hence, whether in power or opposition, they have to support and protect democratic values and human rights within their own organizations.

To succeed, a political party needs several attributes, including enthusiastic members, informed and committed leaders along with practical and innovative ideas for improving the country. Moreover, like any organization, an effective political party has a defined purpose and clear organizational structures and procedures for fulfilling its purpose.

From the above, it is clear that political parties are basic to the transition process, as they are principal bodies for representing public concerns, as well as, central to the negotiation of new political structures. In short, the performance of the political parties will be critical in the establishment of the quality and durability of the new political settlement. In general, political parties play a pivotal role during the transition in providing the vehicles to mediate between different shades of political opinion, aggregate public opinion, and provide policy alternatives for governing. The period of transition provides the most extreme stress test of political parties' internal structures and of their ability to respond to the concerns of voters.

Political parties are “the key mediating bodies in this process of change” (UNDP, 2012, p.84). Their effectiveness will go some way to determining the success and durability of the new political system. It is argued that, in successful transitions, political parties play a key role. They “establish regional and territorial networks, build ties with social movements and civil society organizations help, design and implement strategies to counter the authoritarian regime, and mobilized international support” (Strachan,2017, p.95).

UNDP's (2012) analysis of transitions in Brazil, Chile, and Indonesia offers useful comparisons. In Brazil, Chile, and Indonesia, the very pattern of transition has seriously impeded the role of political parties, as well as that of democratic institutions in general. In this country, the party system remained little institutionalized and extraordinarily fragmented, with several parties too weak to have a nationwide presence, which limits their electoral successes to limited constituencies. Elite politics has been at the core of Chile's successful transition. From 1990 onwards, the political system in Chile has been characterized by a supra-party political elite; the negotiation of power-sharing arrangements in the executive branch; and the elite domination of the candidate selection process.

In Indonesia, according to Evans (2011), political parties recognized the need to negotiate with elements of the old regime by offering opportunities for different factions to cooperate towards political solutions. So, as Evans puts it, political parties here represented an integrative

mechanism between the different divisions in society. Transition involves people learning to interact with each other on a different basis and that negotiation and compromise do not constitute weakness, but rather represent a healthy part of living in a democracy. And, from the perspective of parties themselves, that dialogue will often result in different political actors recognizing the extent to which they have common objectives, and are more likely to achieve them by collaboration as opposed to outright hostility. The need to negotiate with elements of the old regime also had a critically important side effect: “it provided an opportunity for different factions to work cooperatively toward political solutions” (Evans, 2011, p.37). In this, political parties played a crucial role.

Serbian party politics has suffered from fractious coalition relations in the post-Milosevic period. Coalitions formed and dissolved repeatedly over the decade following the democratic revolution, leading to instability and uncertainty (Power, 2011, p.96). Based on Serbian experience, Kuzmanovic (2011) argues that establishing clear internal procedures, infrastructure, and strategy are all paramount in the transitional and post-transitional phases. Likewise, the party’s fortunes should not rest with a single or few figureheads. Rather, party members must be willing to change leaders once their roles and performances are becoming ineffective (Kuzmanović, 2011, p.64).

From the experience of the Republic of South Africa, it can be said that democratic transition and subsequent consolidation becomes much easier if there are well-organized political parties that can perform the traditional political party functions of aggregating interests (Lodge, 2011). It can also be learnt that the transitional period is likely to involve a long interval of negotiation between the previous regime and the insurgent social and political forces. According to Lodge, this might involve a decision to pursue truth and reconciliation rather than to prosecute previous leaders for human rights abuses, an interim power-sharing agreement, or the insurgent forces dropping some of their original demands (Lodge, 2011, p.69).

Perhaps the weakness of political institutions in Argentina, Chile, and Brazil has been the major factor contributing to instability (Fulghum, 1985; Arriagada, 2011). The political consensus that was achieved in Mexico after the Revolution has not been developed in Argentina, Chile, or Brazil for any appreciable length of time. As Arriagada maintains, the task for political parties is

to provide vehicles that can help the public to understand, navigate, and shape the process of transition (Arriagada, 2011, p.20).

In his analysis of the case of Egypt, Kasim (2016) argues that, even though Egyptian political parties have a massive scope of freedom, their role in the democratic transition of Egypt was disappointing. Egyptians were let down by the marionette or cardboard political parties which were assumed to perform an active role in the transition process; however, they failed.

Buslenko (2019), in his thorough comparative analysis, the activity of the opposition in East-Central and Eastern Europe, argues that the transition towards democracy in the countries of East-Central and Eastern Europe largely depended on a new alternative political force – the opposition. It was the opposition political forces that created a political alternative and real political competition by undermining the monopoly of the “party of power” and creating thus preconditions for democratization. The constructive activity of the opposition became a foundation for civil society since its initial pluralism gave rise to different groups of political interests, values, programs, ideologies, and so on.

So far, a picture of political party competence and contribution to democratic transitions has been presented. This brief survey reminds us, then, that political parties have contributed to the democratic transitions in different ways, notably by supplying the necessary vision and leadership, by providing an institutional framework for political coordination, and/or by increasing state legitimacy and maintaining political stability. It is suggested that effective and well-functioning political parties can serve as a safety valve by which social tensions and frustrations can be channeled through peaceful means. In this regard, it can be emphasized that political parties can provide avenues for social cohesion, and minimize possibilities of open conflict and facilitate a peaceful resolution of conflict in multinational federations. However, the fluidity and uncertainty that characterizes transitional periods presents distinct challenges and opportunities. Although literature highlights the distinctiveness of each country’s experience, the main themes emerge that reflect the common, often very practical challenges for political parties including building a broad-based political organization, establishing a constructive dialogue between political parties, negotiating space for democratic politics, and responding to and shaping voter expectations.

The Roles of Political Parties and Their Challenges in Ethiopia

Introduction

Ethiopia has an emergent and distinct political spectrum, which can loosely be arranged in terms of regional and national. On the one hand, locally-based groups representing a single ethnic group are common. On the other hand, more liberal, representing coalitions of national parties also appear. At the center, political parties such as Prosperity Party (PP), the ‘continuist’ party constituted from the reform elements of the EPRDF which led the transition. This party would be a roughly centrist grouping that favors national unity but also advocates ethnic-based federalism. But within its ranks, there are wide divergences based on regional and ideological lines.

As hinted above, the political reform in Ethiopia can be considered as a product of regime-initiated policies and societal pressures. However, the reform is fraught with pitfalls. Why should this be? The immediate answer lies in the character of the political parties, which in turn, however, reflects and combines with key features of their context. The challenges can be broadly grouped into ruling party-centered and opposition-centered concerns. The former includes lack of an agreement and internal power struggles, mounting governance deficits, and remnant authoritarianism. The latter includes things like weak institutions and capacity to engage in political struggle, the worsening of political differences, failure to network and form alliances, weak norms of conduct, and a culture of compromise and accommodation among elites.

Ruling Party

In a seminal article reviewing the main political functions associated with political parties in contemporary Ethiopia, Kasahun (2009) attempted to identify the predicaments of Ethiopian opposition parties that are partly caused by the taking shape and consolidation of EPRDF as a dominant actor in Ethiopian politics. The new ruling party, Prosperity Party (PP), has its origin in the umbrella organization of EPRDF, covering a wide spectrum of interests and parties in eight regional states. The reform forced the resignation of TPLF, the ruling party in the Tigray Region, and as a result, EPRDF split into PP and TPLF. The following describes this and other related dilemmas associated with the ruling party.

Lack of an Agreement and Internal Power Struggles

The reorganization of EPRDF, while it might seem undemocratic for some, has not produced a period of orderly political transition that is free of disorder. Indeed, the reform was first driven by a handful of reformists in EPRDF. Powerful members of the EPRDF are not completely convinced of the reform measures that the new leadership is taking. As will be discussed below, some have questioned the saliency of the reform ideology and the dominance of the Prime Minister. These elements continue to contend that EPRDF is abandoning its ideological foundations of revolutionary democracy and a developmental state in favor of neoliberal and populist tendencies. Divergent views, even among the senior officials, about the ultimate goal of political reform, led to frictions among leaders of EPRDF (Interview with Chairperson, *Baytona*, March 9, 2020).

The new leadership was criticized on the pretext that they failed to swear fidelity to the constitution and the federal system. This issue was apparent in the conflict between "reformers" and "conservatives" that developed as reforms deepened in the last few years. The more conservative elders wanted a controlled gradual reform, while the new group moved beyond limited reforms to implement several political reforms. The TPLF in particular defended previous social privileges and are distressed by their uncertain status after the reform (Abbink, 2019). The Ethiopian case has, therefore, a group of elites (especially members of TPLF) who have been more reluctant in their attitudes toward reform and who are therefore politically less inclined to provide support for the transition process.

To be successful, the transition must be able to muster sufficient political support. Hence, stability is contingent upon reasonable transition agreements with concerned bodies. However, many are skeptical as to how far the ruling party performed these functions (Interview with Deputy Chairman, OFC, March 9, 2020; Spokesperson, NAMA, March 9, 2020). As argued above, interim leaders were naive to embark on the exercise without the backing of the former officials. In other words, they did not have the backing of the TPLF when they established the new PP.

Indeed, following the reform, the government dismissed many of the officials on the basis that they were believed to be corrupt. On the other hand, this has created several concerns regarding the experience of their, largely very young, replacements. On the other hand, there is the concern

that corruption charges have been selectively applied and politically motivated. In this regard, it is argued that the new leadership has used the tools of the executive office to pursue its political enemies.

As to the mass leadership dismissals in government agencies that the government initiated, it is often stated by the PP that, they were caused by requirements of radical reform in the state apparatus and the need to uproot corruption. Conversely, some party representatives, such as Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (*EZEMA*), and the National Movement of Amhara (*NAMA*) – have even accused the new leadership of having compromised too much with the previous officials and not promised fast and full enough transition.

Besides, keeping the PP from tearing itself apart appeared as a mighty task for the new leadership which has proven to be particularly vulnerable to internal dysfunction. As a result, some scholars cautioned that the movement toward political reform in Ethiopia is not universally endorsed (Asebe, 2019; Badwaza, 2018). Much success will probably depend on the quality of leadership at all levels operating during the transitional phase to democracy. Apart from the federal reforms, it is argued, regional leaders have not contributed to the reform through cooperation with the new party of power (Asebe, 2019). At the same time, there are other groups such as different informal youth movements to contend with, which according to some, have weakened the basis for a stable transition (Badwaza, 2018). One of the major defects of the party system is its inability to incorporate the informal youth movement into the official party or related structure. One persistent feature of reform is the existence of a hidden structure of personal relationships that determines critical reform outcomes. It is presumed, in many cases, that the ‘informal political institutions’ have undermined the rules of the game (Interview with Spokesperson, *NAMA*, March 9, 2020).

Among those who may feel aggrieved by the transition, ironically, are the opposition parties who had long lobbied for change. Many political parties call for the new leadership to allow for the orderly creation of a ‘caretaker government’ or power-sharing governments for more stable transitions (Interview with Deputy Chairman, *OFC*, March 9, 2020).

Indeed, the new leadership has encouraged the participation of groups that have not been previously incorporated into the political system. The post-transition period comprised of representatives from banned opposition groups and other political leaders. There is some

oppositional presence with many interlocutors taking part in the few government-sponsored talks to negotiate a way out of the present maelstrom. Many parties called for national dialogue to address the political, economic, and social problems facing the country.

From the above, it is clear that the leadership rivalry and the weakness of the PP in promoting political stability stem primarily from its inability to balance the demands of the competing parties under its umbrella. Regarding the behavior of entrenched leaders, it can be suggested that much will depend on the government leaders who are in power during the transition phase to democracy. They can set the stage for a peaceful and democratic change, or can obstruct the entire process. The process of reform has been complicated by the political actors who continue to compete for power. This struggle among key political parties within the ruling regime has resulted in the reform being stalled (Badwaza, 2018). As a result, many have predicted the break-up of the ruling party over political circumstances.

Remnant Authoritarianism

The extent to which the reform has maintained a ‘level playing field’ for democratic competition in the country remains debatable. The level of democratic competition and accommodation is still challenged by scholars and opposition actors as not inclusive. Accusations of authoritarianism were shared by an increasing section of the opposition (Badwaza, 2018). It is claimed that, on much of the day-to-day running of the government, opposition parties are progressively excluded from many of the deals and lost some of its earlier importance as an arena of accommodation. The representatives of the opposition stress that the political system has remained as exclusionary as it was.

Indeed, during the initial reform period, the regime went to unusual lengths to accommodate opposition interests. Oppositions’ influence was unusually strong during the initial transition; it waned in the years that followed. While incumbent leaders appeared to cooperate with the opposition, they had no intention of giving up power. They simply intended to use this type of forum to ensure that their hold on power was legitimized by a democratic process (Asebe, 2019).

Stressing the need to change the current political operations in the country, it is often remarked that the reform is a victim of the Prime Minister’s manipulations. It is claimed that the transition to democracy in Ethiopia is hijacked by Prime Minister’s manipulations. He promised and

canceled elections, replaced interim leaders at will, and rejected the call for the national dialogue and caretaker government (Interview with Chairperson, *Baytona*, March 9, 2020).

Oppositions also vehemently complain about the absence of predictable rules of the game. During the interim period leading up to elections, it is also necessary to establish clearly who is really in charge. However, there is no consensus between the party in power and the opposition parties on certain basic rules of political transition. Opposition political leaders and critics forthrightly questioned this move by noting that the new leadership has failed to lay any sound basis for democratic transition.

Indeed, the new political elites only embarked on a few modest reforms, such as releasing prisoners of conscience and allowing political opposition. However, the government's emphasis on preserving the political structures set up by the EPRDF has placed the parties in a subordinated position, which has also increasingly undermined faith in the new leadership. This, according to some, has minimized the role of the opposition parties and prevented deeper and much-needed reforms to the political system (Interview with Spokesperson, OLF, March 9, 2020). This arouses the opposition's suspicions that the core features of the EPRDF party-state remain essentially unchanged. Opposition parties criticize the party built on the remnants of the EPRDF, which threaten the legitimacy of the new reform. It is argued that the model of the political party which is adopted by the incumbent authorities, similar to the model that existed under the previous authorities. The opposition has claimed that the situation is failed to improve under the new authorities (Interview with Spokesperson, OLF, March 9, 2020).

Accordingly, as indicated above, some have even expressed skepticism about the sincerity of the new leadership in allowing a truly open political system. The commitment of the ruling party to democracy appears to be irrational because elites are acting outside the rules of the game, grabbing for power, and purging rivals (Interview with Chairperson, *Baytona*, March 9, 2020).

It is argued that the government has regularly abused its power to harass and assault its enemies and opponents. In this regard, it is alleged that opposition parties continue to be victims of legal and political restrictions designed by the incumbent regime. They blame this for what they see as moves by the state to limit the exercise of some political rights, such as party registration limits, limits on hate articles in the media, which can all themselves be proof for the purging of political

opponents. The issue most frequently mentioned is an abuse of the so-called administrative resources.

In general, doubts about the seriousness of the government and mistrust of the regime prevail amongst large sections of the opposition. Opposition political parties are skeptical about the PP's political will to cater to people's interests. As indicated above, it is often argued that the party's interest in maintaining its political hegemony arguably inhibited the kinds of reforms needed to enhance the democratic system. In other words, the reforms are not gauged to advance democracy or contribute to the overall political transition. The opposition parties allege that abuse of "administrative resources", that is, the lack of a clear separation between the party in power and the state, is a major challenge to fair political competition in the country. Many critical observers are increasingly skeptical, with some of the actions of the new leadership, and are describing the transition as derailed or hijacked by specific interest groups (Asebe, 2019).

In 2018, the new leadership promised to act as a transitional government to steer the country to multiparty elections. Nevertheless, as events unfolded over the years, there were frequent arbitrary changes and adjustments. Considering that two years have passed since the onset of the democratic transition, the significance of election especially in terms of nurturing a democratic system is worth considering. Opposition vehemently complains about the postponement of the national and regional election (Interview with Chairperson, *Baytona*, March 9, 2020). Blaming the government for not holding the election as planned, some lamented that all the values opposition political parties held are being assaulted, and the nation is wracked by tension and despair, as a result of serious crises of legitimacy and challenges to the rulers' hold on power.

Mounting Governance Deficits

The period after reform was a period in which little progress was made in developing political institutions that would provide stability for the political system. Despite the successful introduction of the reform, the necessary laws and institutions are still largely missing. In this regard, it is argued that institutional failings and the defiance of central government laws and policies by local authorities have undermined the state's capacity (ICG, 2019). Law enforcement authorities are not able to provide the level of protection necessary to guarantee law and order and "people have lost their trust in institutions" (Interview with Chairperson, *EZEMA*, March 5, 2020).

Indeed, the reform resulted in some degree of street violence between those celebrating the change, those opposing it, and those simply seeking to take advantage of the unrest to loot (Abbink, 2019). In addition, there were many separate incidents of violent attacks on parties and their property. The new leadership has been under pressure to maintain law and order during the period of transition and the official party has lost full control of the process (Al Jazeera, 2019). It is recognized that the institutions of government are weaker today than they were in the immediate post-reform period, making the transition to democracy a daunting challenge.

The violent communal politics plagued the ability of the state to govern properly in the late reform period. At the same time, protests can also be viewed as a ‘symptom’ of the frustration of opposition parties at the lack of space for them to play a constructive role in democratic dialogue. These riots not only radicalized ethnic politics but also served as a reminder of pernicious governance. Although most of these failed to bring about the expected results, yet the new leadership did not move to correct these problems. In this respect, promoting a more constructive role for opposition in transition, and enabling greater freedom of expression through peaceful demonstrations and the media could take away much of the impetus for protests.

It is often said that the breakdowns of rule of law and other setbacks highlight the fragility and uncertainty of the transition. The persistent ethnic question and fermenting religious tension became a cause of worry for the march toward the desired transition in Ethiopia. The future of the country could still be explosive if the ethnic question is not dealt with.

From the foregoing discussion, we can conclude that Ethiopia’s attempts at democracy have been fraught with disappointment and uncertainty. Many of the opposition political parties in Ethiopia are skeptical of the conduct of the transition program, and they made this known to the government.

Opposition Political Parties

The political landscape of Ethiopia is littered with opposition parties of different sizes, strengths, and levels of acceptability. Although opposition parties are quite visible after the reform, their viability and effectiveness remain questionable. In this section, an attempt is made to set out the status and dilemmas of opposition political parties in Ethiopia.

As indicated above, some scholars raised a number of factors that may have contributed to the weakness of opposition parties. Some of these are endogenous to the party's organization, profile, and strategy; others are exogenous to it. According to many commentators, the paradox of the majority of Ethiopian opposition parties is that most of them are poorly organized and lack institutional capacity and clear ideological foundations (Merera, 2007; Kassahun, 2009; Lidetu, 2010; Alefe, 2014). Another area where oppositions are often criticized is their failure to cooperate with each other. Most parties are poorly rooted in the societies they seek to represent, equipped with few resources. The other main concern with the political oppositions is that they lack strong administrative and communicative structures and the capacity to compete (Kassahun, 2009; Lidetu, 2010).

The Worsening of Political Differences

Experience has shown that political reforms get off the ground only when political shifts have occurred that necessitate a renegotiation of the political order. Political parties in Ethiopia do not share a broad-based consensus or agreement on many political values. Regarding the nature of the political reform, the range of belief is greater, and disagreement runs deeper among political parties. Since the reform, Ethiopia has suffered from the troubles of sharpening ideological and ethnic contradictions. In addition, the prevalence of personalism in opposition's politics has contributed to a polarization of political forces (Merera, 2007).

It can be observed that the sudden end of EPRDF's unchallenged monopoly on political power has resulted in a period that can be deceptively unsettled. The opposition political parties leap into a political activity under new freedoms with few norms or rules to follow. All this bears heavily on a fragile new leadership struggling to erect a new order.

Accordingly, disruptive propaganda and unethical engagements on social media, and highly partisan networks that have mushroomed over the past two years cast into doubt the sustainability of the progress achieved since the reform. Besides, it is argued that the country has faced persistent elite-level violations of democratic norms which hampered progress. This has been a notable feature of a range of parties in Ethiopia. They have not shown a reasonably strong capacity for responsible political behavior and high levels of commitment to democratic norms (Abbink, 2019).

Weak Institutionalization and Capacity to Engage in Political Struggle

For democratic change to succeed, political parties must embody political alternatives and possess great potential for mobilization. As indicated above, after the reform, a huge number of parties have sprung up in each of the regions. The party system remains, however, little institutionalized and extraordinarily fragmented, with several parties too weak to have a nationwide presence that limits their electoral successes to limited constituencies. The evidence indicates that though the contemporary party system now provided openness unparalleled in the history of the country, the very plethora of partisan camps and the ethnic cleavages they reflected also created uncertainty about the viability of government in its existing form and about the political directions the nation would pursue (Asebe, 2019).

In addition, an important aspect simply concerns support for the party. Once more with significant exceptions, political parties tend to lack deep social roots. It is argued that very few political parties have any kind of office or other public presence, and therefore, are less connected to their constituencies. Of course, as already observed, political parties and the party system in Ethiopia have been greatly influenced by ethnic and cultural diversity. As a result, only a few political parties have been relatively vibrant at the national level. The point must be made that in practice even ‘national’ parties have only a limited organizational presence in terms of geographical spread.

When it comes to assessing parties’ contribution to democratic transition in practice, there is generally a sense of disappointment. Political parties are upbraided with failing to provide the electorate with meaningful choice, with failing to instill democratic values as well as offering effectual opposition. In most cases, rather than fulfilling their role as intermediaries between the citizens and the state, political parties vied for control of the government and have become instruments for the preservation of elite interests (Interview with Spokesperson at Public and International Relations, PP, March 19, 2020).

Failure to Network and Form Alliances

The Ethiopian transition tends to suffer from fragmentation of political parties, which hindered effective opposition. The multiplicity of competitive political parties did not provide the legitimizing and stabilizing function for the political reform. Success in coalition talks among the opposition political parties has been minimal and remained largely unsuccessful. The frequent

party splits, mergers, and counter splits increased the number of political parties that now contest elections.

As indicated above, after the reform, many political parties are officially registered, of which few are organized on a national basis. This has weakened opposition political parties' ability to present a unified front to voters, to consolidate the party system – and, ultimately, to advance a cohesive national agenda. Besides, the inability of the opposition political parties to reach formidable alliances and coalitions has only translated to more political capital for the dominant ruling party. In brief, in the Ethiopian case, there is a trend towards increasing fragmentation. According to Randal, highly fragmented systems, whether or not entailing classic ideological polarization, tend to be associated with “fragile coalitions and regime instability, (even) less transparent policy-making and bargains struck behind the scenes” (Randall, 2007, p.648).

A stable and numerically viable opposition is indispensable for democratic progress. Indeed, there have been several attempts at party cooperation pacts and mergers, without much success. The proliferation of opposition parties and the continuous fragmentation have weakened their role in shaping the transition process in Ethiopia. Since the verdict of the political reform, some effective attempts at party unity have been made and several others are in the pipeline. Some of them are increasingly considering alliances as the solution to weak and fragmented opposition political parties. The merging of opposition parties is becoming a novel strategy for strengthening them (Interview with Spokesperson at Public and International Relations, PP, March 19, 2020).

Lack of Culture of Compromise and Accommodation

The current political instability is also attributed to a lack of compromise and accommodation. Of course, democratic transitions need to involve fully tolerant, inclusive, orderly, and public-minded political parties. Elite consensus, meanwhile, reduces the likelihood that a political party will use ultranationalist claims to gain the upper hand over rivals. However, as already indicated above, there has been a not tacit agreement between the government and opposition on the most appropriate reform measures. The relation between political parties is often characterized by suspicion and antagonism, which often led to a destructive and violent engagement. In addition to the absence of common interests shared by the political elites, political stability also rested on a lack of a spirit of compromise between the government and opposition political parties. Hence,

the prevailing mistrust and lack of tolerance among political parties are among factors that may impede prospects of the stability of the transition process (Temin and Badwaza, 2019).

The reform is under constant threat from disorders and instability. All claims from the ruling party (PP) ascribe this mostly to opposition parties (Interview with Spokesperson at Public and International Relations, PP, March 19, 2020). The reality is that the growing violence resulted in the closure of shops, destruction of property, and a general sense of uncertainty on the reform efforts (Asebe, 2019). Some of the political turbulences are caused by political parties working against the ruling party. To one degree or another, all of the parties involved participated in the strike to discredit the new leadership.

In general, the discussion so far suggests that political parties' contribution to the possibilities of a democratic transition is generally limited, whether in terms of shaping and elaborating the guiding policy discourse, political recruitment, ensuring accountability, monitoring implementation, or providing legitimacy. The analysis presented here suggests that in general, after the reform, the country has suffered from deteriorating law and order, political factionalism, an obstinate bureaucracy, and an ongoing crisis of legitimacy. However, the general assumption must be that the current political reforms underway present opposition political parties with real opportunities to compete for power and provide policy choices for voters. It is clear that the political oppositions have a range of problems. The ruling party has not only made a major contribution to the processes of the reform in terms of either strengthening political parties but also enabling them to play a more constructive role. In this regard, the opposition political parties have not also helped their own situation. The failure to oppose soundly and arguably constitutes the greatest threat to the political reform. The inclination of some to engage in outrageous accusations has undermined their ability to advance the reform agenda and to offer credible policy alternatives. This phenomenon is not particular to Ethiopia and had been previously observed in a number of transitional and democratizing states (for example Brazil, Mexico, and Indonesia to name only a few).

In a nutshell, although the political parties are often overlooked, political parties play a critical role in the maintenance of democracy by providing a bridge between all of the different elements in society. Yet, there are severe obstacles to their performance in this role. Some of these constraints include inefficient bureaucracies, fragile institutions, the existence of deeply

antagonistic subgroups that do not trust each other and are not willing to turn over power to the opposition and an undemocratic political culture wherein people live in fear with little trust or pride in government.

The reform in the country degenerated into a bitter power struggle between its supporters and the opposition. In other words, the post-reform period turned into a protracted standoff between the ruling party and oppositions. The problem of Ethiopia's political parties is yet to be resolved, and the future of democracy in the country still remains doubtful.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the roles of political parties in political reforms in the post-transitional system using Ethiopia as an empirical case. It is clear from the discussions made so far that political parties are critical to transition as the main barriers against the transition are political. An overall conclusion is that creating an enabling environment for political parties is critical to the success of the ongoing reform efforts. In the case of Ethiopia, the transition is still at a very early stage. Although political parties have a critical role in fostering the creation of a system that encourages dialogue and interaction, they are failing to deliver these benefits. The changes over the past three years have stirred hopes for the future just as continued repression has conjured visions of renewed autocracy and fears of a more aggressive regime. The ultimate outcome of political transition in Ethiopia, therefore, remains in doubt.

Ethiopia's journey towards reform started with great expectations. This picture alludes to some of the dangers which might jeopardize the future of political transition in Ethiopia. One of the most prominent problems is related to weak elite norms of conduct and remnant authoritarianism. The PP and the oppositions have made frequent departures from democratic procedures. In addition, weak traditions of public compromise, a lack of political engagement, have brought about an increase in political instability and failure of the political system to generate stable transition. A major test of the reform will be to maintain the consensus by addressing the needs of all of the political groups in the country. Most crucial will be the need for the interim regime to set out a plan for the new transition. Besides, enhancing the role of the opposition political parties becomes critical to the democratic legitimacy of the reform process. For the political party system to become a more effective institution, the number of political parties must be reduced, and their base of support should be broadened.

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