

Policy Brief

Parliament-Public Engagement in Ethiopia: Selected Notes and Case Studies on a Politically Fragile State

I. Executive Summary

Rich and peaceful parliament-public engagement is the essence of a healthy democracy. The effectiveness of elected politicians' interactions with their constituencies is an extremely important aspect of a functioning democracy, the more so in politically fragile states, such as Ethiopia. A true measure of this cardinal principle in democratic governance is the extent to which the genuine needs and concerns of the public are fulfilled by politicians. When parliamentarians fulfill public expectations through regular contacts with the electorate, this enhances the peoples' trust in their government and parliament while at the same time strengthening the ethos of accountability and representative democracy.

Effective parliamentarians' public engagement promotes societal consensus and stable governance in a complex and heterogeneous state and society landscape, such as Ethiopia's. The experiences of mature and older democracies suggest that parliamentary democracy is strengthened when politicians succeed in representing the varied interests of the diverse constituencies and weakened when they fail to do so. The frequency of politicians' interactions with different constituencies and, more importantly, the kind of consideration that is given to public interests and concerns in the policy-or law- making process can be considered tangible proofs of their commitment to uphold public causes. It is within this context that politicians in Ethiopia should regularly and frequently engage constituencies for societal consensus and stable governance in a complex and heterogeneous Ethiopian state and society.

II. Country Background

With an estimated population of nearly 97 million inhabitants in 2014, Ethiopia is Africa's second populous nation after Nigeria. The Ethiopian state is a land of great diversity comprising more than 85 ethnic and linguistic groups. Ethiopia is unique in very many respects. It is Africa's oldest independent country that has enjoyed an uninterrupted tradition of statehood, and has never been colonized by the Europeans except for the brief 5-year occupation by Fascist Italy during World War

Ethnicity and language are important features shaping national politics in Ethiopia; and in recent years have been important factors in restructuring the state and political representation at national and regional levels. The current government led by the ruling Ethiopian Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) is the torch bearer of this political agenda. Upon assuming power in 1991, the EPRDF Government reorganized the country along ethnic and linguistic lines, and established a federal state structure that consisted of nine autonomous ethnic regions and two administrative areas.

Since WWII, Ethiopia has had three successive regimes with radically different ideologies and sources of legitimacy –the Imperial regime (1941-1974); the leftist military dictatorship (1974-1991); and the current government led by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (1991-to date). All of them have the unenviable record of being authoritarian regimes with weak parliaments subordinated to the executive or suppressed by autocratic personal rule. Since mid-2018, the country has been ruled by Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed, who has launched significant democratic reforms with huge implications for the future of a democratic Ethiopian state and society. Under his leadership, the country continues to surge on the path of sweeping reforms, which at times appear to be irreversible but are not without risks.

In recent years, Ethiopia has registered success in economic growth and poverty reduction efforts. Despite the economic progress, however, there has been a rising level of social and political tension between the government and groups critical of the shrinking political space and the increasingly authoritarian style of rule. The precarious political situation and instability have raised questions as to whether the country can continue on an economic growth trajectory in the long run. Hence, the lesson from the Ethiopian experience is that economic growth must go hand in hand with a sufficient set of political and democratic freedoms, and an acceptable level of public consensus to be sustainable and to have a lasting impact on the lives of the people.

III. Objectives and Methods

The goal of the project was to conduct research on the relationship between parliament, parliamentarians and other actors and organizations in Bangladesh and Ethiopia so as to better understand how the role of parliament and parliamentarians' interaction with their constituencies and others in society could help in strengthening democracy and participatory governance as well as fostering equitable development. In addition, a further objective was to stimulate further academic debate on the work of parliaments as representative institutions, and influence governments and donors engaged in parliamentary strengthening programs. This three-year research project was funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council and the UK's Department for International Development (EC/L005409/1).

Interviews, focus group discussions, a survey, and observation involving parliamentarians, academics, civil society leaders and activists as well as donor representatives and constituency groups all played their part in the data gathering exercise. The aim was to gather the perspectives of different stakeholders on the role of parliament and the extent of interaction of parliamentarians with their constituencies, and how this can strengthen democracy and reduce poverty and inequality.

IV. Major Findings

This research has contributed some significant evidence for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of parliament in Ethiopia, including why it has not developed into a potent vehicle for the democratic transformation of the post-WWII state, especially over the past 25 years of rule. There has been increased political and social instability because of a shrinking political space and authoritarian rule despite relative economic improvement and poverty reduction efforts. Democracy rooted in a strong and a genuinely representative parliament may be one answer to unlock the impasse, and to provide a stable political and social environment. Here below, are presented some reflections that may stimulate debate on the way forward:

- ❖ *Ethiopian parliamentarians face conflicting roles that have impacted on their responsiveness to constituency needs and concerns*

Ethiopian parliamentarians' perception of their role is dual, i.e., they view themselves as representatives of both the electorate and the party. Since most candidates are nominated for election by the party in power, they see themselves as playing an intermediary role between the electorate and the government. This conflicting role is not well received by the electorate because it has engendered a widespread perception that

parliamentarians are representatives of the party/government and not of the people. In the long run, this can erode public trust in parliament as a representative institution. Also, given the preponderant nature of the single ruling party, and its monopoly grip on power, this can also affect the accountability of politicians for their decisions and actions.

- ❖ *Need for more intensive and frequent engagement of parliamentarians with constituencies for accountable governance*

Ethiopian parliamentarians'-constituencies' interactions need to be more frequent and regular to strengthen accountability and responsiveness to voter and non-voter (e.g. children) concerns and needs in law/policy making. At present, these interactions were found to be formal and structured, and conducted according to party rules and guidelines. To be expressions of democratic engagement and accountable governance, consultations that parliamentarians hold with constituencies have to be arranged in such a way that they will be free from party or local government influence. In addition, they should be organized according to times and places convenient to the community as this will make parliamentarians more accessible and easily reachable. In a nutshell, since representing the views and concerns of the electorate is an extremely important duty of parliamentarians, it is strongly suggested that means and ways should be found to overcome the current constraints that limit parliamentarian-constituency interaction

- ❖ *Limited political space for non-state actors in the policy/lawmaking process by parliament*

There has been limited public involvement in law/policy making by parliament in Ethiopia. However, the political space has been recently opening but government and citizens alike need to find ways of expressing opposition more peacefully. Hence, there is the need particularly for parliamentary standing committees to reach out to more stakeholders to provide inputs and recommendations for policy action. Single party rule and a progressively narrowing political space for non-state stakeholders and opposition parties have contributed to this phenomenon. As a result, government policy or law making was largely a ruling party affair. Be it at the federal or regional levels, legislators do not often consult or approach representatives of independent civil society organizations or other actors to listen to their views or

seek inputs. By passing these important sectors in government decisions can reduce policy responsiveness to public needs and demands. It is vitally important that policy- or lawmaking be as participative as possible to enhance the democratic credentials of parliament as a representative institution and ensure good quality scrutiny of law making.

❖ *High representation of women members but with constraints*

The Ethiopian parliament has a high membership of women among its ranks, and this can be recognized as a noteworthy strength for a representative institution. Articles 14 and 35 of the Ethiopian Constitution provide for equal rights of men and women. One of the ways by which this can find practical expression is through the active involvement and recognition of women in policy and law making as well as through leadership roles in the government's high offices. In this regard, Ethiopia has attained relative success by encouraging women to serve as politicians/parliamentarians and occupying important leadership positions. The strong representation of women MPs in the eighteen different standing sub-committees can be cited as an example. Although it is difficult to draw a cause-and-effect relationship, it can be argued that the increased number has helped to give prominence to women's rights and interests and made legislation and policies supportive of their causes.

❖ *Need to overcome constraints to effective parliamentary oversight over the executive*

In Ethiopia, the performance of parliament in exercising its oversight function leaves much to be desired. This is partly explained by executive dominance over the legislature and the omnipresence of the single ruling party, which controls both branches of government. In addition, the absence of a viable and strong opposition has also contributed to limited legislative scrutiny over government programs and plans. Simply put, parliament's control over the executive in Ethiopia is ceremonial, and is intended to provide legitimacy to the ruling party rather than an exercise in checks and balances.

❖ *Limited public participation in the policy process has been a brake on parliamentary democracy*

Due to executive dominance and single party rule, the Ethiopian legislature is known for hurriedly passing through laws and policies without sufficient

critical public debate and input. This has rendered the political system authoritarian and much less inclusive whereby alternative inputs into policies and laws by important societal actors, viz. Opposition political parties, civil society, the private sector, the media, etc. are hardly entertained. Controversial legislations, viz. the civil society law and the anti-terrorism and media bills were used to restrict democratic freedoms of speech, organization and independent political activity in the past. The political space has been progressively narrowing for all segments of society, and the recent wave of unrests in many parts of Ethiopia lends credence to this observation. This has started to change but there is still the need for continued democratic discourse and peaceful engagement for a lasting and durable consensus and harmonious relationships among different segments of society.

V. Policy Recommendations

The key recommendations that emerge out of this study include the following:

A. Government of Ethiopia (GoE)/Ruling Party

- The Government of Ethiopia (GoE) should open up the political space to competitive electoral politics and encourage the growth of a vibrant media to strengthen public scrutiny over government. All restrictions on civil society and the media, allowing freedom of action and creating a level playing field for opposition political parties, and enabling them to have equal access to the media, would be an important first step.
- The Government of Ethiopia should progressively open up the decision making process for participatory and inclusive politics. The current top down and authoritarian style of decision making style with little input from the public, should give way to a more transparent and participative model. In this regard, recognizing the supremacy of parliament that is composed of freely and fairly elected representatives of the people as the final decision maker in the land is of paramount importance. In addition, there needs to be a conducive political environment that permits peaceful free flow of ideas and participation by different stakeholders to enhance accountability and legislative oversight over the executive.

- Politicians in Ethiopia should regularly and frequently engage constituencies for societal consensus and stable governance in a complex and heterogeneous state and society landscape, such as Ethiopia's. Parliamentary democracy is strengthened when politicians succeed in representing the varied interests of the diverse constituencies and weakened when they fail to do so. Frequent interactions with diverse constituencies and, more importantly, the kind of consideration that is given to plural public interests and concerns in the policy-or law-making process can be considered tangible proofs of Ethiopian politicians' commitment to uphold public causes.
- The GoE should build democratic institutions and uphold a sufficient set of political and democratic freedoms and an acceptable level of public consensus for economic growth to be sustainable, inclusive as well as to have a lasting impact on the lives of the people. The Government's heavy-handed policy of restricting the activities of different stakeholders, including the media, civil society and opposition parties, has raised the level of public discontent and thus should come to an end. The country can continue on an economic growth trajectory and the current precarious political situation and instability can be overcome only with the progressive liberalization and opening of the democratic and governance realm.

B. Civil Society

- The Ethiopian civil society sector must play a proactive role in building democracy, promoting peace and broadening the space for the restrictive civil society law provides ample opportunities for civil society organizations and other stakeholders, such as the media, to independent civic action. The recent repeal of promote transparent and accountable governance, and also to encourage the unfettered participation of different segments of societal groups and other

stakeholders in the law-/policy making process by parliament.

C. Researchers/Academics

- It should be a cardinal task of Ethiopian researchers/academics to continuously engage in research into the work of parliament to stimulate more debate and public discourse on strengthening parliamentary democracy in Africa's second largest and populous nation. This research must be interactive and highly participatory involving key stakeholders involved in the building of a democratic order, including politicians/parliamentarians, academics, artists and people from the creative industry, civil society activists and other pro-democracy and rights advocacy groups.

D. Donors (Bi-lateral and Multi-lateral)

- Ethiopia's bilateral and multi-lateral development partners must invest in the country's democratic future alongside the huge economic assistance that they currently provide. There must be the realization that the current economic improvement and significant poverty reduction efforts can be sustained, and a stable and peaceful Ethiopian nation-state can be built only when there are strong democratic institutions that uphold human rights and basic democratic freedoms. As a matter of urgency, all of them should use their leverage to support the significant democratic reforms now underway in the country because there is no alternative to a democratic order and a participatory and inclusive system of rule for a state-society landscape that is as diverse and complex as Ethiopia is.

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