



## THE PARADOX OF NATIONALISM IN ETHIOPIAN POLITICS: AN UNRESOLVED BARRIER TO MULTINATIONAL NATION-BUILDING

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**ABSTRACT:** Ethiopia's political landscape has undergone significant transformation since the political reforms of 2018, coinciding with a resurgence of nationalist sentiments that threaten the country's multinational nation-building project. This study examines the paradox of rising ultra-nationalism in post-reform Ethiopia and its implications for multinational nation-building, analyzing how competing ethnic nationalist movements challenge political integration and national cohesion. Employing a qualitative desk research methodology, this study synthesizes existing literature, policy documents, public discourse, and academic publications on Ethiopian nationalism, ethnic federalism, and nation-building processes from 1991 to the present. The analytical framework integrates primordialist and modernist theories of nationalism with institutional analysis of Ethiopia's ethnic federal system. The findings reveal that Ethiopia's ethnic federalism, while designed to accommodate diversity, has paradoxically institutionalized ethnic divisions and facilitated the rise of ultra-nationalist movements. The political reform has reinvigorated competing nationalist narratives, particularly between Amhara and Oromo nationalist movements, creating an existential challenge to multinational nation-building. The study argues that without deliberate institutional reforms to foster "nesting identity" and intergroup cohesion, the current trajectory of polarized nationalism threatens Ethiopia's survival as a multinational state. Policy recommendations include institutional mechanisms for national reconciliation, addressing structural demands, and educational reforms to promote inclusive citizenship.

**KEYWORDS:** Ethiopia, Ethnic Federalism, Identity Politics, Nationalism, Nation-Building.



## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Ethiopia has witnessed dramatic political circumstances that have fundamentally altered the country's political landscape. Following decades of authoritarian rule under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the political reform initiated in 2018 ushered in unprecedented political liberalization, including expanded media freedom, the opening of political space, and the release of political prisoners. However, coupled with these reforms, a new phenomenon has emerged: the reinvigoration of nationalism discourse that has become a significant predicament for nation-building in the country.

The trend has led to the proliferation of extreme forms of nationalism—ultranationalism—that poses a fundamental threat to the multinational nation-building project that Ethiopia has pursued for decades. The coming and reinvigoration of political forces and figures established along ethnic lines following the political reform have accelerated the surfacing of extreme nationalist groups. This resurgence of nationalist sentiment occurs within the context of Ethiopia's unique federal experiment: the 1995 constitution established an ethnic-based federal system designed to accommodate the country's more than 80 ethno-linguistic groups. The essential complexity in studying nations and nationalism lies in finding satisfactory definitions of these fundamental concepts. Nationalism has been used to describe a process, a type of feeling or identity, a form of political rhetoric, an ideology, a principle, and a socio-political movement. In Ethiopia's case, this complexity is compounded by the institutionalization of ethnic federalism, which has created a paradox: a system designed to manage diversity appears to have intensified ethnic divisions.

Nationalism in Ethiopia exists in paradoxical forms that have molded the political orientations and practices of the state and various groups. While ethnic federalism was designed to answer age-old questions of ethnic grievances and inequality, its implementation has led to the emergence of competing nationalist narratives that threaten national integration. The nation-building and national consensus process is hampered by ferocious conflicts of interest among extreme nationalist groups, each purporting sundry political interests founded on historical narratives that challenge political integration.

This study contributes to the broader literature on nationalism, federalism, and nation-building in multi-ethnic societies. By focusing on the Ethiopian case, it provides insights into the challenges of managing diversity through federal arrangements and the risks of institutionalizing ethnic divisions. The findings have practical implications for policymakers seeking to promote national cohesion while respecting ethnic diversity. This study employs a qualitative desk research approach to analyze the paradox of nationalism in Ethiopian politics and its implications for nation-building. The research design is descriptive-analytical, aiming to examine the complex historical nature and dynamics of nationalism and multinational building processes in contemporary Ethiopia. Documentary sources include declarations from religious organizations, official government records, and constitutional laws have been employed for the analysis of the theme.

This study addresses the following research questions: How has Ethiopia's ethnic federal system shaped the evolution of nationalist movements since 1991? What factors explain the resurgence of ultra-nationalism following the 2018 political reform? How do competing nationalist narratives (particularly Amhara and Oromo nationalism) challenge multinational



nation-building in Ethiopia? What institutional mechanisms are necessary to reconcile the paradox of nationalist aspirations within a multinational state framework?

### **Conceptualizing Nationalism and Variants of Nationalism**

Understanding the process of nation-building begins with comprehending the idea of the nation, and with the nation, the state comes into existence in the contemporary world (Grotenhuis, 2016). Since the 1970s, students of nationalism have increasingly been considered as falling into two great camps: primordialists versus modernists. Primordialists tend to view nationalism as a variant of ethnicity, often underlining its abstract elements and arguing that many modern nations have evolved continuously out of pre-modern ethnic formations. They depict nations based on natural and organic communities that define the identities of members who feel an innate and emotionally strong bond. Natural nations, in this view, have the natural right to self-determination (Brown, 2000).

Modernists, on the other hand, prefer to view nations as concomitants of the emergence of modern states and economies, often emphasizing their ideological aspect and seeing them as an indication of the plastic and socially constructed nature of ethnicity. For Gellner (1983), nationalism is associated with the emergence of a high culture typical of industrialized and urbanized societies.

Nationalism is fundamentally the making of combined claims, on behalf of a population, to identity, jurisdiction, and territory. By introducing the notion of “ethnicity” (or “ethnie”) as “a pre-modern cultural community” applying as a basis for a nation, scholars have sought to bridge the modernist outlook of “nationalism (as political consciousness)” and the primordialist thought of “nationalism (as a cultural sentiment)” (Hearn, 2006; Assefa, 2018).

Traditionally, nationalism has been divided into ethnic and civic variants. Civic nationalism is rooted in citizenship and the individual’s ability to connect with the state, whereas ethnic nationalism is less inclusive because it is based on the myth of common descent (Brown, 2000).

Lane and Ersson (2005) identify two elements that must be considered when examining ethnic nationalisms. First, there is the orientation of a nationalist movement—whether nationalism targets an empire or a colony makes a significant difference. Second, nationalist movements are associated with one of two principal objectives: unification versus separatism. The objective pursued makes an enormous difference in the trajectory and outcomes of nationalist movements. The intensity of nationalism in a given society can be weighted using various indicators, such as secrecy or structural factors, exclusive citizenship, socioeconomic marginalization, and more harmful direct factors such as media discourse, support for nationalist political parties, and violence against particular groups (Bieber, 2018).

### **Nation-Building, Multinational States and Federalism**

Nation-building was a profoundly important issue in the 1950s and 1960s and carried a strong conceptual link to modernization theories of development. During the Cold War, both the United States and the USSR used nation-building as a strategy to contain the influence of their adversary (Scott, 2007). During the 1980s, state- and nation-building were firmly off the international agenda, with the focus turning to reducing the role of the state and unleashing



the market. It was only in the 1990s that state-building began to reemerge as the importance of “good governance” was increasingly discussed (Fukuyama, 2004).

Nation-building denotes the broader process of developing a shared sense of political community capable of binding together the population of a given state. It is the most common form of a process of collective identity formation with a view to legitimizing public power within a given territory. This is an essentially indigenous process that often projects a meaningful future while drawing on existing traditions, institutions, and customs, redefining them as national characteristics to support the nation’s claim to sovereignty and uniqueness (von Bogdandy and Wolfrum, 2005).

A successful nation-building process produces a cultural projection of the nation containing a certain set of assumptions, values, and beliefs that can function as the legitimizing foundation of a state structure. Nation-building may also be viewed as the process through which the boundaries of the modern state and those of the national community become congruent, with the desired outcome being national integration (Mylonas, 2020; von Bogdandy & Wolfrum, 2005).

Scholars observe nation-building from different perspectives involving the sociopolitical and political objectives and strategies expected to be inculcated by nation-building. It is explained as the accommodation of communally disparate entities into a single nation’s institutional framework, conveying a shared sense of political identity and allegiance to the symbolic community defined by such a nation’s founding ideology (Endalemaw, 2015).

A nation-state can be composed of various nations. Such multinational states depend on the compatibility of the various nation-building processes of their constituent nations. For a while, incompatibility may be papered over, and expressions of nationally motivated dissent may be repressed; in the long run, however, such frictions can be a cause for state weakness (von Bogdandy and Wolfrum, 2005). Without strong cohesion of the various ethnic groups and robust national sentiment, the realization of a democratic, strong, and prosperous multinational state cannot be achieved.

Societies with deep divisions require strong social capital that connects them across ethno-national and religious boundaries. Building institutions and systems that nurture shared values—such as strengthening common bonds that tie the people and a shared and inclusive history, inclusive symbols and monuments, the deliberate promotion of common citizenship that transcends ethnic and religious countrywide protection of citizenship rights through courts, as well as leaders that bridge ethno-national boundaries—are critical to counterbalancing rising ethno-nationalism, building a sense of shared belonging, and maintaining the interdependence between unity and diversity (Asefa, 2023).

As Steytler and Ghai (2013) argue, “The slogan ‘unity in diversity’ means more than the recognition and accommodation of diversity; it also entails the nesting of such diversity” through policies and processes that counter the centrifugal forces unleashed by self-rule. It is about “nesting identity” through federalism—an identity that is aware of itself as well as the identity of others. It assumes intergroup interaction for building cohesion among groups, rather than the non-interactive existence of parallel and segregated identities.



## **The “New Wave” of Nationalism**

Ake (1990) describes a second or “new nationalism” as a fresh wave spreading across Africa. The first phase of nationalism took place in the process of decolonization and was directed against colonial powers. This second nationalism is no longer directed against other countries but against denizens (non-citizens) living within an African state. This kind of nationalism is directly related to internal xenophobia. The inclusivity of early independence is gone; now the exclusion of social groups within the same society determines the new nationalism.

The main reasons for the new nationalism lie in the process of globalization and growing national inequalities in respective countries. While the political power of ethnic separatism appears to be increasing significantly in many countries, traditional nationalism is under pressure.

Traditional right-wing parties are finding it increasingly difficult to mobilize support, while new aggressive nationalist parties have made considerable entrance into the electorate (Lane and Ersson, 2005).

From the very beginning of political parties in many African states, ethno-nationalism has served as an important vehicle for social mobilization. People have been instructed to vote for their ethnic parties and representatives. In countries like Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or Kenya, the lack of national identity and the strong ethnic and regional ties of political parties made it impossible to achieve national consensus. Nigeria and Congo fell into years of conflict that has proved difficult to fully resolve (Zahorik, 2011).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **The Nationalism Paradox**

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework that combines insights from primordialist and modernist approaches to nationalism with institutional analysis of federal systems. The central analytical concept guiding this study is the “nationalism paradox”—the observation that institutional arrangements designed to manage ethnic diversity can, under certain conditions, intensify the very divisions they seek to accommodate.

The framework posits that Ethiopia’s ethnic federalism represents an institutional manifestation of this paradox. By constitutionalizing ethnicity as the primary basis of political organization, the federal system has reified ethnic identities: transforming fluid, contextual identities into fixed administrative categories; created structural incentives: encouraging political mobilization along ethnic rather than cross-cutting lines; and fostered competitive nationalism: generating zero-sum competition among ethnic groups for resources and recognition.

### **The Institutional Legacy Thesis**

Building on Semir’s (2019) institutional legacy argument, this study examines how institutional arrangements introduced during different historical periods have shaped contemporary nationalist movements. The framework identifies three critical junctures: Imperial period: centralized state-building that privileged certain ethnic groups, generating





reactive ethno-nationalist movements. Derg period (1974–1991): Marxist-Leninist influence that elevated the “national question” to central political importance and the EPRDF period (1991–2018): ethnic federalism that institutionalized ethnic-based political organization.

### **The Nesting Identity Framework**

To analyze potential solutions to the nationalism paradox, this study employs the “nesting identity” framework proposed by Steytler and Ghai (2013). This framework emphasizes that successful multinational states require multiple, non-exclusive identities where citizens feel belonging to both smaller (sub-state) communities and larger, overarching political communities; intergroup interaction for building cohesion, rather than parallel and segregated identities; and institutional mechanisms that encourage interdependence between unity and diversity.

### **Historical Evolution of Nationalism in Ethiopia**

The origins of nationalist movements in Ethiopia are largely related to the historical state-building process and the expansion of modern education in the late 20th century. These historical developments, coupled with the exclusive political narrative of ethnicity, have strongly influenced intellectuals to construct radicalized ethnic identities (Girma, 2019).

Zahorik (2011) identifies four distinct phases in the evolution of nationalism in Ethiopia: the Adwa Phase (1896): The victory over the Italian army at Adwa in 1896 created an image of Ethiopia as a unique African power capable of defeating European colonialism. The Battle of Adwa protected the centuries-old process of Ethiopian “unification” and fostered a pan-Ethiopian nationalist sentiment. The second one is the territorial phase: this phase concerned the Eritrea-Somalia issue, Eritrea’s incorporation into the Ethiopian Federation, and the Ogaden issue, which challenged Pan-Somalian ideology. Nationalism during this period focused on territorial integrity and external threats. The next one is the Revolutionary Phase: Civil unrest and protests against the centralized power of Imperial Ethiopia and the rise of various associations and Marxist ideology characterized this phase. The quest for modernization and reform among intellectuals led to the formulation of the “national question”—a concept borrowed from Marxist ideology (Merera, 2002). The last one is termed the ethno-nationalist phase: The final phase marked by ethnic nationalist movements across Ethiopia arose in response to the military-socialist Derg regime (1974–1991). During the 1970s, many of these groups were inspired by Marxist-Leninism, though with varying degrees of eclecticism on ideological and practical issues.

### **The Dual Nature of Ethiopian Nationalism**

In the Ethiopian context, nationalism is commonly perceived as a dual-purpose phenomenon: as a moral guise for nation-builders and as an ideological tool for ethnic groups. This dual purpose has dominated Ethiopian politics for the last half-century (Girma, 2019).

During the imperial and socialist periods, political elites sought to rally all Ethiopians by building a sense of Ethiopianism aimed at overcoming ethnic divisions, mobilizing the populace against outside invaders, and encouraging pursuit of economic priorities for national unity. Ethiopian nationalists have drawn their ideologies from various political, religious, and cultural experiences. Memories of past glory, independence, and victories over colonial rule became the core of national ideology (Gebrewold, 2009).



Pan-Ethiopian nationalists seek to overcome political challenges affecting national identity by remembering the past and re-emphasizing the “common” history. However, this commonality is contested due to the presence of strong ethnic nationalist movements.

Ethnic nationalism emerged as a reaction to what some non-Amharic-speaking elites viewed as “nation destruction”—attempts to build a state through educational, religious, political, and military institutions that privileged certain groups. The influence of the Marxist-Leninist movement since the late 20th century paved the way for the emergence and explosion of nationalist movements in Ethiopia (Semir, 2019).

In 1991, groups of ethno-nationalist organizations commenced a new radical strategy of recognition of ethnic diversity with the task of reshuffling the Ethiopian state from centralized to federal. The Constitution was passed in accordance with a commitment to democracy, ethnic-based federalism, political freedom, and human rights. As a result, ethnic federalism’s constitutional endorsement established national citizenship, ethnolinguistic self-determination, political representation, and decision-making at all administrative levels (Endalemaw, 2015).

### **Ethnic Federalism: Promise and Paradox**

Ethiopia adopted federalism in 1995 primarily to hold together the ethnolinguistic groups it includes. Although this was not the first time Ethiopia had resorted to federalism, the 1995 federal experiment is by far the most complex one, involving novel normative commitments and institutional configurations (Berihun, 2023).

In its paradox forms, nationalism existed in Ethiopia and molded political orientations. The 1991 change appeared to offer a new approach: recognition of ethnic diversity with the reshuffling of the Ethiopian state from centralized to federal. The Constitution established national citizenship alongside ethnolinguistic self-determination, political representation at federal institutions, decision-making at all administrative levels, and related policies acknowledging ethnic diversity.

It is widely purported that ethnic federalism, as Ethiopia’s own experience demonstrates, far from subduing ethnic nationalism, has encouraged and aided in its growth. The marriage of federalism with ethnicity invokes too many difficulties to be viable or workable. By its very nature, such a system relies on dividing citizens along ethnic lines and institutionalizes their division. Once reified in this way, ethnic differences have very little chance of fading away over time (Alemante, 2003).

By placing ethnicity at the center of national policy-making and using it as a tool of division and dominance, the system has continued to deepen and widen old lines of political polarization while adding new ones. The democratic opening evident at the beginning of the transitional political order amounted to nothing but a deception, designed to elevate citizens’ enthusiasm for the regime change and gain international legitimacy. The institutional solution of ethnic federalism was primarily designed to answer age-old questions of ethnic grievances and inequality but did not result in the desired outcome. Instead, the implementation led to the emergence of a dominant-party state made possible via the ruling coalition’s successful creation of a party structure that dominated politics across all levels of the federal setting (Yohannes, 2021).



## **The 2018 Reform and the Surge of Ultra-Nationalism**

Ethiopia underwent political reform following mass youth protests against the regime, which basically aimed at respecting political and human rights and addressing prevailing injustice. The regime initially took swift measures to redress grievances and opened up wider political and democratic institutions, including media freedom. Subsequently, new political developments exhibited in the country, albeit the much-talked-about reform measures ended up reinvigorating nationalist sentiments (Semir, 2019).

Various ethno-nationalisms could be corroborated in the last half-century in Ethiopia along ethnic lines, among which the most robust is Oromo nationalism, looked upon as the antithesis of Ethiopian nationalism. Oromo nationalism has served as an ideology of struggle against government for the past half-century. It assumed various characteristics under different historical circumstances.

One recent phenomenon has been the appearance of Amhara nationalism. Compared to other sub-state nationalisms, it's a late arrival. The term "Amhara" has been loosely referred to historically, as has Amhara nationalism, a relatively recent trend as a popular movement. The Amhara ethnic identity has long been subsumed within the broader Ethiopian nationalism, making it difficult to differentiate between the two. The rise of Amhara nationalism coincides with the rise of other competing nationalisms, such as Oromo nationalism (Semir, 2019).

Political balance of power is a fundamental concern for the country's major ethnic groups. For Oromo nationalists, the Amhara elite has profited from past power imbalances at the expense of others. Meanwhile, the Amhara elite sees the Oromo as the new rulers of the country, and this is viewed as a step toward further Amhara conquest. Thus, attempts by one to end past power imbalances lead to fear of new power imbalances being created for the other (ibid).

These elements in the two nationalisms (ethnic and pan-Ethiopian) that clashed during the era before the EPRDF seemed to find peace for a while as they both focused on the EPRDF as a mutual enemy. However, that was only face value. A deeper understanding showed that the fundamental disagreement between the two forces remained alive for ideological and methodological reasons (ibid, 2019).

## **Manifestations of Ultra-Nationalism**

In recent times, ultra-nationalistic sentiments are expressed in mob activities, including mass killings, evictions, exclusion in political and economic spheres of life, and looting and destroying businesses of other ethnic groups orchestrated by ethnic elites and executed by youth groups. This precarious move in diverse and interdependent societies in Ethiopia entails further division of the peoples and the failure of multinational building.

The proliferation of ethnic-based media on the eve and following of the political reform period fueled extreme nationalist sentiment. Media, particularly satellite televisions and social media, usually center their rhetoric on antagonistic historical narratives. Many have been founded to air the grievances of particular ethnic groups and have little intention to reconcile differences or stand up for the solidarity of the peoples of the country at large.





Ethnic extremism is a conviction in and appearance of a political identity based on race, region, blood, and language affinity, the aim being to deal with and abolish divergent views, individuals, groups, or institutions. While loyalty to one's ethnic group is an essential human quality that should be accepted and respected, when ethnic loyalty becomes violent with the aim of excluding others, it turns into violent ethnic extremism (Yonas, 2020).

Ethnic federalism made individuals think in terms of their ethnic personality: not as Ethiopian, but as Amhara, Bertha, Gumuz, Oromo, Sidama, Somali, Tigre, Wolaita—in a nutshell, “Ethnic federalism, which encouraged conditions for savage ethnic radicalism, is an existential risk to Ethiopia as a state and society with negative implications for the steadiness of the Horn of Africa” (ibid.).

### **Implications for Nation-Building**

The interethnic clashes in Ethiopia are both effects and causes of the growth of conflicting ethno-nationalisms. With more conflict comes more ethnic mobilization, leading to more hardened nationalist rhetoric, leading to even more intense conflict. This is the unusual and frightening aspect of nationalism in Ethiopia, which is at increasing levels year to year.

In Ethiopia, multination-building is a contested process, and the path to consensus is neither linear nor guaranteed. In a country as ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse as Ethiopia, reaching agreement is particularly difficult. This has become arduous at a time when generations raised under the EPRDF are increasingly marginalized from the actual interethnic life experience of previous generations (Shimelis and Solen, 2020).

Political institutions form opposing nationalisms, which further undermine those institutions, leading to further nationalist rivalries, which in turn lead to violence. National identities already exist, and by targeting multiple characteristics of national identities to achieve specific goals, such as shared values and beliefs, the nation-building project becomes entangled with political strategy (Semir, 2019).

### **Comparative Perspective**

There are positive and negative implications when appraising Ethiopian ethnic federalism in comparison to multination federalism in the West. On the one hand, there is nothing intrinsically illiberal or undemocratic about the concept of ethnic federalism; several well-known criticisms become less persuasive when Western experiences are taken into account. However, Ethiopia lacks the prerequisites that allowed multination federalism to be successfully implemented and voluntarily adopted in the West. Therefore, ethnic federalism in Ethiopia is likely to remain a risky experiment (Kymlicka, 2005).

Successful nation-building through the degree of ethno-political inclusion in a country's power structures and citizens' identification with their nation-state is recommended. The state should invest in this aspect. Principally, the multinational building project should accord much attention to the strong cohesion of diverse groups. The prime aim of integrating ethnic groups and healing wounds needs to be handled exclusively.

Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia has indeed transformed ethnic consciousness from a cultural sentiment to a political ideology. By constitutionalizing ethnicity as the primary basis of political organization, the federal system has reified ethnic identities and created structural



incentives for political mobilization along ethnic lines. The finding aligns with Alemante's (2003) observation that ethnic federalism "relies on dividing citizens along ethnic lines and institutionalizes their division."

The 2018 political reform, while expanding political freedoms, created conditions for ultra-nationalist resurgence by liberalizing political space without addressing the institutionalized ethnic divisions embedded in the federal system. Political liberalization without institutional and structural reforms can exacerbate rather than resolve ethnic tensions.

The analysis reveals that competing nationalist narratives, particularly between Amhara and Oromo nationalism, represent fundamentally incompatible visions of the Ethiopian state. While Oromo nationalism positions itself as an antithesis to Ethiopian nationalism, Amhara nationalism has emerged as a defensive response to perceived marginalization. This creates a zero-sum dynamic that challenges multinational nation-building.

Sustainable nation-building requires institutional mechanisms that foster "nesting identity" rather than parallel ethnic enclaves. The current system's emphasis on nationalities' right to self-rule without corresponding mechanisms for intergroup cohesion has created a centrifugal dynamic.

The Ethiopian case contributes to the broader literature on nationalism and federalism in several ways. First, it illustrates the nationalism paradox in a particularly acute form—demonstrating how institutional recognition of ethnic diversity can intensify rather than manage ethnic divisions. This finding has implications for other multi-ethnic societies considering federal arrangements. Second, the study highlights the importance of institutional sequencing. The Ethiopian experience suggests that federal arrangements that institutionalize ethnic divisions without corresponding mechanisms for intergroup cohesion may create path dependencies that are difficult to reverse. Third, the analysis contributes to understanding the relationship between democratization and ethnic conflict. The Ethiopian case suggests that rapid political liberalization in contexts with institutionalized ethnic divisions can unleash centrifugal forces rather than foster democratic consolidation.

Building sustainable states and peace in Ethiopia requires addressing core issues without which a secure foundation for peace will not materialize. This entails generating consent of competing ethno-nationalists to channel their demands within the framework of the Ethiopian state, democratizing the state, and decentralizing decision-making processes and institutional competence in protecting individual and collective rights. National reconciliation over historical injustices is a prerequisite for moving forward. Without addressing historical grievances, competing nationalist narratives will continue to fuel polarization.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined the paradox of nationalism in Ethiopian politics and its implications for multinational nation-building. The analysis reveals that Ethiopia's ethnic federalism, while designed to accommodate diversity and address historical grievances, has paradoxically institutionalized ethnic divisions and facilitated the rise of ultra-nationalist movements. The political reform of 2018, rather than assuaging nationalist tensions, has reinvigorated competing nationalist narratives, particularly between Amhara and Oromo nationalist



movements. The study finds that these competing nationalist movements represent fundamentally incompatible visions of the Ethiopian state, creating an existential challenge to multinational nation-building.

The analysis demonstrates that without deliberate institutional reforms to foster “nesting identity” and intergroup cohesion, the current trajectory of polarized nationalism threatens Ethiopia’s survival as a multinational state. The study supports the theoretical proposition that institutional arrangements recognizing ethnic diversity without corresponding mechanisms for intergroup interaction and shared identity formation can intensify rather than manage ethnic divisions.

The recent political reform ushered in a new wave of nationalism that has transcended levels seen in the pre-reform period. This episode, with its simmering past experience, exacerbates the ongoing nation-building process and will taint the process ahead as nationalist sentiments hardly position themselves within the grand project of multinational building. The existing political parties and ethnic-based media mushroomed in the recent past, and the injustice and inequality aspects of the country in the last century have partly widened cleavages that the nation has been unable to cure. Fundamental steps are needed to determine how the nation-building process should be enacted and which actors should be involved. The contemporary opportunity that has witnessed political “glasnost” should be used to assuage the paradox of these nationalist aspirations. Without such deliberate efforts, the paradox of nationalism in Ethiopian politics will remain an unresolved barricade to multinational nation-building, with potentially catastrophic consequences for the country and the broader Horn of Africa region.

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