

Research Article

Ethnic Identity and National Unity in Ethiopia: Challenges and Opportunities for Building National Consensus

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Abstract

Background: Ethiopia's rich ethnic diversity has long been a defining feature of its social landscape. The coexistence of numerous ethnic groups within the country offers both opportunities for cultural enrichment and challenges for the formation of a coherent national identity. Historical, political and social dynamics have shaped the complex interplay between ethnic identity and the quest for national unity, warranting a critical examination of the converging forces influencing the socio-political fabric of Ethiopia. *Objective:* This study aims to systematically analyze the challenges and opportunities related to ethnic identity and national unity in Ethiopia in order to identify ways to build a sustainable national consensus amidst ethnic diversity. By shedding light on the nuanced dynamics of ethnic identity formation, social cohesion and political agency, the study aims to identify strategies that promote inclusive nation building while respecting the diversity of Ethiopia's ethnic mosaic. *Main Findings:* The study examined the historical roots of ethnic identity formation in Ethiopia and shed light on the legacy of various cultural traditions, historical grievances and political developments that have shaped contemporary perceptions of ethnicity. It also critically assessed the impact of ethnic federalism, decentralized governance and ethno-nationalist aspirations on the overall quest for national unity and cohesive statehood. Furthermore, the study explored the challenges posed by inter-ethnic tensions, identity-based conflicts and socio-political fragmentation, while identifying the potential opportunities for promoting dialog, reconciliation and inclusive citizenship to strengthen national consensus. *Methodology:* Using a qualitative approach, the research draws on a comprehensive analysis of secondary sources, including academic papers, historical documents, policy papers and ethnographic accounts. By synthesizing insights from different disciplines such as anthropology, political science and social history, the study has created a holistic understanding of the multi-layered dimensions of ethnic identity and national unity in Ethiopia. *Conclusion:* The complex dynamics of ethnic identity and national unity in Ethiopia underscore the need for inclusive policies that respect the diverse cultural heritage while promoting a common national identity, recognizing historical grievances, addressing inter-ethnic tensions and fostering dialog. Balancing the diverse ethnic mosaic within a unifying national narrative is critical to moving towards sustainable nation building.

Keywords

Ethnic Politics, Ethnic Identity, National Unity, National Consensus, Ethiopia

1. Introduction

In Ethiopia, where nationalism and ethnicity interact to create opportunities and problems for reaching consensus,

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ethnic identity and national unity are vital factors. Ethiopia's political environment has been shaped by the processes of ethnic nationalism, which have historical roots in Marxist-Leninist ideology [39]. In countries that welcome immigrants, such as the United States, preserving national cohesion in the face of ethnic variety is a typical difficulty, as the relationship between national and ethnic identity shapes responses to political values [45]. The intricate relationships between ethnic groups in Ethiopia are highlighted by the complexity of ethnic identities.

An array of about 80 ethnic groups, each with distinct cultures and customs, make up Ethiopia's ethnic landscape [20]. With Ethiopia's post-Derg era establishment of ethnic federalism, the country was conceptualized as a collection of multiple "nations, nationalities, and peoples" in an attempt to acknowledge and accept its mixed ethnic makeup. The transition enabled the nation to evolve into a federal state with decentralized governance that embraces multi-ethnic variety and formalizes ethnic identity [50].

Ethiopia's national unity is greatly influenced by ethnic identity. In the framework of ethnic federalism, the politicization of ethnicity has fueled ethnic divisions, resulting in uniqueness and distinctions that may impede attempts to forge a nation and shared goals [1]. The past regimes administration laid the foundation for the nation's current ethnic politics and fighting, underscoring the difficulties governing ethnic diversity [9]. However, the reality is different according to other scholars. Notwithstanding the problems, ethnically federated Ethiopia is viewed as an attempt to balance national unity and diversity in reaction to past mishandling of ethno linguistic and cultural diversity [2].

The complexity of ethnic-based federalism presents obstacles to Ethiopia's efforts to forge agreement. Although ethnically diverse teams can perform better in various areas, such as innovation and job satisfaction, the nation faces disputes over ethnic groups' territorial limits [15]. Various clans have renegotiated their identities and status due to the federal restructuring to align political and ethnic boundaries, demonstrating the complex relationship between ethnicity and government [33].

To sum up, Ethiopia's heterogeneous ethnic terrain offers chances and obstacles for fostering agreement and national cohesion. Ethnic federalism was adopted to rectify past wrongs and take into account the nation's heterogeneous ethnic population. Fostering a strong sense of national identity is severely hampered by the politicization of ethnicity and the difficulties in regulating ethnic identities. To overcome these obstacles and maximize Ethiopia's ethnic variety for national growth and cohesion, balancing territorial conflicts, inclusive government, and self-rule with shared rule is imperative.

2. Methodology

In order to investigate the intricacies of ethnic identity and national unity in Ethiopia, a qualitative research methodology

based on secondary sources was employed. This approach involves the systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of existing literature, scholarly articles, government reports, and relevant documents. By applying content analysis techniques, key themes, patterns, and discrepancies in the discourse on ethnic identity and national unity are identified. In this way, the complexity of the challenges and opportunities for building national consensus amidst the different ethnic identities in Ethiopia is comprehensively explored.

3. Ethnic Diversity in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is renowned for having more than 80 distinct ethnic groups, contributing to its great ethnic diversity [42]. Ethiopia's ethnic diversity can be linked to critical historical occurrences like the Italian occupation in the 1930s. Around this time, Ethiopian tribes started to become more ethnically diverse, mirroring the colonial processes that other regions of Africa had gone through [55]. Southern Ethiopia's different ethnic groups were subjugated by the Amhara people's cultural values and Amharic language in the late 1800s [4]. The historical background was a basis for establishing Ethiopia's ethnic federal system in 1991, which recognized ethnic autonomy while attempting to preserve national unity [52].

The Oromo, Amhara, Tigray, and Somali are some of Ethiopia's largest ethnic groupings. These groups are different in terms of language, culture, and history. For instance, the Oromo are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, and they speak their language, Afaan Oromo. Their customs, music, and attire are distinctive from their rich cultural past. On the other hand, the Amhara have a lengthy history in Ethiopia and have shaped politics and culture there. The history of the Tigray people is longstanding, and they speak Tigrinya, which is unique to them. Speaking Somali, the Somali people of Ethiopia lead a pastoralist nomadic lifestyle.

Ethiopia, a nation renowned for its abundant cultural and ethnic variety, has been dealing with issues of unanimity and consensus within the country [13]. There is a lack of elite agreement on several national problems due to the nation's ongoing ethnic disputes and political unrest [25]. The lack of an inclusive national consensus has worsened matters and impeded Ethiopia's attempts to democratize and establish its nation [17, 40]. Harmonizing multiple ethnic interests with the requirement for a shared vision and national consensus has proven difficult due to the nation's ethno linguistically based federal government [35].

Ethiopia's social, political, and economic dynamics are significantly shaped by ethnic identity. There has long been ethnic strife and tension throughout the nation, frequently stemming from rivalry for resources, power, and old grudges. Ethiopia's federal system acknowledges the diversity of ethnic groups and aims to provide regional autonomy to suit them. That being said, there are several drawbacks, such as representation problems, resource distribution, and power dynamics amongst various ethnic groups [42].

In summary, Ethiopia's social fabric is intricately woven together by the richness of its ethnic variety. Numerous ethnic groups with distinct cultural heritage and historical experiences are found throughout the nation. Ethiopian society is more vibrant because of its diversity, but it has also made it more challenging to promote unity within the country and reach consensus. Inclusionary governance, fair resource distribution, and a dedication to communication and reconciliation are necessary for addressing these issues. Ethiopia may capitalize on the diversity of its people to create a more inclusive and cohesive society by accepting and celebrating ethnic diversity and fostering common values and an Ethiopian identity.

4. Historical Context of Ethnic Politics in Ethiopia

In many places, including Africa and especially Ethiopia, ethnic politics have played a significant role in the administration. Ethiopia's political system has changed to place more emphasis on ethnic identities since the introduction of ethnic federalism in 1991 [18]. This action was codified in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia's 1994 Constitution, which made ethnicity a cornerstone organizing factor for the government, representation, and political mobilization [33]. There has been discussion over the implementation of ethnic federalism; some academics contend that it has fueled an upsurge in ethno nationalism and jeopardized the country's unity [30, 47].

The intricate interaction between imperial control and post-Italian occupation has had a significant impact on Ethiopia's historical trajectory of ethnic politics. The absorption of ethnic groups like the Oromo shows how European colonial powers impacted Ethiopia's ethnic landscape [31]. The ethnic variety and tensions that continue to influence Ethiopian politics today result from the established historical framework. Additionally, ethnicity's predominance in political discourse has formed Ethiopia's political environment, impacting identities and day-to-day politics. After establishing ethnic federalism, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) reorganized the state in 1991 based on ethnic divides [1]. Ethiopia had substantial upheaval after the Derg rule, including the 1990s governmental reconstruction as an ethnic federation [33]. This reorganization changed the dynamics of power and identity along ethnic lines in addition to changing government.

As a result of the shift to ethnic federalism, ethnically oriented federal states known as *kililoch* (regional states) were established, further solidifying tribal divisions across the nation [38]. Nationwide ethnic tensions and conflicts have resulted from this reconfiguration [11]. Formalizing ethnic politics in Ethiopia has resulted from the use of ethnicity as a weapon for political representation and entitlement [28]. In Ethiopia, disputes over inclusion, representation, and power-sharing have primarily involved the Oromo, Tigray and

Amhara ethnic groups. Tensions over resources have also contributed to confrontations between pastoralist populations, such as the Oromo and Somali [14, 34].

Literature claims that Ethiopia's shift to ethnic-based federalism and fight for territorial control resulted in the reappearance of ethnic and tribal divisions, which exacerbated social inequality and regional differences [43]. The introduction of ethnic federalism has also been associated with new challenges, such as ethnic competition and conflicts within the federation [11]. Although ethnic federalism was implemented to address historical injustices and inequalities, it has led to new issues, such as the growth of political parties with ethnic bases and limited ethno-nationalist ideologies that threaten social stability [32]. Within the framework of democratic republicanism, the conversation on Ethiopia after 1991 has remained focused on essential topics, including land, development, peace, conflict, secularism, and religion [56].

Moreover, Ethiopia's power structure and sense of togetherness have been significantly impacted by the politicization of ethnicity within the framework of ethnic federation. Ethnic federalism has deepened ethnic tensions and conflicts while being initially viewed as a viable nation-building tool in a heterogeneous country such as Ethiopia [24, 1]. Interethnic conflict and division inside the nation have been exacerbated by competition among various ethnic groups for resources and territory, as well as by the institutionalization of ethnic identities [11].

Furthermore, political elites' exploitation of ethnic identities has had a big impact on how Ethiopian politics are shaped. The prevailing ideological narratives propagated by elites inside the state have fostered ethnic nationalism, exacerbating ethnic divisions and impeding attempts to construct nations [39, 1]. A coherent national identity is challenging to create because of the difficulties in balancing unity and diversity in the framework of ethnic federalism.

The rise of ethno nationalism in Ethiopia has sparked worries about the stability and unity of the nation. The expansion of ethno political identities in Ethiopia has been studied using data from the World Values Survey, particularly during reforms implemented by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed [30]. Ethiopia's political landscape has faced challenges because of the country's federalism, which aims to balance socialist and democratic values [50].

Ethiopia is still struggling with the effects of ethnic politics today, as evidenced by recent wars like the Tigray War [43]. Minority rights within the framework of ethnic federalism continue to be difficult to achieve because of the necessity to reconcile past wrongs with the difficulties of ethnic variety [28]. Ethiopian society is shaped by a complex interaction of politics, social psychology, and ethnicity, as demonstrated by the dynamics of politicized collective identities that emerged after the Dergue era [29]. Ethnic federalism has, therefore, had both advantageous and disadvantageous effects in Ethiopia. While it sought to correct historical injustices and disparities, it has brought other difficulties, such as conflicts and

tensions between ethnic groups [12]. Conflicts and large-scale relocations have resulted from the problematic implementation of ethnic federalism [15, 3].

In summary, Ethiopia's adoption of ethnic federalism has significantly impacted the nation's political landscape, highlighting the importance of ethnic identities in civic representation and government. The implementation of ethnic federalism has brought forth new issues, such as ethnic tensions and conflicts, despite the original goal of addressing historical injustices. Using ethnicity as a foundation for political mobilization and state organization has its complications, as seen by the discussion around ethnic politics in Ethiopia. In summary, Ethiopia's unique ethnic composition, the lingering effects of imperial governance, and the adoption of ethnic federalism are all intricately linked to the country's historical background of ethnic politics.

5. The Student Movement and Ethno Nationalism in Ethiopia

Ethiopian ethnic nationalism emerged and developed mainly due to the student movement of the 1950s and 1960s. A surge of student activity during this period concentrated on several causes, including civil rights, freedom of expression, and antiwar protests [48]. The movement fits into a more significant worldwide trend: students with advanced degrees were integral to several campaigns and movements. The student movement in Ethiopia contested the narratives and power structures that the imperial elites were sustaining at the time [37].

A closer look at the more extensive background of social and political activities during that period can help explain Ethiopia's rise in ethno nationalism. Worldwide, student activism was influenced by the American civil rights movement and student movements in Western Europe [46]. As part of a broader fight for autonomy and self-determination, Ethiopia saw the emergence of a federal system that acknowledged the rights of many ethnic groups, ultimately achieved by the student movement [28]. Because ethnic groups in Ethiopia have historically been marginalized, there has been a shift towards federalism [28]. However, a number of scholars do not accept the issue of marginalization of specific ethnic groups in the past regimes; instead, there was class conflict all over the country.

Moreover, Ethiopia's student movement was a part of larger campaigns for equality and social justice rather than existing in a vacuum. Ethiopian students' goals were influenced by the US civil rights movement and the African anti-colonial movements [10]. Ethiopian student activism was an attempt to bring about political and social change and a form of resistance against repressive regimes [10].

In conclusion, the Ethiopian political scene and the foundation for the rise of ethnic nationalism were significantly shaped by the student movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Ethiopian students made a vital contribution to the political development of their country by opposing the status quo, supporting self-determination, and taking inspiration from international movements. However, some literature also criticized this, saying it created extremism and disunity in the country.

6. National Unity and Consensus in Ethiopia

Developing a national consensus is frequently regarded as crucial regarding governance or policy choices. It suggests that different parties, irrespective of their associations or histories, unite to discover shared interests and reach a consensus on essential matters. Recall that agreement is a strong force that may unite a country, support decision-making, and influence national policy. National consensus is crucial in determining a nation's course, whether related to social, economic, or political issues. However, the national consensus in Ethiopia lacks essential aspects, including the language, national symbols (such as national holidays and flags), national security and defense, history and sovereignty, and others.

National consensus and unity are essential for a nation to be stable and develop. Ethiopia has struggled with issues about federalism, ethnic diversity, and the pursuit of a single, cohesive identity. To accommodate Ethiopia's multiple identities, ethnic federalism was adopted after 1991 [22]. Ethnic federalism was adopted during the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) era [16]. Nevertheless, this strategy has resulted in a challenging balance between diversity and unity, necessitating the resolution of ethno-cultural disputes [24]. Despite efforts to foster unity, the nation has experienced political instability and ethno-cultural disputes [21].

The significance of taking pre-Italian occupation legacies into account in the quest for national unity has been emphasized as a factor that may influence the promotion of unity [5]. Moreover, political parties have been emphasized as being vital in fostering national consensus and unity, which is necessary in bridging national divisions [7]. The need for a forum for political parties to hold in-depth discussions to reach a national agreement has been emphasized.

Ethiopia's struggle with ethnic nationalism and juggling several identities has also impacted the country's quest for unity. In modern Ethiopia, the conversation about nation, nationalism, and ethnicity has been further enhanced by the self-determination clauses of the constitution [39]. It has been suggested that ethnic federalism, which grants various ethnic groups self-rule, can manage ethnic tensions and advance national unity [3].

Initiations like the Ethiopian Millennium Celebration, which sought to redefine the nation's identity in the face of ethnic federalism and accommodate its multi-ethnic community, have also highlighted Ethiopia's efforts to establish a

single national identity [44] the Great Renaissance Dam project as well. For Ethiopia to overcome issues of national unity, it has been noted that an immediate corrective procedure is required to achieve internal political agreement [8].

In summary, achieving national consensus and unity in Ethiopia is difficult and calls for negotiating the complexities of federalism, historical legacies, and ethnic diversity. Ethiopia should strive toward creating a more cohesive and unified country by having conversations, resolving ethnic conflicts, and fostering a shared national identity.

7. Challenges to Building National Unity in Ethiopia

Building national unity in Ethiopia is extremely difficult because of ethnic-based federalism, power struggles, historical grievances among various ethnic groups, and unresolved conflicts. Ethiopia's adoption of ethnic federalism has had unfavorable effects, such as the breakup of the state [38]. Longstanding ideals of coexistence have been undermined by this system, which has complicated state-society ties and fostered an atmosphere that encourages ethnic hostility and conflict [11]. Ethnic federalism has presented difficulties for nation-building even though it has partly aided in the socio-economic, political, and cultural growth of many areas [41] such as Oromia, Benishangul Gumuz and the Southern areas.

It has been said that Ethiopia's ethnically oriented federal system exacerbates ethnic identity-based conflicts and erodes national cohesion [12]. The escalation of ethno-nationalist movements has posed difficulties for preserving Ethiopia's statehood [39]. Ethnic federalism's politics of ethnicity has exacerbated ethnic tensions and hampered nation-building initiatives [1]. Further complicating the governing structure are anomalous disparities within ethno-parties and component units brought about by the federal system [28]. However, a number of scholars do not accept the issue of marginalization of specific ethnic groups in the past regimes; instead, there was class conflict all over the country.

Moreover, disputes, especially those involving land rights, have been exacerbated by the fight between various ethnic groups for resources and power [23, 36]. Tensions between different ethnic groups have increased due to national corporations' entry into areas along ethnic fault lines that have contested land, intensifying competition and land battles [36]. These conflicts have a long history, and attempts to promote national unity are made more difficult by unsolved grievances and tensions between ethnic groups [9].

Furthermore, the country's varied ethnic, religious, and linguistic makeup makes achieving national unity in Ethiopia difficult. The main obstacles are historical and cultural differences, political division, ethnic tensions and conflicts, marginalization and inequality, desires for regional autonomy, and economic inequities. These obstacles hamper a common national identity and unity.

In conclusion, ethnic-based federalism, power struggles among ethnic groups, and longstanding grudges between ethnic groups are some of the many factors threatening Ethiopia's efforts to achieve national unity. To properly address these concerns, a comprehensive approach that ensures equitable resource distribution and power-sharing agreements while fostering interethnic collaboration and inclusivity and resolving historical injustices is required.

8. Opportunities for Building National Consensus in Ethiopia

A multidimensional strategy that emphasizes inclusive governance fosters communication and reconciliation across various ethnic groupings and emphasizes common national identity and values to promote unity are required to build consensus in Ethiopia. Several important considerations must be made to accomplish these goals.

First, sustainable development depends critically on inclusive governance [17]. This means putting in place a public administration that is effective, inclusive, and accountable and that serves Ethiopia's many ethnic communities. Effective nation-building processes in Ethiopia also depend on addressing challenges with equity, infrastructural governance, and institutional capacity [19].

Secondly, it is imperative to foster communication and harmony amongst diverse ethnic groups. Recognizing the difficulties and possibilities involved in changing establishments such as the National Dialogue Commission and the National Election Board of Ethiopia [54] is part of this. It also entails acknowledging how initiatives affect inclusion, for example, the detrimental impacts of inclusive interventions in Northern Ethiopia [26]. Furthermore, inclusive governance can be enhanced by ensuring educational policies support the merger of higher education and the workplace.

Third, building unity requires highlighting our shared national identity and ideals. This includes addressing Ethiopia's shortcomings and promoting inclusive democratic governance [53]. To further achieve inclusive governance, international higher education policies informed by social inclusion theories and human capital development must be advanced [49].

In general, the study found three key areas where Ethiopian national consensus may be strengthened. National Dialogue Commission first: The Ethiopian Parliament established the National Dialogue Commission to enhance national unity and revive societal values in Ethiopia. It allows people to freely and tolerantly discuss social, political, and economic issues. The commission must involve a wide range of stakeholders at every stage of the planning, execution, and process to guarantee success [51].

Second, the Pretoria Peace Agreement calls for an end to Ethiopia's hostilities to bring about durable peace in war-torn areas of the country. It was negotiated by Olusegun Obasanjo,

the former president of Nigeria, and brokered by the African Union [6]. The agreement is a significant step toward silencing the guns. It also offers a solid basis for protecting Ethiopia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the quick end to hostilities, the restoration of unimpeded humanitarian access, the restoration of services, and the promotion of healing and reconciliation. Conflict resolution is essential in the Tigray region, where warfare is ongoing. Conflict resolution is crucial in the Tigray region, where warfare is continuing. Ethiopia can establish a discussion and consensus-building atmosphere that might serve as a model for other conflict zones by promoting peace and stability.

Third, Ethiopia has a rich cultural history and customs surrounding conflict resolution that prioritize community decision-making, mediation, and reconciliation. These native principles offer a framework for settling disputes and fostering national cohesion. In 2018, Arba Minchi City's Gamo Elders played a pivotal role in ending violence against the Oromos. However, many things can affect their effectiveness, such as the scope and intricacy of today's conflicts and the requirement to harmonize them with contemporary legal systems. Reaching national consensus and unity necessitates a comprehensive strategy that balances cultural preservation and societal dynamics, integrating traditional values with contemporary governance structures, the rule of law, and inclusive political procedures.

In conclusion, inclusive governance, rapprochement, communication between ethnic groups, and developing a shared national identity and values are critical areas of focus for Ethiopian consensus-building. By tackling these issues, Ethiopia can move closer to a more inclusive and cohesive society.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

For social cohesion and stability, especially in heterogeneous countries like Ethiopia, ethnic identity and national unity are essential. The complex relationship between ethnic identities and the principle of national unity presents opportunities and problems for reaching national agreement. Promoting a sense of oneness among Ethiopians requires understanding the complexity of ethnic diversity and how it affects national identity. Ethiopia's historical background—characterized by a multitude of ethnic groups and the remnants of ethnic federalism—has influenced the nation's current state of identity politics. To negotiate the difficulties of reaching an agreement, it is necessary to take a nuanced approach to addressing the conflicts between fostering ethnic diversity and aiming for a unified national identity.

The debate in Ethiopia about ethnic federalism, historical legacies, and the politicization of ethnicity has made nation-building and the creation of a shared national identity more difficult. Ethno-nationalist movements have grown more potent due to the constitutional framework's emphasis on ethnic self-determination, creating severe barriers to

Ethiopia's unity. It's an arduous effort to balance variety and a feeling of shared national identity, which involves resolving the problems of diverse ethnic groups and promoting a unifying image of Ethiopian citizenship. To forge consensus and bolster Ethiopian unity, it is imperative to move past the polarizing effects of ethnic politics and embrace inclusivity.

Various suggestions can be made to manage Ethiopia's complicated issues of ethnic identity and unification. First, creating programs that facilitate collaboration and cross-ethnic interactions can help heal divisions and strengthen a feeling of shared national identity. These efforts can also help advance intergroup discussion and understanding. Second, reexamining the constitutional framework might help ease tensions and foster unity by recognizing many ethnic identities while highlighting Ethiopian citizenship as the primary one. Thirdly, an appreciation of Ethiopia's cultural diversity and the similarities between its various ethnic groups can be promoted by funding educational initiatives and public awareness campaigns that celebrate Ethiopia's diversity. Last but not least, encouraging inclusive governance frameworks that allow all ethnic groups to participate in decision-making procedures can improve representation and foster a feeling of pride in the nation-building endeavor in Ethiopia.

Finally, a multidimensional strategy that considers the complexities of Ethiopia's diverse ethnic landscape is needed to meet the potential challenges posed by ethnic identity and national unity. Ethiopia may find a way to forge agreement and bolster national cohesion by attending to the complaints of various ethnic groups, encouraging inclusivity, and cultivating a feeling of shared national identity. For the Ethiopian nation to be stable and prosperous over the long run, it must embrace diversity as a source of strength and togetherness rather than division.

Abbreviations

EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
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Author Contributions

Aemro Tenaw Birhan is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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