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The Narrow Limits of Ethiopia's National Dialogue

In its current form, the process will do little to address the country's structural problems

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Ethiopia has long been in a period of upheaval characterised by massive levels of violence. Relations between the largest ethnic groups are in flux, as is their relationship with the government. The state lacks legitimacy in the central regions of the country, its monopoly on the use of force is contested, and it does not have enough financial resources to provide for the population on a nationwide scale. The national dialogue is intended to facilitate Ethiopia's transformation and increase support for the state among the population. However, the conditions for a confidence-building dialogue are not in place, given the armed uprisings in the two most populous states of Amhara and Oromia; the severely restricted independence of the media and freedom of expression; and the dominance of the ruling party in parliament and society. An additional structured dialogue at the level of the most important political players could mitigate one of the main weaknesses of the process. International actors who, like Germany, support the national dialogue should be careful not to allow themselves to be used for authoritarian consolidation.

On 4 June 2024, the first event of the regional phase of the national dialogue at the level of the federal states and city administrations concluded in Addis Ababa. The aim of the overall process is to identify the most important issues that are driving the country apart, determine possible solutions, and nominate representatives for the last round of consultations at the national level. The event in Addis Ababa alone was attended by more than 2,000 people who had been delegated from previous meetings at the local level in the city of Addis Ababa.

Similar events are to follow in the other federal states.

The national dialogue is a central project of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government, which hopes that the dialogue can make a decisive contribution towards pacifying the country, increase the legitimacy of the state across the entirety of Ethiopian society, and thus also boost economic development. The overarching goal is to rally the population behind Abiy's idea of national unity. The dialogue can only take place



within the narrow confines of the government's continued hegemony.

State and society under stress

Abiy has not succeeded in uniting Ethiopia in recent years. On the contrary, his style of governance, the way he has fought insurgencies, and delayed economic reforms are partly responsible for the conflicts, violence, and existential hardships in parts of the country. The Ethiopian state crisis that brought Abiy to office has been exacerbated by some of his actions.

Contrary to Abiy's pan-Ethiopian rhetoric, the country continues to be characterised by its orientation along ethnic (or "national") identities. The ethnic federalism enshrined in the 1995 constitution continues to play an important role in terms of gaining access to state power. A new national narrative has not yet been established. Instead, polarisation and a zero-sum mentality characterise politics, as even Ethiopia's National Security Council has noted. A greater role for one ethnic group is seen by others as a decline in their own level of influence. This is particularly evident in the rise of Oromos in politics after Abiy took office, a development that is viewed critically by traditional elites from Amhara and Tigray.

But Abiy's style of governance is based less on the hegemony of one ethnic group (although some accuse him of favouring Oromos in government and state enterprises) and more on shifting partnerships, in line with his understanding of pragmatic power politics. However, in a context characterised by a zero-sum mentality and a lack of national identity, Abiy's transactional politics is alienating former supporters, especially in Amhara and Oromia. It is also fuelling conflict within ethnic groups between those who are cooperating with the government and those who are turning away in disappointment. Abiy himself accused the opposition of plotting a coup in early July.

Both the government and some elements of the opposition see violence as a legitimate means of conflict resolution. This attitude was reflected not only in the war in the north of the country between 2020 and 2022, but also in the uprisings in Oromia and Amhara. Although the government has recognised that it must also focus on negotiations with the armed groups, it always aims to do so from a position of military strength. For example, the Pretoria Agreement with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was signed in November 2022, when the army was already close to Tigray's capital, Mekelle.

At the same time, the way in which the government fights insurgencies tends to fuel conflicts. In the war against the TPLF, the government fought in conjunction with paramilitary forces and irregular Fano units from Amhara. When these Amhara regional militias were to be demobilised and disarmed after the Pretoria Agreement, many of the units refused because they saw the agreement as a betrayal of Amhara interests. The Fano were able to attract a considerable number of these well-trained paramilitary fighters, which enabled them to hold their own against the government army. Since then, the insurgents have controlled large parts of the rural areas and been able to occasionally advance into towns such as Amhara's regional capital of Bahir Dar and the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Lalibela.

The government forces pose a significant threat to the civilian population in these conflict areas. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights holds them responsible for 70 per cent of the human rights violations that it documented in Ethiopia in 2023. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission reported about the extrajudicial killings by state security forces and mass arbitrary arrests in Amhara, Oromia, and Addis Ababa. In addition, the use of drones, which has resulted in high numbers of civilian casualties, has been criticised. There are reports that the army frequently kills civilians indiscriminately when it is unable to apprehend Fano rebels in Amhara. All

of this is fuelling further resistance from the affected population.

Although the government is investing in prestigious projects in Addis Ababa, it is leaving large sections of the population behind. More than 21 million people in Ethiopia are dependent on humanitarian aid. In some parts of the country, there is acute food insecurity as a result of drought, conflict, and poor macroeconomic conditions. Although inflation has fallen since last year, it remains high at 22.7 per cent, particularly for food (19.9 per cent overall). Driven by rising prices, high unemployment, and restrictions on the freedom of movement, criminal violence is spreading. State institutions have withdrawn from some conflict areas. In the area surrounding Addis Ababa, the danger of becoming a victim of kidnapping is so great that many people no longer dare to leave the capital by land.

Economic relief can be provided through a recent external credit facility agreement with the IMF, budget support from the World Bank, as well as debt restructuring by donors. After years of negotiations, the government has accepted key reform conditions. In July, the National Bank of Ethiopia introduced a new, more flexible monetary policy to fight inflation and floated the exchange rate of the Ethiopian birr. The delay of these reforms had paralysed private-sector productivity and distorted the economy. It will now be key to keep inflation in check and boost social and economic spending.

Very high ambitions for the national dialogue

In principle, the format of a national dialogue can accompany and promote far-reaching political change processes. In a context characterised by violence and repression, dialogue can offer a way to negotiate differences in a peaceful manner. It can also facilitate the opening up of political space by enabling the broader participation of civil society compared to

negotiations among just elites. The overarching objective plays an important role here. Is the aim to reach a consensus on fundamental issues or to create a mechanism for constructively — or at least peacefully — resolving differences that are deeply rooted in history and identity? The establishment of a national dialogue can help a society to find a framework for its conflicts without necessarily resolving them.

The first initiatives to bring about such a dialogue after Abiy took office in April 2018 were constructive. Political prisoners were released, legislation for non-governmental organisations was relaxed, and opposition politicians returned from exile at the invitation of the government. Efforts were made in civil society to organise an inclusive dialogue. To this end, informal and preparatory seminars and workshops were held in 2019 and early 2020. There were also other activities that received the support of the government. In October 2020, a Multi-stakeholder Initiative for National Dialogue (MIND) was formed that included the Destiny Ethiopia Initiative, which acted as the secretariat; a number of civil society dialogue initiatives; the Ethiopian Reconciliation Commission; the Ministry of Peace as the government representative; and the Joint Council of Political Parties (i.e. the opposition parties).

War broke out in Tigray at the beginning of November 2020. The armed conflict was accompanied by a significant polarisation of society and restrictions on the public sphere. Nevertheless, the government continued to push ahead with the dialogue project. On 29 December 2021, the House of Peoples' Representatives — the lower chamber of parliament — passed a proclamation that provided the mandate for the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC). The ENDC took up its work in February 2022. Its term of office is three years. The mandate sets out three overarching goals: to build a “national consensus” on the “most fundamental national issues”, to create trust among the ethnic groups as well as between them and the state, and to pave the way for

a culture of dialogue. The ambitions could hardly be higher, as “internal problems that have been simmering for centuries”, according to the parliament’s declaration, are to be solved through this new culture of dialogue.

The government itself emphasises that a successful national dialogue would mean significant changes to the way in which fundamental political and social differences have been dealt with up to now. Abiy spoke of how a culture of dialogue could dissolve the strict division between “winners and losers” that has prevailed in Ethiopia to date. However, Abiy’s image of himself as a peacemaker and reconciler of the nation does not match the behaviour of his government.

The Commission’s approach

The ENDC took a while to find its feet, define its work, and build trust with key stakeholders. Added to this was the logistical challenge of holding hearings throughout the country. This was also a learning process for the Commission, according to those involved. The only output is to be a public final report to parliament and to the government, with the ENDC also developing a system to monitor the implementation of the expected recommendations.

The basic design envisages a three-stage process: Events are initially held in all of the 769 districts (*woredas*), then at the level of the twelve federal states and the two federal cities (Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa), and finally the actual dialogue at the national level. The ENDC is supported in its work by an advisory committee and a secretariat. Experts in constitutional issues attend the events in order to enable the participants to hold an informed discussion.

The hearings at the *woreda* level followed a standardised pattern. Cooperation partners invited a cross-section of the population, around 3,000 people, who exchanged views in rooms of 50 people each. After a briefing, these smaller groups themselves decided who would moderate, report, and

who would be nominated for the next level up. The groups were categorised according to 10 demographic and socio-economic criteria, such as being women, young people, displaced persons, teachers, or representatives of the private sector, the public sector, or the subsistence economy (herders and farmers). Commission members accompanied these meetings, which were minuted and recorded for further processing.

In this way, the ENDC said it reached around one hundred thousand people (originally 1.5 million were planned). With the exception of Amhara and Tigray, all federal states were represented. According to the government, 12,294 participants from 679 districts were nominated for the regional conferences so far. These rounds of talks at the local and regional levels are merely intended to collect agenda items and nominate representatives of socio-economic groups for the actual dialogue at the national level. The basic idea is that only topics that cannot be addressed at the district or regional level are brought to the national level. The ENDC also listens to members of the Ethiopian diaspora via video conferences and reviews written submissions.

One challenge for the ENDC is to separate the wheat from the chaff. “Sometimes we don’t even know where to start,” said ENDC Chairman Mesfin Araya in a TV interview. There are “tonnes of agenda items”. No interlocutor was able to name a transparent mechanism for filtering and aggregating the many topics. However, the dialogue should focus on issues of fundamental importance that are controversial. For example, the ENDC identified the 10 most important issues from the regional dialogue in Addis Ababa. These included federalism, the national flag, disputes over land claims, and the constitutional status of Addis Ababa.

Conditions for success not met

The national dialogue currently has little chance of achieving its goals. If one applies

the criteria for the success of such formats that comparative research has developed, it becomes clear that Ethiopia does not fulfil most of them.

Support for the initiative by the population and the political elites is central to the success of a national dialogue. To achieve this, the process should be inclusive and transparent, and the Commission should be perceived as impartial. It should also be able to take place in an environment that allows for a reasonably open exchange as well as criticism of the state and government without fear of repression.

The dialogue's credibility is suffering because influential political forces are not participating. These include the Oromo Liberation Front and the Oromo Federalist Congress as well as the TPLF. Overall, the majority of the often very small opposition parties cooperate with the ENDC in one form or another, but others boycott it. In May 2024, a coalition of 11 opposition parties accused the ENDC of being instrumentalised for "political purposes".

Many observers have questioned the impartiality of the ENDC and criticised the procedure used for appointing the commissioners. Although nominations for these positions could be submitted to parliament, the requirement of an academic qualification excluded local and religious leaders, young people, and many women from the outset. The Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa, a regional women's rights organisation, has pointed out this shortcoming.

The Prosperity Party (PP), the ruling party of Prime Minister Abiy, dominates the state at all levels. The formation of the PP in 2019 from three of the four parties (all except the TPLF) of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition that had governed Ethiopia since 1991, as well as parties from other federal states, was intended to counteract the fragmentation of the population. The PP is much more centralised than the EPRDF. According to its own figures, the PP is the largest party in Africa, with 14 million members – many members are also said to have dominated

the consultations of the national dialogue. The PP holds more than 96 per cent of all seats in parliament. Some leaders of the small opposition groups in parliament also work with the government, not necessarily to the satisfaction of their members.

There is correspondingly great concern among the opposition that the government could use the national dialogue to push through constitutional amendments or co-opt additional members of opposition parties. The federal rights of ethnic groups and federal states could be restricted, and a presidential system could replace the current parliamentary system. In view of the prevailing majority, it is obvious that parliament, as the supervisory body of the ENDC, can hardly be considered independent. A representative of a human rights organisation therefore welcomed plans for a presidential system, as this could create more distance between the legislative and executive branches of government.

There is hardly any space for open and free exchanges in the country. Press freedoms are severely restricted and the general public is polarised and susceptible to disinformation campaigns. People with unpopular opinions from the media and politics are sometimes arrested or even killed.

Civil society organisations have been granted more rights since new legislation was passed in 2019, but they still have to deal with considerable restrictions on their work. The federal authority responsible announced in May 2024 that it planned to revoke the licences of almost half of the organisations registered because they did not meet the legal requirements or had not submitted any reports. Human rights organisations also criticise the restrictions and threats issued by the security forces when travelling abroad.

The ongoing violence in Amhara and parts of Oromia and the consequences of the destruction caused by the war in Tigray are also hampering the possibilities for the national dialogue. The ENDC has called on armed groups such as the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and the Fano in Amhara to par-

ticipate, if necessary via proxies or through meetings in third countries. However, making direct contact appears to be difficult. For its part, the OLA has named specific conditions for participating in the process, in particular more political freedoms, peace negotiations, and a more independent commission. Just like other opposition forces, the armed group is concerned that the institutions dominated by the PP are supposed to monitor the dialogue and implement any results. They have long been calling for the formation of a transitional government. Abiy rejected this as undemocratic at the closing event of the regional dialogue in Addis Ababa in early June 2024.

Perhaps the greatest shortcoming of the national dialogue, however, is the lack of an accompanying dialogue at the political (elite) level. The government could have initiated a process with the most important representatives of the political-ethnic groups or parties that would have defined the parameters for the consultation procedures of the national dialogue. This could have helped to set clearer objectives for the dialogue, which is also a condition for the success of this type of initiative.

Even if actual problems are addressed at the ENDC events and, from the opposition's point of view, effective recommendations for solving them make it into the Commission's final report, the process lacks the legitimacy and authority to ensure their implementation. It is unlikely that the national dialogue will significantly reduce the deficit of trust in the government among large segments of the population and elites. The initiative is also unlikely to create trust within the population, as it is primarily designed for the vertical relationship between the state and social groups, but it does not bring together representatives of different communities at the local level.

However, without an overarching consensus, there is a great risk that the government will use the national dialogue to circumvent or even isolate the main opposition forces. For example, Abiy is said to be

seeking to divide up more federal states, which would weaken the larger ethnic groups. Instead of creating an atmosphere of democratic debate, the dialogue could thus encourage authoritarian consolidation.

Risks and opportunities for peacebuilding

Some Ethiopian interlocutors who were certainly critical of the government pointed out the shortcomings of the national dialogue described above, but also expressed concern about a possible failure of the process. This could lead to even more violence in the country. Some were therefore in favour of making the most of the opportunity. Particularly with regard to the goal of peaceful coexistence in the future, it is important to prevent the instrument of dialogue from being severely damaged and social mistrust from increasing further.

The Ethiopia Peace Observatory, an international research platform, points out that the national dialogue could still have constructive effects on some aspects of peacebuilding. As a nationwide consultation process, the national dialogue enables the PP to gather information about local and regional grievances and, on the basis of this knowledge, to increase the levels of trust between members of the PP and the respective administration. This could also put the government in a better position to deal with conflicts on the ground. The situation is similar in smaller regions on the periphery, where things are more peaceful than they have been in a long time. There have been successful peace processes with armed groups, but these are still fragile. In regions such as Benishangul-Gumuz, Afar, and Somali, parallel or sequential formats of the national dialogue could accompany the reorganisation of political and social relations initiated there. In southern Ethiopia, corresponding additional formats resulting from the ENDC consultations could help the newly formed regions to increase their legitimacy and prevent conflicts.

In Amhara, Oromia, and Tigray, the national dialogue could contribute to conflict resolution if there were credible peace negotiations (with Fano and the OLA) or if key parts of the Pretoria Agreement for Tigray were implemented. The TPLF and the government have recently committed themselves to the latter, including the orderly return of hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons to the areas in western and southern Tigray that were occupied by Amhara forces during the war. The consultations could provide a forum for the ethnic groups in the conflict-affected regions to put forward their ideas on co-existence at the national level. Of course, this can only succeed if the political and armed groups that are involved trust the independence of the ENDC, for example by appointing additional commissioners in a second phase.

Finally, the national dialogue should be closely coordinated with other peacebuilding initiatives. In April 2024, the National Security Council, which Abiy chairs, committed to coordinating the government's various approaches to conflict resolution. In addition to the national dialogue, these include transitional justice; the demobilisation, disarmament, and reintegration of former combatants; the reconstruction of infrastructure in conflict areas; the strengthening of law enforcement agencies; and the fight against disinformation. In this context, however, the National Security Council also mentioned that it is sometimes necessary to deploy the armed forces "to maintain peace". One task of the yet-to-be-established institutions of transitional justice would be to analyse the different historical interpretations and perspectives that have probably already come to light in the course of the ENDC consultations.

The demobilisation of combatants, the disbanding of militias, and accounting for past violations of fundamental rights require a basic level of trust in state institutions. All of these measures should be embedded in an integrated peace architecture that also includes dialogue formats at the local and regional levels. Those who

repeatedly raise the expectations of victims through consultations, initiatives, and announcements also increase the pressure to actually bring about improvements in concrete living conditions. Peacebuilding for the sake of appearances, on the other hand, is likely to further fuel anger, frustration, and disappointment among the population.

Ultimately, all peacebuilding instruments face similar challenges to those of the national dialogue. The government – whose actions significantly (if not solely) promote conflicts, sow mistrust, and endanger the civilian population – cannot guarantee the independence and effectiveness of these projects. These are entry points for international actors.

Implications for international players

International actors are already providing significant support for the national dialogue process. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) is coordinating the financial and technical assistance as part of a larger peacebuilding programme. The European Union and several member states, including Germany, as well as Norway are financing the ENDC's work via UNDP with 7 million euros. In addition, technical expertise and training, which began several years before the ENDC was established, is being provided by the Berghof Foundation on behalf of the German Federal Foreign Office and other international partners.

The international players are endeavouring to perform a difficult balancing act. On the one hand, they want to use the national dialogue to strengthen an instrument of peacebuilding in a context where conflicts are often dealt with using violence and repression. On the other hand, external support lends the process additional legitimacy, as confirmed by Ethiopian interlocutors. The international partners should be aware that they also assume a certain responsibility for the effectiveness of the national dialogue.



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Persuading Ethiopia's government to take a constructive stance on the national dialogue and other mechanisms for reconciliation and conflict resolution requires an extremely sensitive and considered approach. Germany should work with the Ethiopian government to advance peace negotiations in Amhara and Oromia. Such efforts on the part of Addis Ababa as well as progress in the implementation of the Pretoria Agreement in Tigray should be prerequisites of further international support for the national dialogue in these regions. In any case, funds for the dialogue and peacebuilding as a whole should not flow directly to the government, but should be channelled in a targeted and transparent manner to the relevant institutions, such as the ENDC and their activities.

Ethiopia's international partners should monitor the continued implementation of the national dialogue closely. With regard to their stance on the process, they should maintain a continuous dialogue with opposition and human rights representatives who take a differentiated view of the process. Some observers are already calling for the dialogue process to be paused so that it can be reformed and supplemented by a dialogue with the elites. Experiences with other countries such as Sudan and Yemen show that inordinate external support for a flawed national dialogue can legitimise authoritarian conflict management. The international promoters and facilitators of the national dialogue should be careful to make a clear distinction between the process and possible outcomes. They should not allow themselves to be used by the Ethiopian leadership for projects that do not improve the living conditions of the population but merely serve to enhance the government's image.

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