



Full Length Research Paper

The Horn of Africa: The Co-constitution of Domestic Political Transitions and Regional Security

Gizachew Asrat¹ and Henok Getachew²

¹Senior Researcher at the Institute of Foreign Affairs, Ethiopia, Department of African Affairs
 P.o.Box. 18529

²Senior Researcher at the Institute of Foreign Affairs, Ethiopia, Department of African Affairs

Article Info	Abstract
Article History	
Received: 01 Jan 2023	<p><i>The political transition, often accompanied by several competing priorities, has brought in challenges as more and more people demanded urgent changes different from the past. This paper adopted descriptive analysis methods and presented an explanation in a qualitative approach. The study, thus, sought to analyze the merit of triggering factors necessitating the political transitions in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia. It deals with undertaking a case study on each country's political transition with the intent of addressing three fundamental questions such as "what are the root causes of transitions, what challenges are there posing in the process of transition, and what implications do the political transitions have in the future of the Horn of Africa (HoA)". A change in one country may be exhibiting a challenge in another because of the national interest that relies on certain types of policies. social fissures with different manifestations, historical narrations, internal power struggles, and economic woes were the most critical root causes of the overlapping problems the three states bore to face perennial fragility. These challenges were the sources of concern, and a security dilemma was set to come into play. Problems arose from these challenges, leading to a security dilemma. The lingering dilemma that locks horns between the countries in the Horn region has long entangled them, and they have become accustomed to the political transition. The dilemma often arises from assumed or real security concerns by one or more countries over one or more countries with which natural resources or historical relations are being shared. Hence, building political development and shared understanding among the region's states is essential to foster broader regional economic integration.</i></p>
Accepted: 23 April 2024	
Keywords:	
<p><i>Horn of Africa, inter-state relations, peace, political transition, regional security.</i></p>	



Introduction

Political transition and the pace of change through the establishment of democratic values have become increasingly complex in many African countries as previously entrenched authoritarian legacies persist. However, the political and socioeconomic reforms that became commonplace neutralized the unbridled privileges of African power elites, reducing citizens to previously "expanders of established economies" (Gros, 1998, p. 3). This political practice and adage has transcended the contemporary historical period into which it was initially referred and remained a prize-tagging quote across the generations.

Churchill explained that 'some politicians change their party for the sake of their principles; others do so to alternate their principles for their party' (Churchill, 1956). His reference hinges on a specific category of politicians who validate principles over party interest and others who compromise their principles for party politics. His understanding and explanation seventy years ago contain a valid meaning in the interplay of contemporary political practices, politicians, and transitions in today's Africa. Transitions, by and large, remain the most problematic political puzzles yet unresolved in most parts of Africa since many of the member states had gained independence from the colonial yokes. Geographic sub-regions within the continent, formed for economic or political reasons, struggled to adapt to the political transition. While some regions, prioritizing the greater good, found a way to cooperate, the needs of ordinary people were often ignored.

It even holds more truth in the context of the current political situations among states in the Horn of Africa.

As the driving force behind state leadership, political parties must possess a deep understanding of, a dedication to furthering, and an unwavering commitment to safeguarding the country's vital interests. Although political parties differ in ideology and philosophy, they must be embraced and obedient to and by core national interests. Many states in the Horn of Africa lack a progressive or even a clear, unequivocal political party law that would set strict and fair criteria to govern political parties via the principles the individual members of the political parties must uphold, especially during political transition processes (Makau, 2006).

Local stability will be just as crucial in any Horn of Africa state. Citing a practical example of Somalia's phenomenon, Al-Shabab, a religious-based armed group, has consistently gained footholds in locations where conflict continues among local authorities or between local authorities and the federal government, jeopardizing the most recent promising political transition in Somalia (Susan, 2022).

Ongoing conflicts and instability over a prolonged period have plagued the Horn. Over the past six decades, there has been no single year when the sub-region has been free from conflict, intra-state or inter-states (Olika, 2008). In the Horn of Africa, states like Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia have suffered from civil conflicts and wars within and between each other. Neither has had a history of free and fair democratic elections

except for the recent attempts in Ethiopia and Somalia. In the past decade, Ethiopia underwent an experience of peaceful transition of power.

The rifts and puzzles of transitions each country either attempts to pass through or deal with the tragedy they found themselves in the maze of sociopolitical challenges. The root causes of transition fragility that befell these states could not be uncommon. This could be seen with a different driving factor in the case of Sudan, whose problematic transition was mainly caused by poor economic management discontented by youth protesters and intra-state power struggles among competing elites in the armed forces. Similarly, the transitions in Somalia and Ethiopia run through assuredly in the pitfalls of age-old clan lines or ethnic politics. Although the latter two remain fragile to explode in a potential full-fledged civil war rooted along ethnic narratives that dangerously linger beneath the surface, the heavy-handed external influences in the conflicts remain active and problematic. The culture of political transitions in the study areas is heavily influenced by the geopolitical dynamics, making the journey towards a democratic transition quite difficult. Over the past three decades, both Sudan and Ethiopia have attempted to transition to democracy, but have faced significant challenges when the ruling parties were unable to rule the country coherently. The split within the ruling party has offered an opportunity to open the civic space. Furthermore, the culture of political transition in the region is mainly characterized by shaking the foundation of the state to the extent of questioning the legitimacy of the states and

governments in power. The three states' susceptibility to regional security dynamics also in part determines their destiny towards institutionalizing democratic norms and values. These circumstances justify the selection of the three cases to understand the culture of political transition and regional security in the Horn. The Horn countries presented for this article have demonstrated complexities of political transitions they experiences that are susceptible to geopolitical influences. What is the root cause of the overlapping problems that the Horn states bear to face perennial fragility, and how does this affect the transition, regional security, and inter-state relations will be discussed in this article?

Methods

In addressing the research questions of this study, this article adopts a qualitative approach. Given the explanatory nature of the research, it utilizes explanatory study design. The data is primarily gathered from secondary sources, such as books, magazines, journals, research works, books, internet sources, and news articles. The study also incorporates observational notes on relevant contemporary events to add depth and nuance to the secondary data. Comparative case study analyses are used to examine discussions by comparing countries (Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia) and tracking transitions within them. By identifying commonalities, these analyses can help to explain failures.

Conceptual Overview of Political Transition

The concept of transitions, initially, was central to the democratization debate for more than four

decades. Before 1970, the use of the word "transition" to refer to a change in a political system was relatively limited because most political scientists at the time focused on how to preserve and strengthen democracy where it already existed, mainly in North America and Western Europe (Rustow, 1970, p. 337). However, Huntington pointed out that "transition" is the primary term used to describe the political changes from authoritarianism to democracy that characterized the "third wave" of democratization (1974-1990). The second is the transition from democracy to authoritarianism, which he calls the "inverse wave," a period in the 1990s that marks when many countries changed from democratic to semi-authoritarian or authoritarian, where Africa is not exceptional (Huntington, 1991, pp. 17).

According to O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) and Lemarchand (1994), political transition is a period between political regimes or a political change from one form of government to another due to warfare and internal social conflicts. Given the fact that "political transition can occur through any of three methods of change: reform, compromise, and overthrow" (Shain and Linz, 1995). Furthermore, the transition model suggests three successive stages around which democratization seems most often structured: opening, breakthrough, and consolidation (Lemarchand, 1994).

Political transition is a complex and multifaceted process involving a fundamental change in a country's political system. Various factors, such as revolutions, coups, elections, or the collapse

of authoritarian regimes, can trigger it. Political transitions can occur peacefully or violently and impact a country's political, economic, and social development. According to Huntington, successful political transitions, particularly toward democracy, are influenced by socioeconomic development, visionary political leadership, international influences, political openings, and elite bargaining (Huntington, 1991). These elements shape the transition process and facilitate the establishment of democratic systems. However, it is essential to note that his conceptual understanding of political transition has faced criticism. It oversimplifies complex transitions, neglects cultural and contextual factors, and fails to account for grassroots movements and citizen engagement. These criticisms highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of political change that considers local agency and long-term democratic sustainability (Fukuyama, 1992; Bermeo, 2003; Haggard & Kaufman, 2008)

On the other side, O'Donnell and Schmitter emphasize the complexity and uncertainty of the transition process. They argue that political transitions are not linear or predetermined but contingent on various factors. The authors explore the interplay of societal, economic, and political conditions and the role of actors and institutions in shaping transition outcomes (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1968). They highlight the significance of factors such as civil society mobilization, the role of the military, the presence of competitive political parties, and the establishment of inclusive institutions for successful democratic transi-

tions. They also stress the importance of avoiding premature institutionalization and ensuring that democratic systems are sufficiently consolidated to withstand potential backsliding (Ibid).

Similarly, Whitehead argues that political elites, civil society organizations, economic conditions, and international influences are critical factors in the political transition process. He emphasizes the role of political elites in driving democratization and highlights the importance of active civil society engagement. Additionally, he examines the impact of economic factors and external actors on the success of democratization efforts (Whitehead, 1996).

Domestic socioeconomic, political, and cultural determinant factors could not alone explain the political transition to democracy within a society. Cognizant of the contributions of external context, scholarly works are increasingly paying attention to regional and international contexts that have invited "little attention within [the existing] literature" (Pevehouse, 2002). Indeed, external circumstances also contribute to stunting or reversing the trajectory of the political transition away from authoritarianism. In this regard, drawing on the experience of the third wave of democratization, the well-noted scholar on democratization, Samuel Huntington, in his article entitled *Democracy's Third Wave* recognized that international organizations can play a significant role in consolidating democracy. He noted that the European Community (EC) played a paramount role in consolidating democracy in Southern Europe, Spain, and Portugal. Apart from the political necessity that propelled the inception and the

development of the continental organization, "the establishment of democracy was also necessary to secure the economic benefits of E.C. membership" (Huntington, 1991, p. 4).

The impact of snowballing is also deemed as another favorable condition for a political transition to democracy when there is a domestic situation necessary for democratization. For instance, in the early periods of the end of the Cold War, the political changes moving towards political openings in Eastern Europe had impacted political reform measures to be taken in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, and Algeria (Ibid, 1991, p.16). Another impact of snowballing was felt during the Arab Spring when a riot erupted in the streets of Tunisia, fuelling the demand for opening the political space in the rest of the Arab world. However, the quest for political freedoms and rights could not alter the political landscape for the better.

External democratic assistance is also cited as another variable in assisting the transition to democracy and its consolidation in democratization literature. Electoral assistance, assistance to political parties, media, and civil society organizations, and backing justice sector reform are considered external democratic assistance to countries with weak democratic institutions (Savun & Tirone, 2011). Nevertheless, the evidence demonstrated that external democratic assistance alone could not be a sufficient factor to move away a state from an authoritarian trend, mainly when the applied "programs ignore the issues of affordability and long-term sustainability" (Ibid). Apart from the inadequate attention to political

and financial sustainability to democratic support on the side of donors, “donor fragmentation and lack of alignment (Rakner & Sorensen, 2007) with country priorities tend to undermine already rather weak institutions” with possible implications for the overall democratization process.

Political transition remains one of the most problematic puzzles in Africa, as many countries gained independence from colonial rule, and each geographic sub-region experienced challenges in dealing with political transition. While there have been successful transitions in some African states, the overall trend seems to be uneven paths.

Puzzling Complexities of the States

The rifts and puzzles of transitions in each country either attempt to pass through or deal with the tragedy they have discovered in the maze of sociopolitical challenges. The root causes of transition fragility in these states could not be uncommon (Ismail, 2022). The Prosperity Party's (P.P.) electoral victory in the sixth general elections in June 2021 has ushered in the end of governing the state under the EPRDF's coalition that had lasted for three decades. The management of political transition seems to be challenged in part by simmering ethnic tensions.¹ These concerns were compounded by escalating media censorship, arrests of opposition leaders, and the spillover of the Tigray civil war. Seeking to navigate this

fraught context, this analysis delves into the significant organizational and structural shifts within Ethiopia's state and parastatal entities, aiming to shed light on the political and economic forces shaping the nation's tumultuous transition. It specifically examines transformations in the cabinet, security sector, and economic realm. A lack of stability defines Ethiopia's transition. Ministerial reshuffles (7 reshuffles), security leadership changes (3 times), and revolving Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) at 90% of significant State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) are hallmarks of the last 5 years. Even the Ethiopian Investment Commission, crucial for economic growth, has seen four commissioners come and go, raising concerns about policy continuity (Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2022).

Throughout Ethiopia's transition, the new administration has implemented various organizational changes. These changes have been for different reasons. On the one hand, it has aimed to enhance the efficiency of the state and simplify its management. On the other side, this has also led to restructuring the administration's existing power and control structures.

The current government of Ethiopia is viewed as moving along the spectrums of ethnonationalism and pan-Ethiopian nationalism; although ethnonationalism remains salient and ethnically defined federal states remain. On the economic

¹ <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/clash-nationalisms-and-remaking-ethiopian-state>

front, the administration navigates a tension between centralizing control under the state and liberalizing the economic space. Within the ethnically defined federal states, however, solidified ethno-nationalist sentiments have a greater proclivity to clash with the vision that drift away therefrom, posing a potential challenge to the government's broader goals. Additionally, economic challenges such as inflation and dwindling foreign currency reserves continue to threaten economic growth and job creation, a critical legitimating factor under the Prosperity Party platform².

The root causes of the transition in Ethiopia, particularly over the past six years, have sprung up from a combination of historical and political developments. Unlike the numerous transitions that came and went in the distant past, the most recent and ongoing one grew out from the new shot of ethnic or identity politics that simmered beneath the surface for two decades before it imploded in mid-2018 (Ismail, 2022). The youth have played a significant role in this transition, with protests in the Oromia region beginning in 2015 due to economic and political marginalization, which then gained support from youths in the Amhara region. The inability of the EPRDF-led govern-

ment to maintain power and prevent the emerging fissures within the ruling circle led to a shift in power and a fragile political environment (Amare, 2020). The four years followed the changes in regime brought along one of the most uncertainty in the political landscape³. Amid the conflicts flaring up here and there, the processes of transition take the course, and the challenges linger and loom extensively, calling for managing the situations not to miss the promises the political transition could bring in Ethiopia.

Similarly, the root cause of transition in Sudan differs occasionally. This could be seen with an element of different driving factors in the case of Sudan, whose problematic transition was mainly driven by poor economic management and financial collapse discontented by youth protesters, protest by professionals, the increasing role of civil society action, deterioration of law and order, the increasing militarization of the society and intra-state power struggles among competing elites within the wing of its armed forces⁴. When the powerful former House Speaker, Hassan al Turabi, had the upper hand over Sudanese politics, Sudan was a struggle between the modernists in army uniform and the puritanical Islamists led by the opposition. Once the protest movements steadily became widespread, they

² The civil war in Ethiopia, which began in November 2020, has caused extensive damage to factories and industrial infrastructure in the Tigray region, resulting in an estimated loss of around \$20 million in monthly export revenues for Ethiopia. November 2020, destroyed swathes of factories and industry in the Tigray region and cost Ethiopia approximately \$20m in monthly export revenues. For details, see <https://african.business/2023/01/finance-services/ethiopia-ponders-benefits-and-costs-of-birr-devaluation>

³ <https://www.usaid.gov/stabilization-and-transitions/ethiopia>

⁴ [Background to a crisis: In Sudan, the stakes are high for the whole of Africa | U.N. News](#)

became a formidable force to oust Umer al Bashir's regime through mass demonstrations. A transition followed by protests in Khartoum and other major cities has laid a ground for Sudan since then to become a fragile and weaker polity. Sudan's fragile transition faces a perilous confluence of internal and external challenges. A politically divided and economically crippled state navigates an increasingly unstable regional landscape, constantly pressured to pick sides in external rivalries. This vulnerability was painfully evident in 2019 when mere protests against Saudi and Emirati influence led to withholding \$2.5 billion in promised post-revolution aid.⁵ The situation is further exacerbated by ongoing internal rifts between civilian and military factions and within the civilian sphere itself. This fragmented landscape creates a constant risk of domestic actors seeking external support to manipulate internal power dynamics and influence crucial decisions.⁶ They operated alongside a fractious coalition of civilian groups, fill seats in the newly formed legislative assembly, and gradually integrate their forces into the national army over several years. These circumstances led to a free-falling economy and escalated violence, not just in the towns of East Sudan but in other urban areas as well. The implementation of the Juba Peace Agreement, which took place in extremely

⁵ <https://www.cmi.no/countries/sudan>

⁶[The Rebels Come to Khartoum: How to Implement Sudan's New Peace Agreement | Crisis Group](#)

⁷ <https://www.cmi.no/publications/7395-sudans-transition-living-in-bad-surroundings>

complex circumstances, locally and internationally, and faced with serious financial challenges (Dabanga, 2020) failed to thwart the chain of events that finally culminated in shattering the fulfillment of the promises of the political transition-economic and political freedoms.

A new question hangs heavy over Sudan's arduous transition: Will it truly deliver on the revolutionary promise of a just and equitable peace grounded in democracy and pluralism? Or will the struggle for power merely reshape the system once again, leaving control in the hands of security organs more interested in self-enrichment than the well-being of a population staggering under rising food insecurity and poverty? This existential doubt comes after repeated setbacks.⁷ Following the 2021 coup, a bitter power struggle erupted between generals Burhan and Dagalo, exploding into armed conflict in April 2023. The devastating toll exceeds 75,000 lives and has displaced millions⁸ and millions of people leaving their homes.⁹

Similarly, in Somalia, the al-Qaeda-linked Islamist group al-Shabaab has significantly impacted regional security dynamics in the Horn of Africa. The group's emergence, activities, and regional responses to these factors illustrate how internal security issues are intertwined with a broader regional security landscape.¹⁰ Al-Shabaab's growth

⁸ Theeastafrican.co.ke

⁹ <https://www.acaps.org/en/countries/sudan>

¹⁰ Al-Shabaab originated around 2004, but its prominence relates to the rise and fall of the UIC in 2006. Mwangi, Oscar Gako. 'State Collapse, Al-Shabaab, Islamism, and Legitimacy in Somalia.' *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2012, 513-527.

has been partly fueled by Somalia's intra-state conflict, governance failures, and state fragility. In addition to violence, the organization has exploited Somalia's local-level governance vacuum to gain legitimacy by providing social services. However, Al-Shabaab's primary legitimation and mobilization strategy lies in its use of a blend of Pan-Somali nationalism and political Islam in tandem with violence, primarily directed at the Mogadishu government, Somalia's neighboring countries and the then the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the current African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) (Ibid).

In 2006, Ethiopian troops supported the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia in overthrowing the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which had briefly controlled Mogadishu following nearly two decades of civil war. Al-Shabaab, the ICU's armed wing, broke away after the union's dissolution and launched an insurgency against the transitional government and Ethiopian troops. Partly due to the historical precarious relations between the two countries in tandem with the presence of Ethiopian forces in Somalia for stabilization used as a pretext to fuel Somali nationalism and radicalism. Consequently, the "complex cocktail of nationalist, Islamist, anti-Ethiopian, anti-American, anti-Western, anti-foreigner sentiments" that emerged benefited al-Shabaab, which portrayed itself as the central

source of armed resistance against the "occupying forces" (Holmquist, E and Rock. I, A., 2023). Since then, al-Shabaab has blended religious discourse with nationalism and anti-foreigner rhetoric against AMISOM and its primary participating countries (Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda). The presence of bilateral Ethiopian and Kenyan troops on Somali soil and Djibouti's perceived support for the fight against global terrorism, as well as its hosting of Western military bases, have served as further justification for al-Shabaab's insurgency. The group has carried out deadly attacks in Kenya, Uganda, and Djibouti and maintains a presence in neighboring countries, most notably along the Kenya-Somalia border, where it frequently attacks infrastructure, security personnel, and education and health facilities.¹¹

The security threat posed by al-Shabaab inevitably draws neighboring countries into Somalia's internal affairs. Kenya maintains a military presence in southern Jubaland, Somalia's southernmost state, and has been accused of attempting to turn the state into a buffer zone. Ethiopia also has troops in Jubaland, but in its western regions, bordering both Ethiopia and Kenya. This further demonstrates the interconnectedness of regional and domestic security. Their military presence for security reason had been critiqued for complicating the election process in Somalia in 2020-2022, as Ethiopia and Kenya were accused of supporting opposing sides in a violent conflict

¹¹ Zeuthen, Martine. 'A New Phase in the Fight against al-Shabaab in the Horn of Africa'. International Center for

Counter-Terrorism, 21 September 2022; Council on Foreign Relations. 2004-2022 Al-Shabaab in East Africa. Available at: www.cfr.org.

between President Farmajo and the incumbent president of Jubaland, Ahmed Madobe.¹²

Al-Shabaab's recent activities in Ethiopia illustrate how national and transnational security intertwine. After several failed attempts to carry out large-scale attacks on Ethiopian soil, al-Shabaab combatants made their way at least 150 kilometers into the Somali region in eastern Ethiopia in July 2022 (Holmquist, E, and Rock. I, A., 2023). Ethiopian forces repelled the incursion, but al-Shabaab members likely remained there. The timing of the attack in Ethiopia can be partly attributed to the war in Tigray, which has weakened Ethiopian security institutions and diverted the Ethiopian government's attention away from other issues while providing an opportunity for al-Shabaab to cross the border.¹³ However, it can also be attributed to an ongoing military offensive against al-Shabaab in Somalia as an attempt to demonstrate strength to disguise the pressure the group is under. Therefore, increased internal pressure against al-Shabaab could lead the group to intensify its transnational activities and presence in neighboring countries, particularly Ethiopia and Kenya. The African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), the rebranded African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), constitutes an African initiative to contain the threat from the group.

The lingering security predicament in Somalia has hardly prevented the phenomenon of politi-

cal transition moving into the direction of democratic reforms since 2012. With the replacement of the Transitional Federal Government, the Federal Government of Somalia attempted to experiment democracy through a 4.5 formula of clan representation which is not reflecting a modern democratic arrangement that is 'one person one vote'. Transitioning to democracy in Somalia has always hinged on the degree of cordial relationship between the central government and federal states; the ability of al-Shabaab to mount violence and the degree of infighting between different factions and political personalities. The inability of the existing governing system to meet Somalia citizens' hope for stability and security, lack of political commitment, inadequate legal frameworks (Yusuf, 2024) in tandem with al-Shabaab's challenge to the existing political arrangement will remain major roadblock to political transition to democracy in the country.

Regional Intricacies and the Quagmire

From enabling factors, one can view the regional dimension of the political transition to democracy in the Horn of Africa. It could be viewed from the vantage points of enabling factors. Political transition in the Horn has historically been fragile and, in its wake, has a propensity to plunge member states, particularly Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan, into more political uncertainty. Every political transition in the Horn affects each member state at varied degrees depending on the geographic proximity or demographic makeup of

¹² International Crisis Group (2020). 'Ending the Dangerous Standoff in Southern Somalia.' ICG, Briefing No 158,

¹³ Interview, Jigjiga. January, 2023

the country in transition. In the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War period, regimes changed, and new leaders came to power in Ethiopia and Eritrea (Woodward, 1996). These changes seemed to bring a new type of governance anchored on democratic principles, which are traditionally anathema to the dominant political culture in the region. Although it was hoped that Eritrea would pivot to the direction of a more democratic trajectory in the aftermath of its de jure independence in 1993, the country has found itself "shut[ing] down the press, jailed its critics, and turned the country into a political prison" (Connel, 2011). On the contrary, Ethiopia demonstrated a semblance of a democratic experiment, although it has not escaped from the encroachment of the civic space and authoritarian political traditions (Lyons, 2006).

The relationship between Addis Ababa and Asmara was cordial until 1998. In 1998, the two states' diplomatic relationship deteriorated and culminated in the outbreak of a deadly, violent war (Bereketab (ed.), 2013). The effect of the "no war, no peace" context that prevailed between Asmara and Addis Ababa between 1998 and 2018 failed to limit the destabilized foreign policy both states pursued against each other. This security dilemma has also served as an excuse for Asmara's regime to prolong the suspension of the constitution and other politico-legal institutions that could be the lynchpin to democracy (Tronvoll et al, 2014; Plaut, 2016). However, the weathering of the prolonged tension between the two states following the rapprochement had her-

alded a new hope for regional security and normalcy. However, the euphoria of normalcy between the two states hardly laid the foundation for Asmara to relax the political constraints that limited the civic space for three decades. At the current moment, this meager opportunity for opening the civic space in Eritrea seems to have evaporated when there is an increasing trend to relapse to the status quo ante Asmara had had with Addis Ababa. The recent steady growing erosion of diplomatic thaw between Asmara and Addis Ababa, in part over the latter's quest for overcoming its geographical disadvantage, could highly likely engulf both parties in a situation more than a "no war, no peace" with disastrous consequences of "reinforcing domestic authoritarianism [in Eritrea] and fuelling proxy wars from Somalia to Sudan" (Michael, 2023).

Since 2020, political transitions in Ethiopia and Sudan have provided hope of domestic political tranquility and regional stability that both states and the region have craved. Apart from the domestic factors, the external conditions of both states need to be given attention to discern whether the trajectory of democracy is stunted or otherwise. Three factors continue to determine the bilateral relationship between Khartoum and Addis Ababa. These factors are the construction of the Grand Renaissance Dam, the disputed ter-

ritory known as al-Fashaga, and the war in northern Ethiopia.¹⁴ These issues, beyond doubt, have generated tension between the two neighboring states and have opened up an opportunity for external actors to project their power and concomitant interests.¹⁵

Unlike other political transitions in the Horn of Africa, Sudan's experiment has a unique feature due to the role of external actors, particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) interests, in shaping the course of the transition in their favor.¹⁶ Following the overthrow of Bashir in April 2019 due to frequent civilian resistance, a coalition government was formed. This government remained in power for a brief period until 2021 and was compelled to transfer its power to military groups. The military wing, which holds state power, was not coherent. It has rather two wings led by rival Generals Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. Both groups have external backers, particularly the Gulf States. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has supported General Burhan, while General Hemeti has the backing of the United Arab Emirates. The Gulf States have pursued plans to "diversify their economies

and consider Sudan as an ideal location for investments as well as a 'breadbasket' for their populations."¹⁷ As well as "gain strategic depth [in Sudan] against what they see as an expansionist Iran."¹⁸ . Above all, "the changing geographies of security interdependence" (Verhoeven 2018) between the Horn and the Gulf continue to determine the political trajectory of the Sudan. The internal simmering tension manifested itself when a civil war broke out between the two rival groups. The eruption of violence on the streets of Khartoum, coupled with the support the rival groups continue to receive, signals the existence of interference in domestic politics that could make the political transition to democracy a difficult enterprise.¹⁹

Another major thorny issue of political transition appears in Somalia, although the country has a unique experience compared to the above-listed instances. In the past three decades, Somalia has been troubled by civil wars with disastrous consequences for the state's very existence *per se* (Samatar, 2013 pp. 156-177 cited in Bereketab (ed), 2013). Against those odds, the election of Mohamed Abdullahi Mohammed as president of the country in 2017 raised hope of a political transition to democracy (Jackson, 2018). This

¹⁴ Horner, Jonas and Soliman, Ahmed. (2023). Coordinating International Responses to Ethiopia-Sudan Tensions. Chatham House. Retrieved from <https://www.chatham-house.org/2023/04/coordinating-international-responses-ethiopia-sudan-tensions/04-regional-and-international>

¹⁵ Horner, Jonas and Soliman, Ahmed.(2023). Coordinating international responses, Untangling Ethiopia and Sudan's cross-border issues. London: Chatham House.

¹⁶ Mohammad, Talal (2023). How Sudan Became a Saudi-UAE Proxy War. Foreign Policy.

¹⁷ Sorbo, Gunnar.(2020). Sudan's Transition: Living in Bad Surroundings. CMI. Sudan Working Paper. No.4. pp.8.

¹⁸ USIP 2020. "Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena." Final Report and Recommendations. Washington D.C., United States Institute of Peace.pp.24

¹⁹ Gramer, R.(2023). How the U.S. Fumbled Sudan's Hopes for Democracy. Foreign Policy. Retrieved from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/10/sudan-conflict-burhan-hemeti-democracy-us-missteps/>

hope lasted only briefly in the face of President Mohamed's failed attempt to extend his tenure and the increasing security risks. Even with various efforts managed to stabilize Somalia, the complex interaction between regional and international contexts helped the threat of Al-Shabaab and Daesh to reach a higher security threat. Aside from the fertile domestic situations, regional factors related to weak regional coordination among member states to fight terrorism could serve as one of the chief factors for these Islamic militants' rising security risks. Indeed, member states of IGAD have developed a regional strategy for preventing and countering terrorism.

The Horn of Africa faces a confluence of factors fostering the proliferation of terrorist activities. Weak coordination between member states and the instability of regional governments create a permissive environment for extremist groups. These groups exploit this vulnerability by disseminating radical ideologies, particularly among youth, who are then mobilized towards violent ends. This cycle of radicalization fuels home-grown terrorism further. Furthermore, globalization has significantly impacted the region's security landscape. The transformation of communication and transportation technologies facilitates the spread of extremist propaganda and recruitment efforts, posing a new and potent threat not just to the Horn of Africa but to the entire world (Rotberg, 2005; USIP, 2004; Woldeselase, 2010).

Ethiopia, due to its strategic position bordering six countries, is particularly susceptible to the power struggles within the region. Any political

shift in Ethiopia becomes a regional flashpoint, creating a complex and often contradictory situation. A potential transition in Ethiopia's leadership would likely lead to a change in foreign policy. However, navigating this transition requires careful consideration of its regional implications, potential challenges, and long-term processes. Ultimately, whether driven by internal ethnic factors or not, Ethiopia's security influence in the Horn of Africa positions it as a key player alongside other regional and international strategic actors.

This reality historically created a dilemma among the frontline contiguous states whose contest over Ethiopia's position in the region drew rivalry. The key frontline countries in the Horn of Africa that rivalled Ethiopia were Sudan and Somalia. These countries have also had tense relations with Ethiopia at times, particularly regarding territorial disputes and accusations of supporting rival factions in each other's countries. The transitions in Sudan and Somalia remain the closest of all, most actively affecting Ethiopia by extension, the region at large. Thus, Ethiopia's proximity to Somalia and the long history of the Ethiopian state's pursuit of securing interest in its easternmost parts of the territory have made it the dominant foreign policy determinant.

As Ethiopia undergoes a challenging political and social transition, it is important to consider the potential impacts on its economy, security, and position in the Horn of Africa region, although the outcomes are uncertain. The radical changes that were set underway and driven by

the political transformation of the party politics, which was previously dominated by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), have led to the emergence of the Prosperity Party (PP) (Lyons, 2021). So far, the process of this transition saw the replacement by a party radically different. Significant regional challenges remain for Ethiopia, which is still in transition, fostering the path for defining the future relationships with Eritrea and affecting Sudan and Somalia in more ways than it would do to others. The internal challenges born out of the transition process in Ethiopia's lingering large create both internal and external potential security lapses, and the concerns by the frontline countries have triggered a security dilemma. As these variables have set to change the course of Ethiopia's transitional trajectory, they impact regional dynamics with a significant source of tension. Managing the political transition at the regional level in the Horn remains a prerequisite for fostering broader economic integration.

In conclusion, although countries of the Horn have gone through some sorts of political transitions over the past half a decade, fragile situations crammed the socioeconomic and political atmospheres of Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan in the past six years have the dark side potentiality to explode across the region if only a collective mechanism to put to a halt falls short of addressing the root causes of the political transition that still locks horns in the Horn.

The fragile situations of the three countries in question have more potential to trigger severe

implications for the region. Nevertheless, collective efforts could most likely reduce the foreign policy anxiety triggered by the security dilemma as a strategy defined by what is a misfortune for one would be an opportunity for other approaches. The fact that the roles already at play by and with as many countries in Africa as they were in addition to that of the African Union (A.U.) to address the interface between the momentous political developments in Ethiopia will shift the regional dynamics in the Horn more positively than being thought in the past. If the scenario in Ethiopia's situation succeeds in the years to come, transition management at the regional level is likely the case.

Conclusion

Political transitions in the Horn of Africa have a ripple effect, impacting internal politics across borders. While regional economic integration aims for cooperation, political transitions, often driven by competing priorities and public demands for change, can create challenges. A shift in one country can expose vulnerabilities in another due to reliance on specific policies, leading to security dilemmas.

The Horn's history is filled with these entangled transitions, where countries clash over real or perceived security threats related to shared resources or historical ties. Despite their differences, the three countries' experiences attest that they share more common values than their occasional conflicts suggest.

These transitions have a dual negative impact on neighboring countries: through destabilization

causing refugee crises and through security dilemmas arising from competing national interests. The biggest challenge lies in overcoming the "security dilemma," where national interests sometimes clash with regional stability which was dominant in the Horn of Africa as a result of historical tensions and lack of trust between countries.

The Way Forward

Overcoming the complex challenges of political transitions in the Horn of Africa demands a resolute commitment to regional cooperation. Organizations like IGAD and the Horn of Africa Initiatives can serve as vital platforms for dialogue and collaboration. By fostering these efforts, countries can address shared issues, support smooth transitions, and strengthen the region's foundation through investments in democracy, human rights, and good governance. Early intervention to prevent conflicts and timely provision of humanitarian aid are crucial to mitigating instability. Regional economic integration through trade and infrastructure projects is key to creating a more interconnected and prosperous Horn. The current approach to managing transitions needs to be revised. A more practical solution lies in establishing a regional platform designed for this purpose. In conclusion, a stable and prosperous future for the Horn of Africa hinges on resolving mistrust, addressing intra- and interstate disputes, collectively pursuing and safeguarding regional strategic interests, and, most importantly, strengthening regional initiatives and institutions. This collaborative approach offers a clear path forward, paving the way for a brighter

future for all countries in the region.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to all anonymous reviewers and colleagues who provided comments to improve the manuscript.

Funding

No funding was received for conducting this study.

Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed in this study are available from the corresponding and co-authors upon reasonable request.

Additional Note

Notes on the contributors

Gizachew Asrat

Gizachew Asrat (PhD) is Senior Researcher of the African Affairs Research Directorate at the Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA), Ethiopia. His latest articles include 'the role of political leadership for economic growth: practice and lessons' SN Social Science, Springer Nature (2023); 'The Matrix of Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia' Journal of ethnicity and cultural studies (2022). He can be contacted at gizasrat@gmail.com

Henok Getachew

Henok Getachew (PhD) is a Senior Researcher of the African Affairs (IFA), Ethiopia. His research interest areas are focused on Africa Union Peackeping, Red Sea politics and Foreign Policy. He presented dozens of con-

ference papers on regional and international conferences in his expertise. He can be found at heno-kgetachew1983@gmail.com

References

- ACLED. (2020, August 27). Riders on the storm: Rebels, soldiers, and paramilitaries in Sudan. Retrieved from <https://acleddata.com/2020/08/27/riders-on-the-storm-rebels-soldiers-and-paramilitaries-in-sudans-margins/>
- Amare, T. (2020). Challenges of Ethiopian Transition: Breakthrough or Brink of Collapse? *African Journal of Governance and Development*, 9(2), 648-665.
- Bereketab, K. (Ed.). (2013). *The Horn of Africa: Intra-state and inter-state conflicts and security*. Pluto Press.
- Bermeo, N. (2003). The end of the transition paradigm. *Journal of Democracy*, 14(3), 55-69.
- Blyth, A. (2019). *Transitioning to national forces in Somalia: More than an exit for AMISOM*. International Peace Institute-IPI.
- Connel, M. (2011). From resistance to governance: Eritrea's trouble with transition. *Review of African Political Economy*, 38(129), 419-433.
- Flint, J. (2010, June). Going nowhere in Doha. *African Arguments*. Retrieved from <https://africanarguments.org/2010/06/going-nowhere-in-doha/>
- Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The end of history and the last man*. Free Press.
- Gros, J. (Ed.). (1998). *Democratization in late twentieth century Africa: Coping with uncertainty*. Greenwood Press.
- Gunnar, S. (2018). *Sudan's transition: Living in bad surroundings*. Chr. Michelsen Institute.
- Haggard, S., & Kaufman, R. K. (2008). *The political economy of democratic transitions*. Princeton University Press.
- Holmquist, S., & Rock, M. (2023). *Regional security dynamics in the Horn of Africa*. FOI studies in African security.
- Huntington, S. P. (1991). Democracy's third wave. *The Journal of Democracy*, 2 (2).
- Ismail, A. (2013). *The Production of Somali Conflict and the Role of Internal and External Actors*. In Bereketab (Ed.), *The Horn of Africa: Intra-state and inter-state conflicts and security* (pp. 156-177). Pluto Press.
- Jackson, P. (2018). *U.S. foreign policy in the Horn of Africa: From colonialism to terrorism*. Routledge.
- Lemarchand, R. (1994). Managing transition anarchies: Rwanda, Burundi, and South Africa in comparative perspective. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 32 (40).
- Lyons, T. (2006). Avoiding conflict in the Horn of Africa: U.S. policy toward Ethiopia and Eritrea. *African Political economy*, 36, 167-180. DOI: 10.1080/03056240903068053
- Makau, M. (2016). *Political parties in transitions: The Kenyan experience*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

- Mesfin, A. (Ed.). (2011). *Regional security in the post-Cold War Horn of Africa*. ISS Monograph.
- Metz, C. (Ed.). (1992). *Somalia a country study*. Federal research division. Library of Congress. Retrieved from https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/master/frd/frdcstdy/so/somaliacountryst00metz_0/somaliacountryst00metz_0.pdf
- Michael (2023). *Taking Ethiopia-Eritrea tensions seriously*. USIP. Retrieved from <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/12/taking-ethiopia-eritrea-tensions-seriously>
- Mosely, A. (2020). *Ethiopia's transition: Implications for the Horn of Africa and Red Sea Region*. SIPRI.
- Netherlands Institute of International Relations. (2022). *Conflict and fragility*. Retrieved from <https://www.clingendael.org/topic/conflict-and-fragility>
- O'Donnell, G., & Schmitter, P. (1986). Transitions from authoritarian rule: Prospects for democratic consolidation. *Journal of Democracy*, 7(4), 506-531.
- Pevouhes, C. J. (2002). Democracy from the outside-in? International organizations and democratization. *Journal of International Economics and Finance*, 24(2), 155-178.
- Plaut, M. (2016). *Understanding Eritrea: Inside Africa's most repressive state*. Oxford University Press.
- Rakner, L., & Sorensen, P. (2007). Donor fragmentation and the political economy of aid allocation. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 45(4), 517-533.
- Rotberg, R. I. (2005). *Battling terrorism in the Horn of Africa*. The World Peace Foundation.
- Rustow, D. A. (1970). *Transitions to democracy: Toward a dynamic model*. City University of New York.
- Sally, A. (2009). *Peacemaking in the midst of war: An Assessment of IGAD's contribution to regional security*. Working paper. LSE.
- Savun, B., & Tirone, S. (2011). Foreign aid, democratization, and civil conflict: How does democracy aid affect civil conflict? *American Journal of Political Science*, 55(2), 233-246.
- Scott, J. C. (1998). *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. Yale University Press.
- Shain, Y., & Linz, J. J. (1995). *Between states: Interim governments and democratic transitions*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sharma, A., & Gupta, A. (Eds.). (2006). *The anthropology of the state*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Soja, E. W. (2010). *Seeking spatial justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Spear, J., & Williams, M. (Eds.). (2012). *Security and development in global politics*. Georgetown University Press.
- Stewart, M. (2008). *Horizontal inequalities and conflict: Understanding group violence in multi-ethnic societies*. Palgrave MacMillan.

- Susan, A. (2022). *Somalia's critical transition comes amid al-Shabab and hunger challenges*. United States Institute of Peace-USIP.
- Tronvoll, K., & Mekonnen, A. (2014). *The African garrison state: Human rights and political development in Eritrea*. James Currey.
- Verhoeven, H. (2018). The Gulf and the Horn: Changing geographies of security interdependence and competing visions of regional order. *Civil wars*, 20(3), 333-357. DOI: 10.1080/13698249.2018.1483125
- Weinstein, M. (2011). *Somalia: A roadmap to nowhere*. Retrieved from <https://allafrica.com/stories/201109230675.html>
- Woldeselase, T. (2010). *Terrorism in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa: Threat, impact and response*. Rehobot Printers.
- Woodward, R. (1996). *The Horn of Africa: State politics and international relations*. Tauris Academic Studies.
- Yusuf, A. (2024). *Prospects for Somalia's Transition From Clan-Based Politics to Multipartyism in the 2026 Election*. Rift Valley Institute.
- Young, K. (2020). Conflict and cooperation: Transitions in modern Ethiopian-Sudanese relations. Briefing Paper. Retrieved from <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/conflict-and-cooperation-transitions-modern-ethiopian-sudanese-relations>